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RESCUE TEAM

GRACE MEDICAL

Candace Calvert

Praise for Candace Calvert

“Candace Calvert’s *Rescue Team* had me intrigued by page 1, laughing by page 2, and in love with the hero by page 3. If you love inspirational romantic suspense and haven’t yet discovered Candace’s books, you need to go to the nearest bookstore and pick up a copy of this book—*stat*.”

—**JORDYN REDWOOD**,
author of *Proof* and *Poison*

“Head nurse Kate Callison finds herself pulled in many directions at Austin Grace Hospital—ethics, loyalties, and love drag her in deeper as she struggles to escape her darkest secret. Rescue volunteer Wes Tanner wants to help her but has his own demon from the past. A multilevel morality play in a modern hospital with a rich and varied cast of characters.”

—**LYN COTE**,
author of the Northern Intrigue series

“*Rescue Team* is a great story with great characters on a realistic journey through a tough few days. Candace brings the hospital routine alive with believable people and situations.”

—**JANICE CANTORE**,
author of the Pacific Coast Justice series

“Full of memorable characters and guided by Calvert’s own experience as an ER nurse, the first novel in her Grace Medical series evokes a realistic and intriguing world readers will definitely want to return to.”

—**BOOKLIST ON TRAUMA PLAN**

“Candace Calvert has crafted another gut-grabbing medical thriller. . . . The faith message was clear, the medical traumas heart-stopping, and the romance heart melting. . . . A great read and one for your keeper shelf.”

—LYNETTE EASON,

award-winning, bestselling author of the *Women of Justice* series

“Candace Calvert paints an exciting story on a canvas she knows very well—the world of medicine and the people who inhabit it. *Trauma Plan* is a novel that will grip your heart and keep you turning pages.”

—RICHARD L. MABRY, MD,

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“[*Critical Care*] flows well and keeps the reader’s attention. . . . Characters find not only psychological healing, but also spiritual renewal.”

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bestselling author of the *Heroes of Quantico* series

“*Code Triage* is an adrenaline high, ripped from today’s headlines, with enough romantic tension to spike your pulse.”

—JULIE LESSMAN,

award-winning author of the *Daughters of Boston* series



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Rescue Team

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“THE GULLY, BELOW THE WATER TANK—I see something.” Wes Tanner pocketed his radio and plunged downhill through tinder-dry Texas cedar and darkness, his cowhide boots scattering limestone gravel like stray bird shot. Logic argued that he could be wrong, that what he’d spotted might be no more than a sack of trash. Or a poacher’s deer bag sent soaring by the November wind. But hope was wearing spurs tonight.

He pushed his stride. *I’ll find you. I’m coming.*

The blue-white beam of his headlamp flickered as branches slapped his helmet and rescue pack; he hated to think of the damage they’d do to the parchment skin of an eighty-year-old. Or of how this woman, battling Alzheimer’s, would fare dressed only in a nightgown. With dawn minutes away, the air temperature couldn’t be more than fifty degrees. There was no way of knowing

what time the former piano teacher had wandered away from the old ranch house she shared with her sister-in-law. She could have been out here for hours, confused, frightened, cold . . . injured? Wes's jaw tensed. He'd find her in time.

He halted, took a deep breath of air made musky by cedar and oak, then swept the light along the shallow gully. "Mrs. Braxton? Amelia?"

The beam lit a stand of prickly pear cactus, a rotting tree stump, and a mound of dirt more than a little suspicious for a nest of stinging fire ants. Wes refused to imagine that cruel scenario and scanned farther, growing increasingly impatient to—

His heart stalled. There, beneath the brush.

The beam focused on a body sprawled in the leaf-strewn gully. Flowered nightgown, snowy-white single braid. Face pale, eyes closed, mouth slack. Breathing?

"Subject located," Wes huffed into the radio, jogging the remaining few yards. "Can't tell yet if . . ." He swallowed the rest of the sentence, hoping he wouldn't have to report back with the team's code word for a deceased body. *Don't be dead. Please.*

"Copy, Wes. We're right above you. On our way down."

"Good."

There was a yelp in the distance—Gabe's chocolate Lab signaling human scent—then voices. One deep, the other feminine. His "hasty search" team, assembled within minutes of the 5:30 a.m. callout by the sheriff's department. Wes was grateful but wished his rural volunteers still included a nurse or paramedic. As an EMT, he carried basic medical supplies, but . . .

"Ma'am?" He dropped to one knee beside the woman and grasped her thin shoulder, shook her gently. "Are you awake?" *Alive?* He held his breath, nudged her again, watching for the rise

and fall of her chest that would confirm breathing, a blink of her eyelids, a small grimace—anything. “Amelia?”

“Unh . . .” Her muffled groan was the sweetest thing Wes had heard in a long, rugged week.

“Hello there.” Relief threatened to choke his voice. “It’s okay. You’re not lost anymore.”

She blinked and he averted the light.

“You’re . . .” Amelia swept her tongue across her dry lips, then stared at him for a long moment.

“Wes Tanner, ma’am. I’m here to help you,” he explained, doubtful she recognized him, though he’d seen Lily and Amelia last week, Amelia’s ever-present doll propped in the elderly ladies’ grocery cart. But his appearance right now would seem intimidating at best: shadowy bulk, dark beard stubble, equipment dangling from his search-and-rescue vest, squawking radio—and every square inch smelling of rode-hard horse. On the white-knight scale, Wes was a notch above Sasquatch.

He lowered his pack to the ground. “Miss Lily asked me—”

“Asked *us*,” Gabe Buckner corrected. A headlamp lit his face like a jack-o’-lantern as he stepped into the clearing. He snapped a leash onto his dog’s collar and walked closer. A few yards away, the team’s newly certified member—a coffeehouse barista by day—said a few words into her radio before following him.

“Deputies are guiding the medics in,” she reported, first-rescue excitement making her voice climb an octave.

“See?” Wes smiled down at Amelia as he lifted the foil rescue blanket from his pack. “Plenty of help tonight.” He patted her shoulder as she tried to sit up. “Don’t move yet, Mrs. Braxton. Let’s be sure you’re okay.”

“You’re . . . ?” Her gaze moved over Wes’s face again, her chin trembling.

“Wes Tanner,” he reminded. “My family takes care of the wells around here. And over there is Gabe. His family . . .” Bad time to mention that they owned the local funeral home. “His family lives right down the road. The pretty one is Jenna. And that four-legged guy is Hershey, the best rescue dog in the county.”

As if on cue, the chocolate Lab whined and wagged his tail.

“We’re your neighbors. Come to help you back home, ma’am.”

“Oh . . .”

Wes watched as she looked from face to face, her expression as wide-eyed and incredulous as Dorothy’s in the black-and-white aftermath of Oz.

“Yes. I remember now.” She returned her gaze to Wes, beginning to smile. “You’re Lee Ann Tanner’s boy.”

Gut-punched, Wes managed a nod.

“Let’s get you warm, ma’am,” Gabe offered, moving forward to help.

They had Amelia wrapped in the blanket moments before law enforcement and the medics arrived. And in less than ten minutes she’d been moved via rescue litter to the waiting rig. An initial assessment concluded that, beyond some scrapes and mild symptoms of exposure, the piano teacher had survived her unexpected adventure fairly well. Considering she’d made the trek in an ancient pair of men’s cowboy boots—worn on the wrong feet.

“They’re taking her to Austin Grace ER?” Gabe asked, watching as they loaded the woman into the ambulance.

“Right.” Wes scraped his fingers through his hair, loosing some twigs left from his scramble through the underbrush. “I’m going to follow along after I get my horse settled. I’ll give Miss Lily a ride

into the city and let the granddaughter take over from there. I'm supposed to meet with the hospital social worker later this morning anyway. We're doing that emergency department presentation on critical incident stress this week."

"Oh yeah." Gabe stooped to pat his dog. "The media's all over those 'new details' on our missing nurse—has to stress those folks in the ER. Even after this long." He sighed. "Now there's a rescue we all wanted to see happen."

"Yeah."

Gabe was quiet for a moment. "Must have been a surprise when Mrs. Braxton mentioned your mother."

Wes hated the way his stomach sank; he should be long past that. "Not unusual for Alzheimer's. Can't remember what a toothbrush is on most days but then can clearly recall the name of a woman who's been gone for twentysome years." *Twenty-seven, come January 3.*

"Right." Gabe glanced away as the ambulance engine leaped to life. "Sure you don't want to catch some breakfast before driving into Austin? Hershey's got his mind set on apple-smoked bacon. I'm buying." He raised his brows. "Jenna's coming too. I get the feelin' she'd be pretty happy to see you show up."

"You're reading things into that one. Thanks, but I'm going to grab something to eat at the hospital."

Gabe shrugged. "While you're there, find us a few volunteers, would ya? I'm willing to share this opportunity for an early morning hike."

"You mean recruit the one remaining nurse who isn't working extra shifts to pay the mortgage and put gas in her car?" Wes frowned at the truth: their community search-and-rescue team was shrinking in this tight economy. He'd proposed a horse-mounted

team and a long list of equipment he wanted to add to their incident command trailer, but donations were down and grant money was drying up. Fewer team members, less overall support. Still, today they'd had a live find. And it felt good.

"Hey, thanks for coming out, buddy." Wes clapped his friend's shoulder. "For a funeral director, a latte maker, a well digger, and a dog that still smells of last month's skunk chase, we didn't do half-bad."

Gabe grinned, snapped an exaggerated salute. "You call; I'm here. Count on it. It's more than worth crawling out of a warm bed to find someone alive."

"Nothing beats it."

Wes headed down the road to his horse trailer as morning lit the hill country cedar and prickly pear cactus—golden as the yolks in Gabe's favorite breakfast. He glanced back at the gully, remembering the moment he'd found Amelia Braxton. "*It's okay. You're not lost anymore.*" His favorite words in the world. Being able to say them and offer that lifeline of hope to another human being had become as important to him as breathing. It was the reason he'd answer any callout—anytime, anywhere. Even if he had to do it alone. And sometimes he did that . . . hours, weeks, even months after other searchers called it quits.

Because he understood how it felt to be lost, cold, terrified, and desperate for help. Despite a lifetime spent trying to forget, he still remembered it as if it were yesterday: the January night that Lee Ann Tanner left her seven-year-old son in the woods. Then drove her car into the river.

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Emergency department director Kate Callison hugged her scrub jacket close and crossed the employee parking lot, watching

dawn's attempt to erase the bruise-dark shadows that shrouded the entrance to the Austin Grace ER. With every step she fought an almost-suffocating urge to jog back to her car, gun the engine, and drive away to . . . anywhere else. Somewhere without media, lawyers, patient complaints, and a sullen and dwindling—and quite possibly mutinous—nursing staff. The last few weeks had been miserable enough to make Florence Nightingale jump ship, and there was no guarantee today would be any better. There was already a rescue rig parked in the ambulance bay.

Her gaze followed the empty sidewalk to the visitors' tables, and an unexpected sliver of hope lightened her step; at least the night shift patient load hadn't spilled outside. It was almost a miracle. Maybe—

"Oh, excuse me," Kate apologized, stepping aside at the doorway. "Sorry; I didn't see you there."

"Uh . . . no problem."

A girl, wrapped in an oversize sweater coat as dark as the shadows, had appeared out of nowhere. As if the building itself simply spit her out. No more than a teenager, she had oily and lank hair, her face thin and far too pale. Even in the chill air, her skin glistened with perspiration.

"Hey . . ." Kate tipped her head, trying to catch the girl's gaze. "Are you all right? You look like you're feeling—"

"Okay," the girl whispered, eyes downcast. Her fingers moved to clutch the front of her sweater. Chipped black nail polish, a silver ring shaped like a Celtic cross. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Kate asked gently. She glanced through the glass door panel and saw that the waiting room was indeed packed. "I can have someone look at you. That's why we're here. To help."

The girl's eyes met Kate's at last. Watery blue, lashes sodden,

dark pupils dilated. Pain? Worry? Then Kate saw it with sudden certainty. *She's afraid.*

"You would do that?" the girl whispered, her trembling hand on Kate's arm. "You'd help me? Even if I—"

"Kate!"

Kate glanced toward the sound, then back at the girl. "I'm Kate Callison, the emergency department director. That nurse is waiting for me, but I meant what I said just now. We're here to help. With whatever you need. Go sign in at the registration desk. Tell them you spoke with me."

"I have to go," the girl said, backing away.

"But . . ."

As fast as she'd appeared, she was gone. Skirting the corner of the building, heading—

"Kate?"

The nurse in melon-pink scrubs held two Starbucks cups aloft, hot brews merging with cool sunrise in a fragrant cloud. Kate smiled, her uneasiness replaced by a rush of gratitude. ICU nurse Lauren Barclay was the only real friend she'd made in the months since she'd moved to Austin. Their prework coffees had become the best part of her day. Lately, the best part of *anything*.

"What do you think?" Lauren asked, glancing at the vacant visitors' tables. "Sit out here?" She raised her brows, one of them disappearing beneath the flowered surgical cap she'd tied over her hair. Another attempt to tame the thick blonde mane, as wavy and long as Kate's was dark and wispy-short. "I realize cool mornings are nothing special to a California girl," she teased in the familiar drawl, "but in Houston, we'd call this a flat-out miracle."

She handed Kate her coffee and settled onto a chair. "That poor mother was out there on the boulevard again. Did you see her?"

“Yes.” Kate winced. A young woman had been stationed at a busy intersection for two days now, holding a huge poster of a bright-eyed and chubby toddler. Below the photo, in heavy and uneven strokes of marking pen, she’d printed a heart-wrenching plea: *Need money for my baby’s funeral.*

“One of the cafeteria ladies said she’s from out of state. They were visiting here when the baby got sick. So sad.” Lauren peered at Kate over the top of her mocha. “How’d things go yesterday with the boss?”

Kate rolled her eyes at the reference to her meeting with the chief nursing officer. “I think Evelyn’s exact words went something like ‘Your team’s morale is sinking.’ She was being polite. It’s more like I’m captain of the *Titanic* and instead of a band playing, there’s one endless Willie Nelson CD.” She sighed. “I never intended to be interim director of the emergency department. It’s not what I applied for. And I had no idea I’d be stepping into the shoes of a saint.”

Lauren nodded. “Sunni’s disappearance has been hard on a lot of people. And if there really is new evidence, another search, and they find conclusive remains . . . I know you’re skeptical about it, but I do think the social worker’s right to present the critical incident stress information again. There’s been more staff coming to the chapel lately. Several from your team.”

“Hmm.” Kate knew her friend was talking about an informal fellowship she led for hospital personnel, designed as a support system. Fortunately she’d figured out there was no point pressuring Kate to join in. Fellowship and hand-holding were the farthest things from her mind.

“When’s that supposed to happen—the CISM refresher?” Lauren asked.

“At the staff meeting on Friday.” Kate watched as an elderly woman made her way toward the doors to the ER. She was accompanied by a man in a faded denim jacket. Tall, with broad shoulders, dark hair, and considerable beard shadow. Wearing cowboy boots, of course—apparently a state requirement.

Kate turned her attention back to Lauren. “It’s not that I’m exactly opposed to peer counseling or debriefing after a specific traumatic incident.” For some reason, she thought of the too-pale face of the girl she’d met in the shadows. “I think it may have some benefit in isolated cases.”

“But . . . ?”

“It’s been six months since Sunni disappeared. I’d be blind not to see how respected she was. I understand that her loss left a big hole. And I don’t kid myself that the things I’ve tried to do have helped much. But in my experience, dwelling on the past—resurrecting it—doesn’t help either. At some point, you have to steel yourself and move on.”

Lauren stared at her. “You’re not quitting?”

“No,” Kate said quickly, glad her new friend couldn’t know about her recent conversation with the travel nurse recruiter in Dallas. Lauren wouldn’t understand that a fallback plan was a necessity. Thankfully she’d never asked how long Kate had worked at Alamo Grace and, before that, the Mercy Hospital in San Jose or any of the other hospitals in California and elsewhere. Places where she’d joined the staff only to find that something didn’t fit, wasn’t quite right. Plan B was a lifeline for someone like Kate. “No, I’m not planning to resign. In spite of my teasing about big trucks and bigger belt buckles, churches on every corner—” Kate smiled—“and that there are actually places you can buy Texas-shaped tortilla chips, I like it here. It doesn’t make any sense, but it’s growing on me.”

Nuts as it seemed, it was true. Kate wouldn't say this city felt like home—nothing ever had, including home—but . . . “Maybe it's because Austin feels a little more like California.”

“Whoa, girl. Don't say that out loud,” Lauren warned in a stage whisper. “You'll be run out of town.” She checked her watch and stood. “We should head in.”

“Right.” Kate followed her toward the entrance to the ER. “I'll probably be run out regardless. Interim director is a temporary position. No guarantees. I came in on the heels of a lawsuit against the hospital that's still being settled. Patient-satisfaction surveys are at an all-time low. And last month I had to suspend that nurse.”

“For drugs—you had no choice.”

“The rumblings are that Sunni would have handled things with far more compassion. I'm working my tail off to prove myself, Lauren.” Kate plucked at her scrubs. “I wear these instead of a suit so I can pitch in alongside the staff. All shifts, I come in to see what I can do to help. Ask Vicky who offered to give that soapsuds enema she groused about. I even baked red velvet cupcakes for the last staff meeting. But . . .”

She looked toward the doors of the department. The man in the denim jacket was standing there, using his cell phone. He glanced up as they approached.

Kate lowered her voice. “My performance review is coming up. At this point, only one of the full-time clinical coordinators supports me. I can probably count on a few of the docs to put in a good word. But if I want to stay, I've got to make a breakthrough with my nursing staff. Get them behind me somehow. Any way I can. Or at least prevent any more ugly PR catastrophes from happen—”

“Nurse!” A man from the waiting room forced his weight against

the half-open automatic door. He gestured at them wildly. “Hurry! We need help in here!”

“I’ve got the door,” the man in denim said, hitting the button to open it fully. Kate lunged into the waiting room with Lauren following. People were on their feet, shouting.

“Let them through!” the man in the denim jacket ordered, forging past Kate to clear the way. What was going on?

“Over there,” someone pleaded, grabbing at Kate’s arm. “That janitor—something’s wrong. Please hurry.”

Lauren pointed toward the far side of the room: a hospital janitor stood against the wall, eyes wild and face as gray as his uniform shirt. In his quaking hands were wads of blood-soaked paper towels.

Laceration? Bleeding ulcer? Mind whirling, Kate wedged through the space created by the man in denim, Lauren close behind.

“It’s a baby,” the janitor moaned, staggering toward them, his face even paler. “It was on the floor . . . the hallway bathroom. Oh . . . help . . .”

Kate’s heart climbed to her throat. *No . . .*

“He’s gonna pass out!” A woman’s shout rose above a frenzy of panicked voices. “Somebody catch him! Don’t let him drop that poor—”

Kate lurched forward a split second too late.

The janitor’s legs gave way. In his last conscious effort, he thrust the tiny, motionless newborn into the denim cowboy’s arms.