

# THE SECRET

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She had first married Thomas Roberts in the school playground when she was five years old. The ceremony had been days in the planning, and when the time came she'd worn one of her mother's net curtains fashioned into a makeshift veil and topped with a halo of daisies, and everybody agreed that she looked just like a real bride. Thomas presented her with a little clutch of hand-picked wild flowers he had collected on his way to school, and they'd stood hand in hand as little Davy Stewart officiated. Davy's speech was impaired by a crippling stammer, and his jam-jar glasses magnified his eyes to the size of a bush baby's, but he was a choirboy and the closest thing they had to a vicar.

Mary smiled at the memory as she turned to one side and admired her profile in the full-length mirror. She ran her hand tenderly over the swell of her belly, admiring the way it jutted out from just beneath her breasts and formed a perfect dome. She placed her hands in the small of her back, leaned forward and studied her complexion

for any signs that she might be blooming. The booties she had bought from Woolworths, a neutral lemon colour, lay on the dressing table. She buried her nose in the wool, but without little feet to warm them, they smelled new and sterile. At the sound of her husband clumping up the stairs, she thrust the booties back in the drawer and just managed to whip out the pillow from under her dress before he opened the bedroom door.

‘There you are, love. What’re you doing up here?’

She bashed the pillow back into shape and laid it on the bed. ‘Nothing, just tidying up a bit.’

‘What, again? Come here.’ He pulled her close, nudged her blond hair to one side and kissed her on the neck.

‘Oh, Thomas, what if I’m not pregnant?’ She tried to keep the whining note out of her voice, but she’d tasted disappointment so many times before that it was becoming difficult to remain positive.

He grabbed her round the waist with both hands and wrestled her on to the bed. ‘Then we’ll just have to keep trying.’ He burrowed his face into her neck, and she detected the familiar lingering smell of coal dust in his hair.

‘Thomas?’

He propped himself up on his elbows and gazed into her face. ‘What?’

‘You will hand your notice in if I am pregnant, won’t you?’

Thomas sighed. ‘If that’s what you want, Mary, yes, I will.’

‘I can’t look after a baby and run the guest house by myself, can I?’ she reasoned.

Thomas gazed at her, a crease of worry lining his forehead. ‘It’ll be tough, though, Mary. I mean, we’ve just had a thirty-five per cent pay increase. It’s a lot to give up, you can’t deny that.’

‘I know, love, but it’s such a dangerous job and you hate the long commute to the pit.’

‘You’re not wrong there,’ he conceded. ‘What time’s your appointment at the doctor’s?’

‘Three.’ She stroked a finger down the side of his cheek. ‘I wish you could come with me.’

He kissed her fingertip. ‘So do I, Mary, but I’ll be thinking of you and we can celebrate when I get home, can’t we?’

‘I hate it when you have to work the night shift.’

‘It’s not exactly a barrel of laughs for me either.’ It was said with a smile that removed any hint of rancour from his words.

As he sat on the bed to pull his boots on, Mary snuggled up beside him. ‘I love you so much, Thomas.’

He reached for her hand and laced his fingers through hers. ‘I love you too, Mary, and I just know you’re going to make a cracking mother.’

Ever since their official wedding night, three years ago, they had been trying for a baby. Mary had not envisaged it being so difficult, and at thirty-one years of age, she was all too aware that time was running out. She was

born to be a mother, she knew it, had always known it, and she could not understand why God was punishing her in this way. With each passing month, as the familiar dragging sensation crept into her stomach and the cramps took hold, a little more of her optimism had ebbed away, and her yearning to have a baby had become ever stronger. She was longing to be woken at four in the morning by a screaming infant, would relish having a bucket of terry nappies festering away in the corner of the kitchen. She wanted to look into her baby's eyes and see the future. Most of all she wanted to see her Thomas with his strong arms tenderly cradling his baby – boy or girl, it didn't matter – and to hear him being called 'Daddy'.

She would stare too long at babies in the street and glare at mothers who shouted at their children. She had once pulled out a tissue and wiped the nose of a little kid when his useless mother seemed oblivious to the long candles of snot the child was trying to reach with his tongue. Needless to say, her interference had not been appreciated. Once, on the beach, she'd come across a young boy sitting by the shoreline all alone, taking in the deep, juddering sobs that all children did when they had been crying too much. It turned out he'd dropped his ice cream on the sand after only one lick and his mother was refusing to buy him another. Mary had led him by the hand to the ice cream van and bought him a 99, his beaming face all the thanks she needed.

Her mothering instincts were never far from the

surface, and she was becoming more and more desperate to nurture a child of her own – hers and Thomas's. As she listened to her husband moving round the kitchen downstairs, getting ready for his shift, she prayed that today just might be the day when her dream would start to become a reality.

It was shortly after lunchtime when the train pulled into the station, its screeching brakes causing Mary to cover her ears. Thomas picked up his duffel bag and heaved it on to his back. He hated saying goodbye just as much as she did, but he always tried to remain upbeat. He held her in a bone-crushing embrace and rested his chin on her shoulder. 'I'm sure it's going to be good news at the doctor's, Mary. I'll have my fingers crossed for you.' He tilted her chin and kissed her lightly on the lips. 'And I give you my word that I'll hand my notice in the minute that little one comes along.'

Mary clapped her hands together, her eyes widening in delight. 'Really? Do you promise?'

He made the sign of a cross on his chest. 'I promise, Mary.'

'Thank you.' She kissed him on his stubbled cheek. 'Oh Thomas,' she sighed. 'Parting is such sweet sorrow.'

'Eh?'

*'Romeo and Juliet.'*

He shook his head. 'Sorry, you've lost me.'

'Oh Thomas,' she laughed, thumping him playfully on

his shoulder. 'You're such a philistine. Juliet tells Romeo that their sorrowful parting is also sweet because it makes them think about the next time they'll see each other.'

'Oh, I see.' He frowned and wrinkled his nose. 'Makes sense, I suppose. He knew what he was talking about, our Bill.'

He stepped on to the train, closed the door and pulled the window down so he could lean out. He kissed his fingers and pressed them to her cheek. She held his hand in place, struggling to stop the tears she knew he hated so much. 'You take care now, Thomas Roberts, you hear me?'

She wagged her finger in his face and he responded with an emphatic salute. 'Yes, boss.'

The guard blew his whistle and the train eased its way along the platform. Mary ran alongside for a few paces, Thomas waving his white handkerchief and dabbing at his eyes. She knew he was teasing her and she couldn't help but smile. 'I'll see you in a couple of days,' she shouted, as the train gathered speed and retreated into the distance.

The doctor's waiting room was crowded and stiflingly hot. The woman sitting on her left held a sleeping baby, who, by the smell of things, had recently filled its nappy. The man on her right roared a sneeze into his handkerchief and followed it with a violent coughing fit. Mary turned away and flicked through a well-thumbed maga-

zine. It was fifteen minutes past her appointment time and she had chewed her way through two fingernails. At last the receptionist bobbed her head round the door. 'Mary Roberts? The doctor's ready for you now.'

Mary looked up from her magazine. 'Thank you.' She rose slowly from her seat and knocked gingerly on the doctor's door. The minute she entered the room, however, all her apprehension dissipated. The doctor was sitting behind his large mahogany desk, but he had rocked back in his chair, his hands clasped together on his lap, a knowing smile on his lips.

She decided to take the scenic route back to the guest house. A bracing walk along the seafront would put colour in her cheeks, and a lungful of the salty sea air would clear her head. She found she didn't really walk, though; it was something between floating and skipping, and by the time she arrived home she was light-headed and breathless. She played the doctor's words over and over in her head. 'I'm pleased to tell you, Mrs Roberts, that you are indeed pregnant.' Finally, after three years of heartache, false alarms and crushing disappointment, they were going to be a family. She couldn't wait to tell Thomas.

## 2

It was the incessant ringing of the telephone in the hall downstairs that wrenched her from her deep, dreamless sleep. She was groggy and disorientated as she glanced across at Thomas's side of the bed; there was nothing there but an empty space. She ran her hand along the cold sheet, confirming that he had not been sleeping there, and as her mind began to clear, she remembered he was working the night shift. She glanced at her bedside clock as the numbers flipped over to read 3.37. The first lump of dread settled into her stomach; nobody called at this time for a chat. She scrambled out of bed and thundered down the stairs, not caring that she might wake her guests. She snatched up the clunky black receiver, her breath coming in short fitful bursts. 'Hello, Mary Roberts speaking.'

'Hello, Mrs Roberts. I'm sorry to wake you.' The disembodied voice sounded thick and rough, as though the speaker needed to clear his throat.

'Who is this?' All her saliva had evaporated and her tongue refused to cooperate. Black dots danced before her eyes in the gloom of the hallway, and she placed a steadying hand on the banister.

‘I’m ringing from the colliery.’ He paused, and Mary heard him struggling to take a deep breath. ‘There’s been an explosion, some miners are trapped and I’m really sorry to tell you that Thomas is one of them.’

Instinctively, one hand went to her stomach and she closed her eyes. ‘I’m on my way.’

After pulling on the first thing to hand, Mary hurriedly scribbled a note for Ruth. The young girl had worked for her for a year now and was more than capable of serving breakfast to the guests. As least that was what Mary told herself, because she didn’t have time to think about the amount of china the girl dropped or the number of times she left the bacon under the grill too long. A less patient employer would have sacked her long ago, but Ruth was the sole breadwinner in a family comprised of her asthmatic widowed father and her younger brother who could only walk with the aid of calipers. Mary had never had the heart to add to her problems.

The rain lashed the pavement as she pulled open the car door, silently praying for the engine to start. The stench of oil rose from the sodden carpet in the footwell. Their old Vauxhall Viva had never been the most reliable vehicle. It was more rust than pale blue, and the exhaust chugged out the sort of obnoxious cloud of black smoke more commonly seen belching out of a chimney. Mary managed to coax the engine into life on her fourth attempt, and made it to the colliery in just over an hour.

She could barely remember the journey, but knew she'd exceeded all the speed limits and dreaded to think whether she had bothered to stop for any red lights.

A small crowd had gathered on the pit banks, the men standing with heads bowed, silent in the rain, just watching and waiting. The sky had taken on an apricot hue as dawn broke over the horizon, the only sound coming from the winding shaft as it slowly pulled up its grisly cargo. A collective gasp emerged from the crowd as two bodies were retrieved from their tomb. Mary rushed forward, but then felt herself being pulled back.

'Let them do their job.' A sombre-looking man in a hard hat with a torch on the front gripped her shoulders. His eyeballs and teeth stood out from his coal-blackened face, and a trickle of blood ran from a deep cut just below his left eyebrow. He was evidently one of the lucky ones.

'What's taking so long?' implored Mary.

'There've been a number of explosions down there, love, but you can be sure everybody wants them miners brought up just as much as you do. We're all pulling together.' His deep cough sounded as though he was going to bring a lung up, and he snorted the resulting globule of black phlegm on to the ground beside Mary, who could not conceal her disgust. 'Sorry,' he apologised. 'You waiting for your husband?'

Mary nodded. 'Thomas Roberts. Do you know him?'

'Aye, I do. He's a good man, and a strong one at that. He's not afraid of hard work either. I wouldn't be

surprised if a promotion's in the offing.' He placed a reassuring hand on her arm and nodded towards the bank. 'The chaplain's over there. If you believe in that sort of thing, it might help you to pray.'

A few members of the colliery band had arrived and began to play hymns, but the mournful tunes only added to the despairing gloom and Mary wandered off to a quiet corner to wait for news. She wasn't sure praying would do any good. Surely if there was a God, there wouldn't have been an explosion in the first place? Still, it couldn't hurt. She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes while she mouthed a silent prayer for the safe return of her husband, making all kinds of promises in return that she knew she would never keep. She tried not to think of Thomas trapped beneath her feet, deep in the bowels of the earth in a place that was surely as terrifying and inhospitable as hell itself.

The rain had eased off and the sky was beginning to clear, yet deep within her chest she felt it. A loud rumble of thunder exploded in her ears and she looked up at the sky. The crowd on the pit banks surged forward as one, but the firemen coordinating the rescue held their arms wide and prevented them from advancing.

'Please, can you all stay back. Come on now, everybody, please move back.' The fireman's tone was firm but kind.

Mary rushed over and joined the throng, suddenly wanting the comfort of others in the same position.

An old man in a shabby donkey jacket removed his

cap and clutched it to his chest. He turned to her and shook his head. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘The thunder, you mean?’

‘That wasn’t thunder, lass, it was another explosion.’

‘Oh God, no.’ She grabbed the stranger’s arm. ‘They will get them out, though, won’t they?’ Her voice dropped to a whisper. ‘They have to.’

He attempted a smile. ‘We can only hope and pray. Who are you waiting for, love?’

‘My husband, Thomas.’ She patted her stomach and added, ‘We’re expecting a baby.’

‘Well that’s right nice for you. My lad’s down there, our Billy.’ He motioned with his head. ‘His mam’s up on the bank, in a right state she is. We lost our Gary in a motor-cycle accident last year and she still hasn’t got over that.’ He paused and shook his head. ‘This’ll finish her off, this will.’ He stole a glance towards Mary’s stomach. ‘When’s your babby due, then?’

‘Oh, I’ve only just found out that I’m pregnant. Thomas doesn’t even know yet.’ She felt her chin wobble and the words caught in her throat as she began to shiver. ‘He’s my life. I’m not sure I could bear it if anything’s happened to him. I’ve loved him since I was five years old. I can’t lose him now.’

The old man held out his gnarled hand. ‘Name’s Arnold. What d’yer say we get through this together, eh, lass?’ He pulled out a hip flask and offered it to her. ‘A nip of brandy will warm you up, erm . . . What’s your name?’

She shook her head to the brandy. ‘I’m Mary, Mary Roberts.’

Arnold took a swig from the flask, wincing as the brandy hit the back of his throat. ‘I’ll tell you something, Mary,’ he said. ‘Them miners down there deserve every penny of that pay rise; dirty, dangerous work it is.’ His bitter tone exposed his simmering anger. ‘But what can you do? Mining’s in our family’s blood. Our Billy was born with coal dust in his hair.’

Mary wrapped her arms around herself. ‘I hate it too, but Thomas has promised to resign when the baby comes along. We run a guest house, you see, so I need him to be around.’ She stared down at her freezing feet. In her hurry to get dressed and leave the house, she had slipped on a pair of sandals, and now the mud oozed up between her toes.

The winding shaft creaked into life once more and the crowd fell silent. The two firemen who brought the cage to the surface exchanged a look, and then one of them turned to his commander and shook his head.

‘No!’ Mary screamed. ‘Is it my Thomas?’

She tried to run, but Arnold held her tight. ‘Mary, love, come on now, you’re best off not looking.’

It was mid-afternoon by the time a watery sun finally broke through the clouds, and still Mary shivered. Her back ached and her stomach grumbled, but the thought of food only made her want to retch.

The chief fireman, his face blackened and expression

grave, removed his helmet and ran his hand through his plastered-down hair. He put a loudhailer to his lips. 'Can you all gather round, please?'

The crowd fell silent and shuffled forward a few steps. Mary clung on to Arnold.

The fireman cleared his throat. 'As you all know, there have been a number of explosions in the main shaft, about two thousand feet down. It's estimated that there are still around eighty miners trapped behind a fire in the main section. We've made some progress, but it's clear that the fire has taken hold.' The crowd drew its breath as one, halting the fireman's delivery momentarily. He held up his hand for silence, before continuing in his solemn tone. 'The air in the shaft is carrying carbon monoxide in dangerous quantities.' He licked his lips and swallowed hard. 'It is believed highly unlikely that anybody could survive in such conditions.' The loudhailer gave a long, piercing whistle, and Mary covered her ears.

She suddenly came over all hot and was afraid she might faint. Her hands clutched her stomach as she turned to Arnold. 'What's he talking about?'

Arnold wiped his eyes, then stared unblinkingly into the distance. 'I think he's trying to tell us our boys are dead.'

Mary's knees buckled and she sank down on to the mud. 'No,' she wailed. 'Not Thomas, not my Thomas.'

It was another four hours before the search was officially called off. With fears for their safety, the rescuers were

withdrawn from the mine and the foreman advised the waiting families to go home for some rest. As the crowd began to dwindle, Mary sat down stubbornly on the muddy bank and wrapped her arms around her knees. There was no way she was leaving Thomas just when he needed her most. She felt Arnold gently squeeze her shoulder. ‘Come on, lass, up you get. You’ll be no good to anyone sat here, and you’ve got that babby to think of.’

It was late evening by the time she arrived home. Ruth, bless her, had done an admirable job with the breakfast, cleared away all the pots and made up the rooms. She was sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper when Mary walked in. ‘Oh, Mrs Roberts. What can I say? I heard it on the radio. They said there were no survivors.’ She stood up and reached her arms out to her employer.

Mary ignored the gesture; any sign of kindness was sure to tip her over the edge. ‘I’m just going up to my room, Ruth. Thank you for all you’ve done today. I’ll see you right.’

Alone in their bedroom, she opened the wardrobe and took out one of Thomas’s shirts. She pressed it to her nose, forcing the scent of him into her nostrils. She wanted to drink him in, to be forever ingrained with his familiar smell. She stripped off her clothes and put the shirt on. It was far too big now, but it brought her a degree of comfort to know that in a few months it would fit her perfectly. She would nurture Thomas’s baby and

make sure he or she knew what a brave man he was, and how much he'd been looking forward to being their father.

As exhaustion took hold, Mary lay back on the pillow and closed her eyes, but it was only a few seconds before images of Thomas choking behind a wall of fire had her on her feet and running to the bathroom. She splashed cold water over her face and stared at her reflection in the mottled mirror above the sink. Her cheeks were streaked with lines of muddy tears and her eyes were bloodshot, little pillows of fat underneath. She began to fuss over her flattened hair, momentarily thinking that it would not do for Thomas to see her in this dishevelled state. She stopped and gripped the edge of the sink. She had no idea how she was going to carry on without him, how she was going to bring their baby up all by herself. It was all she had left of Thomas now, but it was the most precious thing. She wondered if it would be enough to see her through the dark times ahead.

She woke up a few hours later, sprawled on top of the bed, still clad in Thomas's shirt. Her mouth was dry, her head throbbed and the stench of smoke clung to her hair. Her left arm dangled over the edge of the bed and fizzed with pins and needles. It was several seconds before she remembered that her life was never going to be the same again.

She padded to the bathroom and stood with her back to the toilet as she hitched up the shirt. She pulled down her panties, stared at the red stain in the crotch and screamed.