

Redemption's Whisper

Kathleen E. Friesen

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2017

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-971-3

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-972-0

Published in the United States of America

Acknowledgements

Writing is a solitary occupation for the most part, but without my support groups, this book would still be stuck in my imagination.

A huge thank-you goes to my fantastic online critique partners, the ACFW Scribes 202 group and Rhonda Starnes. You not only found typos, you all helped me develop as a writer.

My dear pen pals, Gerry Meggait, Robin Flaten, Virginia Fairbrother, and Anne Lockhart continually encourage me not only in writing but in faith. I love you.

Fylis Edwards, thank you for answering my medical questions. Your nursing experience is expansive, and your friendship is precious.

Thanks goes to my editor, Jamie West, and Pelican Book Group's publisher, Nicola Martinez, for seeing something special in this story.

Last, but definitely not least, thank you to my husband, Ron Friesen, for your patience, your understanding, and your wacky sense of humor that keeps me somewhat sane. You're my hero.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13).

1

A gust of wind shook the narrow, sloped jet bridge as Hayley Blankenship dragged her carry-on toward the jumbo jet. Fear lodged in her throat, and her footsteps faltered.

People surged past. "Excuse me."

She swallowed hard and lifted her trembling chin. Not now. She would not give in to fear today. "You are strong," she whispered. The floor trembled, and Hayley stumbled as the moveable passageway adjusted itself. She clutched the handle of her bag, inhaled sharply, and trudged on. Almost there. She stalled at the entrance to the airplane. Her nerves vibrated. The narrow opening seemed to close around her. The air felt too thick to breathe. Her shoulders curled forward, and her head lowered. This was a mistake. She wasn't ready, not yet. She turned, but a long line of passengers stood behind her. Could she push past all those staring faces? Her knees threatened to buckle.

The flight attendant reached out and touched Hayley's arm, startling her. "Is there a problem, miss?"

Hayley shook her head and stiffened her resolve. She'd made the decision to go to Saskatoon. This might be her last chance. She inhaled through her nose and forced her shoulders back, her head up.

The flight attendant said something as she entered the plane, but it didn't register.

Hayley needed to concentrate. She glanced at the boarding pass in her hand. Seat 20A. The rear of the plane, out of sight of most of the other passengers. A window seat, so she could watch her past disappear. She walked by people already seated, avoiding their eyes, until she came to her assigned spot. Hayley shrugged out of her coat and stuffed it in the overhead compartment. She slid into her allotted place, stored her carry-on under the seat in front of her, and leaned against the window.

Various workers on the ground hurried to load luggage, refuel the plane, and do whatever else was needed to prepare for another flight.

As Hayley watched their purposeful strides, a twinge of envy twisted her lips. Self-pity and self-loathing reared their ugly heads. She closed her eyes in a futile attempt to block the terrible images racing through her mind. *Give up. You're not going to make it. You may as well take the pills—all of them.* She shook her head as though that would dislodge the negative thoughts. She sensed someone settle into the aisle seat but didn't bother looking. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Casual conversation was pointless. If only she could curl into a ball and block out the world, at least for a while.

~*~

Trevor Hiebert ran down the empty passageway to the plane's doorway. As he ran, he muttered a rant against Toronto traffic and cabbies who seemed more interested in conversing on their radios than getting him to Pearson International on time. He couldn't afford to miss this flight.

If only he'd pre-booked a seat. Now he was stuck with a center spot, and he knew from experience how uncomfortable it would be. Maybe the plane would be nearly empty so he could have a row to himself. He ducked around the smiling flight attendant and groaned. So much for that wish. He dragged his wheeled carry-on down the aisle as he scanned the numbers above the rows. Finally, he spotted it: 20B. He glanced at his row mates, a young woman leaning against the cabin wall with her eyes closed and an older woman who looked like a sweet grandmotherly type in the aisle seat.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I'm in 20B."

The old woman looked beside her at the narrow seat and back up at him. Her attention settled on his broad shoulders, and her mouth compressed into a flat line. "Good luck."

Trevor shifted his weight and pulled his leather bag closer. "Would you mind trading spots with me? Then I won't have to climb over you." And he'd have a little more breathing room.

"I certainly would mind. I want this seat." She jutted her chin and glared at him. "You young punks are used to getting your way, but you won't bully me."

The attendant moved to the front of the cabin, ready to begin her safety speech.

His temper surged, but Trevor clamped a lid on it. The woman wasn't worth the regret he'd feel later. He shrugged out of his well-worn leather jacket, lifted it and his bag into the overhead compartment, and tried to maneuver over the woman's legs in the cramped space to his assigned spot. Her leg jolted against the back of his knee, and he lost his balance. He caught himself against the window so he wouldn't land in the

young woman's lap.

The girl's eyes snapped open as he turned to apologize. She gave a sharp intake of breath and tried to ease away, but Trevor's power to move deserted him. Her mesmerizing green eyes widened as shock turned to fear.

"What are you doing?" Her shrill voice broke the spell.

"So sorry," he mumbled. He pushed off from the window and plunked into his chair. "I tripped." He looked sideways at the old woman, who smirked as she smoothed her pant legs.

It was going to be a long flight.

He glanced back at the young woman and wondered at his desire to see her face again. But she had turned away and sat huddled against the wall. Her sharp-angled shoulder blades and the back of her spiky auburn hair made an effective barrier. Kind of looked like a hedgehog. Trevor snorted. He was stuck between a prickly old grouch and a hedgehog. For three and a half hours.

~*~

Hayley pressed against the wall of the aircraft as chills raced through her limbs. Her legs trembled and her heart raced. She'd made it onto the plane. Would she fall apart now? That man had nearly landed on top of her. It happened so fast, she hadn't had time to react. There was no room to move, anyway. But he'd caught himself and apologized. She wasn't hurt, just scared. Her breathing evened out. She'd survived worse. She silently repeated her psychiatrist's prescribed refrain. *I am OK. I am strong. The past is gone. The future is God's.*

Over and over, until her body began to relax. Just like in Dr. Freemont's office.

She'd heard the brief exchange between her seatmates. The man's voice would have excited her in the past. She would have smiled at him and flirted with him. But that was the old Hayley. She was dead.

When she'd looked up and stared into his rugged face, all her senses had sharpened. He smelled like pine forest mixed with motor oil, a strangely tantalizing combination. His tanned skin indicated time spent outdoors. And his dark-lashed gray eyes, like a stormy Lake Ontario, invited her to sink into them. For one brief moment, she had the strangest sensation she could see her future in those eyes. And that terrified her.

~*~

Trevor jerked when the woman he'd first pegged as a sweet grandmother jabbed his arm with her elbow. "Pardon me?"

She already had the aisle seat. Did he have to give up the shared armrest, too? She pushed against his arm. Apparently.

"I need the armrest." She dug into her oversized purse and pulled out a paperback book with a suggestive picture on its cover. "Now leave me alone and let me read my story."

Trevor bit back a retort. He exhaled slowly to cool his frustration. Maybe if he concentrated on work, he could ignore both seatmates, one a royal pain and the other too intriguing. He reached for his phone, leaning to the left so he wouldn't incur the old woman's wrath again. But the space allotted wasn't enough for his

wide shoulders. His left shoulder pressed against the young woman's back and elicited a gasp.

She uncurled and seemed as though she was trying to merge with the wall of the plane. She looked sideways at him, eyes wide and lips clenched.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you. I don't think the airplane designers made these seats for people my size."

Shadows flitted over her pale face and disappeared. A tentative smile softened her lips. "You may be right." She hesitated for several heartbeats, and then turned and held out a slender hand. "I'm Hayley. Hayley Blankenship."

That little smile was like a rainbow during a storm, offering promises of spectacular beauty. Stunned by his reaction, he stared at her mouth until her smile disappeared and she started to pull her hand back. He took her hand in his. It felt fragile, cool, and...a zap of electricity shot up his arm, and she snatched her hand back.

Their eyes connected, and he was lost again until she blinked.

He gave himself a mental shake. "I'm...Trevor Hiebert. Nice to meet you."

She lowered her long lashes. "You too."

"Are you from Saskatoon?"

A shadow returned to her beautiful face. "No, I'm visiting friends there. I...I've been...sick, and my doctor suggested a change of scenery."

That explained the pallor, shadows under the eyes, and fragile appearance. He'd never been good with sickness. He stumbled over what to say. "I hope it helps." That was the best he could do.

She ducked her head, her hands clenched so

tightly her knuckles turned white.

He waited, but she didn't speak. Obviously his best wasn't very good.

~*~

Hayley could hear Dr. Freemont's voice. *"You need to make new friends. Open yourself to positive relationships. Start living again."* But she didn't know how. She carried too many secrets, too much sorrow to ever be a party girl again. That life no longer appealed. She wished she could at least carry on a normal conversation, though.

Especially since this intriguing man would be crammed next to her for more than three hours. She studied him with sideways glances. He'd apparently given up on her and was frowning at the screen of his phone. The lines on his forehead invited her fingers to smooth them. Where had that thought come from? She tucked her hands under her thighs and turned enough to see him more clearly.

There was something familiar about his face. They'd never met before, she was certain. His nose looked like it had been broken more than once, but something about his face reminded her of...The name wouldn't come.

The inflight movie started, one she'd seen many times, and a dashing, dark-haired cowboy appeared onscreen. An older, smoother version of her companion. Not identical, but the resemblance was remarkable.

She couldn't hold back a gasp, and he glanced at her. She looked at him, at the movie screen, and back at him with her eyebrows raised.

He sighed. "Yeah, it's been mentioned a time or two."

His rueful expression brought a long-lost grin to her face. Part of her mind registered wonder that her face didn't crack. She gave herself a mental shake. She needed to concentrate on the here and now. She glanced at the screen again and murmured, "Well, it could be worse."

He cocked his head as though deep in thought and then nodded. "I guess you're right." He didn't break a smile. "I could have looked like his horse."

Laughter bubbled up, surprising her. She touched her lips and watched as his gaze followed her fingers. She dropped her hands and clasped them in her lap, but his eyes didn't move.

He seemed to be a gentleman in spite of his intimidating size and biker-rough appearance. Maybe Dr. Freemont was right. Maybe this was her chance to chip away at her shell of isolation. She should try, at least. Besides, Saskatoon—if it was his destination—was large enough, they would probably never see each other again. So if she messed up, it wouldn't matter. She took a deep breath. "I'm glad I met you today, Trevor."

His answering smile warmed her. "Likewise, Hayley. I thought this flight was going to be miserable." He tilted his head toward the old woman.

Hayley rolled her eyes and whispered, "She can't be happy."

"You're probably right," he whispered back.

An angry retort came from the aisle seat. "I can hear you two. Mind your own bleepin' business and leave me out of it."

Trevor winked at her, and Hayley covered her

mouth with her hand to stifle a giggle.

She lowered her fingers. "Oops," she mouthed. She sat up straighter and tilted her head. "So, Trevor, tell me about yourself. Do you live in Saskatoon, or are you continuing on? What kind of work do you do?" She paused, her chin lowered. "Or am I being too nosy?"

He angled his body toward her. "The answer to your last question is 'no.' I live and work in Saskatoon, for now, anyway. I work at motorcycle shop there, but I may be moving to Toronto to work at Lowrider Cycles. Ever heard of it?"

She shook her head more to tame her emotions than to answer. His mention of motorcycles swept her back to the year she'd dated a young biker wannabe. She hadn't thought about that summer for years, couldn't even remember his name. Matt? Mark? Didn't matter. But she could feel the heat of the exhaust pipes by her legs, hear the wind shrieking past her helmet and the roar of the powerful engine. Such a long time ago, when she was still a teenager. Longing filled her—and shocked her. She hadn't experienced such a rush of yearning for months. Even as she wondered, the feeling faded, leaving a familiar, heavy emptiness.

"You OK?"

She felt her face warm. "Sorry, I got a little lost there." She replayed his question. "Yes, I've heard of it. They specialize in custom bikes, right?"

His smile brightened. "Right. That's what I do. When I can." His smile dimmed. "But I haven't accepted yet. My folks are getting on in years, and they still farm out near Langham. Do you know the area?"

Hayley shook her head. "I went to university in Saskatoon for one term a couple years ago, but I never

got outside the city.”

“Just one term? Why? What were you studying?”

“Um...yeah. I’d planned to go into accounting, but things didn’t work out.” She couldn’t go there. Would she ever be allowed to forget? She fought tears as she glanced at her seat-mate. His expression held curiosity mixed with kindness, and Hayley lowered her head. Dr. Freemont was wrong. She couldn’t socialize. That part of her was dead, or at least damaged beyond repair. Her shoulders hunched, and she turned toward the window, seeing only her failures.

~*~

It was none of his business. He didn’t know this woman and would probably never see her again. But Hayley Blankenship’s reaction troubled him, stirred his protectiveness. He’d seen it too many times, that tentative connection so easily broken.

Trevor glanced at his watch. It was almost three hours until they’d land in Saskatoon. He would give her some time and space to work through whatever had triggered her withdrawal. His mouth twisted as he touched the screen on his phone. He was no superhero. He couldn’t protect everyone, no matter how much he wanted to.

He turned his attention to the notes he’d jotted yesterday, and his gut churned at the questions he’d written to himself. He had a decision to make, and no matter which option he chose, people’s lives would change. People he cared about.

List the pros and cons. Trevor began with his first option, the one he’d gone to Toronto to investigate, and listed everything positive and negative he could

imagine from its outcome. Including the faint uneasiness he'd felt during his interview. Too bad he couldn't have stayed longer, checked it out more thoroughly. But it seemed to be the job of his dreams. He listed several impressions of Lowrider Cycles and the positives and negatives of moving. Then the second scenario, the one involving his parents. That took longer, and he soon lost awareness of everything around him. Sometime later, movement from the left alerted him.

Hayley was trying to stand in the cramped space. "Excuse me, please. My leg...I need to get out."

What little color she'd had was gone. Her shadowed eyes appeared even brighter against the whiteness of her face. Lines had appeared beside her mouth.

"Sure. Of course. Let me get out of your way."

The old woman was snoring, her racy novel open on her chest, but when Trevor tried to step over her, she jerked awake.

"What do you think you're doing? Get off of me!"

He ignored her outburst and moved into the aisle. He offered his hand to Hayley, and she grasped it without hesitation. She seemed to stumble a bit as she joined him in the aisle. She grabbed the back of the old woman's seat with her other hand, and the woman glared at her.

"You two want to play games, go do it somewhere else."

"Just give me a minute, please." Hayley's voice quavered.

The other woman's fierceness dissipated. "You hurtin', girl?" The gruff voice was much softer now.

"I'll be fine. Thank you." Hayley offered a shaky

smile.

A glimmer of compassion softened the old woman's face.

"I know about pain. What happened to you?"

Hayley shook her head and closed her eyes. The plane shifted, and she wobbled.

Acting on instinct, Trevor snagged her around the waist and pulled her closer. She clung to him for a moment, long enough for him to inhale the scent of her hair. Peaches, or maybe strawberries. Something fruity. His arm tightened around her.

At that moment the flight attendant's voice came over the loudspeaker. "May I have your attention? We are flying into some turbulence, so please be seated and fasten your seatbelts. Thank you."

Hayley gasped and pulled away from him. "Excuse me again," she said breathlessly as she stepped over the older woman and back to her seat.

The old woman patted Hayley's back as she passed.

Trevor's eyebrows lifted. People certainly were complicated. He nodded to the woman as he carefully moved back to his seat and fastened his seatbelt. He glanced to his left. Hayley's belt was snugged tight, almost as tight as the lines around her mouth. He leaned closer to her and kept his voice low. "Do you have something you can take for the pain?"

She didn't look at him. "I'm trying to stay away from them. Too easy to get hooked."

Sounded like narcotics. It must have been bad, then. "Would ibuprofen help? I have some in my bag."

"I took some just before boarding, but it doesn't do much." She gripped the armrest as the plane bucked.

"How about a distraction? Give me your hand."

He'd asked without thinking and felt pleasantly surprised when Hayley held out her hand, palm up. He turned it over, found the spot above her wrist bone, and pressed his thumb against it, gently and then more deeply.

At first she watched his fingers on her hand as though hypnotized. After several moments her wide, green eyes lifted and connected with his. "Where did you learn to do that? It's actually helping."

"Something my mom taught me."

When she leaned back and closed her eyes, Trevor eased the pressure of his thumb and began slow, gentle circles on the palm of her hand. He watched as her lips lifted. Nice. He'd only tried acupressure on himself before, and it certainly hadn't been this pleasurable. Her slender hand had been cold when she'd offered it to him, but now its warmth radiated up his arm. It fit in his as though it had been designed for him. Shock halted his movements. What was he thinking?

2

The airplane seemed to have flown into an obstacle course. It jolted and bumped as the pilots guided it through the turbulence. Hayley concentrated on the rough texture of Trevor's thumb as it massaged her hand. It felt so soothing, so relaxing. She sank into the comfort, hardly noticing the pain in her leg or the plane's uneven flight. A tremor passed through his thumb to her hand, and the movement stopped. Hayley opened her eyes. Trevor stared straight ahead, his brow furrowed.

"Something wrong?"

He turned to her, his face flushed. "No. It's nothing."

The plane bucked, and Hayley's left leg banged against the wall. She groaned and tightened her grip on his hand.

"That was a bad one," Trevor said. "How can I help?"

The low rumble of his voice felt like a balm. She spoke through clenched teeth. "Talk to me. About anything." Hayley just wanted to hear his voice. Its bass resonance was an audio massage; she wished she could drown in its depths. It was better than those narcotics hidden in her bag. Perhaps as addictive, but she'd bet not as deadly.

As the plane bounced, Hayley's willpower ebbed. The pain was too much. The rod in her leg seemed to

be reacting to the turbulence. Maybe one pill would help. Just one. Or two. She could handle that, couldn't she? Or would she be hooked again? She slumped in her seat and grabbed the armrest with her free hand. "Tell me a story. Maybe about your farm? I've never been on a farm."

~*~

Shadows flitted across her face as she fought some kind of inner battle. Trevor wondered if it concerned whatever had injured her. She obviously wasn't ready to talk. Tell a story. Didn't seem like much. Maybe it would help, though. He'd do it—as long as he avoided the reality of his childhood. He leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes.

"Farm life is a pretty broad subject. Basically, it's a lot of hard work with a special kind of freedom. But I don't think we have time for everything involved. Let's see...I could tell you about my dog. He was a mutt, but he was my best friend."

"Sounds good."

The plane bucked again, and Hayley clutched his hand. He resumed the circular massage of her palm and tried to ignore the pleasure zinging up his arm.

"My folks let me choose one of the neighbor's pups soon after I got to the farm. He was the runt of the litter, not even cute, but when he climbed on my lap, I had to take him home. He looked like a mixture of German Shepherd, Rottweiler, and Border Collie. Short snout, floppy ears, black legs and brown and white body." His thumb's circular motion lightened to more of a caress. "I named him Hugo. Kind of as a joke, since he was so tiny, but it turned out to suit him."

He grew up fast. Didn't look like a runt for long."

He glanced at Hayley. Her eyes were closed again, but the lines by her mouth had relaxed a bit. Good. "Ever have a dog?"

She shook her head. "No animals allowed."

He was thankful his parents had seen the value in pets. And in him. He turned back to his memories. "Hugo taught me more than I taught him. Mom showed me how to teach him to do tricks once he'd learned the basics. He caught on pretty quick. Helped with the cattle and loved to play catch. I'd throw a tennis ball as far as I could, and Hugo could catch it before it hit the ground. He'd bring it back, drop the slobbery mess at my feet, and bark at me until I threw it again." Trevor chuckled. "What a goof."

The lines around Hayley's mouth eased, and her lips curved upward in a hint of a smile. "Tell me more. I can almost picture him. And a little-boy version of you."

Her whisper created a strange twist somewhere around his heart and blanked out his memory. What had he been talking about? *Oh, right. Hugo.* "He and I had some great times together exploring the bush around the house and in the fields. Turned out to be a good watchdog too. He was such a friendly mutt most of the time, I figured he'd be useless as a guard dog. Until one day."

Hayley's eyes opened, and her emerald gaze held his. "What happened?"

What was it about this woman? Was it the pain she fought? Was that what created this strange feeling of kinship? Trevor tore his attention away from the wide, green depths and back to his past.

"My parents had gone to visit friends from church.

They hadn't been gone long when Hugo started barking and growling. Never heard those sounds from him before. Freaked me out, so I ran outside. He stood at the bottom of the front steps, legs stiff, and the hair on his back stood straight up. His teeth were bared as he barked at a truck driving up our long driveway."

Trevor looked at Hayley. Her face looked softer, almost wistful as she whispered, "Sounds as if he was like a guardian angel. I always imagined they'd look fierce."

"I don't think Hugo was an angel, but he certainly did protect me. Because I didn't recognize the truck or the driver. The guy rolled down his window and asked if my dog would bite. I looked at Hugo and back at the guy. 'Probably.' That's all I said. The guy stared at Hugo for a minute, then backed up and turned around. Don't know who he was or what he was up to, but Hugo sensed an enemy and protected me." Trevor exhaled a long breath. "He was a good dog. I still miss him."

Hayley's answering sigh seemed to disappear into a deep well. "I wish I'd had a dog like Hugo. Or maybe a guardian angel to watch over me."

"Want to talk about it?"

He could feel her withdraw even before she pulled her hand away from his.

"No." She shook her head and started to turn away, but hesitated. "Thank you for sharing your stories with me. And for the hand massage. It helped." Her smile faded before it fully materialized, and a moment later Hayley had resumed her hedgehog position.

The "Fasten Seatbelts" light blinked off, and Trevor realized they'd passed through the turbulence.