

Praise for Room for Hope

"Kim Vogel Sawyer has written a riveting tale of loss, betrayal, and ultimate triumph. Newly widowed Neva Shilling is shocked to learn that her husband led a double life. Shock turns to dismay when she realizes how his deception will forever change her life and the lives of her children. These endearing characters will win your heart as they struggle to make room for hope and to learn the power of love."

 Margaret Brownley, best-selling author of The Brides of Last Chance Ranch series and the Undercover Ladies series

"Neva Shilling is a beacon of hope to everyone around her. But when her own world falls apart, how will she find the strength to keep going? Kim Vogel Sawyer's writing shines in *Room for Hope*, a beautiful illustration of the way bitterness can blossom into grace . . . and unexpected redemption."

—CAROL Cox, author of *A Woman's Place* and *Practically Christmas*

"The Great Depression was an era that required much grit and a great will to survive. Kim Vogel Sawyer has captured that spirit with characters full of determination, rich in heart, and strong in a sense of compassion. *Room for Hope* is not merely a nice novel or a touching story. It is a story of our heritage, a story of what it takes to live a life of mercy and love for the least of these. It is a story of reliance on God during the darkest of days. It is a look into our past to see that, truly, we are not all that different from our grandparents. It is our story."

—Susie Finkbeiner, author of A Cup of Dust:

A Novel of the Dust Bowl

"In *Room for Hope* Kim Vogel Sawyer's characters face the Great Depression from a place where they are able to thrive a little and help others. These characters pulled me into the story and wouldn't let me go until I read the last page. I highly recommend this book."

—Lena Nelson Dooley, author of the award-winning McKenna's Daughters series

"Kim Vogel Sawyer's historical novels always delve deep into the characters' hearts. *Room for Hope* is a beautiful story with an unusual twist. Yes, I cried. It took me back to the days of the Great Depression and showed me how one woman, through her faith, coped with devastating pain. A definite page-turner, this story kept my attention to the very end."

—Susan Page Davis, author of *Captive Trail* and *The Outlaw Takes a Bride*



BOOKS BY KIM VOGEL SAWYER

What Once Was Lost
The Grace That Leads Us Home
Echoes of Mercy
Just As I Am
Through the Deep Waters

The Zimmerman Restoration Trilogy

When Mercy Rains
When Grace Sings
When Love Returns



Kim Vogel Sawyer



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All Scripture quotations or paraphrases are taken from the King James Version.

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For my quiverful of granddarlings—
Alana, Connor, Ethan, Logan, Rylin, Jacob, Cole,
Adrianna, Kaisyn, and Kendall—
with prayers that you find the strength to stand for right
by leaning on the Father



He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.

ISAIAH 40:29

Buffalo Creek, Kansas September 30, 1936

Neva Gaines Shilling

romatic steam wisped around Neva's chin as she spooned up a bit of broth from the savory vegetable stew simmering on the Magic Chef range. She blew on the spoonful—three careful puffs of breath—then poured the broth into her mouth and held the warm liquid on her tongue for a moment before she swallowed. She gave a nod. Perfect. The beef bone had flavored the soup so well Warren might not even notice the absence of meat.

A light *clack-clack* carried from the adjoining dining room. Silverware meeting the walnut tabletop. She settled the lid on the kettle, turned down the flame under the pot to a wavering rim of blue, and called through the kitchen doorway to the dining room, "Belle, remember to set four places. Your father's due home tonight."

Neva's heart gave a joyful skip even as melancholy threatened. The days stretched so long and lonely during Warren's away weeks and seemed to race by when he was home. But weren't they blessed to own a successful business given the country's economic troubles? She shouldn't complain.

"Oh, goodie!" Belle's exclamation, accompanied by a girlish giggle, made her sound much younger than her fourteen years. "Will he bring presents, do you think?"

Neva released a short chuckle. "Doesn't he always bring presents?" Elaborate gifts—gifts that made the women in town look at her with longing and envy. But she always told them she'd be satisfied just to have

her husband home every night, under her roof, instead of traipsing across Mitchell County in his gaily painted sales wagon. She meant it, too.

Belle peeked around the corner. "Should I set out the good plates then?"

They only used the good plates—a matching set of French Haviland china with delicate clovers of freshest green painted around the edges of the pure white dishware—for special occasions. But Warren's return after a month on the road was reason enough for celebration.

"Yes," Neva said, then frowned. "Mind you don't chip the plates."

"Of course not, Momma." The girl slipped away.

Neva crossed to the Frigidaire in the corner, the soles of her brown oxfords squeaking on the sparkling clean linoleum, and peeked into the glazed ceramic pitcher shaped like a little Dutch girl. Still half-full of milk, more than enough for their supper. Thank goodness Bud hadn't drained the pitcher dry the way he'd been doing lately.

She shook her head in indulgence as she thought about her son's voracious appetite. He must be entering a growth spurt. Would he be as tall as his father someday? Everyone said the twins resembled their mother, with slender builds, wavy nutmeg hair, hazel eyes, and narrow faces. Having Belle resemble her was fine, but she wouldn't mind if Bud grew to be as tall and broad-shouldered as Warren. Such a handsome man, her Warren.

Hurry home, dear. I miss you . . .

She plucked out a bowl of butter and a fat jar of raspberry preserves from the icebox and glanced at the green-and-cream enamel clock ticking on the kitchen's floral-papered wall. Almost seven. Bud would finish sweeping and straightening the store soon, and then—her pulse gave a flutter—Warren's wagon would rattle up the alley. She hoped he wouldn't be late.

The biscuits were done and waiting in the stove's warming oven. As much as she loved the luxury of her six-burner, double-oven range—a Christmas gift from Warren last year—she'd learned the warming oven sometimes browned bread beyond recognition. Warren liked his biscuits

feather light, not as firm as charcoal briquettes. And Neva always strove to please her husband in the little things. It was the least she could do, considering how she'd failed him in the biggest thing of all.

Belle breezed into the kitchen. "Momma—"

Bud, with a match caught in the corner of his mouth and wearing one of Warren's castoff straw hats shadowing his eyes, thumped in on his sister's heels. "Ma—"

Neva burst out laughing. "You two . . ." They'd come into the world nearly on top of each other and fourteen years later still operated in synchronization. As she always did, Neva turned to Belle. "Ladies first."

Bud scowled and folded his arms over his chest but kept his lips pressed together.

"The table's all set with the good dishes and linen napkins. Should I use the candlesticks, too?" Her green-gray eyes sparkled. "It would be . . ." Belle hunched her shoulders and giggled. "Romantic."

Bud rolled his eyes. "'Romantic,' she says. Been spending too many nickels at the picture show."

Neva frowned at her son, but inwardly she agreed. Belle did tend to squander her weekly allowance at the movie theater. The picture shows, while entertaining, rarely depicted life as it was in reality. Belle was so naive, so trusting. The bigger-than-life images on the screen might be detrimental to her. Neva intended to discuss the issue with Warren. She answered Belle. "The candles will let us save on the gaslights. So go ahead and set them out."

Belle scurried off, her patent slippers pattering against the gleaming floorboards and her thick braid flopping against her spine.

"My turn now?"

Bud's wry question pulled Neva's attention to her son. "Yes." She moved to the stove and picked up the wooden spoon, ready to give the thick stew another stir. If the bottom scorched, it would ruin the whole pot.

He pushed the hat to the back of his head, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trousers, and scuffed across the floor toward her, his sauntering gait similar to Hopalong Cassidy's. Neva swallowed a smile. Bud

enjoyed the picture shows, too. "Just wanted you to know I found the place where that mouse's been gettin' in. Plugged it with a wad of steel wool. He won't be chewing through any more cornmeal sacks."

Neva clapped the lid into place and beamed at Bud. "What a relief!" Thanks to the little pest's intrusion, they'd had to discard three twenty-pound sacks of finely ground meal—a sizable loss. "Your father will be so pleased."

Pink splashed Bud's face. "Think so?"

Smiling at him, Neva wiped her hands on her apron and then gripped his upper arms. "Of course! He's always proud when you take care of things in the store."

He shrugged. "Figuring out where a mouse came in isn't so much."

She removed the match from his mouth and gave his chin a bump with her knuckles. "Such a thing to say. It's a big thing, Bud—something a shopkeeper does to protect his goods. Just wait. Your father will tell you how important it was when he gets home."

A rare, slow grin climbed Bud's cheek.

"Now go get washed up. We'll eat as soon as—" The clatter of a wagon's wheels carried from the alley through the open kitchen window. A smile captured Neva's face, bringing a light laugh of pure joy with it. She dropped the match into the little metal holder on the windowsill and waved her hands at Bud. "That must be your father now. Get Belle, and we'll go welcome him home."

Neva followed Belle, Bud close behind, down the enclosed staircase to the store level and then up the hallway leading to the back door. Belle came to a sudden halt, and Neva had to grab the wall to keep from plowing into her daughter's back. "Belle!"

Belle whirled, disappointment tingeing her features. "It's not Poppa."

Frowning, Neva peered through the square glass window. An unfamiliar wagon piled high with various furniture pieces and crates sat in the yard.

Bud stared out and released a soft snort, "Looks like another drifter

wanting to trade for supplies." He straightened his shoulders and puffed out his chest. "Want me to handle it, Ma?"

"No, no." The ruddy, big-boned man sitting on the wagon seat probably wouldn't respond well to a smooth-faced youth telling him they weren't interested in a trade. She gave Belle a little nudge toward Bud. "You two go up. Wash your hands, Bud—and Belle, keep the stew from scorching. I'll take care of the customer."

The pair trooped toward the staircase, and Neva stepped into the yard. The early-evening sun hovered above the horizon, casting long shadows over the wagon and its driver, but two lanterns hung from hooks at the front corners of the high-sided bed and sent a soft glow over the contents. Neva had been a shopkeeper long enough to recognize quality when she saw it. This man must have had a flourishing business at some time to afford such nice things. But no matter. Warren insisted on cash only for strangers to Buffalo Creek—no credit and no trades. Even when Warren was away, she honored her husband's preference.

She steeled herself to deny the man's request as she crossed to the edge of the wagon. "Good evening. May I help you?"

The man whipped off his cowboy-style hat and ran his hand through his thick, dark hair. "I hope so, ma'am. My name's Jesse Caudel. I'm looking for Neva Gaines."

She hadn't been called Neva Gaines since she said "I do" to Warren more than fifteen years ago. But she wove her fingers together and nodded. "You've found her then."

Mr. Caudel blew out a breath that held both relief and resignation. He left his hat on the wagon seat and slowly climbed down. Then he stood before her, feet widespread and hands resting at his waist. A silver star glinted on his left patch pocket. Not a drifter, but a law official. Worry began a wild dance in her stomach.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I have to tell you your brother and his missus passed away last week."

Neva drew back. Brother? She didn't have a brother. Or did she? She'd

been told by the orphanage directors—a warm, wonderful couple she called Pa and Ma Jonnson—that she was an only child. But maybe they hadn't known she had a brother. Or maybe she was the wrong Neva Gaines.

She sought a way to ask for more information without sounding as befuldled as she felt. "I . . . um . . ." Heat rose in her face.

Apparently the officer took pity on her, because his lips curved into a sad smile. "I know you're probably plenty shocked."

Bewilderment rather than shock plagued her, but she nodded anyway.

"They succumbed to botulism. It went pretty quick, so they didn't suffer overmuch."

Neva shuddered. Even though she didn't know the people, she wouldn't wish such an unpleasant passing on anyone. If they couldn't be cured, she thanked God they hadn't lingered.

Mr. Caudel went on, his tone low and compassionate. "His missus went first. When your brother knew he'd be joining her soon, he gave instruction for word to be sent to you, along with all his worldly possessions. Well . . ." He lowered his head, scuffing the toe of his boot in the dirt. "At least the possessions that weren't sold to cover his debt. Sheriff's officials auctioned his store building in Beloit, his stock, and some of the furniture from his house. Even so, there was quite a bit left." He gestured to the wagon.

Neva glanced across the wagon's contents again. So the man wasn't trading, he was delivering. From a deceased brother she didn't even know she had. She turned a puzzled look on him. "Are you sure this is meant to come to me?"

He pulled a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and held it out. "This says 'Deliver to Neva Gaines at Main Street Mercantile, Buffalo Creek, Kansas.' Is there another Main Street Mercantile in Buffalo Creek run by Neva Gaines?"

"N-no. Then . . . it's true." She needed to learn more about her brother who knew about her but had never made himself known to her. That

could come later, when Warren was home. In the meantime where would she put everything? Their apartment above the store was already well furnished thanks to Warren's extravagance, their barn barely accommodated Warren's merchant wagon and horse, and they didn't have room in the store for big items like bureaus and bedsteads. She stood speechless.

The man jammed the paper back into his pocket. "I'm sorry you didn't know about your brother and sister-in-law's service. For some reason he didn't want you notified about the burial. But I can tell you most of the town showed up. The headstone carver even donated the stones for their graves. That's how much everybody liked the Shillings."

She shot him a startled look. "His name wasn't Gaines?"

"No, ma'am. Shilling—Warren Shilling and his wife, Violet."

"Warren and his . . . " Neva's knees buckled.

"Whoa there!" Mr. Caudel caught her before she crumpled to the ground. He slipped his arm around her waist and guided her toward the back stoop. His hold on her could be considered brazen, but his firm, strong arm was too needed for her to protest the familiarity.

He eased her onto the little bench sitting next to the water pump and then hunkered in front of her. "Guess the meaning of it all finally caught up to you, huh? Do you need a drink?"

Their sweet well water couldn't wash away the terrible pictures forming in her mind. "You said . . . Warren. Warren and . . ." She closed her eyes. *Dear Lord, this is a nightmare*. Warren—her Warren!—had another wife? And now he was dead? Bile rose in her throat. How would she tell Bud and Belle? What would she tell them? She couldn't divulge the awful truth!

She gulped. "My b-brother—Warren—he had a store in Beloit?"

The man remained crouched in front of her knees, his hands braced on either side of her hips as if ready to grab her if she toppled. "A nice one, right on the main street. And he also did some traveling in a merchant wagon." He grimaced. "I kinda forgot. The merchant wagon and horse got sold, too. That wagon over yonder belongs to a liveryman from Beloit."

She shifted her gaze to the wagon. Dusk had fallen, and from this

angle the large wooden conveyance resembled a slumbering beast with yellow glowing eyes. She shivered.

Very slowly the man pushed to his feet but stayed close. He flicked a look left and right. "I'm not meaning to be unkind, but could you fetch your husband? I need to get this wagon unloaded and back to Beloit tonight if possible. I won't be able to empty it by myself."

Fetch her husband? Neva swallowed a hysterical laugh. She formed a sentence that pained her worse than anything ever had, even childbirth or having her womb removed from her body. "I'm a widow."

"Oh." Great consternation filled the simple utterance. He scratched his chin, eyeing the wagon. "Then you probably can't \dots "

She tipped her head to look at him. Her head might have been filled with sand. Such effort it took to force her gaze upward. "No, I can't unload the wagon." Wild sobs pressed for release, but she pushed them down. She didn't want any of the things Warren and his wife had left behind.

Mr. Caudel turned a frown on her. "Ma'am, how well did you know this brother of yours?"

Anguish twined through her. "Not well." She clutched her stomach, nausea attacking. "Not well at all."

He nodded, the movement slow, as if his head were weighted, too. For several seconds he stared at her, unblinking, his full lips set in a solemn line. Then he crooked a finger at her. "Can you c'mere? There's something . . . important . . . in the wagon you need to see."

The hesitant way Mr. Caudel said "important" stirred Neva's numb brain to life. She rose on quivering legs and scuffed across the yard beside him. He plucked one of the lanterns free of its hook and carried it to the rear of the wagon. Then he paused with one hand braced on the high gate, his expression grim.

"Ma'am, your brother gave instructions to send you his belongings, but also his—" He clamped his lips tight and grimaced. "Well, let's just let you see, huh?"

Neva stood unmoving while he set the lantern on the ground, unhooked the iron pins holding the gate in place, and eased the thick, unpainted wood gate downward. Heavy shadows turned everything in the wagon's bed to gray lumps. He lifted the lantern. Its golden light illuminated the lumps, and Neva clapped her hands over her mouth to muffle her gasp. There, nestled together on a folded feather mattress like puppies in a litter, three children—a boy and two little pigtailed girls—sat staring with wide, uncertain eyes.

Mr. Caudel spoke softly, almost singsong, the way someone might try to calm a frightened animal. "This is Charley, Cassie, and Adeline Shilling—Warren and Violet's youngsters. Warren said to take them to Aunt Neva. I guess that's you."



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