

When Hope is Strong - Extract ...

(Chapter 1... pages 3–7)

Beenleigh, Queensland
Friday, 17 December 1875

‘Shouldn’t be long now. Probably just over the next rise.’

Maddie Hall, perched next to her husband on the rough wooden seat, watched distractedly as the sun glistened on Ted’s dark beard. He’d been repeating the same line for hours now. Or so it seemed. At the top of every hill she had half expected to see the small village laid out before them. Instead, there had been only bush. Hundreds, no, thousands, of green-grey eucalypts edging the roadside, limp and dusty in the heat, their pungent odour mingling with the sweltering air.

Spraying a fine shower of dust rearwards, the wagon groaned and shuddered over the uneven track that somehow passed for a road. Dappled shadows from the overhanging gums fell untidily across the track. Maddie closed her eyes and felt the hot air caress her face. Her skin felt dirty. Taut. She thought fleetingly of the washtub hidden somewhere under the jumble of belongings in the wagon, and dabbed her handkerchief across her forehead. The blue sky shimmered, simmered, its depth infinite above.

‘Everything all right?’ Ted asked, glancing sideways at his wife.

Maddie nodded and managed a tight smile, not trusting herself to speak. For if she spoke, she knew, the tears would come sliding down her tired cheeks. Perhaps the tears, once begun, would never stop, and she would cry until her body dissolved and soaked into the dry track that wound before them.

The thought depressed her further. She knew her husband hated it when she cried. No, she told herself firmly. There would be no tears. Softly she sighed, a faint sound heard by no one but herself, and silently mourned the loss of inconsequential things.

Beth and Kitty wriggled and squirmed on the makeshift tea-chest seats in the rear, chattering incessantly. Emma, curled on Maddie’s lap, slept on, her weight becoming a dull ache.

‘How this child can sleep is a mystery to me,’ Maddie confided to Ted eventually. ‘All these bumps and rattles.’

‘Won’t be long now, love. Won’t be long,’ her husband soothed. The reins rested loosely in his solid hands

Maddie, lips pressed into a firm line of resignation, raised her spare hand and readjusted the angle of her hat, carefully shading her face. Her hair spilled, red-gold, down her slender neck, tiny tendrils escaping from the chignon she had pinned so hastily that morning. She grasped her daughter’s chubby two-year-old hands firmly within her own, vainly attempting to shield the child from the probing rays of sunlight.

‘Everything all right back there, Dan?’ Ted swivelled in his seat and peered through the dust.

Maddie turned, awkwardly because of Emma, her eyes narrowed against the glare. Dan, Ted's young brother. Already he looked the part of the new settler as he sat astride the bay mare that Ted had purchased along with the wagon and the other horses the previous morning in Brisbane. A chestnut pack-horse followed alongside.

Dan caught her eye and flashed a smile, revealing two perfect rows of white teeth. He was seventeen, an in-between age. Not quite a man yet no longer a boy. Almost handsome, in a rugged kind of way. Tall and fair and wiry. Maddie glanced again at her husband. Stocky and dark, Ted was almost the antithesis of his brother. From all outward appearances, it seemed the only physical feature the two shared was the blueness of their eyes. A penetrating sapphire-blue, the colour reminded her of the Wedgwood plates, a cherished parting gift from her father, that she had so carefully wrapped and loaded in the wagon.

After what seemed like an eternity, Ted turned abruptly from his whip-wielding vantage point at the front of the wagon, a smile slapped carelessly across his face.

'Look what's ahead, girls,' he called.

Maddie stared ahead. There, just visible through the trees, were the roofs of several cottages, smoke spiralling upwards, above the trees. From somewhere beyond came the muffled frenzied barking of a dog. Civilisation at last. She breathed a sigh of relief as the vehicle lurched and squealed its way into the village of Beenleigh on that bright December afternoon.

The village was exactly as she had pictured it. A few dilapidated lean-to cottages disgorged an occasional group of shy children who watched, round-eyed and silent, from unkempt yards. Desultory paling fences leant every which way, like a mouthful of broken teeth, flanking the ramshackle buildings. A profusion of weeds poked between split slats and riotous creepers struggled up paint-peeled walls.

In side yards women went about their daily chores., gathering washing from haphazard clotheslines while toddlers played in the dirt at shady ends of shabby huts. An occasional dog barked a wary welcome as the wagon lumbered through the village scattering clusters of squawking hens.

At last they came to the centre of the village. The usual collection of shops lined each side of the road; inevitable sturdy iron-clad structures with verandahs that randomly shouldered and jostled each other along the roadside. Saddler, chemist, butcher, surgeon, boot maker, solicitor, cordial maker and general store: the signs were faded and peeling. The Queensland National Bank sported an impressive, though dusty, sandstone facade. And there, covertly tucked between a grimy barber shop window and the Messrs Hepworth, Fine Tobacconists, Maddie saw the placard: Land Office - District of Beenleigh.

The office was hidden behind an unwelcoming frown of an awning, which hung blistered and peeling in the heat. She pressed her hand against Ted's arm, a slight pressure that made him turn towards her.

'Look! Over there!'

'We've made it,' he said, drawing the wagon to a halt. He sat for a moment, studying the sign, a lopsided grin stretched from one side of his face to the other.

© Robyn Lee Burrows

This text is for personal use only and may not be reproduced in any form without permission from the author.

This book is now out of print, but you may be lucky enough to pick one up on e-Bay.