



The
RUNAWAY
BRIDE

THE BRIDE SHIPS  2

JODY HEDLUND

THE BRIDE SHIPS  BOOK TWO

The
RUNAWAY
BRIDE

JODY HEDLUND



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by Jody Hedlund

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hedlund, Jody, author.

Title: The runaway bride / Jody Hedlund.

Description: Bloomington, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, [2020] | Series:
The bride ships; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2019040930 | ISBN 9780764232961 (trade paperback) | ISBN
9780764235535 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493422845 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Historical fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3608.E333 R86 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019040930>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

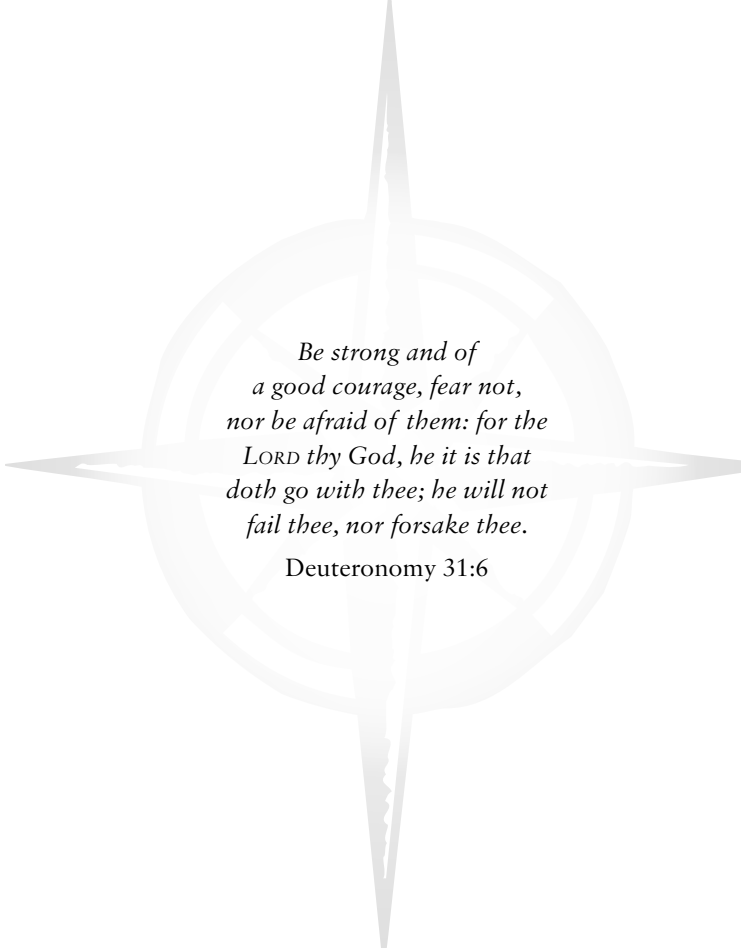
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Mike Habermann Photography, LLC

Author is represented by Natasha Kern Literary Agency, Inc.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*Be strong and of
a good courage, fear not,
nor be afraid of them: for the
LORD thy God, he it is that
doth go with thee; he will not
fail thee, nor forsake thee.*

Deuteronomy 31:6

VANCOUVER ISLAND
SEPTEMBER 18, 1862

Today she might meet the man she'd marry. On the ship's main deck, Arabella Lawrence stood absolutely still as a lady ought to do, even though the prospect of seeing her husband-to-be flustered her to a near faint. Like the others around her, she peered at the top rung of the ladder waiting for a glimpse of the men, her breath choppy, her cheeks flushed.

After one hundred days aboard the *Tynemouth* bride ship, she thought she'd be ready for this moment. She'd had plenty of time to prepare during the long days at sea with little to do. But now that she and the rest of the brides had reached Vancouver Island, all her uncertainties had decided to pay her a visit.

She opened her fan and pumped several gusts across her face. The sea air was balmy for September, drenched with the odor of the salmon the natives had bartered the previous evening after the ship had dropped anchor off Esquimalt Lagoon.

In the dusk, the sight of the long dugout canoes gliding across the glassy water had been terrifying, especially with so many dark-haired and dark-skinned bodies in each vessel. Some

The Runaway Bride

of her companions had whispered frightened epithets of doom, fearing the natives would attack the *Tynemouth*, afraid their group had come halfway around the world only to fall prey to beheading and cannibalism.

The sailors had assured the brides that the natives meant no harm, that if they'd wanted war, the canoes would have been full of well-armed men with their faces painted black. As it was, the dugouts had contained a mixture of half-naked men, women, and children hoisting fish, not weapons.

Now with the light of day, the natives were gone and the visitors readying to board had arrived in longboats, attired in suits and top hats.

"You must all be at your best for the welcoming committee," said their chaperone, Mrs. Robb, as she walked past. She'd spoken the same thing earlier when she instructed them to don clean outfits in preparation for mingling with the first group of distinguished gentlemen, who would be coming over from Victoria to greet the women and bring fresh provisions.

Over the port side of the ship, the saltwater lagoon gleamed like a mirror, reflecting the coniferous forest and rocky outcroppings. On the opposite side, the distant snowcapped peaks of the Olympic Mountains across the Straits of Juan de Fuca rose up in a magnificent display so unlike anything Arabella had ever witnessed, a sight she wouldn't mind waking up to every morning.

At a shout from starboard and the *clank* of the ladder, she drew in a shaky breath.

"Shall we form a more orderly line?" Mrs. Robb clapped her hands at the women. The tall, severe-looking matron had been thin at the beginning of their journey, but she was positively skeletal now, her cheeks sunken and her hair listless.

Arabella supposed they were all rather decimated. She fingered a strand of her long auburn hair. She'd done her best to stay true to her grooming regimen during the voyage, brushing

her hair one hundred strokes every night before bedtime. Yet after going the past three months with only sponge bathing and the most basic of hair washing, her thick locks hadn't cooperated today. Likewise, no amount of rice powder could hide her freckles, which had only grown more numerous on her nose and cheeks in spite of her efforts to avoid the sun's rays.

Not only were her hair and freckles troublesome, so were her gowns. Perpetual seasickness had taken its toll, and the beautiful creations of organdie, silk, and grenadine that had once fit her snugly now hung from her bony frame. While all the ladies had discarded their cumbersome crinolines shortly after boarding, today they'd donned the steel-hooped underskirts that made their gowns fuller.

Joining the other gentlewomen in shifting into a presentable receiving line, Arabella knew she should be smiling and chattering too. After all, marriage was something she'd always longed for but never expected—at least not with a husband of her own choosing. But she could no more tame her unruly nerves than she could tame the changeable sea.

The midshipman leaned over the railing and grasped at the first man coming up the ladder. At the emerging form, silence fell over the deck, and Arabella gawked at the newcomer along with everyone else, even though such behavior was extremely unbecoming of a lady.

As the man's top boots landed against the deck, he straightened and grabbed his tall black hat to keep it from toppling off. The tilt of his head revealed distinguished features set amidst a white mustache and long, white sideburns, a decidedly older man than she'd expected of the prospective husbands.

The vision of another older face pushed to the forefront of her mind. One fleshier with bristly sideburns. One with hard, demanding eyes. One with lips firmly creased in displeasure.

The skin on Arabella's back prickled, the bruises there having healed but the scars still lingering. She closed her eyes

The Runaway Bride

against the memory of the beating, but couldn't block the pain that haunted her.

'Tis in the past. 'Twill not happen again. She silently recited the words of assurance as she had often since boarding the bride ship. In London society at the old age of twenty-five, the only man who'd wanted a spinster like her had been over twice her age. But here . . . in this new land where men reportedly outnumbered women ten to one . . .

She pried open her eyes in time to see Captain Hellyer approach the elderly gentleman and shake his hand. At the same time, the midshipman hefted another man onto the deck, then another. The visiting gentlemen soon swarmed the deck, some in civilian clothing, others wearing the blue uniforms that belonged to those in the Queen's Royal Navy.

They took turns shaking hands with the captain and several other illustrious passengers, including Lord Colville, the ship's surgeon, and Reverend Scott, the second chaperone the Columbia Mission Society had assigned to the brides.

The women around Arabella found their voices again and resumed their excited conversations, especially as the men began to mill about. When the last of the visitors boarded the ship, Captain Hellyer finally addressed the gathering.

The older gentleman who'd been the first to arrive spoke next, introducing himself as Victoria's mayor, Mr. Edward Harris. He issued kind words of welcome before pointing out the most prominent men of the committee—the chief immigration officer, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, the local Anglican minister of Christ Church Cathedral, and a blur of others whose names Arabella couldn't remember.

All the while the mayor spoke, some of the men boldly pe-rused the women. At the attention, the younger orphan girls tittered and whispered among themselves. Mercy Wilkins, one of the poor women from London's slums, tried to shush them. Hardly older than the girls herself, Mercy had been like

a mother to them on the trip, and she'd been more than kind to Arabella, tending her whenever she'd been ill.

The lower-class women like Mercy would find their future husbands on the morrow after going ashore and meeting the laborers, tradesmen, and miners who dominated the community. If the rumors were true, then hundreds of such men were waiting in Victoria for their arrival. On the other hand, Arabella and the other middle-class ladies would draw husbands from the upper echelons of Victoria's society, from among elite and important men like those who'd come aboard.

Whatever the case, their chaperones had assured them that every woman, both poor and wealthy, would have the opportunity to find a good and kind husband.

As brandy and sherry were passed among the gentlemen, they began to mingle more freely, approaching the women and making introductions. Arabella's stepmother would have been appalled at the brazenness of well-born men making their own introductions without proper protocol. Yet under the circumstances, Arabella didn't see any other option.

She swallowed past the nerves constricting her airway. For the millionth time since running away, doubts crowded her mind. Had she done the right thing in leaving? While she'd never wanted to hurt her family, her disappearance was certain to have caused them untold problems.

Smoothing the overlapping layers of her skirt, she fought against her guilt. The elegant gown with its emerald muslin trimmed in ebony velvet reminded her not only of her family but also of the standard of living she'd left behind. Though the sponsors of the trip had assured the gentlewomen that Victoria contained high society and followed Paris trends, Arabella had feared along with the others that she'd be subjected to backwoods fashions and customs.

Mentally she chastised herself. She couldn't give way to her misgivings. Instead, she needed to focus on being as composed

The Runaway Bride

and refined as possible so at least one gentleman present would notice her. After so many days at sea in cramped quarters, she wasn't at her best. But surely she had some chance of attracting a suitor in a place where so many men sought wives.

Several naval officers meandered toward the receiving line. Attired in spotless white trousers and crisp blue coats, the men carried an air of authority. From the stripes of gold rounding their cuffs and the epaulettes decorating their shoulders, Arabella guessed they were officers of some important rank.

"Ladies," said the tallest of the three as he stopped near Arabella and her cabin mates. He inclined his head and body in a slight bow. "Would you be so gracious as to allow us to introduce ourselves?"

For several moments, the men stated their names in a dignified manner. "Lieutenant Drummond of the HMS *Foxtail*," the tall officer said, his attention flitting first to Arabella, then to the other women.

Beneath his flat-brimmed naval cap, his raven hair was wavy but combed into submission. Dark sideburns along with a trimmed mustache lent him a debonair aura, as did the arch of his dark brows above deep-set eyes.

As the other women made introductions, Lieutenant Drummond gave the appropriate responses, but all the while his attention kept shifting back to Arabella, so noticeably that a flush crept into her cheeks.

She waved her fan to cool her face, at the same time willing herself to remain calm.

"This is Miss Arabella Lawrence." Miss Spencer filled the silence that had descended. Having lost weight during the voyage, the young woman's frame was still rounded but more gently so. Rather than the looped braids she normally wore, Miss Spencer had asked Arabella to primp her hair so that the overall effect was to make her pleasantly becoming. Now, beaming with a delighted smile, Miss Spencer was positively pretty.

“Miss Lawrence,” the lieutenant said with another bow, “it is a pleasure to meet your acquaintance. I pray you have found Vancouver Island to your liking thus far.”

With the focus upon her, Arabella responded with the controlled decorum her stepmother had drilled into her. “Yes, thank you. Vancouver Island is truly lovely.”

His lips rose into a slight smile, one that told her she’d answered exactly the way he’d expected of a lady.

“Once you’re settled into Victoria, I do hope you ladies will allow us to show you more of the area.” The lieutenant’s invitation was directed at everyone, but his gaze never left Arabella.

She should have been flattered. This was what she wanted, wasn’t it? But instead of feeling a thrill, a shiver raced up her backbone reminding her of the hurt men were capable of inflicting. Her mind returned to four months ago, to the day her father had called her into his office to tell her he’d made a match for her.

Half hidden behind mounds of papers on his desk, he’d delivered the news without looking up from the document in front of him.

She’d stared at the rounded bald spot at the top of his head as questions thundered through her. *Who? When? Why?*

After going years without suitors, and then finally watching her younger sister, Florence, get married and later have a babe, Arabella had privately grieved the loss of the lifelong dream of marrying and starting a family. And she’d resigned herself to spinsterhood, joining so many other women of her station who were in the same predicament. ’Twas no secret in London circles that there weren’t enough eligible men, not when so many had migrated during recent years.

Arabella stood in her father’s office and waited demurely for him to give her more information, even as her stomach churned.

After several moments of silence, he sighed heavily, returned his pen to the inkpot, and sat back in his chair. Even then he

The Runaway Bride

refused to meet her gaze. “Arabella, this is the best for everyone,” he began, then stopped, running a hand down his trim beard, something he always did when nervous.

Again, Arabella waited for him to continue, attempting to remain composed on the outside while her insides swirled faster.

“Your stepmother thinks you will be satisfied,” he said, as though Elizabeth’s declaration was all that mattered.

Arabella wished she could rely upon her stepmother’s judgment, but she’d learned the hard way over the years that Elizabeth cared about only two people—herself and her son. Whatever Elizabeth did, including all of the training and mothering she’d extended to Arabella and Florence, was designed to improve her own status.

“He’ll be able to provide well for you,” her father added.

“Who, Father?” She squeezed out the question, though she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer.

Father fumbled for his pen, dipping it in and out of the ink. “Mr. Major.”

Arabella wasn’t able to prevent the quick intake of breath.

“He insists upon you, Arabella.” Her father’s voice contained a rare note of apology. “I could say nothing to dissuade him.”

“He’s older than you are, Father.” The complaint was as rare as her father’s apology. Arabella knew ladies ought to keep their negative thoughts to themselves, that one should speak only agreeable and pleasant words.

“There are other matters of more importance than age.” Father stared at the sheet of numbers in front of him. “As your stepmother says, you will finally be able to run your own home, bear children, and will never want for anything your entire life. Surely that will make up for any deficits?”

Not only was Mr. Major old enough to be her grandfather, but he was a difficult man. As president of the bank where her father worked, Mr. Major had been the source of much discontent in her father’s life. Perhaps this union would put

her father into a better position and make his life easier at the bank.

And perhaps her father was right, that the benefits of marriage would make up for Mr. Major's disagreeable qualities. She'd have a place of her own and wouldn't need to burden her father any longer or impose upon Elizabeth. She'd be able to have a babe and ease the ache that only grew every time she saw Florence with her infant. And Mr. Major would certainly be able to provide all the luxuries she was accustomed to and more.

"Well?" her father asked, meeting her gaze for the first time. The tired crinkles at the corners of his eyes and the droop of his brows told her she could give only one answer.

"Certainly, Father."

"He wants the wedding to take place at the church in four weeks."

"So soon?"

"He says he's too old to waste time on courtship."

Of course. A man of Mr. Major's age wouldn't want to put off anything for fear of landing in the grave first.

Arabella bit back her rude comment. "Very well, Father. I shall begin the wedding preparations immediately."

A measure of kindness filled his eyes. "You are a good girl, Arabella."

The praise only strengthened her resolve to make the marriage arrangement work. She'd given up her dream of having a family of her own. Now God was graciously offering her a chance. Maybe she and Mr. Major would never share an abiding love, but she could try to develop some affection for him, couldn't she?

"The welcoming committee is planning a regatta this week," Lieutenant Drummond was saying. "We would be honored to share your company during the race."

Arabella pulled herself back to the present moment and shook off the foreboding she felt. Were these men trustworthy?

The Runaway Bride

Her gaze darted from one gentleman to the next. Dressed in their best attire, they carried themselves with honorable bearing. They all appeared to be the sort of men who would make suitable husbands.

Yet how could one really know what was underneath, especially when etiquette demanded politeness and gentility above all else, glossing over true feelings and true expression in favor of rigid composure?

How had she ever believed herself capable of starting over here? What if she'd run away from one awful predicament only to find herself in another just as dreadful?

Her breathing turned suddenly rapid and shallow. Her hands fluttered, and she clasped them tightly to keep from calling attention to herself. She glanced around for a way of escape, needing to compose herself before she made a bad first impression on these men. "Will you please excuse me for a moment?" she said to no one in particular.

Lieutenant Drummond reached out as though to steady her. "Is there anything I might do to be of service?"

She inclined her head in gratitude. "I thank you, sir. But I shall be gone only a moment."

Before anyone could inhibit her departure, she slipped into the passageway that led away from the main deck back to the staterooms. All she needed was a few seconds to gather her thoughts and remember all the reasons she'd joined the bride ship.

She sped away from the gathering much too quickly, but even as she attempted to slow her gait into one that was more ladylike, the slap of footsteps behind her urged her to go faster.

At the sight of the half-open door of the ship's dining parlor, she slipped inside and quietly closed the door behind her. With her hand on the knob, she leaned close and tensed as the hard footfalls drew nearer. When they passed rapidly by, she sagged and braced her forehead against the smooth oak door.

She expelled a loud breath. “Gracious heavens, Arabella. What are you doing?” Her whispered chastisement echoed against the door and into the unlit chamber. “You cannot run away every time something frightens you. Where is your courage?”

Though she tried to remain brave over the past months, all too often she let her fears dictate her actions. She took several deep breaths and then lifted her chin. “You must go back out there, mingle, and accomplish what you came here to do.”

A throat cleared in the room behind her.

She gasped and spun, pressing her hands to her chest. There, across the long dining table, stood a man holding round loaves of bread in each hand. He was poised above a platter, which contained additional loaves as well as smaller buns. From the nearly empty basket that sat on the table, she guessed he’d been in the process of unloading the fresh bread.

The several portholes on the wall behind him provided scant lighting but enough to reveal handsome features shadowed by a layer of stubble that matched the dark brown strands of hair that curled at his forehead. Even in the dim lighting, there was no disguising the blue of his eyes or the humor dancing in them.

“Mayhap I can help you with what you came here to do,” he said in a warm tone while offering her a grin that brought out a dimple low on his chin.

For several seconds, Arabella was speechless, trying to make sense of her predicament. Apparently, while running from one uncomfortable meeting, she’d thrown herself headlong into one even more so.

He lowered the loaves to the platter, positioned them next to the others, then wiped his hands on an apron in much need of laundering. “Arabella?” He stretched his hand across the table toward her. “I’m Peter Kelly. Pete. Your humble servant.”

Arabella could only stare in mortification at this man’s audacity to address her by her first name and to presume to shake

her hand. Both were completely unacceptable ways to interact with ladies. Rules of etiquette demanded she turn away from this man and pretend not to notice him. But since they were the only two in the room, she wasn't sure what to do. Her step-mother's training hadn't prepared her for a situation like this.

"Miss Lawrence," she said, needing to put them both on proper ground.

Should she exit immediately? After all, she was breaking another rule by being alone with him. And he was a complete stranger. She couldn't predict what he was capable of doing to her, even with the table separating them.

As if sensing her mounting worry, he dropped his hand and grinned again—a slightly crooked grin that lent him a boyish quality. "Well, *Arabella*," he said with an emphasis on her given name, "is it too much to hope that you rushed in here to meet me, the handsomest fella on the island?"

"I didn't know you were here." She said the first thing that came to mind and then wished she hadn't.

"Mayhap God arranged it." His bright blue eyes teased her and contained a kindness that disarmed her.

"I was visiting with the welcoming committee." Her tongue seemed to have a mind of its own, tripping and stumbling over itself again. "And I needed a breath of fresh air. That's all."

"Aye." He waved a hand at the dim interior of the room. "I suppose the air in this room is as sweet as it comes?"

"As a matter of fact, 'tis very refreshing." She wanted to palm her forehead at the stupidity of her comment.

"In that case, don't let me stop you from enjoying your breath of fresh air. In fact, mayhap I'll join you."

As he audibly inhaled and then loudly exhaled, she could only watch him with a mixture of embarrassment and fascination. The movement caused his shirt to stretch tight at his shoulders, highlighting the broadness and thickness of his muscles.

He repeated the process, this time blowing out an even deeper

breath. “It is sweet,” he said, his gaze touching on her features. “Very sweet.”

Was this man flirting with her? She wasn’t accustomed to interacting with men, much less handsome young men. Should she feel flattered or offended?

She gave her head a shake and squared her shoulders. What did it matter how she felt? This man wasn’t her concern, not like Lieutenant Drummond and the other gentlemen on the welcoming committee. Very fine men who were hopefully still waiting for her.

“I must return to the gathering.” She started to turn the knob.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” he asked, his blue eyes turning serious.

Her hand stalled. “Pardon me?”

Before she could decide whether he was truly safe or not, he was rounding the table. As he approached, she opened the door wide, her heart thudding harder. She started to exit into the passageway, but before she could make an escape, he caught her hand and pressed something into it.

“Your courage.” He closed her fingers around an X-shaped object and then took a backward step toward the table.

“My courage?”

“Aye, wasn’t that what you were seeking when you came in here?”

She opened her hand and stared down at a silver cross. It was plain, without any fancy engravings, worn smooth and yet solid and sturdy.

“He’ll give you courage like no other can.” His words were sincere this time, without any hint of flirtation.

She hesitated. She couldn’t accept such a gift . . .

“Keep it,” he said.

Her fingers glided along the smooth beams. *Courage*. She’d been in short supply of it for a long time. “I shouldn’t—”

The Runaway Bride

“I won’t be taking it back,” he said firmly as he skirted the table, moving farther away from her. When he reached the basket, he resumed his task of emptying it.

She let her fingers fold around the cross. “Thank you.”

He paused, roll in hand. “You’re welcome.”

Somehow, the warmth in his eyes and in his words sent a flutter to her stomach, a flutter that was both foreign and frightening. She dropped her gaze, tilted her head at him in a slight nod, then made her escape.