

# DREAM COUNTRY



*A Novel*

# LUANNE RICE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *FOLLOW THE STARS HOME*

A black and white photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, there is a dense forest of trees. A river or stream flows through the middle ground, winding through the valley. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains with some rocky peaks. The overall scene is a scenic landscape.

# Dream Country

Luanne Rice

**Bantam Books**

New York Toronto London Sydney Auckland



DREAM COUNTRY

A Bantam Book / February 2001

All rights reserved.  
Copyright © 2001 by Luanne Rice

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information address: Bantam Books.

ISBN 0-553-80119-8

---

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Its trademark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a rooster, is Registered in U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam Books, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036.

---

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# Dream Country



ALSO BY LUANNE RICE

*Follow the Stars Home*

*Secrets of Paris*

*Cloud Nine*

*Stone Heart*

*Home Fires*

*Crazy in Love*

*Blue Moon*

*Angels All Over Town*

To Bob



# Acknowledgments

For twenty-one years of friendship and grace, I send my love and thanks to everyone at the Jane Rotrosen Agency: Jane Berkey, Don Cleary, Stephanie Tade, Meg Ruley, Ruth Kagle, Annelise Robey, Peggy Gordijn, and Barbara Goodwin, and, especially, Andrea Cirillo.

To Nita Taublib and Tracy Devine, with thanks for their boundless patience, insight, guidance, and support.

Many thanks to the Dutchess County SPCA and Animal Farm Foundation, Inc., who worked together to save the real Petal; to Dr. Kathy K. Clark, everyone at the Clark Veterinary Hospital, and Pet Connections, Inc. on behalf of Maggie, May, and Maisie, and to Amelia S. Onorato for the help and care she gives to all animals.

With deep gratitude to Dr. Elizabeth Moreno, Sherry Kohn, Mary Connolly, and Lynda Hunnicutt.

For a lifetime of inspiration in life, joy, compassion, and skiing, love to Betty Anne Whitney, Tobin Hagelin, Sam Whitney, Sarah Blanchard, and Palmer Whitney.

With appreciation to Rob Monteleone for his

commanding performance on the docks in Lunenburg, and his inspiring presence on the baseball field and hockey ice.

Thanks to Heather McNeil, for her warmth, generosity, humor, and for making me an honorary Cuckoo.

To Karen LeSage Stone, whose songs are deep and true, for sharing her art, spirit, and philosophy with me, for our talks at 104 and so much more.

Rosemary and Maureen: I love you.



# Dream Country

# Chapter One

At seven A.M., Daisy Tucker paused at the foot of the stairs to smell the laundry she held in her arms. She had gotten up an hour early to wash her daughter's clothes, throwing an extra sheet of fabric softener into the dryer the way Sage liked it.

Mounting the stairs, Daisy wondered why her heart was pounding. She felt nervous, as if she were applying for a new job instead of waking up her sixteen-year-old with a pile of clean clothes. The house was quiet, flooded with thin morning light. While waiting for the laundry to finish, Daisy had gone to her spare-room jewelry studio to work on a bracelet that she hoped to finish that afternoon. But she had been too upset to concentrate.

Daisy and Sage lived alone. There had been no witnesses last night to hear Daisy screaming like a banshee, see her pulling her own hair like a caricature of a maniac. There had been no one present to watch Sage sit back in her inflatable chair, messy dark hair falling across her face, observing her frustrated mother with cool detachment in her wide green eyes, no one to watch that composure crumble under Daisy's words.

Sage had been wearing the clothes Daisy now held in her arms, and they had been mud-stained and sopping wet. She had been out with Ben Davis, her boyfriend, until midnight, even though she had promised to be home by nine. They had gone canoeing and capsized. In late October, Silver Bay, Connecticut was frosty and cold, and all Daisy had been able to think about was how they might have drowned in the dark.

The phone rang. Still holding the clothes, Daisy walked to her bedroom. Wondering who it could be, ready to be stern to Ben, she picked up.

“Hello?” she said.

“How’s my wayward niece?”

“Sleeping,” Daisy said, relaxing at the sound of her sister’s voice. “But it was touch and go last night. When she walked in all soaked and bedraggled, I wanted to kill her.”

“‘Kill’?” Hathaway asked. “That seems like a strong word. Perhaps you mean ‘maim.’”

“Oh, Hath,” Daisy said, almost laughing. Talking to her sister could break the tension like nothing else. “She was bad, but I was worse. The mad twin took over. I was standing over her, slavering—truly, foam was dripping from my mouth—”

“Did you ground her until college?”

“Yes, and I told her only stupid girls go out canoeing with boys until midnight on school nights,” Daisy said, cringing as she remembered her words, her tone of voice. “Stupid, slutty girls.”

“I hope you told her she could never see Ben again,” Hathaway said, knowing that, last night notwithstanding, Daisy liked Ben. He was polite, serious about his schoolwork, too mild to ignite any real passion in Sage.

“Of course I did.” Daisy stared miserably at the clothes she held, knowing that the hour of truth was at hand.

“She did come home late,” Hathaway said. “On a school night. Plus, there was ice on my birdbath this morning. Just a thin coating, but still. It was cold out—no wonder you lost it.”

“I hate that I called her slutty.”

“No, you just *compared* her to slutty girls. That’s different.”

“I feel awful.” Standing over her sulking teenager, looking into those huge eyes, Daisy had felt as if her heart could break. She was an overprotective mother, and she knew it. Sage’s twin brother, Jake, had disappeared when he was three, and that fact informed every decision Daisy had made ever since regarding Sage. All Daisy had ever wanted was to protect her children. With a slim body, full mouth, and wide, knowing eyes, Sage had lost the last vestiges of babyhood. Still, Daisy had looked straight past those features to see the infant she and Sage’s father had brought home from the hospital sixteen years ago.

“I don’t want her to get hurt,” Daisy said.

“I know,” Hathaway said gently.

“But I said some awful things. I could see it in her eyes. I have to go wake her up now. I did her laundry, and now I want to sit on the edge of her bed.”

“And tell her you love her.”

“And everyone makes mistakes.”

“But you’ll ground her for life if she ever does it again . . .”

“Right,” Daisy said, laughing.

Hanging up, she felt a little better. Talking to Hathaway had helped her put the situation into perspective. A single mother raising a smart daughter, Daisy was ultravigilant about keeping Sage’s focus on schoolwork, away from boys. Generations of daughters had been staying out too late, falling into lazy rivers. That didn’t make them bad children, and it didn’t mean they had bad mothers. Many years had passed since Jake’s death, time for Daisy to tell herself again and again she wasn’t to blame.

Sunlight streamed through the bedroom windows, into the upstairs hall. The wood floors were waxed and polished. Walking toward Sage’s room, Daisy thought about what a nice house they lived in. It was a small saltbox, safe and enclosed, with a sliver of view down the cove. Daisy had bought and paid for it herself, selling the jewelry she made and saving her money. Sage might dream of riding the range, living the ranch life, but Daisy reassured herself that she was doing a good job, making a fine home for herself and her daughter right here on Pumpkin Lane.

Taking a deep breath, Daisy took hold of the doorknob to Sage’s room. She said a prayer, that she could stay calm no matter what, that she wouldn’t rise to any bait Sage might float her way—intentionally or not. This only *felt* like a war, and merely because Daisy loved the girl so much. Forcing herself to smile, she entered her daughter’s bedroom.

The room was empty.

Sage’s bed had not been slept in. It was neatly made, the Indian blanket drawn up over the pillows. Daisy could see the outline of her daughter’s body, where she had lain outside the covers. A drawer was partly open, and Daisy saw that clothes were missing.

Posters of Wyoming hung everywhere. Purple peaks—the Wind River Mountain Range, the Medicine Bows, the Big Horns, and the Snowies—filled the walls, along with blowups of cowboy corrals and galloping mustangs. Her father had sent her a rack of elk antlers, and she had turned them into a shrine: The single picture she had of him hung among turquoise beads, horseshoes, the pelt of a jackrabbit, and her brother’s blue booties.

A note lay on Sage’s desk. The second Daisy saw it, a small

sound escaped her. She dropped the neatly folded laundry and touched her heart.

Her hands shaking, she picked up the note.

Sage had been upset when she'd written it. Daisy could tell by the spidery handwriting, the way the ink had blotched and trailed off, the terrible terseness of the message from a girl who had always loved to talk, more than anything.

Daisy stared at the words. She looked for "Dear Mom" and "Love, Sage," but there were only four words, and in the time it took to read them, Daisy felt the world cave in around her:

"I HAVE TO GO."



Daisy called Hathaway. As she waited for her sister to arrive, she paced around the house. She suddenly had so much energy, she felt as if her chest was going to explode. At the same time, she had a knot in her forehead from concentrating on where Sage might have gone. It was Thursday, a school day. Could "I have to go" mean simply "I have to go to school"?

Just in case, she telephoned the office at Silver Bay High School. Sage was in eleventh grade, her third year. She had finished off sophomore year with high honors, gotten A's on her first junior year tests—and had received two deficiencies last week. Daisy had stared at those notes from Sage's chemistry and history teachers, filled with worry and fear. Sage, her bright light, her brilliant girl, letting herself slip? "Hi, Mrs. Wickham," Daisy said to the school secretary. "It's Daisy Tucker and I was, um—"

"Hello, Ms. Tucker. I was just about to call you. If Sage is going to be absent, we really need to get a call from you, just to let us know—"

"I'm sorry," Daisy said, bending over from the waist, covering her eyes, dropping the phone. Of course: Of course Sage had not gone to school. Hurrying now, she tried Ben's house and found no one home. The same for Zoe, Amanda, and Robin.

Hathaway walked in, looking tall and tough. She smothered Daisy in a hug before Daisy could get one word out. By then Daisy was crying, and she leaned openmouthed against the shoulder of her older sister's silk blouse. When she pulled back, Hathaway was regarding the spit-blotch with dismay. But she raised her eyes to Daisy.

"It was just a fight," Daisy said. "It was bad, but still . . . it was

just an *argument*. We've had hundreds. Why would she say she has to go?"

"Where's the note?" Hathaway asked, as if it contained answers. Perhaps it did: Feeling renewed hope at her sister's arrival, and her sister's direct approach, Daisy's heart leapt.

"Here." Daisy handed over the blue-lined white paper, ripped from one of Sage's notebooks.

"That's a *note*?" Hathaway asked.

"I told you." Daisy would have been much happier if Sage had left her pages of complaints, grievances about life at home and school. She would have preferred spewings of anger and resentment. Being sixteen had moments of torture, and Daisy was a mother prepared to bear the brunt.

"Who have you called?" Hathaway asked.

"Ben, some of her friends, the school."

"What did Ben say?"

"I got the answering machine at his house," Daisy said. "I know his mother works at a bank, but I'm not sure which one. His parents are divorced, and his father lives in Boston."

"This note . . ." Hathaway said, frowning. She was big-boned and chic, very no-nonsense. She ran a small boutique on the wharf called The Cowgirl Rodeo, where she sold western jackets, suede skirts, and Daisy's jewelry. For some reason, people vacationing in their Atlantic coast town loved spending their money on items evocative of the Old West. Hathaway had gotten the idea back in the days when she would visit Daisy and James in Wyoming.

"It's short," Daisy said, trying to laugh.

Hathaway just stared at the scrap of paper. "'I have to go,'" she read out loud.

"She ran away, that's all." Daisy was unable to keep the tremor out of her voice. "I did that when I was young, more than once. I was five the first time, remember? I packed a washcloth and my stuffed dog and went to live in the pine hollow. And I ran away again when I was nine, right after Dad died, so I wouldn't have to go to the cemetery—"

"She's sixteen; that's not five or nine," Hathaway said.

"She's a good girl. She wouldn't—" Daisy's mind felt crazy. Her thoughts were darting all over the place to avoid the fact that it was nine-fifteen A.M. and Sage hadn't slept in her bed and she had no idea of where her daughter was. "She left a note. It's short, and she was obviously upset; we'd just had the worst fight

of our lives. I was so mad. She knows how I felt after Jake disappeared. She wouldn't do that to me . . ."

"She sounds serious," Hathaway said, taking Daisy's hand.

"Oh—" Daisy said, making a moaning sound again, because she couldn't get out the next part: serious about what?



Serious about Ben, of course. Daisy called four banks before she got the right one. Paulina Davis managed the wharf branch of Shoreline Bank & Trust. Paulina was with a client, and the receptionist told Daisy she would call back. Daisy gave her ten minutes, then rang the bank again.

"Hello?" Paulina sounded very slightly annoyed.

"Hi, this is Daisy Tucker," Daisy began. Although the two women weren't friends, they had spoken on the phone several times since the previous summer, when Sage and Ben had started spending so much time together.

"I got your message," Paulina said.

"Did Ben—" Daisy paused. How could she word this without offending his mother? Did Ben skip school today, did he run away from home, did he leave you a four-word note that scares the hell out of you?

"Did Ben and Sage lose our canoe last night? Yes," Paulina Davis said. "Did I just get a call from school telling me he's absent without my permission? Also yes. I'm furious, Daisy."

"At Sage?" Daisy felt the heat in her face. Was this supposed to be Sage's fault?

"Ben's a senior," Paulina said. "He's always been a good student, and this year he's captain of the soccer team. It's been his dream, and yesterday he missed the game. He should be visiting colleges, planning—" She had to stop, her voice shaking with rage. "I've forbidden him to see Sage before, but this time I mean it."

"When did you forbid him to see Sage?" Daisy asked. Her worry was instantly supplanted by defensive rage at this other mother's tone of voice regarding her daughter.

"A month ago," Paulina said. "Not that he listened."

"Listen, Sage is a good student, too. An honor student," Daisy said hotly. "I'm not wild about her spending every free minute with Ben, that's for sure. I trusted them all summer because they're good kids, especially Sage, she's always—"

“Look, I’m sorry.” Paulina cut her off. “I’m upset. Seeing each other nonstop all summer was one thing, but now school has to come first, I’m sure you agree. It’s just a matter of making some rules and sticking to them. I just think—”

“Have you been home since the school called?” Daisy asked.

“No, of course not. I work until— Why?”

“Because I think maybe they’ve run away.”

“Run away?”

“Sage has, anyway.” Daisy started to shake as she said the words. “Run away. She left a note.”

“Did she mention Ben?”

“No.”

“Ben wouldn’t run away,” Paulina said flatly. “Would not.”

“I didn’t think Sage would, either,” Daisy said.



Ben hadn’t left a note, but he had packed some things and taken his backpack and tent. Paulina had left work immediately to go home, and she called, upset, the minute she checked his room. Hathaway leaned against the refrigerator, waiting while Daisy held the phone and listened. Daisy was upset, but she wasn’t surprised by the fact the two kids had gone off together.

“He doesn’t have a car, she doesn’t have a car,” Paulina said. “What are they, hitchhiking?”

“Hitchhiking, yes, probably,” Daisy said.

“This is great,” Paulina said. “This is wonderful.”

Paulina’s tone said she was blaming the whole thing on Sage, and Daisy felt like screaming at her. “Should we . . .” Daisy didn’t want to finish the question: “Should we call the police?”

“The police,” Paulina said. “For one thing, they’re teenagers old enough to play hooky, and your daughter left a *note*. So the police won’t give this the time of day. For another, my son is seventeen, and I don’t want them getting the wrong idea.”

“What wrong idea?” Daisy asked.

“That this is *his* plan.”

“Maybe it is!” Daisy said harshly, closing her eyes, picturing Sage cuddled beside her on the loveseat, wanting her mother to play with her hair.

“No, Daisy. It is not! One thing I know about my son is he would not run away from home. Would not, unless someone was coercing him. If this isn’t Sage’s idea, I don’t know what. So don’t



give me *that*. We're a close family! My son wouldn't just disappear." Paulina choked back a sob.

"I want to call the police," Daisy said with her eyes closed. She felt Hathaway take her hand. She had a new pain in her chest, from saying it out loud, the fact that she wanted to call the police, and from hearing Paulina Davis say with pure and total conviction that her son wouldn't just disappear. Jake's image flooded Daisy's mind.

Only three years old, her son had been strong and solid. He had the same dark hair and green eyes as his twin sister, a brilliant smile and an amazing laugh, a way of scrambling up to his mother's neck and hanging under her chin, refusing to be put down. He would laugh, his lips against her skin, and she would start to laugh too, as if his happiness and good humor were catching. Oh, God, she had never thought he could just disappear. She had never thought she would look into her husband's eyes while he told her he'd lost their son. Jake had been missing, presumed dead, for thirteen years. And now Sage was gone, too.



Daisy dialed 911. When the operator answered, Daisy had to concentrate on not losing it. "My daughter . . ." she began.

"Yes?" the operator asked.

"Go ahead," Hathaway urged.

"My daughter's missing," Daisy said. "That is, she left a note. We had a fight, and she was very upset."

The operator directed her call to a detective. He gave his name, but Daisy didn't even hear it. She started talking right away. "My daughter is sixteen," she said, her throat aching, filled with relief at the sound of this anonymous voice that was going to find Sage, bring her back home.

"You say you had a fight? And she left a note?" the detective asked. "That's what you told the dispatcher?"

"Well, yes," Daisy began. "But—"

"This isn't unusual," the detective said in a calm voice. "It's a gorgeous day out, and she's probably playing hooky. Sixteen is prime time for that."

"I know," Daisy said. "I called the school, and she hasn't been there. But—it's not like Sage."

"She's a teenager," he said calmly. "They like to hang around the orchards, go pumpkin picking this time of year. Whole