

THE CADENCE OF GRACE SERIES, BOOK 1

BE  
STILL  
MY  
*Soul*

A NOVEL



JOANNE  
BISCHOF

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BE STILL MY SOUL

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*To my parents, Mike and Janette Soffes.*

Weeping may endure for a night,  
but joy cometh in the morning.

PSALM 30:5

## One

The night air brushed her arms, and Lonnie prayed autumn's cool breath could whisper her off—carry her into another life. *Lord, help me.* She looked up at her pa and forced a tight smile. With his broad back to the moonlit sky, his scruffy face was hidden beneath the shadow of a floppy hat. Chestnut hair swirled against her cheeks, and she blinked, willing the breeze to calm her nerves.

Joel Sawyer arched a bushy eyebrow. “Don’t see what’s gotten ya so shaken up all a sudden.”

She lifted her chin. “I ain’t shaken.” Her eyes dared him to say otherwise. “I just don’t see why. . .” She bit her tongue at the tremble in her voice. Her thumb traced the fresh bruises on her wrist—each small dent the same size as her pa’s fingers.

“Because your ma’s got a headache.” Her pa’s growl was for her ears alone. His eyes bored into hers, even through the lie. “Can’t go lettin’ Samson down.” Sour breath hit her face. “Now get on up there and sing for these people.”

Lonnie swallowed and eyed the crowd that had gathered for an evening of dancing. With the first autumn leaves blanketing the forest floor, it was sure to be the last of the summer. She’d never sung for a

crowd before and, at seventeen, felt foolish when her heart pounded in her ears and her skin tingled with fear. If only Samson hadn't asked that her ma sing this night.

Her pa had made it clear. No wife of his was gonna *smuggle up* that close to Samson Brown. Over his dead body, or so he'd said. Lonnie watched her pa descend the steps, shoulders hunched.

"Sorry about your mama's headache," Samson whispered. He smiled and his eyes crinkled.

Lonnie nodded, certain he knew the truth, yet fighting the urge to make a liar out of the man who'd just deposited her at the stage as if she were no more than a pawn.

Lonnie glanced to the sky, and even as night's chill crept past her faded gingham dress, she prayed for a peace from the One who could help her through this. Her ma was the songbird. Not her. Folks were always going on about how Maggie Sawyer had the prettiest voice on any Sunday morning.

A gray spotted dog tipped his ears when Lonnie stepped over him onto the makeshift stage. Her bare feet skirted around a pair of lanterns at the stage edge. Samson Brown, eyes twinkling, raised a banjo onto his lap. Lonnie took her place beside the trio's mandolin player, Gideon O'Riley, and when their shoulders touched, she stepped sideways, nearly tripping as she did.

Gideon glanced at her, his expression unreadable until amusement flitted through his green eyes. Lonnie chided herself for blushing so easily. The fiddler tilted his instrument to his chin. The creases in his blacksmith hands were stained dark as coal. He nodded and waited, bow poised. Reluctantly, Lonnie returned the nod.

The hollow sound of his tapping boot echoed through the cracks of the porch. The bow slid across the strings slower than a cat stretching

after a good, long nap. Gideon struck the strings of his mandolin, and Samson's banjo twanged, rambling as free as a holler. Lonnie watched in awe, bewildered by their confidence.

She clung to the shadows from the eaves overhead, but when her pa motioned for her to step into the moonlight, she scooted forward. Her bare toes reached the edge of the porch, and she glanced away from her pa's smug stare. When the fiddle's strings thickened in harmonies, Lonnie sang out the words. Her heart quickened, stunned by the sound of her own voice belting out a song she'd learned at her ma's knee. She stared into the blur of faces as feet stomped and calico skirts swirled, revealing dozens of homemade petticoats and faded stockings. She forced her foot to tap in rhythm as men spun their girls around. Those without girls jiggled up enough dust to make a body need a good bath.

About to round into the third verse, the words snagged in her throat. She blinked, her mind suddenly blank. *Lonnie, you know this!* With his shoulders hunched, Gideon's hands flew over the fret board, and the fiddler played louder than ever. After clearing her throat, Lonnie readied herself for the last verse.

But Gideon sped up, leaving the rest of the band behind.

When the crowd bellowed and cheered, Lonnie bit her lip. Gideon played faster, an impish grin lighting his face. She clapped trembling hands and glanced to the musician beside her. Shaking his head, Samson rose slowly from his chair and, still plucking the strings of his banjo, crossed the porch. He flashed a twisted smile.

Cheers swarmed from the crowd. With slow movements, Samson reached out his boot and kicked Gideon's stool so hard it flew out from under him. Gideon stumbled but did not fall. His hand fell from the fret board, and after throwing a glare at Samson, he grabbed the stool and sat.

“C’mon, Gid! Lighten up a bit, would ya?” Samson yelled over the noise.

Gideon rushed in with a few last strums until only his vibrations remained, bouncing through the woods. Folks whistled and cheered so loudly Lonnie could no longer hear the pounding of her heart. Clapping along, she stepped back. Never again would her pa talk her into singing in front of folks. No sir. Her place was in the back of the crowd.

Gideon held his mandolin over his head and bowed. As cocky as he was, Lonnie couldn’t help but smile. He walked toward her and, without hesitation, draped an arm over her shoulders. He smelled of smoke and cedar. Heat grew in the back of her neck and tingled into her cheeks. She needn’t look down to see the flame in her pa’s face as well—she knew it was there.

When the applause mellowed, she slid away and scurried down the steps, her legs weak and head light with relief. She brushed past a nuzzling couple and ducked under a thick arm that clutched a pint of cider, finally spotting her aunt Sarah beneath a scarlet maple. Enough moonlight danced through the leaves to make the woman’s ginger bun shine. Rushing over, Lonnie clasped her cool hands, the rough skin worn and familiar.

“Why, you’re tremblin’ som’n awful.” Sarah squeezed her hand. “Don’t think for one moment you don’t belong up there. You’d made your ma proud.”

Lonnie fought to catch her breath. “That was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

She felt a shadow behind her. Lonnie didn’t need to glance over her shoulder when rough fingertips clutched her elbow. “We’ll be leaving now.” Her pa’s voice was gruff.

She glanced at her aunt, then peered up at him. “Mind if I stay a bit longer?”

His eyes flinched, but then he sighed. The smell of moonshine hung thick. “Walk home with Oliver. He’s stayin’ too.”

“Yessir. Thank you, Pa.” Her words seemed to fall on nothing but the breeze as he strode from the clearing. Lonnie knew her ma would be up waiting, the littlest ones already tucked into bed. With a sigh, she let the last of her worry melt into the cool night air and turned to her aunt, pleased to have her company for at least a little while longer.

“So...” Sarah’s whimsical voice nearly sang the single word.

“Don’t say it.” Lonnie wagged a finger with little authority, knowing full well what her aunt was itching to say.

Sarah sobered, the lines around her eyes smoothing.

But Lonnie knew her mother’s sister well. “I blush too easily,” she blurted.

A smile lifted her aunt’s round cheeks. Twice Lonnie’s age and with skin a shade paler, she was as dear a friend as Lonnie had ever had. When Sarah’s gaze moved past her, Lonnie tossed a glance over her shoulder and saw the blacksmith run a cloth over his fiddle. Samson lowered his banjo into a sack. Gideon had moved on. His shoulder was pressed to the bark of a hundred-year-old chestnut, and his arms lay folded over his chest. The girl he was wooing looked more than willing to have his undivided attention.

“Seems like every girl in Rocky Knob wants to steal that boy’s heart.” Sarah shook her head. “Don’t you pay it no never mind.”

Forcing a shrug, Lonnie tugged at a pinch of her faded dress. The fabric, different shades of blue, had seen better days. She suddenly wished she hadn’t been so eager to stay behind.

“There you are!” Oliver bounded up to them, his voice stuck between a man’s and a child’s. Lonnie peered up into his thin face.

“Heard you were still here,” he panted.

The crowd milled around them. A child’s boot grazed her bare ankle, and Lonnie moved closer to her brother.

“I meant to come find you. Please, don’t leave without me.” She fought a yawn.

“Leave?” His voice cracked on the single word. “The night’s just begun!”

A broad hand clapped Oliver on the shoulder. “Indeed it has.”

Lonnie looked up to see Gideon passing by.

“Gid!” Oliver squeaked. “Just the man I wanted to see.” He grabbed Gideon’s arm, halting him. Then, with scarcely a breath, Oliver began pelting him with questions about playing.

Gideon chuckled, but his eyes drifted to where he had been headed, his lack of interest in Oliver clear.

“And when you hit that solo...” Oliver swallowed loudly. His chest heaved with enthusiasm. “It was...amazing!”

“You’re my kinda fella.” Gideon tousled the boy’s hair, nearly bumping Lonnie with his elbow. She stepped back, embarrassed by how invisible she must seem. She thought back to his behavior on stage and the way he’d made her blush. When a girl had Gideon O’Riley’s attention, she didn’t have it for long.

“Say, Gid,” Oliver said as Gideon turned to go, “I’ve been wanting to learn myself. What key was...?”

Lonnie didn’t hear the rest of her brother’s words.

Gideon’s body shifted, and his demeanor changed when Cassie Allan strode by. Only a few years older than Lonnie and quite pretty, Cassie gave Gideon a sorrowful glance. He tugged off his hat and ran fingers

through his hair. His hand lingered, arm up, as if to shield himself. He cleared his throat, suddenly showing interest in Oliver's ramblings.

"Evenin', Gideon," Cassie said softly.

Lonnie studied her and saw heartache in Cassie's blue eyes.

"Evenin'," Gideon replied without looking at her.

Several moments of silence passed, and Cassie's fingers grazed his elbow. "Would you mind if we talk—"

"Say, Oliver," Gideon blurted. "That song was in G."

Lowering her eyelashes, Cassie glanced at Lonnie and strode off.

Lonnie's heart ached for the girl. She chewed the inside of her cheek.

When Cassie moved on, Gideon's gaze followed her. His green eyes were troubled.

"Perhaps you should let Gideon get back to what he was doing," Lonnie said softly. "The night is still young."

Gideon turned to her, his eyes meeting hers for the first time. Lonnie fought a yawn, and his amusement was clear. "Not for you, I see." Though the words teased, his tone was soft.

Her sharp intake of breath cut the yawn short, and she glanced away, embarrassed.

"I'm off myself. Good night, Lonnie." Sarah flashed a carefully disguised wink. "Oliver." Then Sarah nodded to the man who stood head and shoulders above her. "Good night, Gideon."

"Miss Sarah." He pressed his hat to his chest as she strode off. His autumn-colored hair stood on end, and he slid the hat back in place.

Lonnie watched as her aunt disappeared, thick skirts swaying. "We should start for home, Oliver."

"Home? I'm just gettin' started. Ain't even had a chance to talk to Samson yet." Oliver moved toward the makeshift stage, dodging a rowdy crowd, leaving Lonnie alone with Gideon. Oliver glanced back

over his shoulder. “Say, Lonnie, why don’t you just ask Gid to walk you home?” He vanished in a sea of shadowed faces.

Mortified, Lonnie stared at her feet. Her heart pulsed beneath her shimmy as she searched for some way to remedy her brother’s remark.

Gideon stood silent, as if he too were embarrassed. His shoulder was so near that she felt the warmth through his plaid shirt. A strap crossed his broad chest, his mandolin tucked safely against his back. When he didn’t speak, she braved a peek at his face. His expression was torn, gaze pinned on a pair of young women giggling a few paces away. His dark lashes grazed his cheeks, and he thrust his hands into his pockets. He kicked at a clump of dirt.

The banjo sounded in the distance, and Lonnie knew Oliver would soon be immersed in a midnight lesson.

“You must have somewhere to be. I’m sorry.” The words felt inadequate. Before she could muddle the situation further, Lonnie turned and hurried toward the dark edge of the clearing. The sound of music and laughter faded. Her pa would not be pleased. And she had more than a few words to say to her brother come morning. To think of passing her off to Gideon O’Riley like she was a burden to be carted home. She braved a glance back to see Gideon standing there, indecision thick in his expression. He’d made it more than clear he had better things to do. She hurried on, eager to be home. A lump rose in her throat as she rushed forward. How she wished she could crawl under the nearest wagon and disappear from sight.

Muted footfalls thumped against the hard-packed earth, and Lonnie spun to see Gideon jogging toward her.

He caught up to her and peered down. “You walking home alone,” he panted and ran a palm over the back of his neck, “just doesn’t seem right.”

“Please, don’t think you have to—”

“I insist.” For the first time that night, his smile was for her alone.

His eyes bored into hers. As if his gaze could read into her heart, she glanced away.

Before Lonnie had time to think, Gideon whisked her away from the noise and lantern light. Laughter drifted away behind them, and he led her toward the cool, still quiet.

## Two

A full moon lit the trail home. Gideon pushed a laurel branch out of the pathway, and careful not to bump against him, Lonnie ducked under the glossy green leaves.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Gideon nodded, and when she hesitated, he took the lead on the narrow path. She followed close behind, and although they walked in silence, more than one critter sprang from its snug bed in a rustle of brittle leaves.

The path widened, and their shoulders touched. Gideon glanced sideways at her. Lonnie stepped away.

“You all right?”

She felt him studying her. “Yes, thank you.” She peered at him in the dark and tried to make out the curves of his face in the moonlight. A face she had always known from afar was suddenly clearer. Only a few years younger than him, she’d often seen him in passing but never once had spoken to him. It was rumored around Rocky Knob that only the girls looking for trouble sought out Gideon O’Riley. *Is that what Cassie was doing? Looking for trouble?* Lonnie shook off the thought. Cassie had always been a sensible girl from what she knew of her.

*And what about you, Lonnie?* Here she was, walking the path alone with him. Her mouth suddenly dry, Lonnie blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “I’m sorry my brother made you feel like you had to do this.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Gideon offered a smile. “Besides”—he stepped over a rock and held out his hand—“you never know who you could bump into out here alone.”

She grasped his fingers, and he helped her over. They came around the bend, and she saw the rutted surface of a makeshift bridge jutting over a small creek. She’d crossed this bridge countless times, but when Gideon’s unfamiliar hand cupped her elbow, Lonnie feared her wobbly knees might send her into the dark trickle below.

Once they were safely on the other bank, he released her. Night’s chill tickled her skin. Lonnie pressed her hands together and glanced up. He was even more handsome up close. Having grown up the shy, awkward daughter of Joel Sawyer, she’d hardly spoken to any boy, let alone the one who had mothers whispering warnings in their daughters’ ears and fathers loading shotguns.

Lonnie gulped, suddenly realizing how alone they were.

Even in the moonlight she could see the smattering of freckles across his nose and the curl of hair against the nape of his neck. When he looked at her, Lonnie dropped her gaze and studied her trudging feet. She’d never admit it to her aunt Sarah, but she suddenly understood what all the fuss was about. It seemed all her girlfriends were silly over Gideon O’Riley. When his steady hand pressed to the small of her back, she began to see why. Lonnie climbed over a stubborn stone embedded in the path. His hand fell away, and she fought the urge to look at him.

Lonnie quickened her pace, grateful he could not hear her thoughts.

The path narrowed, and he fell in step behind her. She pointed out where a fork in the trail led to her aunt's cabin. Her refuge. "I'll be livin' there soon, I suppose," she blurted, not liking the silence. "Aunt Sarah's a soap maker. She's gonna teach me the trade. Just the two of us." Lonnie lifted her shoulders in a contented sigh "I've gotta turn eighteen first, Pa says." She wrinkled her nose at the thought of waiting all those months.

"Is that so?"

"Then I'll be free."

"Free?"

"Of my pa. Though I don't know why he makes me wait. It's not like he wants me around. I'm surprised he didn't ship me off long ago." She screwed her mouth to the side, realizing she may have said too much. If her pa got wind of her true feelings, there'd be hell to pay. Yet she could not catch her words and take them back. She wouldn't, even if she could. It was no more than the truth. "I hope that doesn't make me sound ungrateful."

"Your secret's safe with me." He winked.

They walked on.

"Almost there." Her heavy breathing slowed her words, but she wanted to change the subject. "Home's not far."

Digging her toes into the hard-packed dirt, Lonnie trudged upward. More than once, she heard Gideon slip behind her. Her pa's cabin was higher than most folks', but having lived there her whole life, Lonnie had no more trouble climbing the steepest parts of the Blue Ridge than a mountain mule.

"Couldn't your pa find any better land than this?" A smile carried on his voice.

“C’mon,” Lonnie teased. “I thought you were a mountain boy. Are you saying this little hill is too hard to climb?”

“Yes,” Gideon chuckled between breaths. His laughter fell to a mumble. “Better be worth it.”

The air cooled as they rose. Lonnie rubbed her arms.

Gideon hurried to catch up with her, walking closer than necessary now that the path had opened. “So where is the top of this mountain of yours?” The back of his hand grazed hers.

“Right there.” Lonnie paused and pointed. “That’s as far as I go.” Breathless, her chest heaved.

A small cabin stood quiet and humble on the hillside. Its rough timber and warped windowsills told of a harsh life. A candle flickered in the window, giving off the only light to be seen. Lonnie knew her ma had placed it there so she could see when she got home. She remembered just how late it was. Surely her family had long gone to bed.

A night owl hooted.

Gideon shoved his hands in his pockets. “I suppose this is where we part ways.”

Lonnie studied him. It struck her how far he had come. Here she was worried that she had arrived home too late, and he had another hour of walking yet to do.

“Gideon.” She turned toward her house, then paused, uncertain. “Thank you for walking me home. It was awful nice. You better hurry on if you want to beat the sunrise.”

He tilted his head toward the stars.

Lonnie shook her head at the thought of the early morning glow lighting his way home. “I’m sorry I live so far. You shouldn’t have walked me.”

As if the pull of her words had tied a string to his heart, he looked

at her. He stepped forward, confidence squaring his jaw. "It wasn't as much trouble as you might think."

Lonnie rubbed her palms together. "I better get inside. Ma will be worried."

Gideon didn't look at her as he spoke. "Don't a fella get a good night kiss? I mean...you do live pretty far."

Her breath caught. She had never kissed a boy before. Her ma always said kissing was for married folk. "Well, I don't know." She turned away and stared at the lone flame that beckoned, and she wished someone would wake and call her inside. Her hesitation spoke what she could not.

"I see. Good night, Lonnie." He looked at her cabin before turning. He started back down the path.

Torn, Lonnie glanced back at the man who'd come so far—just for her. She'd always disappeared in a crowd, but not this night, not with Gideon at her side, smiling down on her as no man ever had. "Gideon, wait." She ran to catch up with him.

One kiss might not be so bad. Not for the man who'd promised to keep her secret.

Lonnie blurted out the words before she could change her mind. "You can kiss me good night. If you want to."

Gideon stepped toward her, closing the gap in three long strides. Her heart jumped, and she feared he would hear. She smoothed her dress and folded her hands, as if a nice appearance would affect his answer.

He leaned forward, and cool lips touched hers. Like the brush of a feather, Lonnie could feel his wide-brimmed hat covering her face, hiding their kiss from the stars.

A few moments passed, and she tried to pull away, but Gideon slipped his hand behind her and drew her closer. The taste of corn liquor was bitter on his lips. With his other hand, he clutched at her dress, lifting it above her knee. His fingers traced her flesh like a spider's spindly legs. Lonnie gripped his hand, but the strength there was impossible.

"Stop." She ground out the word.

A groan, like the sound of an old bear, came from the back of his throat, striking a chord of fear in her unlike any she had ever known.

When he nestled his mouth in the crook of her neck, chills shot through her. Lonnie squirmed. She pushed against him with one hand and kept the other locked around his, lest it go where it wanted. If she screamed, her pa would stumble onto the porch in two heartbeats—shotgun in hand.

But her innocence would be hard to prove.

Gideon leaned into her, nearly crushing her with his hold. Fear sped her breath and her head spun. Desperate, Lonnie did the only thing she could think of.

"Gid, stop!" She yelled as loudly as she dared. With all her strength behind it, her fist crashed against his jaw. Gideon stumbled back, his eyes unfocused, as if still stuck in a dream. Lonnie snatched up a mound of dirt and hurled it at him. It shattered against his chest.

Still panting, his eyes narrowed into slits. "What'd ya go and do that for?" Turning his head, he spat a few drops of blood. He rubbed his jaw and glared at her.

With a wave of fiery tears building inside her, Lonnie turned and ran up the pathway to the steps. She brushed a wrist over her eyes before she halted and turned. "If I didn't know any better..." Her vision

blurred and she shook her head. "I trusted you." She climbed the steps and slipped inside the door without making a sound. How could she have been so foolish?

She stepped to the window, the glass cold in the snug room. Cupping the flame with her palm, she puffed it out. From the darkened room, she watched Gideon straighten the strap over his chest and felt his gaze on the window. He turned and disappeared into the trees.

"Is that you, Lonnie?"

Lonnie dropped the curtain, shutting out the moonlight. A set of small, shining eyes looked up at her.

"Go back to sleep, Addie, baby. It's just me." Lonnie hung her sweater over the chair, then slipped out of her dress. The wood floor was smooth beneath her bare feet as she stepped toward the bed. She slipped beneath the covers with her little sister and pulled up the worn quilt. She slid as close to Addie as she could, draped her arm over her sister, and closed her eyes.

Still on the edge of slumber, the four-year-old mumbled, "You're cold."

"I know. I'm sorry. Go back to sleep, baby." But Lonnie lay there wide-eyed.

Images assaulted her.

She could still feel Gideon's jaw beneath her hand, see his bloody lip. She could still feel his fingers crawling on her skin. Cold lips touching her flesh. Lonnie shivered. Her ma had told her to never lead the boys to thinking things. Lonnie's eyebrows pulled together, but she shook her head. She hadn't led him on. But she certainly never should have kissed him.

With Sid snoring like a bear in the lean-to, her parents nestled behind their closed door, and Oliver yet to come home, gratitude

coursed through her that her family hadn't seen what happened. Lonnie buried her face in her sister's hair and forced her eyes closed.

She felt violated. Worse. She felt sinful. Her chin trembled. God knew the truth. Lonnie stared at the mantel clock, ticking away the late hour. If only turning back time were as easy as cranking the key. Her stomach dropped and churned. The grabbing and the touching—a shudder passed through her.

Lonnie pulled her pillow close, sank her face into the feathers, and let out a shaky breath. The back of her throat burned. She looked at Addie's baby-soft cheeks, so full and plump. Such innocence. A tear slipped down Lonnie's cheek and onto her pillow. If only she could turn back time and be as naive as Addie. As naive as she had been yesterday.