

TIDEWATER BRIDE



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Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Frantz, Laura, author.
Title: Tidewater bride / Laura Frantz.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2021]
Identifiers: LCCN 2020018355 | ISBN 9780800734961 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800739669 (hardcover)
Subjects: GSAFD: Love stories.
Classification: LCC PS3606.R4226 T53 2021 | DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020018355>

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Agency, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa CA 94509-7953, www.booksandsuch.com.

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21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the true Pocahontas and her people

1

JAMES TOWNE, VIRGINIA COLONY SPRING 1634

Alas, she was not a tobacco bride, but she had been given charge of them. A daunting task for a young woman of six and twenty, even if she was the cape merchant's daughter. All winter, reams of glowing recommendations for these fair English maids had piled like a snowdrift atop her father's burgeoning desk, their names sifting through her conscience like icy flakes.

Jane Rickard. Mary Gibbs. Jane Harmer. Audrey Hoare. Jane MacIntosh. Margaret Boardman. Jane Jackson. Abigail Downing . . .

A shame there were so few Janes!

She smiled wryly as she stood near the crowded wharf, the list of tobacco brides clutched to her bodice to hold in whatever warmth could be had in Virginia's incessant coastal wind. Glad she was to be named Selah. Surely no other woman aboard the coming *Seaflower* could claim that.

All around her swirled the reek of salt water and fish, tobacco and tar. Noisy gulls flew overhead, screeching as if they,

too, were welcoming the long-awaited ship. At first sighting a quarter of an hour before, the men of James Towne had been the first to gather, those long suffering souls enflamed through the wants of the comforts of marriage. Each groom would pay one hundred fifty pounds in good leaf tobacco for a bride, an extravagance denied many.

But first, the colony's officials assembled at the forefront of the welcome. Dressed in their Sabbath best, hair and beards freshly trimmed, some almost beyond recognition save Alexander Renick.

Xander, his intimate circle called him. Broad of shoulder. Terribly tall. Strikingly bearded. With the wrist of an able swordsman to boot. One of Virginia's "ancient planters" who was not so ancient but among the surviving few who'd landed first and defied death since the settlement's founding nearly thirty years before.

And now he was looking her way, amusement—or was it disdain?—in his gaze. A flush she tried to tamp down warmed her winter-pale face. She hadn't expected to see him today as the brides came in, widower though he was.

He gave a slightly mocking sweep of his hat. The sun played off his dark hair, worn loose about wide-set shoulders. "So, Mistress Hopewell, all is in good order, aye?"

"We shall see, Master Renick. Have you come for a bride?"

This time, he turned swarthy. At her boldness?

"If ever a fair maid deserved an industrious husband, 'twould be Alexander Renick, esquire." Her tone was as mocking as his exaggerated bow. "I can add you to the roll of eligible men . . ."

"Which no doubt exceeds the number of king's daughters aboard."

“True. There are never enough women here.”

He ran a hand over his jaw. “Tell me, as I’ve been upriver, what will happen once they dock?”

Selah looked to her papers, though she knew the details by heart. “The women will be churched first, then lodged in married households and looked after till their choices of husbands are made.”

“So, all of Virginia will go a-courting.” He adjusted his hat in the rising wind. “In the hopes of keeping our men from forsaking the colony or taking heathen brides.”

“Something like that,” she murmured, stung by the poignant truth of his words. “Mattachanna is missed.”

A pause. His eyes bore the intensity of a summer storm. Silvery as a newly minted coin one minute, then brilliantly blue as the Chesapeake Bay the next. They’d not spoken of the tragedy that befell him till now. In fact, they rarely spoke at all. “You call her by her Indian name. Not Lady Rebecca.”

“An English name does not make one an Englishwoman,” Selah replied. “Mattachanna was a Powhatan princess, and I can call her nothing else.”

He cast her a last, piercing look. She expected no reply. That telltale hardness of his bearded jaw, the dare-not-trespass edge that defined him, was full blown now, hedging her out, marking a line she dared not cross.

With a low farewell, he took a step back. “I’m off to Rose-n-Vale.”

“You won’t stay for the—” Flummoxed, Selah left off. What *was* she to call the tobacco brides’ arrival?

“The coming carnival?” With a shake of his head, Xander turned away, the edges of his dark cloak furling and unfurling like a sail in the wind.

Carnival, indeed. But truly, that was what the occasion felt like amid so many merry masculine voices and rollicking laughter. More men were amassing, gazes riveted to the tall-masted ship that had been home to the coming brides for three months or more.

“My best to Widow Brodie and those noble hounds of yours,” she called after him, trying to dismiss the topsyturvy feelings his scarce appearances always wrought. Regret foremost. Fascination a close second. Disdain a distant third.

Thankfully, the *Seaflower* proved a worthy distraction with so many women at the railing. A rumble went through the gawking men as they pressed forward like the tide with a great swell of anticipation. Pity lanced her. The New World had gone hard on them. They craved company. A comely apron. A full plate. Something beyond their narrow world of drudgery and hardship. She’d seen these men at their worst, knew their rare merits and many faults like the wares of the colony’s storehouses, and, sadly, wouldn’t give a farthing for most.

“Sister!” On the upraised deck, carrying over the ruffled water, came a familiar shout. Shay?

Her nettled spirits soared. How long her younger brother had been away, all because their father believed him bored with merchanting and in need of a different venture. He stood by Captain Kendall, looking cheerful if a tad thinner than when he’d left James Towne six months before. Salt pork and ship’s biscuits did not suit him. How she’d missed his company.

He was first off the ship, running full tilt down the gangplank on unsteady sea legs through the crush of men. He finally reached her and nearly knocked her down, more from his rank smell than his embrace.

“Selah, at last!”

She held her breath as she clasped him, joy bubbling inside her. “You look none the worse for the voyage, Brother.”

“Eight dead and twelve landed sick,” he told her sorrowfully, looking about. “Where’s Father?”

“On his way.”

“And Mother? Is she well?”

“In her garden, aye.” Where else would she be in spring?

“I’m ravenous and needs be off.” With a gap-toothed grin he bolted, reminding her of Xander’s departure in the same direction a quarter of an hour before. With a last look over his shoulder he shouted, “The stories I shall tell you!”

Smile fading, she returned to her list. Which poor women had perished, and which would be taken to the infirmary? Their own charge, a faceless if not nameless lass—Cecily Ward—might be among them. Already she felt she knew these women. So rigorous were the Virginia Colony requirements, only those young, handsome, and honestly educated need apply. The youngest was but sixteen, the eldest eight and twenty. As for their Cecily . . .

The daughter of a deceased gentleman, knows how to spin, sew, brew, bake, make cheese and butter, general huswifery, as well as being skilled in making bone lace.

Selah returned her gaze to the women now turning away from the ship’s rail to disembark. The trials and tribulations of being shipbound was telling, their expressions guarded, even grave as they faced whatever James Towne offered them. And James Towne, recently christened James

Cittie in a laughable bid to appear other than it was, boasted aplenty. Each bride would receive a parcel of land, something unheard of in England and that surely helped hasten them here. On the voyage they'd been given new clothes and white lambskin gloves. For those who craved sweets, prunes were purchased. All funded by English investors.

On this side of the Atlantic, Selah and her father were to oversee disbursing other promised goods now shelved in the James Towne store. Petticoats, aprons, two pairs of shoes, six pairs of sheets, and white caps, or coifs, that married women wore as a mark of distinction.

But first, the brides themselves.



Rose-n-Vale was part two-storied frame timber house, part Flemish bond brick, an odd melding of the old and the new, the rustic and genteel, but it was his and it was home. Several miles upriver from James Towne, Xander's "castle in the air," as Rose-n-Vale was called, was a haven for no other reason than it was away from the petty politics and ongoing squabbles of Virginia's largest settlement.

Surrounded by tobacco fields in various stages of cultivation, the sprawling, hard-won estate was a testament to how he spent his time. Beyond his far-flung borders his neighbor's fields lay fallow. Xander still felt the lack of his fellow planter and friend felled by the violence of 1632. On the other side of him lay Hopewell Hundred, equally idle, but owned by Ustis Hopewell, the cape merchant, another trusted friend. 'Twas rumored some of it was Selah Hopewell's dowry. But till she tamed her tongue and her temper, he doubted any man would claim it, or her.

Xander entered through the riverfront door and removed his hat. He sent it sailing toward a table near the stairwell, where it landed with a soft thud, nearly toppling the vase of flowers his housekeeping aunt had placed there. With a wince, he righted the skewed arrangement before entering his study, easily the most used room in the house.

“Alexander?” A feminine voice carried from a side door.

“Aunt, are you well?” She’d had a headache when he’d left for James Towne. The Virginia climate did not suit her Scottish sensibilities.

“Fully restored, Nephew.” She smiled, drying her hands on her apron. A touch of flour whitened her wrinkled cheek. “I’ve just finished the sennight’s bread baking. But I’m hungrier for news of the tobacco brides.”

Starved for feminine company, likely. He rounded his desk, eyeing the tardy ledgers and mounting correspondence. “The *Seaflower* was almost in when I left town.”

Her eyes rounded. “You did not stay to see all the maids land?”

“Nay.” Clearly this was a trespass of the highest order. “If I’d known you were interested, I would have delayed my leaving. I spoke first with Mistress Hopewell—”

“Selah?”

“Aye. She told me the women were to be put up in married households, and then the courting would commence.” He cast about for more details, the disappointment in his aunt’s expression making him dig deeper when he’d all but forgotten the matter. “There were a good many eager fellows on hand to greet these would-be brides.”

“But not you, sadly.”

“My mind is more on plantation matters.”

“Understandably, after so long a winter. Will we be dining alone again this evening?”

Again. The simple question sagged with dismay. Alone. Adrift. With no bridal prospects in sight. “Aye, but tomorrow we’re invited to the Hopewells’, in fact.” He turned toward the mantel, where his pipe collection rested, a far more attractive sight than desk work. “I had business with Ustis Hopewell at the last, and he extended the invitation. How about you accompany me? Rest from your labors.”

“Oh, a splendid plan! When shall we leave?”

He paused, picking up an English clay pipe with a pin-wheel maker’s mark on the heel. “Half past five, mayhap? By shallop, not overland, if the river’s becalmed.”

“I’ll be ready. Perhaps a bowl of early strawberries would be welcome. Selah spoke of deer ravaging theirs last I saw her.”

“Strawberries, aye. I believe the Hopewells are to host a tobacco bride. You’ll be among the first to meet her, whoever she is.”

This had the intended effect. She clasped her hands together with childish delight. With that, she left him, returning to the kitchen to do whatever aging aunts did, leaving him to pinpoint exactly why he hadn’t stayed longer at the docks.

Because he was a widower of two years.

Nay, most men remarried within weeks.

Because the wind was cold.

Nay, the wind was the warmest he’d felt since last autumn.

Because he disliked James Towne.

True enough, aye. But more so because the one woman who unsettled him so oft of late had such mesmerizing eyes . . .