

*'Milk Fever sings. It's graceful and
gentle and tender and beautiful.*

It makes you smile to be alive.'

JULIE CAPALDO, bestselling author
of *Love Will Take You Home* and *Weather*



milk fever

Lisa Reece-Lane



Julia

They're crammed in the bed. Julia stares at the ceiling and tries to relax. She can hear Bryant breathing beside her and knows from the rhythm that he is pleased with himself. He laughs loudly and reads another passage from his proposed brochure.

'Bryant Heath is a master. His yoga classes are invigorating and inspiring. I felt more alive after one session than ever before. I would recommend anyone to see him.' He clears his throat when she doesn't answer. 'It sounds like someone's doing a review on me.'

'It's wonderful.' Her voice is too flat to sound genuine but she has already endured thousands of these false quotes during the long drive up here and, although she wants to support her husband's new venture, for tonight, at least, she can't muster any more enthusiasm.

Heat pins her down like a weight and she pushes the sheet to the bottom of the bed with her feet. They've left behind the ducted heating, the evaporative cooling, the dishwasher, caf  s that know what real coffee is, intelligent friends, a sunny, low-maintenance courtyard, for what? Half an acre of blackberries, a run-down house, musty-smelling supermarkets and severe water restrictions. They've moved to a town called Lovely. But it's not. It's a town in the middle of emptiness, abandoned by mountains and coast. The road travels gladly on to more picturesque towns, more exciting places, further ahead. There is a lake, true, but it is half-empty. A disused train station with its tracks coming to an end in an overgrown sheep paddock. One or two of the buildings in the town centre whisper of a gold rush past. But apart from that, Julia

can see no enticement for motorists to pull off the highway and get out here. It is nothing at all like Bryant's glowing description, which was perhaps softened by the memory of a fishing trip he took with his father a few years ago, not long before the old man died.

The only precious thing she has now, which she insisted on bringing despite the agent wanting to include it on the list of chattels at the old house, is her Faema espresso machine — an old, two-group, deco-style, brass-trimmed masterpiece that needs to be plumbed in, and which she sometimes loves as much as her children.

Dinner was inedible; she couldn't work out how to control the temperature on the unfamiliar hotplates. Burnt chops, dry mashed potatoes and peas. Now it all sits like a clenched fist below her ribcage. Her stomach and hips are expanding while she lies there.

'When I start healing people they will say their own stuff, of course, and then I can quote that.' A little of Bryant's enthusiasm is fading. 'But, in the meantime, I thought this would work well.'

Oscar and Amber are pressed between them. Oscar snores softly from a summer cold. Amber sleeps with her face wedged against the pillows, her hair a mass of tangles over her Barbie pyjamas. Neither of the kids wanted to sleep in their new bedrooms tonight. They were both too upset about the accident.

A few kilometres out of town they had run over a dog. It had been standing on the side of the road, a cattle dog of some sort, sniffing grass. When Bryant reached for the road directory, he'd veered slightly onto the gravel and hit the poor thing head on. The dog jumped into the air, like a circus animal, its acrobatics accompanied by the kids' screams. It landed on the road behind them, with one of its front legs unnaturally bent. Julia stayed in the station wagon, her body stiff, telling Oscar and Amber not to look, that the dog would be fine, doggies always recover, and she kept talking while Bryant pulled it off the bitumen and into the ditch.

He got back in the car and wiped his hands down his trousers. 'Well, at least it was quick.'

The kids stared out of the back window as the car pulled off the gravel, crying, watching the stain on the road where the dog had been. Julia had felt like crying too.

A hundred metres up the road, she had made Bryant stop the car and headed back towards the accident site, her impractical city shoes

soon rattling with stones, covered in grey dust, determined to find the pet's owner and let them know what had happened. But after a fruitless half hour or so, trudging along the narrow road and up and down three very long driveways, knocking on farmhouse doors, and one or two corrugated iron sheds, she encountered only empty yards, barking dogs or blank faces.

Julia isn't the suspicious type — she never consults tarot readers or psychics like half her friends, she doesn't bother to throw a pinch of salt over her shoulder if she spills any, nor does she walk around ladders if it's quicker to walk underneath one — but this accident has put a chill inside her and she can't help feeling that it's a bad omen for the move.

Bryant leans across the kids and places his hand on Julia's arm. 'Tomorrow I thought we would get out a bit and meet some of the locals. We can hand out my brochures. How does that sound?'

'I want to find a plumber first.'

'They don't work weekends out here, love. Anyway, we'll decide in the morning. You know I was thinking of joining the Country Fire Authority. I saw a poster advertising for volunteers. It would be nice to do something to help the community and a fast way of making friends.' He chuckles. 'I quite fancy myself on the back of the fire truck with the sirens going, and I'd look pretty good in the uniform, don't you think?'

'You'll look very handsome.'

He pats her arm. 'Get some sleep now. We've got a big day ahead of us.'

All three of them snore. Different timbres and rhythms, filling the strange room like the warming up of an orchestra. She stares into the darkness and listens. Julia forgives the children their quiet snuffles and wheezes. But, with Bryant, his loud exhalations, the occasional pauses and sudden snorts make her irritable. She imagines thumping her elbow into his chest to stop him. God, everything annoys her now.

When had that started?

Before the move? After Amber was born?

She remembers their wedding night. He had performed a striptease to one of his favourite Bob Marley tunes; played on a portable CD player he must have hidden away earlier. He had

dropped his clothes on the floor as though they were veils and twirled his jocks around on his finger, before throwing them up in the air to land on the overhead fan. And then he had spent ages, naked, looking for something under the bed, in the bathroom, in the hotel drawers and cupboards. Julia had waited patiently on the bed in what she hoped was a seductive pose, shivering a little and feeling exposed in her thin-strapped negligee, the satin material tight over her pregnant stomach.

‘What are you looking for, darling?’

‘Nothing,’ he’d said, yet continued to search.

She seemed to be disappearing from his awareness.

‘Rose petals,’ he’d said, eventually, and walked over to the bed. ‘I planned to sprinkle them on you.’ He smiled down at her. ‘Look at you lying there, like an angel. I must be the luckiest man alive.’ He climbed onto the bed and held her shivering body against his chest, rubbing his hands up and down her back until she was warm again.

Their lovemaking had been tender, yet somehow remote after that. As if a part of Bryant was elsewhere, searching still. If she’d been asked, Julia would not have been able to say what it was exactly; her husband had spent a gentleman’s measure on foreplay, he’d held her in his arms afterwards and kissed her hair, and sighed in a way that conveyed contentment. But there was a gap. A little gap; not of the body, not of the mind, not the age gap between them, although that seems more noticeable now that Julia is in her mid-twenties and Bryant is almost forty. No, it was something else, harder to define.

Everything is wonderful. Julia had repeated the words over and over silently in her mind, re-playing all the happy moments of their wedding ceremony, the breathless, rushed romantic moments of their courtship, and she had congratulated herself on finding such a good man and pushed the doubt into the abyss of her subconscious.

But now? Seven years on. Was doubt about to bob to the surface again like a rotten apple in water? No, she decides; she’s just tired and sad about moving. Everything will improve once they’ve settled in. Everything will feel better once the house is clean. Somehow they will survive the drastic drop in income. Country living is bound to be cheaper. And, now that Bryant has left his demanding sales job, he’ll have more time to play with the kids.

The snoring eases and she can hear the drone of cicadas outside. Weariness descends. He's a good man, she tells herself; sensitive, clever, enlightened.

Most women would envy her.

The centre, an old scout hall, has been freshly painted — jelly-pink walls with clotted cream trim. Gauze curtains lift in the breeze or are tied back with red ribbons. The floor is polished pine. Unframed prints of Indian temples and meditating monks are stuck to the walls and there is a bookshelf near the front door beneath a sign, *Please place shoes here*, and another one advertising Bryant's chakra balancing workshops. The hall smells of paint and incense; outside, the sound of birds and the odd car.

'Smell the air,' Bryant says, and Mrs Fatori, the landlady, joins him in a deep breath.

'So, how do you kids like the place?' Mrs Fatori has been fussing over the children ever since she arrived to drop off the keys. Her bare thighs, the colour of chicken sausages, are squeezed into army shorts; her sneaker-clad feet seem too small to support her rotund torso; and half of her teeth are missing. Oscar hasn't said a word, just stares at her as though she's a cartoon character, and Amber ignores her completely.

Julia hates answering for the children; she read somewhere parents shouldn't do that, but Mrs Fatori continues to wait for their answer and the silence is stretching. 'I think they will love it here,' she says. 'The local school is supposed to be good.'

'Are both of yours going there?'

'Amber's only five, so she's still in kinder. But Oscar will; he's in year one this year.'

'All my grandkids went to the local school and they turned out well. They do a lot of Steiner things, apparently, or so my daughter reckons. It's supposed to be good for kids' self-confidence. Although I think the youngest girl is a bit *too* self-confident.' She turns to Bryant who has draped a beaded tapestry across the front of the yoga platform. 'What amazing material. Did you get it from here?'

Bryant smiles, his face radiant. 'No, Mrs Fatori. It came from *India*,' like the material has been couriered down by angels; a hand-sewn offering from God.

Mrs Fatori screws up her face as though he's offered her a plate of something unsavoury. 'Ooh, no. Spicy food doesn't agree with me.'

Lunchtime, and Julia has only handed out two or three leaflets.

'You could put a little more enthusiasm into it.' Bryant's face is red from the heat. 'Don't ask if they want one, simply hand it to them.'

'And then they end up in the bin.' There isn't a single shade tree in the mall, only prickly natives that grow parallel to the pavement and shelter piles of fading rubbish. The awnings from the shops do nothing to cool the area. Airconditioners drip and hum. She is sweating rivers beneath her shirt. 'Most people here don't even know what yoga is.' She sounds childish; even Oscar and Amber are content to sit in the middle of the town mall, swinging their legs under the seat, smiling at old ladies who stop to ask where their mummy is, and playing I-spy. 'Perhaps it would be better to drop them in people's letterboxes.'

'Come on Julia, my first class is on Thursday night. We want a good turn up, don't we? And it's nice to meet people face to face. They'll remember us that way.'

That was the difference between them; Bryant loved centre stage, Julia preferred to dance in the background.

She hands a brochure to a young mother with two kids. The woman's face is raw with acne. 'What's this for?'

Julia points to the picture of Bryant on the front, to the magnified close-up of his face, looking eager and slightly goofy. 'My husband has started up a yoga centre here.'

'What's that?'

'Yoga?' Julia fumbles. 'It's a kind of exercise.'

'Like aerobics?'

'Kind of.'

The young mum pushes the pram away and drags it back again. The toddler's head moves in rhythm with the rocking. His nose is running. A baby lies behind him asleep.

Julia takes a step away from them. She can feel the beginnings of a headache gnawing at her temples.

The woman follows. 'How much does it cost?'

Julia has no idea. Bryant stands with his arm around a man

dressed in overalls and gum boots. They laugh together as though they'd known each other for years. She approaches Bryant. 'How much are the yoga classes?'

He nods towards the brochure. 'It's in there, darling. Fifteen dollars for an hour and a half.' The smile remains in place but Julia can tell he's hurt. She should know that already.

That night, Oscar's scream reaches every corner of the strange house.

Julia walks unsteadily up the hallway, like she did a thousand times before in the old house to a thousand similar screams. She's a well programmed automaton, banging into the walls, dreams still trailing behind her — hold on sweetheart, Mummy's coming — while she tries to get her eyes open enough to see in the darkly nested house. One whimper, cough or snuffle, even a held breath, and she is awake and ready, despite the seductive pull of sleep and dreams.

'Why does he do that?' Amber cuddles her one-legged Barbie, groggy, half asleep.

'Just dreams, darling, go back to sleep. See, he's all quiet now.'

'It scares me though.'

'Come here then.' Julia offers her other arm to Amber who jumps out of her bed and snuggles close. Oscar hasn't even woken up, although his legs twitch occasionally.

She lies there, sandwiched in the single bed, smiling at the ceiling, a child on either arm, humming a tune she used to sing to them as babies. Even from here she can hear the rumble of Bryant's snoring. Amber giggles.

Julia falls asleep, her arms going numb from the weight of their heads.

When the first birds start calling outside the window, Oscar pokes her in the ribs with his little elbow. 'Get out, Mummy. You're taking up all the room.' She puts Amber back in her own bed, kisses her forehead, and tiptoes out of the room.

As the dawn appears through the bedroom window, she slides between the cool sheets and presses herself against Bryant's back. She feels the warm pull of desire and moves her hand towards his stomach.

Bryant's breathing remains slow and even; he's obviously settled at the bottom of a peaceful sleep. The kind one shouldn't disturb.

If she was irresistible it would be different. What man complains about being woken up by a goddess, wanting sex?

Her hand hovers for a moment longer, uncertain, then withdraws, fingers curled against her palm. No, she must lose some weight first, she decides. Eat less, get some exercise, and think more positively. Then she will get her old body back. Then she will be irresistible again.

*'I grab her hand and pull her down the steps.
She stumbles a little and I pick her up and carry
her, across the yard to the fruit trees that border
the property. The moon is creamy yellow and so
full it can barely lift itself above the trees. It lends
a milky phosphorescence to the cows grazing in
the paddock behind us.*

The night is warm and sweetly-scented.

And I am alone, at last, with Julia.'

In the misnamed town of Lovely, newcomer Julia Heath is struggling to adapt to life in the country, especially when she begins to suspect that her yoga-teacher husband is having an affair with the butcher's wife. But she soon falls under the spell of Tom, a handsome, if troubled, dairy farmer who experiences the world through extraordinary senses. When Julia's husband sets out to cure Tom's memory lapses and migraines, all three lives become inexorably entwined and Julia is forced to heal the wounds of her past and abandon all ideas of the perfect family.

Milk Fever is an uncommon romance. It is a novel of love, yearning, the fragility of modern family and forgiveness. And of how, despite our desire to remain separate, we are all incredibly precious, connected and, ultimately, necessary to each other.

