

Praise for Kim Vogel Sawyer

"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."

—Lauraine Snelling, author of *To Everything a Season*, Wake the Dawn, and Heaven Sent Rain

"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

"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

"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*

"Quite simply, I loved this story from page one until the end. Kim has created a story that lovingly depicts the people, land, and culture of Appalachia. *Guide Me Home* is a tale of love and hope and faith that will hold your heart long after you reach the end."

—Laurie Alice Eakes, author of *The Mountain Midwife*, 2016 Rita Finalist

"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 . . . 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

Echoes of Mercy
Just As I Am
The Grace That Leads Us Home
Guide Me Home
Room for Hope
Through the Deep Waters
What Once Was Lost
When Grace Sings
When Love Returns

When Mercy Rains



Kim Vogel Sawyer



GRACE AND THE PREACHER

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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For my cousins

Larry, Gerald, Lyle, and Allen,
who fortunately never asked me to rob a train.

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

- 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

Cooperville, Missouri March 1882

Theophil Garrison

ey, Theo, didja hear the news?" Theophil Garrison paused with the pitchfork tines buried in the mound of hay and sent a sideways look at the barber's son. The skinny youth nicknamed Red nearly danced in place on the packed-dirt floor of the livery stable, and an eager grin split his pimply face. The news must be powerful exciting to get Red so wound up. Theo could use a little excitement.

Angling himself to face the boy, he held the pitchfork handle like a walking stick. "Don't reckon I did. What is it?"

"They're comin' home."

But not that much excitement. Chills attacked Theo from the inside out. Cotton filled his mouth. His muscles went quivery, and he lost his grip on the pitchfork. It fell against the stall wall, bounced, then slid onto the pile of straw. He unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth and barked a nervous laugh. "You're makin' up stories. My cousins got a twelve-year sentence for that attempted robbery. They've only been gone ten." He knew, because he'd served the same number of years laboring as hard as four men to atone for robbing his aunt and uncle of their sons.

"State shortened things up 'cause of their good behavior." The boy sniggered. "I guess it is kinda hard to believe."

Knowing Claight, Earl, and Wilton the way he did, it was impossible to believe.

"But it's true. I swear it on my mama's grave."

Red's mother wasn't even dead. Theo scowled at the boy. "You're foolin' with me."

"Am not! I was standin' right next to my pa when Sappington came runnin' across the street from the telegraph office an' read the wire message to your uncle."

"Mr. Sappington knows telegrams're supposed to be private."

Red shrugged. "He only read it 'cause your uncle told him to. You know ol' man Boyd can't read a word hisself."

His neck felt stiff, his head heavy, but Theo managed a jerky nod. "Yeah. Yeah, I know." Nobody in Theo's family could read except him. He wouldn't be able to, either, if Granny Iva hadn't sent him off to school when he was young. Uncle Smithers called Theo a sissy if he even cracked the cover of a book. Of course, Uncle Smithers called Theo a sissy—and worse—for other reasons, too.

"So your uncle told Sappington to read the telegram out loud right there in the barber shop. Every fella in the place heard it."

Which meant by evening every living soul in Cooperville would know that the Boyd brothers were on their way home from the state penitentiary. Theo gnawed his lip. Had the officials already let his cousins out? Jefferson City was a hundred miles away, but if the prison warden gave them train tickets to Springfield, they could cover that distance in half a day. Then an hour stage ride from Springfield, and—

"Think they've forgot how you let the law catch 'em, Theo?"

The last thing Claight said before the deputies took him, Earl, and Wilton away roared through Theo's memory. "Just wait 'til we get out, boy. You'll pay for this. You'll pay."

They hadn't forgotten. Theo snatched up the pitchfork and jammed it into the straw. "Thanks for tellin' me about my cousins, but I got work to do, Red. You get on outta here now."

The boy smirked. "You might wanna get outta here, too."

Theo ignored the taunt and continued forking clean hay into the stall. When all the stalls were fresh and ready, he headed to the attached corral to collect the horses. As he grabbed the cheek strap for a tall, speckled gelding, another memory attacked.

"You got the easy part, Theophil." Earl never shortened up Theo's name, and he had a way of making Theophil sound like a curse word. "All you gotta do is sneak the horses from the livery an' make sure they're waitin' under the trestle."

Theo might've been only fifteen, but he understood that "sneak" really meant "steal," something Granny Iva had taught him was wrong. He said so, and Earl gave him a clop on the side of the head that made his ears ring. "We gotta have horses to make our getaway after robbin' that train, so you just bring 'em, you hear me, Theophil?"

Theo had heard, had even nodded in agreement, but he hadn't done it. And his cousins paid for his deceit with ten years of their lives.

He released the gelding into the first stall with a pat on its neck and hurried back to the corral for another horse. Red's parting comment— "You might wanna get outta here, too"—nipped in the back of Theo's mind. Red was young, prone to talking without thinking, but this time his words had merit.

When the stagecoach rolled into town and Claight, Earl, and Wilton set foot on Cooperville's Main Street, Theo intended to be far, far away.



Fairland, Kansas Grace Cristler

Even before the murky cloud stirred by the stagecoach's wheels and horses' hooves on the dirt road had begun to settle, Grace Cristler stepped from the little stone-block post office and onto the boardwalk. With a lace handker-chief pressed over her nose and mouth, she blinked rapidly and made her way

through the billowing swirl of dust particles to the battered conveyance's side.

"Afternoon, Miss Cristler." The driver grinned down at her, his teeth a slash of yellowish-white against his overgrown beard and grime-smeared face. "Watchin' for me, were ya?"

She lowered the handkerchief. "Why, of course. Everyone in town anticipates your once-a-week delivery of the mail, Mr. Lunger." Every Friday at one o'clock, as dependable as Uncle Philemon's key-wound mantel clock, the man pulled the stagecoach to a stop outside the post office. She often wondered how he managed to keep such a precise schedule given the poor road conditions and ever-changing Kansas weather. But not once during the three years she'd served as the town's postmistress had he disappointed her with a late arrival.

Lunger chuckled. He reached beneath the bench seat and pulled out a worn leather pouch stamped with the name Fairland, Kansas, USA. "I don't reckon you come runnin', though, 'cause you're all excited about other folks' mail." The man had the audacity to wink. "You're hopin' for another letter."

Oh, such a brash thing to say! She frowned.

"When's your preacher due, Miss Cristler?"

Her preacher? She pursed her lips tight and gave him her sternest look.

He laughed. "Sometime next month, ain't it?"

Grace hoped the dust was still thick enough to hide the flush surely staining her face at the man's impudent comments. She loved the close-knit community that had been her home since she was very young, but did everyone—including the United States mail carrier!—have to be privy to her personal affairs?

"My uncle expects Reverend Dille by the end of April." She waved the handkerchief, pretending to swish dust but actually fanning her warm cheeks. "The *entire congregation* is very eager to make his acquaintance."

Mr. Lunger laughed, his thick beard bobbing against his bandanna. He yanked off his shabby hat and used it to slap his thigh twice, raising another

small cloud of dust. "All right, all right, I can take a hint. You ain't already smitten with the new preacher." He settled the hat back in place and winked again. "Least not more'n anyone else in town is. That make you feel better?"

"Let me empty this bag and replace the contents with our outgoing mail. Please wait."

His laughter chased her back into the post office. Her fingers trembled as she made the transfer, and it took all of her self-control not to search through the stack of envelopes for one addressed to her from Reverend Rufus Dille of Bowling Green, Missouri.

With the bag in hand, she hurried out to the stagecoach. "Here you are, Mr. Lunger. Drive safely now. I'll see you next week."

Humor still twinkled in his eyes, but he kept his smirking lips closed and gave her a nod in reply. He brought the reins down on the horses' rumps, and the beasts strained forward.

Grace hurried inside the building and snapped the door closed to avoid a second coating of dust for the day. She rounded the counter, her skirts swirling with her rapid strides, and reached for the pile of letters. Was there one from Reverend Dille? From . . . Rufus? Her heart pat-pattered just thinking of his given name. Of course there should be a letter. For the past twelve weeks, his missives had been as dependable as Mr. Lunger's deliveries. She skimmed through the stack, seeking his bold, masculine script.

Mr. Lunger's taunt about her running to retrieve her own personal mail raised a wave of guilt. Wasn't she the town's postmistress, voted to the position by ballot? If she put her own wants above theirs, she would disappoint and betray the people who'd appointed her. By three o'clock folks would start arriving, asking her to check their boxes. She had a beholden duty to put their mail where it could be found.

She stamped her foot against the floorboard. "I must do my job." She picked up the entire stack, balanced it against her rib cage, and marched to the wood cubbies built behind the counter along the north wall. Midday sunshine streamed through the uncovered window and highlighted the face of each

envelope as she sorted through the stack. She flicked the envelopes into their boxes, so familiar with the routine she didn't even need to look at the numbers stamped on the little brass plates to ascertain the envelopes found their rightful locations.

She'd nearly reached the end of the stack when familiar handwriting leaped from the front of an envelope and sent her heart spinning in wild somersaults. Her hands stilled, and a smile pulled at her mouth. She drew several shallow breaths, a giggle of delight building in her throat. With slow, measured steps she moved to the counter and placed the envelope, faceup, in the middle of the darkly stained surface.

Keeping her gaze fixed on her name—Miss Grace Cristler—written in black ink on creamy paper, she forced her feet back to the cubbies, where she finished sorting the remainder of the postcards and letters, this time more slowly and with shaking hands.

Finally she slid the last envelope into its place, and she skipped to the counter and scooped the letter from Rufus against her thudding heart. The scent of spicy cloves, an aroma she'd come to associate with the man, rose from the crisp rectangle. She pulled in a slow, deep breath, savoring the essence, before she lowered the envelope, this time facedown, to the work surface once more and reached for the silver-plated opener stored in a little basket beneath the counter.

As she slipped the tip of the opener beneath the edge of the envelope flap, the post office door swung open and the town's milliner, Opal Perry, breezed into the building. Grace tossed the opener and envelope into the basket and aimed a smile at the older woman.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Perry. Have you come for your mail?"

Mrs. Perry's gray eyebrows rose. "Can you think of some other reason for me to visit the post office?"

Women often visited the dressmaker's shop, the mercantile, and even the millinery shop to collect pieces of town gossip, but Grace never indulged in such activity. She released a nervous laugh. "I suppose not. Let me check your box."

"I'm actually more interested in a package. From Chicago. I ordered several spools of silk ribbon, all in pastel hues."

"Then I'm sorry to disappoint you." Grace removed a picture postcard and two envelopes from the Perrys' cubby and gave them to the milliner. "Mr. Lunger didn't bring any packages at all this week."

Mrs. Perry made a sour face and tapped the mail against the wood countertop. "I was so hoping to place my Easter bonnets on the sale shelf this week."

Grace offered the woman a sympathetic look. "Maybe you can buy some ribbon here in town. Mr. Benton carries ribbon in the general merchandise store."

"He sells ribbon for men's ties."

"Isn't the ribbon silk, though?" Her uncle's ties were silk, and he'd purchased most of them from the merchant next door to the post office.

"Yes, the ribbon is silk, but it's meant for men's ties. It's black." She flipped her wrist in a dismissive gesture. "What woman wants black ribbon on an Easter bonnet? Or any spring bonnet, for that matter?" The milliner sniffed. "How am I to decorate my spring hats without pastel silk ribbons?"

Grace gave Mrs. Perry's wrinkled hand a pat. "Surely the ribbons will arrive next week. You'll have them in plenty of time to finish the bonnets for Easter."

"Well, you be certain to come in and pick out a pretty bonnet, dear." She flicked a look across the unadorned bodice of Grace's brown dress. "I also sell lovely collars, hand-tatted by my nieces from Boston. If you buy a bonnet, I'll let you choose a tatted collar free of charge. You'll want to wear something feminine and eye catching when your preacher takes the pulpit for the first time, won't you?"

Grace yanked her hand back. "Mrs. Perry . . ."

A sly smile curved the woman's lips. "Oh, come now, Miss Cristler. Don't

be coy with me. Your uncle told the congregation that the new preacher is young and single. He'll need a helpmate. Everyone knows you'd make the perfect preacher's wife, having been raised by a clergyman and serving as his assistant since his wife's passing during that dreadful flu epidemic. Is it three or four years now?"

"Five." Grace didn't rue a single year of assisting in her uncle's ministry, either. Her aunt and uncle had been so good, taking her in when her parents died. She owed them a debt of gratitude and service.

"Yes, five. And a true blessing you've been to your dear uncle. But to appeal to a younger man, you need a softer hairstyle." Mrs. Perry shook her head, clicking her tongue on her teeth. "Must you comb your lovely locks down so snugly?"

Grace smoothed her fingertips from her temple to the tightly wound bun at the nape of her neck. It took a great deal of effort to tame her thick, wavy hair into a bun, and she'd always been proud of her ability to fashion the style without the help of a mother or an aunt or a sister. Until now.

"The color of your hair, as rich red-brown as a maple leaf in fall, is so eye catching. With a softer hairstyle and a little rouge coloring your cheeks, you'd come close to being pretty."

Close? Grace's face heated.

"Not that pretty is necessary for a preacher's wife. Your dear aunt, rest her soul, was a plain woman. But to my way of thinking, ministers are men first and servants of the Lord second."

To Grace's way of thinking, Mrs. Perry had it backward, and she started to say so.

"So donning a less, er, austere frock and setting off your face with a ruffled bonnet all covered with flowers and lace would appeal to the man. Then, when you've captured his attention, you can let him see all the wonderful qualities that would make you a fine wife for a preacher."

Surely he already knew her qualities. By now he knew everything of importance about her, thanks to the weekly letters she'd written to him. If

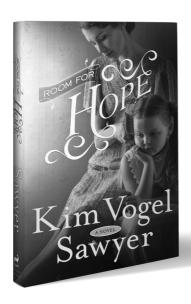
Rufus's responses were any indication, he approved of her. But would he find her appearance displeasing when he set eyes on her for the first time?

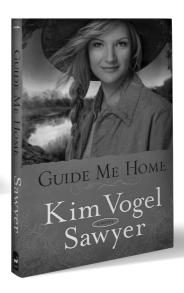
The woman reached across the counter and delivered a pat on Grace's cheek. "You be sure to come see me next week after my shipment of ribbons has arrived. We'll find the perfect bonnet to help you capture your preacher's heart." She scooped up her letters and departed.

Grace sagged against the counter. Finally! Now maybe she could read her letter. She needed the assurance of his interest after listening to—

The door banged open again, and two youngsters raced in, clamoring for their pa's mail. For the next hour Grace assisted one townsperson after another until more than a third of the cubbies were empty. The regulator clock on the wall chimed five, and Grace locked the door behind young Mrs. Morehead. The rest of the mail could wait until tomorrow when folks did their Saturday shopping. For now, she had her own mail to read.

Do you love stories of hope and encouragement? Don't miss these other books from Kim Vogel Sawyer!

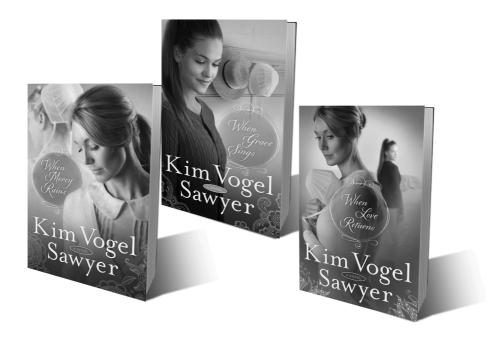




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