

*When
Mercy
Rains*

Kim Vogel
A NOVEL
Sawyer

Praise for
When Mercy Rains

“A compelling cast of authentic characters, heart-wrenching mistakes and responses, and love, redemption, and restoration make *When Mercy Rains* by Kim Vogel Sawyer a must-read masterpiece.”

—MONA HODGSON, author of *The Sinclair Sisters of Cripple Creek* series, *The Quilted Heart* omnibus, and *Prairie Song*

“Kim Vogel Sawyer paints characters with exquisite detail emotionally and physically, then sets them in a story that transports the reader into a world equally as appealing as the people who live there. A captivating read, leaving you wanting more.”

—LAURINE SNELLING, author of *To Everything a Season* in the Red River series, *Wake the Dawn*, and *Heaven Sent Rain*

“*When Mercy Rains* takes readers on a remarkable journey into the lives of the Zimmermans, a Mennonite family whose secrets threaten to destroy them. With a compelling style, Kim Vogel Sawyer weaves a story of love, compassion, forgiveness, redemption, and a family determined to discover and accept the truth. This novel captivates and challenges—a wonderful read.”

—JUDITH MILLER, best-selling author of the Home to Amana Series

“Perhaps you’ve heard the old phrase ‘You can’t go home again.’ Kim Vogel Sawyer proves it wrong in her beautifully written novel *When Mercy Rains*. Intriguing, tender, bittersweet...this heart-wrenching story took me to places I didn’t even realize I wanted to go. Highly recommended.”

—JANICE HANNA THOMPSON, author of *Fools Rush In* and *The Dream Dress*

“*When Mercy Rains* is a beautiful testimony to the power of forgiveness. With three generations of characters to fall in love with, Kim Vogel Sawyer’s new novel kept me turning pages—and discovering surprises—to the very end. I especially enjoyed the Kansas setting and the restoration of a homestead that was a beautiful reflection of the restoration of hearts and minds.”

—DEBORAH RANEY, author of *The Face of the Earth* and the
Chicory Inn Novels series

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BOOKS BY KIM VOGEL SAWYER

The Grace That Leads Us Home

What Once Was Lost

Just As I Am

Echoes of Mercy

Through the Deep Waters

THE ZIMMERMAN RESTORATION TRILOGY

When Mercy Rains

When Grace Sings

When Mercy Rains

Kim Vogel
A NOVEL
Sawyer

The Zimmerman Restoration Trilogy, Book 1



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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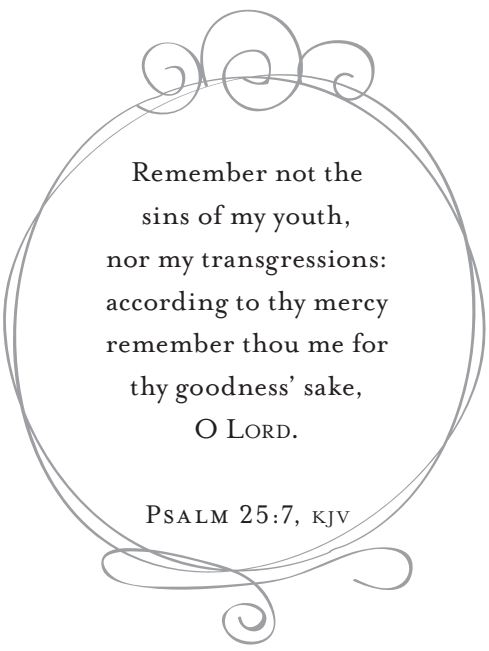
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*For Kaitlyn,
who forgives readily and remembers the slight no more*





Remember not the
sins of my youth,
nor my transgressions:
according to thy mercy
remember thou me for
thy goodness' sake,
O LORD.

PSALM 25:7, KJV



Prologue

Suzanne
Spring 1994

The hiss of approaching tires on wet pavement broke the tense silence between the mother and daughter seated on the bus-stop bench. Suzy flicked a look at Mother and dared a timorous comment. “Here it comes.” Now that her leave-taking was upon her, would her mother’s disapproving demeanor soften?

The lines of Mother’s mouth remained etched in a stern line, the furrows between her brows forming a V so deep it might never depart. Suzy hunched into her wool coat—a coat far too cloying for the damp May dawn but also too bulky to fit in her small cardboard suitcase. She’d be gone well into the winter months, and Mother insisted she’d need it so she should wear it. And she always did what her mother said.

Well, almost always. Who knew one foolish mistake could hold such far-reaching consequences? *I’m so sorry, God.*

The bus groaned to a stop at the curb, and Mother curled her hand around Suzy’s elbow, forcing her to rise. Although Mother’s grip was hard, impersonal, Suzy welcomed it. Her ordinarily demonstrative mother hadn’t touched her even once in the past two weeks, as if fearful Suzy’s stains would rub off. So she pressed her elbow against her rib cage, needing to feel the pressure of Mother’s

work-roughened fingers against her flesh. But the coat proved too thick a barrier. Suzy blinked rapidly.

“Get your case.”

The moment Suzy caught the handle of the old suitcase, Mother propelled her through the gray drizzle toward the bus. The slap of the soles of their matching black oxfords sent up dirty droplets from the rain-soaked sidewalk, peppering their tan hosiery. The dark spots reminded Suzy of the dark blotch now and forever on her soul. She pushed the thought aside and looked into the opening created by the unfolding of the bus door.

The driver glanced from Mother to Suzy, seeming to focus on their white mesh caps and dangling ribbons—Mother’s black, Suzy’s white. Accustomed to curious looks from those outside her Mennonite faith, Suzy didn’t wince beneath the man’s puzzled scowl, but she battled the desire to melt into the damp concrete when Mother spoke in a strident tone.

“I am Abigail Zimmerman, and this is my daughter. She is traveling one-way to Indianapolis.”

One-way... Suzy swallowed hard.

Mother gave her elbow a little shake. “Show him the ticket, Suzanne.”

Suzanne. Not Suzy as she’d been tenderly called her entire life. She gulped again and drew the crumpled ticket from her pocket.

The driver eased himself from the seat and plucked the rectangle of paper from Suzy’s icy fingers. He stared at it for a moment and then bobbed his head and waved a hand in invitation. “Come on aboard. Long drive ahead of you.”

Suzy gritted her teeth to hold back a cry of agony. He didn’t realize how long. She turned to Mother, silently praying the mother who had dried her tears and bandaged her childhood scuffs would reappear, would read the fear in her eyes and offer a hug. A kind word. A hint of forgiveness.

Mother leaned close, and Suzy’s heart leaped with hope. “The people at the...in Indianapolis know what to do. You do what they say.” Mother’s harsh

whisper raised a slight cloud of condensation around her face, softening the fierce furrows of anger etched at her eyes and mouth.

"I will." Questions Suzy had fearfully held inside pressed for release. What had Mother and Dad told Clete, Shelley, and little Sandra? Did the fellowship know she was leaving? Would she be allowed to call home?

"Afterward you can come to Arborville again. It will be as though this never happened." Mother took a step back, shoving her balled fists into the pockets of her lightweight trench coat.

Tears flooded Suzy's eyes, distorting her vision. The suitcase encumbered one arm, but she lifted the other, her fingers reaching fleetingly toward her mother. "Mother, I—"

"At least you will be able to bless your cousin Andrew and his wife. God will redeem your sin. Now go, Suzanne." Mother jerked her chin toward the rumbling bus. "Go and put this unpleasantness behind us."

Behind *us*... Suzy's shame had spilled over and tainted her entire family. She bowed her head, the weight of her burden too much to bear.

"I will see you afterward."

Mother's words sealed Suzy's fate. With a heavy heart, she climbed the stairs, the unwieldy suitcase and her trembling limbs making her clumsy. She trudged down the narrow, dim aisle past snoozing passengers to the very last bench and slid in. Hugging the suitcase to her aching chest—to her womb, which bore the evidence of her shame—she hung her head and toyed with the plastic handle of the suitcase rather than clearing a spot on the steam-clouded window to see if Mother might wave good-bye.

The bus lurched forward, jolting Suzy in the seat. She closed her eyes tight as a wave of nausea rolled over her. Her thoughts screamed, *Wait! Let me off!* She didn't want to go so far away. She needed her mother. She would miss her father and sisters and brother.

And Paul.

Her mother's final comment echoed in her mind. "*I will see you afterward.*"

After Suzy delivered this child and handed it to others to raise. The ache in her chest heightened until she could barely draw a breath. She leaned her forehead against the cool glass and allowed the long-held tears to slip quietly down her cheeks. She would leave her home in Kansas, and she would count the days until she could put this nightmare behind her and go back to being Mother and Dad's Suzy again.



Chapter 1

*Suzanne
Twenty Years Later*

Suzanne Zimmerman balanced a clipboard against her hip and recorded the milliliters of antibiotic-infused solution administered via Mr. Birney's IV, then she checked the box next to "pain medicine dispensed" and confirmed the time on her wristwatch before writing it down. Her clerical duties complete, she slid the clipboard into its plastic pocket on the wall and moved to the side of the tall, railed bed.

The blinds were drawn against the night, and only one small fluorescent bulb glowed from a panel above the bed, but the dim beam of light was sufficient. To her relief, Mr. Birney's face had lost its ashen appearance and his breathing was much less labored than when he'd been admitted three days ago.

As she looked down at him, his eyes fluttered open. His gaze drifted around the room, confusion marring his brow, but then he fixed his faded gray eyes on her face, and his expression cleared.

She touched the man's wrinkled hand. "I'm sorry. Did I disturb you, Mr. Birney?"

"Call me Ed. 'Mr. Birney' makes me feel like some old man."

Suzanne swallowed a smile. According to his file, Mr. Birney had turned eighty-two a month ago. He spoke in a crusty tone, but she admired his spunk. And she was thankful for it. He'd need spunk to recover from his bout of pneumonia. "Ed then. Are you comfortable?"

“As comfortable as I can be in this crazy contraption. Hard as a rock and folding me in half like a pretzel. A bed like this belongs in a medieval torture chamber.”

Reflecting upon the proverb about laughter being good medicine, Suzanne teased, “Well now, you guessed our secret. We purchase our beds from Torture Chamber Supply Company. After all, if you’re too comfortable, you won’t want to get well and go home.”

Mr. Birney gave a brief snort of laughter that ended in a cough. He shook his head, the lines of his jowls shifting with the motion. “Torture Chamber Supply Company. That’s a good one.” His eyebrows beetled, real concern chasing away the glint of humor. “About goin’ home...I’ll be doing that, won’t I?”

Compassion filled Suzanne. She looked directly into Mr. Birney’s watery eyes and spoke with great confidence. “You’ll be going home. No need to worry.”

He heaved a rattling sigh, then set his jaw in a stubborn jut. “Wasn’t worried. Just wondering. Somebody’s gotta keep the bird feeders filled, you know.”

“That’s true.” Suzanne was glad he had a reason to keep living. So many of the elderly patients who came to Mennonite Manor Hospital and Recovery Home had no motivation to get better. Attitude played a significant role in recuperation, and she suspected Ed Birney would be back in his little home feeding the birds very soon given his plucky attitude.

Apparently reassured, Mr. Birney closed his eyes. Suzanne remained beside his bed for a few more minutes, watching the rise and fall of his chest, then sent up a quick prayer for his full recovery before stepping into the quiet hallway.

In less than half an hour, the day-shift workers would begin to arrive and the hospital corridors would buzz with activity, but night shift was quieter, peaceful. She’d worked the graveyard shift for so many years now, she had no trouble catching her sleep during the daytime hours and couldn’t imagine any other schedule.

She rounded the corner to the nurses’ station, the rubber soles of her white

lace-up shoes squeaking on the freshly waxed tile. A familiar head of short black waves showed over the edge of the tall counter, and Suzanne gave a little skip to speed her steps. “Linda! You’re back!” As she stepped behind the counter, the hospital’s longtime bookkeeper rose and held her arms open. Suzanne wrapped her friend’s bulky form in a hug.

“Course I am.” Linda banged her thick palm against Suzanne’s shoulder several times before pulling loose. “Counted down the days ’til my vacation was finally over and I could head on back here. Whole time I was gone I worried the place would fall apart without me, but look at this—the walls’re still standing and nobody seems the worse for wear.” She balled her fists on her hips and pasted a fierce scowl on her face. “But these files are a mess and nobody bothered to refill the candy dish. How’m I s’posed to get anything done if I haven’t got any black cats to chew on?”

Suzanne laughed. “You and your licorice cats. I’ll stop by Sarah’s Sweet Treats on my way home this morning and pick up a bag for you.” Surely Linda’s purchases of licorice cats had kept the little candy shop open over the years.

“And that’s why you’re my favorite.” Linda released a deep, throaty chuckle. She dropped back into the wheeled chair and began organizing the manila files scattered across the long desk.

Suzanne leaned against the edge of the counter and watched Linda work. “Did you enjoy your vacation? I bet the Caribbean islands were beautiful.” Every year, Linda and her husband visited an exotic location for her retreat from work. On more than one occasion they’d invited Suzanne to join them, but the cost was always beyond her means. Even so, she wouldn’t trade the years of raising her daughter for a hundred Caribbean cruises.

“Beautiful and *hot*.” Linda fanned herself with both palms, pretending to pant. “I told Tom next year we’re going to Alaska. Polar bears instead of palm trees. Wanna come?”

A vacation with Linda and her teddy bear of a husband would be pure delight. She loved both of them—they’d become her surrogate parents over the years. But she shook her head in gentle refusal.

Linda snorted and returned to her file sorting. “Girl, you’ve got enough vacation time saved up to take off for six months.”

“Seven,” Suzanne corrected with a smile.

Linda rolled her eyes. “But do you go anywhere? Huh-uh. Work, mothering, church, work, mothering, church... That’s your whole life.” She gave Suzanne’s elbow a light smack. “You need to do something fun. Live a little. The Bible says, ‘All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.’”

Suzanne burst out laughing. “The Bible says that?”

“So maybe the good Lord Almighty didn’t say it, but it’s good advice all the same.” Linda’s round black face pursed into a worried frown. “You know I’m proud of you, Suzanne. Heavenly days, you beat all the odds, having that baby when you were hardly more than a baby yourself and then getting your nurse training without a family to support you. You raised Alexa right, and you made something of yourself. When I volunteer down at the crisis pregnancy center, I hold you up as an example of what those scared girls can be if they put their minds to it.”

Suzanne lowered her head, both pleased and embarrassed. With God’s help and the loving support of friends like Linda, she’d managed to carve a decent life for Alexa and herself. Even so, the stigma of once having been an unwed teenage mother still lingered. A part of her resisted accepting Linda’s praise.

Linda went on in her husky voice. “But that girl of yours is old enough to fend for herself now. Why not take some time off? Do something for yourself for a change?” She leaned close, her dark eyes fervent. “You’ve earned it, Suzanne.”

The mutter of voices and patter of footsteps signaled the arrival of day-shift workers. Suzanne bent forward and deposited a kiss on Linda’s plump cheek. “I’ll think about it,” she said, then turned to greet the incoming nurse.

She updated the day nurse on medications prescribed to patients during the night, listened to one worker’s complaint about the hospital’s failure to change to computers in lieu of the old record-and-file system, and reminded her—as she’d done dozens of times before—of the small, mission-minded

organization's limited budget, completed and initialed her reports, and then finally headed to the bank of lockers for her coat and purse.

As she pushed her arms into her trench coat, Linda's suggestion to take some time off whispered through her mind. She'd promised to think about it, but thinking was all she'd do. She wouldn't take time away from the hospital. Here she was needed. Respected. And busy, leaving her no time to reflect on the past or how things might have been.

She slipped her purse strap over her shoulder and stepped out into the cool dawn. Beneath a rose-colored sky, she crossed the street to the small, graveled parking lot used by hospital employees and planned her morning. Breakfast with Alexa, a quick jaunt to Sarah's Sweet Treats for a half pound—well, maybe a pound—of licorice cats, then pajamas and bed.

She slammed the door on her late-model sedan, sealing away Linda's suggestion. Her friend meant well, bless her loving heart, but Suzanne was satisfied with her life of work, mothering, and church. God had gifted her beyond all deserving. She had no desire for anything more.



The alarm clock's buzz roused Suzanne from a sound sleep. She slapped it silent, then rolled over and stretched like a lazy cat. After tossing back the covers and slipping her feet to the floor in one smooth movement, she sat on the edge of the mattress for a few seconds and allowed herself to awaken by increments. Yawned. Rubbed her eyes. Yawned again.

Finally awake, she padded to the window and rolled up the blinds. Late-afternoon sunlight poured into the room, making her blink, but she welcomed the splash of brightness. During the winter months she often awakened to a black sky, making her feel as though the sun never shone. But now spring had arrived with its longer days and warmer evenings. Before long she and Alexa would be able to sit on their tiny balcony in the evenings, sip tea, and chat while

watching the sun set over Franklin. One of their favorite activities. They'd always been content with little pleasures.

The clatter of silverware found its way past her closed door. Alexa was setting the table, so apparently supper would be ready soon. Knowing how her daughter disliked letting a meal grow cold, Suzanne quickly showered then dressed in a work uniform—flowered scrub top over a long straight skirt, anklets, and her comfortable oxfords. She brushed out her damp hair, braided it into a single plait, and then twisted it into a bun on the back of her head. After running a soapy cloth over her face and brushing her teeth, she made her bed and then headed to the kitchen.

Alexa looked up from chopping a red pepper into thin slices and smiled. "You're just in time to turn the chicken breasts on the grill."

Suzanne raised her eyebrows. "You started the grill? Kind of early, isn't it?" They'd only turned the calendar to April three days ago.

Alexa shrugged, sending her long ponytail over her shoulder. The silky tresses, as richly brown as a mink's fur, fell straight and sheeny down her slender back. "The sun warmed up the balcony, and I couldn't resist having our first cookout." She bobbed her chin toward the sliding doors at the far end of their small combination sitting and dining room. "Better go turn 'em before they scorch."

Suzanne grabbed the two-pronged fork from the end of the counter and stepped onto the balcony. The aroma that rose when she lifted the grill's cover made her stomach roll over in eagerness. She poked the thickest chicken breast with the fork, and clear juices ran out to sizzle on the hot grid. She stuck her head inside and announced, "They're done."

Alexa bustled over with a plate, and Suzanne transferred the chicken from the grill, then turned off the burner and closed the gauge on the propane tank. She entered the apartment just as Alexa carried the bowl of salad to the round table tucked in their tiny dining alcove.

"I hope you don't mind just having chicken and a salad." Alexa lifted a pitcher of tea from the middle of the table and poured it over ice cubes in two

jelly jar glasses. “A light supper will leave room for what comes later.” She wagged her eyebrows teasingly.

Suzanne slipped into her chair, smiling. She’d gotten spoiled over the past years since Alexa had taken on the responsibility of cooking. Her daughter was especially adept at creating delectable desserts. Fortunately all of her hallway walking at the hospital worked off the extra calories. “What did you concoct this time?”

“A triple-layer torte with both chocolate and strawberry fillings.”

Suzanne nearly groaned. “Oh, that sounds rich. Where did you find the recipe?”

Alexa offered another glib shrug and plopped into her chair. Suzanne would never cease to be amazed at how Alexa could move so quickly and still appear graceful. “I sort of made it up. If it turns out, you can take the leftovers to work and share.”

Suzanne had no doubt she’d be sharing with her coworkers. She held her hand toward Alexa, and her daughter took hold. They bowed their heads in unison, and Suzanne offered a short prayer of thanks for the meal. Alexa used a pair of plastic tongs to serve the salad—a combination of colorful chopped vegetables, walnuts, and dried cranberries that was almost too pretty to eat.

Suzanne lifted her knife and fork and cut into the tender chicken breast. At the first bite, she murmured, “Mm...how did you season this?”

Alexa swallowed a bite and took a sip of tea before answering. “I brushed them with olive oil, then sprinkled on dried parsley, basil, a little seasoned salt, and some garlic pepper. I was afraid the garlic pepper might be overboard, but it doesn’t taste bad at all.”

“It tastes great.” Suzanne stabbed up another bite.

“I used the same seasonings and olive oil for the salad dressing but added some fresh-squeezed orange juice and a little bit of sugar.”

“Sweetheart, everything is wonderful, as always.” Suzanne gave Alexa’s wrist a squeeze, pride filling her. “You’re going to make a wonderful homemaker for a lucky man one day.”

A wistful expression crossed Alexa's youthful face. "Well, you keep praying for my husband-to-be, Mom, and I'll keep my eyes open. So far he's stayed pretty well hidden."

Suzanne forced a light chuckle, but inwardly she cringed. If she'd raised Alexa in the Old Order sect, she'd probably already be published to marry. At nineteen, she was considered old enough to be a wife and mother. Although Suzanne prayed daily for a loving, God-honoring husband and faith-filled home for her daughter, she didn't mind waiting another year or two for Alexa to find the man God had planned for her. She liked having her close. As Alexa had grown older, she'd become more than a daughter—she'd become Suzanne's best friend. Would they be as close if—

She chased away her inner reflections by asking about Alexa's work. Alexa shared a few cute anecdotes about the children who came through the line at the elementary school where she helped prepare and serve lunch each day, then Suzanne told her about Mr. Birney and asked her to pray for his full recovery—as he'd said, someone needed to fill the bird feeders. Their supper hour passed quickly, and when they'd finished, Alexa carried their empty plates to the sink, then removed the torte from the refrigerator.

As Alexa sliced into the towering dessert, she said, "Oh, Mom, I almost forgot. You got a letter today. From Arborville."

"Really?" Letters were rare, usually arriving around Christmastime, the time of year when families were expected to contact one another.

"I put it on top of the daily newspaper." She shook her head, pursing her lips in a what-is-this-world-coming-to expression. "Read the article on page three about the abandoned baby a kitchen worker found in the Dumpster behind a restaurant. I can't believe someone would just leave a newborn in the trash that way..."

Suzanne experienced an inner jolt of reaction to Alexa's dismayed comment, but she didn't respond. She knew all too well how children were tossed aside by unfeeling or desperate parents. As she crossed to the far side of the room and picked up the long envelope, she offered a prayer for God to provide

a loving home for the little foundling. Every child deserved to be loved and nurtured by caring parents.

Then she turned her attention to the envelope, and her hands trembled. The return address said Cletus Zimmerman in scrawling penmanship. Clete had never written before. Letters always came from Mother.

"Cletus is your brother, right?" Alexa slid a sliver of cake onto a dessert plate and licked a smudge of icing from her thumb.

Suzanne nodded woodenly.

Alexa snickered. "He should be a doctor with handwriting like that. What does he say?"

"I don't know. I haven't opened it yet."

"Well, don't just hold it. Open it, goofy." Alexa's teasing grin did little to calm Suzanne's rattled nerves.

Suzanne managed a weak smile. She peeled back the flap and removed two sheets of yellow notepad paper. Clete's messy scrawl covered the front and back sides of both pages. Mother's letters, which were meant to encompass a year's worth of news, never filled more than one sheet of paper. Comparatively speaking, Clete had written a book.

Alexa touched Suzanne's arm. She jumped in surprise, unaware Alexa had left the kitchen. A soft smile curved her daughter's lips. "Mom, sit down and read your letter. I'll put the cake back in the fridge, and we'll have it when you're done, okay?"

Suzanne cupped Alexa's smooth cheek in a silent thank-you. Then she sank onto the couch cushion, flicked on the table lamp, and angled Clete's letter toward the light. She read slowly, frowning at times as she struggled to make sense of her brother's sloppy handwriting, but eventually she reached the end. By the time she'd finished, her desire to sample Alexa's triple-layer torte had fled. She wouldn't be able to swallow a bite.



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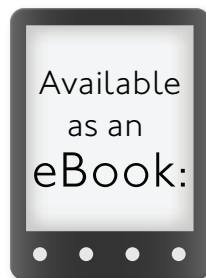
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