

Author of  
*Unveiling the Past*

Kim Vogel Sawyer

FROM  
*This*  
MOMENT



a novel

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# *From This Moment*

*A Novel*



KIM VOGEL SAWYER



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## FROM THIS MOMENT

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First Edition

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This one is for *the posse*,  
with a special nod to *Eileen*,  
who planted the first story seed

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See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland.

—Isaiah 43:19, niv



*Bradleyville, Kansas*  
*Jase Edgar*

JASE CHECKED THE GPS. AGAIN. THE THING SHOWED he'd reached Bradleyville, but it had to be wrong. He scratched his stubbled cheek and frowned out the window. He'd left San Antonio for *this*? He must have lost his ever-lovin' mind.

Thick, hairy grass—wheat, probably—grew on both sides of the road. A little gas station, its wood siding painted bright white with red trim, stood proudly near the two-lane road, but where was the town? There wasn't a single other business in sight. Only a smattering of what appeared to be houses. They formed two uneven north-to-south rows about a quarter mile behind the station. If this was Bradleyville, he'd made a horrible mistake.

Why had he said goodbye to San Antonio, where he'd lived since he was fourteen? Goodbye to the folks at Grace Chapel, who'd welcomed him into their fold eighteen years ago? And goodbye to Rachel? A lump filled his throat, making it hard to take a breath. Saying goodbye to Rachel . . . that'd been hardest of all. How had he found the strength to turn his back on the love of his life?

He shook his head. He hadn't turned his back on her. What had

Brother Tony said? Jase closed his eyes and forced himself to recall every word the wise pastor had said to him during their final counseling session his last evening in San Antonio. *"You'll always carry her with you, Jase, but this fresh start means you're trusting God with the next chapter of your life."*

The problem was, even after twelve months of coming to grips with the fact that she was gone, he didn't want a new chapter. He wanted the one he and Rachel had scripted together. And taking the first step of his so-called new chapter on April first—April Fools' Day—seemed especially inappropriate. He wondered, not for the first time, what God had been thinking to take her and leave him behind.

He scowled at the GPS. According to the lines on the screen, his new boss's address—207 Bluebell Street—was a bit west and north of where he now sat in the idling U-Haul. Gritting his teeth, he eased his foot off the brake and rolled forward on a potholed dirt road. He passed the gas station and came to an intersection marked by a handmade sign indicating Bluebell Street. He could only go right, so he made the turn and drove slowly, scanning both sides of the street while holding the U-Haul to a crawl.

A street called Bush brought an end to the wheat field on the left and led to a block with two small houses separated by empty lots. More wheat on the right. Disbelief weighted his gut. How could they call this place a town? The next intersection was the first four-way intersection he'd encountered so far. A metal building with a cupola filled a good chunk of land on the right. A portable sign sat at the edge of the road. Black block letters spelled out Beech Street Bible Fellowship. So this was where he'd serve as a youth pastor.

He eased to a stop and craned his neck, giving the church a bet-



ter examination. Now he could see there were actually two long metal buildings standing roughly twenty feet apart. The first one had the cupola, and the second sported a wooden cross nailed to its front. Some sort of enclosed breezeway, the peak of its roof barely reaching the eaves of the other two structures, connected the two halves. Although there wasn't an official steeple or any stained-glass windows, the buildings and the yard all looked clean and well cared for. Not fancy. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Not even churchy. But homey somehow.

Jase's angst eased a bit.

Shifting his focus forward again, he spotted a two-story home with a trio of carriage-type garage doors on its lower level. The front of a ranch-style house stuck out from the far side of the garage. Its paint colors—cream with dark green trim—matched the garage. No other house sat on the right-hand side of Bluebell Street, so it had to be where the pastor lived. Jase pulled in a breath and blew it out, then drove the remaining distance, the growl of the U-Haul's tires loud on the gravel road.

He parked in front of the house and turned off the engine. He hadn't even climbed out of the cab before the front door of the house opened and a smiling couple stepped out onto the porch. The woman stopped at the edge of the concrete slab, but the man—short, heavysset, with gray-streaked hair and a huge grin—ambled down the steps and came toward Jase, his hand extended.

Jase met him in front of the U-Haul. The man's handshake, strong yet not crushing, sent a message of welcome. Jase felt his lips curve into a smile. "Hello. I'm Jase Edgar. You must be Reverend Kraft."

"I am. But call me Brother Kraft. Everyone around here does." The man beamed at Jase, his blue eyes narrowing to merry slits.

“I’m sure glad to meet you. And you’re right on time for lunch. We were sitting down when Leah heard your truck. She said it had to be our new youth minister.” He chuckled and leaned forward slightly, like a child sharing a secret. “She made extra in the hopes you’d be here in time to eat with us.”

Jase glanced at the woman. She waited with her hands tucked in the pockets of a yellow-flowered bib apron, her gaze seemingly glued to him. He gave a nod, and she bobbed her head. He turned to Brother Kraft again. “That’s awfully nice of her.”

“Well, Leah loves to cook. Doesn’t need much of an excuse to fix plenty, either. So come in, come in.”

Brother Kraft slung his arm up and across Jase’s shoulders and herded him along the paved sidewalk to the house. The warmth of the man’s arm felt good. Although Jase wouldn’t call the temperature in this part of Kansas cold, it was definitely too cool for the T-shirt, cargo shorts, and sandals he’d put on that morning. The weather here was at least ten degrees lower than a typical April day in San Antonio.

Mrs. Kraft, equal in height to her husband but half his girth, pulled her hands out of her pockets and grabbed Jase in a tight hug the moment he stepped up onto the porch. It reminded him of the hugs given by some of the older ladies at the church back home, and he automatically returned it with matching oomph. She patted his back several times, then let go and grinned at him. “Jase Edgar, welcome to Bradleyville. My brother-in-law spoke so highly of you, I know you’ll be a blessing in these parts. But instead of standing out here talking, let’s get sat down at the table before the meatloaf and mashed potatoes are cold. I hope you’re hungry.”

Jase’s mouth watered. “I am, and that sounds good, ma’am.”

“Call me Sister Kraft.” The preacher’s wife slipped her hand

through the bend of Jase's elbow and gave him a little nudge into the house. "We'll get good and acquainted while we're eating, and then we'll help you settle in to your new home."

*New home.* A boulder seemed to drop into Jase's stomach. They were kind words. Welcoming words. Shouldn't they inspire something other than panic?

*Merlin Kraft*

MERLIN FORKED ANOTHER slice of meatloaf onto his plate. What had Leah added to the ground beef this time? Yesterday's leftover mixed vegetables? Some of their breakfast oatmeal? Maybe a dab of spaghetti and slices of garlic bread from Monday's supper? All of the above? If it fit through the grinder, it was a potential ingredient. He often teased her that her meatloaf was more loaf than meat, and she never denied the claim. The recipe differed every time, but he could always count on it tasting good. Their guest must've agreed because he also took a second serving. Or was it his third? One thing was certain. There'd be no leftover-meatloaf sandwiches for supper.

Leah picked up the bowl of potatoes and held it to Jase. "More?"

The young man smiled and plopped a spoonful onto his plate. "Thank you, ma'am. Everything's real good."

"Why, thank you. I'm glad you're enjoying it." Leah set the potatoes on the table and offered Jase the green beans. "Help yourself. The youngest of our brood—twins, Stella and Staci—moved out more than fourteen years ago, but I still cook enough to feed the six of us who used to sit around this table."

Jase's eyebrows rose. "Six?"

Pride glowed in Leah's pale blue eyes, which Merlin had come to expect whenever she spoke of their children. She said, "Merlin and me, Stella and Staci, and then our boys, Todd and Matt. They're all on their own now and scattered all over the United States."

Jase jabbed a forkful of green beans and carried it to his mouth. He chewed and swallowed, then grinned at Leah. "They must miss these home-cooked meals."

Leah laughed softly. "Oh, I hope so! My sisters and I were raised by our grandmother. Did my sister Eileen ever tell you that?"

"No, ma'am." Jase cut off a chunk of meatloaf and dipped it in his mashed potatoes.

"Well, Grandma taught us to cook," Leah went on. "She'd lived through near starvation in Russia before coming to America, so she knew to make do with whatever she could scrounge. We didn't eat fancy, but we never went hungry."

Merlin observed Jase out of the corner of his eyes. He listened attentively, respectfully, even while he ate. Tony had been right when he said the young man was personable. Leah was already taken with him. But Leah took to nearly everyone, whether they wanted her to or not.

She sent a sideways glance at Merlin, then settled her gaze on Jase again. "Tony told us you grew up in foster care."

Jase swiped his mouth with his napkin and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I was lucky, though. I got bounced around a little bit in the beginning, but I landed with a real nice family when I was an eighth grader and stayed with them until I graduated. They took me to Brother Tony's church. That's where I accepted Jesus, got baptized, and met my—" His cheeks streaked pink. He cleared his throat and lowered his head.

Leah touched Jase's wrist. "Tony told us about your fiancée. We're sorry for your loss."

Jase raised his head and looked back and forth from Leah to Merlin. "Thanks. Did Brother Tony also tell you that Rachel and I planned to be church planters after we got married?"

Merlin nodded. "He did. That's why he thought you'd be such a good fit here in Bradleyville. We're forging new ground by starting a ministry dedicated to high schoolers." He set his fork on his plate and propped his arms on the edge of the table. "You probably noticed there aren't a lot of houses here in Bradleyville."

Jase grinned. "Well . . ."

Merlin chuckled. "We have a population of three hundred and twenty-five."

Leah shook her finger at Merlin. "The count is three hundred and twenty-six, now that Jase is here."

Merlin smiled. "True. Beech Street Bible Fellowship ministers to the people who call Bradleyville home, but we reach out to neighboring areas, too. There's a fairly new housing district a bit north of us, and some of the folks there have started attending services. The students in Bradleyville are in the Goddard school district, so of course we've done some outreach there."

The responsibility of teaching people to move beyond mere religion to truly knowing and serving Jesus created pressure in the center of Merlin's heart, and he inwardly thanked the Lord for sending the help he'd long prayed for. And none too soon. "I'm pleased to say our attendance is increasing, and we have quite a number of people from Wichita who've joined the church in the past four years. I can't see to all of the needs on my own anymore, so you, young man, are an answer to prayer."

An almost-nervous grin appeared on Jase's face. "I hope I won't let you down."

"If half of what Tony told us about you is true, I know we're going to be glad you're here."

Jase ate the last bite of meatloaf on his plate and set his fork on the table. He sighed. "I'm going to need your recipe for meatloaf, ma'am. That was the best I've ever had."

Merlin recognized a conversation change when he heard one.

Leah laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

Merlin winked at her and stood. "Thank you for lunch, dear. If you'll excuse us, I'm going to show Jase to his apartment. Then I'll give him a tour of the church." Leah angled her face and tapped her cheekbone. Merlin gave her a kiss, then turned to Jase. The young man gazed at them with such a forlorn expression that it stung Merlin. He'd talk with Leah later about curbing their easy affection when Jase was with them. No sense in rubbing salt into the new youth minister's still-raw wounds. "Ready?"

Jase nodded and rose. He thanked Leah and followed Merlin out the back door.

Merlin led him across the narrow side yard to the outside staircase for the apartment over the garage. He pointed to the garage. "There's a stall available for your car." He frowned at the U-Haul. "I assume you have one."

Jase shook his head. "I left the car behind that I've used for the past year. My car was totaled in an accident." Pain flickered in his blue-green eyes. "Before I got the insurance payout, a church member loaned me a vehicle. Then, after the payout arrived, he told me put my money in the bank and keep using the car for as long as I needed it. I gave the car back the day before I came here."

So I've still got that money. I'd like to find a used car as quickly as possible."

"I can help you with that." Merlin started up the creaky stairs, with Jase behind him. "In fact, one of our members owns a family-run dealership in Wichita. You can trust him to sell you something dependable."

"Sounds perfect."

Although the words were positive, the younger man sounded uncertain. Merlin thought he understood. He flicked a glance over his shoulder. "Lots of changes all at once, isn't it?"

Jase released a dry chuckle. "It is. But I'll be okay. I got used to sudden changes when I was a kid."

Had this staircase gotten longer since the last time he climbed it? Merlin paused with one foot on the square landing and pulled in a big breath. "Jase, I'm sure you already know this, but I'm going to say it anyway. We do not serve a wasteful God. I doubt Tony told me everything you've dealt with in your short life, but he told me enough to know you've had a lot to overcome. Every one of those situations we refer to as trials serves a purpose. Maybe it was to strengthen you. Maybe to give you wisdom. Maybe so you could show someone else how to navigate a tough pathway."

He fixed Jase with a steady gaze, his voice rising in response to his inner conviction. "God tells Moses in Exodus 9, 'I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' God raises us up for His purposes so we have the opportunity to experience and share His power in a human life." He placed his hand on Jase's shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze. "Stay open to His leading, Jase. You might feel like your plans have been lost, but His plans are

never forsaken. He will use you for His glory, and it'll be for your good, too."

Merlin examined Jase's face for signs of resentment. Had he said too much too soon? After all, he hardly knew the man. Leah sometimes warned him his enthusiasm led him to race ahead of God. Had he raced?

The corner of Jase's lips twitched. Then came a full-blown grin. "Are you this convincing in the pulpit?"

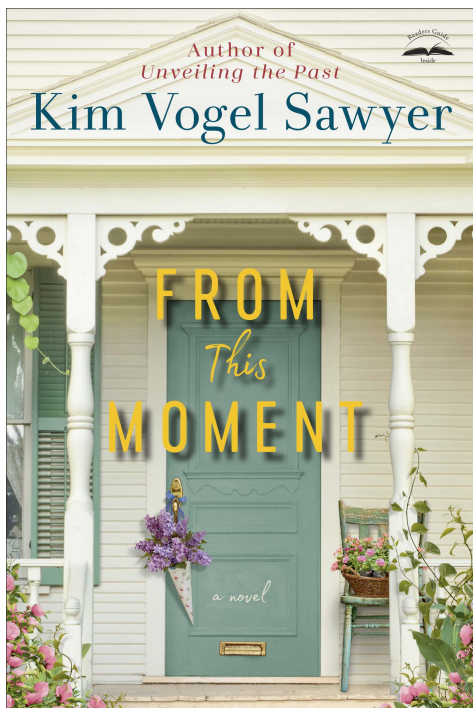
Merlin shrugged, battling a chortle. "You'll have to ask some of the members. It's hard to be objective about yourself."

Jase nodded. "Thanks for the words of wisdom. I'll give them some consideration."

Merlin nearly sagged with relief. He hadn't run Jase off. Yet. He pulled the key for the apartment door from his pocket and held it out to Jase. "I'll let you do the honors since this is your place now. I hope it'll feel like home to you real soon."

Jase took the key and looked at it for several seconds, his eyebrows low. "Me, too, sir. Me, too."





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