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Written by Tracy Chevalier

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The Last Runaway

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This book is dedicated to Catoctin Quaker Camp
and Oberlin College:
two places that shaped and guided my younger self





Horizon



SHE COULD NOT GO back. When Honor Bright abruptly announced to her family that she would accompany her sister Grace to America – when she sorted through her belongings, keeping only the most necessary, when she gave away all of her quilts, when she said goodbye to her uncles and aunts, and kissed her cousins and nieces and nephews, when she got into the coach that would take them from Bridport, when she and Grace linked arms and walked up the gangplank at Bristol – she did all of these things with the unspoken thought: I can always come back. Layered beneath those words, however, was the suspicion that the moment her feet left English soil, Honor’s life would be permanently altered.

At least the idea of returning drew the sting from her actions in the weeks leading up to their departure, like the pinch of sugar secretly added to a sauce to tame its acid. It allowed her to remain calm, and not cry as her friend Biddy did when Honor gave her the quilt she had just finished: a patchwork of brown, yellow and cream diamonds pieced into an eight-point Star of Bethlehem, then quilted with harps and the running feather border she was known for. The community had given her a signature quilt – each square made and signed by a different friend or family member – and there was not room for both quilts in her trunk. The signature quilt was not so well made as her own, but of course she must take it. “Tis best left with thee, to remember me by,” she insisted as her

weeping friend tried to push the Star of Bethlehem quilt back at her. 'I will make more quilts in Ohio.'

Jumping over thoughts of the journey itself, Honor tried to fix her mind instead on its end at the clapboard house her future brother-in-law had sketched for Grace in his letters from Ohio. 'It is a solid house, even if not of the stone thee is accustomed to,' Adam Cox had written. 'Most houses here are made of wood. Only when a family is established and unlikely to move do they build a brick house.'

'It is situated at the end of Main Street on the edge of the town,' he had continued. 'Faithwell is still small, with fifteen families of Friends. But it will grow, by the grace of God. My brother's shop is in Oberlin, a larger town three miles away. He and I hope to move it when Faithwell has grown large enough to support a draper's. Here we call it "dry goods". There are many new words to learn in America.'

Honor could not imagine living in a house made of wood, that burned so quickly, warped easily, creaked and groaned and gave no feeling of permanence the way brick or stone did.

Though she tried to keep her worries confined to the notion of living in a wooden house, she could not stop her mind straying to thoughts of the voyage on the *Adventurer*, the ship that would take them across the Atlantic. Honor was familiar with ships, as any Bridport resident would be. She sometimes accompanied her father to the harbour when a shipment of hemp arrived. She had even gone on board, and watched the sailors furling sails and coiling ropes and mopping decks. But she had never set sail in one. Once when she was ten her father took them to nearby Eype for the day, and Honor and Grace and her brothers had gone out in a rowing boat. Grace had loved being on the water, and had shrieked and laughed and pretended to fall in. Honor, however,

had gripped the side of the boat while her brothers rowed, and tried not to appear alarmed at the rocking, and the curious and unpleasant sensation of no longer having stable footing. She had watched her mother walking up and down the beach in her dark dress and white bonnet, waiting for her children to come back safely. Honor avoided going out in a boat again.



She had heard stories of bad crossings but hoped she would cope with such a thing as she did any other hardship, with steady patience. But she did not have sea legs. That was what the sailors said. Perhaps she should have realised this from her encounter with water under her feet in the rowing boat. After leaving Bristol she stood on deck with Grace and others, watching the Somerset and north Devon coast unfold alongside them. For the other passengers the unsteadiness was an amusing novelty, but Honor grew more and more unsettled, responding to the ship's movement with a wrinkled brow, tightening shoulders and a heaviness deep in her gut, as if she had swallowed an iron pound weight. She held out as long as she could, but as the *Adventurer* was passing Lundy Island, Honor's stomach finally convulsed and she vomited on to the deck. A passing sailor laughed. 'Sick and we're barely out of Bristol Channel!' he crowed. 'Wait till we reach the ocean. *Then* you'll know sickness!'

Honor was sick down Grace's shoulder, on to her blankets, on to the floor of their tiny cabin, into an enamel basin. She threw up when there was nothing left to bring up, her body like a magician managing to conjure something from nothing. She did not feel better after each bout. When they reached the Atlantic and the ship began its long roll up and down the swell of the waves, she continued to be sick. Only now Grace was ill too, as well as many of the other passengers, though only for a time, until they

got used to the new rhythm of the boat. Honor never got used to it; the nausea did not leave her for the whole month-long voyage.

When not seasick herself, Grace nursed Honor, rinsing her sheets, emptying the basin, bringing broth and hard sea biscuit, reading to her from the Bible or the few books they had brought: *Mansfield Park*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. To distract Honor she chattered on about America, trying to get her to think about what lay ahead rather than the grimness of the present moment. 'What would thee rather see, a bear or a wolf?' she asked, then answered her own question. 'A bear, I think, for wolves are like overgrown dogs, but a bear is only like itself. What would thee rather travel on: a steamboat or a train?'

Honor groaned at the thought of another boat. 'Yes, a train,' Grace agreed. 'I wish there were a train we could take from New York to Ohio. There will be one day. Oh, Honor, imagine: soon we will be in New York!'

Honor grimaced, wishing that she too could see this move as the great adventure Grace clearly did. Her sister had always been the restless Bright, the one most ready to accompany their father when he had to travel to Bristol or Portsmouth or London. She had even agreed to marry an older, duller man because of the promise he held out of a life away from Bridport. Grace had known the Coxes, a family of five brothers, since they moved from Exeter several years before to open a draper's shop, but she only showed interest in Adam when he decided to emigrate to Ohio. A brother – Matthew – had already gone there but had become infirm, and his wife had written to ask a spare brother to come and help with the business. Once Adam had moved to America, he and Grace corresponded regularly, and with gentle hints she led him to ask her to join him in Ohio as his wife, where they would run the shop with Matthew and Abigail.

The Brights were surprised by Grace's choice; Honor had thought she would marry someone livelier. But Grace was so thrilled by the prospect of living in America that she did not seem to mind her prospective husband's reserve.

Though patient, and perhaps feeling guilty for subjecting her sister to weeks of seasickness, even Grace grew irritated by Honor's persistent illness. After a few days she stopped urging her to eat, as Honor never kept anything down for more than a few minutes. She began to leave her sister alone in their cabin to walk on deck and sit and sew and chat with the other women on board.

Honor tried to accompany Grace to a Meeting for Divine Worship organised by the handful of other Friends on board, but as she sat in silence with them in a small cabin, she could not let go of her thoughts enough to empty her mind, worrying that if she did so, she might lose what little self-control she had and vomit in front of them. Soon the rocking of the ship and the upheaval in her stomach forced her to leave the cabin.

Sometimes on the fraught voyage between Bristol and New York, when she was curled like a shrimp in her cramped berth or doubled over a chamber pot, Honor thought of her mother standing on the pebbles at Eype beach in her white bonnet, and wondered why she had left the safety of her parents' house.

She knew why: Grace had asked her, hoping a new life would quell her sister's heartache. Honor had been jilted and, though her spirit was less adventurous, the prospect of remaining in a community that pitied her propelled her into following Grace. She had never been dissatisfied in Bridport, but once Samuel had released her from their engagement, she was as eager as Grace to leave.

All of her clothes stank with a sour meatiness no washing could remove. Honor avoided the other passengers, and even her

sister: she couldn't bear the disgust mixed with pity in their faces. Instead she found a space between two barrels on the leeward deck where she tucked herself out of the way of busy sailors and curious passengers, but close enough to the railing that she could run across and heave into the water without drawing attention. She remained on deck even in the rain and the cold, preferring it to the tiny cabin with its hard board for a bed and the close stench of her blankets. She was, however, indifferent to the seascape – the huge sky and sea that were such a contrast to the neat green hills and hedgerows of Dorset. While others were amazed and entertained by the storm clouds and rainbows and sunlight turning the water to silver, by schools of dolphins following the ship, by the sight of the tail of a whale, for Honor monotony and nausea struck dead any wonder she might have felt for such feats of nature.

When not leaning over the railing, she tried to take her mind off her sore, churning stomach by bringing out her patchwork. As a gift for the journey her mother had cut out hundreds of yellow and cream cloth hexagons and paper templates for Honor to sew into rosettes. She had hoped she might complete a whole grandmother's garden quilt during the voyage, but the swaying of the deck made it impossible for her to establish a steady rhythm in which to make the neat, tiny stitches that were her trademark. Even the simplest task of tacking the hexagons on to the templates with loose stitches – the first sewing Honor had learned as a young girl – required more concentration than the movement of the ocean allowed. It soon became clear that whatever cloth she worked with would be forever tainted with nausea, or the idea of it, which was much the same thing. After a few days of trying to sew the rosettes, Honor waited until no one was about, then dropped the hexagons overboard – they would make her sick if

she ever saw that fabric again. It was a shocking waste of precious cloth, and she knew she should have given them to Grace or other women on board, but she was ashamed of the smell that lingered on them, and of her weakness. Watching the bits of cloth flutter down to the water and disappear, Honor felt her stomach grow calm for just a moment.

‘Look at the horizon,’ a sailor commanded one day after witnessing her dry heaves. ‘Get up the bow and keep your eyes on where we headed. Pay no mind to the humping and bumping, the rocking and the rolling. Watch what don’t move. Then your stomach’ll settle.’

Honor nodded, though she knew it would not work, as she had already tried it. She had tried everything anyone suggested: ginger, a hot water bottle on her feet, a bag of ice on her neck. Now she studied the sailor out of the corner of her eye, for she had never seen a black man up close before. None lived in Bridport, and when she visited Bristol once she’d seen a black coachman drive past, but he was gone before she could take him in properly. Honor eyed the man’s skin: it was the colour of a conker from a horse chestnut tree, though rough and wind-burned rather than smooth and shiny. He made her think of an apple that has ripened to a deep, rich red on the tree while its neighbours remain pale green. His accent was untraceable, from everywhere and nowhere.

The sailor was studying her too. Perhaps he had not seen many Quakers before, or he was curious what she looked like when her face was not ragged with nausea. Normally Honor’s forehead was smooth, punctuated with eyebrows like wings over wide grey eyes. Her seasickness, however, etched lines where there had been none, and pinched the calm beauty from her face.

‘The sky is so big it frightens me,’ she said, surprising herself by speaking.

'Better get used to that. Everything's big where you headed. Why you going to America, then? Going to find you a husband? Englishmen not good enough for you?'

No, she thought. They are not. 'I am accompanying my sister,' she answered. 'She is marrying a man in Ohio.'

'Ohio!' The sailor snorted. 'Stick to the coast, love. Don't go nowhere you can't smell the sea, that's what I say. You'll get trapped out there in all them woods. Oh, there she goes.' He stepped back as Honor leaned over the railing once again.

The captain of the *Adventurer* said it was the smoothest, quickest crossing the ship had ever made across the Atlantic. This knowledge only tormented Honor. After thirty days at sea she stumbled, skeletal, on to the docks at New York, feeling she had vomited out every bit of her insides so that only a shell of her remained. To her horror, the ground heaved and bucked as much as the ship's deck had, and she threw up one last time.

She knew then that if she couldn't cope with the easiest crossing God could give her, she would never be able to go back to England. While Grace knelt on the docks and thanked God for reaching America, Honor began to cry, for England and her old life. An impossible ocean now lay between her and home. She could not go back.

*Mansion House Hotel
Hudson, Ohio
5th Month 26th 1850*

My dear Mother and Father, William and George,

It is with the heaviest heart that I must tell you of the passing today of our beloved Grace. God has taken her so young, and when she was so close to reaching her new life in America.

I am writing from a hotel in Hudson, Ohio, where Grace remained during the final stage of her illness. The doctor said it was yellow fever, which is apparently more common in America than in England. I can only accept his diagnosis, since I am unfamiliar with the disease and its symptoms. Having witnessed my sister's painful demise, I can say that Dorset is lucky to be spared such a horror.

I have already written of our journey across to New York. I hope you received my letters from New York and Philadelphia. I do not always feel confident when I hand letters over here that they will reach their destination. In New York we changed our original travel plans, and decided to go by stage to Philadelphia and across Pennsylvania to Ohio, rather than take boats along the rivers and canals of New York to Lake Erie and down to Cleveland. Though many told me that such boats are very different from ships on seas, still I could not face being on the water again. I fear now that my lack of courage proved fatal to Grace, for perhaps she would not have caught the fever if we had gone by boat. With your forgiveness and God's understanding, I must live with this guilt.

Apart from a mild bout of seasickness, Grace remained very well on the crossing, and down to Philadelphia, where we stayed with Friends for a week to recover from our journey. While there we were able to attend the Arch Street Meeting. I have never imagined one

could be so large – there must have been five hundred Friends in the room, twenty times the size of Bridport. I am glad that Grace was able to witness such a Meeting in her life.

When travelling to Ohio, there is an established network of Friends one may stay with in Pennsylvania. All along the way – in large cities like Harrisburg and Pittsburgh and smaller settlements too – we were welcomed, even when Grace showed the first signs of the yellow fever, two days out from Harrisburg. It begins with a fever and chills and nausea, which could be any number of illnesses, so at first there was little concern except for Grace's discomfort in the various coaches in which we crossed Pennsylvania.

We stayed for a few days in Pittsburgh, where she seemed to rally enough to insist that we press on. I am sorry that I listened to her and did not follow my own instinct, which told me she needed more rest, but we were both anxious to reach Faithwell. Unfortunately within a day her fever had returned, this time accompanied by the black vomit and yellow tinge to her skin that I now know confirms yellow fever. It was only with great difficulty that I managed to convince the coachmen not to leave us by the side of the road, but continue on to Hudson. I am sorry to say that I had to shout at them, though it is not in a Friend's nature to do so. The other passengers would not allow us to sit inside for fear of contagion, and the coachmen made us perch on the luggage on top of the coach. It was very precarious, but I propped Grace against me and held tight to her so that she would not fall off.

In Hudson she lasted just a night before God called her home. For much of that time she was delirious, but a few hours before she died she became lucid for a little while, and was able to call out her love to each of you. I would have preferred to take her on to be laid to rest in Faithwell amongst Friends, but she has already been buried today in Hudson, for everyone is fearful of the infection spreading.

Since I am so close to Faithwell, I am determined to go on. It is only forty miles west of Hudson, which is no distance after the five hundred miles we came from New York and the thousands more across the ocean. It grieves me that Grace was so near to her new home, and now will never see it. I do not know what I will do when I get there. Adam Cox is not yet aware of this sorrowful news.

Grace suffered much and bore it bravely, but she is at peace now with God. I do know that one day we shall see her again, and that is some comfort.

*Your loving daughter and sister,
Honor Bright*