



REDEMPTION'S *Hope*

KATHLEEN D. BAILEY

AN OREGON TRAIL
HISTORICAL ROMANCE

Redemption's
Hope

Kathleen D. Bailey

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Redemption's Hope
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Dedication

To my sister Sheila Lewis. Your physical landscape may not have been as vast as Jenny Thatcher's, but your capacity for love is equal if not more.

Also by Kathleen Bailey

Westward Hope
Settler's Hope

What People are Saying

“Loved this story! I had a crush on White Bear myself. Kathy Bailey has done some masterful wordsmithing!”

~Clarice G. James, author of "The Least of These," "Party of One," "Double Header" and "Manhattan Grace."

“Redemption’s Hope is a sweeping tale of faith, dedication, and perseverance set in the American West. Filled with vivid descriptions and rich historical details, this tender romance is sure to warm the heart of every reader.”

~Kelly Goshorn, Award-winning author of “A Love Restored.”

1

THE EASTERN PLAINS
MAY 1849

“Now see here.” Jenny Thatcher spoke through half-gritted teeth. “Ain’t only one of us is gonna come out of this, and I’m partial to it being me.”

The bobcat didn’t seem impressed as it moved her way, its paws padding softly over the bare brown earth. Didn’t seem impressed. Didn’t seem worried. Didn’t seem scared. Jenny had taken off her gun belt so she could wash in the creek, and her pistol and rifle lay in the cave next to her bedroll. No help there.

What had Michael told her, a lifetime ago now? “Try to frighten it away”? Worth a try. She opened her buckskin jacket, flapped the sides like wings and let out a stream of gibberish.

“Try to appear larger,” Michael had said. She clambered up on a rock and waved her hands over her head.

The cat’s eyes gleamed green, the only other color in this wilderness of tumbleweeds and dust, as it continued its slow and sinuous pace.

Throw something. Without turning her back, she fixed her gaze on those blank jade eyes, flexed her

knees, and picked up a good-sized chunk of rock. It landed beyond the cat and thudded into the dirt.

And the cat lunged for her.

Jenny grabbed its forearms and tried to push it away. It pushed back, its yellow pointed teeth in a snarl. She kicked at one of its back legs. Iffen she could get the thing off balance –

She did, and it pulled her down with it. They thrashed together in the dirt. She could smell its foul breath, feel claws digging into her leg.

God. Help me.

She couldn't die this way. Not until she found White Bear. Not until she knew. For better or worse.

It was on top of her now with its yellow fangs bared as far as they could go. If she could only reach another rock –

Or something better. "Rebel!" she gasped.

Was that her stallion, breaking off from munching the short grass, bounding to her side? Kicking the cat with his powerful hooves, battering it until it set Jenny loose and rolled over on its back, panting hoarsely?

Rebel gave the bobcat a few more thumps and Jenny rolled away, fumbling for the knife she kept hidden in her boot. Rebel held one hoof on its stomach as Jenny crawled to its side, plunging her blade deep into the animal's throat.

"Thanks, God," she said when she could breathe again. "And thanks, Rebel."

Rolling over on her back she added, "Pity we can't eat it."

But she would bury it. She didn't want the

vultures coming to her camp here on the Eastern Plains. And it was a beautiful animal, even dead. Not its fault Jenny wanted to live.

When she'd dug a hole and rolled the cat into it and covered it with dirt and some rocks, she started her evening fire. Time to roast the fat rabbit she'd shot this afternoon, drawing to a halt its bounding across the plain on this fine spring day. The nights were still cold, but this cave was snug enough. She'd be blessed if she found as good a one on other parts of this fool trip. She was new to God's blessings, so she wasn't sure what God would do, but she had faith.

God, Rebel, and herself. That was what she was counting on.

Rolling up her pants leg, Jenny inspected the scratches. They weren't deep, but they did sting. She searched inside her saddle bag for the strip of an old petticoat she'd rolled up for bandages to use during this trip. One never knew when they'd be needed. A small bottle of moonshine was in there too.

She un-tacked Rebel and led him to the stream where he drank deeply.

Jenny washed her wounds and poured the 'shine over the wound. It took all she had not howl at the sting that assaulted her flesh. The burn subsided, and she wrapped some of the bandage around it. She'd take it off in a day or two.

The rabbit was done when they came back, and Jenny tore into it, letting the grease drip down her hands. Wouldn't eat like this anywhere else, but who was there to see her? She finished, wiped her fingers

on her denim pants, and banked the fire for the night.

She huddled in her bedroll and watched the play of the shadows on the stone wall. And felt the doubts creep in along with the shadows. Could she even do this? She'd crossed the country once before, but that had been with a wagon train, a wagon master, and a scout. Plenty of people who knew more than she did, and she'd learned a lot from them. She'd beaten that cat, but what other dangers lay before her? Two-legged, four-legged? Iffen she could only sleep. It would all be there in the morning. Jenny had learned that, too.

The nights were the worst part. Jenny had never been lonely before. Never let herself become lonely. Because if she became lonely, it would have upset the house of cards that was her life. Then the house had fallen apart anyway, and she'd found herself with a better one built by her God.

God had taught her about loneliness even as He'd filled her life with people she loved and who loved her. And through that He'd taught her the hardest lesson of all.

If you loved someone, sooner or later you ended up missing them.

And if you loved someone, or thought you could, you had to know. Were they alive? Were they okay?

The tall Cheyenne man who had a special way of looking at and of treating her. Like she was better'n a saloon girl, like none of that mattered. Jenny knew her way around men. Knew and didn't much care. But White Bear was different. Even though she'd only

known him for three days, three years before.

He'd treated her better than she deserved, and when Jenny found God, she knew there was a name for that too. Unconditional, well, love.

What she'd felt for him wasn't a crush. Jenny Thatcher didn't get crushes. She wasn't sure it was love, not only after three short days. But there had been something there, an awareness of what they could be together.

Enough to shove her out of the best life she'd had since she'd been driven from her home. But the ranch would wait; her friends would wait.

She had to know.

Jenny reached out and touched the worn canvas of her saddlebag. She carried an extra hundred dollars in gold on top of what she'd brought along for expenses. That would pay the Cheyenne back for her care three years ago when a feverish, out-of-her-head Jenny had stumbled into their camp, and they had nursed her back to health. And there were the clothes, the soft deerskin dress and trousers she'd worn while they cared for her. She had to return those, didn't she?

They were the excuses she'd given her friends in Hall's Mill for taking off right after foaling season, leaving Michael Moriarty, her business partner, and their foreman in charge of the ranch. Had her friends bought the explanation? Jenny was having trouble buying it herself.

But it was the best excuse she had for this trip if White Bear didn't want her. Or remember her.

~*~

White Bear sucked in a breath and reined his paint pony to a stop. No. It couldn't be. His heart slowed and he gripped the saddle horn. He was dreaming, a nightmare. But even at their worst, his nightmares had never taken a form like this.

And now they never would. Because it had already happened.

His fists clenched so much they hurt as he looked down from the ridge at what was left of his tribe's summer buffalo camp. Cooking fires abandoned. Weaving or beading or tanning projects kicked aside. Foodstuffs scattered.

Tipis burned to the ground.

Grey Eagle. Red Dawn. Mother.

He dug his knees into the paint's sides and tore down the hill, scattering dirt as the pony's hooves hit the ground. The travois loaded with furs and hides tipped to one side, and some of the smaller pieces fell out, but he didn't look back.

The smell met him as he reached the outskirts of the settlement and he reached for the bandana his white friends had taught him to carry. He knotted it over the lower portion of his face as the paint carried him through what had been their village.

Tipis were a mess of burned hides puddling into the ground.

His friends had been caught in their rush to escape. Their charred forms were sprawled like dolls on the ground. Small Hawk's woman with her

newborn clutched to her breast.

The two children of his friend Swift Current, a boy and a girl, their faces frozen in screams.

Children. He couldn't help it. He untied the bandana just in time, and vomited into the dirt.

Who had done this?

The scene repeated itself as he plodded through the camp. People he'd known all his life, some of them all their lives. When their faces were burned beyond recognition, he still knew them by a moccasin pattern or a scrap of bead work.

Mother.

Her buckskin dress had burned through, showing her thin chest and frail bones. But her beautiful silver braids were unscathed. Her eyes were sightless in death.

Mother.

He wanted to stop, to gather what was left of her into his arms, to mourn her properly, but it would have to wait. He had to see who was left.

It was his duty as the man who could have been chief. If only Father could see him now.

But if Father had been alive, none of this would have happened.

His brother Grey Eagle, his body shriveled from the flames, had his arms around two of the elders who couldn't walk. Had he been trying to get them to safety? His younger brother's sightless eyes stared up at him.

If Grey Eagle was dead –

Fear swelled inside White Bear. No, no, no. He

dug his knees into the paint's sides again, cantering through what was left of the camp. "Red Dawn! Red Dawn!"

He rode through the camp and back, his horse's hooves the only sound. A wolf puppy poking through a dead cooking fire was the only other sign of life. The smell of smoke and burned human flesh rose around him, and he battled another bout of nausea.

He was rewarded by a feeble cry from the wash on the edge of the camp. Not an adult, but definitely human. White Bear jumped down from the paint and peered over the edge.

Red Dawn, his sister-in-law, huddled at the bottom. She clutched her three-year-old son Soars with Eagles as he whimpered. Hunger? Thirst? Fear?

Thank You, Lord, for leading me to them.

White Bear scabbled in his pouch for hardtack and jerky and slung his canteen over his shoulder. He made his way down the embankment, dirt scattering with his haste, and took the boy from his mother. Red Dawn looked as limp as a cloth doll. Soars with Eagles clung to White Bear like a monkey, and White Bear broke off a piece of hardtack, placing it in the boy's mouth.

"There, there," he murmured, silly comforting sounds in English. Soars with Eagles wouldn't know the difference. "My brave boy."

He turned to Red Dawn and switched to their Algonquian tongue. "My sister, what happened?"

She stared up at him, her brown eyes wide and as unseeing as the blind.

“Red Dawn, my sister. Who has done this?”

No response.

White Bear sighed and lowered himself to the dirt floor. He tipped some water into Soars with Eagles’ baby bird of a mouth and handed the canteen to Red Dawn. She, at least, knew enough to drink and to chew on a piece of jerky. But she would not talk. He’d seen this before. Too many times.

Tears welled in his burning eyes. Was it from the smoke or his loss? Cheyenne didn’t cry, but who was left to chastise him? He bit back a cough, but another one followed on its heels. Smoke hung over the deadly silence of the camp, the silence in this wash. He tamped down his anger. There would be plenty of time for that later.

So much to do. Build platforms enough to hold fifty people, so the animals wouldn’t get their bodies. Nothing he could do about the vultures. Mourn his mother, his brother, and his lifetime friends. Make sure Soars with Eagles and Red Dawn got enough to eat and drink. Try to get Red Dawn to speak again.

This grove by the Platte River had been their summer home for as long as he could remember. They worked together, coming up from North Texas in a caravan, hunting enough buffalo to keep them in food and skins and carving bone for the winter. It was here he had had his Sun Dance and Vision Quest. Here where Grey Eagle and Red Dawn had wed. Here where Father had lived his last months.

And here where White Bear had met the tall white woman with the black stallion, who had never

completely left his thoughts. Who never would, until he had his answer.

Red Dawn's eyes closed, and she slumped against his shoulder. How long had she stayed awake, starting at every noise, desperate to protect her boy? And she was expecting, he saw from the slight bulge under her ripped deerskin dress. This truth brought another layer of fear.

Soars with Eagles crawled into his lap. Soon he slept, too. But White Bear stayed awake, looking up at the cloudless blue sky.

Under the sharpness of his loss, a dull ache ran like a sluggish river. He could never bring her back here. If she was still alive.

He would find out who had done this. For their sakes, and for his own.

2

JUNE 1849
NORTHERN NEW MEXICO

"Rebel," Jenny murmured as they plodded along under the noonday sun. "Where are we?"

She didn't expect an answer, not in words anyway, but you never knew with Rebel. Look at the way he'd risen up to protect her from that bobcat. Rebel was all right.

Jenny had picked up more'n her share of wilderness and survival skills as she'd crossed the continent with Wagon Master Pace Williams and his scout, Michael Moriarty. Too bad neither of them had taught her to read a map.

This was pretty enough country with its brilliant plants in strange shapes, with the dried weeds that rolled across her path like the pig bladder balls Pa'd made for them at hog butchering. The territory was pretty, with its tall cliffs everywhere, rising around her and their pale red color catching the sun, lots of sun. But she already knew she wasn't supposed to be here. Knew it in her gut. This wasn't the way east.

Oh, where were they? And how far behind would this put her on her quest?

This land was unlike any desert she'd ever seen,