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Freedom's **SONG**

A NOVEL

Kim Vogel Sawyer

AUTHOR OF *THE LIBRARIAN OF BOONE'S HOLLOW*

Praise for
Freedom's Song

“Kim Vogel Sawyer has once again written a delightful, heart-warming tale of romance and adventure. Readers will come to love Fanny and Walter—and perhaps even the ‘villain,’ Sloan—all compelling characters, each of whom journeys to a moment of gripping revelation and change. Don’t miss this engaging story.”

—LOUISE M. GOUGE, award-winning author
of *Winning Amber*

“A truly enjoyable and riveting read. Young Fanny’s character captured me right from the start. A beautifully told story of the priceless value of freedom.”

—MELODY CARLSON, author of the
Legacy of Sunset Cove series

“Kim Sawyer is known for her long list of uplifting and hope-filled novels, but *Freedom’s Song* may be her best yet. Deftly weaving the theme of freedom through an unforgettable story of love and escape, Kim delivers a tale that readers will not soon forget. The characters will jump off the page and into your heart, and the message will bring you hope.”

—KATHLEEN Y’BARBO, a *Publishers Weekly* bestselling
author of *The Yes Dare*, book 3 of the Pies,
Books & Jesus Book Club series

“Kim Vogel Sawyer writes classic Christian fiction at its finest. *Freedom’s Song* is no exception. I didn’t want it to end, but it ended the way I wanted it to—that is a great book.”

—TRACEY BATEMAN, author of *The Nanny Proposal*

“Freedom’s Song is a heartwarming story of God’s perfect timing and provision. Out of the darkness of indentured servitude emerges a sweet romance and a strong story of hope that will resonate with readers. Fanny, the heroine, is inspiring because she never gives up and she clings to her faith in spite of the difficult things she faces. Another great read from Kim Sawyer.”

—VICKIE McDONOUGH, bestselling author of more than fifty novels and novellas, including *The Anonymous Bride*

Freedom's Song

Books by Kim Vogel Sawyer

Beneath a Prairie Moon

Bringing Maggie Home

Echoes of Mercy

From This Moment

Grace and the Preacher

The Grace That Leads Us Home

Guide Me Home

Just As I Am

The Librarian of Boone's Hollow

Ours for a Season

Room for Hope

A Silken Thread

Through the Deep Waters

Unveiling the Past

What Once Was Lost

When Grace Sings

When Love Returns

When Mercy Rains

Freedom's Song



A Novel

KIM VOGEL SAWYER



WATERBROOK

FREEDOM'S SONG

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

This is a work of fiction. Apart from well-known people, events, and locales that figure into the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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First Edition

Interior book design by Virginia Norey.

For *Kristian*, my songbird;
for *Kaitlyn*, my joy bringer;
and for *Kamryn*, my champion of the underdog

If the Son therefore shall make you free,
ye shall be free indeed.

—JOHN 8:36

Freedom's Song

1



On the Mississippi River, near Monticello, Missouri
Mid-April 1860
Fanny Beck

Thunderous applause. Cries of “Encore, encore!” Fanny Beck bowed her head in humble acknowledgment and gratitude. Da had told her she’d been given a special gift by the Almighty to use for His glory. Ever since she was a wee girl, she’d relished enthusiastic responses to her singing, seeing the praise as an offering to the One her parents had taught her to love and honor.

With memories of Da and Ma warming her heart, she lifted her face, held her arms in a graceful position as if bestowing an offering, and burst into the song she always saved for when the audience clamored for an encore, “‘Come, let us join our cheerful songs with angels round the throne.’”

This hymn by Isaac Watts, offering adoration to the Lamb of God, wasn’t a favorite of Sloan’s. He often reminded her that her voice belonged to him because he’d indentured her, but he had given her permission to choose her own encore. She sang all five stanzas with heartfelt thanks for her Lord and Savior.

She sang the final note an octave higher than written and then dropped into a deep curtsy. While the audience proved their appreciation with resounding applause for several minutes, she remained in the pose she’d learned from the woman Sloan had hired to tutor her. The accolades continued, but Fan-

ny's limbs began to tremble. She straightened and caught sight of Burke, her assigned watcher for the evening, gesturing to her from the edge of the riverboat's stage.

Standing behind a fall of shimmering red velvet, he was concealed from the audience. But Fanny was aware of his presence. Of the unwavering glare beneath his thick gray eyebrows, the scowl framed by untamed whiskers, and—mostly—the unspoken warning. If the applauding attendees could see his dour face or the stern jerk of his arm that signaled, *Come here now!* would any of them ponder why the young singer billed as the Darling of the *River Peacock* was kept under constant observation and summoned so harshly?

She faced the still clamoring crowd, touched her fingertips to her lips, then swung her arms wide, as if showering them with kisses, the way Sloan had instructed her to bid farewell. Then she pulled the folds of her black velvet cloak over her dress. As heavy and cumbersome as the cloak was to wear, she welcomed its coverage. Her performance dresses, all commissioned by Sloan in bawdy colors with plunging necklines, left her feeling exposed and indecent. Neither Da nor Ma would have approved indenturing her to Sloan if they had known she'd be dressed up like a strumpet.

With another bow of her head to her admiring audience, she left the stage, mindful of the rolling motion of the riverboat beneath her feet. The wind must be stout tonight. The moment she reached Burke, he grabbed the hood of her cloak and jerked it over her head.

She frowned. Sloan didn't want her wearing the hood. He'd said the cloak's red satin lining was too pretty against the rich black velvet to stay fully hidden. "Besides," he'd added, his gaze roving over her the way men examined a horse before purchasing it, "part of your appeal is your bonny face and dark-brown

hair shot through with strands of red-gold. Why not let the men admire one of God's most lovely creations?"

If he saw her with her head covered, he'd rage at her. She reached to remove it.

"Leave it," Burke said.

Fanny paused with her fingers pinching the edge of the hood. "Why?"

"It's rainin'. We can't have you drippin' like a drowned rat. You're gonna need to look fresh for the eleven o'clock show."

She had a full hour to dry and refashion her hair. She could tell him so, but why bother? She never won arguments with Sloan or Burke. Sometimes she argued anyway, if only for the sake of entertaining herself and utilizing her wits. But the hour was late, the weather was foul, and she preferred to reach her room for a much-needed rest.

She stifled a yawn. If only she could eat a little supper, crawl into her warm berth, and not have to get out again. But nothing would entice Sloan to cancel the late-night Friday show. During the program reserved for the male passengers, wine and other spirits poured freely, and in their drunkenness the men tossed coin after coin onto the stage at her feet. Of course, she wasn't allowed to collect those coins. Stage workers gathered them up and turned them over to Sloan.

A shudder rattled her frame, brought on by guilt and worry. Sloan would be furious if he knew her secret. But she was furious, too. Her term of service should end in August this year. Yet on her customary daily supervised stroll around the deck a few weeks ago, she'd overheard him instructing a couple to be certain to cruise again at Christmastime, when Miss Fainche Beck would deliver a special concert. She'd asked her escort, an elderly man nearly crippled by arthritis and nicknamed Cricket for the way his hip joints creaked when he walked, to take her to

Sloan. Cricket had complied and stood silently while she reminded Sloan she'd be off this boat well before Christmas.

She would never forget the fury in Sloan's green eyes or the way he leaned within inches of her face and growled, "I'll let you know when you're free to leave this boat, and until then you'll do as I say if you have any intelligence at all."

She'd proved her intelligence—or her cowardice—by holding back further words of complaint, but she'd continued to rebel in her mind. And apparently she'd won Cricket's compassion. Because after that, each time he was given charge of accompanying her on her stroll, he sneaked her a coin or two. At first she hesitated to accept the five-, ten-, and twenty-dollar gold pieces. If they were caught, they would surely suffer dire consequences. But he told her, "These're some tossed on the stage as thanks for your pretty singin'. You earned 'em, Miss Fanny. Ain't ya gonna need travel money to get to yer folks?"

How many times had she prayed for God's provision for transport to the Manhattan borough of New York City, where Da, Ma, and her little sisters had settled? Who was she to say that God hadn't prompted the old man to lend aid? God often used unlikely means and people to further His will. Besides, Cricket was right. She had earned them. So she gratefully accepted the coins. Closed in her private room, she'd wrapped each coin with a bit of cloth and hid them in her muslin dimity pocket. Sloan had many rules for her and only one for the crew concerning her: "Hands off." The pouch, tied by a string around her waist beneath her layers of skirts, was safe from discovery. She wore it day and night, its pressure against her hip bone a silent promise that she would join her family someday.

Burke escorted her through the unlit corridor behind the stage and out to the covered deck. Lanterns hanging from overhead beams poked holes in the darkness, but they did little to cheer the night. Not a soul, not even the usual cigar smokers,

l lounged on the chair-lined, gleaming teakwood-paneled deck. And small wonder, for lightning slashed the sky and thunder rumbled in the distance. Fat raindrops, blown sideways by gusts of wind, pummeled the water and the paddleboat's tin roof with nearly as much clamor as the applause she'd left behind. Not even her hood protected her face from the onslaught. She hunched forward and shivered, the leather soles of her embroidered silk slippers sliding on the wet deck.

Burke, amazingly agile for a man who must be as old as Da, cupped her elbow and kept her upright. At the entry to the lower level, Burke released her arm. She stood shivering while he lifted the angled door built of thick planks joined with metal bands, his arm muscles bulging against the faded gray fabric of his shirt. He left the door open and led her down the warped wooden stairs to the lowest level—the level reserved for the lowliest of the crew—where Fanny had spent the majority of her life for close to seven years. The moist, cool breeze followed them.

He snagged a flickering lantern from a hook at the base of the stairs and gestured her to go ahead of him down the narrow hallway, light from the lantern bouncing off the damp walls like flashes of lightning. At her door, he hung the lantern on a nail pounded into the doorjamb and removed a ring of keys from his trousers pocket. He grunted as he twisted the key in the iron lock. *Click!* The rusty lock released.

Burke swung the door open and gave her a little nudge into the tiny space. "One of the cook's helpers left a cold supper beside your bed."

The lamp burning on the little table next to her cot cast a dim glow over three shriveled slices of pinkish meat veined with fat, a biscuit, and some type of wilted greens, probably fried in the fat from the meat. The diners she'd entertained during the seven o'clock show had sat at linen-draped tables and feasted on roasted pork, glazed carrots, buttery mashed potatoes, and

crusty rolls. The sight and aroma of those foods had stirred her appetite, but the cold offering on her chipped crockery plate quelled her desire to eat.

Burke nodded toward the table. "Fill your belly, then rest. Sloan'll expect you bright eyed an' ready to sing loud an' strong for tonight's show."

Fanny had no intention of filling her belly. Not only were the options on the plate unappetizing, but a full stomach would prevent her from getting a full breath and, therefore, hinder her ability to sing well. She'd eat later, when hunger overrode her aversion. But now she would rest.

She sat on the edge of her cot. The moment her frame met the lumpy cotton-stuffed mattress, the boat lurched and shuddered. Burke stumbled sideways and slammed against the door-frame. She bolted to her feet. The boat gave another violent shake, and she nearly lost her balance.

"Stay here." Burke staggered into the hallway, retrieved the lantern from its nail, and left.

Fanny gaped. Had he truly left the door open? Not once in all her years on this boat had her cabin door remained unlocked, let alone open, when she was inside. Had God chosen this day to answer her prayer for escape? The plan she'd concocted weeks ago unfolded in her mind. Make it to the passenger deck and hide, perhaps behind the stage, until the ship docked, then mingle with the passengers as they disembarked. Once on land, locate a railway station, purchase a ticket, and travel to New York City.

The desire to be reunited with Da and Ma, Flossie, and little Moira propelled her to the opening. She peered out. Burke was gone, and the hall lay thick in shadows. The roar of the boiler and rhythmic groaning squeals of the massive paddle wheel were now silenced, but scrambling noises and shouts filtered from the levels above, sounds unlike any she'd heard during her

long years aboard the *River Peacock*. A perfect opportunity for someone to become lost in the crowd.

Heart pattering in both apprehension and hope, she took a hesitant step into the dark hall. Her body trembled so badly she marveled she could stay upright. She paused, fully expecting someone—Sloan, Burke, or one of the many crew members who'd been given charge of her over the years—to storm up and force her back into her cell. But no one came.

She felt her way up the hallway toward the staircase. The boat pitched sideways, throwing her against the opposite wall. Her feet slid out from under her, and she went down. The shock of the fall stunned her for a moment, rendering her incapable of movement. But then the acrid stench of coal oil and smoke attacked her nose. Her eyes burned. She turned her face into the satin hood of her cloak and forced her confusion-riddled mind to calm and think, think.

Screeches, wails, shouts, and the thunder of many footsteps filled her ears and painted a picture of panic. The boat must be on fire. She had to get out of the bottom deck before the vessel sank.

Mouth dry, lungs heaving, she struggled to untangle her layers of clothing and rise, but the slickness of the floorboards and the violent jerking motions of the boat forced her down again. Whimpering in terror, she shifted to her hands and knees and half crawled, half dragged herself the remaining distance to the stairs. *Let the hatch be open, me dear Lord*, her heart begged as she inched her way to safety and freedom. If Burke or someone else had closed the hatch, she'd be trapped. The door weighed more than a hundred pounds. She'd never be able to open it by herself.

The desire for escape pounded in her chest, giving her the strength to push to her feet and stagger the final few feet to the base of the stairs. Rain-scented air poured over her. The hatch

was open! She scrambled upward on all fours and burst onto the deck into a dance of chaos. She was swept into the milling throng and carried with it.

“This way! This way to the lifeboats!”

The authoritative voice had come from behind Fanny, cutting through the storm’s fury, women’s wails, and men’s fearful shouts. Yet no one seemed to heed it. Fanny hollered, “Turn around! Turn around! The lifeboats are behind you!”

The tide of passengers turned in the opposite direction, and Fanny got bumped aside. Her soles slid on the rain-wet deck, but she caught her balance and rejoined the throng. Someone slammed into her, sending her stumbling sideways. Her hip collided with the railing. Pain exploded through her lower spine. She gasped and instinctively arched her back. Her feet went out from under her and her body flipped, the cloak wrapping itself around her as she tumbled headfirst over the railing.

A piercing scream left her throat, and then the frigid river swallowed her whole.



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