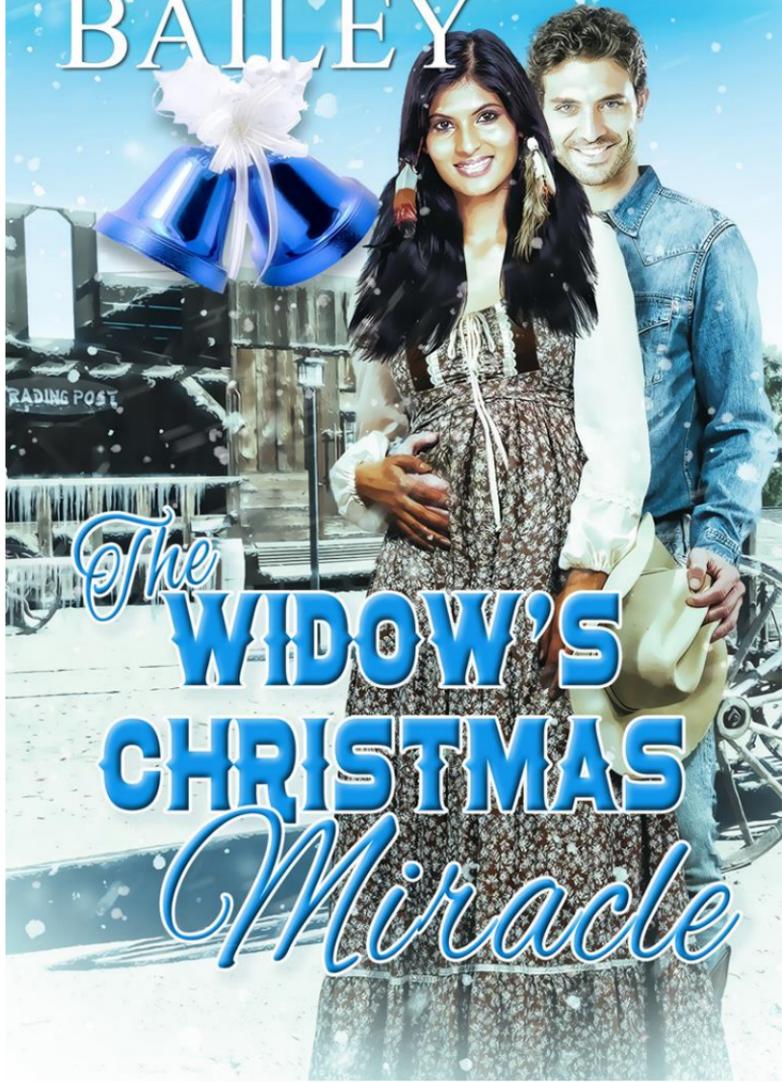


KATHLEEN D.  
BAILEY



*The*  
**WIDOW'S  
CHRISTMAS**  
*Miracle*

The Widow's  
Christmas  
Miracle

Kathleen D. Bailey

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## *Dedication*

To my parents, Alfred and Alice White Perron, who loved Christmas and gave me a lifetime of wonderful holidays, although not as dramatic as Red Dawn's and Laban's.

# 1

*“A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”  
~Isaiah 40:3*

*May 1849  
The Nebraska Territory*

“Well, they can’t stay here.”

Laban Jones banged one fist on the rough plank counter and glared at White Bear, the Cheyenne chieftain’s son and his friend. “It’s out of the question,” he said, backing up to a more reasonable tone. “I’m not set up to keep a woman here—or a kid.”

White Bear rubbed a hand across his brown forehead, once smooth, now creased with the care of his people. What was left of them. “I don’t have anyone else, Laban. My people died in the fire. You’re all I’ve got. All we’ve got.”

“But I’m not set up for—”

“I’ll help you build a bed in the barn. Red Dawn and the boy can stay in your quarters. Laban, you’re my friend. I—there’s no one else I trust.”

Strong words from the tribal leader who stopped by Laban’s trading post four to six times a year, trading furs and bead work and bone carvings for white flour,

eggs, and the few vegetables his people didn't grow in their summer camp. White Bear often lingered for a meal or a game of chess, sometimes stayed overnight, rolling out his bedroll on the floor of the store. White Bear could read. He exchanged out-of-date newspapers from his travels for month-old magazines that found their way to the shop, and the two men discussed the politics Back East well into the evening. White Bear was a friend, probably the best friend Laban had out here.

But to take care of his kin?

And how could he take care of them? Laban reached under the counter, rubbed the place where the wooden leg met what was left of his thigh. He'd kept some skills from his cavalry days, he could fire the rifle he kept under the counter and the pistol he kept locked in the cash drawer. He could defend his store and anyone in it—as long as he didn't have run, wrestle or disarm an opponent.

He prayed daily that he'd never be put to the test.

The woman was comely enough, small and slender, with big dark eyes above her high cheekbones. Scared dark eyes. She shrank back into White Bear, and the brave put an arm around her. He muttered something in their language.

Scared dark eyes and long braids that glistened like licorice. A beautiful young woman, even in a buckskin dress over buckskin trousers that were torn and stained and burned at the fringes. About eighteen, maybe twenty, and afraid for her life. How could Laban comfort someone like her?

And a chubby boy with the same gleaming black hair, in his own tiny set of buckskins, running aimlessly up and down the aisles of the trading post. A

three-year-old. Just the right age for a one-legged man to try to keep out of the merchandise and keep safe on the prairie.

He could stall, stall while he thought. Nobody'd ever accused Laban Jones of rushing into anything. "Tell me again what happened."

White Bear ushered the young woman to an empty barrel, what passed for a chair at the trading post, and he kept one hand on the trembling girl's shoulder. "I came back from a scouting trip and found my village burned to the ground. Every tipi. Every horse dead or scattered. My brother and my mother dead. Others too charred to recognize. And Red Dawn and her boy still alive, but barely. The raiders thought they were dead. When the raiders rode in, Red Dawn took my nephew and hid in the wash. They were half-starved when I found them."

Sometimes Laban wished White Bear's English wasn't so good. "What's the boy's name?"

"Soars with Eagles. My brother's son. We had—have great hopes for him."

Might as well get this over with. Though his surroundings were rough, Laban still had the manners Ma had drilled into him. He made sure his pant leg covered the wooden stump, then walked as gracefully as he could around the counter and over to the young woman. "Ma'am, my name is Laban Jones, and this here's my store. You're welcome to stay a while." At least as long as White Bear was here.

The woman stared at him, her gaze as blank as a blind woman's.

"She don't speak English?" Laban guessed.

"She doesn't speak. At all." White Bear gazed down at the crown of the girl's head. "She hasn't

spoken since I found her and the boy huddled in the wash. Probably not before that. I can only imagine what she's seen, and what she went through to survive."

"You know who did it?"

"I've an idea, and I'll keep looking until I'm proven wrong." White Bear's expression hardened. "If I don't have to worry about her and the boy."

Laban looked at his friend. Tall, with shoulders that filled the narrow doorway of the trading post, and smooth dark skin stretched out over a planed face. Laban had seen him throw three thugs to the ground in a failed store robbery. Had seen him carry crates in from the freighters as if they weighed nothing. He was strong and perfect in his youth, the man Laban had always wanted to be. The man he could never be, since the cavalry outing that had cost him his leg.

The kind of man a woman like Red Dawn would want. "Why don't you marry her?" Laban ventured. "The Bible says it's a duty for a man to raise up children for the brother he lost."

White Bear's teeth glinted in his dark face. "That's Old Testament, my friend, and you know it." He sobered. "I did pray about it, Laban. Since the day I found them. But the Lord isn't leading me to Red Dawn, at least, not now. Trust me, I would know if He were."

Nice that they could talk about their Lord together, the Lord Laban had found in those long months in an Army hospital, the Lord White Bear had found when he was apprenticed to an Eastern merchant. But Laban knew what was coming next.

"Have you seen—"

"I ain't seen her. And I've asked."

Their words tumbled over each other, a ritual more than two years old, since White Bear had met and lost the tall, blonde woman who'd passed through their summer buffalo camp. White Bear had never forgotten the woman, who could ride like the wind on a horse like midnight, or some such nonsense, and he asked Laban on every visit if he'd seen her. Or heard of her.

Laban quizzed his customers and dutifully reported every supposed sighting of the woman, who had expanded into an almost mythical creature who fought mountain lions and caught bandits with her bullwhip and stopped stagecoach robberies single-handed. For all Laban knew, she turned mice into cornmeal mush. But for all the tall tales, nobody seemed to know where she'd finally lighted.

"What will you do?"

White Bear gazed off into the distance, past the log walls of the shop, past the prairie itself. "I'll find the monsters who destroyed my people. And then I'll look for her."

Laban looked away from the raw passion in his friend's face. Had he ever felt that strongly about anything? His Lord, yes, though there were precious few ways to serve Him in this desolate outpost. But anything else? No. His passions died the day the field surgeon plied him with whiskey and laudanum and sawed through what was left of his leg.

He'd never dared ask for anything more.

But he could support other people's dreams. And it would be good to have some company, even if they were a woman who wouldn't talk and a rambunctious little boy.

Laban sighed. "Barn's pretty tight. Shouldn't be

too hard to fix up a spot for me.”

~\*~

It was a nightmare from which she would never awaken. Even here, where people seemed kind and White Bear hovered over her.

Red Dawn looked around the sturdy building. It was a “store” or a “trading post,” White Bear had explained to her in their language. He’d explained a lot of things, leading her and her boy on his horse across miles and miles of prairie, keeping pace with them when she knew he could eat up the miles by himself. He had talked most of the way, sometimes in English, a rambling background to her thoughts, more often in the Cheyenne tongue, words tumbling like a river across the flat land. If only he would stop. She craved silence, the silence of the grave.

His friend’s “trading post” held white people’s items from wall to wall, and on shelves in between the walls. Clay dishes glazed and painted with complicated scenes, tools, barrels with odd smells coming from them, and books like the book White Bear kept in his tipi and read from. Pieces of white people’s furniture, some with drawers that could open and close, at least two with black-and-white fingers arranged in odd patterns. Some of her own people’s crafts, weavings and such. So this was where White Bear went to trade.

So this was who he traded with. A tall man, not as tall as White Bear or her late husband, but tall enough and muscular under his homespun shirt and apron. His hair was light brown and curly, cut short but not

too short. He had a square jaw and eyes the color of the prairie sky. Had she ever seen such eyes before?

And he was sad, a sorrow she understood but could not give voice to. Sadness lurked in those blue eyes, behind his welcoming smile. What had this man seen? What had he been through, besides losing his leg?

She wouldn't be here long enough to find out.

She had lost too much. If only she hadn't had Grey Eagle's son. She could have taken her own life, or not struggled so hard to survive. But her precious boy, and the new life she carried, won over bereavement. She would live for their sake.

But as far away from here and the white man, any white man, as possible.

## 2

*“Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call him Immanuel.” Isa. 7:14*

The man had his hands out, urging her to do something. He was saying something in a soft voice, the kind of voice her husband had when he used to break the wild ponies. This man was a good man, wasn't he? White Bear wouldn't leave her with anyone who'd harm her or her boy. Would he?

But the man was white. As white as the men in the coats the color of the night sky, with the fasteners gleaming in the sunlight, who had come to their summer buffalo camp with torches.

Torches whose fire had taken her mother-in-law. Taken her man. Taken everyone else she knew. Leaving her shivering despite the heat, huddled with her son in the wash until White Bear thundered in. Now even White Bear was gone.

Leaving her with nothing but her son, at the mercy of a white stranger.

The man was making gestures now, motions of a person eating. Red Dawn shook her head. Could she ever eat again? Not when she'd seen the only world she'd known and loved, burned to the ground on a

sweltering summer day.

Soars with Eagles raced up and down the narrow passageways in this place White Bear had called a "store," a building piled to the top with things her child could break or be hurt by. Red Dawn knew she should quiet him, bring him back, but she couldn't summon the strength. Or the voice to call him.

The white man said something else, with a questioning rise at the end of his voice. How could she answer? How could she tell him she could no longer speak her own language, much less understand his? She shook her head. That would have to do, for whatever he was asking.

Red Dawn pulled her knees to her chest and turned her face to the wall. She wouldn't make this easy for him.

Because none of this had been easy for her.

~\*~

Well, Laban could at least feed them, couldn't he? He was kind of hungry himself. And it would kill some time till the woman started talking. If she ever did.

His suite in the rear of the store was a big one, and comfortable. The major had personally supervised the building when he set Laban up here, after the Army gave up on Fort Kearney. "You'll be doing everyone a favor, Jones," he remembered the major pointing out. "Folks need a place to stop about here, wagon trains, Army folk."

Better than going back to Pennsylvania and spending his days as an invalid, in a wheeled chair with a quilt over his legs. Out here there was a job for everyone. Even slow-moving cavalymen who hadn't

been able to dodge a madman's bullet.

He had two private rooms, a combined kitchen, dining room, and parlor, and a bedroom. He'd put on fresh sheets while White Bear had been explaining things to the woman. She hadn't argued back, though the look on her face was an argument and then some. She would be comfortable here. And he'd be comfortable in the barn, away from those accusing black eyes.

Laban had taught himself to cook, and his river rock fireplace served up some good vittles. He could make something out of nothing. But today he didn't have to. Too early for fresh vegetables, but he had two prairie chickens he'd shot and cleaned yesterday. He dredged them in cornmeal and flour, put the spider on the coals left from breakfast, and ladled some mush in another pot. Did the boy eat real food? Been a long time since he'd been that close to a young'un. The wagon train women and the smattering of Army wives who passed through his trading post kept their children close, with fear already in their eyes. He could have told them the trip would get a lot worse. But that was the wagon master's job, not his.

He put two of last year's potatoes to bake in the embers, he loved the smoky flavor it gave them, and he got out two extra tin plates and forks. These were White Bear's people; he'd treat them well.

When the food was done, he ladled mush onto one plate and fried prairie chicken and potato on the other. He fixed a third plate for himself. Carrying three plates would unbalance him, so he placed them on the wooden tray he'd crafted from a busted-down wagon. Laban had learned how to get along.

White Bear's sister-in-law still crouched in the

corner. Bending at the waist, he put the plate on the floor beside her and went to collar the kid.

The boy had stopped running and had taken an iron shovel from the wall, riding it like a pony.

Laban peeled the child's fingers away from the handle. "Got some dinner for you," he said. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why would the boy understand Laban any better than his mother?

He took the child's hand. To his amazement, Soars with Eagles walked with him to the back of the store. He looked up at Laban with those big dark eyes and a wide, dimpled grin. Soars with Eagles wasn't afraid of Laban, he seemed excited about this new life.

Oh, to trust like a child.

And Soars with Eagles was hungry. He sat cross-legged on the floor and dug into the white mush with his fingers.

"No, no, no." Laban grabbed for the cleanest rag on the counter. Who knew where this child's hands had been? He cleaned them himself, each plump little digit, while the kid squirmed and stewed. But the grin never left his face.

Couldn't be said of the mother. She seemed to hear the slurping, good, nothing wrong with her ears, and she turned from the wall to watch her boy eat mush. The kid was hungry even if she wasn't, cleaning the plate in a matter of minutes and looking up expectantly.

What else did Laban have? Best to do some cookin', later when it cooled off. He clumped his way into the back room, wiped his own fingers with a towel, and scabbled in one of the cupboards until his fingers closed around a chunk of cornbread. Not his, but traded by a wagon train mother who wanted some

of his eggs.

The connecting door squeaked, but the woman didn't look up as Laban passed through and handed the boy the cornbread. He gobbled it like most other kids would eat dessert, and as he beamed up at Laban, cornbread crumbs crusted his lips.

Well, the kid wouldn't be a problem as long as Laban kept him fed.

But his mother needed to eat something. How long had it been since White Bear hauled them away from that fire? Long enough. The Cheyenne's summer buffalo camp was a good three days' ride from the shopkeeper's place, which was called a sutler's store, according to White Bear. White Bear wouldn't have let them go hungry. Still, there was a difference between hardtack and jerky gobbled on the trail and a sit-down meal. Laban didn't particularly miss his hardtack-and-jerky days. There were bigger things to miss.

He was hungry even if this Red Dawn wasn't. Using his counter for balance, Laban lowered himself to the rough plank floor. Good thing he swept it every day. He sat with the wooden leg and the real one stuck out straight in front of him, the counter supporting his back. He looked at Red Dawn until she finally looked at him again with a blankness more chilling than anger.

Soars with Eagles was running through the store again, singing to himself in his own language. It didn't take much to keep the kid happy. Did he realize that his pa was gone? Not yet.

But the woman sure did.

Laban sawed off a chunk of prairie chicken and speared it with his fork. "Mmm, this is good," he said.

It *was* good, this land had been more than fair to him, giving him fresh meat, eggs from his chickens, and a thriving vegetable patch. He traded for flour, coffee, and saleratus, and ate almost as well as he had back east.

But Red Dawn didn't seem impressed.

Laban forked a chunk of potato. "This here's good too," he told the woman. "Got a nice crispy crust."

He cleaned his plate and watched Red Dawn's food go cold. Did she think he was trying to poison her?

He couldn't spend all day coaxing her, he had a shop to take care of, and a three-year-old who needed watching, in a place filled to the brim with temptations and dangers. Would Soars with Eagles bump into a shelf and send an iron fry pan crashing down on his head? Would the boy grab a water cask, upend it and get stuck inside? Or would he find a tin of matches and send them all into oblivion?

Laban's store, private quarters, and barn were sturdily built. The major had seen to that. But they were still wood. It wouldn't take much, especially in a prairie summer.

Laban had better watch this kid and rethink the way he displayed some of this stuff.

He caught up with Soars with Eagles and found the boy had not only taken back his shovel "horse," but also lifted a broad-brimmed hat from a tumbling stack of them. The boy must have seen cowpokes somewhere, or maybe a trail scout. He grinned and rocked on his wood-and-iron mount, as content as any cowboy Laban had ever seen.

At least one of them was happy.

But not for long.

~\*~

Red Dawn had never felt anger like this. Anger that took her over, that she couldn't say "no" to. Anger that gave her feet wings. She ran to the other side of the "store" and pulled the white man's hat from Soars with Eagles' head. He would *not* dress like their enemy, the men who had killed his father. She threw the hat on the floor and gathered him into her arms, tight, until he almost lost his breath.

The man was saying something again, gesturing, speaking softly. Saying he was sorry? It wasn't his fault, but she didn't know who else *not* to forgive.

So Red Dawn ignored him.

The man clumped to another corner of the shop and dug in a bin. She clung to her son. All she had left. How could she make him understand? White Bear could have done it. He had lived among the white men, learned their ways and language. Served their God. And what good had that done any of them?

The man stomped back to their corner, more slowly than before. With that wooden leg she'd always know he was coming. She tried not to think about why she'd need to know he was coming.

But not today. His arms were full. He clumsily lowered himself to the floor and spoke directly to Soars with Eagles, who strained in her arms. She could have told him her son didn't understand, but even she knew the words were meant to calm, not necessarily to be understood.

"Train." The man pointed to a series of brightly colored pieces of wood, squared off at the ends, and linked together with wheels on the bottom.

A plaything. Soars with Eagles burst from her grasp and studied the item. Whatever a "train" was, he liked it. He gathered the wood pieces into his arms.

But the man wasn't done. "Wagon." At least Red Dawn knew what one of those was. So it was called "wagon" in the white man's tongue, "*amo'eneo'o*" in hers. This was a child-sized wagon, again with wheels.

"Blocks." The man upended a cloth bag, and different-sized chunks of wood tumbled onto the floor. They were painted too, in bright colors, and some had markings on the sides.

Playthings. Gratitude warred with annoyance in Red Dawn. Did he think they would stay?

If the items could keep Soars with Eagles out of the man's other things, it would do.

But there was nothing he could do that would make *her* happy here.

~\*~

The toys would keep the boy from boredom, and help Laban protect his merchandise. Wagon trains would be coming in, now that it was summer, and somebody always forgot something. He had enough flannel shirts, iron cookware, tools, and sundries to supply, well, an army. He was good at what he did. Harder to find customers for the things the pioneers left behind, the glass beveled mirror, the writing desk with the turned legs, the melodeons. To get rid of those he relied on soldiers' wives making their way back east to civilization and refurnishing the homes they'd left behind. And he was always after the freighters to bring him candy, peppermint sticks or lemon drops, so he could soothe the anxieties of the homesick children.

Laban's store had something for everyone.

Except for White Bear's sister-in-law.

She had made her way back to her corner by the back wall, slowly, like an older woman. She lowered herself to the floor, picked up her plate and began to eat. With her fingers, his tin fork and knife staying spotless, but that was all right, leastways she was eating. She tore into the prairie chicken, holding the generous leg portion with both hands, wiping her mouth with her hand when she was done. She downed the potatoes one by one, licking her fingers after each. Apparently satisfied, she leaned back against the wall.

And Laban saw clearly what he'd missed the first time around.

A curve at the woman's middle, under her soft deerskin dress. A curve not yet huge, but large enough at this point so there was no mistaking what it was, standing out from her slenderness like a signal flag.

Red Dawn was with child.

Could this get any worse? If it could, Laban would just as soon not know.

### 3

*“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” Micah 5:2*

“Breakfast is ready.” Laban gave the eggs a final flip, then covered the spider. Did Indians eat eggs? He had no idea. But he had a pot of oatmeal warming on the coals, just in case, and bread he’d toasted on another skillet. A good breakfast to launch what would, *please, God*, be a short stay.

He didn’t even know if his house guests understood the word “breakfast.” but the fragrant odors should have been their own clue. Everyone understood food, didn’t they? And this Red Dawn was eating for two.

He peered into the bedroom. She hadn’t gone near the bed, but the blankets were neatly folded on the floor. No sign of the young Native mother or her son.

The shop? No, the trading post was dim and silent, a just-after-dawn stillness. No Red Dawn, no Soars with Eagles.

Maybe she’d taken the boy to see the animals. Laban clomped back to the barn. He’d already done the morning chores, milked Delilah, fed Ebenezer, the