

Wedding Whispers

Mary woke before dawn. There were still jobs to do on this her wedding day. As she pushed up her window, the scent of her mothers' carefully tended roses whispered to her on the breeze; it was cool and still smelt of last nights' thunderstorm; this left her wondering if the day would be a day of dripping heat or cool down into the autumn weather she hoped for. She heard her brothers laughing at something as they crossed the yard to the animal barn, and her mother and sisters moving around the kitchen. No one had knocked on her door yet; they must have decided to let her move at her own pace, being her last day at home. She enjoyed hearing their soft conversations floating through the thin walls as tomorrow it would only be her and William making conversation in the small hut he built for them over the past summer. She would have loved a timber plank home; however, she was thankful that the hut had walls and a ceiling, and she didn't mind dirt floors. She knew that it was only hard work, good crop and sheep sales, and saving for the future that would get them a timber home somewhere in the future.

With that thought in mind, Mary sat on her bed and thought about her hard-working family. Her parents were one of the earliest settlers into the area, and had seen many things change. Some changes were not good and would never be fixed, other changes were like a breath of fresh air through the community. Currently, the constant whispers of bushrangers were at every gathering and meal. People helped them mostly, as they felt that helping the bushrangers saved lives, especially their own. Mary secretly thought meeting one would add some spice to her life, as it sounded like there was a lot of freedom in their radical lifestyle. The idea of riding off wherever the wind took you and setting your own plans for each day was very appealing; especially as she thought of the physical work being a wife would entail.

The smell of breakfast cooking interrupted her thoughts; she got dressed into a house dress, made her bed for the last time and headed to the kitchen. Without saying a word, she kissed her mothers' cheek and began helping.

The morning passed in a hectic environment of activity as last-minute foods were prepared; dishes, tablecloths, stools, and other items were packed into the wagon and taken to the newly built church hall to be used for her wedding breakfast after her 4pm service. The spit roasts had been set up in the yard between the church and hall, and some of their friends were tending to that for the families. William and Mary would help do the same in a few weeks' time for the next wedding breakfast. Community living did have its benefits after all, Mary decided. At midday, the family sat down to a cold-cut luncheon, where the friendly banter between her and her siblings didn't let up. She would miss these times, and thought about inviting them all to a meal at her new home in a week or two. The realisation of how few kitchen dishes she currently owned stopped the invitation. Maybe there would be more given tonight. After the final cup of tea, her mother shoed everyone out of the kitchen and set up the hip bath.

'Right, Mary, go get your underclothes and towel, and I'll start filling this. Do you want lavender or rose soap?' Her mother asked as she smiled at her daughter.

'Rose please, Ma, to go with my bouquet.'

Her mother had placed large kettles of water on the stove at the beginning of lunch; Mary had not noticed them. She was glad of them now. A midweek bath was a real treat to match the midweek wedding.

'I'll come back in 15 minutes to wash your hair one last time,' her mother whispered as she left the room. Mary nodded and allowed herself to relax for a few minutes in the hot, rose scented water.

The voice of her younger brother broke through her dreams of William: 'I heard this morning that Thunderbolt was headed this way – I hope its true! I want to meet him!'

'Shhh,' her father spoke softly, 'we don't want to concern Mary with that today. I'm sure he is nowhere near our town.' The men's voices faded as they walked past the house, collecting more water from the rain barrels for their outside baths. Mary was left pondering the possibility of Thunderbolt being in her town and prayed that he would not hold up anyone here.

Her mother came back to wash Mary's hair and began softly speaking to her about what to expect on her wedding night. Mary blushed. Secretly she disagreed with her mother's idea of 'just lie there and wait', as her and William had already found time to experience those joys. In fact, Mary thought she might already have a baby on the way. She blushed again, and her mother noticed.

'It gets better over time,' she spoke softly, thinking Mary was shy of what the marriage bed was about. Ma quietly left the kitchen, telling Mary to add another kettle of water so the bath would be warm again for her use. Mary knew her time to get out of the bath had come.

Soon after, while a cool breeze blew around the house and her family continued to get ready, Mary gently drew on her bleached hessian wedding dress. There was never enough money for extra items, and like most people in her community, clothing was made from

hessian or calico. Her undergarments were calico, as it was softer against her skin; however, her dress was bleached hessian, as it would become her 'good' dress for a year or two, and then a housedress. It needed to last. They had washed the hessian many times to soften it, then bleached it as white as they could make it and decorated it with hand made lace that her younger sister had been working on ever since Mary announced her engagement. She was very happy with her dress, and how so many people had been involved in its creation. At half past three, they all loaded into the covered buggy, her mother and sisters each looking beautiful in their 'done over' dresses with new collars, each of them holding another platter of food; her brothers sitting on the barrels of ale in the back looking uncomfortable in their Sunday suits. She didn't know how her father had found the ale, and wondered if the boys had set up the still they had been talking about. The more Mary thought about it, the more she realised a still would account for the odd smells whispering in the wind at certain times of day, as she walked by the creek.

The ride to the church didn't take long, and Mary stayed in the back of the covered buggy, under her veil held in place by rosebuds from Mama's garden; she lifted her bouquet and deeply breathed in their subtle fragrance. She had loved the smell of roses all her life, so sweet and soft; her mother taught her how to graft new bushes from the old, which was why she had such a beautiful rose garden. All the dishwater went onto the roses, which helped keep them alive too. Mary listened to those walking past, and realised most of the conversation was about Thunderbolt, and how close he was. She wondered again what he was like. She saw William enter the church with his family and knew it was almost time. Her father appeared.

'Ready?'

'Yes, Pop. Please help me down.' Her father took her hand and helped her climb down. He then lifted her veil, kissed her cheek, and smiled. 'My first daughter to marry. I pray happiness for you.' Mary smiled her thanks and placed her veil back in place, took her fathers' arm and walked slowly into the church with him, sniffing the smell of the roasts cooking as she passed by the hall yard. Her tummy whispered its thoughts to her, causing her to grin.

Not long after, William kissed her firmly, showing the world his love of Mary. They headed out of the church to be greeted by all the young children throwing flower petals at them. Mary giggled, remembering the times she had done that at other weddings. It seemed like the whole town was here for her wedding, and the new hall only just held them all. The spit roast meal was all it should be, and the smell hung in the now still air. There was plenty of meat and vegetables left; and the cakes and jellies were to be set up while the young couple danced.

Mary and William whispered to each other as they danced, talking about their future and the possibility that she was already 'in the family way'. He was so happy for that to happen but needed to not jump and whoop about it yet. He held Mary tighter as they danced, then she felt William suddenly tense up and look towards the door. Mary heard the sudden whisperings however she hardly noticed as she looked at Williams' jaw tighten.

The whisperings around her began to reach her ears, confirming her thoughts as to who had bought her wedding to such a sudden stop.

'Is it *him*?'

'No, surely he wouldn't?'

'He has! Only *Thunderbolt* would hold up a wedding!'

At those words, Mary let go of William and spun around, looking for the infamous Captain Thunderbolt. Was he really at her wedding? She had read all the newspaper articles on him, and the gossips around town had filled in the gaps with their own versions of his life. The man pushing his way through the crowd certainly looked like the picture she had seen in the papers. *Oh my, I hope I don't faint!* Mary smiled up at the bushranger, in the hope that nothing awful would happen.

'Well, well, a bride who is not dancing. We need to rectify that,' Thunderbolt boomed, while holding her gaze. He winked at her, then looked at the fiddler and snapped his fingers at him, grabbing Mary as the music began and twirling into a waltz. Mary looked back at William, who was having a hard time concealing his rage although he appeared unable to move. As Mary changed positions in Thunderbolts' grip, she saw two other bushrangers from his gang by the door. Realising there was nothing William, or any other man could do, Mary tried to dance lightly and kept smiling at Frederick Ward.

'So, Mr Ward, you are passing through our town today,' she said easily, 'I hope you have all that your need already.'

'The smell of the roast you ate is still lingering on the wind, and it is what drew us to your hall. That and every eating place in town is already closed. You, or your new husband, must be popular for the whole town to close. And to answer your statement, a dance with you and a meal is all we require,' Fred replied, 'I won't ruin your day.'

After the waltz, an Irish jig started. Thunderbolt still held on to Mary, and whispered 'Let's make your husband jealous!' Then he kissed Mary on the neck with the whole town

watching! Oh, the whispers that now began! Mary stepped back, ready to slap Thunderbolt, when a look from William stopped her. She gritted her teeth and said, 'If you and you men would like to eat, you had better go into the yard now as I can see the fires are almost out.'

Thunderbolt laughed, and looking at his men, mentioned towards the double doors. Mary realised she was now tightly surrounded by all the girls and women whispering to her, and thought she would faint in the suffocating air that she felt now filled the room. William saw her turn white and was by her side very quickly. He took her to the nearest window and sat her down. 'Take some deep breaths – smell that gorgeous breeze! There's a hint of rain again, mingled with the gums.' He kept talking to her about the smells of their town, whispering on the wind, which calmed her nerves.

Mary smiled at him. 'What a story we now have to tell our grandchildren about! Who would think that Thunderbolt would interrupt our wedding, and demand a dance and dinner?'

William winked at her. 'I think you enjoyed it at the time. You had the biggest smile up until he kissed your neck.' His eyes twinkled, and she knew he wasn't mad.