

*The Wedding*

An autumn Saturday, uncharacteristically mild, blue sky clear of cloud. A private church, sparrow pecked sandstone walls, Welsh slate roofing a Gothic entrance framed by two massive old oaks, their canopies of red and yellow shimmering on a light breeze, living confetti as if designed just for this day. A postcard scene, picture perfect the setting magical.

Family and friends have flown in from interstate and overseas, some neighbours attending, *Saint Elmo* the district's oldest property first settled long ago on the Fish River, an estate carved with convict labour.

One person not on the invite list is Mick Howell. There are three children who will inherit *Saint Elmo*, two brothers comprising today's groom and best man who despise him intensely. And a daughter, Sophie. Mick and Sophie are an item, this recent development rankling within her family.

Mrs Mac is on the invite list. She lives on a property adjacent to *Saint Elmo* and Mick happens to maintain her place repairing fences, pumps, spraying weeds, any odd job. In return Mick buys and sells lambs and calves, fattening them for market, saving money to start his own line of breeding cattle. A barter system so Mrs Mac does not compromise her war widow's pension. Several days ago, Mick unloaded his first small herd of purebred Angus heifers onto her place.

That night *Hector Saint Elmo*, an impressive Angus bull of sizeable proportions and impeccable bloodline ploughs through the boundary fence. In breeding terms Hector has excellent conformation, wide across the chest and loins, a well-rounded rump, his top-line straight and even. Ever the opportunist, Mick leaves him to service his herd but on this Saturday morning he moves the great beast back home before Mrs Mac's neighbours notice their best bull is missing.

Back home again Hector roams strangely unfamiliar paddocks near the stone church, spying a small herd of heifers idly cropping the last of summer's paddock grass some distance away. Neither this paddock nor the heifers were here a few days ago. He tests the temporary fencing, erected to separate farm stock from the church grounds.

The wedding party and their guests emerge from the church spilling out into bright sunshine, shady oaks inviting them into their embrace the ground beneath mottled with a deep bronze and burgundy plush.

The professional photographer sets up her camera. Guests pose with the wedding party. Sophie stands with Mrs Mac in the church's narrow vestibule. She is no fan of her new sister-in-law and her brothers' recent treatment of Mick has left her cold. She is not in a forgiving frame of mind.

A young heifer appears followed by another and then a third, the animals looking confused, corralled by a line of vehicles parked on the circular cobbled church drive. Guests laugh. The beasts stop staring at the wedding guests, one dropping pads of warm manure on the manicured grass.

Hamish, the groom's father and master of *Saint Elmo* acts quickly. He grabs his unattached son, the best man by the arm. "I don't know how this has happened but let's get them away from here now."

No sooner do the two men move to outflank the animals when three more heifers bolt onto the scene Hector St Elmo close behind.

While six animals canter through the bemused crowd looking for a good place to eat and nothing more Hector has more pressing intentions, pursuing six irresistible young girls. Guests scramble away as Hamish, the best man, the groom and now several guests try to herd the animals.

One heifer balked, running straight for the church door. Sophie ushers Mrs Mac to one side as it dashes inside. It breaks in the shadowy nave and slides on the slate flagstone flooring before crashing into rows of cedar pews, skittling the unsuspecting marriage celebrant in the process.

Hamish runs between Hector and the heifers his arms flailing, blocking the bull's direct access to his prospective harem. There is a temporary stand-off. Hamish and Hector share much in common, the estate squire and the sire of his paddocks both entitled, self-serving and obtuse, intractably so.

However, Hamish weighs 65 kilos and Hector tips the scales at well over half a tonne. It is a no-brainer even for a bull. He charges, tossing his owner aside like a grunting bag of chaff, Hamish momentarily airborne before landing on his cobbled drive, arms at odd angles, his head bleeding in multiple places. He lays writhing in pain.

Guests fare little better, knocked off their feet as they run from the scattering animals, the bull running wildly, changing direction every time he spies a prospective conquest. People look for places to hide. So do the heifers except for one hussy. Hector interests her and she interests him.

The best man puts his shoulder against her rump trying to move her. She objects and farts, hot dribbly manure spraying over his face. He stumbles away as Hector side-swipes him, sending him flying across the grass.

The groom grabs his new bride, lifting her up onto a low branch. No sooner has he lifted her to apparent safety when Hector charges underneath, his horns spearing through the copious folds of her wedding dress securing it firmly, pulling her out of the tree.

She screams, landing face down along the back of the huge bull, her ankles effectively secured to Hector's head, her body bouncing up and down as Hector lumbers along.

The groom chases them, Hector oblivious to the pursuit. He is focussed, the hussy yarded by the row of cars. Playing hard to get she takes the only available option, the open rear door of the Bentley Convertible. Hector follows, clambering into the bridal car then mounting her, pinning her onto the rear seat. The Bentley sags under the weight of some vigorous coupling. There is a loud crack as its rear axle snaps, the bride screaming in synchrony with Hector's exertions.

The wedding photographer captures the essence of the moment, the heifer baying loudly, Hector with his forelegs splayed across her shoulders, a look of

ecstasy on his face and the newly married bride draped along his back, punching wildly at the hind of the muscled beast.

The groom climbs into the front seat of the open convertible, pulling his bride off Hector's back. Hector backs out of the Bentley, his horns adorned with trailing white satin ribbons. After his first ride in a motor vehicle, he is keen for another elsewhere. The hussy jumps the closed rear door on the other side of the car, leaving her hoofed impressions on a side panel.

Guests run to assist Hamish. Someone calls an ambulance. Sophie and Mrs Mac help the celebrant as the heifer inside the church contentedly crops the floral pew arrangements. When she finishes, she drops a cow cake and leaves, pausing to sniff at the marble baptismal font.

They finally manage to herd the cattle out of the churchyard, restoring some semblance of normality. But the post-wedding scene is a debacle. The Bentley is towed and there are two vacant seats at the reception, the celebrant and Hamish both admitted to hospital. The bride and groom attend the reception in their going-away outfits, the bride sobbing through her five-course meal. The best man weeps too, suffering an allergic reaction to hot manure. In his speech the groom makes an oblique reference to their recent wedding vows, ruefully commenting that the '*for worse*' came sooner than he expected. The bridal corsage is not thrown, consumed earlier by a heifer indifferent to the occasion.

Sophie drives Mrs Mac home. "Should I choose to get married I doubt it will be in the old church" she comments ruefully.

“You and Mick will make it work. You’ve rejuvenated him, turned him into a new person, one I like more than the old one. Mind you, you could do without the cattle,” Mrs Mac replies impishly.

Mick is waiting. “Have a good time?”

“Yes. The wedding was memorable for all the wrong reasons though the reception was up to the usual high standard” Sophie replies.

“What happened?”

“Our main stud bull gate-crashed the wedding along with half a dozen heifers. Absolute mayhem. Two went to hospital, the celebrant and father. A Bentley towed.

Strangely, Mick is quiet. Mrs Mac regards him. “Please don’t tell me you had something to do with it?” She is too perceptive; Mick thinks to himself.

“Not on purpose,” he replies cryptically.

“Please explain,” she insists. Sophie stares at him expectantly.

“Well,” he begins evasively, “Your bull broke into Mrs Mac’s paddock the other day where my cows are. I left him there for a while and returned him this morning.

“But I am an innocent victim too.”

Sophie shakes her head.

“I doubt that you have ever been innocent in your life, Michael.” Mrs Mac admonishes.