

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WINGS ABOVE THE MALLEE*

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*The Path Through the
Coojong Trees*

*Love can build and love
can break; can love
bridge the impossible?*



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Now

No matter how pretty the town or how nice the locals seemed, Natasha knew there were always hidden secrets. A darker edge. Houses on the wrong side of the tracks that no one wanted to admit existed; people the townsfolk didn't want to claim as their own.

Settlers Bridge hides it well, Natasha thought as she passed one of the nylon grocery bags to Zehra. Despite having wandered the few aisles of the store with her, the nine-year-old peered into the shopping bag, clearly hopeful some contraband had made its way past her mum's budget restrictions. No such luck.

'There's a Regional Action Group meeting in the old council building next week,' the woman behind the checkout said, continuing the 'welcome to town' speech she'd embarked on as soon as Natasha started unloading groceries onto the smooth wooden counter, and introduced herself as the new teacher. The monologue had begun with a proud rundown of all the local facilities—which included a yet-to-open

Americana-themed diner and not one, but two pubs—then segued into activities that included the usual country-town favourites: football, netball and tennis clubs, along with line dancing, an apparently recent addition. Now, the cashier had moved on to service clubs and other offerings.

Fifteen minutes earlier, Natasha had paused on the cement ramp into the IGA, taking a couple of deep breaths before committing to entering; it had been a long time since she'd had to go into a country supermarket. Yet, she needn't have worried—the quaint store was nothing like old Handsy's shop, back in Borgainville.

'We're looking at getting a skatepark set up for the kids,' the cashier continued, putting the last couple of items into a bag. Natasha tried not to wince at the total. There was a definite financial toll involved in moving to the country. 'A skate shop in Adelaide's offered sponsorship, and we've all kinds of research and design studies being done.' Her incredulous tone enhanced how big a deal that was. 'But if you notice anything else that would help us bring Settlers Bridge back to life, you come along to the action group meeting next week and put in your five cents' worth, lovey.'

That didn't sound like such a great idea. Natasha had liked the look of her new work location on Google Earth precisely because the small town was so sleepy. The handful of streets either side of a wide, unpopulated main street where the gum tree-shaded shops seemed to mirror one another, had looked safe. Hopefully, there was a magic number where a small population meant less judgement. Borgainville had obviously exceeded that number.

Perhaps, as Tarik had said, she should worry less about fitting in and more about carving her space. Not that it had ultimately worked for him.

'In any case,' the cashier continued, 'the group will be a good opportunity for you to meet some locals. Though

once the new term starts, I suppose that'll all fall into place. You'll be going to Settlers Bridge Primary with your mum, too, lovey?'

Zehra nodded, her blonde ponytail pooling like liquid gold on top of the groceries in her arms.

'Well, don't you worry, you'll make plenty of friends there.'

Zehra shrugged. 'It's my fourth school. I'm not worried.' As usual, the nine-year-old's polite words held a directness, a confidence, that Natasha both marvelled at and coveted. If she'd had that innate confidence, how different would her life have been? Without feeling a need to please, a desire to be loved at any cost, surely she would have made entirely different choices.

'Oh, goodness, fourth already? That is a lot of moving about.'

Natasha caught the interest in the woman's tone and registered the instinctive shut down within herself. A ridiculous defensive reflex: she had nothing to hide. And Tarik would have pointed out that by automatically throwing up her walls, she missed a valuable opportunity to close the gap.

But Tarik wasn't here and there was no reason for her to explain to anyone what had brought her and Zehra to the small South Australian town. Besides, she couldn't verbalise the longing that had steadily grown within her. For the last ten years, Wollongong had offered a haven. The frenetic pace of life, the consuming, exhausting struggle to get her qualifications, pursue a career and raise her baby single-handedly in the city, meant her sorrow and hurt were only permitted to surface in the small hours of the morning, when darkness walled the tiny space she allowed for her own feelings.

Yet, despite her determination to blend and disappear in the city, she'd felt an increasing desire to reconnect with

the country. Eventually she'd accepted that, for whatever reason, it was time to leave. Funny; she'd hated when Dad had done that to her when she was a kid: uprooting her and chasing the dust devils as they headed further and further from Sydney. Though with Mum hanging around his neck like a blotchy white yerungi stone, refusing to move beyond what was familiar, Dad had never made it this far. Instead he'd gotten them stuck in Borgainville. Literally and figuratively on the wrong side of the tracks.

'Zehra is counting kindy, prep and junior in those four,' she said, dragging her focus back to the conversation. 'No relocation required—' her gaze grazed the woman's name tag, '—Lynn.'

'Right you are. In any case, I guess being in the same school will make an easier time of it for Sarah.'

'Zehra.'

'That's unusual, isn't it? Zehra.' Lynn wrinkled her forehead. 'Very fancy.'

It wasn't. It was very Turkish.

'That school's not going to know what's hit it, with two new teachers in the one year.' Lynn shook her head, as though she could never have imagined such big things for the tiny town. 'It's a lovely little school, though. Of course, the older kids have to bus to Mannum or Murray Bridge for high school. But other than that, you'll find everything you could possibly want in Settlers Bridge.'

A swimming pool? It seemed the only sport the woman hadn't mentioned and the question trembled on the tip of Natasha's tongue, but she wouldn't ask it. She hadn't been swimming for ten years. Not since . . . Tarik.

'It does look like a lovely town,' Natasha agreed politely. And it did. But she'd lived in country towns for long enough to recognise the hidden dangers; she wasn't one of those

parents who would let her child roam the streets, trusting to the town to raise and protect her. In fact, she'd throw herself into the very heart of this community simply so she could check out every single business, every person, to make sure her daughter was safe. It wasn't only strangers who brought danger. 'When is that action group meeting?'

'Thursday. About five. But you wander along whenever suits you, lovey.' Lynn glanced at her watch. 'Elaine over at the real estate agent will be back from lunch, if you want to collect your house key. The fridge is on, so you can pop your cold stuff in straight away. Not that it's going to warm up quickly in this weather, anyway.' She gave an exaggerated shiver, crossing her arms over her apron. 'I've put you over on Seventh Street.'

Natasha tensed. Was Seventh on the wrong side of the tracks?

'Because it's walking distance to the school,' Lynn continued, raking her fingers through her vibrant, spiky locks. She looked a little like a rosella, puffy chested and brightly plumaged against the drab greyness washing in off the winter street. 'Well, everywhere is walking distance around here, really. But the cottage on Seventh is just close enough to school, but far enough away that you can pull the blinds down and have a sickie when the need arises. Oh, here's Ant.' She beamed as a guy with a beanie tugged down to his cheekbones strode into the IGA. 'Did you say the removalists are bringing your things, Natasha?'

She hadn't said anything of the kind, but there was no reason to be secretive. Not here. 'They should be arriving around two.'

'If you need a hand unloading, sing out and Ant will pop around and help, won't you, lovey?'

'Can do,' the man responded with a friendly nod at Natasha.

‘Thanks, but I really don’t have much to unload.’ Zehra had been raised in a second-hand crib balanced on stacks of used textbooks. When Natasha had graduated and Zehra moved into junior school, finances finally became a little less tight, but the habits of a lifetime, cemented by working and studying while pregnant, meant their few bits of furniture were all op-shop finds and hard-rubbish treasures. Really, none of it was worth the cost of transporting, but in a rare tantrum, Zehra hadn’t wanted to leave behind the remembrances of their lives in Wollongong. She was adamant that, although they couldn’t bring the friends they’d made, as much had to come with them as possible. Given that she was uprooting her daughter, Natasha suspected she had no right to argue; as long as she and Zehra were together, nothing else held any importance. So she’d found the money for the removalist and helped Zehra wrap a lifetime’s worth of childish trinkets and memories. The only trinket Natasha would ever care about was around her ankle, the light clasp reinforced with a gold safety chain that she hadn’t been able to afford, but could risk not affording even less.

Lynn smiled past her. ‘And here’s another pair of willing hands.’

Natasha glanced toward the door. Froze. Only for a millisecond, though. Blond and good looking, in that clean-scrubbed, all-country, local-football-star kind of way, of course the guy who entered wasn’t Dean.

He raised a hand in greeting. ‘Afternoon, all.’

‘Hamish, lovey, this is Natasha. And little Zehra. Natasha’s going to be working at the school with Charity.’

‘Hey. That school’s really having a shakedown, isn’t it? That’s more new teachers in a few months than in all the years I went there.’ Hamish selected a tube from the Lifesaver stand on the counter and waggled the packet of peppermints

at Lynn before pulling a handful of change from his pocket. ‘You’re living in town, then, Natasha?’ He unwrapped the package, offering it to Zehra. Zehra looked to Natasha, who nodded permission.

‘On Seventh, apparently,’ Natasha said, though she raised an eyebrow at Lynn, checking.

Hamish tilted the Lifesaver packet toward her. His hands were like Dad’s, bearing the telltale stains of a life spent under the hood of a vehicle. Still, that didn’t make him Dean. She had to remember that. Had to remember that a decade had passed now. It was time to focus on making good memories in this new life she’d chosen.

‘That’s one of your places, Lynn?’ Hamish continued. ‘It’d have to be, right? Reckon you’re keeping Elaine in business with all your investments in Settlers.’

The lolly packet continued doing the rounds and Natasha suppressed an urge to giggle. Four adults and a child, sucking candies while they gossiped about the town. Couldn’t get more country than this.

‘That one’s leased to the Education Department as teacher housing, but as Charity won’t be needing it, it works out well for Natasha here. Though, it’s not only me keeping Elaine in business,’ Lynn said around her lolly. ‘I’m sure you’d have heard that Tracey was looking at turning Tractors and Tarts into an upmarket op shop kind of thingy? Well, now it seems she’ll have to consider using the old bank building instead.’ She hollowed her cheeks around the lolly, examining her audience as though waiting on a reaction.

Ant frowned. ‘Why’s that? Tractors and Tarts has been empty for years.’

Lynn smiled fondly, as though he deserved an award for asking the correct question. ‘Right?’ But Elaine said this morning that she’s had some *interest* in the shop.’

‘No way!’ Hamish said, jamming one hand in his jeans pocket, cocking an eyebrow. ‘I’ve not heard anything round the traps. Mind you, I’ll be stoked to be able to get a decent pie and a vanilla slice again. Things haven’t been the same since Ploughs and Pies closed down. Nothing against your frozen stuff, Lynn.’ He gestured to the back of the small store, where three tall refrigerator units hummed busily. ‘But it’s not really a country town without a bakery, is it?’

‘I’m with you, lovey. But the thing is, interest from *who*? If it was anyone from around here, we’d know.’

‘It can’t be anyone from *not* around here, either,’ Ant put in. ‘Because, why?’

‘Exactly!’ Lynn said. ‘Unless it’s someone driving in from Murray Bridge each day. But why would they bother? No one’s going to buy from someone they don’t know.’

Natasha hid a chuckle. These people would starve if they found themselves in the city. ‘Well, nice meeting you all,’ she said, catching Zehra’s eye and tilting her head toward the door.

‘Are you coming to the opening of Christine’s Diner on Saturday, lovey?’ Lynn asked. ‘It’s in the shop that used to be our cafe. Well, not that that means anything to you. But you can’t miss it. Christine will be playing rockabilly loud enough for the whole street to hear.’

There was a faint note of censure in the words and Natasha suspected that country music may have been considered more acceptable. It would be interesting to see who this Christine was, apparently brave enough to flout the unwritten rules of a small community. Although Natasha had embraced the anonymity of city life for a few years, she’d finally acknowledged the intrinsic loneliness in being unknown and unrecognised, just another face on another street. Now, more mature, she could appreciate the comforting familiarity

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of the small-town mentality that made it okay to have an expectation of knowing each other's business. Maybe if she'd taken advantage of that quirk in Borgainville, instead of working so hard to keep people locked out, things would have played out differently. Now she had to do better than that for Zehra. Had to show her daughter how to be better, live better. Love better.

'We might,' she said to Lynn as she made for the door. 'What do you think, Zehra? Hamburgers and Elvis sound good for a Saturday treat?'

'Hamburgers, yes, but what's an elvis?' Zehra said. 'I'd rather have fries.'

'I'm sure you'll find those there, too,' Lynn said. 'You can't miss the diner, just a few shops down the street, toward the river. Hopefully the weather will pick up by then, but regardless, everyone will be there. It's so long since we've had a new shop in town—though, you're right, Hamish, it is such a shame we had to lose Sam's cafe.'

Although the cashier looked nothing like Gloria, Lynn's friendliness sent a jolt of nostalgia through Natasha, a longing for one of her previous employer's unstinting hugs. She couldn't allow herself to be seduced by memories though; while the owner of the Borgainville cafe had been one of so few good things in her youth, this place would be better. Settlers Bridge would be everything for Zehra that Borgainville had failed to be for Natasha.

Because, after so many years of planning how to escape the country, Natasha had returned. And this time she wasn't a prisoner.