

WATERS OF TIME

came
back
to me

JODY HEDLUND

come
back
to me

Books by Jody Hedlund

The Preacher's Bride

The Doctor's Lady

Unending Devotion

A Noble Groom

Rebellious Heart

Captured by Love

BEACONS OF HOPE

Out of the Storm: A Beacons of Hope Novella

Love Unexpected

Hearts Made Whole

Undaunted Hope

ORPHAN TRAIN

An Awakened Heart: An Orphan Train Novella

With You Always

Together Forever

Searching for You

THE BRIDE SHIPS

A Reluctant Bride

The Runaway Bride

A Bride of Convenience

Almost a Bride

COLORADO COWBOYS

A Cowboy for Keeps

WATERS OF TIME

come
back
to me

JODY HEDLUND



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2021 by Jody Hedlund

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

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: Come back to me / Jody Hedlund.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2021] | Series: Waters of time
Identifiers: LCCN 2020047618 | ISBN 9780800738433 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800740047 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493430444 (ebook)
Subjects: GSAFD: Science fiction. | Romantic suspense fiction.
Classification: LCC PS3608.E333 C66 2021 | DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020047618>

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



To my agent, Natasha Kern.

Thank you for believing in this book and believing in me. You have been there for me in countless ways—cheering, advocating, encouraging, advising, editing, and educating. Thanks for even taking the time to discuss with me in detail the physics of time and energy. You are the kind of agent that makes me believe anything is possible.



May 21

“Your father is in a coma.”

“What did you say?” Marian Creighton fumbled with her phone and almost dropped it. “I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

“I’m sorry, Marian.” Harrison Burlington’s English accent on the other end was as loud and clear as if he’d been sitting at Jasper’s desk opposite from hers. “Unfortunately, you did hear me all too correctly. I’m afraid your father is in a coma.”

“My dad’s in a coma?” The words reverberated all the way to the cells in her bone marrow, sending chills over her skin.

“Yes. He’s here at Kent and Canterbury Hospital.”

Marian shoved away the research sprawled in front of her and shot out of her leather chair.

“The hospital staff phoned me about an hour ago, and I came straightaway.”

“What happened? Was he in an accident?”

“The doctors think not. But they’re still trying to sort it out.”

“I don’t understand.” The blue lights on the digital clock on her desk read 10:48 p.m., which meant it was almost four o’clock in the morning in Canterbury, five hours ahead of Connecticut.

“Apparently, your father arrived at the hospital and passed out in the lobby.” Harrison paused, and in the background the

beeping of monitors was unmistakable. “They’ve been doing tests on Arthur, but they haven’t been able to locate any trauma that may have caused the coma.”

“That makes no sense.” She stared through the glass walls of the inner laboratory to the dark deserted offices beyond. The red exit sign gave off an eerie, almost haunted light that spread over the pharmacokinetics department of Mercer Pharmaceuticals’ research lab. “Dad called this afternoon, and he sounded fine. Said he was feeling great.”

She didn’t talk to her dad often. They were busy with their pharmacokinetics research. At least that’s the excuse she made for them both. Plus, there was that big body of water called the Atlantic Ocean separating them, although truthfully at times the ocean seemed small and shallow compared to the deep gulf that stood between them.

“I saw your father in the office yesterday morning, and he didn’t complain of anything being awry. He acted a bit distracted. But there’s nothing dodgy about that.” Harrison was being too kind. But she supposed his ability to overlook Arthur Creighton’s glaring idiosyncrasies was why he happened to be Dad’s one and only friend.

“So the doctors have no idea why he’s fallen into a coma?”

“None. They’re gobsmacked.”

“There’s no visible sign of an accident, fall, head trauma?”

“Not that they can find.”

“What about a brain aneurysm or cerebral hypoxia?”

“No and no.”

What other symptoms could lead to unresponsiveness? “Maybe he experienced some kind of poisoning, like carbon monoxide? Or perhaps cardiac arrest or—”

“Marian, I’ve already queried the personnel about every possible cause.” Harrison was a brilliant medical scientist, a coworker of her dad’s at Mercer’s Canterbury research and development

headquarters. Of course, he'd know all the right questions to ask the physicians regarding Dad's situation.

Exhaustion hit her, and she lowered herself back into her chair. She regularly put in twelve- to fifteen-hour days in the lab. It was her life. She succumbed to sleep only when she had to.

"I'm truly sorry, love. I know the news is dreadful." Harrison's voice radiated with sympathy.

She pictured her father's friend in his power wheelchair. A young man in his thirties, Harrison was stately and scholarly, his dark waves untouched yet by silver compared to her dad's full head of gray hair. Behind thick spectacles, Harrison's eyes contained kindness, and he cared about what she had to say, unlike Dad, who rarely tore his attention away from the one thing that mattered most: finding a cure for the genetic disease that had robbed him of his wife.

Marian's throat tightened. "Thanks for being there with him."

"I'll be here as long as it takes."

Marian rapidly calculated the amount of time needed to drive to the airport and catch the first flight to Heathrow. "I might be able to make it to the hospital by tomorrow afternoon."

"Go home and have a rest first. I don't want you becoming ill in the process of rushing to get here."

Her? Ill? She almost laughed. "I'll be fine, Harrison. I always am."

"I know you can look after yourself, but I couldn't bear it if something happened to you too."

Too. The tiny word was a glaring reminder of all that had gone wrong in her family.

"Marian?" His voice dropped a decibel. "Let's not talk about this to Ellen yet."

"Definitely not."

After ending the call, Marian tossed her phone onto the detailed spreadsheets and charts scattered across her desk. The soft whir

of the laboratory equipment behind her was the lone sound in the office, and their fluorescent glow the only light—other than her desk lamp, which spotlighted the results of her recent failed experiment.

Harrison had no cause to worry about her getting sick. She'd won the lottery and inherited the good genes in the family.

Ahead, the screen saver on her laptop displayed a gorgeous blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman with a whitened, orthodontist smile—a picture of perfection. But pictures were deceptive. They never told the true story. They couldn't reveal that underneath the beautiful exterior, Ellen was on the fast track toward death, that tumors were growing somewhere in her body again. If she didn't die of inoperable cysts in the brain like their mom, she'd likely die from cysts elsewhere in her body.

At twenty-six, Ellen was two years younger than Marian but had already suffered more than most people did in a lifetime. It wasn't a matter of *if* Ellen would end up hospitalized again. It was merely a matter of *when*.

"It's not fair, God." Marian whispered the same prayer she had a thousand times since the fateful day when the blood test revealed that Ellen had inherited the anomaly from their mom and Marian hadn't. "Ellen doesn't deserve it."

If either of them had to get stuck with VHL, Von Hippel-Lindau syndrome, Marian should have been the one with the mutated gene. Ellen had so much more to give the world—more love, compassion, kindness, laughter, and beauty. What did Marian have to offer, other than her frantic race to find a cure for VHL?

"Oh Ellen." Frustration clamored inside, looking helplessly for a release.

The scrolling laptop screen saver shifted to a different picture, this one of the two of them together from last month when Marian had flown to Haiti to visit Ellen, who was currently volunteering

in an orphanage and using her pediatric nursing skills to make a difference there.

Even in the humidity and blazing heat, Ellen was as striking as a model. Yes, she was a tad thin. But with her long legs and ample curves, combined with her outgoing and sweet personality, she was irresistible. The orphans adored her. The local workers thought she was a goddess. And any man who came within a mile radius fell in love with her.

Marian snorted aloud at the differences in their appearances. Sure, their oval-shaped faces contained similarities—narrow chins and prominent cheekbones. And they both had long lashes framing upturned eyes.

But compared to Ellen's tanned face, Marian's complexion was pale, making her brown eyes too dark and brooding. Ellen had pulled her hair back into a messy bun, managing to look stylish and casual at the same time. Although Marian had used plenty of straightening products and her hot iron in an attempt to tame her long auburn waves, her messy bun looked just that—messy.

Marian picked her phone back up. She had to reserve a flight. One tonight, if possible.

The phone screen lit up with a recent text from Ellen still awaiting her response. Nothing serious, just Ellen being her usual sweet self and checking in to say hi. Marian's fingers hovered above the message, but then she swiped it away. She had to wait to reply. If she ended up having a conversation with her sister, she'd probably spill the news about Dad.

She'd never believed in her wildest dreams Ellen would outlive their dad. And she'd certainly never imagined she'd have to bear bad news to her sister about Dad. It was always the other way around—calling Dad to let him know of a new development with Ellen.

Last year Ellen had laser surgery to eliminate three tumors from the outer regions of her retina. The year before, she had one of

her adrenal glands removed. Even now, her doctors were paying special attention to the tumors on her kidney, which would need to be taken out eventually.

Harrison was right. They couldn't say anything to Ellen. Not until they knew more. Otherwise her sister would jump on the first plane out of Port Au Prince to be by Dad's side. But the travel, the sleeplessness, the stress—it would take a toll on Ellen, weaken her immune system, cause high blood pressure, lead to more weight loss, and increase the rate and size of tumor growth.

The outer office door swung open, and the motion sensor lights came to life, revealing Jasper's brown hair and athletic frame. In his Under Armour shorts and University of Illinois at Chicago sweatshirt, he'd slung his gym bag over his shoulder after exercising in the company fitness center. Marian was never sure if he timed his nightly workouts to coincide with her late hours, but he was always there when she finished.

He smiled and lifted a hand in greeting.

She gave a half wave in return, too despondent to muster any enthusiasm at seeing him.

He wound through the hallway to the office they shared with several other researchers. "Hey," he said as he entered. "Almost done? I'll walk you out."

"My dad's in a coma." Saying the words aloud was like having the wind knocked out of her. She pressed a hand against her chest and tried to drag in a breath.

Brow furrowing with concern, Jasper shrugged his bag off his shoulder and eased it to the floor. His hair, damp from his shower, clung to his forehead, and his body emanated the citrus of his Axe body spray. "I'm sorry, Marian. Does anyone know what happened?"

"The doctors haven't found the cause yet."

Jasper crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. Mercer had hired Jasper Boyle at the Groton facility about the same

time she'd started last year. They'd been partners on several chemical analysis projects and had quickly gotten to know each other.

Over time, she'd opened up to him about her frustrations with her dad, especially regarding his crazy research and theories. And Jasper had shared his disappointment with his dad's Lou Gehrig's disease.

Jasper had hinted recently at wanting more from their relationship, but Marian had been honest with him that she was married to her work. Besides, she hadn't wanted to ruin their friendship with romantic entanglements.

Of course, she'd never had many romantic entanglements to speak of. In high school, she'd been a geeky science nerd and had happily spent Friday nights dating her books rather than boys. That pattern had continued through college and graduate school. And she doubted it would ever end. Not until she found a way to save Ellen.

Now her plans had to widen to include saving her dad.

"You look tired." Jasper's gaze swept down the form-fitting black Dior top she'd paired with a slim charcoal skirt. The appreciative glint in his eyes assured her that while she might not have Ellen's jaw-dropping beauty, she had inherited the same long legs and womanly form.

"I'll be fine once I'm at the hospital with Dad."

"Have the doctors given him a prognosis?"

"Not that I'm aware of." She reached for the leather briefcase beneath her desk. "But as soon as I get there, I'll find out exactly what's going on and make sure they're doing all they can."

"I have no doubt you will." His tone was amused. He knew her well enough to realize she was capable of getting what she wanted. "When are you leaving?"

"I haven't booked a flight yet." She tucked her laptop into the briefcase along with the binder filled with meticulous records of all her experiments.

“You should take the company jet this time.”

She shook her head. “You know how I feel about that.”

He shrugged. “I thought you might like to get there faster.”

Since her dad’s family—her great-grandfather—had been one of the founders of Mercer Pharmaceuticals and her dad still owned a share of the business, she had access to the company jet whenever it suited her, but she didn’t want to be known for using the family perks. The other employees already thought she’d landed her position because of her connections. Of course, no one said so to her face. But she had no doubt that’s what they believed.

The truth was, she’d earned her research job at Mercer Pharmaceuticals the same way everyone else had. She’d spent long years in school, excelled in her studies, and pushed herself hard to get where she was.

She reached for the latest spreadsheet outlining the pharmacokinetic parameters, the columns of absorption rates and volume of distribution that were once again inconclusive. She was getting close. Intuitively, she knew that. But how could she convince everyone else without solid evidence?

With a frustrated sigh, she crumpled the sheet and tossed it toward the wastebasket in the corner. It bounced off the glass wall and landed on the floor near the other papers she’d already discarded.

Jasper straightened and combed his fingers through his damp hair. “Let me come with you.”

Her gaze shot to him in surprise.

His eyes were warm and sympathetic. “You shouldn’t be alone at a time like this.”

For one brief instant, she was tempted to let herself need someone else. But just as quickly as the weakness surfaced, she stuffed it away like an item in her leather case. “Thank you, Jasper. But you have responsibilities here, and I don’t know how long I’ll be gone.”

“I can take off some time—”

“What if he doesn’t come out of his coma right away?” *Or ever?* She shuddered at the unbidden thought.

“I’ll stay as long as I’m able.” His expression was earnest.

“Jasper . . .” She didn’t want to lecture him with the I-only-want-to-be-friends conversation again. She was too tired for it.

“Just as friends, Marian.” He could read her well. “Friends are there for friends, aren’t they?”

She snapped her briefcase closed.

He grinned one of his charming grins that could win over even the staunchest of hearts. He was attractive and amiable. And the impish quirk of his mouth told her he knew it.

Her lips gave an involuntary twitch of a smile, but she leveled him with what she hoped was her most serious look, one that said his charm didn’t work on her—even though he was chipping away at her reserves. “I’ll be fine. I promise.”

He stuffed his hands into the front pocket of his sweatshirt. “If you’re sure.”

“I’ll let you know if his condition worsens.”

“Say the word, and I’ll be on the first plane over.”

She tidied the remaining items on her desk. “You’re too nice to me.”

“Friends are supposed to be nice.”

She couldn’t hold back her smile any longer. “You’re a good friend, Jasper. Thank you.”

He tugged the keys out of his pocket and jangled them. “Since you clearly don’t intend to wait for a morning flight, I’ll drive you to the airport.” Sometimes it was scary how well Jasper knew her.

She made several quick phone calls, one to reserve her flight, a second to her boss to let him know of the family emergency, and another to her landlady. With no time to swing by her place and pack, Marian was glad her dad had insisted on her keeping a room and wardrobe at his Canterbury home. She’d always felt like he

wanted the arrangement to make himself feel better. Maybe he truly had believed it would help draw them closer. But it hadn't.

Marian switched off several machines before giving the lab a final survey. Her gaze snagged on the silver-framed picture on her desk, the last photo taken of her family during a trip to Jennings Beach before Mom died. The happy faces stared back at her. With windblown hair and their arms draped around one another, they stood against the backdrop of the ocean stretching out behind them. Even her dad was smiling, his hair still red without any gray.

That day on the beach had been the last time not only for smiles, but for being together. Little had they known they'd existed in a sinking ship without a lifeboat. Cancer had been lurking beneath the surface, waiting to capture Mom in its sharp teeth and drag her away, leaving the rest of them lost at sea and floating further apart with every passing year.

Even if the abyss between Dad and her felt unbridgeable, she had to go to him anyway. She still loved him, had always been close to him growing up, closer than to her mom. She didn't want him to be alone during this medical crisis. Perhaps when he awoke from his coma, she could try harder to connect with him.

For a second, she considered snatching up the family photo and taking it with her, especially as a strange sensation came over her—one warning her she'd never see the picture again.

She shook her head to dislodge the silly feeling. Then she brushed past Jasper out the door and down the hallway without another glance at the lab or the silver-framed picture. She was coming back. She was on the verge of finding a cure for Ellen. No one and nothing could stop her from returning and saving her sister's life.