

“This was a great book! I loved the adventures of Grace and her watermelon family. It’s an easy and fun read.”

—KRISTY CARDINAL

Illiana Watermelon Promotion’s Coordinator 2000-2008

Past Illiana Watermelon Queen 1998

Present member of Illiana Watermelon Association and

National Watermelon Association

“As a former National Watermelon Queen, I loved reminiscing about my year and vicariously living through Grace. I couldn’t put the book down!”

—MAGGIE BAILEY

2009 National Watermelon Queen

“The author provides a captivating romance novel of the tragedy of life and the misplaced trust of the heart that seeks love. The heroin (Grace) finds true love and her first kiss in the only place she had not looked—right before her eyes.”

—BARB HELM

Miss Indiana Board Member and Field Director



Loving  
Grace  
a novel



APRIL SMITH



AMBASSADOR INTERNATIONAL  
GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA & BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

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# Loving Grace

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To Grandma Jan



## Chapter 1

I'M LATE. THE PHONE IS already ringing off the wall by the time I make it to my desk. I toss my keys and bag to the side, not really bothering with where they land. I'll get them later. I grab the phone and snag the corner of the desk with my hip. That's going to leave a mark.

"Melon Ridge Farms. How may I help you?" I ask, hopping around and rubbing the spot.

The phone call doesn't take long. I take a message and write *John Baron* at the top of the memo pad. The name pretty much sums it up. He is the largest melon farmer in the Midwest. Mr. Baron is great, though.

I notice an envelope with my name on it, but I set it aside. I have to get the orders going first.

I'm about an hour in when the door slams open. I stifle a groan and keep my eyes on my papers. It's Beau Baron—one of the boss' sons. The worst part of my job is having to deal with him on a daily basis.

He leans against the doorframe, just watching me. I stop and raise an eyebrow.

"Is there something I can help you with?" I look at him pointedly, hoping he'll take the hint and go back out the door he came in through.

"Dad's wondering why you haven't called him," he mumbles.

He looks out the window like he would rather be anywhere but in here.

“Call him?” I use the same bored voice he used.

“He left you a note in an envelope. He got worried when you didn’t call right away,” he explains.

“I will now. Thanks.” Trying to get rid of him, I add, “You can go now.”

“I’m supposed to wait for you,” he says with an air of boredom.

The call to Mr. Baron makes my insides churn. I need to meet him at the packing shed and read the note on the way. Unfortunately for me, Beau will bring me in the pick-up truck. I brace myself for the ride to the shed. Why couldn’t it have been Bennett, Beau’s older brother? Bennett is funny and not at all like Beau. I’ve been crushing on Bennett Baron since seventh grade. He makes it pretty easy to do so with his southern charm and boyish good looks.

Beau is already waiting at the door. He opens the rusted, red door, and we head out in the hot June sun.

“Do you know what this is about?”

“Read the letter, but don’t shoot the messenger,” he says.

I tear through the envelope—a million terrible thoughts drumming through my head.

It’s worse than I thought. Mr. Baron has signed me up for the watermelon queen pageant. He’s the president of the Midwest Watermelon Association, and he has chosen to sponsor me. In other words, I’m competing in a pageant to win the title of Midwest Watermelon Queen. I crumple the paper and close my eyes. *Breathe*, I remind myself.

“Well, say something,” Beau says.

“It’s not a good idea,” I whisper and then exhale.

“Saying something or the pageant?”

"Both." I stop. "Wait a minute. You knew?"

Beau frowns a little bit, but that's all the answer I get.

What in the world was Mr. Baron thinking? The watermelon family who sponsors an individual knows that if their candidate wins, they are in charge of taking them to all the promotions. The organization pays for all of the expenses; but the person who sponsored the queen is basically her guardian for a year, and the queen's schedule is non-stop. Fun and exciting, but non-stop. He knows that Beau and I are like two roosters in a hen house. We're always fighting. Spending an entire year in each other's presence doesn't sound like a good idea.

"Did you tell him it was a bad idea?" I ask.

"Of course, I did. Do you think I want to spend an entire year carting you and your stuff around?" He glances over, annoyance clearly written on his face.

"Well, at least you're honest. Don't worry; the feeling is mutual."

"Grace, that's not what I meant," he says, trying to backpedal.

"Save it." I turn away, irritated.

We used to be different before Luke died, but in the eighth grade, things changed. Finally, the truck pulls up to the packing shed, so I swing the door open before it even comes to a full stop, making my way to Mr. Baron. He's talking with a semi driver as the last few melons are loaded into the trailer. He gives the man a handshake and makes his way toward me with a smile on his face.

"I see Beau got you here in one piece," Mr. Baron remarks.

"Yes, sir. Thanks for having him bring me over."

Mr. Baron smiles, making it obvious why he usually gets what he wants. He has a way about him that makes it hard to say no.

"Well, Miss Grace, is your answer yes?"

I take a breath to harden myself. “Mr. Baron, first, I want to thank you for the opportunity, but I don’t—”

He interrupts.

“Keep in mind that if you were to win, every event you go to is paid for—your clothing, travel expenses—not to mention you get paid per promotion. And you will have the opportunity to compete for the national queen title in a year.”

I had forgotten about that. The queen is well-cared-for, and she is paid, too. I could really use that money for college. Plus, the traveling would be so much fun. I’m pretty enough. I have no problem talking in front of crowds, and I know most of the people involved with the Midwest Watermelon Association because I’ve been working for Mr. Baron these last few years.

“I’ll do it,” I blurt out before I can change my mind.

“Thanks, Grace. No need to come into the office tomorrow. Pamela will pick you up in the morning to do whatever you ladies need done before the convention this weekend. She’s been after me for weeks to get you to do this. With only Bennett and Beau and no daughter to sponsor . . . well she pretty much told me not to come home tonight unless I had the answer she wanted.”

He leaves me standing there. I hadn’t thought about Mrs. Baron being involved in this. I should have known it was her idea. She was the Southwest Watermelon Queen thirty years ago, and to hear her tell it, it was one of the best years of her life. My stomach starts to feel like I’ve drunk too much water after working in the sun all morning. I swallow back the nausea and head to the truck. When he sees me, Beau closes the tailgate of the truck. Then he meets me at the passenger side door.

“From the look on your face, I’d say Dad got his way.”

I don’t respond. There’s no reason. I climb in the cab, and Beau shuts the door.

He walks around the front of the truck, shaking a few workers’ hands as he passes by.

He starts the truck and turns the air on full blast. Even with the windows rolled down, it’s still suffocating in the cab.

“Why couldn’t you have been a girl?” I grumble.

“Really, Grace? I think that’s one you’ll have to figure out on your own. Or maybe you want to ask my parents how that all works.”

“Funny.” I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Seriously, he is so annoying. I don’t know why I even bother trying to talk to him.

“Yeah, I do, but I don’t think I’d look very good in a dress, do you?” The smirk on his face says he is enjoying this too much.

“I don’t think your ego can handle what I think,” I say, looking out the window.

The truck comes to a stop in front of the office.

“You know you like me. All the girls do.” He wiggles his brow, trying to be funny.

“Not this girl,” I shoot back, hopping out of the truck.

He chuckles.

I don’t look back, but I yell over my shoulder, “Even so, it wouldn’t hurt you to at least act humble, Beau Baron.”

I close the office door behind me and slowly breathe out through my nose. Closing my eyes, I lean against the door trying to shut out the conversation Beau and I just had. When I’m calm enough to open my eyes again, I see the answering machine blinking, and now I am

an hour behind on my paperwork. My bag and keys are still where I left them. I stand them back up and take a breath. I do want to be the watermelon queen. I'm sure I won't have to see Beau that much. If I win, it will be Mr. and Mrs. Baron taking me to most of the events anyway. Right now, though, I need to put my thoughts aside and tackle the work that is piling up on the desk.

I've been making headway with the messages and stacks of orders for the better part of four hours when the door opens.

"Just as I suspected, Grace," Mrs. Baron says airily. "You didn't stop to eat."

Mrs. Baron—Pamela to most—is always smiling. She's your stereotypical southern girl—light and breezy on the outside, nerves of steel on the inside. Mr. Baron was probably telling the truth when he said he wouldn't be welcomed home if he didn't get a yes out of me.

"I'm doing all right, Mrs. Baron." I point to the wrapper of the granola bar I had consumed earlier.

"Nonsense. I brought you some watermelon salsa and a chicken salad sandwich," she says, laying the plate on my desk.

"Thanks." My mouth begins to water as soon as she sets the food in front of me.

Mrs. Baron can cook. No one turns down anything she brings to the table—and for good reason.

"You eat, and I'll talk," she commands.

I nod my agreement as I slide the tomato back into the sandwich.

"Tomorrow, I will pick you up at nine in the morning. I've already set up an appointment at Glam to pick out a dress. From there, we will take care of your interview and speech outfit. Oh, and we'll need something for the cocktail party, too."

“Okay,” I say in between bites.

She puts her hand on my shoulder.

“Thanks, Grace,” she says, tearing up. “Well, with your mother gone and me with only Bennett and Beau, you’ve made me very happy. She was my best friend, you know?”

“Yes, ma’am, I know,” I say, swallowing the lump in my throat.

Then, in true southern fashion, she blinks her eyes a couple of times and turns back into her bright, sunshiny self.

“I don’t mean to keep you. I’ll be on my way,” she says. “Just start thinking about your speech.”

And then she’s out the door.

I swallow to force the sandpapery dryness away and breathe. Taking two deep breaths, I focus on the work that I still need to get done, and I finish the last stack of paperwork right at five. I barely had time to finish the orders for today, let alone think about my speech. I switch the answering machine back on and check that the back door is locked before heading home to Gramps.



The screen door makes its normal protests as I open it. The house smells like meatloaf and roses.

“Gramps?” I call out.

I hear his muffled reply coming from the kitchen. “In here.”

“I put your meatloaf in. Should be ready in a few minutes.” He leans against the counter in my grandma’s old, frilly, floral apron.

I sit at the countertop, drumming my fingers.

“Sounds good.” I try to sound upbeat, but I’m unable to hide the tremble in my voice.

“Spill it. What’s got you down, Short Stack?”

I let it all pour out. Mrs. Baron pretty much mandating that I do the pageant. My fear of looking like an idiot. My frustration at myself because I can do this. I’m a good public speaker, and I love watermelon and the people in the watermelon association. They’ve been good to me, too, this past year, with everything that I’ve had happen. Then, I start rambling about traveling and leaving Gramps behind.

Gramps lets me go until I have it all out. He even managed to get the meatloaf out during my little verbal rain shower.

“So, what I’m hearing is a lot of excuses, Short Stack. Sounds like, to me, you are letting fear get in the way. Let’s talk about it over supper, and we can pray about it, too.”

Gramps puts the meatloaf on the table, and we make quick work of filling our plates. After we thank God for our food, Gramps prays over the decision I’ll need to make about competing for the Midwest Watermelon Queen. A feeling of safety and calm washes over me as we take the matter to the Lord.

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