



A
BRIDE *of*
CONVENIENCE

THE BRIDE SHIPS  3

JODY HEDLUND

THE BRIDE SHIPS  BOOK THREE

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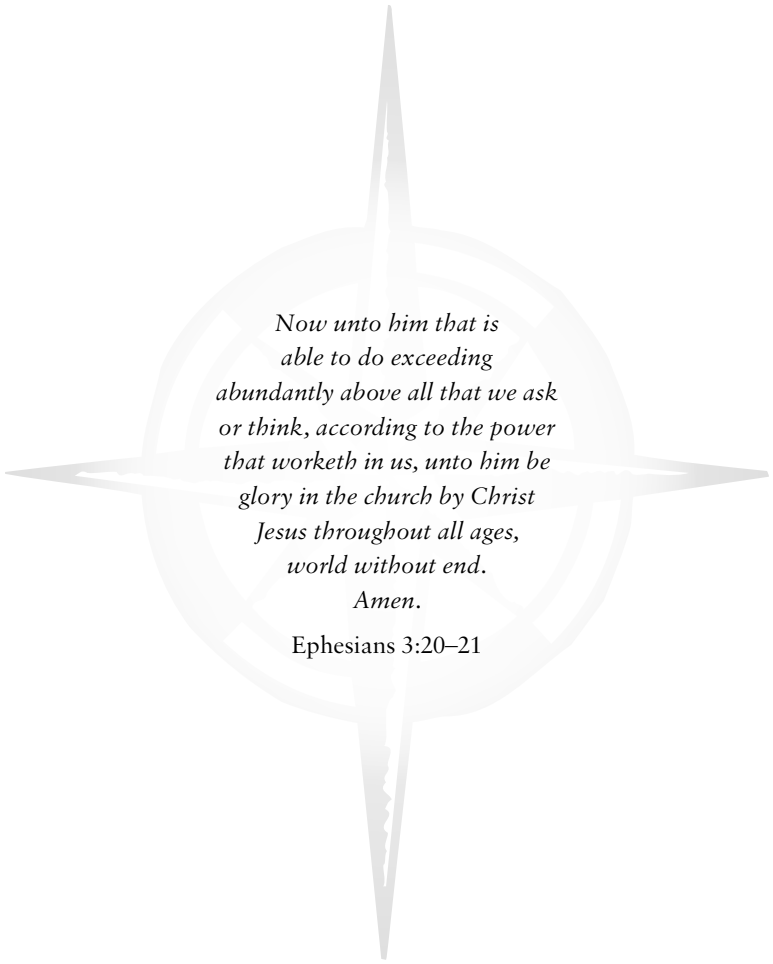
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*Now unto him that is
able to do exceeding
abundantly above all that we ask
or think, according to the power
that worketh in us, unto him be
glory in the church by Christ
Jesus throughout all ages,
world without end.*

Amen.

Ephesians 3:20–21

VANCOUVER ISLAND
JANUARY 12, 1863

I ain't gonna make it, Zoe.”

“Don't say such nonsense.” Zoe Hart clutched her friend's hand tighter as if by doing so she could keep Jane from leaving her.

The beginning of a cough slipped from Jane's lips, and the young woman cupped a rag over her mouth. While Jane might be able to muffle the deep hack, there was no hiding the bright crimson that seeped through the linen.

Zoe wound an arm behind her friend, holding her up, trying to ignore the outline of bony ribs. Not that Jane needed her support, since she was strong enough. It was just that staying on their feet was difficult against the rocking of the steamship in the choppy water surrounding Vancouver Island.

“Once we get to land, you'll be much better,” Zoe said loudly enough for Dr. Ash to hear from where he stood across the deck. “You're needing solid ground again is all.”

Scratching at his long gray beard, the ship's surgeon was speaking in low, almost urgent tones to the HMS *Grappler's*

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commander, Captain Verney, and gave no indication he'd heard Zoe.

'Course, she'd said her piece to Dr. Ash earlier in the day and would say it again if she needed to. She wasn't letting him take Jane away. They hadn't been apart during the entire voyage—not since they'd left Manchester in September and boarded the *Robert Lowe* in Gravesend. And there was no need to separate now, not when Jane just needed to get off the cramped ship and have a few days to recuperate.

After 114 days at sea, they *all* needed a few days to recuperate. Aye, their journey from England across the Atlantic, around South America, and up the Pacific to Vancouver Island had been uneventful—and easy, according to the sailors. But still, the voyage had taken a toll, especially because so many of them, like Zoe, had already been near to starving before setting foot on the ship.

Even when the *Robert Lowe's* supplies had dipped dangerously low over the past week, so that each passenger had been given strict rations, the gurgling and grumbling in Zoe's stomach couldn't compare to what it had been like during the last awful months in Manchester when starvation had plagued them.

Captain Verney nodded gravely at Dr. Ash before pulling back and straightening his blue jacket with its many golden stripes and trimmings. The middle-aged man swept his gaze over the women gathered on the deck, all thirty-eight of the brides. He didn't have to say anything for Zoe to sense his disapproval. The downward slant of his brows and the pinch of his lips spoke loudly enough.

The *Tynemouth*, the other Columbia Mission Society bride ship that had sailed to Vancouver Island several months earlier, had apparently contained a mixture of poor laborers from London along with an equal number of wealthy middle-class gentlewomen.

If that's what Captain Verney had been expecting again, then no wonder he was disappointed in getting a shipment of unemployed cotton-mill workers. They were already drab, but their months at sea had made them duller and dingier.

Perhaps the captain was worried none of the men in the colony would want them for brides, that they weren't appealing enough. Maybe he'd decided to send them back to England.

Zoe tucked a strand of her dark hair under her knitted headscarf and swiped at her cheeks, hoping she didn't look quite as grimy as her companions but guessing she did. They needed the opportunity to clean up before meeting any men, and that would help their chances. Maybe she'd suggest that to the *Grappler's* captain.

"May I have your attention, please?" Captain Verney's voice was commanding.

The women stopped their chattering and turned to look at him. The rumble of the steam engine beneath their feet filled the silence along with the splashing of waves against the hull. Overhead, smoke from the funnel billowed into the sky, making the low blanket of clouds a dirty gray.

Since they'd sailed through the Strait of Juan de Fuca two days ago, a chilled rain had fallen off and on, keeping the passengers mostly to their cabins when all they'd wanted was to be outside on the decks taking in the view of their stunning new home. Even now, Zoe let her gaze stray to the mountains on the mainland. Their peaks were snow covered, and they were dressed in thick, dark green pine.

The mountains. The Fraser River Valley. And hopefully Zeke.

Before he'd run away over a year ago, her brother had said he was heading to the goldfields of British Columbia and the Fraser River Valley. What if he'd never made it or had given up his prospecting and gone elsewhere? All she could do was pray she'd be able to find him so she could give him the news

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that would finally set him free. And maybe—just maybe—he'd forgive her for her part in all that had happened that had forced him to leave home.

She pressed her hand against her pocket beneath her skirt, assuring herself that Zeke's pendant was still with her and had been since he'd thrown it down at her feet before running off.

"We shall be arriving in James Bay shortly," Captain Verney said. "However, after speaking with Dr. Ash about the illness in your midst, I have decided we shall delay disembarking until after the afflicted are taken over to the hospital in West Bay."

"We're all suffering from one thing or another, Captain," Zoe said before she could stop herself. "Does that mean you're gonna take us all to the hospital?"

"Zoe, please try to understand." Dr. Ash tugged at his beard again, his weathered face lined with deep grooves. "If we don't quarantine Jane and Dora, the rest of you won't be able to go ashore. At least not without causing a panic."

"No telling who else has it," Zoe insisted. Mill fever was common among mill workers, and they couldn't put life on hold because of it. They had to keep going and fighting and hoping for the better. If they worried every time something went wrong or they had a slight cough, they'd have given up a long time ago.

"Miss, I am sorely tempted to quarantine all of you." Captain Verney leveled a stern look at Zoe. "But if I arrive in Victoria without any women, the waiting men will riot, especially since they were already fighting each other this morning when the *Emily Harris* delivered the other passengers."

After resting aboard the *Robert Lowe* on Sunday in Esquimalt Harbor, everyone had been anxious on Monday morning to disembark. The *Emily Harris* had arrived early to ferry newcomers the short distance to Victoria's inner harbor. Zoe and the other women had watched with both frustration and longing as the steamer had chugged away, leaving them behind.

Now that they had boarded the *Grappler* and were so close to being on land, Zoe didn't want to be the cause of any further delays. Yet how could she allow them to take Jane away?

"I'll go." Jane broke away from Zoe.

Zoe grabbed Jane's arm, but her friend shot a warning glare, one filled with more life and energy than Zoe had seen in recent days.

"I'll be able to rest in the hospital just as well as anywhere." Jane closed her fingers around the bloody rag as if to hide it.

Zoe hesitated, unable to let her friend walk away. Everyone knew hospitals were where people went to die.

"I'll make a point of looking after the women," Dr. Ash said as though reading Zoe's mind.

"Royal Hospital is a fine one," the captain added, "and shall provide them the best care possible."

Zoe examined Jane's dear face, noting the pallor, sunken eyes, and sharp angles. Gone was the robust young woman Zoe had met the first day she'd started at the factory when she'd filled in for her mum in the cardroom.

Jane hadn't questioned Zoe's presence or given away her true identity and as a result had won Zoe's gratitude. When Jane had quietly shown her each step of the carding process of combing and cleaning the cotton fibers, she'd won Zoe's admiration. And when Jane had pretended not to notice Zoe's tears when her mum had died, she'd won Zoe's everlasting devotion. The overlooker hadn't realized Zoe had replaced her mum until weeks later. By then she'd learned to do the job so efficiently that he'd kept her on.

Zoe swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. Jane's body might be a shell of what it used to be, but her friend's sweet spirit hadn't changed.

"Don't be thinking you can get rid of me so easily." Zoe wrapped Jane's rainbow scarf around her neck. Zoe had knitted

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the colorful creation during the voyage using cast-off yarn. If only she'd had more material to knit Jane a thick sweater. "I'll be visiting you every chance I get."

"Nah," Jane said with a wavering smile, "you'll be busy fightin' away all the men who want you."

Zoe forced a return smile. "I'll be sure to save one for you."

Jane nodded but then began coughing. She stumbled and would have fallen if Dr. Ash hadn't caught her. Gently, he led her away while their chaperone, Mr. Reece, and his wife guided Dora, the other ill woman, toward starboard.

The lump lodged in Zoe's throat again, and her mind flashed with images of her father leading Mum down the street to visit the dispensary. Her mum's shoulders had been hunched with coughing. It was the last time Zoe had seen her alive.

Several of the other women patted Zoe's arm or offered a kind word. But their eyes held a resignation that only made Zoe angry. Jane was going to be just fine. After everything they'd been through over the months of unemployment and then during the months at sea, Zoe would make certain Jane had the chance at having something good happen.

When the *Grappler* began to turn the last bend leading into James Bay, the captain ordered the women to go belowdecks to wait until Jane and Dora were taken away by a Royal Navy tender. Zoe supposed the captain wanted to give the appearance that the ill women had been kept separate from the rest. But the truth was, they'd all lived together in cramped third-class cabins for the duration of the trip. They'd already been exposed to the illness, and there was no changing that now.

The steamship's engine finally silenced, and Zoe was surprised along with the other women to hear cheers and whistling.

"Are them the men a-waiting for us?" asked one of the women, her wide eyes revealing both excitement and fear.

“Heard Capt’n Verney saying there’s hundreds of fellas on the shore,” said another.

“All I need is one,” Zoe chimed in. “The right one.”

“Handsome?”

“Aye, a handsome fella and a good kisser.”

The women giggled at Zoe’s brash declaration.

“How you gonna tell if he’s a good kisser?”

“I’ll have to test him out.”

Her comment earned more laughter.

She grinned. “Course, he’s gotta be rich. And willing to take me up into the mountains so I can find Zeke.”

“You planning to put up a sign with your requirements?” teased someone.

“I might,” she teased back. At nineteen, Zoe wasn’t the youngest woman in the group, but neither was she the oldest. With her long raven hair and bright green eyes, everyone had always said she looked just like her mum, who’d been considered one of the prettiest women in Manchester. Even wasting away on her deathbed, Mum had still been beautiful.

Zoe supposed that’s why Father had taken Mum’s death so hard. His wife had been his source of beauty amid the bleakness and hardships of life. Truthfully, she’d been the beauty for all of them, both in body and spirit. And when she’d gone, they’d lost the goodness that had been holding them together. Without her, their family had frayed into a thousand threads.

“You’ll find a handsome fella in no time,” said Kate from her spot next to Zoe on the bottom step of the deck as they waited to go above.

“You will too.” Zoe tugged the girl’s long blond braid, which earned her a smile. A year younger, Kate Millington had grown up with Zoe in the same neighborhood and had always been like a little sister. It was hard to believe the pretty young woman was old enough to take a husband.

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“Too bad Jeremiah wasn’t richer and better looking,” Kate continued. “You could have married him, and then you wouldn’t have had to leave home.”

Kate’s older brother Jeremiah had been a good man, one of Zeke’s best friends. But Zoe had never paid him or any other man much heed. At first she’d been too busy working at the mill. Then after she’d been let go with all the other women, she’d filled her days taking care of Eve, her sister Meg’s babe, and trying to survive the hunger along with her father’s drunken rages.

“Time to go ashore!” came a call from above deck. Within minutes, the women congregated at the main railing, taking in the scene before them—the small but sprawling town of Victoria along the harbor with more of the thick forests of stately pines that seemed to cover everything that hadn’t been cleared to make room for the new colony.

Zoe’s gaze frantically searched the boats and ships that filled the busy harbor until she found a Royal Navy tender rowing away toward the east with two women inside, both with heads bent and shoulders slouched.

“Jane,” she called, even though her friend wouldn’t be able to hear her amid the clamor of the people lining the shore.

A dull ache throbbed in one of Zoe’s temples. She took a deep breath and started kneading the spot. She didn’t have time for a headache. Not today. Not when she had to find a way to get to the hospital and do her best to save her friend. She couldn’t lose Jane. Not when she’d already lost so much.