

PROPER ROMANCE



Healing Hearts



SARAH M. EDEN

Bestselling Author of THE SHERIFFS OF SAVAGE WELLS

“Eden weaves serious issues into the story of a plucky young woman fighting for happiness.” —PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

Wyoming Territory, 1876

As the only doctor in the frontier town of Savage Wells, Gideon MacNamara knows his prospects for a bride are limited. The womenfolk in town are either too young, too old, or already spoken for. So, being a practical man, he decides to take advantage of the matchmaking service of the day—mail-order brides—and sends away for a woman with nursing experience.

When Miriam steps off the stagecoach in Savage Wells, she sees a bright future in front of her. But when the town—and Gideon—meets her, ready for a wedding, her excitement quickly turns to horror. Somehow Dr. MacNamara’s message had gotten turned around. He didn’t want just a nurse, he wanted a wife. When she refuses to marry him, she finds herself stranded in Savage Wells with some very unhappy townspeople.

But Gideon is not like the other men Miriam has met. Embarrassed by the misunderstanding, he offers her a job, and the two begin an awkward—and often humorous—dance of getting to know each other as they work to care for the people of their town.

Romance blossoms between the two, but when a former medical associate of Miriam’s arrives in town, Gideon and the other townsfolk must rally around Miriam to protect her from a dangerous fate. Gideon and Miriam must decide if they are willing to risk their hearts for each other even as buried secrets are brought to light.

PROPER ROMANCE is a registered trademark.



Cover photos: Lee Avison/Trevillion Images,
Mark Owen/Trevillion Images
Book design: © Shadow Mountain
Art direction: Richard Erickson
Design: Heather G. Ward

Healing Hearts

OTHER PROPER ROMANCE NOVELS

NANCY CAMPBELL ALLEN

My Fair Gentleman

Beauty and the Clockwork Beast

The Secret of the India Orchid

Kiss of the Spindle

JULIANNE DONALDSON

Edenbrooke

Blackmoore

Heir to Edenbrooke (eBook only)

SARAH M. EDEN

Longing for Home

Longing for Home, vol. 2: Hope Springs

The Sheriffs of Savage Wells

Ashes on the Moor

JOSI S. KILPACK

A Heart Revealed

Lord Fenton's Folly

Forever and Forever

A Lady's Favor (eBook only)

The Lady of the Lakes

The Vicar's Daughter

All That Makes Life Bright

Miss Wilton's Waltz

Promises and Primroses

BECCA WILHITE

Check Me Out

JULIE WRIGHT

Lies Jane Austen Told Me

Lies, Love, and Breakfast at Tiffany's

Healing Hearts

PROPER ROMANCE

SARAH M. EDEN



FOR REVIEW ONLY

© 2019 Sarah M. Eden

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the publisher, Shadow Mountain®, at permissions@shadowmountain.com or PO Box 30178, Salt Lake City, Utah 84130. The views expressed herein are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of Shadow Mountain.

Visit us at shadowmountain.com

PROPER ROMANCE is a registered trademark.

This is a work of fiction. Characters and events in this book are products of the author's imagination or are represented fictitiously.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Eden, Sarah M., author.

Title: Healing hearts / Sarah M. Eden.

Description: Salt Lake City, Utah : Shadow Mountain, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018016728 | ISBN 9781629724584 (paperbound)

Subjects: LCSH: Nurses—Fiction. | Physicians—Fiction. | Wyoming, setting.

| Nineteenth century, setting.

Classification: LCC PS3605.D45365 H43 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018016728>

Printed in the United States of America

Marquis Printing, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To the hours of 1 to 3 a.m.
Without you, this book would have
taken far longer to complete.*

DO NOT DUPLICATE

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Chapter 1

Savage Wells, Wyoming Territory, 1876

Miriam Bricks sat in the cramped and rancid interior of a rickety stagecoach and contemplated for the hundredth time how fortunate she was to be there. In many ways, being pressed between two passengers—one of whom clearly hadn't bathed in months, perhaps years, and neither of whom had stopped arguing since embarking that morning—was still an improvement over her previous circumstances.

The swaying of the coach had left her ill, her body had grown painfully stiff, her head pounded, and she was hungry and exhausted. But more than anything, she was grateful.

When a person had been confined to a cold, heartless mental institution, even the most uncomfortable, miserable moments spent in freedom were a welcome improvement.

Beyond her independence, she had a new job in a new town where no one had any idea about her past. She could make a fresh start. She could rebuild her life.

Yes. She was desperately grateful.

The stagecoach came to a rocking, jarring halt in Savage Wells, her new home. Miriam didn't waste a moment but opened the

SARAH M. EDEN

stagecoach door and clamored out, clutching tightly to her worn, leather-covered sketchbook. She pulled in a breath of blessedly fresh air. Her eyes scanned the tall, well-kept buildings and colorful storefronts and the crowd of people gathered at the stage stop.

The bureau only had a scant bit of information for her, none of which described Dr. MacNamara, the man who'd hired her to work as a nurse. She'd assumed he would be the only one to meet the stage, but an entire crowd stood there, watching her.

She'd heard the ratio of women to men was lopsided out West. That appeared to be entirely true. But which of the many men standing about watching her was the man she was looking for? And who were the others there to see?

She checked the stagecoach once more. The other passengers were filing into the nearby restaurant. The townspeople were all watching *her*, then. She was not generally shy, but this was overwhelming. She folded her arms around her sketchbook and pressed it to her heart like a shield.

"I'm—I'm looking for Dr. MacNamara," she said to all of them at once.

Chuckles and grins spread through the crowd. That was not reassuring. Miriam inched back toward the stagecoach.

An older lady, seventy years if she was a day, stepped forward, reaching out to take one of Miriam's hands in her own. "He wanted to meet the stage, but a patient came by. I'm certain with all of your nursing experience you know how unpredictable things can be."

She nodded. She was well aware of the chaotic nature of the medical profession.

The woman smiled warmly, almost maternally. "But that is why you're here, isn't it? To help our dear doctor."

"Yes. That is why I am here." It was the one reason she was willing to admit to.

HEALING HEARTS

“Gideon said he’ll meet up with us as soon as he’s able.” The woman hooked her arm through Miriam’s. “The entire town has gathered. We are all so happy for our doctor. He has needed someone for such a long time.”

The crowd followed behind as Miriam was led up the street. “The town must be very fond of Dr. MacNamara.”

The woman gave her an amused sideways glance. “I am certain you can call him Gideon.”

Miriam had never called any of the doctors she’d worked for by their given names. She knew social niceties were often more lax in the West, but being that familiar would take a great deal of getting used to. And, yet, winning Dr. MacNamara’s trust was crucial to her success in Savage Wells. As was, apparently, enduring the crowd of people keeping pace with her nameless guide.

“I hadn’t expected such a welcome.” She hadn’t wanted one, truth be told.

“We are so happy you are here. Ever since Gideon told us, we’ve been beside ourselves trying to think of a way to welcome you properly, to support the both of you.”

All of this over the arrival of a nurse? Either this was the most friendly town in all the world or the most ill.

They continued down the street at such a fast clip that Miriam hardly had time to register the buildings they passed. She would need to take time later to familiarize herself with the place, perhaps sketch the main street so she could commit it to memory. Growing accustomed to the horde of people would take a bit longer. She hoped they wouldn’t follow her about on a daily basis. Secrets were far more easily kept from a distance.

“Does Dr. MacNamara see a lot of patients?”

“Oh, yes. He is the only doctor in a hundred miles, further in some directions. People come from all over to see him, and he

SARAH M. EDEN

travels all over to see them. He is sometimes gone for weeks at a time.”

That was precisely what Miriam needed. Solitude. Quiet. Peace. The asylum had never been peaceful. Not ever. And every movement, every breath, every word it seemed, had been watched and controlled. In Savage Wells, she would finally be free again.

The older woman led Miriam toward a schoolhouse, one surrounded by wagons and buggies and horses tied to hitching posts. More people gathered around, adding to the crowd trickling up from behind her

“Oh, Mrs. Wilhite!” A woman older than Miriam but not nearly as old as Miriam’s companion hurried up, hands clasped in front of her. “Is this Miriam?”

Mrs. Wilhite—it helped having a name for her guide—nodded enthusiastically. “Yes. And isn’t she lovely? She seems nervous, though.” She turned her gaze on Miriam. “Are you nervous, dear?”

Several dozen people were watching her, most of whom had followed her all the way from the stagecoach. “I am, a bit.”

“Well, what woman in your situation wouldn’t be?” Mrs. Wilhite patted Miriam’s hand. “But we can assure you that Gideon is so kind and gentle and caring. He really is a wonderful person.”

She was glad to hear it. Dr. Blackburn at the asylum had been nothing short of a monster.

Mrs. Wilhite still had one of Miriam’s arms hooked through hers. The newly arrived woman claimed Miriam’s other one. Together they pulled her toward the schoolhouse.

“Have you met Sheriff O’Brien yet?” the new woman asked.

“I have not even met *Dr. MacNamara* yet.”

“He wouldn’t miss this, I promise you.” The two women laughed. Miriam wasn’t sure what was so amusing.

They quickly took the three stairs up to the schoolhouse and

HEALING HEARTS

stepped inside. Flowers filled the interior, and a shocking abundance of ribbon framed the windows, tied in bows along the rows of benches, and adorned the lectern at the front of the room as well as a nearby table that held a cake and punch bowl, along with piles of plates and cutlery. Savage Wells, it seemed, spared no effort in welcoming a new citizen.

Mrs. Wilhite remained at Miriam's side, though her other companion slipped away into the crowd. The townsfolk trickled in, filling in the rows of seats. She received smiles and hand squeezes and an unending supply of "Welcome to Savage Wells" and "So pleased to meet you."

She had accepted the job in Savage Wells in part because it was so isolated; she was unlikely to encounter anyone who knew her or her past. If the town reacted this way to new arrivals, perhaps it was even more isolated than she'd realized.

"Oh, there's Gideon!" Mrs. Wilhite actually bounced a little.

"Which one is he?" Miriam asked.

"He's standing up at the front, of course." Mrs. Wilhite swatted at her teasingly, quite as if Miriam ought to have been able to identify a man who was a stranger to her.

Three men stood near the lectern. One was older than the others and appeared to be a preacher. The tallest of the three sported a gun belt and wore a silver sheriff's badge pinned to his leather vest. Dr. MacNamara must have been the third man.

He was younger than she'd expected, likely not even thirty. His clothes were finely cut and fashionable. His tailcoat and red silk waistcoat would not have been out of place in even the finest drawing rooms back East. And he was handsome, with his nearly black hair and gray eyes. Not that any of those things truly mattered in an employer; they were simply the first things she noticed. That likely made her shallow, she chided herself, but she

SARAH M. EDEN

had nothing else to go on. She knew of him only through what the employment bureau had told her: his profession, a few details of his education to assure her he was a legitimate doctor, and his need for a nurse.

Mrs. Wilhite took Miriam up to the front. "Here she is, Gideon." She hugged him tightly. "Oh, I'm so happy for you." She looked from Gideon to Miriam, dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, then stepped away.

This town places a great deal of importance on their medical treatment.

"You are Miriam Bricks?" Dr. MacNamara asked.

She nodded.

"Welcome." His smile could have melted a glacier. It sent warmth straight to Miriam's cheeks. "I am sorry if the town has overwhelmed you with their enthusiasm. I lost control of all of this the moment I told them about you."

"They are very kind." At least she hoped they were.

"I don't want to rush you," he said, "but the children aren't likely to wait much longer without diving for the cake."

"Of course, Dr. MacNamara," she said.

"Gideon. Please."

She gave a tiny nod, though she knew adjusting to that request would take some doing.

He turned toward the sheriff and the preacher. "I think we're ready."

The sheriff thumped Gideon on the shoulder and moved away. The preacher stepped up to the lectern. A hush fell over the gathering.

What had caught their attention so immediately? No one had called for quiet. Was this some kind of meeting rather than a welcoming party? The presence of cake made that unlikely.

HEALING HEARTS

The preacher pulled out a Bible and set it, opened, on the lectern. He looked over the room serenely. “Dearly beloved.”

Dearly beloved?

“We are gathered today in the sight of God—”

A horrifying sense of familiarity slid over her. She knew this beginning. Worse still, she knew where it ended.

“—to join this man and this woman—”

Goodness gracious.

“—in the bonds of holy matrimony.”

Her eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets. These were not words she’d anticipated at all.

“This is a wedding,” she whispered.

Gideon nodded. “Yes.”

This was a wedding. Gideon and *the preacher* were standing at the front of the room. Only one person would be placed there with them, as she was, and it wasn’t because she was the newly arrived town nurse.

“This is *our* wedding.” The strangled words clawed their way out of her.

Gideon nodded, again, but slowly. “Of course.”

“I didn’t—This wasn’t—” *Goodness gracious.*

She tried to breathe through the ever-thickening lump in her throat. She took a frantic step backward, holding to her sketchbook with a viselike grip. Everyone was watching her, all having come expecting her to marry a man she’d never met, one whom she’d only agreed to *work for*.

Absolutely not. She hadn’t fled one form of undeserved imprisonment in order to blindly accept another.

She did the only thing a woman could reasonably be expected to do in her situation: run.