



## BOOKS BY KIM VOGEL SAWYER

Beneath a Prairie Moon

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



## Kim Vogel Sawyer



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SNEAK PEEK SAMPLE ONLY

## OURS FOR A SEASON

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In memory of Diann Hunt, who fought with beauty and grace and finished strong.



My plans are shattered.

Yet the desires of my heart
turn night into day;
in the face of the darkness light is near.

—Job 17:11–12, NIV



## Pine Hill, Indiana Marty Krieger Hirschler

arty followed her husband to the front door, keeping enough distance between them to prevent bumping her knee against the bulky suitcase that hung from his hand. Anthony gripped the battered case's handle hard. Angrily hard. So hard the tendons stood out on the back of his hand. She stared at the discernible ridges and wished his angst were for the same reason as hers.

The carved front door—one of Anthony's woodshop projects—stood open, but the screen door sat firmly in its frame, the little hook latch secured to prevent the seemingly endless Indiana wind from bouncing the door against the casing. When Marty was a child and let the screen door smack into place, Mother always scolded, and Marty had determined early she wouldn't yell at her children for letting the screen door smack. Not that she'd had the chance to honor the vow.

Anthony unlatched the hook with a flick of his finger and put his palm against the door's frame, but then he stood frozen, gazing outward. A question hovered on her lips—*Have you changed your mind about going?* She tried to swallow the knot in her throat, but it refused to budge. No words could work their way past such a mighty lump, but her heart beat with hope.

Still facing the mesh screen, he spoke through gritted teeth. "I hate arguing with you."

"I won't argue anymore if you'll stay." The words rasped out, as if



sliding over sandpaper. She worried her apron skirt in her hands, waiting, hoping he'd take his broad hand from the door's wood frame and carry his suitcase back to their bedroom.

A sigh heaved from his chest. Hand still braced, he angled an unsmiling look at her. "You know, it'd be a lot easier on me if you'd try to understand."

Easier on him? What about him making things easier on her? The hope swept away on a gust of frustration. She released the wad of fabric and raised her chin. "I do understand. That's the problem. You'd rather spend time away from me than with me."

He released the door and ran his hand over his face. Slowly. Drawing his tanned skin downward. Even after he lowered his hand, his lips remained downturned. "That's not true. I go because I have to make a living."

"You could use your business telephone and computer to do the sub-contracting. Your team of workers is dependable. They'd perform just as well without you there acting as supervisor. You don't have to travel to every jobsite and oversee every project, but you choose to." Her voice quavered with her attempt to control her emotions. She wanted to rail at the top of her lungs, but good Mennonite wives did not raise their voices to their husbands. She'd failed in so many other things—at the very least she could refrain from yelling.

She clasped her hands at her waist and pressed hard against her aching stomach. "If you have to go, then take me along."

He groaned. "We've been over this. And over it and over it. A construction site is no place for—"

"I wouldn't go to work with you. I'd stay in the hotel. Or do some sightseeing. At least we'd have the evenings together." How she hated the long, lonely days when he was away. But then, sometimes it was lonely with him home.

Anthony drew in a breath that strained the buttons on his chambray



work shirt. Thirty-six years old and more broad shouldered and muscular than he'd been at twenty. But she hadn't changed, still as slender as she'd been the day they exchanged vows. How she envied the women with broadened hips, pooching bellies, and sagging breasts.

His shoulders seemed to wilt as his lungs emptied of air. He set the suitcase on the floor with a light thud and cupped his wide hands over her shoulders. "Martha . . ." He called her Martha only when his patience was spent. He'd called her Martha more times than she could count over the past two years. "Noblesville is lots bigger than Pine Hill, that's true, but there aren't enough sights to see to keep you busy for a full week."

"Then I'll—"

"And before you say you'll stay in the hotel room and read, I already told you no." His blue eyes, usually the color of a cloudless summer sky, darkened, as if a storm brewed within. "I need to focus on the job, on the materials, on the workers. Sure, my men can be trusted, but some of the subcontractors aren't honest. If I'm not there to inspect things, they might bring me warped boards or watered-down paint, thinking they can put one over on a simpleminded Mennonite man. That's why I go to the sites. So my reputation doesn't get banged up because somebody else didn't do their best."

"Knowing why you go doesn't make me any less lonely."

He rubbed his palms up and down her short sleeves, the firm touch sending shivers across her frame. "Then don't stay here by yourself. Invite some of your friends to the house for cake and coffee. Drive to Lafayette and browse the mall."

She shrugged. "I don't know . . ."

"Well, then visit Dawna. You've hardly gone out to the farm since she had her last baby. She'd probably appreciate help with the other kids, especially now that school's out and all four of 'em are underfoot."

He couldn't have hurt her more if he'd skewered her with a sword. For him to suggest such a thing meant he didn't know her. Not at her core,



where she desperately needed his understanding. She hugged herself and battled tears. "I . . . can't."

His expression hardened, and his hands stilled on her upper arms. "Then stay here by yourself and be lonely. I don't know what else to tell you. But I've gotta go." He dipped his head, his lips puckering. She shifted her face slightly, and the kiss landed next to instead of on her mouth. He released a soft snort as he let go of her and picked up the suitcase. "I'll call when I get settled in the hotel. Bye, Marty."

At least he'd called her Marty.

She trailed him as far as the edge of the porch, then remained rooted in place, bare toes curled over the gray-painted planks, arms loosely wrapped around a post. He tossed his suitcase into the bed of his pickup truck in one smooth motion and opened the driver's door. He paused, his head low, as if he was contemplating something important, and a tiny flicker of hope came to life in the center of her heart. Was he rethinking his decision to leave her behind? Would he let her come?

Without glancing in her direction, he jolted, climbed behind the wheel, and pulled the door shut with a firm yank. Moments later the engine roared to life. The tiny flicker was extinguished as effectively as a birthday candle from a puff of breath. As he pulled out of their gravel driveway and onto the dirt street, the neighbor's children darted across their grassy yard and chased after him, kicking at the billows of dust stirred up by the truck's rubber tires. Their laughter rubbed salt into the ever-festering wounds on Marty's heart, and she scuttled inside.

Even in the house she could hear the childish voices that carried through the screen, so she closed the solid inner door. Silence fell. A silence so big it threatened to consume her. Although the room was uncomfortably warm, chill bumps rose on her arms. She sent a slow glance across the neat living room, and her gaze stilled on the wide band of morning sunlight flowing through the plate-glass window. The beam glittered with

hundreds of dust motes—a shower of diamonds—and made the pink roses on the area rug glow like rubies. So bright. So beautiful. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

While she watched, transfixed, the beam began to shrink. First shorter and then thinner. Thinner and thinner, until it disappeared. She hurried to the window and peered out. A large bank of clouds had drifted across the sun. The sun still glowed behind the clouds, but its beams had been erased. A sense of loss gripped Marty, and she blinked rapidly against the sting of tears.

"There'll be days in life when the S-U-N-shine hides behind a cloud, but there ain't any cloud so big it can hide the S-O-N-shine. So you always walk in the Sonshine, Martha Grace, you hear?"

Great-Grandma Lois's gentle voice whispered from the past, and in Marty's memory she heard her own childish reply.

"I'll walk in the Sonshine always. I promise."

Marty turned from the window with a sigh and trudged to the kitchen sink. How she'd relished her week every summer at Granddad and Grandma Krieger's farm in Pennsylvania, where Granddad's mother, Lois, also lived. As much as she loved her grandparents, she'd spent most of the time with her kind-faced, warbly voiced great-grandmother, who was no taller than the wire tomato cages Granddad fashioned for the garden. She taught Marty to knit scarves, embroider flowers on pillowcases, and stitch squares into little quilts and talked from morning to night about the One she loved most, the God she faithfully served.

Guilt pressed hard. Marty hadn't honored her promise to Great-Grandma Lois. But it wasn't entirely her fault. The Sonshine had stopped shining on her a long time ago. Or so it seemed.

She drained the now-cool water and ran a fresh basin. Lowering the few breakfast dishes into the steamy, sudsy water, she glanced out the small window above the sink into the backyard. Anthony's garage and attached

workshop took up more than half the yard, leaving a narrow grassy patch with a garden at the far end. A century-old oak tree stood sentinel in the middle of the remaining yard, its branches casting shade over all but the corners of the rectangular patch of grass.

Anthony had wanted to cut down the oak and build his shop in the middle of the yard, but she'd asked him to leave it, pointing out the sturdy limb that begged for a swing. Of course, back then she'd envisioned a child's tire swing, but she had come to enjoy the double-sized cedar swing Anthony crafted for her thirty-fourth birthday almost two years ago. She'd thanked him with manufactured enthusiasm for the gift, realizing he had meant well, but underneath she still mourned the silent message it sent. He didn't expect to ever hang a tire swing.

She gave herself a mental shake and returned her attention to the dishes. Her daily chores still needed to be checked off her list. By noon, they'd be complete. Then she'd go to her basement sewing room and work on the little quilt she should have finished weeks ago for her newest niece. The basement was cooler, and the hum of the machine would mask the otherwise deathly silence of her too-empty house.

Kansas City, Kansas Brooke Spalding

Brooke signed her name to the bottom of the check with a flourish. She set the gold-inlaid pen aside, pulled the check from the pad with a satisfying *scriiiitch*, and pinched it up by opposite corners. Holding the business check at arm's length, she ignored the burn of acid in the back of her throat and lifted her attention to the six men seated along the sides of the long table in the bank's meeting room. "Done."

Ronald Blackburn—the gray-haired, big-bellied, sagging-jowled banker at her right—inched his hand toward the check. His smooth pink



palm and short, pudgy fingers absent of calluses spoke of years behind a desk. He licked his lips, a fox ready to devour a hen. But Brooke was no hen.

With a casual sweep of her arm, she presented the check to the man on her left, an unpretentious older gentleman lacking the gleam of greed that showed in every other pair of eyes around the table. She knew the gleam well. She'd glimpsed it in her own reflection. "Here you are, Mr. Miller. As they say, it's been a pleasure doing business with you."

The man held the check gingerly, as if fearful it would shatter. His gaze seemed locked on the amount written in black ink in her meticulous handwriting. She stifled a chortle. She'd seen dozens of businessmen gawk at her handwritten business checks. Why use computer-generated checks if a person wrote legibly? Every one of her purchases culminated in a personally inscribed check—what those in the corporate real estate business world called her trademark. That and her fuchsia suits, always with skirts instead of trousers. In all likelihood, however, the dollar amount on the check held Harvey Miller's attention.

She leaned slightly in his direction. "Is it correct?"

He zipped his gaze to her. His mouth opened and closed several times, like a goldfish releasing air bubbles, and he nodded. "Yes, Miss Spalding. It sure is." His thick eyebrows rose, and he let out a throaty chuckle. "I sure never thought that chunk of land my father left me would amount to this."

Mr. Blackburn cleared his throat. "Of course, you must remember there are fees and agent commissions, as well as escrow costs, title insurance costs, surveyor—"

Brooke put up her hand, and to her satisfaction the man abruptly ceased talking. "Mr. Blackburn, does Harvey Miller seem like the type of person who would cheat these gentlemen"—she swept her arm to indicate the other men in Armani suits—"out of their agreed-upon payments for their assistance in this transaction?"

The banker settled back in his chair and harrumphed. "I never intended to intimate—"



"All fees, commissions, and costs are outlined in the contract Mr. Miller signed." She maintained a firm tone, but tiredness tugged at her. Usually finalizing a business deal left her too buzzed to sit still. Leapin' lizards, from where was this weariness coming? And when would the heartburn abate? She'd popped two antacids before the meeting started.

She folded her hands on the polished tabletop and forced herself to continue. "Everyone will receive their piece of the pie. Allow the man a few minutes to enjoy the fruits of his deal making."

Blackburn pursed his lips, irritation sparking in his grayish-green eyes, but he ceased his blather.

Brooke pushed back her executive chair and rose. Every man around the table rose, too, Blackburn finding his feet last. She slid the thick folder containing Mr. Miller's copy of the multipage contract to the center of the table, then reached for her briefcase, which she'd left resting against a table leg. Holding her leather case, she made her way around the table and shook each man's hand, offering a few congratulatory words for his role in the most monumental exchange of her career. She ended with Mr. Miller, and she held the mild-mannered gentleman's hand rather than offering a brief handshake.

"Mr. Miller, it truly has been a pleasure to meet you. I don't believe this 'windfall,' as you've repeatedly called it, could have come to a nicer individual."

The man ducked his head for a moment, chuckling. "Thank you, Miss Spalding."

"Now, may I make one suggestion before you begin setting up college funds for your quiverful"—she'd loved the quaint turn of phrase he'd used—"of grandchildren?"

"What's that?"

She gave his hand a squeeze. "Take your wife on a cruise. After forty-five years of marriage, she's earned it, yes?"

He chuckled again. "Oh, that she has."



Brooke smiled and gently withdrew her hand. "I suggest the Rhine River in Germany."

His eyebrows shot up.

"You can afford it."

His gaze drifted to the check. A slow smile curved his lips. Tears winked in his eyes. He turned to look her full in the face. "Thank you, Miss Spalding. We'll look into it."

"Good." Brooke shifted to send one last glance around the circle of faces. "Gentlemen, I leave you to complete your business."

She aimed herself for the door, and Blackburn commandeered her chair at the head of the table. "Yes, let's finish this up. Harvey, I—" She closed the door on the banker's voice. She dug in the little pocket on the outside of her briefcase and withdrew the crumpled foil wrapper holding one last antacid. She stuck the white tablet in her mouth, jammed the string of foil into her case, and turned in the direction of the lobby. For a few seconds her shoulders wilted, a dull ache in her lower spine holding her captive. Chewing the chalky tablet, she ground her fist against the achy spot and forced her feet to carry her across the marble tiles leading to the bank's front doors. Eagerness to bring the day to a close pressed at her. If she didn't know better, she'd think old age was creeping up on her. She'd certainly felt closer to eighty-six than thirty-six the past few weeks.

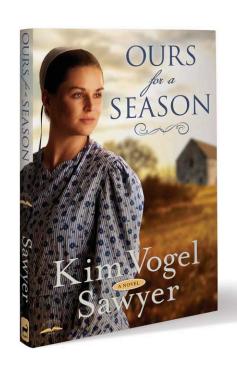
She pushed the revolving door and stepped from cool air-conditioning to cloying humidity and heat. She unbuttoned her jacket with one hand while moving toward her waiting Lexus. Her steps lagged, unlike her usual heel-clicking progress. She huffed, irritated with herself. How tiresome to always be so tired. Maybe she should schedule a checkup. She rolled her eyes. As if she had time.

Brooke punched the code into the number pad on the car's door, and the lock released. She slid into the driver's seat, grimacing as her body connected with the sun-heated cream-colored leather, and swung her legs beneath the steering wheel. Pain shot through her lower back. She sat for a moment, hissing through her teeth until the sharp stab eased into the too-familiar dull throb. Sighing in relief, she tossed her briefcase into the passenger's seat and started the engine.

She turned the AC level to high, fastened her seat belt, and twisted to look over her shoulder. Another pain gripped her. She slapped the steering wheel. That was it. Limited time or not, she would schedule a visit to a chiropractor. Her hours hunched over a desk had probably pulled something out of whack. But the appointment would have to wait a day or two. She still had work to do. Now that the land officially belonged to her, she needed to give the go-ahead to reestablish utilities in the abandoned buildings, have a sturdy fence erected to keep out vandals, and secure a reputable construction manager. She knew who she wanted to oversee the rebuilding. If she dangled a plump enough carrot, she could likely coax him from Indiana to northeast Kansas.

She'd already written a sizable check. When she got home, she'd put her writing hand to crafting a letter. Continue Reading...

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