



Jenna Brandt

*Healed by
Grace*

The Civil War Brides

HEALED BY GRACE

The Civil War Bride Series

JENNA BRANDT



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Jenna Brandt is, in my estimation, the most gifted author of Christian fiction in this generation!

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HEALED BY GRACE

Grace Abernathy helped wounded soldiers during the American Civil War. Now that it's over, she has to find a way to move on. Her parents think having her stay with her cousins in Myrtle Grove, South Carolina, can help her do just that. She isn't looking for love after what she went through, but when she spends time with a returning soldier she knew from a long time ago, she wonders if he might spark a rekindling in her heart.

Wyatt Hammond was conscripted to serve in the Confederate military. Though he only served for a few months before the war ended, the horrors he saw during that time haunt him. He isn't sure if he can ever be happy again, until he is reunited with an old flame who has the power to heal his broken heart.

Can Grace forget her painful past? Will Wyatt be able to let go of what he went through during the war? And what will happen when the man Grace is running from, finally catches up with her?

RECAP

In book one and two of the Civil War Brides series, small town life is disrupted while the United States of America is torn apart by civil war.

Faith Abernathy was set to marry, and eventually does marry, Nathan Maddox, a former spy and prisoner of war, who was miraculously rescued. They have a small farm in Myrtle Grove, South Carolina, on the edge of Faith's family's plantation. The aftermath of his captivity put everyone's faith to the test, but the woman he loves along with her family and friends, helped Nathan overcome the trauma from the war.

Hope Hammond, Faith's best friend, along with her family, also live in Myrtle Grove on their own plantation. Her father was an officer in the military but was discharged after being injured during the war, resulting in the loss of his leg. Additionally, Hope's only sibling, Gregory, was killed in the war shortly after her father returned home. Her father turns to alcohol to console himself, causing Hope and her mother to have to take care of the family and the plantation. Eventually, he turns back to God after a series of events that change all their lives.

Hope and Davis are married right before he heads off to join the war effort. He plans to follow after Hope's cousin, Dr. Wyatt Hammond, who is already serving due to conscription.

*-To Dustin-
You're my personal soldier.
Thank you for fighting for us.*

CHAPTER 1

Late May, 1865
Myrtle Grove, South Carolina

Grace Abernathy pushed back the edge of the curtain and peeked out the window of the stagecoach. Her cousins' vaguely familiar small town of Myrtle Grove came into view. Though she hadn't been there since she was a young girl, not much had changed since her last visit. There was the same town square, white church, and Main Street sprinkled with staple stores and one restaurant. This time, however, Grace wouldn't be returning to her home in Charleston. Her parents had decided her stay was to be permanent in order to give her a fresh start.

At first, Grace had been upset about the decision that had been thrust upon her. She had volunteered to help her father tend to the injured soldiers at the hospital during the war. As one of the most prestigious surgeons in all of the South, her father had saved many lives throughout his career. It had devastated him to have to take leg after leg and arm after arm due to the various bloody battles.

"I can't believe my life's work has come to this. I've become a butcher of men," he had lamented to her. The hollow look in his brown eyes and the wrinkles around them, told her that her father would never be the same again. "I no longer feel like I'm saving lives, but rather destroying them piece by piece."

Grace had survived the war, despite the ruination around her. She had believed that all the calamity was behind her, but the worst was yet to come. After what happened to her, her parents made the decision she needed to leave in order to protect her. Even though she hadn't liked it, she knew the wisdom in it. Charleston was a shadow of its former glory—a constant reminder of a past now buried so deep it could hardly be remembered—just like Grace. Gone was the carefree young debutante, who thought her only goal was to obtain a suitable matrimonial match. It was replaced by a woman who knew all too well, that everything a person held dear could be destroyed in the blink of an eye.

The carriage came to a stop at the stagecoach depot. A couple of moments later, the coachman came around and opened the door. As Grace stepped down, the warm spring air brushed across her face. She opened her parasol and placed it over her shoulder, shielding herself from the strong rays of the afternoon sun.

Her aunt and uncle should be there any moment to pick her up, but even a short amount of time in direct sunlight would make Grace's delicate cream skin burn. She'd managed to stay out of the sun during the entirety of the war; she didn't plan on having her appearance ruined now that it was over.

"Can I have your luggage delivered somewhere, miss?" asked a young man with black hair and a friendly grin.

She shook her head. "You can leave my bags beside me. My aunt and uncle should be here soon to pick me up."

"Who's your aunt and uncle, if you don't mind me inquiring?"

Grace pressed her lips together. She supposed it didn't matter if she told the man. Everyone in the small town would know soon enough of her arrival. "Thomas and Tabitha Abernathy."

"That means you're cousins with Faith and Davis," the man pointed out. "I went to school with both of them. They're good people."

"I agree. I'm very lucky to have such a wonderful family," Grace acknowledged.

"How long will you be staying?"

Grace didn't know how to respond. Even though the entire Abernathy family knew her stay would be with no prearranged limit, she wasn't sure she wanted to disclose that to anyone else.

To her relief, she heard the familiar voice of Faith beside her, keeping her from having to respond. "I can't believe my eyes. I barely recognized you, Grace."

She turned to the side to find her cousin, standing next to a tall, dark-haired man. She assumed it was Faith's husband, Nathan Maddox. Just a few steps behind them were her aunt and uncle.

"We're so glad you're here," Tabitha said, reaching out and pulling her niece into an embrace. She leaned back and added, "I see the Abernathy fair complexion still remains. With your blonde hair and green eyes, you could pass for twins with my own Faith."

"Twin cousins, what an odd thought," her uncle added, coming up and patting Grace gently on the back. "But it seems to be true. It's good to see you. How's my brother doing?"

"He is well, as is my mother. They send their love to all of you," Grace said with a smile. "They wished they could have come with me, but my father is busy with the rebuilding of the hospital."

"We all have a lot to do to recover after the war," Tabitha said in a weary voice. "I don't think any of us were prepared for it. Our own plantation was nearly destroyed. I daresay, if we hadn't—"

"We don't need to dwell in the past, Tabitha," Grace's uncle interrupted, giving his wife a look that made it clear he wanted to drop the subject. "The day is getting away from us. We should be heading back to Oak Haven before it gets dark. Let's get this luggage loaded into the wagon," her uncle said, gesturing to his son-in-law. "Why don't you grab the other side of the trunk, Nathan."

"Where's the rest of the family?" Grace inquired as the men made short work of loading her luggage. She looked around for her other four Abernathy cousins.

"They're at home waiting for us," her aunt explained. "Believe me, they wanted to come, but it would have been complete chaos with Nancy and Jack along. I asked Ida to stay behind and watch them. As for Davis and Hope, they needed to finish up some work at their farm."

"You'll just have to settle for us during the ride home," Faith teased, looping her arm through her cousin's. "I hope we're enough."

"Always, Faith, always," Grace said, placing her own hand over Faith's.

CHAPTER 2

One long look around his office, and Wyatt Hammond tried to remind himself he was home where he belonged. The war was behind him, and he was ready to get back to his life as the town doctor. The problem was, everyone in Myrtle Grove continued to remind him of the time he wanted to forget. He hadn't wanted to be featured in the article in the *Daily Examiner*. What he did during one of the final battles had been out of instinct, not to garner praise or recognition. Now, he was expected to play the part of the brave hero returning from the war, ready to be the beacon of pride the South wanted him to be.

Everyone around him expected him to be okay; after all, he hadn't sustained any physical injuries. It didn't mean he was okay, though. Far from it; he felt broken inside due to the horrors he saw during the war. If he had his way, he would never talk about the war again, but that didn't seem to be an option.

"It's good to have you home," his Uncle Luke said, as he came inside and shut the door behind them. "We prayed for you every day while you were gone. God saw fit to bring you back to us, which I'm eternally grateful for."

Wyatt wanted to agree with his uncle, but part of him had a hard time accepting it. So many of his fellow soldiers died, and yet, he managed to make it out alive. He didn't understand why, and felt immense guilt over the fact. Avoiding the subject, Wyatt moved over to his desk and took a seat behind it. He shuffled through the papers, noticing they were organized by importance. "I see Aunt Joanna did a good job of keeping everything in order while I was away."

"She's a good woman like that. She came by every few days to clean and deliver your mail."

"I'll have to thank her next time I see her," Wyatt mumbled under his breath, continuing to scan through the stack of letters on his desk.

"Tonight," his uncle blurted out, causing Wyatt to glance up.

"Tonight, what?" Wyatt inquired with confusion.

"You can thank her tonight when you come over for dinner."

Wyatt stiffened under the invitation that was more like a command. He was exhausted, and felt like curling up with a book more than socializing. "I didn't know we had plans."

His uncle's brows furrowed together with a look of puzzlement. "We just assumed, since it's your first night home, you would want to be with family. It won't be just your aunt and I. Hope and Davis will be there, too."

"He's back then?"

Luke nodded. "He returned a month ago due to an injury."

"Is he all right?" Wyatt asked, leaning forward in his chair, concern audible in his voice. Reflexively, his hands gripped the edge of the desk, tightening with every passing second. He didn't like not knowing the status of his close friend and cousin-in-law.

"Davis is fine—though he has a jagged scar along his cheek now. He didn't last long in the war. During his first battle, he was hit by a piece of shrapnel. He was lucky it didn't cause any permanent damage." Luke gestured to his own missing leg from the war. "He was lucky; you both were."

Wyatt pressed his lips together, forcing himself not to blurt out he didn't want to be lucky, and would have preferred to die with honor like the other men in his regiment. Instead, he was being celebrated as a war hero for saving a singular man, the only other survivor from his unit.

"Everyone is looking forward to seeing you," his uncle explained. "We'll be expecting you at six."

"I'll be there," Wyatt relented, knowing there was no point in arguing with his uncle. It would raise too many questions. He didn't want anyone to have a reason to look too closely at him. If they did, he was certain they would see the damage the war had done to him.

Once Wyatt was alone, he stood and made his way over to his sack and picked it up. He strode to the back of the building, opened

a door that divided the area, and entered his bedroom. He glanced around, noticing that everything was exactly as he had left it, though it was free from dust. His aunt must have cleaned the surfaces, but nothing more.

He moved over to the dresser, his fingertips brushing against the cool metal of his pocket watch and cuff links. He picked up first his comb, then his straight razor, turning each item back and forth in his hand. He opened the top drawer, moving around the undershirts and socks. All of the items were his, but they felt like they belonged to someone else now. It was as if he was a stranger ruffling through someone else's possessions.

Wyatt let out a heavy sigh, running his hand through his dark hair, before lifting his bag onto the end of his bed. He opened the top and pulled out his uniform, his pistol, and his Bible. Buried towards the bottom, his hands encountered the edge of a small, wooden box. He hesitated, debating whether he wanted to bring it out. He knew he would have to look at it sooner or later, but he wasn't sure he was ready to have the emotions hit him like they did the last time he looked inside.

Slowly, he brought the box out. Though the Confederate States Congress approved the president to bestow medals and badges to soldiers, none were ever created or awarded. Now that the South had lost the war, that was how it would remain forever. What was inside, though, was more precious to him than any medal he could've ever received. It was a hand-written letter of recognition stating he deserved the highest of honors for heroism during the war. Each of the surviving men from his regiment signed it. It had been given to him before he left to return home. Along with it, he had been given a Confederate half-dollar, one of only four that were in existence. It wasn't worth much on its own, but it was a symbol of what he and his fellow soldiers had fought and died for—Southern freedom to live their lives as they saw fit. That dream was lost now. In its place, a crippled nation floundered to survive.

Wyatt sagged against the edge of his bed, saddened over all that had happened during the past several years, and the immense losses they had suffered. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes; the sting of them teasing him to let them fall. Everything they believed in and fought for was destroyed now. Thousands of strong, good men died,

while the “lucky” few returned home broken and stripped of everything they once held dear.

Depression took hold of him, causing Wyatt to fall back on his bed. Was this to be his life now? Was he to never know a day of happiness again? His eyelids fluttered for a few moments before he welcomed the darkness that claimed his weary mind, temporarily releasing him from the constant dread that filled his heart.

CHAPTER 3

Though the South hadn't won the war, Myrtle Grove was still proud of the soldiers who fought gallantly. They wanted to celebrate their safe return. In honor of them, the mayor decided to host a social in the town square. Grace hadn't been anywhere since her arrival two days prior, and was relieved to have something to distract her from the troubling thoughts that plagued her. This would be a chance for her to take her mind off of the past.

She placed the final pin in her hair, securing her curls. Her cousin, Faith, had told her there would be a picnic in the afternoon, as well as a dance in the evening, which meant it was going to be a long event. She wanted to make sure her curls held up for the entire night. Once she was certain they wouldn't fall, she inspected her green, satin dress a final time in the mirror. It was the last of her good dresses, the rest being either ruined or stolen during the war. Pilferers had raided most of the wealthy homes, and hers had been no exception. This one only managed to survive because it had been misplaced by one of the servants before they had fled the city. She added her solitary set of gold earrings and necklace, saved by the fact she had worn them on a regular basis. The rest of her jewelry had been sold to support the troops or stolen like her dresses, clutches, and shoes.

"You look beautiful," her Aunt Tabitha said, reaching out and gently placing her hand on her shoulder. "A vision of perfection. You'll land a husband in no time."

Grace pressed her lips together, forcing herself not to snap out that she had no intention of doing so. The last thing she wanted was

a husband, especially after what had happened to her.

"Are you both ready?" she heard Faith ask from the doorway. "Hope and Davis will be waiting for us at the social."

"We are," her aunt said, picking up the cream shawl from the bed and handing it to Grace. "I'm looking forward to a nice evening with family and friends."

"Me, too," Faith said with a smile, stepping out of the way to let Grace and her mother pass through the door. "It's been a long time since the town has had something to celebrate."

"You mean, besides your wedding? Oh, let's not forget to mention Hope and Davis' wedding, too," her mother stated with a quirk of her eyebrow.

"Well, that's true, but this is the first time Grace gets to attend a town social with us. I can't wait to introduce her to everyone. I wish Wyatt was home, but last I heard, he was delayed in Virginia. You would like Wyatt, Grace. He's a true war hero, a good man, and a handsome doctor. If you—"

"That's enough matchmaking, Faith," her aunt corrected gently. "She'll meet Wyatt soon enough when he returns, and she can make up her own mind about him."

"Yes, Mother," Faith said with a nod. "I just want Grace to find a husband and to be as happy as I am with Nathan."

Grace pulled her shawl tightly around her chest, twisting the edges in frustration. Why was everyone so determined to marry her off? She knew that everyone was suffering due to the aftermath from the war—her aunt and uncle were no exception. They had had to resort to sharecropping. The land had been owned and operated by the Abernathys for several generations, but now they had to take on outside farmers. Sharing the profits just to keep from losing their land was not uncommon, but it was difficult. Grace didn't want to be a burden to her family, but she also didn't want to marry a stranger, especially a soldier. Of course, Wyatt wasn't exactly a stranger. Not many people knew this, but they had danced at a ball in Charleston while he had been at university and she a debutante. There had been sparks, and for a moment, she thought he might court her. Then the war happened, and it took over everything, including the pursuit of anything romantic. He left without saying a word, causing her to realize she had read into the situation; assuming it was more than it was. Now, he was a returning soldier, and she

was a different woman. It didn't matter what had passed between them five years ago. To her, it seemed it was a lifetime ago.

The women made their way downstairs where the men were waiting.

"Did I tell you how pretty you look in that dress?" Nathan asked, reaching out to take Faith's hand and placing it in the crook of his arm.

"You say that every time I wear this dress, which is a lot since we can't afford any new ones." Even though it was a true statement, there wasn't any bitterness in Faith's voice. She was simply stating a fact.

"You could always borrow one from me. Though they aren't new, they would be new to you," Grace offered.

"That's very sweet of you, cousin," Faith said with a grateful smile. "I wouldn't dream of wearing one of your dresses and ruining it, though."

"I wouldn't worry about that. This is the best one I have by far, but you're welcome to any of the ones I have."

"You'd be surprised how quickly I can stain a dress," Faith said with a small laugh.

"That's true. Faith tends to be clumsy, especially now with her being—" Nathan's eyes rounded, as he glanced away, his cheeks tinging red with embarrassment as he stopped himself from continuing.

"Now with her being, what?" her mother pounced on the unfinished sentence. "Is there something we should know?"

"Is there something wrong with you, Faith?" her father asked, joining in on the inquisition.

She shook her head, then glanced over at Nathan and gave him a dirty look. "It's too early to be talking about this, Nathan."

"Are you both that blind?" Ida asked, entering the room with Jack and Nancy behind her. "She's been ill regularly lately, and her clothes aren't fitting like they used to. It's obvious; Faith's going to have a baby."

"You are! I can't believe it," her mother gasped with excitement. She rushed over and threw her arms around her daughter. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to, but I wasn't sure how it was going to go," Faith explained.

"I'm going to be a grandfather. It seems you're keeping up on your end of the deal, Nathan," Thomas said, coming up and patting the younger man on the back.

"I'm going to be an aunt," Nancy squealed with delight. "I can't wait to tell all the other kids at school."

"Don't you dare," Faith said, pulling back from her mother. "We don't want to make an announcement quite yet."

"Listen to your sister, Nancy. And that goes for you, Jack, as well. Both of you need to respect your sister's request," their mother reprimanded kindly.

Nancy's lip came out in a pout as she placed her hand on her hip. "This is my first time getting to be an aunt," she whined. "I want to tell the whole world."

"There'll be plenty of time for that down the road," their father said, "But for now, it's just going to be an Abernathy/Maddox secret."

Secret. Grace hated that word—and all the negative emotions it invoked for her. Wanting to escape, Grace knew she needed to properly congratulate the couple before leaving. "That's wonderful news," Grace said, despite feeling like she was an outside spectator in someone else's life. She quickly added, "I think I will wait outside."

She slipped out the door and headed over to the rundown wagon. She climbed inside, being careful to avoid the sections of wood that were splintering from excessive use. Gone were the days that the Abernathys arrived in carriages. It was a luxury that they could no longer afford. She reminded herself she should be grateful they didn't have to walk to town, like so many people had to do now.

A few minutes later, the rest of the group came out and joined her in the wagon. No one addressed her sudden departure, but she could tell they were curious as to why she did it. She was glad for the absence of questions. She didn't want to discuss her reasons. The truth was, ever since what had happened to her back in Charleston, she didn't react to situations the way she used to. It was like the part of her that used to care and celebrate was gone. She was left with a shell of her former self.

Faith stretched her arm out across the wagon and squeezed Grace's hand. She gave her cousin an encouraging smile, without making it seem condescending. Grace liked that. Faith always had a

way of making her feel better. She was glad to see that hadn't changed after all these years.

They arrived in town, checking their wagon and horse in at the livery before walking the short distance to the town square. Families were already there, setting up their picnics. A few faces looked vaguely familiar, but Grace couldn't put any names to the faces. Not surprising, since it had been nearly seven years since the last summer she spent in Myrtle Grove.

The Abernathy children placed the blankets on the grass, then set the picnic baskets upon it. Eagerly, they rushed off to join the other children in the games.

"There you all are," she heard the familiar voice of her other cousin, Davis, say from the side. He came into view, with a pretty, strawberry blonde clinging to his arm. Again, her face looked vaguely familiar, which made Grace believe it was her cousin's new wife, and Faith's best friend, Hope Hammond. Grace supposed it was Hope Abernathy now, since they had gotten married right before Davis left to join the war effort.

"Where are your parents?" Tabitha asked, looking for the other couple.

"We just arrived a few moments ago. Everyone else should be joining us in a minute," Hope explained. Glancing over at Grace, she reached out her hand. "You must be Grace. I recognize you from when we were children."

Grace took the extended hand, and shook it in return. "As I did with you."

"I hear you'll be staying with the Abernathys for a while. You should come with Faith and me to the next knitting party at the church. Though with the war being over, I'm not sure what we will be knitting. I suppose there's always a need for scarves and socks. There's so many orphans now due to all the soldiers who—"

There was a cough from Thomas Abernathy and the other women looked uncomfortable. Hope must have realized she was speaking about matters that were still a sore subject. She looked mortified, as her eyes darted to the ground.

Grace decided she would rescue the other girl. "I would love to join you, Hope, though I have to admit, I have the least masterful hand when it comes to a knitting needle."

The other woman looked up with a relieved smile. "You can't be much worse than me."

"Hey now, I loved my scarf you sent with me," Davis teased, kissing the top of his wife's head. "Though I have to admit, I much prefer your baking to your knitting."

"You should never tell your wife you prefer one talent over another," Nathan jokingly rebuked. "As far as we're concerned, they're experts at everything."

"He's right, son, don't make the same mistake that many a man has made," another older man said, joining the group with an older brunette woman beside him.

"Luke, you made it," Thomas declared with a pleased tone.

"We said we would, but we ended up running a bit late because we had to wait on this one." Luke stepped back to reveal a handsome dark-haired man behind him. Again, he looked familiar, but this time it wasn't vague memory. Grace could tell by his unforgettable, piercing, hazel eyes, she was staring at Wyatt Hammond.

CHAPTER 4

As his eyes locked with Grace Abernathy's, Wyatt was instantly transported back to five years ago. It had been the last ball before the South seceded from the Union—though no one had known it would at that time.

The ball was thrown to raise funds to support the university, in hopes of increasing the number of applicants that they could accept into the medical school. Dr. Abernathy, Grace's father, was the head of the medical school. Wyatt was one of his star students, garnering him an invitation to the elite and prestigious Charleston event.

"I can't believe that soon we will graduate and finally be one of them," Michael Reed whispered in awe, leaning towards Wyatt and adding, "I can't wait to nab one of these pretty debutantes and make her my wife."

Of course, Michael would think it as easy as that. He came from a long, pedigreed Charleston family, while Wyatt was an orphan. With only an aunt and uncle living on a distant plantation, he had little family to speak of. What man would approve of his daughter marrying a man who had so little?

"Take that one for example; isn't she a looker?"

Wyatt glanced over at the woman Michael was referring to. She was gorgeous, with her golden-blond hair and hour-glass figure that was enhanced perfectly in her golden gown, with green and burgundy trim. She was one of the most striking women in the room, and he couldn't tear his eyes from her. At least until the moment Dr. Abernathy approached her and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Because of the age difference, Wyatt assumed she was his daughter, which meant she was strictly off-limits. He tried to put his reaction to her in check. He'd worked too hard to impress the

head instructor at the medical school to let it all be ruined because he was fascinated by his daughter.

"We should head into the cigar room and listen for any clues about the secession," Wyatt said, grabbing Michael by the arm and dragging him away. "If we go to war, they're going to need doctors more than ever."

Two hours passed without any definitive facts about what was going to happen between the North and the South. Wyatt was tired, and decided he was ready to head back to the dormitory. He made his way out of the cigar room and along the edge of the ballroom dance floor, which was currently filled with couples dancing a waltz.

"He looks like a good candidate," a young brown-haired girl said, pushing the gorgeous blonde from earlier into his arms. "You haven't danced with him, yet."

"Elizabeth Moore, how dare you," the blonde woman protested, her head turning towards Wyatt with an astonished expression on her heart-shaped face.

The moment he looked into her bright, green eyes, he knew he'd be a fool to let her out of his arms. He tightened his grip around her waist, pulling her onto the dance floor. He gathered her up into his embrace, whispering, "Remind me to thank your friend later."

"For what?"

"For giving me the chance to dance with the most beautiful woman in the room."

"Do you really think I'm gullible enough to fall for that?" she asked in an irritated tone. "I get paid twenty compliments a night like that."

His brows shot up in surprise. "That might be so, but let me assure you, you're the first woman I've spent a moment with tonight, let alone uttered such a declaration to."

Her face softened. "You didn't come here to join in on a bride hunt? Many men would love to land the daughter of Dr. Abernathy."

"Is that who you are?" Wyatt asked, pretending not to know. "I simply thought you were a maid that stole a dress and came to the ball."

She let out a giggle. "Wouldn't that be something. Sometimes I wish I could blend in like the maids do. Between my mother trying to marry me off to the richest men in Charleston, and my father using me to prove women can understand medicine, I'm somewhat notorious around here."

"None of that matters to me, though I do agree that women are capable of understanding a great multitude of things far more than most men give them credit for."

"How forward thinking of you," Grace said with approval. "Not common around here, at all."

"I consider myself broad-minded. I'm smart enough to know, I don't know much at all. It's why I value my education at the university so much."

"What are you studying? My guess, based off your ability to be a free thinker, philosophy, or perhaps literature."

He shook his head. "I'm completely engrossed by science—have been since I was a child. I wanted to know how it all worked. Why God created everything the way He did, and how we all figured into it."

"Sounds like you have a little bit of a poet in you, after all," she teased, her laughter filling the space between them. It was intoxicating, and Wyatt realized he would be willing to listen to it the rest of his life if that was an option.

"I have to remember to keep you laughing. It's infectious," he declared.

"I'm not sure I've ever heard anyone quite describe it like that."

"Well, it's true. I could listen to it without ceasing, and never get tired of it."

Before she could say anything back, the song ended. Wyatt wished he could pay the band to keep going. Knowing that wasn't possible, he reluctantly let go of her. "Would you care to grab a bit of fresh air with me?"

She nodded, letting him take her hand and place it in the crook of his arm. He liked the feeling of her hand resting there. The cool evening air brushed across their faces as they made their way onto the veranda, and she shivered slightly. He removed his jacket and placed it across her shoulders. They continued to walk along the garden path until they were covered by shadows towards the back.

"Thank you," she whispered, glancing up at him with her forest green eyes. "Even though it's April, the evenings are still chilly."

"You're welcome," he whispered back, his face drifting closer to hers. "I'm not sure how you're doing it, but I think you're casting a spell on me. That's hard for me to admit, as a man of science, but I swear it to be true."

"There you go again; such a poet's heart residing in that soul you protest is so strictly reserved for scientific purposes."

"I guess you've managed to draw it out in me. I've never had this happen before," he muttered, his lips moving even closer to her. "I know none of this makes sense. I shouldn't be here with you like this."

"Why not?" she asked, turning towards him and placing her hand on his chest. "Don't you want to be?"

He nodded. "At the moment, I can't think of anything I want more."

Without another thought except the need to taste her, his mouth came down gently, testing her lips with his own. The kiss was everything he thought it would be; sweet, thrilling perfection. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close. Her hands came up and wrapped around his neck as she leaned into his embrace.

There was a cascade of loud shouts from inside the Charleston mansion, interrupting their kiss. Wyatt pulled back slightly, not wanting to stop, but knowing he should. "I don't want to, but I should probably go see what that's all about."

He started to pull away, but her hand reached out and stopped him. "You never told me your name."

"That's right; how silly of me. I told you, you have my head all mixed up. My name is Wyatt Hammond."

Her eyes grew round with shock. "My father talks about you all the time. You're one of his most promising students."

"Don't hold that against me," he chuckled, just as another round of shouts came bursting from the house. "I really should go find out what all the commotion is about, but I promise you, this is to be continued. If you're amiable to the idea, I would like to ask your father tomorrow if I can court you."

"I'll hold you to that, Mr. Hammond," she declared, laughing as she waved him off. "And you should probably know my name, so you know who to call on when you come around tomorrow. Miss Grace Abernathy."

"I would have found that out somehow. Believe me, nothing is going to keep me from you."

Wyatt never got his chance to call on Grace, or ask to court her. The South seceded from the Union that very day. Wyatt didn't think it fair to ask her to commit to him, when he knew he would be serving as a doctor for the war efforts. He wouldn't be able to provide a stable life for her, and she deserved better than that. He knew she was the type that would protest, and so he had decided to break her heart in order to make it easier for her. If he never came around again, she would think he was just a cad that had taken advantage of her on the eve the war broke out.

Two days after the war started, Wyatt graduated early from medical school and was sent as a volunteer to help with the war efforts in New Orleans. He spent a year there, escaping just before the city was captured. He made his way to Atlanta, where he stayed for another

two years, narrowly escaped being captured for a second time when the city fell. Each time he narrowly escaped, it confirmed he made the right decision about Grace. She didn't deserve to live her life in fear of losing the man she cared about.

When the Myrtle Grove doctor decided it was time to retire, it was an easy decision to take the job. His aunt, uncle, and cousin, were the only family he had left after his cousin, Gregory, was killed in the war. He didn't want to cause the family anymore losses. He even thought about writing to Grace and explaining why he did what he did; however, fate had a different idea. Two months after becoming the town doctor in Myrtle Grove, he was conscripted to join the war as an official field doctor.

"Wyatt, aren't you going to introduce yourself to the Abernathys' cousin?" he heard his aunt ask him, bringing him back to the present.

His eyes focused back on Grace, who was looking at him with obvious recognition. "We've met before," he whispered. "While I was at medical school in Charleston."

"I should have guessed you might know each other. You studied under my brother, didn't you?" Thomas asked.

"Yes, Dr. Abernathy was my mentor," Wyatt admitted. "He taught me everything I know about medicine."

"I get that, but how do the two of you know each other?" Faith asked, tilting her head and glancing between them in a way that made Wyatt uncomfortable. Could she tell they had been romantically involved in the past?

"We met at a ball right before the war started," Grace explained. "It was the briefest of moments."

The dismissive words stung, causing Wyatt to look away. He had expected when he never told Grace why he decided to do what he did that it would hurt her, but never did he think she had thought so little of their time together. The way she spoke of their encounter, it was as if they were less than acquaintances.

"That will change now that you're both living here in Myrtle Grove," Hope said, coming up next to her cousin. "There will be plenty of time for you both to get to know each other."

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Faith gushed. "I was just saying earlier this afternoon how I thought Grace and Wyatt would get along fabulously."

Wyatt glanced back at Grace to see her reaction to their cousins' declarations. Was there a chance she might be open to reconnecting? In all of the things he regretted, he wished he had handled the situation with her differently. In all the time that passed, she never strayed far from his thoughts; his feelings for her never fading. Now, as she stood in front of him, he knew he needed to do whatever it took to convince her to take another chance on him. The problem was, from the withering look Grace was giving her cousin, it was clear she wouldn't be open to the possibility. At least, not yet. Hopefully, over time he would be able to convince her to give him a second chance.

"I think we've had enough matchmaking for one day," Thomas said in a way that made it clear everyone should drop the subject. "I'm ready to eat."

The Hammond family laid out their blanket next to the other two brought by the Abernathys, and both families took spots on them. Wyatt noticed that Grace settled on a spot as far away from him as she could. He tried to hide his disappointment and focus on the food. Though his aunt was a good cook, each bite stuck in his throat like sandpaper, as he watched Grace from across the blankets. She was carefully avoiding eye contact with him, which made him only feel worse about the situation.

Once everyone was finished eating, the group decided they would go over and watch the kids participate in the games and activities. Ida volunteered to be a part of a magic trick. Everyone marveled as a quarter appeared from behind her ear, and when a baby kitten appeared in her skirt pocket. Despite their bickering, Jack and Nancy won the three-legged race.

"Why don't the three of you participate in the pie-eating contest," Hope suggested, pushing Wyatt and Davis forward as Faith did the same with her husband. "I'd love to see which one of you can eat the most before giving up."

"I don't think I'm up for that," Nathan protested. "The last thing I want is a bunch of people staring at me with my face full of pie."

"Oh, come now, Nathan, don't be a spoilsport. Your friends are doing it," Faith pointed out.

"I'm not sure when I agreed to do this," Wyatt protested. "I'd much rather watch than participate."

"I don't mind," Davis said with a shrug. "Anything to impress my new bride."

Wyatt then realized there was a chance he could do the same with Grace. If he partook and was a good sport about it, maybe it would remind Grace he could be fun. "You know what, I've changed my mind. I think I will take the challenge."

"You do that often, don't you," Grace quipped from behind him.

"I do what?" he asked, turning around to face her. The rest of the group moved past them, over to the pie-eating contest area, leaving them alone.

"Change your mind," she clipped out as she glared at him. "You did it the night of the ball. One moment you were promising to ask my father to court me and to come calling, the next, you put me out of your mind and never gave me another thought."

"That isn't true, Grace. I—"

"Miss Abernathy," she corrected. "We are not familiar enough to call each other by our given names."

He moved towards her, lowering his voice so only she could hear. "I think the kiss we shared would dispute your objection."

"How dare you bring that up," she snapped. "I was vulnerable that night, and now you're using it against me."

"That's not what I meant to do. I just want you to remember that we did have a connection—even if it was a long time ago. If the war hadn't happened, I have no doubt I would have followed through on my promise. I was asked to go help the soldiers and I couldn't refuse."

"Don't blame the war for your fickle nature. You could have come and told me what your plans were. I would have understood. It wasn't like I didn't believe in the war effort. I helped my father nurse wounded soldiers for the duration of it."

"I didn't know that," Wyatt muttered. "That was very noble of you. It must have been very hard."

"We all had to do our part," she said with steely resolve. "I'm a Southern lady, after all."

"Come on you two," Davis shouted from the pie-eating contest area. "The contest is about to start."

"You should hurry. You don't want to miss out on your chance to eat dozens of pies."

"I'd rather stay here and talk with you, if you'll let me explain why I made the decision I did."

"Look, Dr. Hammond, it was only one night. I don't need to hear your excuses as to why you chose to lead me on and then jilt me. We've both moved on."

He tried to hide the look of hurt on his face, but he knew it was a lost cause. Her words stabbed him like a dagger to the heart. "That might be true for you, but there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think about you, Grace."

Her angry face softened for a moment, but she quickly replaced it with indifference. "I told you a long time ago, I've had my share of flattering words. If you'll excuse me, I need to return to my family."

As Wyatt watched Grace walk away, he realized it was going to be a lot harder work than he first anticipated to get Grace to give him a second chance. He was willing, however, to put in the time. Wyatt didn't care how long it took, or how hard she made it, he was going to convince Grace they belonged together.

CHAPTER 5

Grace spent the entire previous night avoiding Wyatt at the picnic and subsequent dance. Every time he tried to come up to her, she would make an excuse to get away. Part of her knew she should give him the chance to explain what happened five years ago, but then the other part of her that was hurt by him, followed by what had happened to her during the war, caused her to reject the idea. It was better to keep him at a distance, than open her heart to anyone again.

"You ready for church this morning?" her Aunt Tabitha asked, coming into the room and helping her finish placing the last of the pins into her hair.

"I have to admit, I'm a bit nervous about going with you all today," Grace confessed.

"Why would you feel that way?"

"I haven't been in Myrtle Grove for years, and by now, everyone knows I'm back. I'm worried that people will ask me why I've come to stay with you."

"It isn't any of their concern. Don't you worry about any of them," her aunt said in a way that made Grace almost believe she could do that. "Besides, you're family. You're always welcome here at Oak Haven and anywhere else in Myrtle Grove."

"Thank you, Aunt Tabitha," Grace said, turning to the older woman and giving her a grateful smile.

Even though her aunt's reassurance helped some, what Grace didn't mention was that there was one person in particular she wasn't looking forward to seeing. She was certain Wyatt would be in

church, which meant there was a possibility of having to be around him again. She knew she wasn't being fair to him; that she should at least hear him out about the decisions he had made. The problem was, it didn't matter because she didn't want to get close to any man after what happened during the war.

Grace dabbed the top of her face with the clean edge of her apron as she took a seat next to Elijah's bed. She held back the tired sigh that threatened to escape, knowing no matter how tired she was, or how rough she might feel at the moment, Elijah was in far worse condition.

"How are you doing today?" she asked, hoping he had finally turned the corner emotionally. "I'm sorry I haven't been by sooner, but we had an influx of patients this morning."

Elijah didn't roll over, but continued to stare at the wall beside him.

"Please, don't be mad at me," Grace pleaded. "I came as soon as I could."

"It doesn't matter," he whispered, unmoving. "I've resolved that I'm never leaving this place—at least alive."

"Don't say that. You're stronger than you think," Grace encouraged. "I've seen you heal from wounds that killed other men. You just need to push through this melancholy, and you'll be ready to start your new life."

"I was a soldier; that was all I was ever good at. Now, with one of my eyes missing and my memory gone, I can't even do that anymore. I don't have a future."

"That isn't true. You just have to find your new purpose," Grace encouraged, reaching out and placing her hand on his arm. "Why don't I pray with you for God to show you what it is?"

"We're here," Grace heard Nancy shout with glee, causing her to return to the present.

The Abernathys piled out of the wagon, then entered the church; joining Faith and Nathan in their family pew. Davis and Hope were sitting in the row right in front of them.

Grace glanced around the room, trying to figure out if Wyatt was there. When she didn't see him, she had mixed emotions. Part of her was relieved he wasn't there; the other part she hated to admit was there, was disappointed she wouldn't have a chance to see him again. She hated that part, and tried to push it away.

Just before the service was about to start, the Hammonds arrived and took seats next to Hope and Davis. Great, that meant that Grace

had to stare at the back of Wyatt for the entire service. How was she going to avoid thinking about him now?

The congregation stood to their feet and sang several hymns, then Pastor George Howell came to the front, taking his place behind the pulpit.

"Good morning, everyone," Pastor Howell greeted in his slow Southern drawl. "I'm grateful to see each of you, including Wyatt Hammond, whose safe return we've waited and prayed for patiently. I also see that Grace Abernathy is with us today. I grew up with her father, and it pleases me to see his daughter here. Today, I feel like God wants me to speak about forgiveness. It's a difficult subject, as many of us have a long list of wrongs done to us. It's easy to keep a record of wrongs, but we aren't called to do that. The Lord calls us to forgive, even when it's the hardest thing in the world to do. Harboring unforgiveness in our hearts hurts us; not those that we hold it against. It's why it's so important for us to release it, and pray for them rather than continue to live in a state of anger and bitterness because of what happened to us."

Grace stiffened under the rebuke. She knew Pastor Howell was correct, and even more importantly, God was using him to talk to her. No one besides her parents knew the full reason for her being sent to Myrtle Grove. He couldn't have known she was filled with anger and bitterness because of what happened with Elijah. Even though she needed to find a way to forgive and let it go, it seemed impossible.

After the service, everyone was filing out of the church. Outside in the courtyard, Grace's worst fears about coming to church came true. Several of the women cornered her and started asking questions.

"How are you doing, dear?" Bonnie Baker, the town busybody inquired, with a concerned look on her face. "I hear your family was right in the thick of the war. I can't even imagine the atrocities you saw."

"I'm fine, Mrs. Baker, just trying to adjust to life here in Myrtle Grove."

"Yes, how long will you be staying with your cousins?" Sarah, one of the other townswomen, asked.

"I'm not sure—"

"What's that on the edge of your sleeve? It looks like dried blood?" Bonnie asked with a disapproving scowl.

Though Grace was relieved that her interruption kept her from having to go into details about her stay, she was mortified the other woman noticed a stain on her dress. Grace glanced down at her sleeve, and sure enough, there was a dark, red dash across the edge. "Oh, my, I thought I had gotten that out," she lamented. "This was one of the dresses I wore when I tended the soldiers at the hospital."

"You did that? I can't even imagine being around all those poor, wounded men," Sarah said with a shiver.

"I think I would rightly pass out from it," Wendy chimed in, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"I wasn't doing it alone. There were other volunteers, as well as my father, who's a doctor," Grace explained. "They needed as much help as they could get, and my father had been teaching me about medicine before the war broke out."

"What an odd notion," Bonnie said, scrunching her nose up. "Why would anyone think a proper young lady would want to do such a thing?"

"I couldn't stand by and let more of our men die, when I had the ability to help them," Grace said, trying to justify her choice. "Even if it meant ruining a few dresses or seeing some things I'd rather forget."

"I just think your father should have known better. It's his job to protect you, not put you in such a precarious position," Bonnie protested further. "Of course, he was always eccentric, even when he was growing up here in Myrtle Grove. I remember this one time, he —"

Grace could feel her cheeks flame red from the woman's negative, inaccurate observation about her father. She was about to interrupt the town busybody and correct her, but Wyatt's familiar voice did so for her, instead.

"Dr. Abernathy is a good man. He would never do anything to harm anyone, let alone his own daughter," Wyatt said, coming up to the group. "All your comment does is prove you don't know him, or you wouldn't be saying such things about him."

Bonnie looked embarrassed. After a moment, she started to move away, saying, "We should be going. We look forward to seeing you around town."

Grace swiveled around to face Wyatt, glaring at him with irritation. "I didn't need your intervention."

"I know that, but I've always respected your father as a mentor; I'm not willing to stand by and listen to someone talk about him like that. Besides, what I left out for your sake is that they obviously don't know you, either. No one lets you do anything. You've always done exactly what you want to do."

"That's not true. I wouldn't be here in Myrtle Grove, if that were the case. Believe me, this is the last place I want to be."

Wyatt's brows came together in a furrow. "Come now, it isn't the worst place to be. Your cousins told me you had wonderful times here together growing up."

"Have you been asking after me?" Grace asked, narrowing her eyes. "Don't go poking around in my past," she snapped out, gathering the edge of her skirt, and pushing past him.

"It wasn't like that," Wyatt defended, reaching out and gently grabbing her by the arm to keep her from escaping. "Hope and Davis were talking about your childhood antics after church. I didn't grow up here, as my parents moved to Chapmin before I was born, so they were filling me in."

Grace felt bad, realizing that she had jumped to the wrong conclusion. It didn't matter, though, she didn't need Wyatt digging into her past. Some things were better left alone.

"I have to go, Dr. Hammond. My aunt and uncle are waiting for me over by the wagon." Grace pulled free from Wyatt's grip, then turned and walked away. She didn't look back; knowing she would only see a confused look on his face. It was better than having to explain the truth about why she was sent to live in Myrtle Grove.

CHAPTER 6

The broken look that had been etched across Grace's face kept floating back into Wyatt's mind. It had only been there a moment, but it was unmistakable. He wasn't sure what the root of it was, but he was certain whatever happened to her had been profoundly painful. He wished he could erase the pain he saw there, but he knew that it wasn't up to him. Sometimes things happened that changed a person forever, and no matter how hard they tried, there was no coming back from it. The war had been like that for him, especially at the end, when he was in the center of it all. Wyatt would never be the man he was before, and he needed to find a way to make peace with that fact.

"You look upset, cousin," Hope said, coming up beside him. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just worried about Grace," he admitted. "Something is wrong with her; I just don't know what."

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you know why she was sent to live with the Abernathys?"

Hope shook her head. "I don't have any details, if that's what you're asking. I'm not sure if anyone does. Faith just told me that Grace needed a fresh start after the war."

"I can understand that," Wyatt admitted. "But I think there is more to it than just that. She looks—haunted."

"That isn't a very nice thing to go around saying," Hope admonished. "You, of all people, Wyatt Hammond, should understand needing a fresh start after the war."

He felt warmth flood his cheeks as he looked away. His cousin was right, of course. He shouldn't be poking his nose into Grace's past. She didn't owe him anything, let alone an explanation. Her past was her business, and he should respect her wishes and leave it alone. He wouldn't want anyone pushing him for details about his time in the war. He had a hard enough time pushing the memories away without anyone forcing him to think about it.

"Get down, Wyatt" he heard Michael shout from across the field. "Incoming."

Wyatt darted out of the way, pulling with him the wounded soldier he was treating. A cannon ball whizzed by, barely missing them. Two more flew by, knocking into nearby stacks of supplies and trees.

"That was a close one," Michael said, joining Wyatt as he continued to work on the soldier behind the protection of a nearby grove of trees. "You need to pay better attention out here, or you're not going to last very long on the battlefield."

"Thanks for that word of encouragement, Michael," Wyatt stated wryly, securing the bandage that was now wrapped around the soldier's left arm. "You're a doctor just like me, so don't go around pretending you're some tried and true career soldier."

"I never said I was, but I definitely listened in training more than you did. It's why you're lucky they assigned us to the same regiment. I might be the only thing that keeps you alive out here."

"I'll keep that in mind," Wyatt said, then adding to the young man sitting on the ground, "We're all done here."

"Can I go back to the battle?" the soldier asked, flexing his arm back and forth.

"I wouldn't recommend it. You risk making that wound a lot worse, not to mention the pain could cause you to pass out."

The young man jumped to his feet, picking up his rifle. "I don't have a choice. We need to win this battle."

Before Wyatt could protest further, the soldier rushed off. Wyatt sent up a silent prayer, hoping the young man, who really wasn't much more than a boy, wouldn't end up meeting his death by the end of the battle.

"I know you, Wyatt, and you can't let that boy's choice eat you up. We can't save them all."

"Isn't that our job though, Michael? We took an oath to save everyone we can, but I sometimes wonder if we can do that in a place like this," Wy-

att said, gesturing around at the carnage nearby, trying to block out the sound of gunfire and cannons going off.

"You can't dwell on things like that," Michael said matter-of-factly. "It's not going to do you any good." Pulling out his map, Michael looked at it for several seconds, then pointed in the other direction. "It's time to move on. We need to go check in with the captain and see where he needs us next."

"You ready to head over to my parents for lunch?" he heard Hope ask, causing him to return to the present.

Wyatt nodded, just as Davis joined them. He tried to focus on being with his family, but no matter what he did, the memories from the war kept coming back. He hated that he was a hostage to them, but the truth was, he was alive and so many of his fellow soldiers weren't. Perhaps being haunted by the past was the price he paid for surviving.

CHAPTER 7

Grace wasn't sure how she felt about the Hammonds coming over for dinner. When her aunt announced the decision, her initial reaction was to feign a headache and hide in her room. She wasn't one for lying, however, and figured if she sat far enough away from Wyatt, it wouldn't matter that he was present.

When it was time to get ready for dinner, Grace slipped on her green, satin dress, telling herself she shouldn't care what she wore since there was no one she wished to impress. Yet, to her own alarm, she found herself settling on her prettiest dress, one that enhanced her figure perfectly. She spent the rest of the afternoon irritatingly complaining to herself, that despite her best efforts, Wyatt still seemed to get to her. By the time her hair was done, and her jewelry added to her outfit, she was in one of her sourest moods.

Grace made her way downstairs and entered the parlor where the Abernathys were already present. Hope and Davis had just arrived, and the rest of the Hammonds were due to be there at any moment. She took a seat next to Faith, at the edge of the sofa, making sure there was no room for anyone else to sit near her. She glanced around the room, realizing that she hadn't been in there since returning to Oak Haven. Most of the paintings were gone, along with all of the crystal, silver, and figurines. Also gone was the grand piano, and the draperies. She assumed that her aunt and uncle had to sell off their entertainment items like her own parents did. Almost all of the South was in the same predicament; the grandness of their homeland being diminished to nearly nothing.

"You look really pretty in that dress, Grace," Faith said, giving her a knowing smile. "I think you know that, though, and made sure of it for a certain someone coming here tonight."

Grace wanted to object, but decided against it. Let Faith think what she wanted; arguing would probably only convince her cousin more that she was right.

"Do you think they will appreciate us bringing up the matter?" Aunt Tabitha asked, a worried look on her face. "I don't want them to think we are overstepping by suggesting it."

Uncle Thomas shook his head. "All of the plantations around here have been hit hard by the war. Sharecropping saved us from losing everything. I think the Hammonds need to consider it, too."

So, that was what this dinner was all about. Grace had wondered what the reason for it was. They were using a social gathering as a ruse to delicately bring up the other family's precarious position with their plantation. It made sense they would feel the need to address the issue. If Hope's family lost everything, it would affect her marriage to Davis, and put a burden on them to have to take care of her parents. That would be difficult for any newly married couple to manage.

A few moments later, the Hammonds arrived with Wyatt. As he breezed into the room, Grace couldn't keep her eyes from him. She tried to pretend she didn't notice him, but she wasn't sure if it was convincing anyone. He looked good in a clean white, button-up shirt, a brown vest, and black jacket. The chain of his pocket watch was hanging out of the vest, and it reminded her of the night they spent together before the war. She was certain it was the same watch. His dark hair was slicked back, which made his hazel eyes and chiseled facial features stand out even more.

Wyatt looked over at her, and she quickly glanced away, hating that he caught her staring at him. For the rest of the time in the parlor, she avoided looking at him, choosing to focus on everyone but him.

Aunt Tabitha returned and announced that dinner was ready and everyone should move into the dining room. The long wooden table, which was the final remnant of Oak Haven's former luxurious decorations before the war, had a simple setting of plates, utensils, and glasses on it. The finer items were gone, just like the ones from the parlor. Grace noticed that her aunt had pulled out the last set of

good candles, placing them on a set of tin candlestick holders; an expense Grace wondered if the family could even afford. Conservation of candles was still a necessity, since the family coffers were not replenished yet. Sometimes she worried she was an added burden that they didn't need. She should think about how she could contribute to the family, rather than simply being an extra mouth to feed.

Grace noticed throughout the meal, Wyatt watched her. She wondered why he continued to show interest in her when she had tried to dissuade him from doing so.

Towards the end of the meal, Joanna gave the Abernathys a warm smile. "Thank you for having us. It's been a long time since we've had time to enjoy a meal with all of you like this. We've been so busy trying to get the plantation back up and running."

"We understand. Without the workers we used to have, and the added issues from Lincoln's Homestead Act, finding workers willing to work for a wage we can afford is nearly impossible," Thomas agreed. "Which is why we ended up resorting to sharecropping. If I'm honest, we were against it in the beginning. This land has been operated by Abernathys for generations. Suddenly, we had to let strangers use parts of it to farm; however, it will give us the opportunity to dig out of the hole the war has put us in."

"I don't want to sharecrop," Luke stated firmly. "Joanna and I can handle our land on our own."

Joanna glanced over at her husband, her look making it clear she doubted what he was saying. She remained quiet; however, and played with her fork, instead.

"Father, I think you should listen to Mr. Abernathy," Hope pleaded. "This might be the only way to save us from losing Fairmore."

"Fairmore is no longer your home. You don't need to worry about it," Luke reminded Hope.

"But it is *my* home," Joanna said, finally speaking up. "And I agree with Hope. I think we need to consider looking into taking on sharecroppers."

Luke was silent for several seconds before he finally nodded. "I need to listen to the women in my life. You both took care of the plantation when I was unwilling to do it myself." He looked over at Thomas and added, "Why don't you and Tabitha tell Joanna and me about the process in the parlor."

"And the rest of us can spend some time on the veranda," Faith suggested.

"I'd like that," Hope agreed. "I've been wanting to discuss the knitting party I want to have for you to make clothes for the baby."



The younger members of the Abernathy and Hammond families made their way to the back of the house, stepping out into the cool evening air, taking seats on the benches that lined the garden path.

"You don't have to have a knitting party for me, Hope. It's a lot of work, and considering the war just ended, there are more pressing concerns."

"We need something to celebrate, and what can be more exciting than a new baby," Hope gushed with pleasure. "Once you've made the official announcement around town, I'll send out the invitations for the party."

"I can see I'm not talking you out of this," Faith relented. "I just hope you will get some help and not do it all on your own."

"I think I can talk your cousin into helping me. Isn't that right, Grace?"

Grace had remained quiet during their verbal exchange, as did the men. None of them wanted to come between the best friends. Now, she looked as if she felt relieved they had resolved it. She nodded, saying, "Of course, I will help."

"I have one question; how many clothes does one baby need?" Davis asked with confusion. "I can't imagine the need for a party to make so many clothes for him."

"Or her," Faith added. "Despite your wanting a nephew, you might end up with a niece."

"As long as she or he is healthy, that's all that matters," Nathan said, stopping the siblings from fighting. "Besides, we plan to have lots more babies, so we can always have the other gender down the road."

"Lots?" Faith squeaked out. "We might need to discuss how many you're thinking of. This first one is doing a number on my body. Sometimes I swear our baby likes kicking my ribs just for sport."

"I did make a promise to your father," Nathan teased. "And between all of us, I am still rather afraid of him."

Everyone laughed at the last comment, including Grace. It was wonderful to hear her laugh once more. Without thinking, Wyatt leaned over and whispered, "Your laugh is still the most beautiful sound I've ever heard."

Grace's head jerked towards him, her eyes widening at the declaration. For a moment, he wondered if he ruined the moment by blurting out his feelings. A smile formed on her lips; however, and he realized she wasn't upset by his admission.

"I'd forgotten how much you like it."

Wyatt liked seeing Grace relaxed. It was the first time since she re-entered his life that she reminded him of the old Grace. Not that he expected her to be exactly like she was before—the war had changed them all—but it was nice to see that she wasn't completely different from the girl he adored.

The temptation to ask her to go for a walk crept into his heart, but he realized that she was barely becoming comfortable around him again. Wyatt didn't want to ruin that by asking for too much, too soon. He decided his best course of action was to be patient. When the time was right, he could make his move where Grace was concerned. For now, he was content that they were starting to form a friendship again.

"Now that we have the matter of the baby clothes settled, let's talk about having a picnic down by the river," Hope suggested. "I think we should have one this weekend after church. What do all of you think?"

The group agreed it would be a nice outing. They spent the next hour going over what everyone would bring, and by the end of it, they had a firm plan in place. As Wyatt headed back to his home, he was grateful for the dinner and the chance it gave him to be around Grace again. Hopefully, this weekend, he would be able to move their friendship into something more.

CHAPTER 8

Grace still needed to get the picnic items she was responsible for, which meant she needed to go into town. As she was gathering up her shawl and tapestry bag, Nancy followed her around her room.

"Can I go with you," Nancy begged. "Please, Cousin Grace, please. I promise I won't be a bother."

"Don't beg like that," Ida rebuked her younger sister, coming into the room. "You shouldn't burden Grace with yourself like that."

"It's all right, Ida. She can come along, and you can, too, if you'd like."

"Really?" Ida asked, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

"Certainly; I like spending time with the both of you."

"Thank you," the older girl said with an appreciative smile.

"Go gather up whatever you need, while I go see if there is anything we can pick up for your parents," Grace ordered.

"I told you she'd let me go," Nancy said as she exited the room. "You always think you know everything."

A smile formed on Grace's face as she shook her head. Being an only child, she never had to deal with siblings and all that came with it. The closest thing she had to that relationship was her bond with Faith. They'd had their fair share of fights growing up, but they always managed to work it out, just like the Abernathy children did.

Grace made her way downstairs and found her aunt in the kitchen. "I need to head into town. Is there anything you need, Aunt Tabitha?"

The other woman glanced up from the stew that she was stirring in a giant pot on the stove. "Not at the moment, but I'm glad to see you're heading into town. This doesn't have anything to do with Wyatt Hammond, does it?"

Grace's brows came together in a furrow as she shook her head. "No, I simply need to pick up some items for the picnic after church on Sunday."

"So, it does have to do with Wyatt. You want to make sure everything is right for him. You don't have to hide how you feel about Wyatt from me. He's a good man and could provide a good life for you. You're well past the marrying age, and should have been married before the war. Now that it's over, it's high time you settled down to start a family of your own."

"I never said I was going to do that; let alone with Wyatt Hammond," Grace protested, disliking that her aunt was so ready to see her married off. It just confirmed that her aunt viewed her as an extra mouth to feed, and if she could get rid of her, she would.

"Grace, you can keep trying to convince yourself of that, but I see how you look at Wyatt when you think no one is paying attention. It's clear you have feelings for him."

She wasn't sure what to make of her aunt's observation. The whole time since Wyatt came back into her life, she had done everything she could to keep him at arm's length. She kept telling herself that she was better off without him, that he would only break her heart again. Was she afraid of letting him get close because he had the potential to make her break her resolution to swear off men?

"I need to be going, Aunt Tabitha," Grace said, sidestepping responding to the other woman by talking about her visit to town. "Nancy and Ida wanted to go with me. We'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Dinner will be ready when you return," her aunt called out as Grace retreated from the kitchen.

The girls were waiting for her by the front door. They exited the house and made their way over to the stable. Ida helped Grace hook one of the horses up to the wagon before they all climbed onboard and headed into town. The two sisters chattered on about school and church. Grace was content to listen to them, rather than contribute to the conversation.

They arrived at the livery, where they checked in the wagon and horse.

"Where are we going first?"

"I need to head to the general store and pick up a few items for the picnic."

"That you're going to with Wyatt," Nancy taunted in a sing-song way.

"Don't tease her, Nancy. That isn't very nice," Ida chastised, giving her sister a withering look. "Sorry about that, Grace."

"I didn't mean anything by it," Nancy said, her lip coming out in a pout and her eyes welling up with tears. "I want Grace to marry Wyatt. He's so handsome, plus he's really nice. And if they get married, I get to be a flower girl again."

Grace wasn't sure what to say. She didn't want to encourage her little cousin, but she also didn't want to hurt her feelings. Choosing to avoid the matter altogether, she suggested instead, "Why don't the two of you go play at the town square? I see some of your friends over there. I'll come get you after I pick up the items I need. I'll even grab you both a penny candy."

The girls looked over at the town square, and both their eyes widened with happiness.

"Thanks, Grace." Nancy shouted, rushing off across the dirt road. Ida followed after her, right before saying, "I'll keep an eye on her for you."

Once she was sure the girls were safely playing with the kids, Grace turned around and continued to head towards the general store. She passed the butcher shop and the dress store, looking in the windows as she passed by. There was a beautiful, plum dress with black lace along the collar and sleeves that Grace would love to buy, but a new dress was an indulgence she couldn't afford. Impulsively, she entered the shop and went right over to the dress that caught her eye. She reached out and touched the soft satin fabric. She rubbed her fingers along the bodice, taking in the luxurious feel of it. What she wouldn't give to have a fine dress like this again.

"Would you like to try it on?" the shop owner asked with a smile.

Grace pressed her lips together as she contemplated the possibility. It couldn't hurt, could it? "Thank you, I'd like that," Grace said, letting the woman guide her to an area that was behind a curtain. She took off her faded, stained dress and slipped on the fresh, new

one. She stepped out and moved over to the long mirror nearby. She moved back and forth, her hands on the side of the dress.

"It fits you like a glove," the woman marveled. "You wouldn't need a single alteration. It's as if this dress was made for you."

Grace felt the same, but knew it didn't matter. Even though her parents had sent some money with her, she had given it to her aunt and uncle to help with the costs of running the household. If she wanted something as extravagant as this dress, she was going to have to find a job to pay for it.

"Thank you for letting me try it on. If I had the money, I would buy it right now. You don't happen to know if anyone is hiring around town?" Grace inquired.

The woman shook her head. "Not that I know of. I'm sorry, Miss Grace."

Once Grace removed the new dress, and put her old one back on, she exited the shop. She continued down the boardwalk, checking for any signs asking for help in the windows, just in case the dress store owner had been wrong about any work opportunities. By the time she reached the general store, Grace was discouraged. As she entered the establishment, she tried to push her disappointment away. She made her way through the store, picking up the items she needed for the picnic. Once she had everything, she made her way to the cash register and paid the bill. The store owner wrapped up the items and placed them in her tapestry bag.

A sudden, uneasy feeling caused Grace to look around the store. It felt as if someone was watching her, but no one else was present besides the shop owner. A shiver crawled up her spine as the feeling continued.

"Are you all right, Miss Grace?" Mr. Smith asked with concern in his eyes. "You look upset."

"I'm fine," Grace said, trying to convince him as much as herself. "Thank you for asking, though. I really need to be going."

Grace exited the store and made her way back down the boardwalk. Even though she had pretended to be okay, she still couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching her. She sped up her walk, wanting to pick up the girls and get back to Oak Haven as quickly as she could. The sound of footsteps behind her caused her to panic. Someone was definitely behind her.

Glancing around frantically, she looked for anywhere she could hide. Her eyes landed on the sign, *Doctor's Office*, across the street. Her instincts told her to go inside; she knew Wyatt would protect her.

Picking up the edge of her skirt with her free hand, Grace rushed across the street. She pushed through the door of the office, causing it to chime.

"It's good to see you, Grace," she heard Wyatt's familiar voice say, the sound instantly comforting her. He stood from his desk and came around, a look of alarm clearly visible. "Is something wrong?"

Without thinking about how it would appear, she rushed forward and buried her face in his chest. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she started to shake. She knew she shouldn't be like this with him, but she was so scared, it didn't matter. She needed the reassurance his nearness provided.

Wyatt's arms moved around her, as he asked, "What's the matter, Grace?"

Her mind drifted back to a time she wished she could forget.

Grace was organizing the medical supplies in the storage room when she felt the presence of someone behind her. She didn't like the feeling of someone watching her, and deep down she was certain she knew who it was. She swiveled 'round. Her eyes locked with Elijah's, confirming her worst fears. "What are you doing here? You were discharged yesterday."

"I know, but I had to see you. Since I woke up, not a day has gone by that I haven't seen you." Pulling a bouquet of flowers from behind his back, he thrust them out towards her. "Besides, I wanted to give these to you."

Grace didn't reach out for the flowers. She didn't want to encourage Elijah. As the weeks had progressed during his recovery, he had become overly attached to her. Demanding she be the only nurse that changed his bandages or brought him his meals. Towards the end of his time at the hospital, he had told her that she was the reason he was still alive, that she was his new purpose. In that moment, she knew he had become too close to her, and had mistaken her compassion for something more than it was. She was relieved when they said it was time for him to go home, hoping some distance would make him realize it was only infatuation. Apparently, the forced separation hadn't worked.

"You shouldn't be here, Mr. Malone."

"Why? I only came here to see the woman I love. After all, we're going to spend the rest of our lives together."

"I already told you, that's not going to happen," Grace protested, moving around him in an effort to head into a more public area of the hospital.

Elijah's hand reached out and grabbed her by the arm. "Don't do that, Grace. Don't deny what's between us. I know you're afraid, but we're meant to be together. I know now, that's why I was injured during the war. All of it was supposed to happen so it could bring me to you."

"I'm sorry you saw something that wasn't there. You're a good man, and you'll find the right woman to settle down with someday, but it's not me. You need to stop coming here." Grace pulled away and rushed from the room, hoping that Elijah got the message. It seemed, however, that wasn't the case. He spent the next month stalking her, following her everywhere, becoming more and more aggressive as time went on.

"Tell me what is going on, Grace," Wyatt coaxed, rubbing her back with his hand.

It didn't seem she could ever get away from her past, no matter how hard she tried. It didn't mean she needed to discuss it with anyone else, let alone Wyatt. She wasn't sure if he would believe her, and it would devastate her if he didn't.

Grace hiccupped, lifting her head until her eyes met Wyatt's. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You might not want to, but maybe you should. Sometimes it helps to talk about what's bothering you."

"I've never told anyone why I came here to Myrtle Grove," Grace whispered, adding, "Not even Faith."

"I promise, your secret is safe with me. I won't breathe a word of it to anyone."

Though Wyatt was a soldier, she wasn't afraid of him, despite her past. She found herself wanting to trust him. "I mentioned I helped my father during the war. Countless injured soldiers came in and out of the hospital, and I took care of many of them. One in particular became...infatuated with me. I never encouraged him, but he seemed to think we were meant to be together. I told him I wasn't interested in him in that way so many times. It only seemed to make him more determined to convince me I was wrong. He started following me; watching me all the time. One night, he cornered me in a secluded part of the hospital. He got rough with me, claiming he was trying to shake some sense into me. He would have...he would have done something worse if my father hadn't found us. When I said that he attacked me, he lied and said we were having a lovers'

quarrel. My father knew it wasn't true, but to protect my reputation and to get me away from the soldier, he sent me to stay with my aunt and uncle."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, Grace. That must have been so awful for you."

She nodded. "No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to forget how he made me feel. I know I was lucky, that he didn't actually force himself on me, but I still feel so scared all the time."

"What happened today to make you react the way you did?"

"I was headed to pick up my cousins at the town square when I thought someone was following me," Grace admitted, her cheeks warming with embarrassment. "I know how foolish that sounds. I moved hours away in a place he can't find me, and still he manages to terrify me."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. I think it's natural for you to feel the way you do. You went through something awful, and it's going to have an effect on you."

"Thank you for understanding. Part of me has been afraid to say anything about what happened, because I was worried that people wouldn't believe me."

"Of course, I believe you," Wyatt said, placing his hand on the side of her cheek. "You're a strong, honest woman, and you would never do anything to compromise your character."

Grace let out a sigh of relief. "You don't know how good it is to hear that. I didn't even realize how much I cared what you thought about me until just now."

"Then you should know, I think you're the most wonderful woman I've ever known."

The look of desire in his eyes made it clear he wanted to kiss her, and she wasn't sure how she would react to that. Before she could decide, he pulled back and said, "Why don't I walk you over to get your cousins?"

She nodded. "I'd appreciate that."



Before they reached the front door, Grace stopped and turned to face Wyatt. "I have something to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Just now, as we were getting ready to leave, I noticed that your place could use a little organization."

For the first time, Wyatt realized she had never been in his office before. He knew it was out of sorts, as he tended to focus on patients and their illness more than anything else. He moved over to his desk and started straightening up. "I try to keep up on all of this, but sometimes I get behind."

"I have a solution for that," Grace said, coming over to stand in front of the desk. "What if I came to work for you. I can help keep everything in its place around here. Since I'm trained as a nurse, I can also help with patients when you need me to."

"Why would you want to do all that?"

"Truthfully, I feel useless around Oak Haven. I have no training when it comes to farming, but I can work here. I can use whatever pay you're willing to give me to help out my aunt and uncle. It's the least I can do since they took me in."

"I could use the help," Wyatt conceded. "When I go visit families in their homes, it would be nice to have someone here, especially who knows medicine as well as you do."

"Then I'm hired, Dr. Hammond?" she asked with anticipation clear in her voice.

He nodded. "You can start first thing tomorrow. Since we'll be working together, I think you can go back to calling me Wyatt. For now, let's go get your cousins and I can escort you to the livery."

They exited his office and made their way farther down the street. They crossed when they were at the town square. It was a short walk filled with pleasant conversation about the Abernathy children and Wyatt's latest patient, that turned out to be a sick hog named Suzy. By the time they reached the square, Wyatt was wishing he had more time with Grace.

The children rushed up to them, shouting with excitement. "The gophers are back, the gophers are back."

"One at a time, girls, one at a time," Grace said, laughing at how they animatedly tried to tell her about the return of the infamous gophers that had wreaked havoc in the town square six months prior.

"Great, I bet the town asks the men to take shifts again to deal with the rodents," Wyatt said, his irritation with the situation obvious from his tone and frustrated frown.

"That happened?" Grace asked, turning to face Wyatt.

He nodded. "It was cold and miserable, and I really don't want to repeat any of it."

"They should just let the gophers be," Nancy whined. "They're so cute."

"You don't know what you're talking about. They eat all the grass and make holes that are unsafe," Ida pointed out.

"Girls, stop fighting about the gophers. It's time for us to head back to Oak Haven," Grace said kindly. "Dr. Hammond is going to escort us over to the livery, so go say goodbye to your friends before we leave."

"I thought I told you to call me Wyatt," he whispered, leaning towards her.

"I never agreed to that," she whispered back. "I don't think it would be appropriate since you're now my boss."

"Is that all I am? I thought we were friends again."

"We were never friends," Grace quipped back, turning her head to look at him. Her eyes softened as a smile formed on her lips. "We were always more than that."

"You should understand why I think you should call me Wyatt, then," he insisted.

"You're really not going to let this go, are you?"

"Not until you relent."

"Fine, when we are in private, I'll call you Wyatt."

"I suppose I can accept that," he said, giving her a smile as the children returned.

As they made their way to the livery, Wyatt was grateful he was in a good place with Grace again. They weren't at the place he wanted to be, but he was patient and determined enough to wait, however long it took.

CHAPTER 9

A week had gone by and Grace was enjoying working for Wyatt. They had fallen into a good rhythm, with her spending the mornings organizing the medical supplies and prepping everything for the day. As patients arrived, she would help in any way she could, making sure to assist but not overstep. When Wyatt got called out to a home, she would manage the office for him and treat patients, as needed.

"You did another good day of work, Grace. Thank you for all your help," Wyatt praised as he finished the last of his notes and placed them in the new files she suggested for each patient.

"Thank you," she said, finishing the final clean-up of the day. "In my experience, a lot of doctors don't think women have the aptitude to work in medicine and are resistant to their help. You're an easy doctor to work for."

"High praise, considering your father is the most knowledgeable doctor in all of the South," Wyatt said, looking up from his work.

"The whole country before the war broke out. Now, he's lucky to still have a place to practice medicine at his clinic."

"Your father didn't deserve what happened to him. He shaped dozens of doctors throughout his career. He deserved to return as the head of the university."

"It didn't help that the entire place was turned to ruins by the war. There was nothing left to return to. There's talk that they will rebuild, but with lack of funds, I'm not sure if that will ever happen."

Grace glanced over at the clock on the wall. "Can I leave early to get ready for the town social?"

"I have a few more notes to enter." Wyatt gestured to the papers in front of him, "then I will be getting ready myself. I'll see you there tonight?"

She nodded. "I'm looking forward to it."

Grace retrieved her horse from the livery, making her way back to Oak Haven. Once there, she headed to her room, anxious to slip into her prettiest dress and put her hair up the way Wyatt liked it. Though nothing had happened between them romantically, she hoped that tonight that might change.

There was a knock at her door. "Come in," she called out from her seat at her vanity table.

Aunt Tabitha entered the room carrying a large box. She placed it on the bed, then came over to her niece. "You should open that. It was just delivered for you."

"What is it?"

"I have no idea, but it's heavy."

Grace stood and made her way over to the bed. She flipped open the lid of the box. To her pleasant surprise, it was the plum satin dress she had looked at in the store a week ago. She had no idea anyone knew she wanted it, let alone would be kind enough to get it for her.

"Did you do this for me, Aunt Tabitha? It's so kind, but you shouldn't have."

Her aunt shook her head. "It wasn't from us, my dear. You should probably read the note that's inside."

Grace picked up the folded piece of paper that was inside the box with the dress:

A bonus for all of your hard work.

I can't wait to see you in it tonight.

Yours Forever, Wyatt

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, threatening to fall because of the sweet gesture.

"Did it come from Wyatt?"

"Was it that obvious?"

"Dear, he's been smitten with you from the moment you came back into town," her aunt said, touching the soft garment. "It's quite lovely. A gift like this says much about how he feels about you. I think he'd marry you right now if you would agree."

Grace wondered if that was true. Did Wyatt care that much about her? At one time, she thought he was going to court her and they would end up together. That had been a long time ago. Could it be possible that he still cared for her? If he did, what did that mean for her? Should she return his feelings?

"I should probably put this on and get ready," Grace said, pulling the dress out of the box.

Her aunt headed to the door and opened it. "We'll be leaving in an hour. I'll see you downstairs."

Grace slipped the dress on and twirled in front of the mirror. It looked every bit as good on her now as it did the first time she tried it on. She made quick work of her hair, placing half her hair up in curls, and letting the rest cascade down around her neck. She added a dab of rouge before grabbing her black shawl and hat.

"Wow, you look so pretty," Nancy gushed, rushing up and touching the edge of the dress.

"I didn't know we had money for new dresses," Ida accused from the corner of the room, crossing her arms with a look of envy.

"We don't. This was a gift. I saw the messenger deliver it," Nancy corrected. "And I think I know who sent it...Wyatt," she taunted. "How romantic to buy you such a pretty dress to wear at the town social."

Grace didn't vocalize it, but she had to agree. The extravagant gift made her feel special. Even though he had said it was a bonus for her work, she suspected it was more because of how he felt about her than anything else.

"Are you both ready to go?" her uncle asked.

Aunt Tabitha nodded. "Yes, just let me grab my shawl."

A few minutes later, they arrived at the livery. After checking in the wagon and horse, they made their way over to the town square. The social was already bustling, with the townspeople enjoying re-

freshments and talking in groups, while the band played music in the background.

"There you are," Faith gushed, rushing up to her cousin, with Hope by her side. "We were waiting for you to arrive."

"Your dress is gorgeous. Is it the one from the dress shop window?" Hope inquired.

Grace nodded. "It was a gift from Wyatt."

"How wonderful is that. I had a good feeling about the two of you," Faith said. Then glancing around, she asked, "Where is Wyatt?"

"I'm right here," he said, coming up to the women with Nathan and Davis right behind him. "Your husbands saw me at the edge of the square and told me where you all were."

"We were telling him how we barely got rid of the gophers in time for the social," Nathan explained. "They sure seem to be smart little devils."

"But we were smarter," Davis added. "And tonight should be gopher free."

The group of friends spent the next hour talking at one of the tables while they ate cake and drank punch. Grace would occasionally glance over at Wyatt, wondering when he was going to finally ask her to dance. Just when she was beginning to think it wasn't going to happen, he stood up and came over to her side. He reached out his hand to her. "Would you care to dance, Grace?"

She nodded, placing her hand in his. He guided her over to the dancing area. He gathered her up into his arms, pulling her in close. They swayed to the music as he said, "You look beautiful in that dress."

"How did you know I wanted it? I didn't tell anyone."

"I saw you try it on through the window of the shop. You looked so happy in it, I knew that I wanted to get it for you when the time was right."

"Thank you, Wyatt, that was very sweet of you, but it's so expensive. I hope it didn't put you in a bad way."

"Don't worry about that. It was worth every penny to see that smile on your face."

Grace felt her cheeks flush with warmth. "You have a way of making me feel like the most special woman in the whole world."

"Good, that's what I want to do, for the rest of my life, if you'll let me. I was so stupid, Grace, to not see you before I left to go to war. I should have come and told you how much I cared for you and asked you to wait for me. I didn't want you to worry about me or mourn for me, if something should happen. I thought you would be better off without me complicating your life."

"You would never be a complication for me, Wyatt. I care about you, too, and I only pretended not to when I came back to Myrtle Grove because of how you hurt me."

"Can you forgive me? Are you willing to give me a second chance?"

Grace nodded. "Yes, Wyatt, I want us to try again."

"I will come to Oak Haven tomorrow and ask your uncle if I can officially court you. I would ask you to marry me, but I know you're still recovering from a painful past. I don't want to rush you."

Her heart filled with joy. Not only did he want to be with her, he was willing to take it slow. It was exactly what she needed to hear. She placed her head on his shoulder, allowing herself to relax into his embrace. The moment was perfect, until she got the same uneasy feeling that she had a week ago. Grace jerked her head up, her body stiffening with fear.

"What is it, Grace?"

"I think he's here," she whispered, her eyes filling with frightened tears as her eyes darted around the town square. "I can feel him watching us."

Wyatt scanned the area before saying, "I don't see anyone that isn't from Myrtle Grove."

"You don't know what it's like to have someone follow you, to keep you from feeling safe in your own skin," Grace snapped out, her body starting to shake uncontrollably. "He's here; I just know it. If he sees me here with you, if he knows how much I care for you, he'll do bad things to both of us."

"Listen to me, Grace. It's going to be okay. I'll never let anything happen to you."

"You can't promise that," she mumbled, shaking her head in denial.

"We should go sit down," he suggested, guiding her over to one of the tables in the corner of the refreshment area. "I'll walk the entire square just to make sure he isn't here."

"Please, don't go," she begged, reaching out to grab his arm. "You don't know what he's capable of; he's dangerous."

"If you're worried about me, I'll take Nathan and Davis. They're both soldiers. If he is here, he won't be a match for the three of us." Wyatt gestured for their friends to come over. "Faith, Hope, do you mind keeping Grace company while I walk the square with Nathan and Davis? We need to check for gophers."

Both men gave him a puzzled look, but didn't say a word. Grace was relieved he didn't tell any of them her secret.

"What was that all about? I thought the gophers were taken care of?" Faith asked in a perplexed tone.

"Oh, they probably just wanted to go off and talk about us for a few minutes," Hope said with a roll of her eyes. "Men."

"Wait, something else is going on," Faith observed. "You've been crying, Grace. Did Wyatt say something to hurt you?"

Grace shook her head. "This has nothing to do with Wyatt."

"You can tell us what happened," Hope coaxed, reaching out to pat her friend's hand.

Grace debated whether or not she wanted to talk about it. On the one hand, she would have to tell them everything. On the other, if Elijah was there, any of them could be in danger. If something was to happen to any of the people she cared about, because she didn't tell them, she would never forgive herself.

She took a deep breath, then made the decision to tell her cousin and friend what happened.

When Grace was finished with her story, Faith gave her cousin a sympathetic smile. "I can't believe you went through all of that, Grace. I'm so sorry."

"We're here for you, no matter what," Hope added, giving her a reassuring grin. "After all, I have a feeling we'll be family soon."

The men returned and Wyatt took a seat next to Grace. He reached out and took her hands in his own. "You have nothing to worry about. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary," he reassured her. "I promise you're safe."

"Do you want us to take you home?" Faith offered.

Grace nodded, standing to her feet. "I don't want to be here anymore. I just want to go back to Oak Haven and get some sleep."

Wyatt stood, too. He looked like he wanted to reach out and pull her into an embrace, but he refrained. Instead, he said, "I'll be by to-

morrow to check on you, and to talk with your uncle.”

As Grace left the social, she realized that even without seeing him, Elijah still managed to ruin the best night of her life. When was she ever going to finally be free of him?

CHAPTER 10

The loud cracking of gunfire filled Wyatt's ears, vibrating through his entire body until he was shaking from it. The air was filled with the thick smoke from the last round of cannon fire, and he knew it wouldn't be long until the next one. He needed to move now if he was going to do it before it was too late.

Wyatt couldn't see through the dark gray clouds, and it felt like he was breathing in fire. He choked on it, coughing several times, before he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and covered his face with it. The only sound now was of his fellow soldiers around him crying out in pain. He needed to get to them, but he couldn't. He crawled along the ground, hoping he could find all of them, any of them, in time to make a difference.

He could feel the panic welling up inside him the longer he went without finding anyone alive. Dead, they were all dead.

"Wyatt, help me," he heard Michael call out. "Where are you? I need you."

He crawled towards his friend's voice, praying he would find him in time. When he reached him, though, he knew it was too late. As he looked down into Michael's lifeless eyes, he realized he had failed him. He had failed them all.

Wyatt jerked awake, sweat pouring from his skin from his horrible nightmare. It took him several moments to realize he wasn't back in the war; that it was over, and he was back in Myrtle Grove, safe in his own bed.

"Calm down, Wyatt, it was just a dream," he whispered to himself, trying to let it go.

He wondered what time it was, and rolled over to look out the window. Light was just starting to peek through the glass, which meant dawn would be here soon.

"Stop being so stubborn; you need to take your own advice, dummy," he chastised himself, remembering that he told Grace it helped to talk to someone. If he got up now, he could head over to Nathan's house and catch him before he went to work on his farm. If anyone could understand what it was like being in the war, it would be his friend. After all, he'd been taken prisoner and nearly lost his life because of it.

A quick splash across his face at his wash basin, followed by throwing on a pair of pants and a button-up shirt, and Wyatt was heading out the door. He arrived at his friend's farm a half hour later and headed to the barn.

Nathan was inside, hitching his ox to a plow. He looked up from his task, and asked, "What are you doing here, Wyatt?"

"I was hoping you could spare a few minutes to talk with me."

Nathan stopped what he was doing, brushed off his hands on his pants, and came over to Wyatt. "Sure, why don't we go sit on the front porch?"

They made their way over to the main house and took seats on a set of wooden rockers.

"What's going on, Wyatt?" Nathan inquired after a few moments of silence.

"I debated about coming over here, but figured you would understand better than anyone, what I'm going through. I remember when you spoke in church after you returned. You talked about how God was with you, how he never left you. I'm having a hard time of my own right now, and need to find the peace you did."

"I've noticed that you've been struggling since your return. Don't get me wrong, you're good at hiding it, but since I was an expert at trying to hide what the war did to me, I know what to look for. I've been praying for you, and was hoping when the time was right, you would reach out."

Wyatt gripped his hands in his lap, not wanting to look up. He didn't want Nathan to see how upset he was. "I've been having a lot of nightmares since returning home. It's always the same. I'm surrounded by smoke from cannon fire. I'm looking for my fellow soldiers to help them, but I can't find any of them. I get more and more

frantic, and finally I hear my friend, Michael, calling out. By the time I get to him, though, it's too late."

"Even though my experience during the war was different, I understand being haunted by the past. I didn't really tell anyone, besides Faith, how hard it was for me after I returned. All I can say is that you did the right thing coming here. Having someone to talk to and pray with me made a world of difference. If you want, I can do that for you."

"You'd be willing to do that?"

"Of course; you're my friend, Wyatt, and I'd do anything for you."

"I haven't told anyone about what I went through during the war. I feel like it's my job to pretend to be the brave soldier for everyone else."

"I get that, but you don't have to be that way for anyone else, Wyatt. You have a right to feel what you do, and you shouldn't have to hide it."

"I just keep seeing Michael's death over and over again. I mean, I lost nearly my entire unit, which was hard enough, but then Michael died right in front of me, too. We went to medical school together; planned to work at the same hospital after graduation, and served in the war together. I just thought he would always be there, and now he is gone."

"That's a lot to carry; you shouldn't have to do it alone. God tells us we can give all our burdens to him. He's willing and able to take them from us, all we have to do is ask."

"It's my fault they're all dead. I should have saved them. I deserve to feel bad about that."

"That's not true, Wyatt. You shouldn't blame yourself for what happened to those soldiers. I know you, and I'm certain you did everything you could to save them. Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, bad things happen. We can't control everything, no matter how much we want to. You need to ask God to help you with this. He's the only one who can." He reached out and patted Wyatt's arm. "Why don't we pray together now?"

Wyatt let out the breath he'd been holding, grateful that Nathan didn't judge him about his nightmares. "I'd like that."

The two of them spent the next several minutes praying together; asking God to help Wyatt with his anxiety and fears. By the time

they ended, Wyatt felt better and headed back to town as if a small piece of his burden had been lifted. He knew it would take time to fully heal, but he knew he was finally headed in the right direction.

CHAPTER 11

Grace was giddy with anticipation. Tonight she was spending her first official evening alone with Wyatt, since he asked her uncle if he could court her. Though they spent every day at work together, this was different. She was certain tonight he would try to kiss her, and she was going to let him.

"You look perfect," her aunt said, coming into her bedroom. "I always had a good feeling about you and Wyatt. He's a good match for you."

"I know. He's exactly what I need in my life." Grace turned to face her aunt and asked, "Do I need anything else?"

She shook her head. "You look perfect. He'll love that you're wearing the dress he gave you."

"It was the most thoughtful gift I've ever received. I want him to know how much it means to me."

They made their way downstairs where the girls and her uncle were waiting by the front door.

"You look so pretty in that dress," Nancy gushed. "I think it'll make Wyatt propose tonight."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," her uncle corrected. "This is only the first of many social outings they will have before it's time for that."

"Are you worried I'm in a hurry to marry, Uncle?"

He chuckled. "Not you, as much as your beau. When Wyatt came here and asked permission to court you, I could see he was ready to get down on one knee if he thought you would accept. He's smart enough to know you need more time than that, though."

Grace tilted her head to the side, giving her uncle a curious look. Did he know about her past? Had her father told him and she didn't know? She decided it didn't matter. She wasn't ashamed of her past anymore. If Wyatt believed her, that was all she cared about.

"Wyatt has grown wiser over the years," Grace confirmed. "He seems to know exactly what I need before I do."

"Did he tell you where you were going tonight?" Ida asked. "I hope it's somewhere romantic."

Grace shook her head. "He said it was going to be a surprise."

"Well, there are only two restaurants in town, so I'm betting it's the fancy one," Nancy said. "If he knows what's good for him."

"I think he—"

Ida's retort was cut off by a knock at the door.

Both girls shouted, "He's here," and they giggled as they moved behind Grace to watch her open the door.

Wyatt always looked handsome, but when she opened the door to find him standing on the other side in his best suit, she could hardly take her eyes off of him. The dark blue suit complemented his taupe skin and enhanced the blue specks in his hazel eyes.

"Good evening, Grace," he said with a smile, causing his dimples to stand out on his cheeks. The familiar feeling of butterflies fluttered in her stomach. For a moment, Grace thought she might faint from the heady feeling his smile created in her. He reached out to take her hand, saying, "You ready to go?"

She placed her hand in his as he guided her out of the house. He took her over to his wagon and helped her up before walking around to the driver's seat. They made their way into town and dropped the wagon and horse off at the livery. As they started to walk down Main Street, Grace's curiosity was growing by the minute. They weren't headed in the direction of either restaurant.

"Where are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise," he told her. "You'll see when we get there."

When they stopped in front of the butcher shop, Grace was utterly confused. "What are we doing here?"

"Everyone knows that Mrs. Brooks bakes the best pies in all of South Carolina, but she doesn't have a pie shop—yet. Her husband decided that wasn't right, and has been in the process of adding on to the butcher shop, so she can have one."

"I had no idea he was doing that," Grace stated in surprise.

"No one in town did, but he dropped a hammer on his foot the other day working on it, and had to come into the office. You had already left for the day, so you weren't there. I asked him how he did it, and he told me. That's when I had the idea to surprise you with this."

He knocked on the door and Mrs. Brooks opened it, with Mr. Brooks coming up behind her, bracing himself on a crutch.

"We have everything ready," the elderly woman said with a kind smile. "Follow us."

Behind a curtain, there was a new door that led into the other section of the building. As they walked through the threshold, Grace's breath was taken away by the room. It was filled with fresh flowers, twinkling candles, and a table set for two.

Wyatt guided her over, pulled out her chair, and helped her in it.

"You planned all of this for me?" Grace asked with awe. "I can't believe it."

He nodded. "Rather than take payment for helping Mr. Brooks, I asked them if we could plan this, instead."

"And, of course, we said yes," Mrs. Brooks chimed in. "We loved the idea of being a part of helping two wonderful young people fall in love." She placed the first course in front of them, a steak with a baked potato. "Our best cut for our town doctor and his future wife."

Grace's eyes widened at the statement, not sure how to respond to it. Luckily, Wyatt handled it for her. "Thank you, Mrs. Brooks."

"Come now, Mrs. Brooks, let's give them some time to enjoy their meal."

She nodded, backing up as she said, "Make sure to save room for my strawberry-rhubarb pie."

Grace took a sip of her sweet tea. "This was so thoughtful. I can't believe you went to all this trouble."

"You're worth it, Grace. I like doing special things for you."

"Every time I think you can't outdo yourself, you surprise me."

"I want to do that the rest of our lives," he said, reaching out across the table and squeezing her hand. "If you'll let me."

They spent the next hour enjoying their meal while talking about the office and the sharecropping going on at Oak Haven and Fairmore. By the time Mrs. Brooks brought out two slices of pie for dessert, Grace couldn't believe how much time had passed.

She dipped her fork into the pie and placed the first bite in her mouth. Her eyes widened with astonishment. "This is the best pie I've ever tasted."

"I told you," Wyatt said with a laugh. "I wasn't joking."

Mrs. Brooks was peeking in from around the corner. Grace could tell she was wanting to know what she thought. She gestured the woman over, saying, "This is by far the best pie I've ever had the pleasure of eating. You have a true talent, Mrs. Brooks. Once your pie shop is open, you're going to have a permanent customer in me."

"You won't be the only one," Wyatt promised. "I'm betting there'll be a line around the block on opening day."

The elderly woman beamed under the praise. "Thank you."

They finished their pieces of pie, and said their goodbyes to the Brooks before leaving.

"This was a wonderful evening," Grace said with a smile, wrapping her arm around his as they started to walk down Main Street. "I don't think I've ever had a better one."

"I'm glad to hear it. I have to admit; I feel the same." He stopped walking and turned to face her. "Being with you is the happiest I've ever been, Grace."

She could tell he wanted to kiss her, and she wanted him to. He leaned towards her until his lips brushed across hers in the gentlest of ways. It was a hesitant kiss, more about testing her reaction than showing how he felt. Grace wanted him to know it was okay, that she wasn't fragile anymore; that he could kiss her like the strong, resilient woman she wanted to be. She wrapped her arms around his neck, letting her fingers tangle in his dark hair. He took the cue, letting the kiss become more passionate. When he finally pulled back, they were both ragged from the intensity of it.

"That was better than I remembered," Grace said with a sigh.

"That's because it was five years in the making," he teased. "There was a lot behind that kiss."

"I'd like to know if a second one would be as good," she teased back.

Before he could fulfill her request, though, one of the local boys rushed up to them. "Dr. Hammond, my Pa is waiting at your office, and he's hurt really bad. Someone said they saw you walk down here earlier, so I came to see if it was true."

"What happened?" Wyatt asked, as they all took off towards his office.

"Pa was trying to fix the blade of the plow, since we can't afford a new one. His hand got caught and the blade ran over it. We pressed a towel on it, but it soaked clean through by the time we got here."

"It's going to be okay, Timmy. I'll take care of your Pa," Wyatt reassured the boy as they reached his office.

Mr. Granton was sitting on the steps, holding his arm against his chest with a towel wrapped around his hand that was now completely crimson. He was pale, and looked like he was in shock.

"Let's get you inside," Grace said, moving over to help him up while Wyatt did the same from the other side.

They took him directly over to the examination table. Grace gathered up the needed supplies, while Wyatt examined the wound. As she came back over to the patient, the sight and smell of all the blood triggered Grace's memory. Suddenly, she felt like she was right back at the hospital during the war. The horrors of that time came flooding into her mind, causing the room to spin. She braced herself against the edge of the table.

Wyatt glanced over at her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, trying to pretend she was fine. She pushed off the edge, but as soon as she did it, she regretted it. The room tilted again, and she was afraid she might lose her dinner, if she didn't get whatever was happening to her under control.

"You look like you're going to be sick, Grace. Why don't you go outside and get some air?"

"That's probably a good idea," she whispered. "I'll be right back."

Grace slipped out of the office and leaned against the wall of the building. She pulled out her handkerchief and dabbed her eyes, trying to fight against the tears that threatened to fall. She leaned her head back against the wall, taking in deep breaths in an effort to steady herself.

"You don't look so good. I think being away from me has been hard on you."

She jerked straight up, the frightening sound of Elijah's voice causing her blood to run cold. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think. I'm here for you, Grace." He moved up the steps until he was only a few feet away. "You thought you could run

away from me, but you should know, there's nowhere you can hide from me. I'll always find you."

"You should leave, before I call out for help," she threatened.

"I wouldn't do that because I promise, if you do something that stupid, the first bullet," he patted his pistol in the holster at his side, "is going straight through that doctor you've been kissing."

Grace froze; the thought of something happening to Wyatt caused her to keep from screaming. "I don't understand why you're here. Why can't you understand, there's nothing romantic between us?"

"There was something, Grace. You spent so much time by my bedside. I know you care."

"I took care of you because you were injured, just like I did with hundreds of other soldiers."

"No, it wasn't like that," he said, closing the distance between them and grabbing her roughly by the arm. He pulled her off the porch and dragged her around the corner of the building. "We belong together, Grace," he shouted at her, "and I'm not going to let anyone come between us, especially not some doctor you now fancy. I have a good mind to go in there and kill him right now to make sure you know how serious I am about you being mine."

"You don't have to do that," Grace pleaded, dropping her handkerchief on the ground and placing her hands on Elijah's chest. "If you let him be, I'll go with you anywhere you want. We can start over somewhere else, and we can be together, just like you want." She was willing to sacrifice herself, if it meant Wyatt would be safe. She loved him too much to let Elijah kill him.

"You finally sound like you're making sense," Elijah said, relaxing a bit. "We need to go before he comes looking for you."

As Elijah dragged her towards the livery, she accepted the fact she was never going to see Wyatt again. Just knowing she was keeping him safe was enough to make her glad for the choice she was making. She was protecting the man she loved, and now she would have to live with what it was going to cost her.

CHAPTER 12

Wyatt wiped his brow, exhausted from finishing up the last of the stitches in Mr. Granton's hand. "I'm going to give you a salve for the wound. It will help to keep it from infecting, as well as manage the pain. I also want you to change the bandage twice a day."

Mr. Granton nodded. "Thank you, Doc, I really appreciate you helping me like this. I know you were on a date with Miss Grace, and I'm sorry I interrupted it."

"It's okay. We know emergencies happen." Realizing he hadn't seen Grace since she went outside, Wyatt added, "If you'll excuse me, I should go check on her."

Wyatt exited his office, but to his surprise, Grace was nowhere to be found. It was too far of a walk for her to head back to Oak Haven. Besides, he was certain she wouldn't have gone anywhere without telling him first. He walked down the steps, looking for any clues that might tell him where she went. Around the corner, he saw a piece of cloth in the dirt. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand. In the corner, GA was embroidered. This was Grace's handkerchief, but where was she? He started to inspect the area, and immediately recognized there were two sets of boot prints. One was small and delicate, most likely Grace's, and the other one was bigger and heavier, a man, who from the looks of the scuffle marks, struggled with Grace.

Wyatt tried to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat, but his mouth had gone dry from the fear he felt in the pit of his stomach. Something happened to Grace, and it wasn't good.

"Is everything okay, Doc?" he heard Timmy ask from behind him.

"I don't think so." He spun around with Grace's handkerchief in his hand.

"Is that Miss Grace's?" the boy asked, a look of worry in his eyes.

Wyatt nodded, too afraid to speak about what he thought might have happened to her.

"Did that man do something to her?"

"What man, Timmy?"

"He was a blond fella I've never seen around town. He had a gun on his hip, and he looked angry. Miss Grace seemed to know him, and he calmed down after talking to her. When she went willingly with him, I thought she knew him."

Wyatt let out a frustrated growl, hating the fact that something happened to Grace right under his nose. He couldn't prove it was the man who attacked her during the war, but his gut told him it was.

"Did I do something wrong? Should I have gotten you?"

"It's not your fault. You didn't know any better," Wyatt said, ruffling the boy's hair. "I need you to do me a favor, Timmy. I need you to take your horse and go get Nathan Maddox. Tell him it's an emergency and I need him to meet me at the livery right away."

"Yes, Doc, I'll go right now."

Wyatt poked his head in the office and told Mr. Granton what was going on, asking him to lock up after he left. If the man planned to get away with Grace quickly, he would need a horse. He hoped that someone at the livery might know which direction they went in. Wyatt sprinted over, knowing every moment was precious when it came to finding Grace safe and sound. He would never be able to live with himself if something should happen to her.

The livery worker was rubbing the side of his head and glancing around in bewilderment when Wyatt arrived.

"What's wrong?" he asked the young man. "Did something happen to you?"

He nodded. "I saw a stranger dragging Miss Grace in here. She looked scared, so I asked what was going on. He told me to stay out of their business. He demanded a horse. I could tell Miss Grace didn't want to go with him, so I tried to keep him from taking off with her. I told him we didn't have any to rent right now. The next

thing I know, he picked up a rock and swung it at me. I just woke up a couple of moments ago on the ground."

Wyatt inspected the injury. "You should be fine. The wound isn't very deep."

"Thanks, Doc, but I'm more worried about Miss Grace than myself right now. That man was no good, and he had no business being with her."

"You're right, Matthew, and I'm going to do whatever I can to find them and make sure she is okay. I was hoping you would know which way they went."

"Sorry, Doc, like I said, he knocked me out, probably so I couldn't tell anyone. I never even saw the man in town until he showed up here tonight."

"I don't think anyone did. I think he was slinking around, spying on Grace, for who knows how long before he decided to finally make his presence known."

All the times Grace felt like someone was watching her or following her came to mind. She hadn't been paranoid; it was her instincts trying to warn her. He had dismissed them, thinking she was only reacting to pain from the past. He should have listened to her and taken it seriously. If Wyatt had found him before tonight, he could have stopped the monster from taking the woman he loved.

"What are you going to do?" Matthew asked with concern. "Miss Grace has always been kind to me. I don't want anything bad to happen to her."

"Neither do I," Wyatt said, moving to inspect the ground around the livery. He wished he could involve the sheriff, but he knew that he was sick with influenza. He didn't have time to send someone to get the sheriff in Chapmin. He was going to have to find Grace on his own. "How many horses were brought in and out today?"

"Not that many; just two earlier this morning. Come to think of it, I wonder if he took one of the horses while I was knocked out."

Matthew checked the stalls, then came trotting back. "He did. Stella is missing."

"Can you tell the difference between hoof prints?" Wyatt asked with hope.

"Not usually," Matthew said, coming to kneel down next to Wyatt, "but Stella had a hoof injury a couple of years ago, and we've had to shoe her differently ever since. Her hoof mark isn't quite a

full 'U' like normal ones." He pointed to a set that were heading west. "Those are hers."

"Then I know where I need to go. Can you get my horse ready?"

"Right away, Doc, and please bring Miss Grace back safe."

"I won't rest until I do."

"And neither will we," he heard Nathan say from beside him.

"She's family," Davis added, "And we always take care of family."

CHAPTER 13

Every bump pushed Grace further against Elijah's body, making his proximity radiate through her. She wished she could jump off the horse right now, but she had no idea where she was. It wouldn't help her, though, if she ended up wandering around in the middle of nowhere. She'd probably die from exposure before she ever found help. Her only option was to wait for the right time when she could escape into a town; if and when they passed by one.

"You did the right thing coming with me, Grace. You'll see—once we've spent some more time together—we're meant for each other. I'm going to take really good care of you—just you wait and see."

Grace didn't respond. She was afraid if she spoke up, she might say something that would make him mad. The last thing she needed was that. Even though he was crazy and making no sense, at least he wasn't dangerous at the moment.

"Once we reach California, we can start over. We'll be happy there, Grace, you'll see. You'll be so happy; you'll forget all about that doctor."

She wanted to scream he was wrong. She would never forget Wyatt because he was the love of her life; however, she knew that wouldn't do her any good. It would only make him angry, and Elijah became volatile when he was angry.

"You know, I'm trying to make conversation with you, Grace. You haven't said a word this whole time, and I'm beginning to think you're not going to try to make this work."

She bit back her sharp reply that it was impossible to make something work with a man that forced her to be with him because he

threatened the man she loved. Instead, she simply said, "I'm tired, Elijah, that's all."

"Why didn't you just say so, Grace? Anything you need, I'll take care of it for you. We'll rest soon, once we find somewhere with cover. We don't want anyone to see our fire and interrupt us."

Interrupt them? What did he mean by that? She hoped he didn't plan to make her *do* anything with him. She thought running away wasn't an option, but she would rather take her chances in the wilderness over letting him force himself on her.

Silently, Grace sent up a prayer, asking God to help her. She wasn't sure what to do, or if she was going to survive this, but she knew God had the answers.

She wasn't sure how much more time passed, but Elijah was finally bringing the horse to a stop near a grove of oak trees. He tied the horse to one of the branches, then sat her down by a fallen tree trunk.

"You stay here while I gather up wood for the fire. Don't try to run away, or I'll go back to that town and kill that doctor. If I can't have you, no one can; just remember that before doing something stupid."

So much for running away. She knew Elijah was insane enough to go back and kill Wyatt like he threatened. The man had completely lost touch with reality.

Grace pulled her knees up to her chest, trying to keep herself warm. Even though her dress had several layers, it didn't keep the cold night air from penetrating them. She forced herself not to cry, knowing it would only make Elijah mad if he saw it. Instead, she closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on Wyatt's face.

"Are you asleep, Grace?"

This was how she could get out of whatever he had planned for her. If he thought she was asleep, maybe he would leave her alone for tonight. It didn't solve her problem for tomorrow, but she needed to deal with one problem at a time.

She purposely didn't respond and continued to remain still.

"You really were tired," he mumbled. "I thought we might..."

Suddenly, she felt his hands on her and she had to bite her tongue to keep from screaming out in fright. Was this it? Was he going to finally take what he thought was his?

"I'll let you have this one. You can sleep tonight, Grace. We have a sea of nights ahead of us."

She felt him pull her against his frame as he wrapped his arm across her body. Though she was grateful that he hadn't violated her, she hated the fact that he was forcing her to sleep right next to him. Grace was certain of one thing; she wasn't going to have a peaceful night's sleep tonight, or any night, as long as she had to be near Elijah.



The three friends arrived at the makeshift camp in the darkest part of the night. They moved slowly, careful not to make a noise and warn the man who took Grace.

Once they had eyes on them, they made their plans.

"I'm going to grab Grace," Wyatt whispered. "While the two of you subdue her abductor and take his gun."

Nathan and Davis nodded, both accepting their assignments.

They continued to move forward, Wyatt approaching from one side and his friends from the other.

They gestured across, making sure that they were ready to pounce at the same time. Just as they were about to make their move, the man stirred, opening his eyes. He jumped to his feet, pulling Grace up in front of him. He held the gun to her side, yelling, "What are you doing here?"

"Elijah?" Wyatt gasped out in utter shock. "What are you doing here? Why did you take Grace?"

He couldn't believe his eyes. Standing in front of him was the only man he had been able to save from his unit. He had been severely injured, and Wyatt had been able to keep him from dying on the battlefield. Wyatt lost track of him after he was transported to a hospital for further treatment. Wyatt would have gone to check on him, but by the time the war was over, he had already been discharged. He never would have thought that he was the same soldier that had attacked Grace.

"Wyatt, Wyatt, is that you?" Elijah blinked several times, his hand waffling as he glanced back and forth between them. "How do you know Grace? What's going on?"

"We met when I was in medical school. Her father was my mentor," Wyatt explained, hoping to keep Elijah focused on him to give Nathan and Davis a chance to come up behind him. "After the war, she came to live with her aunt and uncle who live in the same town as me."

"No, no, I don't believe you," Elijah said, shaking his head in denial. "My brain is all mixed up. Bits of memories keep coming back, but none of them make sense. I saw you kissing her earlier this evening, but I thought my head got it confused. I can't keep anything straight."

"Listen to me, Elijah, we can work this out," Wyatt said, slowly moving closer as he looked for an opportunity to grab Grace. "With your head the way it is, you didn't mean to hurt anyone. I know you. You're a good man, a good soldier."

"I'm not a soldier anymore. The war took that from me. It took my memories, too. All I have left is Grace. She told me I had to find a new purpose, and my purpose is to love her. I can't live without her," he cried out. "She's mine."

"I know you must care a great deal about her, Elijah, which is why I know you won't hurt her."

"You're right, I don't want to, but I saw the way she looked at you, the way she kissed you. She loves you and I can't let her be with anyone else. I just can't."

Wyatt glanced past Elijah and noticed that Nathan and Davis were in position behind Elijah. He was distracted, and hadn't noticed them moving. They gave Wyatt a slight nod, and when he returned it, they pounced. There was grunting and a few yelps as the three men fought for the gun. Elijah's grip had loosened on Grace, allowing her to dart out of his arms and run straight into Wyatt's embrace.

She started sobbing into his chest. After a few moments, she looked up, her eyes bright red from the tears. "I was so relieved when I saw you."

There was a loud thud, and Wyatt looked over Grace's head to see that Elijah was crumpled on the ground. Nathan was tying him up with rope they had brought with them.

"He's going to be out for a while," Nathan explained. "We'll head over to Chapmin to turn him over to the sheriff."

"Thank you," Wyatt said, giving them both a grateful smile. "I couldn't have done this without you."

"We told you, that's what family is for," Davis said, before helping Nathan pick up Elijah and carry him away.

"Are you all right?" Wyatt asked, looking down at Grace. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. God kept me safe until you could find me. I don't even want to think about what would've happened if you hadn't gotten here tonight."

"Don't think about it. It's over, and you're safe. That's all that matters."

Grace shook her head. "No, that's not all that matters. I need you to know, when he took me, I realized how much I love you. I've always loved you, but when you hurt me, I tried to pretend I didn't. I don't want to have a long courtship, Wyatt. I want to be your wife right away."

"You do?" he asked, the admission causing his heart to fill with joy. "I'm so glad to hear that. I've loved you a long time, Grace, but I wanted to be patient and let you heal from what happened to you. The funny thing is, while I was waiting for you to heal, you healed me. When you came back into my life, you gave me a reason to deal with my own pain from the war. I'm finally on the road to recovery, and it's because of you, Grace."

Wyatt leaned down and placed his lips on hers. It was a tender kiss that held so many emotions: joy, relief, passion, and most importantly, love.

EPILOGUE

As soon as they returned home, they announced that they were to be married at the end of the week. She knew it meant she wouldn't have a big wedding, but she was happy with simply being Wyatt's wife.

Her parents arrived just in time for the big day, after making sure that Elijah was returned to Charleston to stand trial for his crimes. Apparently, besides stealing a horse, he was also wanted for multiple counts of murder. He killed two doctors and a nurse at a mental hospital when he escaped.

"That's the prettiest dress I've ever seen," Nancy cooed, marveling at the white, satin gown that Grace's parents brought with them from Charleston. "You look like a princess."

"Thank you," Grace said with a warm smile, "but I think your flower girl dress is the prettiest dress I've ever seen."

The young girl spun around in her own white dress, showing it off. "It is, isn't it?"

"Don't be so vain, Nancy," Ida chastised, giving her sister a disdainful look. "It's not very ladylike."

"Neither is being bossy," Nancy challenged, giving her an equally dirty look.

"The two of you need to stop this right now. You don't need to be squabbling and ruining Grace's special day," their mother rebuked, coming into the back room of the church. "You look gorgeous, Grace."

"Thank you, Aunt Tabitha."

"I need to go join your parents and uncle, but I had to come give you one more hug before I do," she said, reaching out and hugging Grace.

"I can't believe by the end of the day, all three of you will be married," her aunt said, looking at Faith, Hope, and Grace. "I knew this day would come, but now that it's here, I just keep remembering you as little blonde girls running around and playing tag in my garden."

"And look at us now," Hope said, with a wide grin. "Faith is going to have a baby in a couple of months, I'm your daughter-in-law, and Grace is marrying my cousin. After all these years of being like family, we all ended up actually *being* family."

"God has a wonderful way of working things out exactly how they're supposed to be," Aunt Tabitha said before heading out.

"You ladies ready to go get me married?" Grace asked, squeezing both their hands.

"We sure are," Faith said, squeezing her hand back, as Hope did on the other side.



The ceremony passed by quickly. They said their vows and exchanged their rings, promising to love one another forever. By the time Pastor Howell was announcing them husband and wife, Wyatt realized it was time for him to kiss his bride.

He pulled her towards him and placed his lips on hers. Their guests clapped and cheered, excited to be a part of the couple's public proclamation. They made their way into the town square that was decorated and ready for the wedding reception.

"We're so happy for you," Grace's mother said, coming up to them.

"When you first came to the university, I knew there was something special about you, Wyatt. I thought it was because you were so gifted when it came to medicine, but now I know it's your ability to love. You love my daughter in a way that I know she will always be happy. It makes a father pleased to know that."

"Thank you, Dr. Abernathy. It means a lot to me to hear you say that."

Her parents gave them both a hug before joining Grace's aunt and uncle at one of the tables.

Next, his own aunt and uncle came up to congratulate them.

"I have to tell you, Wyatt, I'm proud of the way you've handled yourself after the war. You've done our people, and family, a great honor. Now that you've gone and married an Abernathy, just like Hope did, I guess there's no way of getting around it, we're stuck with them as part of our family." His Uncle Luke winked at them both, then added, "Which for the record, also makes me proud."

"I'm so happy for the both of you," his Aunt Joanna said, reaching out and squeezing both their hands. "You two are perfect together. I can't wait to be a great-aunt."

Grace's eyes widened as she glanced between Wyatt and her new aunt. "I hope you don't think it will be *too* soon. I'd like a little time alone with my new husband before we introduce children into the equation."

Aunt Joanna let out a laugh, nodding in agreement. "I can understand that, but don't wait too long. I'm not a spring chicken anymore."

"Your aunt and uncle are waving us over," Luke said, looking over at one of the tables. "We should go join them."

"I can't believe how happy I am," Grace said, wrapping her arm around Wyatt's. "After the war, I thought I never would be again. Now, because of you, I'm more than I've ever been."

"I feel the same," he said, pulling her into his arms. "Let's dance before someone else comes up to us."

The music started to play, and they swayed to the music. Wyatt loved the feel of Grace in his arms. She felt like she belonged there, and he never wanted to let her go.

"I love you, Wyatt," she whispered. "I don't know if I will ever get tired of saying that to you."

"I hope not," he said back, "because I plan on us both saying it to each other for the rest of our lives."

She laughed, the tinkling sound of it making Wyatt's heart fill with joy. "There you go again with your poetic words."

"You should get used to that, too," he teased. "I love you, Grace, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life showing you just how much."

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you have enjoyed Healed by Grace.

Your opinion and support matters, so I would greatly appreciate you taking the time to leave a review. If you would like more info, please join my [Newsletter](#) and get a free novella and short story just for signing up. I'd also love for you to check out [My Reader's Group](#)!

Happy Reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenna Brandt". The signature is written in a cursive style, with the first letter of "Jenna" being a large, stylized capital 'J'.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenna Brandt is an award-winning, international best selling, historical and contemporary romance author. Her historical books span from the Victorian to Western eras and all of her books have elements of romance, suspense and faith. Her debut series, the Window to the Heart Saga, as well as her Billionaires of Manhattan and Civil War Brides, have become bestselling series, and her multi-author series, The Lawkeepers, Silverpines, and Disaster City Search and Rescue are fan-favorites.

She has been an avid reader since she could hold a book and started writing stories almost as early. She has been published in several newspapers as well as edited for multiple papers. She graduated with her Bachelor of Arts in English from Bethany College and was the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper while there. Her first blog was published on Yahoo Parenting and The Grief Toolbox as well as featured on the ABC News and Good Morning America websites.

Writing is her passion, but she also enjoys cooking, watching movies, reading, engaging in social media and spending time with her three young daughters and husband where they live in the Central Valley of California. She is also active in her local church where she volunteers on their first impressions team.

