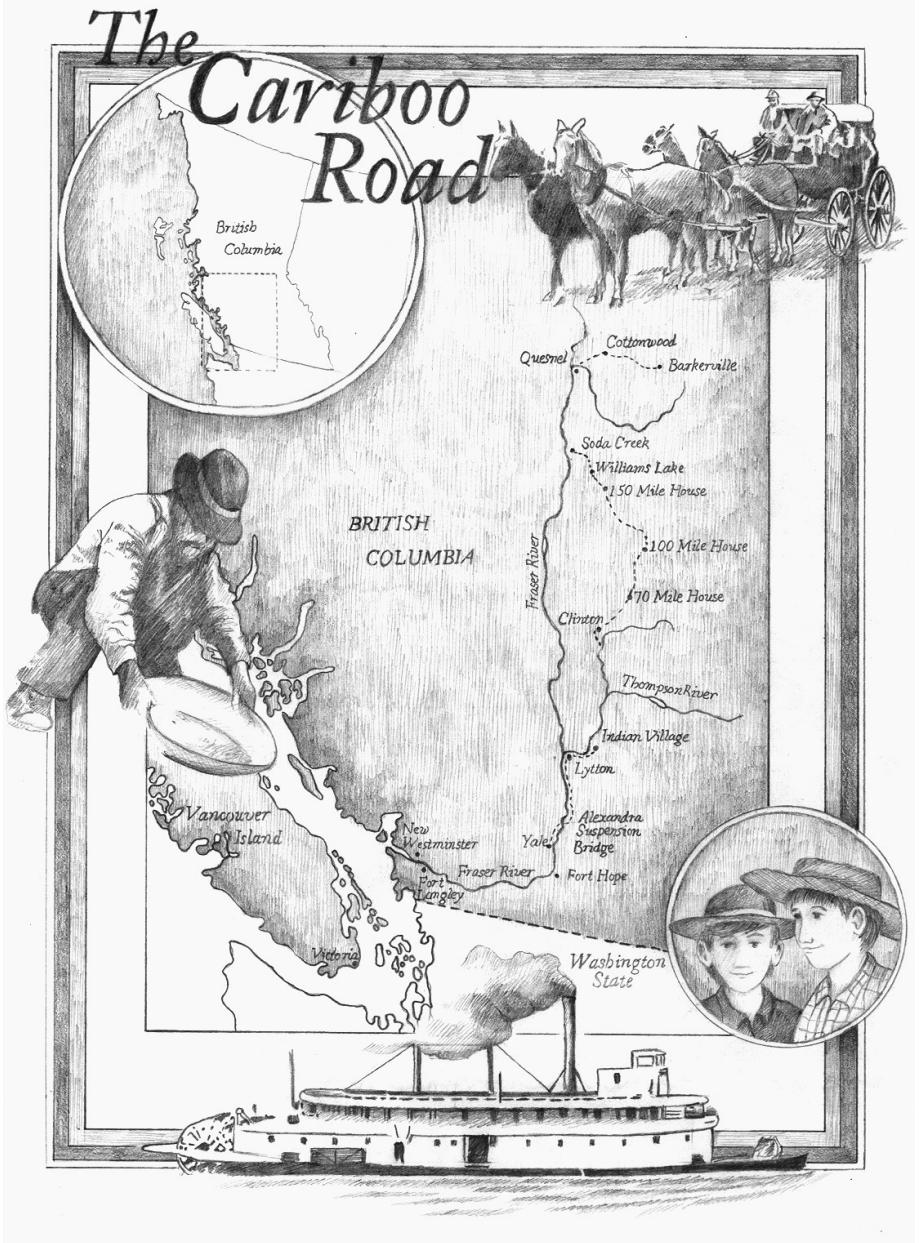


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CARIBOO RUNAWAY





## THE RUNAWAY

Elva Parkhurst tossed impatiently in bed. She felt as if she'd lain here forever listening to Tim's breathing deepen and soften as he fell asleep. There was no danger of her accidentally falling asleep; she was too excited. But would her mother never put out the lamp and leave the parlour?

Elva shifted her listening from inside the small apartment to the outside chorus of Victoria. Men clomping down the boardwalks, wagons squeaking, horses champing and snorting as they pulled provisions to and from the waiting ships. Faintly, through all this, drifted a mournful miner's song.

*Isn't it midnight yet? Haven't the sailors gone back to Esquimalt yet?* She sighed and thought she heard the creak and shudder of a ship in the harbour.

For the hundredth time Elva checked beneath the bed. Her pack was still there. She heaved under the hot covers again. Sweat trickling down her back made her itchy, and she wriggled to scratch. Putting her nightgown on over her clothes and climbing into bed before Tim came into the room had been the only way to keep her plan from him. She didn't want a nosy eleven year old brother fouling it up.

## CARIBOO RUNAWAY

“My head’s aching,” she’d said to her mother. “I think I’ll go to bed.”

“So early?” Mrs. Parkhurst had glanced up from her mending and frowned. “I hope you’re not getting ill.”

Elva saw again the look on her mother’s face. *She’s older*, Elva thought suddenly. She’d regarded her mother as ageless, always capable. But six years of bringing up two children by herself in a new seaport town had drawn lines on her face and touched her hair with grey. *I must find him*, Elva resolved. *She can’t go on like this.*

Elva quietly drew her thick nightgown up and over her head. She lay still for a minute, breathing in the relief of some coolness before she inched her legs from under the covers. The sheet gleamed in the moonlight. The edge of the bed creaked. Tim moaned and rolled over, taking his blankets with him. *Don’t wake up*, she willed. Her feet touched the floor and, keeping an eye on her brother, she reached under her pillow for the scissors she’d hidden there.

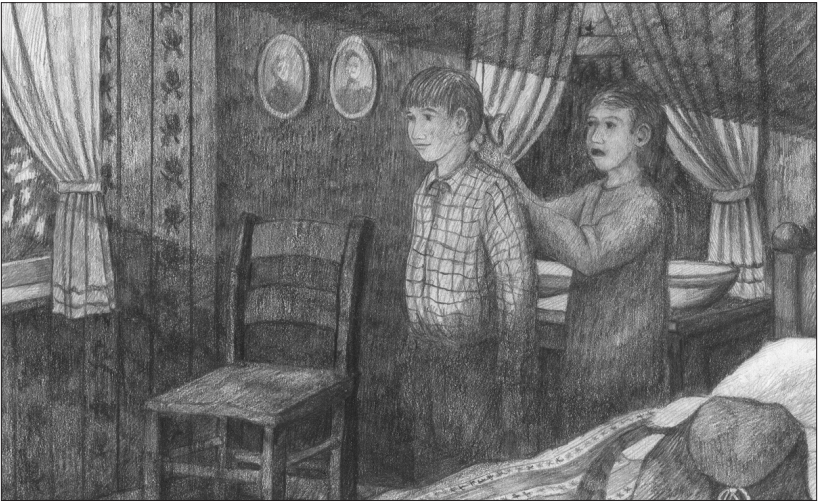
As she bent over, her long blonde braids fell forward. She automatically flipped them back—then slowly stroked one. This was the part she’d dreaded most. She was proud of her hair. She could sit on it. It had never been cut. One of her ambitions, along with being an actress, was to have the highest hairdo when the time came in a few years to put it up and be a woman. But now what choice did she have?

Her braids were so heavy and thick she had to saw at them with the scissors. They made a crunching noise. Finally she held them in her hands.

*Like something dead*, she thought, looking at them in the moonlight. *But what I have to do is more important than any pieces of hair.* She shoved them under the pillow, for lack of a better hiding place, and tried by touch alone to even out the ragged ends.

Tim stirred, then thrashed onto his back. Elva froze, scissors pressed against her neck. *Go to sleep. Go to sleep.*

No use. Tim’s eyes opened, started to close, then jerked open wide.



He sat up. “What are you doing?”

“Shhh! Do you want to wake Mother?”

“Where’d you get those pants? You look like a boy!”

“Thank you,” Elva retorted sarcastically. “That’s what I hope I look like!” She smacked her tongue on the roof of her mouth. “Well, now you’re awake, get up and trim the back of my hair.”

“Oh—your braids.” His surprise sounded sad.

She winced. “Don’t talk about it!”

Tim pinched his lips together. “I’m not helping till you tell me what you’re doing.”

Elva sighed. Her brother was quite capable of standing in the middle of the room and screaming until their mother came—until the whole British Navy came. She’d never get away. She took a breath, trying to control her urge to smother him with a pillow. “I’m going to find father.”

Tim’s mouth opened and closed, fish-like. “You’re going to the goldfields? You can’t. You don’t know where he is. You don’t know how to get there. Besides,” he added the final cut, “you’re a girl!”

“So what?” Anger flared through her. Little brothers shouldn’t be

## CARIBOO RUNAWAY

allowed to happen. “I do too know how to get there! It’s in all the newspapers! And you just said I look like a boy!”

Elva glanced down at the long linsey-woolsey trousers. She held out her arm and admired the blue and white checked shirt. She’d had to do three essays for Jamie Allen before he’d give her the clothes. Jamie Allen was nice but, fortunately for Elva, not interested in schoolwork.

Tim struggled into his trousers. “I’m coming with you.” His voice was muffled in his nightshirt.

“No! You can’t! I mean, no, Tim. Somebody has to look after Mother. What’ll happen to her if we both go? She’s not been well, the shock might kill her!” Elva placed a hand over her heart as she’d seen an actress do at the Royal Theatre last winter. She looked sorrowfully at her brother. “No, you can’t come. Mother needs a man about the place.”

Tim paused, his nightshirt half-on, half-off. “If she needs a man so will you, even more in the goldfields!”

“In the goldfields you won’t be a man, you’ll be a child. You’re too small. I’m sorry to say it, but you’re just too small. If they saw you they’d look harder at me, then I’d never find Father.”

“You won’t find him anyway!” Tim tried to hurt back. He hated being small and thin. “Father might be dead for all we know!”

“He’s not dead! He’s not! I know it! He’s finding a fortune. He said only a fortune was good enough for his family and he wasn’t coming home till he had one!”

But now it was time to bring him back, with or without his fortune.

Elva fished her pack out from under the bed. “Look,” she said more gently, “I have to go. If he’s dead, which he isn’t, that horrible Mr. Robart’ll marry Mother, and she’ll do it just so we can have a father. Mr. Robart keeps telling her Father’s dead and she cries—I’ve heard her. And now she’s been ill she can’t teach dance and deportment. The last money Father sent is gone. All she has are her piano pupils