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Still My **FOREVER**

A NOVEL

Kim Vogel Sawyer

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Still My Forever



A Novel

KIM VOGEL SAWYER



WATERBROOK

STILL MY FOREVER

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

This is a work of historical fiction based closely on real people and real events. Details that cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author's imagination.

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First Edition

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For Alana—

You seemed to grow up in the blink of an eye, and now you're off, pursuing your dreams! God has wonderful plans for you, dear granddaughter, and Gramma is praying for you every step of the way.

The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted
in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly
rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him.

—Psalm 28:7



Chapter One

Falke, Kansas (a Mennonite community)
1905
Ava Flaming

“IS THAT THE TRAIN I HEAR?”

Ava gave a start and turned from placing Papa’s freshly starched and folded shirts in the bureau drawer. Mama lay with her eyes closed, but her fine brows were arched in query. Ava pushed the drawer shut with her hip and hurried to the side of the bed.

“Jo, it is.” She smoothed her mother’s once thick, dark hair, now more gray than brown, away from Mama’s cheek and grimaced. Mama’s pallor was nearly as white as the pillowcase cradling her head. Why hadn’t she listened yesterday when both Ava and Papa told her the gardening would be too much for her? Oh, how *stoakoppijch* Mama could be. But then, Ava was often accused of stubbornness, too. She knew from which parent the characteristic was passed.

Mama opened one eye and pinned Ava with a narrow glare. “I wish your Foda had given more thought to the wisdom of building a house so close to the rail lines. The trains rattle the windows. I often worry our little house will shake itself from the foundation.”

Ava smiled to herself. The rail lines had been laid three years

after Papa set their stone foundation. But of course Mama knew this. Once when she chided Papa about their close proximity to the silver tracks, Papa asked her how he was to know the railroad would choose to run lines behind their house. Mama pointed at him and said with eyes alight, "Ah, my husband, I used to believe you know everything. Now? I am not so sure." And they'd all laughed. Ava missed the days when Mama teased and laughed.

She sat on the edge of the mattress and gently patted her mother's vein-lined hand. "When Falke's post office was right here in our house, our close location to the railroad line was fortuitous. You thought so yourself. Besides, our house is built solid. Not even last year's tornado shifted it from its foundation, and a tornado is much more powerful than a passing train. Do you really worry about such things?"

A sigh eased from between Mama's chapped lips. "If you are *ne Mutta*, you worry. It goes with the title. You'll find out someday when you have children."

Ava looked aside. She wished Mama wouldn't say such things. Of course, Mama wanted to see her only daughter married and raising children of her own. Maybe even more now that Ava's brothers were gone. Who else would give her and Papa *Grootkjinja* to spoil? But Ava was twenty-one already. The unlikelihood of marriage became greater with each passing year. Maybe she should stop stubbornly refusing her one persistent prospect. She inwardly cringed. Nä. Even for a home and children of her own, she couldn't marry someone she didn't love, no matter how much Joseph claimed to love her.

"As often as it stops here in Falke, we should have our own depot." Mama rolled to her side. "Please close the window. I don't wish to hear the squeal as it leaves town."

Ava started to argue. The raised window allowed the sweet

spring breeze to waft in. Despite her often gloomy thoughts concerning her single state and Mama's poor health, she always found a measure of joy in the glorious scents of new life burgeoning. Might the freshness have the power to revive Mama's spirits, too? But Ava hadn't won yesterday's argument about who should plant the vegetable garden. She'd only further weary Mama by arguing today.

Ava crossed to the window, settled it in its sash, then stood with her fingertips on the sill. She gazed at the black locomotive's dust-smudged nose seeming to poke out from behind the family's barn. The engine's vibration gently rattled the house, sending shivers from her fingers up her arm.

If she wanted to argue, she could rebuff Mama's claim about the need for a depot in little Falke. The community founded by Mennonite immigrants in 1873 and named for the abundance of peregrine falcons preying on the plains' mice and rabbits was hardly a pindot on the newest Kansas map. Trains wouldn't stop—or slow down—except to take on water from the tank or retrieve the dangling mailbag Papa placed weekly on its hook. Now and then someone who'd purchased a ticket to McPherson or Newton but only wanted to come as far as Falke would hop off the train when it took a watering break. But it was such a rare occurrence, she knew not to look for—

Suddenly, a tall, broad-shouldered man moved from behind the barn and into her line of vision. She released a self-deprecating chuckle. Of course someone would disembark at Falke the same day Mama declared the town needed a depot.

She squinted against the bright midday sun and examined the visitor. He wore a dust-smeared gray suit and a bowler hat tipped rakishly forward on his head. The brim of the felt hat threw a shadow across his face, hiding his features from view. A plump brown leather bag dangled from one hand, and in the

other he carried a black case shaped like a violin. With long, sure strides he moved toward town.

A traveling salesman, perhaps? Salesmen seldom bothered knocking on the doors of Falke's residents. The people of this little town were too frugal to squander their hard-earned money on frivolities. But if he intended to sell musical instruments, he might find some success. Love for music, Papa often proclaimed, was born in every Mennonite child. Ava had never doubted him. When the community members gathered for worship on Sundays, surely their hymn singing rivaled angel choirs. She had learned to sing in harmony with her brothers even before she was old enough to attend school. If this man was selling instruments, he had chosen the right place to peddle his wares.

She glanced at the music case, and a distant memory carried a tune, both sweet and mournful, from the recesses of her mind. As if the fierce Kansas wind transported her, she was swept backward in time to 1901, New Year's Day. In her mind's eye, she saw Gil with his violin under his chin, his tapered fingers expertly drawing the bow over the strings while his velvety brown eyes fixed on hers and a tender smile curved his full pink lips. *Her song*, he'd called the tune he'd written, his way of expressing to her what words could not.

The remembered notes and his adoring expression flooded her with mingled longing and regret. Determined not to revisit the source of the tune, she started to turn from the window. But at that same moment, the man stopped and raised his face to the sun. The slice of shade slipped away. Recognition burst through her with as much force as a lightning bolt.

Ava stumbled backward a step and pressed her quivering hand to her lips. A single word rasped from her throat. "Gil."

Gilbert Baty

“WELL, AS I live and breathe, Gil Baty just passed my window.”

Gil came to a halt. Four years had passed since he moved from small and sleepy Falke to big and bustling New York City. He’d encountered more people, heard more voices, than a man could possibly count in that amount of time. Didn’t matter. Even without looking, he knew who’d uttered the statement—Bernard Flaming, the town’s postman and, more importantly, Ava’s Foda.

He stifled a groan. Not even home for five minutes, and one of the people he’d specifically prayed to avoid—the man who’d regularly taken him fishing when he was a gangly twelve-year-old—had already spotted him. In Falke, word spread faster than whitewash on a barn. He hadn’t expected to dodge the Flaming family forever. But God couldn’t give him a day, maybe two, before they knew he was back? Should he move on? Pretend he hadn’t heard? Yes, he’d ignore it and—

“Gil! You there, Gil!”

He couldn’t ignore that. Pulling in a breath of fortification, Gil turned around and strode directly to the gray-haired, barrel-chested man waiting outside the post office door. He placed his suitcase on the planked boardwalk and stuck out his hand. “Hello, sir. It’s good to see you again.” Such a lie.

Bernard took hold of Gil’s hand and pulled him into a breath-stealing embrace. “Welcome back, my boy. Are you visiting or have you come home to stay?”

Gil wriggled loose. “Well, sir, I—”

“Look here, it’s Gil Baty! Gil is in town!” The shout came from behind Gil and saved him from stuttering through a reply. Which was just as well, because he had no idea how to

answer Bernard's question. Within minutes, it seemed every shop owner and customer in town abandoned their business dealings. Townsfolk surrounded Gil, all talking and laughing and clapping him on the back.

"It's too bad we don't have a band to give you a rousing welcome-home tune, Gil," the town banker said.

The barber nudged the banker on the shoulder. "Now, John, we do have a band. But we didn't get enough notice to round up our instruments." He aimed a mock scowl at Gil. "Why didn't you send word, Gil? We've been working on a rousing rendition of 'When the Saints Go Marching In.' It would have made a fine welcome-home tune for our town's most successful young person."

Gil swallowed a knot of mortification. If these people knew how unsuccessful he was, they wouldn't be overjoyed to see him. He didn't deserve their congratulations, and he should tell them so. But weariness from the days of travel and heartache from the years of rejection prevented the words from forming. He shrugged and forced a grin. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rempel. Next time I'll give everyone plenty of notice."

The man slung his thick arm around Gil's shoulders and squeezed. "Ach, boy, you don't owe me an apology. We are all just so happy to see you home."

Others echoed the barber's statement, then several tossed questions at Gil about big-city life, his musical pursuits, and his future plans. Gil's head spun. He shouldn't have come back here. Even though he'd lost his roommate and couldn't afford the rent for his apartment in New York City on his own, he should have tried harder to find another roommate. He should have temporarily taken a room at the YMCA. He should have—

He shook his head, dispelling the should-haves. It was too late for them now. He was back in the town of his childhood,

the place he hoped to lick his wounds, rediscover his peace, and perhaps finally compose a musical piece that would bring accolades rather than yawns from the elite of New York's music community. He held up both hands, and to his relief, the barrage of questions ceased.

"Fellows, I appreciate your kind welcomes. You've made me feel right at home again." His half-hearted comments earned smiles and nods. "But it's a long train ride from New York to Falke, and to be completely honest with all of you, I'm too tuckered to talk."

Laughter rolled, and with farewells and promises to catch up after he'd rested, all the townsfolk except Bernard ambled away. Gil reached for his bag, but Bernard got hold of it first.

The man beamed at Gil. "Let me tote this to your uncle's place for you. Now that I get a good look at you, you're pale and seem as weak as a day-old kitten." He winked. "Did the train ride have such an effect, or did life in the big city wear you out?"

Suddenly a comment whispered through his mind. *"Did you hear that hayseed sawing away at his fiddle? He said he wrote the song himself. I could barely hold back my laughter. What a joke."* The criticism, made by a fellow violinist auditioning for a spot in a Broadway orchestra, stung so much in remembrance, Gil winced. He had no intention of honestly answering Bernard's question. "Thank you, Mr. Flaming, but—"

"Mr. Flaming?" Bernard's voice boomed out on a note of disapproval. "I think we know each other too well to be so formal. You're still the same boy who banged in and out of my house, begging for cookies or the chance to drop a line in the creek, aren't you?"

Somewhere inside him, that boy still existed. Didn't he? Gil gave a meek nod.

“Well, then, I’m still Onkel Bernard to you.”

Warmth flooded Gil. So many things had changed since he packed his bags and chased his dreams to New York. Having this one thing stay the same meant more than he could understand. “Thank you, Onkel Bernard.”

The man snorted under his breath. “No need for that. Now come.” He started toward the south edge of town where Gil’s uncle, aunt, and cousins lived, and Gil fell into step beside him. “I don’t recall finding a recent a letter to Hosea and Dorcas in the mailbag from you.” Bernard peeked at Gil from the corners of his eyes. “Do they know you are coming?”

Gil hadn’t written to his only remaining family for close to a year. Why bother? He had little to report, and they rarely wrote back except for the occasional penny postcard. The townspeople had welcomed him to Falke, but how would Onkel Hosea and Taunte Dorcas react to his appearance? He turned a sheepish grimace on his old friend, his feet slowing to a halt. “No. No, they don’t.”

Bernard stopped and pinched his chin, his brow crinkling. “Well, then, we should make things as easy on them as possible. Dorcas probably already has her evening meal planned out. So here’s what we’ll do. We’ll let you get settled in at your uncle’s house”—

Strange how Bernard didn’t say *your* house, considering Gil had lived there from the time he was eleven years old. Maybe it wasn’t his house anymore. Maybe it never really had been.

—“and then you’ll come for supper at my table at seven.”

Gil jolted. “Oh, no, sir. That . . . that’s kind, but it’s an inconvenience for your wife.”

Bernard gently pushed Gil’s leg with the suitcase, sending him into motion. “It’ll be a pleasure, not an inconvenience. Trust me. Ava won’t mind a bit.”

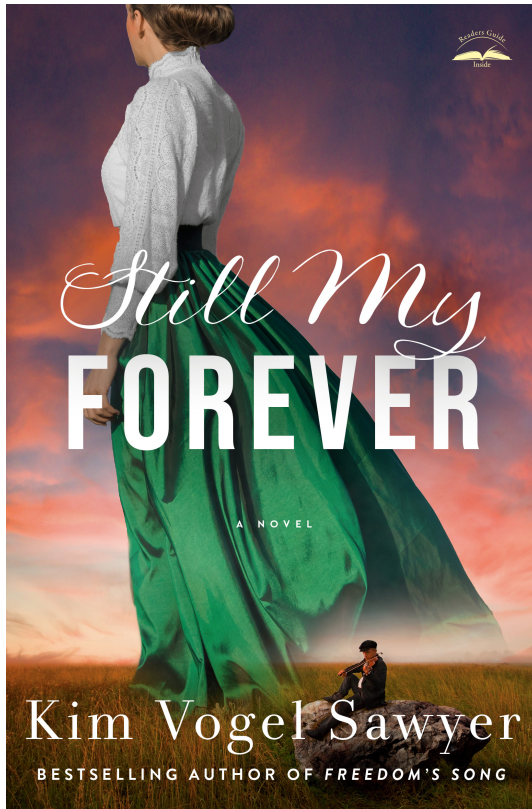
Gil stopped again and gawked at Bernard. “Ava? Ava cooks for you?”

Bernard released a deep sigh. “Jo. Your Taunte Maria is too weary by day’s end to prepare meals. So Ava sees to it.”

“So she still . . . she still . . .” Gil couldn’t make himself finish the question. He really didn’t want to hear the answer.

Bernard’s lips quivered into a sad grin. “Yes, Maria still suffers, and our dear Ava still lives with us.” Then a real smile broke across his round face. “But Ava is a fine cook. So fine, in fact, the owner of the café orders all her pastries and cakes from Ava. She’s even asked Ava to take over the whole restaurant. Imagine our little Ava a businesswoman. Ach, such a wonder! Jo, she’s a very good cook. You won’t regret sitting at our table.”

Bernard was wrong. Gil already regretted it. How could he face Ava? The fact that she still lived at home meant he’d most certainly ruined her life.



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