


BEACONS OF HOPE  BOOK ONE

Love
Unexpected



JODY HEDLUND



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For my two sons

I thank God for the godly young men
you're becoming.

He who began a good work in you
will bring it to completion.



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Chapter 1

PRESQUE ISLE, MICHIGAN
JUNE 1859

The blast of a gunshot awoke Emma Chambers. But it was the whiz of a musket ball over her head and its ping against a metal beam that brought her out of her sweet dreams.

Her back stiffened against the barrel of salted whitefish that had served as her headrest on the cargo deck of a steamboat.

“Don’t move!” came the tight voice of her brother Ryan next to her.

She blinked the sleep from her eyes. In the faint light of dawn she couldn’t make out anything but the outlines of the barrels that surrounded her and the unending darkness of Lake Huron beyond.

“Pirates,” Ryan whispered. “The steamer’s being attacked by pirates.”

She shuddered in spite of Ryan's instructions not to move. He placed a steadying hand on her arm.

The normal whirring of the paddle wheel and the hissing of the boiler were silent, as if they were holding their breath with her. The damp chill of the lake permeated the air and slithered under the scratchy wool blanket that covered her outstretched legs. The chill rippled against her skirt and wound its way under her shirtsleeves, making her shiver.

Shouts echoed on the deck above them, followed by the stomping of footsteps.

"You've got to hide." Crouching, Ryan peered over the top of the barrel in front of them at the hulking shadows of the pirates moving about on the cargo deck.

"And you." She crawled to her knees beside him. "You need to hide too."

He shook his head. "I'll be fine, Emma. I'm just another man among many. But you . . ." He brushed a hand over her hair, smoothing down the flyaway wisps that had escaped the plait she'd wound before dozing. "You're the only woman aboard. I don't want to take any chances that they'll see you and decide to steal you, along with everything else."

"They won't want to steal me," she said.

She wasn't ugly or anything like that, but neither did she turn the heads of many men. In fact, at twenty-two she'd yet to garner an offer of marriage. And she'd certainly been surrounded by enough men over the years to gain a proposal if she was going to get one. In short, she wasn't anything special to look at, she didn't have any outstanding talents to speak of, and she certainly wasn't made of money.

"Over there." Ryan nodded to a cubicle next to the boiler room. "Crawl over there and hide in that closet."

She hesitated. She'd always been the one protecting Ryan, watching over him all these years, putting his needs before hers and making sure he was safe.

"Come with me," she insisted. "I won't leave you here by yourself."

Another gunshot echoed as loud as a cannon blast. In the calmness of the summer morning, in the vast openness of the lake and under the wide expanse of sky, everything was noisier—the shouts, the stomping, and the scuffling overhead.

With the recent rumors of pirates roaming Lake Huron, *Lady Mist* had left Mackinac Island armed and her deckhands prepared to fend off any attacks. Even so, there was no telling what might happen.

More footsteps sounded on the metal steps that led down to the main deck that contained the cargo, the steam engine, and the wood-fired boiler that powered the engine. The cramped deck was also the place for carrying poor passengers like her and Ryan, who couldn't afford to pay for a cabin or private berth.

Ryan's fingers bit into her arm as he propelled her forward, steering clear of the pirates who'd already descended. "Go, Emma! There's only room for one of us in the closet. Besides, they won't do anything to me. I'm just another passenger."

She scrambled next to him among the barrels, her skirt tangling in her legs. She knew as well as Ryan that the pirates wanted the barrels of fish and any other valuable cargo the steamer was taking to Detroit, and when the thieves started carting off the goods, she'd be better off hidden.

"Hurry," Ryan urged, opening the closet door, bringing with it the waft of coal oil. The boxlike closet was filled with greasy tools and an assortment of spare belts and screws and gears intended to keep the engine in working condition.

She climbed in and bumped her head against a long-handled wrench hanging from a hook in the wall. She could hardly manage to turn around in the cramped space.

Ryan started to close the door.

“Be careful,” she called after him, wedging her foot against the door to keep it from closing all the way.

“I’ll be fine,” he said through the crack, “so long as I know you’re safe.”

His shadow fell away and he was gone.

She slid the door open a sliver wider and peered after him. Part of her wanted to grab him and force him to hide next to her as they had so many times in the past when they’d faced other dangers together. She wanted to hold his hand and keep him from any harm. But another part told her that he was a full-grown man now and didn’t need her help anymore, that she was in fact slowing him down and keeping him from doing the things he really wanted to do in life.

The truth was, now that Dad was dead, Ryan would be better off without her.

The shouts in the cargo hold grew louder, and she sank back on her heels, resting against a large wooden tool chest, trying to calm her breathing. The rolling and scraping of the barrels told her the pirates were indeed stealing the fish—the same fish that honest men had labored to catch, men like Ryan and, at one time, her dad. Fish she’d spent her days drying and salting alongside a few other women in the fisheries on Mackinac Island.

She ought to be outraged by the lawlessness, by the bandits swooping in on the steamer and taking for free what others had worked so hard to produce. But she could only release a pent-up sigh and rub her dry, cracked hands across her eyes. She’d seen altogether too much stealing in her young life, and now

she couldn't muster surprise or even disgust for it. She simply wanted to survive. And to make sure Ryan did too.

"Found another passenger, boss," shouted a pirate near the closet door.

Emma peeked out to see a pistol pointed at Ryan's head. Her throat constricted, capturing a scream deep in her lungs.

"Empty his pockets," ordered a pirate who was limping as he rolled a barrel toward the bow and the landing stage.

Emma fought the urge to swing open the closet door and jump onto Ryan's attacker. She would only get herself hurt or Ryan shot if she attempted something so foolish. Even so, in the darkness of the closet she swept her hand along the floor, searching for a makeshift weapon, a hammer, anything she could use to save Ryan.

Her fingers grasped something solid and cold and cylindrical like a lead pipe. But before she could pick it up, Ryan had deposited the last of their money into the outstretched hand of his attacker. The man shoved Ryan back against the boiler room wall and then stashed the stolen coins into his pocket.

As the pirate strode away, Ryan remained unmoving against the wall. From the stiffness of his outline, Emma could tell he wanted to spring after the pirate and punch him. But he held himself back, just as she had. Like her, he'd witnessed enough injustice over the years to know when to stay silent and when to fight. And now wasn't the time to fight. From the sound of the footfalls and voices, they were outnumbered.

For interminable minutes she sat waiting, just as Ryan stood outside the closet, flattening himself against the wall, doing his best to remain invisible. The only motion was the slight pitching and swaying of the *Lady Mist*, the only sound the scraping of her gunwale against the pirate boat.

Maybe they should have stayed on Mackinac. Yes, the winters were unbearably long. Yes, they were isolated from the rest of the world. And yes, the fishing industry was in decline and there was the chance they'd lose their jobs soon anyway. But it had been safe, at least mostly so. They'd lived on the remote northern island nine months—the longest place they'd stayed since emigrating from Ireland a decade ago. Maybe the tiny dormer rooms they'd rented above Beaver Skin Tavern hadn't been home, but they'd come close.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, trying to ward off the growing discontent that came over her all too often lately. She was past ready to settle down, get married, and have children. There were even times when the longing for a stable life and family of her own was so keen that it was almost unbearable.

If only Ryan hadn't wanted to uproot their lives again . . .

Ryan finally slid to the door and peeked inside. "Em? You okay?"

"I'm fine." She gave him the usual answer, the safe one, the words that didn't probe too deeply into the longings of her heart. "Is it all right to come out?"

The shouts had long faded, and an eerie quiet had fallen over the steamer.

"I'll go up and check," he said. "Promise you'll stay here?"

"As long as you're back in a few minutes."

He nodded and bolted across the empty deck.

Most of the barrels were gone, revealing a deck littered with broken staves, sawdust, and rat droppings. She could only pray the pirates would let them go without harm. She'd heard stories where bandits boarded a steamer, stole the goods, and then dumped any witnesses overboard.

The hiss and whirl of a boiler and engine clamored to life in the

stillness, except it wasn't coming from their steamboat. Instead, it came from the direction of the pirate's boat. A shout was followed by the shattering of glass on the deck not far from her closet.

She pressed against the tool chest and held herself motionless until the slapping water of the paddle wheel drifted off, signaling the danger was finally moving away.

She released a deep breath and sat up. She'd survived another mishap. Maybe she and Ryan were penniless as a result, but at least neither of them had been hurt. Hopefully within a day or two they'd be in Detroit and be able to locate work and a new place to live.

And maybe at last she'd have a home again, a home like the one they'd had in Ireland before the horrible days of famine and starvation had come upon them, a home like the one Mam had made for them before she'd wasted away.

Was it too much to hope that perhaps she'd meet a man who would want to marry her? She wasn't an old maid yet. But she wasn't getting any younger either. With each passing year, her chances of getting married were growing slimmer.

The acridness of smoke tingled Emma's nostrils, overpowering the usual heavy stench of fish. She pushed open the closet door and recoiled.

Bright flames lurched high in the air near the metal staircase that led to the upper decks. Shards of broken glass spilled across the floor, along with the oil and base of a kerosene lamp that had fallen. More likely the pirates had tossed it onto the steamer as they'd chugged away.

For a long moment Emma could only stare at the flames lapping at the deck and beginning to creep along the floor toward the rails. They lit up the starboard, giving her a clear view of the emptiness and the murky water of Lake Huron.

If she didn't put out the fire, it would consume the ship, and she'd soon find herself in that cold abyss. With a start, she grabbed the blanket she'd discarded earlier. She sprinted to the railing, crouched low, and dipped the length into the lake. Dragging the dripping mass of wool, she rushed to the fire and whipped at it with the wet blanket.

Smoke spewed into her face and stung her eyes, and the heat forced her back several steps. She tossed the blanket on the flames again, but to her dismay the fire leaped into the air and began grazing the planks of the ceiling.

How could she reach that high with the blanket? She needed help and fast. "Fire!" she shouted. Once again the heat made her jump back. "There's a fire on the main deck!"

She wasn't sure if her shouts had alerted the men on the deck above or if they finally saw the rising smoke, but within seconds several pairs of boots descended on the stairway. Then a wall of fire stopped them halfway down.

"Emma?" Ryan cried out.

Through the orange and yellow flames she caught sight of his face. "I'm here!" She waved her arms. "Tell everyone to get water and blankets. It's spreading fast."

"You need to come up here!" He reached out a hand but then just as quickly jerked it away from the blasting heat.

The fire was sneaking closer to her, and even though she wanted to jump through the wall of heat to Ryan, to the safety he would provide, she had no choice but to move back.

The deckhands and Ryan worked to contain the fire, throwing down buckets of water and snuffing it out with anything they could lay their hands on. From her side of the wall of flames, Emma fought against it with her blanket, making more trips to the side of the steamer to soak the cloth.

But as they worked, the fire only spread with a growing appetite. It continued to push her toward the stern until she could barely see Ryan, who was still fighting the fire from his spot on the stairway.

Flames shot upward from the leeward side, casting bright flickers across the water. Emma coughed and pressed her face into the singed blanket. It was hot, but at least she didn't have to breathe the smoke and fumes. She leaned against the rail, her body weak, legs trembling. She clung to the grain sack containing all the possessions they owned, which wasn't much.

When she dared to peek again at the main deck through her watering eyes, a sickening weight settled in the bottom of her stomach. They were fighting a losing battle.

The steamer was burning up, and there was nothing they could do about it. How would she and Ryan survive? They *had* to survive. They hadn't come this far and suffered as much as they had, only to die in a steamboat fire.

She glanced behind her at the rolling water of the lake. Even though Dad had taught her and Ryan to swim when they'd been hardly bigger than minnows, she didn't relish the thought of trying to stay afloat. For even in early June, the lake was still frigid. If only they were closer to shore . . .

She peered into the distance and could make out the dark shadows of the eastern Michigan shoreline. A thin beacon of light flashed to the north, one of the strategically placed light-houses along the coast that warned passing ships of the countless shoals that had been the demise of many vessels.

Were they close enough to swim to shore? If she jumped into the waves, would she have the strength to make it all the way across to land? But if she didn't jump . . .

She spun around to the fire that was pressing nearer. It wouldn't

be long before she'd have no choice but to plunge into the water. Either that or be roasted alive by the advancing fire.

From the deck above, she heard Ryan's voice. "Emma?"

She leaned over the rail and craned her neck to search for him. He was dangling from the stern. "Ryan?" Her shoulders sagged with relief—relief that he was still safe and that perhaps he could help her figure out what to do next. "What should I do?"

His face was smeared with soot, making his eyes and the worry in them stand out like twin moons. "The fire has spread to this deck, and it won't be long before the floor caves in. The lifeboat's already on fire."

Emma glanced at the burning ceiling. The fire had already eaten through the boards in many places. She clung to the railing, leaning as far away as possible from the inferno.

"We need to get off this hulk," Ryan shouted, "before the pressure of the ripping beams drags her down and pulls us with her."

He tossed a barrel overboard. It hit the water near the rudder with a splash and disappeared underwater for a moment before bobbing back to the surface.

"I'll go first," he called as he climbed over the rail, "and then I'll be there to help you."

Before she could protest, he launched himself off the steamer. He flailed through the air and hit the water feetfirst.

She gathered her skirt into her fists, hoisted it up, and climbed onto the rail. "Ryan!" she cried, the heat of the fire beginning to burn her back.

A head broke through the water's surface—her brother. Her heart started beating again.

Coughing out a mouthful of lake water, Ryan shook his wet hair out of his eyes, caught sight of the barrel he'd tossed in, and swam toward it.

Once he'd grabbed the barrel, he motioned to her, staring behind her at the fingers of flames that reached out to grasp her. "Throw in the bag first!"

Perched atop the rail, she had a better view of the shore. In the distance she thought she saw the flicker of a lantern. But she couldn't put off the inevitable any longer. She tossed the grain sack toward him, and it landed in the water with a splash.

"Now jump!" he called, lunging for the bag.

"Heaven have mercy," she whispered through trembling lips. She tried not to think about what was going to happen next. Then she jumped.

The wind had only an instant to slap her before the waves sprayed and reached out to swallow her. The icy wetness surrounded her, the shock of the cold on her skin paralyzing her. Instantly she began to sink, her nose filling with water, her arms and legs fighting back the dark surge.

Then suddenly Ryan was grasping her and dragging her to the surface. Her face rose above the waves, and she spluttered, her teeth already chattering and her body shaking violently from the cold.

The lake had only been open for about a month, since May when the winter ice had thawed.

"Here," Ryan shouted, clinging to the barrel with one hand and holding her with the other. "Wrap your arm around the barrel."

Her hands were numb, and she struggled to get her fingers to bend. But somehow she managed to drape an arm across the staves.

"Hang on," Ryan said from behind her. He kicked his legs as he pushed the barrel away from the burning steamer.

Over the crashing of the waves, she heard the Bradley whistle,

the seven short blasts and one long one that signaled *abandon ship*. The whistle was accompanied by the shouts and splashes of the deckhands jumping from the heat-blistered steamer. Some had clothing ablaze and screamed as they plunged into the lake.

She had the sudden urge to pray, to petition God for some kind of help, to at least spare the men their lives. But she hesitated. She hadn't done much praying over the years. She'd prayed herself hoarse for Mam but to no avail. After she lost Mam, she'd been too busy trying to survive with Ryan and Dad, running and hiding and facing the long days of starvation. And when they'd finally reached America, she wasn't sure she remembered how to pray anymore.

A stinging wave hit Emma's face, filling her mouth with lake water. She coughed and gasped for air while tightening her hold on the barrel.

"We've got to move farther from the boat," Ryan yelled, kicking and flapping in the water, trying to propel them but making little progress against the waves.

The fire had now spread to the uppermost deck of the steamer and to the pilothouse. The smokestacks were engulfed, one of them leaning at an odd angle. Against the backdrop of the dark lake, the burning ship was like a giant torch.

Emma gritted her teeth and began pumping her legs, working with Ryan to swim away from the deadly steamer. But whenever she looked at how far they'd come, it seemed mere inches.

Then an enormous creak came from the steamer, and she and Ryan paused. Above the chattering of her teeth and wheezing of her labored breathing, the terrified cries of the other passengers and deckhands echoed in the early morning. The ship ripped into two and started to sink. The water surged over the flames,

finally dousing them and leaving in its place a silent darkness. Within minutes the ship was completely gone, brought down into the freezing lake.

“We’ve got to keep going,” Ryan said behind her. “We’re both strong. We can make it if we don’t give up.”

She hardly had the strength to nod. The cold lake tugged and clawed at her, trying to dislodge her from the barrel. Her hair had loosened from her braid and plastered her face, and her limbs were fast becoming stiff.

“Let’s head for the lighthouse,” he said, pointing in the direction of the beam of light she’d noticed earlier.

They fought to paddle forward.

“Don’t give up,” Ryan told her whenever she stopped moving.

“I can’t do this, Ryan,” she finally said. Her muscles ached, and she couldn’t muster the energy to cling to the barrel. Her body demanded that she let go, stop fighting, and slide down into a watery, peaceful grave.

“Just hang on!” His voice had turned urgent. “I think I see a boat.”

She rested her cheek against the barrel and closed her eyes. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep her hold.

“Hey!” Ryan shouted. “Over here!”

The waves in the growing dawn were beginning to calm down, turning gentle and enticing, making her want to sleep. If she fell asleep and slipped under the water, maybe she’d awaken to heaven in the arms of both her mam and dad. They’d finally be together again with no more pain or unhappiness or guilt. And without her, Ryan would be free to get on with his life.

“Here!” Ryan called again.

The water around her began to fade. The cold seeped away. The struggle lessened. She was going down . . .

Strong arms lifted her, heaving her out of the jaws of death, returning her to the sharpness of dawn. Though the lake clung to her and refused to let her go, the thick arms that surrounded her were stronger and more determined. She found herself hauled upward until she was free of the water, pulled over the side of a rowboat against a solid warm chest.

“There you are, lass.” The man spoke gently with the hint of an Irish brogue.

With the utmost care her rescuer lowered her into the stern. His lantern cast a glow upon his face, revealing rugged features. Beneath the brim of a flat-topped cap, he peered down at her. The leathery, weather-bronzed skin crinkled at the corners of his eyes.

“You’re safe now.”

She could only stare up at him, her body shuddering as the cool morning air swept over her wet clothes and skin. And all she could think was that he had the kindest eyes she’d ever seen.