

Redeeming
Light

Annette O'Hare

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Dedication

A father is neither an anchor to hold us back, nor a sail
to take us there, but a guiding light whose love shows
us the way ~ author unknown

Daddy, you will forever be in my heart.

Harrell "Jerry" McRae

1937 - 2017

What People are Saying

In *Redeeming Light*, Annette O'Hare once again gives us a delightful novel with fascinating characters caught up in a story of love, endurance, and complete trust in God in the most trying of times. Set on the Gulf Coast of Texas, the reader will experience the whims of the weather and tides of Bolivar and will be turning the pages to see who survives the tempest.

~Martha Rogers, author of the
Seasons of the Heart series

Annette O'Hare has nailed it in this delightful novel of a young woman's search to secure her future and finds an everlasting love. Well done!

~Cynthia Hickey, author of
the Shady Acres mystery series

1

For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy. Psalm 61:3

Bolivar Peninsula, Late Summer 1900

Sarah Jane McKinney had dreaded the coming night for some time now. The very thought of having to deal with that crotchety old man had her stomach performing somersaults. On more than one occasion she'd heard Daddy refer to him as a shyster. And if he was brazen enough to try pulling something over on Daddy, then taking advantage of a house full of women should be as easy as drawing ants to a picnic.

"Come on, Ginger." Sarah Jane clicked her tongue and tugged the reins. The auburn mare flipped her head in the direction Sarah indicated. The horse's russet-colored mane swished past long, dark lashes. Ginger had the glamorous eyes of a pin-up girl on a calendar. She nickered and snorted her annoyance at the restless dog running between her legs.

"Come on, Rex. Mama's gonna be angry if Maisy May gets out of her pen and eats up her vegetables, again." The keen-eyed dog snapped to attention at the sound of his name. Sarah gestured toward the gate. "Get the rope."

Eager to please his master, Rex grasped the

tattered cords in his mouth and pulled. The wooden gate swung toward the scruffy dog and latched shut.

"Good boy, Rex."

The milk cow mooed her protest at being shut inside the barn.

Sarah knew firsthand that Maisy preferred the taste of Mama's homegrown produce to her store-bought feed. "Sorry, girl, but I'm not drinking any more onion-flavored milk."

With the pen secured, Ginger slowly clopped to her stall in the back of the barn. The slow cadence of her hoof falls indicated her fatigue. All the animals spent their nights in the barn except the beef stock, and Rex of course. Rex stayed in Sarah's room, much to Mama's displeasure.

Looking back, Sarah saw Maisy May's udder bag swishing to and fro as she fell in line behind Ginger. Two goats, the newborn kid, and a half-dozen or more sheep followed in step as they did every evening.

Sarah dismounted and filled Ginger's feed trough with fresh oats. Sarah unhitched the saddle and lifted it off the horse's back. She had helped her daddy take care of the ranch for years, with the help of Pedro and the other hands, but now that her father was gone she quickly came to realize how much work there really was. There were so many things that needed attention. If she didn't get some help soon, the place would fall into disrepair.

Ginger snorted her approval of dinner by plunging her long nose into the feed. Sarah brushed through the horse's fur, damp from a hard day of work. Ginger's flanks quivered with each stroke of the brush.

Without warning, Pedro stuck his head around the

corner of Ginger's stall.

Sarah startled, and the goats bleated their condemnation of his intrusion. She put her hand to her chest willing her heart to slow down to its regular pace. *I need to put a bell around that man's neck.*

"I'm gonna go now, Miss Sarah, OK?"

"OK, Pedro." It was an effort for Sarah not to pick up Pedro's thick Hispanic accent. "Thanks for all your hard work today."

"I see you next week, OK? We gotta castrate those new bull before Mr. Crosby come for the herd, OK?"

Sarah draped her arms over Ginger's back. She extended a weary wave to Pedro. Exhaustion overcame her at the very thought of castrating the young bulls. It was disgusting work for sure, but she'd put it off long enough and needed to get it behind her. Her top lip curled thinking about the nauseating job that loomed ahead of them. "See you next week. Say hello to Inez for me."

He nodded. "OK." Pedro wasn't a man much for words. Having said his piece, he disappeared around the corner. He was a good man—their best man. And the only one who stayed on to help her with the herd after Daddy was killed. The others had left, afraid there would be no more work, no more pay. Not Pedro, though. He had been by Daddy's side for as long as she could remember.

But after the cattle were sold, she'd probably have to let him go too. Daddy's ranch was too big for three women and one elderly Mexican man to handle. To keep her father's MK brand alive, she'd have to scale down the operation. At least until she could get more help. Times like these made her wish she had half-brothers instead of two half-sisters.

Pedro led his mule out of the pen, where he kept her during the day, and climbed on her back. It amazed Sarah every time his leg made it over with his diminished stature. He nudged the mule in the flanks and held tight to the homemade harness she wore. She took off down the road with a jingle from the bells around her neck, all the while hee-hawing her grievances. Pedro's wife, Inez, decorated the mule's harness with colorful ribbons and bells, making her, as she said, "*Muy bonita!*"

Sarah removed her cowboy hat, and a passel of long, blonde curls tumbled down. She shook her head and ran her fingers through the straw-colored waves. A cow lowed in the distance, drawing her from the barn. She put the hat back on and walked toward the fence.

One of the fence posts leaned precariously, demanding Sarah's attention. One more thing she needed to take care of but didn't have the time or energy for. She chose a sturdy post and leaned her weary body against it. It was the time of day she'd grown to love so much growing up on the peninsula.

The sun appeared larger than usual. It cast brilliant rays of light onto the Bolivar Point Lighthouse standing tall in the distance. The huge tower reflected the dazzling light onto the swampy pond in front of it. The water danced and glimmered. The sun gave forth its final magnificent rays before gently sinking into the waters of Galveston Bay.

The herd of fifteen hundred Texas Longhorn cattle bearing her father's MK brand grazed in the pasture. The colors of their hides were more varied than an artist's pallet. She couldn't imagine a more beautiful sight than the one that lay before her.

“Sarah Jane.” Her short, red-headed mama hollered from the back door. “Come inside and get cleaned up. Mr. Crosby will be here before you know it.”

“I’ll be right in, Mama.” The screen door slammed shut. *Oh, Lord, I’m not looking forward to this meeting tonight. You know how Mr. Crosby is. He’s not to be trusted. I need You there to make sure he doesn’t take advantage of us.*

God heard her prayers, but ever since Daddy died, it felt as if He was nowhere to be found. If she was to have a successful meeting with Mr. Crosby, she needed all the heavenly assistance she could muster.

Brutus, the oldest and best of their breed stock, bellowed his long, loud cry. The cows followed him into the far pasture with a soft lowing. Mama insisted they keep Brutus after the horrible accident. She asserted they needed him to continue Daddy’s near perfect line.

The broad chested king of the herd sauntered away with prideful arrogance. His seven-foot horn span swayed as he walked. Brutus was a regal animal, but it didn’t matter to Sarah how majestic he might be. She turned toward the house.

She would never forget that he was responsible for goring her daddy to death.

2

Sarah and her sister, Grace, helped Mama serve up the delicious cut of beef, potatoes, gravy, green beans, fresh peaches, and yeast rolls.

Sarah paid careful attention to Mr. Laird Crosby's demeanor during supper to get a feel for how their negotiations would go afterwards. If the way he devoured Mama's home cooking had anything to do with his willingness to deal, then prosperity was on their side. But uncertainty assailed her. It seemed he'd checked his previously crotchety manner at the door. Perhaps he was on his best gentlemanly behavior since he was in the presence of ladies.

"Mrs. McKinney, that might have been the juiciest piece of roast beef I've ever tasted." Mr. Crosby patted his round belly as he followed Mama into the living room. He sat down in Daddy's chair.

Mama said nothing, so Sarah let it go.

All men were to be respected, even if they did speak with some kind of Alabama accent. He wasn't a native Texan; that much she was sure of.

"Why, thank you, Mr. Crosby. It's been a while since I've cooked for a man." Mama sat in her rocking chair and smoothed out her skirt. Rex trotted over and sat close to her. Mama put her hand on his furry head. "As you already know, our cattle provide some of the finest beef in southeast Texas—have for years now."

She gestured to Sarah and her sister, standing at the doorway. "Girls, come on in and have a seat. You are as much a part of this as we are." She reached up and touched one of her faded red curls. "This will all be yours someday when I'm gone." Her voice cracked.

Sarah wanted to roll her eyes. It was Mama's new practice to voice her sense of mortality since Daddy died. She didn't buy into Mama's poor-little-old-me act. Her mother had survived a divorce and the deaths of her last two husbands. If she could live through that, then selling off a herd of cattle should be an easy day's work for her.

The middle sister, on the other hand, seemed to thrive on Mama's newfound insecurities. Most everyone considered Grace Winnie the most beautiful girl on the peninsula, with her enormous blue eyes and angelic features. Of her two sisters, Sarah was closest to Grace, but bless her heart, the poor girl was as naive as they came.

Grace rushed to Mama's side and lifted her hand. "Oh, Mama, are you getting the gloomies again?"

Mama patted Grace's arm. "I'll be fine, honey. Now have a seat." She patted the straight-backed chair next to her rocker, and Grace sat down beside her.

"Eh, hm." Mr. Crosby loudly cleared his throat. "Mrs. McKinney, even though it hasn't been clearly stated to me, I believe I can ascertain the reason as to why you've invited me out here to your ranch."

Mama raised her eyebrows. "Oh? Well, it is the spring, Mr. Crosby. And if I'm not mistaken, the late Mr. McKinney had always invited you to our ranch at this time of year to discuss the purchase of our beef stock. So naturally, I assumed the reason I invited you here was more than obvious."

"Well, you see now, that's just the thing, Mrs. McKinney." The man turned his attention away from Mama and looked at Grace. "Darlin' would you be a dear and fetch me a cup of warm coffee and some of that delicious-looking peach cobbler I seen on the sideboard?"

Grace looked to Mama, who patted her on the knee. "Go on and get him what he wants." She left the room.

Mama clasped her hands together and leaned forward to talk to the man. "Now what was it you were saying, Mr. Crosby?"

Mama's question appeared to catch the man completely off guard as his eyes lasciviously followed Grace's backside from the room. His neck whipped around to Mama, a revolting smile on his face. "What I'm saying, Mrs. McKinney, is that, if, in fact, you have invited me here to discuss whether I intend to enter into a contract with you...*ladies*, well then, I'm sorry to disappoint you. You see, ma'am, I'm not exactly in a position to purchase your cattle this year."

"What?" Sarah jumped from her chair. "But you've always bought Daddy's beef stock. Why would this year be any different?"

Mr. Crosby tightened his jaw and sneered at Sarah. He leaned forward in his chair...Daddy's chair, and put his hand on his knee. "It's different, my dear, because you are not Clayton McKinney." He pointed at Mama and Sarah with two fingers on his right hand. "You two may be McKinneys, but you're by no means the man of the house."

Mama waved her hand at Sarah. "All right now, Sarah. Let's all calm down, and see if we can work this out." Sarah returned to her chair, and Mama turned

her attention to the smug faced man. "Mr. Crosby, I'm afraid I don't understand your meaning. Of course, we're not the *man* of the house, but we're all that's left." She held up a hand in question.

He sat back in Daddy's chair and crossed his legs as though he owned the place. "I see what you're saying, Mrs. McKinney, but as far as I'm aware, you may not even be the legal owner of the Longhorn stock, since Mr. McKinney is no longer alive."

At that moment, Grace came into the living room with a steaming cup of coffee and a saucer of Mama's peach cobbler. "Here you are, Mr. Crosby." The way she politely handed them to the nasty man and even went as far as to smile at him made it obvious she hadn't been listening to the conversation. She returned to her place next to Mama.

He winked at Grace before setting the coffee on the side table. "Why thank you, darlin'."

Mama continued, a bit more frustration in her voice than before. "I'm sorry, Mr. Crosby, but how can you possibly think I'm not the legal owner of my own husband's cattle?"

Mr. Crosby took a huge bite of cobbler and didn't mind talking with his mouth full. Bits of cobbler shot from his mouth as he spoke. One of them would have to clean the floor later. "Well, ma'am, do you have any papers showing that the beef stock has been left in your name? Perhaps you are in possession of your late husband's will. Because I don't know for sure, but Mr. McKinney may very well have...say, a brother with just as much claim to the cattle as you do."

Uncle Jasper's face appeared in Sarah's thoughts. He wouldn't lay claim to Daddy's cattle and leave them penniless. He wasn't that kind of man. He was

good and kindhearted like Daddy. How did this disgusting man know anything about Daddy's brother? What kind of game was he playing?

Mama looked at Sarah. She hoped her mama could find a source of support in her eyes. She turned back to her aggravator. "The only one who might have more entitlement to the cattle than I do would be my daughter, Sarah, here. As you know, she is my late husband's only heir."

Mr. Crosby picked up his coffee from the table and took a long, loud sip. "Is that right, Miss McKinney? You are your daddy's sole heir?" He wiped coffee and sweat from his lips.

Sarah stiffened her back. "That's right, I am."

Having devoured the cobbler in only a couple bites, he put the empty dish on the pedestal table next to Daddy's chair. "Well now, Miss McKinney, seeing that you claim to be the sole owner of the MK Ranch, I suppose I should be talking to you then. If you don't mind me asking, would you tell me how old you are, my dear?"

Sarah scowled at the pompous man. Righteous indignation swelled inside her. "Why, I'm seventeen and a half. Not that it's any of your business. And for your information, I never claimed to be the sole owner of this ranch. The ranch belongs to Mama."

A self-satisfied smile crept upon Mr. Crosby's face. He adjusted himself in the chair, coffee cup still in hand. "My, my, but you're just a child. How do you plan on running this ranch all by yourself? I heard about all your hands running out on you. Such a pity." The man clicked his tongue and shook his head.

Sarah flinched with every sound from his mouth. Her bottom lip began to quiver. How on earth could he

know about the ranch hands leaving? Had he been snooping around in their business? Might he even have had something to do with them leaving? “Mr. Crosby, I’ll have you know that we’ve managed to handle our affairs just fine this far.” Sarah’s cheeks burned. “Now, are you going to make us an offer on our beef or not?”

“All right, now. Calm yourself down, and we’ll talk.” He held his coffee cup out toward Grace. “Would you mind getting me another cup of coffee, darlin’?”

Sarah hated the way the man talked to them. It was typical for Grace to stay out of the conversation. She was more suited to chasing after the neighbor boy and reading the latest fashion magazines than running a cattle ranch. She was normal...not like Sarah. Grace took the coffee cup and smoothed back her long, beautiful hair. With her gaze on the floor, she silently left the room.

Mr. Crosby smiled at Sarah, infuriating her. “Well, now, I suppose I’m willing to make you all a proposition, seeing as me and your daddy were such close friends and all.”

Sarah wanted to wretch. This man was never a close friend of her daddy’s. He only did business with him because he always offered the most money for the cattle.

The despicable man turned his attention to Mama. “You see, June...you don’t mind me calling you June, now, do you?” Mr. Crosby chuckled, causing his belly to bounce.

Mama didn’t say a word, and by the look on her face, she was in shock from his brazenness.

“When I received your message, I was surprised. I found it hard to believe that you invited me—a single,

and might I say, wealthy man—all the way out here from Galveston Island just to talk about...cattle."

Mama's chin dipped down, and her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me, Mr. Crosby, but what exactly are you implying?"

"Why, I think it's mighty clear to everyone here." He began to laugh softly. "What I'm saying is that when a newly widowed woman invites a man to her ranch, one can only assume she has other business in mind besides just selling cattle."

Mama shook her head.

Sarah stood, her fists clenched at her sides.

He held his hand out to Mama and chuckled. "Now listen to what I have to say, June. I have an idea in mind that would solve both our problems. It seems to me you're in need of a man who knows something about cattle. And I just happen to be a man with certain needs of my own. Now you don't want to lose your late husband's herd and his ranch too. What do you say, June? We could go to the courthouse tomorrow and make it legal."

Mama sucked in her breath and grasped at the collar of her wrap. "I'm not going to marry you. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in Texas!"

Grace walked through the living room door holding Mr. Crosby's coffee in her hands.

Sarah walked toward the man, her face a fiery crimson. "I don't know who you think you're dealing with, Crosby, but we're not a bunch of ignorant bumpkins like you may think! Now get out of my daddy's chair."

Grace dropped the dainty cup and saucer of coffee. The hot liquid poured out, and some splashed

onto her skirt. The china shattered into pieces on the floor. She gasped and put her hands over her mouth.

Mr. Crosby got out of the chair.

Mama rose and approached the man. She moved Sarah to the side and wedged herself between him and her daughters. Anger seeped from her eyes. "Sir, I'm not the kind of woman you think I am, and you have no business coming into my house and accusing me or my daughters of anything but wanting to sell my late husband's cattle."

Mr. Crosby took a step back, almost falling into the chair. He righted himself and stuck his stubby finger into Mama's face. "Now wait just a minute there, ma'am. It's not me, but you that's out of line. Here you are inviting me, one of the most eligible bachelors in Galveston, to enjoy a lovely dinner with a house full of young, single ladies." He reached up and twisted the right side of his long-handle mustache. "Humph. For all I know, it might be you who's looking for another husband. After all, if I'm correct in my thinking, Mr. McKinney *was* your third husband, wasn't he? And to think, your poor old husband is barely cold in his grave."

Sarah could see the blood drain from Mama's already pale face.

Grace put her arm around Mama and helped her to a chair. She looked ready to faint.

Sarah could take no more. When Mama was safely sitting down, she marched to the front door and swung it open. Rex followed after her. She pointed outside and turned to Mr. Crosby. "Get out!"

Laird Crosby stomped to the door, pushing past Sarah. Before he walked out, he turned and pointed at Mama. "Woman, you better think long and hard about

what I'm saying. Ain't nobody in their right mind gonna buy from a widow woman without a legal will and her brood of...of...banty hens."

It was hard to hear anything the man said with Rex barking and growling at him.

He shoved the door open the rest of the way and departed.

Sarah slammed it behind him with all her might.

Grace knelt at Mama's side and comforted her. Sarah collapsed onto her daddy's chair and rubbed the side of her face. Rex sat firmly in front of her and whimpered.

"What are we gonna do, Mama? If Mr. Crosby won't buy our stock, then who will? We'll be stuck with a pasture full of fatted cattle and no buyer."

Mama raised her head and pulled a crumpled white handkerchief from the waistband of her skirt. She wiped away her tears and stiffened her jaw. "Don't worry. I have a plan." She swiped at her nose with the handkerchief.

Sarah held her hands up in question and aggravation. She shook her head. "What plan, Mama? Don't you see we're in big trouble here?"

"Now calm down, Sarah Jane." She turned her attention to Grace. "I need you to go to the train depot first thing tomorrow morning."

Grace put her hand on Mama's knee. "Yes, ma'am. Who do you want me to wire?"

"I need you to send a wire to your Uncle Jeremiah's law office in Galveston."

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief at Mama's words. If anyone would know what to do, it would be her uncle, Jeremiah Logan.

3

Maisy May chewed her cud while Sarah sat beside her on the short, red milking stool. All the hard work she did around the ranch was worth it when it came time to sit down at the dinner table. Sarah could skip everything on her plate for one of Mama's hot buttermilk biscuits slathered with Maisy's sweet butter. Sarah whipped her head to the side, slinging hair out of her face. "Almost done, girl." Maisy May flicked her tail, mooed, and stuck her nose up in the air at the sound of Sarah's soft, soothing voice. "That's right, you're doing a real good job."

A loud clackity, clackity, clack sound startled Sarah. Rex barked and took off toward the noise.

Maisy May put her foot back, ready to move. Sarah rubbed her leg. "Steady—steady girl." One swift kick of Maisy's leg and the pail of milk would be spilled on the barn floor. *What on earth is that sound?* With the bucket in hand, Sarah headed out of the barn. She walked toward the ranch house, and it dawned on her that they had wired Uncle Jeremiah a few days earlier and he was liable to arrive at any time. Her heart and spirit leaped with the excitement of seeing her uncle. *It sure doesn't sound like Uncle Jeremiah though.*

Some of the fresh milk sloshed out of the pail when she whisked around the handrail and bounded up the two steps onto the porch that encircled the