

**Excerpt from Chapter 1 of
*What Heals the Heart***

Joshua Gibbs felt sun on his face and thought about opening his eyes. He decided to wait. He had some blessings to savor that wouldn't need sight.

He was in a bed, a four-poster with a well-stuffed husk mattress, instead of in a tent on rough ground. He was in Nebraska, far from any of the towns he had passed through — or seen devastated — during the war. The sound nearest his right ear wasn't the whistle of a shell or the wails and screams of dying men, but the soft grumbly snore of his Irish Setter. And the dog's name might be Major (or, to give the full grandiloquent version, Reginald Phineas Major), but that was the closest to an officer he'd find for miles around.

And what Joshua smelled, when he took a slow, lazy sniff, was a mix of Major and almost-clean bed linen, and not . . . well, no need to sully a brand new morning with the memory of what he'd have smelled this time nine years ago.

But thoughts like these were not worth staying abed for. He opened his eyes and sat up, stretching out his arm and laying a hand lightly on Major's side for the warm breathing comfort of it. Major's eye twitched, and his tail, but that was all. A dog knew, without having to think about it, what safety meant.

Joshua levered himself out of bed. He'd shave, get dressed, and take a walk with Major before frying himself some breakfast.

As a boy, if he could have even imagined himself so old as thirty-three, he'd have assumed he'd be leaving a wife behind staying warm in bed or making breakfast, or better yet, accompanying him on his morning amble. But things change. War changes them. And solitude suited him, these days.

Most of the latest — perhaps the last? — snow had melted. It wouldn't take him too long to clean off his boots after his walk. Joshua liked having clean boots when he saw patients, even if some folk in town might think it affected of him.

He headed away from the square to start, toward the creek that had given Cowbird Creek its name. If he'd been taking this road out of town to see a patient, he'd have been riding his trotter Nellie-girl or using one of the livery stable buggies. He wouldn't have had time or attention to spare for the serviceberry bushes just starting to put forth their lacy white flowers, or the sparrows with their thin high chirps, stirring about on whatever business sparrows had.

He got as far as the buttonwood tree by the creek before his hollow stomach reminded him to turn round. He took a turn around the square and saw a light in the laundry. Li Chang looked to be hard at work already. It wasn't easy to get the Chinese fellow talking, as busy as he kept himself, but his tales of the gold fields could cure anyone of hankering after mining. Though he'd managed to make enough of a stake to set up his business and even pay for help — except the help had given up on America and gone home a year since.

Turning the corner brought Joshua past the church. Passing the church meant passing the churchyard. A few of his patients were at rest there, though others were buried on their farms. One or two of them wouldn't be there yet, if he'd known then what he knew now. He paused, bowed his head, and sent them a silent apology, and a promise to stick to his books until he knew as much medicine as anyone could learn that way.

At least there were other folk, asleep in bed or about their chores, in town and outside it, who might have been sleeping colder in the ground if not for him.

He picked up his pace, more than ready for breakfast. He had bacon and eggs he'd got in payment from the farmer whose cough he'd dosed two days ago. Good thing he liked his eggs runny, because he hadn't left all that much time for cooking and eating before opening his office and seeing who sauntered or stumbled or limped in to be doctored.