

BENEATH
A
PRAIRIE
MOON

SNEAK
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SAMPLE
ONLY

Kim Vogel
A NOVEL
Sawyer

BENEATH
A
PRAIRIE
MOON

BOOKS BY KIM VOGEL SAWYER

Bringing Maggie Home

Echoes of Mercy

Grace and the Preacher

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

BENEATH



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BENEATH A PRAIRIE MOON

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*For Kristian and Allen, who watched friendship
blossom into happily ever after.*



For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this;
Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

—Galatians 5:14

Late August 1888
Spiveyville, Kansas
Mack Cleveland

When're you gonna have your letter ready, Mack? The fellas is gettin' fidgety. They all wanna get the packet sent off, you know."

Mack Cleveland paused in scooping nails into the scale's bowl and sent a scowl across the counter to Spiveyville's postman. The man's grin, mostly hidden behind his overgrown mustache and beard, seemed to taunt Mack. "Didn't I make myself clear the other night? I think it's a fool notion, and I want no part of it."

Clive Ackley's thick eyebrows shot upward, forming a pair of fuzzy black tepees above his watery brown eyes. "You still takin' that stand? Figured by now you'd come around, seein' how every other man in town voted yes."

Mack bit back an argument. Not every man in town attended the meeting. And the preacher hadn't voted yes. But Preacher Doan's vote didn't count because he already had a wife. Mack gave Clive an up-and-down look, taking in the scraggly beard dribbling across his chest and his rumpled checked shirt stretched over his round belly. "Are you sending a letter?"

Clive jammed his hands into his trouser pockets and rocked back on his heels. "You can bet your buttons I'm sendin' one." He laughed as if he'd made a joke. The scruffy facial hair couldn't quite mask a gap where a back tooth used to be or the tobacco bits caught between front teeth. "Can't hardly wait to meet up with the gal who'll be Mrs. Clive Ackley."

Mack hoped whoever arrived to claim the title would have eyesight as poor as Clive's or she might run screaming for the Pratt Center depot when she got

a good look at her prospective groom. Mack dropped another clattering half scoop of nails into the tin bowl and examined the scale. Two ounces past a pound. He pinched off a few nails, and the needle jiggled a smidgen past the one. Close enough.

He lifted the bowl and poured the nails into a paper bag. After rolling the top down tight, he held the bag to Clive. "There you are."

The man kept his hands in his trouser pockets. "I think you're makin' a mistake not addin' your letter to the packet."

Mack plopped the bag on the counter and gave it a little shove toward the postman. "Do you want these nails or not?"

Clive grabbed the bag, curling his sausage-shaped fingers around the rolled edge. He pointed at Mack with the lumpy bag. "You're gonna be wishin' you done somethin' differ'nt when every fella in town except you is sayin' his vows in front of Preacher Doan."

Mack brushed bits of iron shavings from the counter and ground them into the planked floor with the sole of his boot. In his opinion, the ones wishing they'd chosen different would be all those men who trusted a matchmaker from Newton, Massachusetts, to find them wives instead of relying on the Good Lord's guidance. But he'd said all that at the town meeting and nobody'd listened to him, the same way Uncle Ray hadn't listened to Ma and Pa, so what was the sense of repeating it?

"Go ahead and send those letters, Clive. I hope it works out good for all of you."

Clive shook his head, glaring at Mack in disgust, but he ambled out of the building without another argument.

Mack grabbed the broom from its spot in the corner and set to work, smacking the straw bristles against the floor with more force than needed to clear the wide planks of dust. Sweat dribbled down his temples and dripped off his chin, leaving little splotches on the floor that quickly dried in the hot wind coursing through the open front door and wheezing out the back. If he didn't

slow down, he might give himself heatstroke, but he had to channel his concerns somewhere, and the floor seemed a safe target.

Why wouldn't the men in town listen to reason? Buying a bride was foolhardy. Maybe even dangerous. The fellows in Spiveyville might not be the smartest men in the state of Kansas, but they were, for the most part, an honest lot. How could they know for sure the women who came at their request were honest? Could any woman who would make herself available to travel to a town she'd never visited and marry a man sight unseen be one a decent man would want to wed? Not likely.

Some of these women could be trying to escape the law. Maybe they were women of ill repute. And the men of Spiveyville planned to send their letters and hard-earned money to a matchmaker states away without any guarantee they'd end up with a bride. Why would they be so reckless?

Mack leaned against the broom's handle and sighed. He knew why. Because they were lonely. The same way Uncle Ray had been lonely. Truth be told, Mack was, too. His thirty-first birthday had passed a month ago, and he'd operated Spiveyville Hardware and Implements on his own for coming up on ten years. He wanted companionship—a family—as much as any other man his age did.

But lonely was one thing. Desperate was another. Gritting his teeth, he put the broom to work again. Every other unmarried man in Spiveyville could participate in the scheme, but he wanted nothing to do with any mail-order bride.

Mid-October 1888

Newton, Massachusetts

Abigail Grant

Abigail drew in a deep breath, allowed it a slow escape through her puckered lips, and finally reached for the doorknob. She gave the oval etched-glass

knob a twist and pushed, pasting on a smile as the door opened on silent hinges.

Mrs. Helena Bingham's gaze lifted from an open ledger on the polished top of the French Empire desk and settled on Abigail. Disappointment instantly sagged her lined face. "Here you are again."

Abigail lifted her chin even though her pulse thrummed in an erratic beat. She dropped her valise next to the doorway and crossed the cabbage-rose carpet, the fraying hem of her deep-russet skirt grazing the thick fibers. "I assure you, there was no other choice. The situation there was—"

Mrs. Bingham held up one hand, reminiscent of a courtroom judge. "Let me guess. Deplorable." She raised her snow-white brows. "Yes?"

Abigail pursed her lips. The woman needn't use such a sarcastic tone. She tugged her little travel hat from her head and dropped it on the desk. A wavy strand of hair—defined as "mink brown" on her summary sheet—slid along her cheek, and she pushed it behind her ear with an impatient thrust. "Completely so. A creek for water, a dirt floor—dirt!—and a sod roof. Spiders descended onto the table during dinner." She shuddered. "The place wasn't fit for animals, let alone humans."

Mrs. Bingham closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, the disapproval glimmering in her pale-gray irises pierced Abigail to the core of her being. "Abigail, Abigail, what am I to do with you?"

Abigail rested her fingertips on the edge of the desk. "Stop sending me to these barbaric locations for which I am woefully unsuited." She shifted her attention to the stack of applications resting in a delicate wire basket on the corner of the desk. "Isn't there at least one request from a gentleman?"

Even as she uttered the question, her heart divulged the sad truth. No gentlemen of prominent backgrounds relied upon a matchmaker to secure a bride. Their families and close friends guided them toward equally prominent prospects. At one time, she was considered a fine catch. But her family's tumble from the social registers as a result of Father's illegal dealings sealed her fate. She hung her head, bracing herself for Mrs. Bingham's response.

“Perhaps you aren’t suited to matrimony at all.”

Abigail jerked, meeting the older woman’s unsmiling gaze. “N-not suited to . . .” After three years of harboring Abigail beneath her roof, had the matchmaker not learned how much Abigail’s heart yearned for a husband and family of her own? Why, even the Bible—what Mrs. Bingham herself declared God’s holy Word!—spoke of the wisdom of every man having his own wife, and every wife her own husband.

Abigail sank slowly onto the padded seat of the side chair near the desk and gaped at the older woman through a veil of tears. “How can you say such a hurtful thing?”

“Sometimes being truthful requires one to be hurtful.” Mrs. Bingham’s pale eyes held a hint of regret, but her lips formed a grim line. “How many times have you traveled to meet a prospective groom and returned dissatisfied?”

Abigail blinked rapidly. “I, um, I . . . don’t recall.”

“Six times.” Mrs. Bingham aimed a barbed look across the desk and steepled her hands on the ledger. “The first time, you claimed the house was too small and was without a cooking stove. The second time, the prospective groom had rotten teeth and bad breath. The third time, the distance from town was too great and you felt insecure. The fourth time, you said you couldn’t possibly marry a man with such a short stature. The fifth time, the town itself had no apothecary or millinery shops—how could you survive in such a barren place? Now, this time, the reason is a dirt floor, sod roof, and spiders descending during meals.”

“If you had seen the decrepit dwelling, you—”

“Abigail, you aren’t fooling anyone. Not even, I daresay, yourself.”

Abigail lifted her chin and narrowed her gaze. “What do you mean?”

Mrs. Bingham reached into a desk drawer and withdrew a small square piece of paper. She waved it gently. “I received this telegram three days ago. The same day you boarded the train for the return to Newton.”

Perspiration broke over Abigail’s frame.

“Shall I read it to you?”

Abigail wanted to refuse. She wanted to escape. But her tongue stuck to the roof of her dry mouth. Her quivering limbs resisted supporting her weight.

Mrs. Bingham slipped a pair of wire spectacles into place and angled the page toward the lamplight. “‘Sending her back. Too hoity-toity. Give me refund or new girl.’”

Humiliation swept through Abigail, searing her from the inside out. Had others sent similar messages? First rejected by young men from her rightful social class for her father’s sins, and then rejected by unworthy suitors for having manners too refined. Where would she find her place of belonging? The ache for a home and family of her own engulfed her and brought the desire to cry. But she sniffed hard, blinked away the moisture gathering in her eyes, and held her chin at a regal angle, the way Mother had taught her.

Mrs. Bingham flipped the telegram into the basket and pinned Abigail with a stern glare. “Tell me the truth. Whose decision was it for you to return to Newton—yours or his?”

She patted her forehead with the back of her gloved hand. “Well, I . . . He . . .” She swallowed and gripped her hands in her lap. “I suppose it was mutual.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Abigail leaned forward slightly, beseeching the matchmaker with her eyes. “I’m a city girl, Mrs. Bingham. Send me to Boston, or New York, or even Philadelphia. I’m certain all will be fine if you’ll only match me with someone of similar background and breeding.”

Mrs. Bingham released a heavy sigh. “The description on the telegram—‘hoity-toity’—is far too accurate, and it is your biggest detriment to finding a match.”

Abigail hung her head, blinking back tears. How could refined manners be considered a detriment? Her earliest, most cherished memories were of tea parties with her dear mother, who patiently taught her how to use silverware, to pat rather than swipe her lips after small bites of pastries or sips of tea, to

utilize proper speech and decorum. Now, with Mother gone, all that remained were memories and the refinement she'd learned from her gentle mother. Was she to discard these last bits of her former life for the sake of matrimony? Abigail forced aside her thoughts and focused on Mrs. Bingham's stern reprimand.

"My clients are down-to-earth, hardworking, responsible men who are seeking down-to-earth, hardworking, responsible women with whom to build a lifelong relationship. Sending you to a city will not solve the problem, because you will take your snooty airs, fastidious manners, and unrealistic expectations with you." She raised both hands in a gesture of surrender. "I've tried my hardest, but half a dozen failures is six too many for this business. If I continue to accept money for a match that cannot possibly succeed, you'll damage my reputation as a matchmaker."

She glanced toward the door, where Abigail's carpetbag sat plump with all her earthly belongings. "Your bag is still packed. Do not unpack it. Instead, take it and—"

Abigail leaped from the chair. She clasped her hands beneath her chin, shamed by her behavior yet too desperate to do otherwise. "Please don't remove me from your list of brides. Give me one more chance. I promise it will be different this time if you'll allow me one more opportunity."

Mrs. Bingham rose and rounded the desk, determination etched into her features. "I intend to give you one more opportunity. It—"

Abigail caught the woman's hands and held tight. "Oh, thank you, ma'am."

Mrs. Bingham withdrew her hands. "Will you kindly remain silent long enough for me to finish speaking?"

Abigail whisked her hands behind her back and closed her lips. But her chest rose and fell in rapid heaves of breath she couldn't seem to control. Oh, why had Father chosen such an unsavory path? Maybe it would have been better if she had died of a broken heart as Mother had. At least she'd be spared the abject indignity of begging.

Mrs. Bingham sorted through a file on her desk and removed a fat envelope. She held it in front of her like a shield. “This envelope, sent by men from a small town in Kansas, contains sixteen written requests for brides.”

Hope fluttered to life in Abigail’s breast. Surely out of sixteen men, there would be one acceptable candidate for her hand.

“If the placement fees hadn’t been included, I would have discarded the entire lot. The letters . . .” The woman’s face pursed. “Suffice it to say, many of the writers of these missives are sorely lacking in the social niceties.”

Abigail bit the inside of her lip. The hope began to fizzle.

“But sixteen requests . . . As a good businesswoman, I cannot reject the potential income. Thus, I have been striving to secure matches for each of these men.”

Abigail drew in a steady breath. She’d promised to make her next assignment work. She was twenty-five already—by next April, she’d be too old to be included as a potential match. Regardless of how unattractive the man or how dismal his dwelling, she would have to accept him as her husband.

“But I will not send any of my girls to men who indicate a distinct bent toward loutishness. This group of prospective grooms must undergo a transformation.” The matchmaker dropped the envelope on the desk and folded her arms across her chest. “That is where you come in.”

Abigail tilted her head. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re well mannered, well spoken, and you possess an air of authority.”

If the woman meant to compliment her, the tone she used fell short.

“If anyone has the ability to mold these men into suitable husbands for my girls, it’s you.” The woman moved behind the desk and rustled through a drawer. “I’ve already checked train schedules. There is a departure tomorrow afternoon for Pratt Center, Kansas. In the morning I’ll send a wire to the telegrapher in Spiveyville and inform him to expect your arrival on the fifteenth of the month.”

Wariness climbed Abigail’s spine as nimbly as the spiders had climbed

their webs in the little sod house in Nebraska. If Mrs. Bingham was planning what Abigail suspected, she wanted no part of it. “Ma’am? I—”

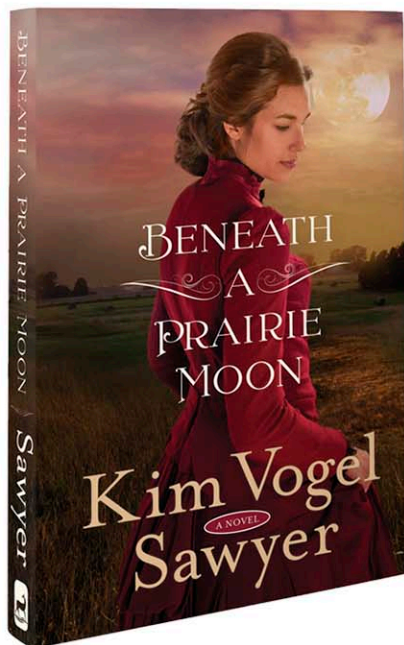
Mrs. Bingham straightened and fixed Abigail with a firm glare. “You owe me a tidy sum for refunded fees and train fares. Are you able to repay me in dollars and cents?”

Abigail gritted her teeth. If she had funds available, she wouldn’t have set herself up as a mail-order bride in the first place. The argument she’d been forming died on her tongue.

“Then you can repay me by serving as a tutor. I’m sending you to Spiveyville to ready the grooms for their brides.”

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