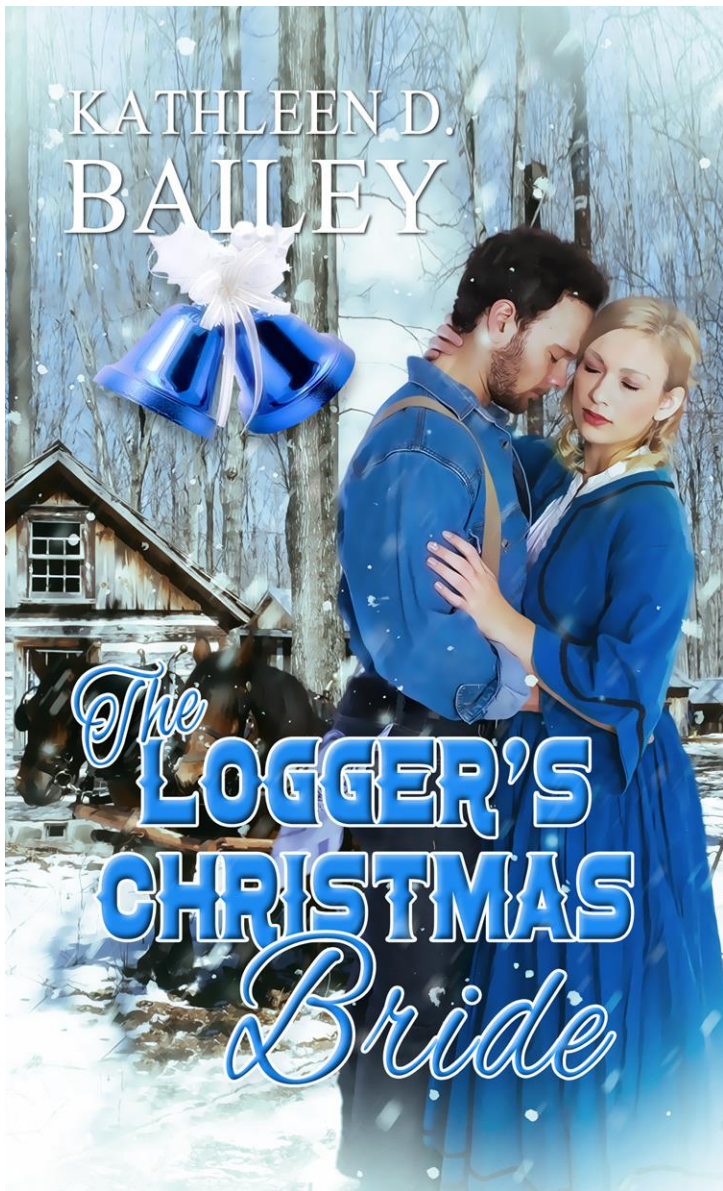


KATHLEEN D.
BAILEY



The **LOGGER'S
CHRISTMAS**
Bride



The Logger's
Christmas Bride

Kathleen D. Bailey

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The Logger's Christmas Bride

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Dedication

To David again, for bearing, believing, hoping and enduring.

1

But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. ~ Isaiah 43: 1-2

*The Oregon Country
Autumn 1846*

“Such pretty little feet. Hope you don’t freeze your toes off!”

Viola Chivers spun around at the laughing male voice. “And what business is it of yours if I do?”

The creek water *was* cold, this late in the year, this high in the mountains. But she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

The stranger picked his way down the rocky slope to the creek. Sure footed, though his boots looked held together with twine and a prayer. He was tall, with thick dark hair and broad shoulders under his plaid flannel shirt. Handsome, not that she cared.

“You look like a wood nymph,” he said in that

same teasing tone.

Viola felt a blush coming as she swung her feet out and dried them on a corner of her shawl. "How would a logger know what a wood nymph looks like?"

"I don't." The man's big shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I've read about them. And how do you know I'm a logger?"

What else was there here in the Klamath Mountains of the Oregon Country?

"I've seen you in the village," the man was saying. "You're Mr. Chivers's daughter, aren't you? What are you doing way up here?"

Drinking in the beauty of this land, her land, before she had to leave it, probably forever. Memorizing the dew on a leaf, the mournful cry of a spotted owl, the feel of cold, clear creek water on her bare feet. Storing it up, like a squirrel stored food for winter.

Not that it was any of his business, however appealing he was with those brown eyes and that square jaw. That deep voice laced with laughter. She'd seen *him* in the village, too. He would have been hard to miss.

"Just wanted to get out of the house," she said instead. "No crime against that, is there?"

Careful to keep her back to him, she pulled her stockings over her reddened but dry feet. She could feel his amused gaze on her, even though she couldn't see it.

Well, there were still surprises in these woods, and that was why she wanted to stay here.

~*~

Steve Miller watched the bent golden head, saw the blush build on the girl's neck.

Old Man Chivers's daughter was appealing from a distance, stunning up close. Small and slender, her cheeks pink from the cold, wisps of gold escaping from her thick braid. Blue eyes with thick lashes, the way he liked them. Blue eyes relaxing into friendliness, not the hauteur he'd have expected from the mill owner's daughter. *Hauteur*, his word of the day from Noah Webster's dictionary. Viola Chivers was an educated woman. Would she care that he was trying to better himself?

Nobody had yet.

And she wasn't for the likes of him, even if she wanted to be. Chivers would see to that or one of his giant blond sons.

Lord, help me to know my place, and to be grateful for the place I have. He'd worked hard enough to get there.

Viola Chivers did make a pretty picture, sitting by the cold rushing creek, the autumn sun slanting through the trees, catching her yellow hair. But he had to get out of there. He tipped an imaginary hat. "Good day, Miss Chivers. Got a stand of trees waiting for me."

"Wait."

He turned. Was she really calling him back?

"What's your name?"

"Stephen Miller." At least he thought it was, and the orphanage had deemed it good enough.

~*~

Vi whistled to Darby, her gelding, and mounted

effortlessly. They'd been riding these trails together for three years, ever since Pa had bought the mill from Mr. Hall and up and moved them all to the Oregon Country.

Her country.

Darby carried her down the mountain without much direction, and she was free to think of Stephen Miller. She'd noticed him at the mercantile. Also, when the freighters came in shepherding a load of logs to her father's sawmill. He'd always seemed a little more refined than the other loggers, in his interactions at the store or the blacksmith's. She'd never seen him coming out of the saloon, which was unusual for a single logger. And she'd wondered what he was like.

Not that she'd ever find out.

The pine and fir trees rose up around her, evergreen against the blinding blue bowl of sky. The first bite of an autumn chill rode the late afternoon air. The first leaves from the hardwoods fluttered down around her as Darby picked his way down the hill and into the hollow. Hall's Mill, the huddle of buildings she called home, lay spread out beneath her. The settlers' shacks, the inn, the livery stable, the mercantile. Her family's lumber mill.

How she loved this place.

Welcoming smoke rose from the chimney of her home. The Chivers house was one of the few substantial buildings in the settlement, a large log cabin with its own barn. Pa had built to last, as he did everything. She dismounted and led Darby to his stall, where she rubbed him down and gave him some cracked corn. She hung her saddle on a peg.

Her brother, Jedediah, poked his head out of the hayloft. "I'll finish him up. Pa wants to see you." He

swung himself down from the loft. Tall and broad, he had the same flaxen hair and light skin as Vi and their brother, Micah, looks that were a gift from their English Saxon mother. But he also had his father's quick frown. "Does Pa know you've been riding astride?"

"He won't if you don't tell him." Vi gave him a quick grin, and though Jed grumbled a little, she knew she was safe. She had never unpacked her sidesaddle. She wouldn't know what to do with it here.

A fire crackled in the hearth, and the big kitchen welcomed her as she hung her shawl on a peg. Her stepmother was slicing potatoes, her back to Vi, her black braid swinging with the rhythm. But Lily was thin, too thin, she looked like a little girl from the rear.

Vi reached for the knife. "Lily, let me do that. You go rest, or visit with Pa."

Lily's face was thinner too, and Vi had to work to remember the vibrant, young Seminole woman Pa had brought back from a business trip to the South. She'd been Morning Dew then, only six years older than Vi, more of a sister than a second mother. Her daughter's birth on the Oregon Trail and the damp Oregon climate had stolen her health.

Lily smiled at Vi, an echo of the smile that had charmed them all five years before. "I can finish up. Sophie and I took a nap together this afternoon, and I'm feeling good. He's in his office."

The only "he" that existed for Lily Morning Dew Chivers.

Would Viola ever know a love like that?

She moved toward Pa's office in the back of the house. But a tiny tornado attacked her. "Vi! Vi!"

She lifted her half-sister and swung her until the

three-year-old shrieked with joy. Vi buried her face in Sophie's sleek, black hair. Sophie looked like her mother, dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin. But though they shared only half their blood, the little girl lit up her life.

Vi placed Sophie on the floor, and the little girl tugged at Vi's hand. "We play?"

"In a little while." Vi tucked a hair into Sophie's stubby braid. "I've got to see Papa and help your Mama with dinner. But I'll read you your bedtime story." By Sophie's bedtime, Lily was usually overdue for her own.

No way out, and no more time to stall. Viola walked slowly into her father's office.

Edgar Chivers put down his pen and ledger. He was a lion of a man, with a mane of golden hair now white, powerful shoulders only slightly stooped, and a deep voice that caused her brothers and the mill staff to jump to his bidding. Only his daughters weren't afraid of him. Vi, who saw him through to the core. Sophie, who wasn't afraid of anything.

"You wanted to see me, Pa?"

"Yes. The courier brought a batch of mail." He gestured to a cream-colored envelope, slit open, and a densely written letter.

Vi's heart began to hammer. Hometown news from Aunt Dorothy? Or Uncle Enos? No, she couldn't be that blessed.

"The school has accepted you, and you'll start in September. I sent the first payment back with the courier."

No. *No!*

Until now she'd held out hope—the letters would be lost, the school would be full. But Pa had paid. Now

she had to pay.

"Pa, I'm still not sure that's the best course," she ventured. "I'm too old to go back to school. I'm almost eighteen!"

"You wouldn't be learning to read and write," he reminded her with an edge of impatience. "You already know those things. It's a finishing school."

She wanted to risk a joke, to tell him she was already finished, but one didn't joke with Pa. Especially when one was arguing with him. She picked her words with care, aiming for his heart as he'd aimed for hers. "I can't leave Lily. She needs me now. She's not strong. Who'll help her with the work, with Sophie?"

Pa waved her objections away. "Both your brothers are fixing on marrying. Their wives can pitch in."

It confounded her how he could make decisions for women none of them had technically met yet. But that was Pa. He made decisions for everyone. She could only hope her brothers' girls were competent and willing.

"I don't *want* to leave Lily," she argued. "Pa, let me stay and help her raise Sophie. Lily's like a sister to me, as much as Sophie is."

"Lily and you are good together," he said slowly. "That's one of the things I wondered about, bringing her home. Whether you'd suit. But you have, and the boys like her too."

Lily's Seminole heritage, the reason that had driven them West in the first place. People in their Virginia town hadn't minded Edgar Chivers marrying a younger woman. What they minded was him marrying an Indian, and it took only a few instances of

Lily being snubbed before Edgar began to look West. He'd bought a sawmill, sight unseen, in the fabled Oregon Country; sold his mercantile; and shepherded his new wife, two sons, and half-grown daughter onto one of the first wagon trains. That had been four years ago, when Vi was thirteen. By the time they reached the Oregon Country, Edgar had a new daughter, his wife had lost her health, and Vi was enraptured with all things Western.

"Lily needs me." If she said it long enough, maybe he'd listen.

"I'll hire someone, if the boys' wives don't work out. I won't neglect her. But Viola, you belong in the East. This is what your mother wanted for you. Your real mother."

Oh, Pa must be desperate to aim that low. But he wasn't done. "Your ma wanted you to marry well, be a lady. *She* was a lady. She made me promise—"

Vi had been three years old when her mother died. How had she known who Vi would be, what she would love?

She loved her family, and she loved this country, every mountain trail, every pine needle, every sunrise. She could live out her days here and still never have enough.

But Pa would send her back to the land of horses and carriages, cobblestone streets, crowded-together townhouses, to live out her days as the wife of a rich man. All for a promise she'd never known she would have to keep.

And a handsome logger had no place in the picture.

They were done, for today anyway, and Vi turned away. "I'll help Lily with supper."

2

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.~ Isaiah 55:1-2

Would Steve see Miss Chivers while he was in town? He had no business looking. But as he forked up his last bite of hotcake, his heart beat a little faster at the thought.

The hotcakes were a little dry, a little mealy, but better than the camp cook's and far better than he could have made himself. He left two bits on the plank table, nodded to the other men who'd come down the mountain for Sunday breakfast at Hall's Mill's excuse for an inn and walked outside.

What would he do with the rest of the day? If only they had a church or at least a service of some kind. He could read his Bible at the camp and he did, but it had been a long time since he'd worshipped with other people.

What was *she* doing? If he were anywhere else, if

he were back East, and she was anyone but Edgar Chivers's daughter, he might pay a call.

No, he wouldn't. Orphan boys with barely two cents to rub together didn't call on girls.

But if they ran into each other? Couldn't help that.

The mercantile and the mill were closed for the Sabbath. The saloon would open in the afternoon, but he wasn't that bored. He would never be that bored. He'd seen what the drink did to men —and their women.

He plopped down on a bench, pulled his hat over his eyes, and basked in the autumn sunlight. It was warmer here down in the valley. Up at camp the leaves were coated with frost, and he'd seen a few flakes of snow. Christmas was coming, not that they made much of it in the logging camp. Not that he'd ever had a Christmas, except for the orange and new pair of socks at the orphanage.

Where would he be next December? Wasn't anything to keep him here. He could read and write and cipher. He had a trade. Plenty of world to see.

He sat up straight, snapped to attention. She hadn't spoken, not anything he could hear on the other side of the square, but he knew she was there. Promenading around the miserable excuse for a town, greeting other residents in a mocking salute to Sundays back East. She wore a dark blue dress, cinched at her tiny waist, with some kind of frilly stuff at the neck and wrists, and she walked with another, older woman and a small child who danced ahead of them. The little girl was dark-eyed and black-haired. Had to be adopted. The older woman's sunbonnet shaded her face. Viola's mother?

Would she speak to him? Probably not. They

hadn't been properly introduced, and it would be wrong even if she weren't a Chivers and he a logger. Well, he'd sit here a few minutes more and then head back up the mountain, maybe catch himself some fish for supper.

Here in these Klamath Mountains, the salmon almost begged to be hooked. Rich, beautiful country. If he had to be somewhere, might as well be here. For now, anyway.

"Sophie!"

He turned, alerted by the senses that had served him well in logging, anticipating a problem before it came to fruition. And saw the tiny, black-haired child with one foot over the edge of the riverbank and the other sliding on a damp rock poised over a river swollen from the recent rains.

Viola Chivers was running toward the child, and the other woman, a hitch in her gait, followed more slowly.

God hadn't given Steve long legs for nothing. He was up and away before the women even reached the river, and with his own boots sure on the rocks, he hooked an arm around the little girl. "Here, now. Honey, you don't want to do that." He held her close for a minute, breathing in her scent of soap and soft skin. A lovely, well-cared-for child. What would it be like to have a daughter? Had to have a wife first, and the pickings in Hall's Mill were slim.

Viola reached them first and took the little girl from his arms. "Sophie, you need to stay with us," she scolded gently.

"Sophie like the river." The girl reached up to touch Viola's cheek. "No tell Papa?"

Viola laughed ruefully. "Not this time."

And Steve knew there had been other secrets. He lingered, though they didn't need him anymore, and shuffled his feet. Looked everywhere but at Viola.

The other woman had caught up with them. Steve looked down into a face that was younger than he'd thought, a face that had once been beautiful, with olive skin, high cheekbones, and huge dark eyes. Sophie's face, but older and careworn and very ill. "Thank you," the woman said in a rich, low voice.

"Lily, this is Stephen Miller. He works up at the Ames camp," Viola was saying. "Mr. Miller, this is my stepmother, Lily Chivers. And this is my sister, Sophie, as you've probably figured out."

"You saved my daughter's life," Lily said. "Thank you so much."

A white woman would have sobbed and held on to the girl for dear life.

Steve always had to remind himself that he wasn't in the states anymore, and that women and men of the Oregon Country came in all shapes, sizes, and dispositions.

And Viola Chivers was beaming up at him, her blue eyes enhanced by the dress and a blue sunbonnet hanging down her back. He hadn't forgotten that smile. "I'm so grateful to you. My sister—she's a handful. Pa says she's more trouble than me and my brothers combined."

"It was no trouble. I like kids." He was tongue-tied around her, here in town, with her stepmother listening. Funny, they'd talked just fine in the mountains.

Viola took his arm, and her touch burned through his sleeve. "Come on, we're meeting Pa. He'll want to thank you."

"That's—not a good idea," Steve managed. She was so close. It went to his head, like a day without breakfast, or the thin air nearest the summit.

"Nonsense. Sophie is the apple of his eye. He'd want to meet you."

She guided him, or dragged him, to the largest house in Hall's Mill. It wasn't much compared to the Eastern mansions he'd seen as a boy, but by Western standards it was a palace: a sturdy, one-story log home, roomy and well-built. A narrow passageway connected the house with the barn. Viola led him down the hall, past a tidy kitchen, to a parlor.

Edgar Chivers relaxed in front of a fire. He put down the book he was reading, and his shaggy eyebrows rose as she urged Steve forward. "Who's this?"

Steve found it hard to breathe. She was still so close—and so was her father.

"Pa, this is Stephen Miller. He's a logger up at Ames Camp." Viola's voice was cheerful and confident. She must be the only person in town not afraid of Edgar Chivers.

"Yes?" Chivers's voice, like the cracked ice in a mountain stream, said there had better be more.

"Sophie just broke loose from us and headed for the river. She was about to go in, and Mr. Miller scooped her up and brought her back to us."

"Oh. Well, thank you, Mr. Miller."

What would come next? An invitation to supper? Permission to call on his daughter? What currency did saving a child amount to?

Chivers fished in his pocket and hauled out a silver dollar, which he placed on an end table. "Preciate it, Mr. Miller. Hope this helps."

~*~

Vi had never been so embarrassed, no, not in all her eighteen years. And she didn't dare look at Steve Miller.

But she heard him clear enough. "Mr. Chivers, I won't take your money. Hauling Sophie away from the water was the right thing to do. I'll let myself out," he added.

Vi finally dared look at him then, as he left the parlor. His neck and ears were a dull red. What should she do? Stay here and scold Pa? No, he had already gone back to his book. Follow Steve? Mr. Miller, she corrected herself. She picked up her skirts and ran. "Mr. Miller. Mr. Miller!"

He ignored her first cry. He turned at the second one. "Yes?" The beautiful brown eyes, the eyes that had sparkled as he'd teased her on the mountain, were guarded and cold.

"I am so sorry. I didn't think—I didn't think he would do that."

"It's all right. It's not—" He paused and then said deliberately "—it's not as though I was calling on you."

Would he call on her? *Could* he call on her? He was the handsomest man she'd seen since coming West, and the nicest.

But he had two strikes against him. He was a logger, lower on the social scale in Pa's eyes, if not hers. And she was going back East. Whether she wanted to or not.

~*~

Well, that was that. No chance that he could have courted, or even been friends with a woman like Viola Chivers. Not when her father treated him like hired help. Steve didn't need Chivers's dollar. And he didn't need the humiliation. He could do that just fine on his own.

Miss Chivers, now, she was different. Seemed genuinely sorry. And she loved that little girl. What would she look like, holding a child of her own?

Probably not much different.

But it wouldn't be his. He was a logger, and worse, a boy who had never known his ma and hadn't seen his father since Pa plunked him down in the orphanage.

He would go on home, or what passed for home these days. Ride up the mountain, read his Bible on this day that passed for a Sabbath, and then go catch some fish.

This Oregon Country was the most generous he'd seen, fish and game for the taking, rich soil for planting. He could make a life here if he had someone to make it with.

He was rounding the corner by the livery stable when he saw a shadow against the wall of the mill building, and Steve's hackles went up. He'd lived the rough life too long not to be suspicious. Who'd be at the mill of a Sunday, the only day the wheels stopped turning, the only day it was shuttered and still? The figure moved quickly, bent over, hidden by a pile of yet-to-be planed logs. But the afternoon sun cast its shadow against the side of the building.

Was it one of the Chivers boys? No, they wouldn't be sneaking into their own property.