

# *to Dance* ONCE MORE

SHERRI WILSON JOHNSON

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## [A SNEAK PEEK AT THE NOVEL]

# One

*April 6, 1886*

The warm sun beamed through the lace curtains covering the whitewashed windows of Lydia Jane Barrington's bedchamber. Her home at Live Oaks Plantation sat on the outskirts of Gulf Resort, Florida, a modern, bustling port. Outside, the mourning doves cooed, and the bushy-tailed squirrels scampered about the lawn. Chickens clucked while they pecked at the ground eagerly gathering corn kernels. In the distance, cows mooed, waiting for the farm hand to milk them, unaware that summer waited patiently for its chance to scorch the land.

A salty breeze blew across Lydia's porcelain face and called her from her deep slumber. Her curtains rose with the breeze and jerked down quickly, slamming back against the windowsill. She stretched with a yawn, and as morning nudged her, languorously she opened her eyes. She slid from her bed, cast the covers onto the floor, and sauntered across the sun-drenched room. Her crystal blue eyes sparkled like the sun on the ocean in the morning. Her hair, an auburn-colored cascading waterfall, was a gift from her mother's side of the family. She went to the window and, pushing back the curtains, looked out at the plantation. The moss-draped live oaks and the towering cypress trees painted shadow puppets on the ground. The sun shone on the land as far as Lydia could see.

Lydia put on the pastel-blue cotton dress her Aunt Rebecca had made for her, then gazed out her window and drank in the scenery. As a child, she had stared out this same window and dreamed, like most young girls, about being the lady of her own manor with many children. However, over the past year, during moments like this, she wondered what else the world had to offer beyond what her eyes could see, away from this vast estate. She did not want to be like all the women she knew who seemingly disappeared in the shadows of their husbands. She feared most of all a betrothal to someone whom her father chose for her; forced into a loveless relationship simply to increase her father's money pouch. To her, that was nothing more than slavery, and slavery no longer existed, thanks to the Civil War.

She wanted to travel and see the entire world, not simply entertain guests

who had come from exotic locations around the world. She knew in her heart that there must be a higher purpose for her life. Therefore, she vowed that she would find her way in this world, like the women about whom the new governess, Kathryn, had taught her.

Soon she descended the oak staircase, ten-feet-wide and slightly curved, and headed for the sweet-smelling breakfast room, where her family gathered for the morning meal. Isabel Ann, the cook, with a delightful smile across her dark, round face, placed the steaming food on the twelve-foot-long oak table, hewed from one of Live Oak's old trees.

Lydia found her seat next to Kathryn. As usual, she reached for a nibble of biscuit and instantly received a scolding from Isabel Ann as her father, Archibald, began his prayer of thanks. This mirrored almost every other morning Lydia had experienced, except that this morning marked her sixteenth birthday.

"You and Nathan have a good day in the fields, Archibald. Eliza and I are going to prepare the house for tonight's birthday festivities. Josie, Alexa, and Lydia, you young ladies get off to school now," Rosalyn, Lydia's mother, said as she gracefully rose from her seat at the table.

"Oh, Mother, do I *have* to go today? It *is* my birthday after all," Lydia protested, twisting sideways in her chair to face her mother.

"Yes, of course you do. Nathan is working today, and so will you. Now run along," Rosalyn said, dismissing her with a wave of her delicate hand. Her eyes sparkled with love for her animated daughter.

Lydia's father looked on in reserved silence. His dark eyes, in contrast to Rosalyn's, seemed like coal dust. "A good education is something to be appreciated, Lydia," Archibald chastised in his firm but loving way.

"Yes, Father." Lydia stood up from her chair and excused herself.



"It's hard to believe you are sixteen today," Alexa told Lydia while they walked to the one-room schoolhouse, built on their property for the Barrington children. Little yellow flowers lined the walkway, and white sand peeked through the grass.

"Why? You make it sound like you are so much older than I am. You're just seventeen yourself." Lydia rolled her eyes. Being the baby of the family was worse than being last in line for the water pitcher on a hot summer day. Even her twin brother was older by five minutes.

"Now don't be defensive, Lydia. Alexa meant no spite," Josie said, her

dark eyes squinting in the morning sun. “You have to admit it does seem rather strange that we no longer have little children in our home.”

“We haven’t had little children around here for a long time,” Lydia defended. She kicked a pebble into the woods.

“Fine then, I didn’t mean to start a war.” Alexa glared at Lydia with coffee-colored eyes.

“I hate being the youngest. You’re very fortunate to be eighteen, Josie. You can marry and escape this dreadful place soon.”

“Lydia! There is absolutely nothing dreadful about Live Oaks. Father has provided a wonderful home for us all,” Josie corrected.

“Yes, Lydia, we have a great home and a marvelous family. How could you ever want more?” Alexa chimed in.

*Why doesn’t she simply drive a stake under my fingernails?* “You don’t understand. I want to do something with my life. I want to be more than a wife and a mother. I don’t mean I don’t *ever* want to be a wife, I just want to be more,” Lydia answered, but she knew her sisters would not identify with her point of view. She wondered sometimes if they really were related to her. They certainly didn’t look much like her with their olive skin and dark eyes, and they obviously held different ideas of happiness.

The girls plodded on in silence, the rustle of their shoes on the crushed-shell pathway the only sound. Little puffs of dust followed behind them.

Finally, Josie spoke. “Lydia, I’ve never understood your desire to be more than what you are. Father says that rebellious thinking will only get you into trouble. I think you need to suppress those thoughts before you get a switch across your backside.”

Lydia did not respond. Heat rose in her chest and threatened to set her pale face ablaze. She lagged behind her sisters, taking a few minutes to compose herself, but eventually made her way to the schoolhouse.

This whitewashed building resembled a church with its small front porch and high, pitched roof. Around the back was the entrance to Kathryn’s housing. She had a sitting room complete with a wood burning stove, a washbasin, and a water pump. A ladder led to a loft, with a feather bed and a desk for studying and grading schoolwork. Lydia thought privately about how exciting it would be to live away from home and be free to do whatever she wanted to do, like Kathryn.



“Okay, girls, let’s get started this morning with history. Today we’re going to

talk about the Civil War.” Kathryn’s voice echoed in the high-ceilinged room as she wrote the words on the wallboard; chalk dust drifted in the muggy air.

“Excuse me, Miss Kathryn, but is the Civil War actually history? I mean, it happened not too long ago. I was five years old when it ended,” Lydia asked.

“Lydia, anything that happened in the past is history. It doesn’t matter if it’s been one hundred years or one day. Now, there is one particular woman who was inspirational during that time.”

“Who is it, Miss Kathryn?” Josie asked.

“Harriet Tubman.” Kathryn wrote the name on the board.

“What did she do?” asked Alexa, pushing her thick, brunette hair behind her ear.

“She was a runaway slave, and she spent most of her young life trying to end slavery.”

“How did slavery begin?” Lydia leaned forward in her desk. She held onto the desktop with expectancy, her knuckles white.

“Oh, Lydia, slavery has been around since the beginning of time practically. But the Civil War broke out because people kidnapped other people from their homes in Africa and sold them at auction. They treated them like livestock. The person who gave the highest bid got the slave. Children were torn from their parents’ arms; husbands and wives were separated.”

“That’s awful!” Alexa exclaimed.

“Yes, it is,” Kathryn said.

“Isabel Ann and Theo were slaves, I think,” Lydia said.

“Yes, they were. Father freed them,” Josie answered.

Lydia recalled the familiar story, passed down to her from her parents.

“So, what was Harriet Tubman’s role in all of this?” Alexa asked.

“Harriet was born in 1820 in Maryland on a plantation.” Kathryn pointed to Maryland on the map. “Her parents were slaves, so she was born a slave. She escaped when she was almost thirty years old.”

“Where did she go?” Lydia clung to every word Kathryn said. Suddenly life here at Live Oaks in this schoolroom did not seem lackluster anymore.

“She went north because slavery was not a problem there. She returned repeatedly to the South to help free slaves. Not everyone would come, though, because they were afraid of being killed.”

“How did one woman do all of that?” Josie asked, crossing her legs.

“It was not only one woman. She had many helpers. People used their homes and barns as safe houses to hide the slaves until they could move on to the next location of safety. They called it “The Underground Railroad.””

“There was a railroad under the ground?” Alexa asked.

“Not a real railroad for trains. That was the name they gave her plan. Punishment occurred for people who helped to free the slaves, but still many people helped anyway. Do you know why?”

“Because it was the right thing to do?” Lydia’s eyes were glued to Kathryn.

“You’re correct. It was the right thing to do.”

“I want to do something great like that one day,” Lydia said. “I want to make a difference.” Lydia looked only at Kathryn, not at her sisters. She knew they would scoff at her.

“You will, Lydia. With that attitude, you will,” Kathryn assured.

The talk of the Civil War and Harriet Tubman’s part in freeing the slaves went on for quite a while.

Later, Lydia headed toward the gazebo in front of their home to read in the afternoon sun. She ambled along the pathway from the schoolhouse, passing the eight-room guesthouse, built by her grandfather in 1835, three years after he built the main house. She crossed the lawn in front of the house, unable to resist bending to pick a yellow daffodil. Her spine tingled at the sweet smell.

“Hello, Mrs. Baker. How are you today?” Lydia called to her mother’s friend as she and Rosalyn sat on the porch swing.

“I’m fine, Lydia. And you?”

“Oh, I am wonderful, now that I’m free for the afternoon. Did you bring any orange marmalade with you today?” Lydia licked her lips.

“Yes, I did, dear. You will have to have some this afternoon.”

“I will. Thank you,” Lydia said, going on about her way.

Lydia sat in the gazebo, her soul a peaceful bubbling brook. She smiled and sighed a cleansing breath. This small structure and its surroundings provided her with an escape from the boredom of everyday life, since a comfortable lifestyle offered very little entertainment to fill the endless hours of a day on a plantation. Lydia did not even have chores like so many of her friends at church. Her mother encouraged her to master homemaking skills and to learn to play the piano, but Lydia cared nothing about those things. She would sit for hours at a time in the gazebo, encircled by various flowering trees and shrubs, and wonder about exotic places and hope to visit them one day.

After reading for a while, Lydia left the gazebo and disappeared down the path to the pond. The water lapped at the edge, beckoning her. She took off her dusty boots and lifted her skirts to her knees. Dipping her feet in the tepid

water, she squealed with delight, for the water, though still a little too cool for swimming, felt great for toe dipping. This was exactly what she needed to make her day complete.

But it only took a few minutes for the chill to reach Lydia's bones. She dried her feet on her skirts, put her boots back on, and made her way to the stables, stopping at the garden first. The sun threatened to scorch her delicate skin if she didn't get inside the barn quickly. Her nostrils filled with the sweet smell of hay and oats, and she smiled.

"Afternoon, Miss Lydia," said Levi, one of the barn workers, as he tossed hay with a pitchfork into a stall.

"Afternoon, Levi. I stopped in to see my baby for a bit. I won't be in your way for long," Lydia answered politely.

"Take your time. I know he's been waiting for you all morning."

She picked up a brush, entered the stall, and gently caressed her horse, Gabriel. "Good morning, baby. I brought you a treat. Here's a carrot."

Gabriel's beige coat twitched as she rubbed it. His black mane and tail gleamed with each stroke of the brush. She dodged horseflies with her free hand. The chickens clucked and the bunnies squeaked, while the hogs whined and snorted, wanting food. Lydia paid them no mind, however, as she engrossed herself only with her pet.



Dinnertime slipped up on Lydia like a summer hailstorm. She scurried to the main house where delicious food and her family awaited her, entering in through the kitchen in the back of the house. Characteristically tardy, she felt the hot glare of her father's eyes burn into her from the other room. She had to get past Isabel Ann, though, before she would face her father.

"Child, you wash up before you come to the table. And since you were late again, you will do the dishes today," Isabel Ann said.

"Yes ma'am." Lydia shrugged in defeat and stopped in the kitchen to wash off, accustomed to this scolding from Isabel Ann. In fact, Isabel Ann scolded her far more than her own mother ever did. She washed her face and hands in the washbasin by the wood-burning stove. The windmill her father had built last year pumped in the water from outside and sent it up to the attic. It flowed through pipes by gravity to the kitchen. She knew this was a luxury not many of her friends had in their homes.

After Lydia washed up, she joined the rest of the family in the dining room. Her birthday meal included pecan pie and spicy carrot cake for dessert,

her favorites. There was even a bowl of Mrs. Baker's orange marmalade and hot biscuits.

After the prayer, Lydia asked, "Father, do tell us again the story of our wonderful plantation. Please?" Lydia tried to detour her father's thoughts from her tardiness.

Archibald's brow furrowed. "You've heard it dozens of times." He cut his biscuit in half and spread the marmalade liberally on it.

"Oh, but Father, please tell us again. For Miss Kathryn's sake," Josie chimed in, clapping her hands.

All four Barrington girls cheered and prompted Archibald to satisfy their wishes. Nathan was too busy eating his roast beef and gravy to convince Archibald to share the past.

Archibald took a drink of sweet tea, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and began, "Grandfather Alexander Barrington built this house over fifty years ago. The style is a Greek revival because of the columns on all sides. It looks like a Greek temple. He wanted the front porch to provide ample room for guests to gather during parties, so he made it twenty feet wide. The portico on the second story provided a place for him to step out from the bedchamber to monitor the plantation.

"You see, Kathryn, when my father first bought this land, he owned slaves and ran a cotton plantation back before the war. After Father died from malaria, I took over, as my sisters had all moved out west with their husbands to settle there. They did not want to be part of the fighting over slaves. I freed the slaves at that time. Some of them agreed to stay on and help me turn this into much more than a cotton plantation. I've always felt like you shouldn't invest everything you have in one market only." Archibald used the nail of his little finger to dislodge a piece of roast from his front teeth.

"You are a very smart man, Mr. Barrington," Kathryn said, as she placed her napkin in her lap. "How did the plantation thrive during the war?"

"We made do. I don't really like to talk about those days much. The children were still young and those were tough times. But that is the past now. The plantation does well and helps us to stay relatively self-sufficient. Out back, we have a smokehouse, a well, and a teahouse. We drink store-bought tea now, but our workers still prefer homegrown sassafras and spice-wood teas. We have a pigeon house, a dairy barn, stables, and a blacksmith shop, too. We ship much of our goods from our dock on the river at the edge of the plantation. Did you see our gardens?" Archibald's eyes sparkled.

"No, sir, not yet. I've been so busy getting settled in my room and teaching the girls, of course."

Rosalyn completed Archibald's thoughts as she gestured with her soft, dainty hands. "Oh, you'll have to take a walk with the girls around back and see them. We grow every kind of spice, vegetable, and flower you can imagine. We have many fruit trees, as well. Theo is our gardener. He will give you anything you ask for. On your walk, you'll see the former slave quarters, too. Now they are private homes for our people. They're not much, but they meet the needs. And, let me say one thing about how we thrived during the war. It was God and God alone who got us through that tough time."

"Yes, indeed. You are right, my dear." Archibald patted Rosalyn's hand.

"Tell her what you do in the city, Father," Eliza suggested.

"I fear my daughters romanticize my work a bit too much, Kathryn. I run a modest lumber and turpentine business. I am hoping one day Nathan will work with me, and possibly even a son-in-law or two." He shrugged his graying eyebrows at his daughters. All the girls except Lydia giggled.

Lydia noticed how he cheered at the thought of sons-in-law. "That is *if* I get married. The only boy I like is Nathan, and he is my brother! I think marriage is very old-fashioned and limits what women can do with their lives," Lydia explained, glancing towards Kathryn.

No one reacted immediately to her well-known response about boys. Kathryn, new still to the plantation and not quite accustomed to Lydia's free spirit, hid her smile with her napkin.

"Now, Lydia. A girl has to marry eventually. How else would she ever support herself?" Rosalyn finally asked. She chided Lydia with her eyes, as only a mother could do.

"Mother, I am very resourceful, you know. I will find a way."

"That kind of talk can get a girl in trouble. You cannot venture out without a gentleman by your side. A woman cannot make it in the world alone," Archibald interjected. He made it clear by his fierce look toward Lydia that he was through with this kind of independent thinking.

"What about Miss Kathryn, Father?" Lydia knew severe chastisement would occur for contradicting her father, but she had to ask. After all, her parents had insulted Kathryn to her face when they said those things about women.

"Allow me, please, Mr. Barrington," Kathryn cut in. "Lydia, I am not on my own. As you see, your father employs me and provides a place for me to live while I am in his service. This did not happen by itself. I had to receive my teaching certificate, after much studying, mind you, and I had to have references from people who knew me well before I could even imagine having work like this. Although I am not married, I do not consider myself an

independent woman. I am very dependent upon the good graces of your family. And I have very little to call my own.”

Lydia blushed at her own naïveté. “I never really thought of it like that, Miss Kathryn. I see your point.” Lydia paused thoughtfully, then added, “However, I still am not going to marry someone wealthy just so I can travel the world. I’ll find another way.”

“Lydia, let’s not ruin your and Nathan’s birthday by talking about the future. You have a wonderful evening ahead of you,” Rosalyn concluded.



That evening, Lydia looked at her reflection in the mirror as she readied herself, and noticed how her face glimmered like moonlight and her eyes twinkled like stars. When she saw all of the guests in the forty-foot banquet hall, she felt like skipping but remembered Eliza’s words from earlier that day about acting like a young lady. As a result, she remembered to greet everyone in sight and then made her way, as gracefully as a swan, to the end of the hall to get a cup of cider.

She wore an unadorned, silk dress, topaz in color, made especially for the evening by her mother. Her hands adjusted the lace sash that encircled her waist and reached to the hem of her dress. She wore her hair pulled away from her face, fastened at the nape of her neck with a bow made from the same silk. This style accented her slender face and almond-shaped eyes to their fullest beauty. Nathan’s suit, black in color, complemented Lydia’s attire.

Hours of dancing followed dinner that evening. After the guests said their good-byes, the family gathered on the porch for the Scripture reading, and then everyone retired for the night.

Sleep was a stranger to Lydia that night for her mind swirled with excitement. She had danced until her legs would no longer support her and talked to innumerable people. She could not possibly remember all of the conversations she had had. One thing about the evening she would never forget, however: the way she felt when she danced with a gentleman. It made her want to squeal. She knew now why her sisters enjoyed parties so much. All throughout the night dancing filled her dreams. Even though she still did not think she ever wanted a husband, she hoped she would be able to dance again at another party someday soon.



The following morning, Eliza glowed from head to toe with happiness over a

new gentleman friend she had met at the party. Since her return from finishing school, only a few young men had come to call. Benjamin Wickersham had attended the party with hopes of meeting Eliza and asking if he could call on her.

Evenings without a gentleman caller would be nonexistent now.



“What are we going to study today, Miss Kathryn?” Lydia asked, sitting on the edge of her chair. She wanted to learn more from the teacher she had grown to admire. The birds sang outside the open windows, but they did not deter Lydia from what Kathryn had to say.

“I thought we’d talk about Elizabeth Blackwell.” Kathryn, with her blond hair pulled into a bun and her doe eyes blocked by her spectacles, held in her hand a very thick leather-bound book.

“Who is Elizabeth Blackwell?” Josie asked.

“The first woman doctor. She was born in England over sixty years ago, around the same time as Harriet Tubman. She was a very shy little girl, who always worried about being good. She also worried about whether or not she would ever find a husband,” Kathryn said.

Lydia frowned. “A husband? Why would she fret about that? If she was a doctor, why did she need a husband?”

“She wasn’t a doctor at the time. As a young girl, she was a lot like you. She loved to read and be outside surrounded by nature.”

“That does sound like me.” Lydia grinned at her sisters.

“Her family moved here to America when she was eleven years old. Guess how long it took to get here by boat?”

“I would say about two weeks. It’s a long way from England,” Josie guessed.

“It took almost two months!”

The girls all gasped.

“When they arrived in New York City they found the streets crowded and filthy. Moreover, the housing was not much better. There were also a lot of slaves in New York City.”

“Slavery is so disgusting,” Alexa said.

“I know, I know, but it was a fact of life then, not too long ago. Elizabeth’s family moved to New Jersey. She went to school in New York City, and it was there she began to think about what she would do with her life when she grew up. She wanted to be more than a teacher or a seamstress.”

“What’s wrong with being a teacher? You’re a great teacher, Miss Kathryn,” Josie said.

The others agreed.

“Well, I love being a teacher, but Elizabeth wanted to do something else. She wanted to be able to support herself, should she never marry. Her family moved to Cincinnati. Do you know where Cincinnati is?”

“Ohio?” Lydia answered.

“That’s right. Several months after they moved there, her father died. What do you think happened to her family once the man of the house was dead?”

“They probably didn’t have any money,” Josie said, wide-eyed.

“You’re right. The same would happen to you girls if your father passed. Elizabeth’s family started a school in their home to make money. Elizabeth did not like teaching, however, and one of her friends who was sick suggested that she become a doctor.”

“Really? But, there were no women doctors, right?” Lydia asked.

“Exactly. In addition, imagine how difficult it would be for a poor girl to become a doctor. On top of that, illness made Elizabeth feel sick. When she was twenty-six, though, she left for medical school in New York. Do you think she was afraid to leave home?”

“I wouldn’t be,” Lydia proclaimed.

“I would be. I like being at home,” Alexa said.

“Elizabeth was scared because she was such a shy person, but she was excited about the challenge, too. And she knew she was doing what God wanted her to do with her life, so that made it easier.”

“How did she know that God wanted her to be a doctor? God doesn’t care about what kind of job you have, does he?” Lydia asked.

“Oh, yes, God cares about what you do. Elizabeth felt a peace about being a doctor, and God paved the way for her to get her schooling and to become one. After she graduated, she went to Paris, France, to learn more and to work with other doctors.”

“Paris! That’s where I want to go!” Lydia drummed her hands excitedly on the wooden desktop.

“Elizabeth was not welcomed by the hospitals there, though. None of them wanted a woman doctor.”

“What did she do?” Josie asked.

“She finally found a hospital for mothers and their babies and began to work there. While there, she caught an eye disease and had to get a glass eye.”

“A glass eye! Goodness. That is the strangest thing I have ever heard,”

Alexa squealed.

“Yes, a glass eye. However, she did not let that stop her. She kept on going, even though the working conditions were not good. Later she moved back to New York. She opened an office and treated poor people at no cost, teaching them how to be clean and how to eat nutritious food.”

“That’s good. I read once that doctors didn’t use to wash their hands or their tools.” Lydia scrunched up her nose.

“That’s right, but Elizabeth worked to change that. Her sister even became a doctor, too. She also trained nurses and sent them to help during the Civil War. After that, Elizabeth went back to England to change their hospitals. Fifteen years ago she started the National Health Society.”

“What is that?” Alexa asked.

“It helps show people how to stay healthy. Elizabeth is still alive and lives in England.”

“Really? I hope to meet her someday. Is Harriet Tubman still alive?” Lydia asked.

“Yes, she lives in New York.”

“Oh, I want to meet these women,” Lydia said.

“Whether or not you ever get the opportunity to meet them, you need to learn from their examples and think and pray about what God would have you do with your life. You girls are practically women now. I won’t be with you for very long, but I hope that while I am with you, I can light a spark in you to be something great one day. Now tomorrow, we’re going to learn about Lydia Maria Child.”

“Who is that?” Lydia asked.

“No, no, you’re not going to get it out of me today. You’ll have to wait until tomorrow.”



During the next year, Kathryn taught Lydia and her sisters about many great women in history and even some about the women actively making a difference all around them.

The summer of 1886 began with Josie’s debutante ball, right after a severe hurricane in June.

In January 1887, Eliza married Ben. The Barrington family attended a birthday or wedding celebration at least once a month throughout the entire year, except for in October, when another hurricane brought torrential rainfall. Although Lydia’s wish for dancing came true, she now focused so

much of her thoughts on doing something important with her life that she paid little attention to the gentlemen with whom she danced. The waiting for her future to begin threatened to suffocate her. Lydia grew quite impatient with everyday life.

## Two

*May 1888*

*Dear Diary,*

So much has happened lately. It seems like since Eliza got married last year, things around here have not stopped changing. Nathan went to work with Father, using the farming techniques he learned at school to improve the plantation. Then he fell in love with a girl named Jacqueline Blount. She's seventeen and just moved here from Virginia with her family. I call her Jackie. She has long blond hair and gray eyes that are practically see-through.

Josie is getting ready to leave for finishing school after the summer. I don't think Alexa is going to go. She really likes it here and begs Mother to let her remain home. Mother says I'm looking more like a lady every day and says that I have matured a great deal, as well. If so, then why do I still feel as though everyone treats me like a child? Particularly Father.

I've been reading a lot because Miss Kathryn says reading will broaden my mind. The books and magazines I've been reading just make me want to leave Live Oaks even more than ever. I would miss Mother and Father very much, but I feel there is so much more to this world than what we do here at home. Miss Kathryn says that I should pray God would show me what he wants me to do with my life. I am still unclear on how I will know.

Tonight is Alexa's nineteenth birthday. She will be receiving gentlemen callers now. I have much hope that something amazing and thrilling will happen.

**W**hile Rosalyn and Kathryn stirred around the house getting ready for the big ball, eighteen-year-old Lydia rode Gabriel down the pathway to the pond. Her spine tingled at the sight of her most beloved spot. She had asked Alexa to join her, but Alexa preferred working on her sampler on the porch to fishing at the pond. Isabel Ann had packed a basket of goodies for Lydia, so she had as much time away from the house as

she wanted and did not need to rush back in fear of being tardy for the afternoon meal.

Lydia ate until her stomach nearly burst and then reclined back on the grass as the warm May breeze blew through the willow trees surrounding the pond. She closed her eyes and imagined the upcoming ball. Nathan and Jackie would be side by side, and Eliza would be there with Ben. Josie would have a full dance card, as well as Alexa, and Lydia guessed that she would probably dance a little, too. Since Lydia enjoyed dancing more than any other activity, despite the implied romantic connection, she looked forward to the evening.



That night at the birthday celebration, Alexa's feet never came to a halt, just as Lydia had guessed. Lydia danced with her father, and Nathan even managed to dance a few times with her. She savored the time with him because she understood how he wanted to dance every song with Jackie. Tiny twinges of jealousy pricked her heart because Nathan had a new best girl, but she was genuine in her approval over the girl he had chosen.

"Thanks for dancing with me tonight, brother," Lydia said as she and Nathan twirled. "You smell nice and look quite handsome."

"I do try to look nice for my ladies. What do you mean thanking me for dancing with you? I love to dance with you, Sis." He gave her a perplexed look.

"I know, but you do have Jackie now."

"And? That does not change how I feel about you. You'll always be my favorite sister." Nathan spun Lydia around the room, virtually polishing the heart pine floor with their steps.

Lydia noticed Hamilton Scarbrough, Nathan's friend who was eighteen, standing over to the side of the dance floor and casually waved at him. They had been friends for as long as she could remember. Often they fished together, rode horses, and tossed horseshoes. Hamilton never teased her as the other boys did and never seemed to mind when she tagged along with him and Nathan, and for that she was thankful.

The band began to play "Lorena," a haunting love song, one that made Lydia's heart ache in an unexplainable and unfamiliar way. While the two siblings danced, Hamilton approached. "Nathan, may I have this dance with Lydia, please?"

"Sure, but remember, I'll be standing right over there, so be a gentleman," Nathan teased his friend, watching them as he slowly walked away.

“Your brother, and my friend, seems to mind that I dance with you.” Hamilton pretended to stab himself in the heart.

“Oh, you know Nathan. He’s only trying to unnerve you. Pay him no mind.” Lydia slipped comfortably into his arms. *My, how strong his arms feel.*

“If I may, I must say you are very lovely tonight,” Hamilton complimented with a wink.

“Thank you so much, Hamilton. You look very nice, too.” Lydia’s cheeks flamed at his unanticipated flirting. His scent filled her nostrils. *He smells as Father smells when he returns from the barber.*

Hamilton waltzed Lydia around the dance floor. Her brilliant hair floated in the air as she turned. The two talked no more, only danced. *Hamilton is quite experienced in the art of dancing. I’m not entirely surprised, though. This is not the first ball he has attended. He could possibly be Nathan’s fiercest contender, if this were a competition. Something about this reminds me of Eliza’s wedding last year. I think I remember dancing with Hamilton that night. There is something familiar about the way he swirls me around and holds his hand to my back. Why haven’t I remembered dancing with him before now? Maybe because, until now, I have thought of him simply as a brother.*

As the song ended, someone stole Lydia away from Hamilton, and Josie found her way into his arms, then Alexa. Lydia smiled pleasantly when Hamilton chose to dance with her repeatedly. He only broke away out of politeness to other gentlemen.

Lydia closed her eyes as she and Hamilton moved across the floor effortlessly once again. What harm could it do to her plans of being a self-sufficient woman for her to dream about him as her prince...this once? She could see them dancing in Paris or London.

While Lydia danced with Hamilton, she caught a glimpse of her father and noticed that he watched them intensely. *I wonder how he feels to see his youngest daughter in this way.*

James O’Sullivan, a businessman from Ireland, approached her father. Soon the two began to argue. Mr. O’Sullivan’s face grew nearly as red as his hair, and his eyes looked as though they would burst out of his head. They left the room and headed toward her father’s private office. For a moment, Lydia pondered the origin of their confrontation and wondered if it involved her, as it appeared to do so. However, she knew her father’s business was just that...his.

For the rest of the evening Lydia remained virtually oblivious to everything. She owed it all to Hamilton, this friend turned potential suitor.

“Farewell, Lydia. I enjoyed myself this evening. I’ll see you at church services Sunday,” Hamilton said, kissing her hand. He whispered to her, “I can’t wait until your next birthday.”

Lydia’s heart swelled like an ocean wave as he walked out the front door.



That night Lydia tossed and turned like a ship in a storm. Her father and Mr. O’Sullivan remained on her mind, and she brooded over their disagreement. Mainly, though, she could think only of Hamilton.

*Hamilton...he’s so unlike any of Nathan’s other friends...the most handsome man I have ever met, except for Father, of course. My heart melted at the sight of his dark hair and eyes the green color of the sea. His strong chiseled jaw is so manly. I never noticed until tonight how muscular he is. There was such strength in his arms when we danced. I’m sure it’s because of his work in the fields. And he is so sweet. How has he been right in front of me all of this time, and I’ve never even noticed?*

Lydia sat suddenly upright in her bed and pulled her covers up to her chin. “What am I doing dreaming about Hamilton? That’s ghastly. He’s practically my brother. Besides, dreaming of him will ruin my plans for my future.” She slid down, adjusted her pillows, and searched for a comfortable spot in the bed. “I have to admit, thinking about him brings a bit of enjoyment to my otherwise dull life.”

Lydia eventually settled in her bed, rolled over, and once again shut her eyes. She dreamed of the handsome prince named Hamilton, who left behind all of her sisters and chose her to be his fair maiden. Together they would discover the world....

## About the Author



**SHERRI WILSON JOHNSON** has enjoyed creative writing since she was a young girl and has always loved spending summer vacations at the beach. *To Dance Once More* is a culmination of those two loves. A special project originating from Sherri's love of pure romance, and inspired by the love stories of her ancestors, *To Dance Once More* sets out hoping to prove that true love still exists. Sherri candidly speaks of

the purity of not only the heroine, but also the hero, and wholeheartedly desires to point others to Jesus through her words.

Sherri has been married since 1988 and has homeschooled her children since 1997. She lives in Georgia with her family and pets. She is a graduate of the Christian Writers Guild writing course and has been published in *Creation Illustrated* magazine, *The Link* Homeschool newspaper, *Homeschooling Today's Homeschooling Helper*, and The Writing Academy's *Daily Devotions for Writers*. Sherri has written two Inspirational Romances in addition to *To Dance Once More*, two self-published Bible study guides, and various other resources for homeschoolers and churches.

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