

A
RELUCTANT
BRIDE

THE BRIDE SHIPS  1

JODY HEDLUND

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THE BRIDE SHIPS

A Reluctant Bride



T H E B R I D E S H I P S  B O O K O N E

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JODY HEDLUND



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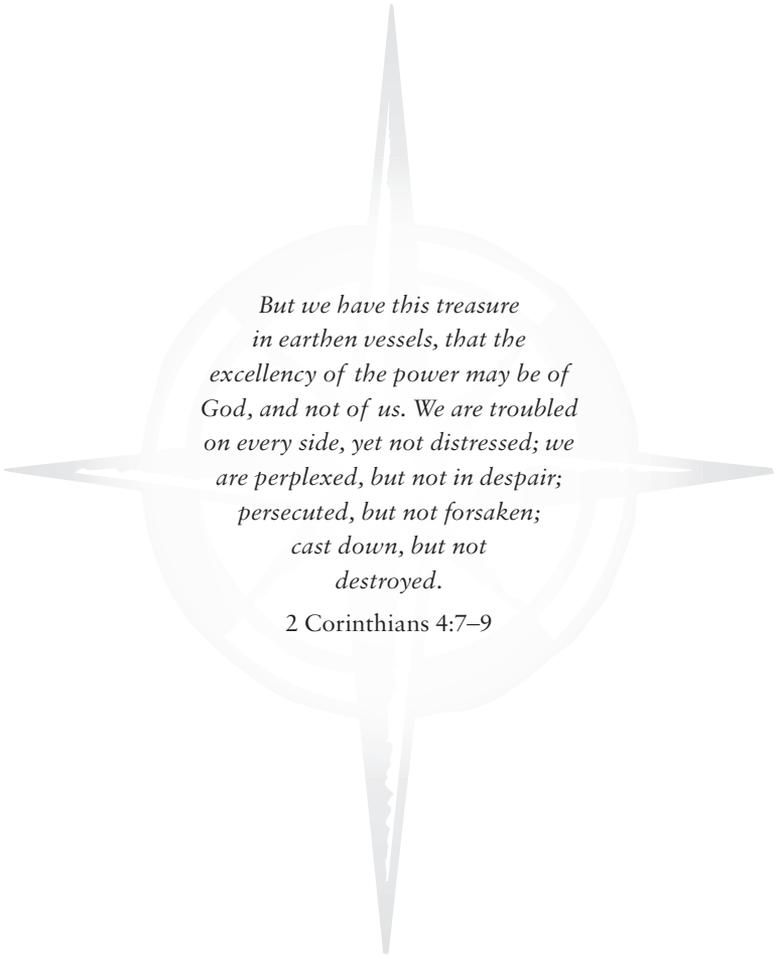
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*But we have this treasure
in earthen vessels, that the
excellency of the power may be of
God, and not of us. We are troubled
on every side, yet not distressed; we
are perplexed, but not in despair;
persecuted, but not forsaken;
cast down, but not
destroyed.*

2 Corinthians 4:7–9

LONDON, ENGLAND

MAY 1862

*H*ang on a little longer, my lamb.” Mercy Wilkins shifted the listless infant in her arms without slowing her pace.

Clara had stopped responding on Chilton Street, but the slightly warm breath coming from between the little girl’s colorless lips told Mercy she wasn’t too late . . . so long as the Shoreditch Dispensary wasn’t crowded and so long as Dr. Bates was available. He’d treat the infant even though Mercy had no way to pay for his services.

“Don’t you fret,” she murmured. “If Dr. Bates isn’t there, I’ll sell my shoes to pay the fee.”

Mercy ignored the cold dampness between her toes, the puckered skin on feet that hadn’t been dry since spring had chased away the chill of winter and invited a familiar tormentor in its place—rain.

The frequent showers not only soaked her half boots but also turned the streets into swamps of mud and horse manure. The mixture oozed through the holes where her toes had worn through the leather and threatened to suck the shoes off her feet.

A Reluctant Bride

She'd tied the frayed laces tight, causing them to break and forcing her to knot them yet again. Though the strings didn't reach the tops of her boots anymore, she was lucky to have them, lucky to have boots at all when so many wore nothing on their feet but rags.

"I'll gladly trade my boots for you to be seen to by a doctor, my sweet one." She brushed a kiss against Clara's cheek. The infant's face was as pale as the fog that hung over the rooftops, and as thin and hollow as the terraced houses that lined either side of the street.

Several boys bumped against Mercy, jostling her. Fingers darted in and out of her skirt pocket with the nimbleness of an expert thief. She had nothing for the boys to steal. The looks of her should have told them that. Except that with the sick infant, maybe they supposed she had a halfpenny tucked away to pay the doctor.

She caught sight of the face of one of the boys, recognizing him in spite of the layer of soot and filth. "Mr. Martins is looking for another boy to clean the streets. Go talk to him and earn your bread the honest way. D'ye hear me?"

The boy didn't acknowledge her comment except to hunch further into his man-sized greatcoat and tip his round cap down to shield his face.

Mercy shook her head but plodded forward. If Mr. Martins would only offer her the street-cleaner job, she'd take it in a snap. But no amount of her pleading had changed his mind about giving the work to a young woman.

"Heaven save us all," he'd exclaimed. "What's the world coming to with women thinking they can do a fellow's job?"

Mercy had wanted to retort that dodging betwixt horses and carriages to shovel up steaming piles of dung didn't take any special talent. Surely a woman could do the job just as well as a man. But Mr. Martins made it clear enough he wouldn't hire her, just like the dozen other people she'd approached that day.

"No matter," she whispered. "I'll find something. Just you wait and see."

Clara's head lolled, and Mercy shifted the infant again. Not quite two years old, the child didn't weigh much more than Twigg's newborn babe. Even so, after carrying the girl for blocks, Mercy's arms burned from the burden.

Through the foggy mist hovering in the narrow street, she glimpsed the Shoreditch Dispensary. Like the surrounding businesses, it leaned outward and was propped up by beams to the building across the street. The beams were almost like canes, meant to keep the aged, tottering structures from collapsing into the filth below.

Between high windows hung strings of soggy garments, so threadbare and gray they resembled the rags Twigg sorted at the factory. Their soaking from the recent rain would wash away the grime for a moment, but never for long. In this part of London, the filth was as constant a companion as the rats.

"Almost there, dear heart." If only she'd known how sick the girl was, she would have brought her earlier. At least in the late afternoon, the streets weren't as crowded. And at least the rain had decided to show some compassion.

Upon reaching the dispensary door, Mercy fumbled at the handle, kicking her boots against the brick step, attempting to dislodge the muck. As she entered, the dark gloom of the hallway greeted her.

An old man crouched in the corridor cradling his arm. A mother sat opposite him, holding a bundle of blankets with a tiny bare foot poking through the fabric. The babe's stillness, as well as the mother's vacant gaze, told a story Mercy had heard too many times.

"Doctor!" Mercy strode down the hallway, her footsteps squeaking and squishing with each step. "I'm in desperate need of help."

"Wait your turn, you young cur," growled the old man. "There be others needing the doctor first." He nodded to the mother and babe. The woman stared at the faded green wallpaper, the remnants of a time when the home had been fancy and belonged

A Reluctant Bride

to a family of means. Such families had long since moved away and built larger homes in parts of London Mercy had only heard about but never seen.

Mercy regarded the babe's unmoving outline, then faced the older man. "The doctor may be able to save a life. Do you want two children dead instead of one?"

She held his angry gaze until finally he dropped his sights to the muddy footprints that caked the wood floor.

"Doctor," Mercy called again as she made her way to the room Dr. Bates used as his office. "Please, I need your help. Straight-away."

Seeing the door was ajar, she bumped it open with her hip. The massive desk positioned near a boarded window was cluttered with books and papers and inkpots. A lantern was lit and illuminated its dusty globe painted with delicate flowers. But Dr. Bates wasn't there.

The door of the adjacent room swung open, and a young man exited, his hand swathed in bandages. He didn't spare her or the others a glance, as if they didn't exist.

Mercy supposed it was easier for some people to pretend the problems weren't there. The heartache, the burdens, the needs . . . it was all so overwhelming at times.

Clara's weight dragged at Mercy. For an instant, she was tempted to slide down next to the mother with the dead babe and stare at the wallpaper too. But at a clank from the open doorway, Mercy forced herself to move, gathering the strength to fight for one more life.

"Doctor?" She entered the room unbidden. "Can you give a look at my little lamb?"

At the room's lone table, a young man stood in front of a basin of water where he was washing his hands. Beside the basin lay a scattering of instruments and supplies—a scalpel, small scissors, ligature thread, and needles. He'd discarded his coat over the back of a nearby chair to reveal a striped waistcoat and a finely tailored

shirt, its sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His dark brown hair was tousled, likely the result of a long day of rushing from one urgent need to the next.

His face was unfamiliar, not one of the usual doctors who gave of their time at the dispensary. Since Clara needed immediate attention, this man would have to do.

He glanced up and paused in his scrubbing. Exhaustion crinkled the corners of his eyes and forehead. “I shall be with you in a moment.” He didn’t speak unkindly, just wearily.

“I don’t have a moment, sir.” Mercy crossed the room toward the cot. “This sweet child is failing fast, that she is.”

Gently Mercy lowered the girl, whose limbs flopped about, her strength and life all but gone. Mercy dropped to her knees beside the cot and caressed Clara’s cheek and forehead, brushing back strands of matted hair. The girl’s dirty face was shriveled, her eyes shrunken, her lips cracked.

“Don’t you leave me, dear heart. The kind doctor will fix you up. I promise.”

Thankfully, the doctor didn’t delay and instead crossed to them quickly. He knelt on the opposite side of the cot and checked the infant’s pulse, an air of urgency emanating from every brisk movement he made. “What are your daughter’s symptoms?” he asked as he lifted first one eyelid and then the other.

“She’s not . . .” Clara wasn’t Mercy’s daughter. Yes, they shared the same blond hair. But couldn’t the doctor see Mercy wasn’t wearing a wedding band?

As soon as she asked the silent question, she chastised herself. A wedding band wasn’t necessary to have children, especially not where she came from. This doctor apparently knew it too.

He placed an instrument against Clara’s chest. “Her symptoms?”

“She can’t keep anything down, sir. No liquids or solids. It all comes out one way or the other.”

The doctor rose so suddenly that Mercy started. “How long has she had the vomiting and diarrhea?”

A Reluctant Bride

“It began last night—”

“And you are just now bringing her in?” Irritation edged his voice.

“I’d have brought her earlier if I’d known, sir,” Mercy replied. If only Clara’s mother had thought to call for her sooner.

“Fever?”

“Come and gone.”

The doctor muttered something under his breath as he rummaged through supplies in a chest. He returned with a teaspoon and a small brown vial. “I would normally suggest having the child drink a mild solution of salt and warm water until the poison is eliminated and vomit runs clear.”

“Poison, sir?”

“Her symptoms point to cholera infantum.”

A chill crept up Mercy’s spine. Most people called it summer diarrhea because it occurred in the summer months when the heat made the foulness of streets and ditches almost unbearable. She’d watched helplessly last August as a dozen little ones in her neighborhood had wasted away, including her own baby brother.

“That cannot be it, sir,” Mercy said. “It’s not summer yet.”

“Cholera infantum can strike at any time of the year.” The doctor unscrewed the lid on the brown bottle and poured a scant amount into the spoon. “The condition is related to tainted food, possibly spoiled milk.”

Mercy used her fingers to comb back Clara’s hair. Milk was rare in the slums. Had Clara’s mother found some? If so, she’d have given the treat to the girl expecting it to nourish, not poison, her.

“Raise her head,” he instructed.

Mercy lifted Clara’s body.

He brought the spoon to the girl’s mouth. “She’s too dehydrated and won’t rouse to drink. Our best hope is to administer the acetozone every ten to fifteen minutes.”

With surprising tenderness, he tipped the contents between her

lips. He watched the pale, unresponsive face for a long moment before holding out the spoon and brown bottle to Mercy.

She took the items hesitantly. "Sir?"

"You may administer the next dose when I tell you it is time. Meanwhile, I shall prepare an enema for her."

Mercy nodded.

He crossed the room and searched in the chest again. Then he laid out a syringe and catheter and began mixing a solution from a number of bottles. From the fine cut of his garments to the way he held himself, she could see he was a gentleman. But strangely his face and arms were as sun-bronzed as a dockhand's.

Perhaps he'd recently returned from India or Africa or one of the other tropical colonies. She'd heard such places were blissfully warm all the year long. Those were the kinds of places that occupied her dreams during the winter, when they had only enough coal to keep from freezing to death but never enough to be warm.

"You're new to the dispensary, sir?" she asked, letting her curiosity get the better of her as usual.

"No." His stir stick clanked against the glass container as he swirled the cloudy liquid. "I'm only helping Dr. Bates for a few days now and then while I'm in town."

"Oh, Dr. Bates. Now, he's a right fine gent." Not only didn't he charge her for his treatments, but he was always kind and offering her helpful advice.

She swished the contents of the brown bottle. How much would this new doctor charge her today? Would the offer of her shoes be enough? They were the last thing she owned of any value. She'd long since pawned the rest of her possessions. Would she, like some of the women she knew, have to start trading favors for what she needed?

The very idea repulsed her. But as she ran a finger along Clara's delicate nose and traced the outline of her face to her chin, she could begin to understand what drove some women to such desperate measures.

A Reluctant Bride

Mercy glanced at the doctor and caught him staring at her. She half expected he'd read her thoughts, that she'd see lewd calculation in his eyes the same that she'd seen in Tom Kilkenny's eyes when he'd told her she could be a serving wench in his pub. She knew as well as everybody else that Tom's wenches did more than hand out mugs of beer.

She'd told Tom she'd rather go to the workhouse.

He'd only laughed and warned her the workhouse would ruin her pretty features and turn her into a hag so that no one would ever want her.

Mercy had only to think about how much Patience had changed in the few months she'd lived at St. Matthew's Bethanl Green Workhouse. Before going in, Patience had been like a rare blade of green grass poking through the piles of garbage in a dark alley. But she'd withered so that whenever Mercy visited the workhouse, she hardly recognized her sister anymore.

All the more reason why Mercy needed to find a job, so Patience could live at home again.

The doctor shifted his attention to Clara, but not before Mercy glimpsed the compassion in his expression. He felt sorry for her because he thought Clara was her daughter. She ought to correct him, but what if his assumption motivated him to work harder to save the child?

"It's time for another spoonful of the acetozone," he said as he readied the catheter.

Mercy poured the medicine into the spoon, cradled Clara in her free arm, then slowly tipped the liquid into the girl's mouth the way the doctor had. "There you are, sweet one."

She envisioned Clara's adorable smile, the one she'd given Mercy yesterday morning when Mercy had delivered half rolls to the children who lived in her building. Occasionally Mr. Hughes, the old baker over on High Street, gave Mercy the rolls that had gone stale. It was a kind gesture. She supposed he did it because she'd once stopped a boy from thieving a basket of fresh bread from his shop.

Even if the rolls were harder than a pewter pot, they were nourishment all the same. And Clara was just one of the children Mercy made a point of helping whenever she could.

She bent and pressed a kiss against Clara's sunken cheek, waiting to feel the faint warmth of the little one's breath. Instead, there was stillness. Mercy sat up only to find the gray liquid dribbling from the corner of Clara's mouth.

Her stomach twisted with a deep knowing, one she wanted to ignore. She dragged the spoon under the leaking medicine and brought it back to the girl's lips. "Come now, lamb. You have to take this."

She attempted to pour it in, but it trickled back out. She tried again and again, murmuring, "Please sweet one, please . . ."

Finally she became aware of gentle fingers tugging at the spoon, attempting to pull it from her. She tore her gaze from Clara to find the doctor across from her. His brows slanted above eyes brimming with pity.

How dare he give up so easily? She wanted to shove his hand away, to scream her protest and cling to the spoon, as if by doing so she could cling to hope. But having seen death too many times in her eighteen years, she knew the fight would be futile.

She released her hold and let her hands fall to her lap. The pain in her chest was not as easy to release. It gripped so tightly she struggled to suck in a breath. Then she fought to push away the ache just as she always did. She'd learned long ago to stuff it out of sight or she might just go mad from the sorrow.

"I'm sorry." The doctor sat back on his heels, haggardness grooving more lines into his face.

Mercy bent low and kissed the little girl's forehead, praying her kiss would anoint the child as she journeyed to a better place.

Surely anyplace in heaven or earth would be better than London.