



SETTLERS' *Hope*

KATHLEEN D. BAILEY

AN OREGON TRAIL
HISTORICAL ROMANCE

Settlers' Hope

Kathleen D. Bailey

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Dedication

To my husband David W. Bailey, who has never let go
of helping me achieve my dreams.

Also by Kathleen Bailey

Westward Hope

What People are Saying

This was an enjoyable and satisfying read! The characters, scenes, story lines, and writing deserve five stars. Yes, I want to know what happens next.

~ Clarice G. James, author

1

January 1847

Hall's Mill, The Oregon Country

In his career, Pace Williams had confronted Mexican bandits, wagon train mutinies, white men's pistols, red men's tomahawks, and a man in the Canadian lumber camp who had gone berserk and charged the entire company with an axe. But he'd never been pushed into a water trough by a woman with a perfect face and eyes the color of a mountain stream.

He struggled to his feet, shaking himself like a dog. The water was cold enough. At least it wasn't raining, the rain that dripped or pounded its way through every day of an Oregon Country winter.

This woman knew how to get a man's attention; he'd give her that although there must be easier ways.

His best friend, Michael Moriarty, clambered out of the trough, with his wife, Caroline, clinging to him as though she could lift two hundred pounds of muscled Irishman. Mike looked as sorry as Pace felt, with his denims and plaid shirt sticking to him. Their friends' and neighbors' laughter didn't help any.

Mike leveled a glare at them before focusing it on the newcomer.

"Moriarty, who is she?" someone from the crowd called out.

"She's Oona Cathleen Moriarty, my sister. And she's supposed to be in a convent in Dublin, not pushing me into horses' troughs."

The woman matched him, scowl for scowl. "After what you did to me, 'tis a blessing I didn't drown you. Putting me in a convent? Could not even you have thought of something better?" Her voice was melodious with Mike's Irish lilt, sweeter than her words or her expression.

She looked like a scarecrow in a wool coat with a button missing, stall-mucking boots, and a man's shapeless felt hat. But the face under the hat was the best one Pace had seen in a while. An oval face, with full red lips, skin like fresh cream, and big eyes with long dark lashes.

And angry. Very angry.

Mike crossed his soggy arms. "How did you get here?"

"Steerage ship, wagon train, freighter." Oona Moriarty ticked them off on her fingers. "And a few interesting conveyances in between. I hitched one ride with a man who was driving a hearse. An empty one—he was delivering it to a funeral parlor," she clarified.

She was playing the crowd, and they loved it. Whatever she'd been, whatever she'd become, she was still a Moriarty, this performance marking her more than the blue eyes and black hair. Mike always loved an audience, even in the darkest of times.

Mike shivered as he stared at her.

"Maybe we should get you into some dry clothes," Caroline murmured, her gaze locked on this unexpected sister-in-law as if Oona would burst into

flames.

But their friend, Jenny Thatcher, took charge. "Michael, go home, get into some dry duds. I'll take your sister back to the hotel and find her something to eat." Jenny always knew what was best for everyone and wasn't shy about showing it.

The townspeople continued to point, to chuckle. It'd be nice if they all went home, but Pace knew his neighbors. That was too much to ask.

Every person who could walk or be carried was in the village today to watch the freighters from the east roll in. They were wagons like the "prairie schooners" that had brought most of Hall's Mill west, but larger and without the canvas roofs. These wagons bulged with crates, barrels, and indefinable shapes, all lashed together with stout ropes. Teams of oxen pulled the wagons, and huge, weary-looking men trudged beside them, goads at the ready. Teamsterin'. One of the few legal things Pace hadn't done.

Pace's glance passed over a pigtailed Chinese man, a smattering of Injuns. The settlement's only black family stood a little apart as they always did.

The faces differed in color, but had one thing in common. None of them was old. Any elderly had been weeded out on the sixth-month overland journey or had sense enough not to come in the first place. The West was young people's country.

It wasn't raining. But the air was still damp, mixed with the odor of smoke struggling from the poorly ventilated shacks and the heady smell of new-cut lumber from the mill. And the mud churned up by the teamsters' wheels.

A shiver ran through Pace.

A logger from one of the camps slapped him on

the back. "You all right, Mr. Williams?"

"Yeah, Owens. Thanks."

People liked him here. Might be a good place to put down roots, if only he'd had roots. If anyone had the skills to wrest a living from these green forests, this rich land, Pace did. He had farmed, ranched, logged, and worked on the docks of a seaport city. And he'd led wagonloads of starry-eyed fools from the States to here. Make a living in the Oregon Territory? Child's play.

Would it be today? Would these wagons bring direction for the next step of his journey? Did he want them to? Pace was thirty. He'd been on the run for nineteen years. Maybe the trip would end here, at the edge of the known world. He was tired of running, tired of checking every wagon train for their faces. The prison term was up this year. Yeah, he'd kept count. What would they look like now? Old. Mean. The meanness that had been as much a part of them as breathing. The kind of meanness a body didn't outgrow, didn't have beaten out of them.

Nobody came to Hall's Mill without a reason. Few people even knew it existed. They'd never track him here. Would they?

Well, he couldn't stand around all day. He had a run to make. But first, he had to find some dry clothes. And second—he mentally rubbed his hands together—he had words to have with Mike's sister.

~*~

Oona allowed the one called Jenny to shepherd her toward a single-story building that Jenny assured her was a hotel. The building looked like the doll

houses she and her sister Orla used to make out of packing crates. She'd take Jenny's word for it. Nothing in Hall's Mill looked built to last, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't be here long enough to find out.

Could she pull it off? This trip had taken everything Oona had, financially, emotionally, physically.

And Michael was married. Well, that was a complication, but nothing she couldn't handle. She'd spent three, no, four years planning for this, and a lifetime before that sharpening her wits against five brothers and three sisters. She could manage Michael.

How could Michael live in a place like this? Worse than she'd expected, worse than the other pilgrims had told her, with its one street of mud and the ramshackle buildings, with the rain that broke for maybe an hour a day. Was this why the people on the wagon trains sold their farms and businesses, said good-bye to loved ones forever? *This* was their Promised Land?

Some parts of it could be tolerable. She peered over her shoulder, hoping to catch a glimpse of the tall man she'd dunked along with Michael. Teach *him* to laugh at her.

He was good-looking enough, but she had no intention of getting mixed up with some cowboy. Not with the job she had to do. Get what she came for, that's what she'd do, and leave this raw and dirty place behind. Shake off the dust from her feet.

Or the mud.

2

Pace edged closer to the open hearth. Except for his feet he was dry, thanks to a dash home to change into clean pants and shirt. Wasn't nothing he could do about his feet. The only dry socks he had were several days past clean. Just one more thing to blame on the beautiful, babbling stranger.

Caroline and a dry-clad Mike flanked Miss Moriarty at the kitchen table of the modest Hall's Mill Inn. Behind them, Jenny kneaded the next day's bread, and the first drops of a new rainstorm spattered the windows. Dishes clattered as Sadie, the mute kitchen girl, washed them in the background. There was never any telling what Sadie understood or didn't, but Pace didn't care. The whole world could hear Oona Moriarty's explanation, just as long as he did. He gave her his best scowl, the one that had subdued many a stubborn pilgrim to the West.

But she went on chatting with Mike between bites of fresh bread, spoonful of stew, and sips of tea. As if she hadn't done anything.

Maybe he could get some dry socks from Mike. Mike had stuff like that. Pace didn't. He did his own laundry, rinsing clothes out in a creek when they got stiff. Maybe he could ask Mike, or Caroline. That is, if

the sister ever stopped talking.

“Of course I wasn’t staying,” Oona said in answer to Mike’s question about the convent. “’Twas never my plan. I just wanted to be safe until you got out of the country. I thought the whole business with Mr. Hawthorne would die down.”

It hadn’t—anything but. The Moriartys’ English landlord had not forgotten his son’s death. This wasn’t the place or time to tell her, though. Not with Caroline still staring at this new relative as if Oona was about to explode.

It was almost funny. Mike near speechless from the shock of seeing his sister. Mike without words.

Mike managed, just barely, to croak out another question. “When did you leave?”

Oona talked around a crust of bread. How long since she’d eaten?

“The convent? Nigh on to a year ago. I managed fairly well during the postulant and novice stages. Except for the obedience and keeping silence parts,” she added, a frown marring her smooth brow. “But it was coming on to my third year, and we’re supposed to take our first vows. Michael, I couldn’t vow something I didn’t believe was for me. So I left. They gave me a lecture, five pounds. I got a job as a maid and saved up my passage, and then I was a governess in New York and worked until I had money for the wagon train.”

Pace shifted his wet feet and moved closer to the fire. The water sloshed in his boots, so loud one could hear it.

Jenny quirked an eyebrow at him.

He’d hear about this. It wasn’t his fault. This Oona Moriarty, now, she was out of line. Weren’t *her* feet

rotting inside *her* boots.

He was cold and already tired, and he had a delivery to make. Funny how cold feet could make the rest of your body feel like an icicle. He'd been through worse than this, much worse, bringing cattle in from the high pasture during a fall storm, falling into a creek in the logging camp. Hiding in wet clothes from men who meant him no good. Didn't make this time any easier. *Getting soft, Pace.*

"I came over in the steerage," Oona was saying. "And I can tell you, it made the wagon train look easy."

Nothing made a wagon train look easy. No woman made light of the westward journey, and few undertook it alone. Brave as well as pretty, this one.

But Pace had a delivery to make, he couldn't stand around jawin' all day. "Miss Moriarty."

She swiveled to face him, those blue eyes so like Mike's and deceptively full of innocence.

"Why'd you dunk *me*? I never did anything to you."

The girl didn't miss a beat. "Because you were there. And you were laughing."

So was the rest of the town.

"Thank you to keep your hands to yourself in the future."

She sized him up with a slow grin he didn't much like. "I will do that, Mr.—Mr.—"

"This is Pace Williams, the trail boss. I worked for him," Mike inserted.

Oona Moriarty dimpled, and held out the hand that wasn't feeding her. "'Tis pleased I am to make your acquaintance, Mr. Pace Williams."

He shook her hand briefly. Long slender fingers,

soft skin—when had he touched anything that good? “Pleased to meet you, too.” He wasn’t really, but she’d probably figured that out.

Oona. The sister who had killed the landlord’s son, smashing a stone on his head to keep him from harming Mike.

He dropped her hand as though scalded. Shaking hands with a murderess. Self-defense, but still...

“I got to go, got to make a delivery up the mountain.” He turned to leave, he hoped with dignity, but his wet socks squeaked in his boots.

~*~

Oona looked after Pace Williams. Interesting man, tall, with that deep tan and crinkles around his eyes, the dark brown eyes that had held hers too briefly in the square. Was he taken? Probably. Anyway, that wasn’t what she was here for.

Michael interrupted her thoughts. “The others. What happened to them? I got just the one letter from Uncle Eamon, tellin’ me Ma was dead.”

She heard the plea in his voice, the loss even his Caroline couldn’t fill. Oh, these three years had been just as hard on him.

“Well, Ma died on the trip. You know that. After—after they got evicted from the cottage.” Dead in a ditch from starvation on the long walk to Uncle Eamon, the only relative who had room for an evicted family.

“What about the others? What about Tom?”

“I do not know. When I got out, I asked about him. Eamon hasn’t heard from him.”

Michael put his head in his hands, as she’d known

he would. He would not ask about the "littles," the three youngest Moriartys. If she couldn't find Tom, their oldest brother, she wouldn't find the children.

Caroline stroked his arm, and leaned her head against his shoulder. She was a pretty little thing, with heart-shaped face, big hazel eyes, and light brown hair escaping from her bun to curl around her face. Not what Michael's type had been, but anyone could change. And in the old days, almost everyone had been Michael's type.

He lifted his face to look at Oona again. "So why did you come?"

Better a half-answer. She was good at those. "You're all I have left. I was afraid to stay in Ireland. Afraid of Hawthorne's men, afraid they'd find me. That they'd figure it out."

"Well." Michael cleared his throat. "That's not happenin' soon. Two of 'em tracked me across the country. They caught up with us in the Blue Mountains, and now they're dead."

"There will be others." There were always others.

"But they'll never find us here. This is as far West as we can get. And *nobody* comes to Hall's Mill."

Oona couldn't argue that. She already wished she hadn't. But she knew he would.

"What about Kevin? Did you try to find *him*?"

Kevin O'Halloran. The genial young man who'd asked for Oona's hand before all their worlds suffered a sea-change. Oona took a deep breath. When would it stop hurting? "Kevin's dead, Michael. He was in the underground, going to meetings, and he got on the wrong side of some landlord. Not Hawthorne, but just as mean. The members of his cell found him strung from a tree."

"I did not know Kevin was political."

"I did." Oona was silent for a minute, going back to a time when they were all young and Ireland offered as much hope as it ever would.

The English, their overlords. Would they never stop taking? She was years removed from the village. She'd thought they couldn't hurt her here.

"Well," Michael said. "You can't stay."

She put down her spoon. "And why not?"

"'Tis obvious. We don't have the room." He looked to his wife for help, but she just stared back, with a spine Oona wouldn't have expected. This was Michael's fight.

Jenny, the pretty blonde, turned from the stove. "You can stay in my room. I got two beds. I just need to find a pillow and blankets. And Molly, she's the one who owns this place, she might have some work for you."

Michael gave Jenny a dirty look before he transferred it to Oona. There was plenty to go around. "But it isn't—you can't—"

She could argue him into a hole. "It's a free country. Isn't that why you're here?"

"There's nothing here for you. Not for a single woman, and one not used to our ways."

Our ways. Yes, he was an American now. "I'll pick them up. I'm not leaving, Michael." Not yet, anyway. Not 'til she'd gotten what she came for from him.

"It's not safe here."

"It's as safe as it is for your wife." She jerked her head toward Caroline. That one. She'd probably scream if she saw a mouse. Alive or dead.

"But she has a husband."

"But I have my wits. And a brother."