

the
TAPESTRY
of
GRACE

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PEEK**



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A NOVEL

**Kim Vogel
Sawyer**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF FREEDOM'S SONG

The Tapestry of Grace

A Novel



KIM VOGEL SAWYER



WATERBROOK

THE TAPESTRY OF GRACE

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In honor of my grandmothers whom I never got to meet, *Elizabeth Klaassen Voth* and *Lillian Miller Vogel*, and my wonderful step-grandma who filled their role in my life, *Helen Hawk Vogel*—you were generous, loving women of strong faith, and I know you'll be part of my welcome-home party someday.

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace,
that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in
time of need.

—Hebrews 4:16

The Tapestry of Grace

Chapter One

Alexandertol, Kansas

April 9, 1895

Augusta Dyck

Augusta stood just inside the Alexandertol Mennonite Church and scanned the crowded benches on the women's side of the sanctuary. *Ach*, every woman in town must have come to tonight's meeting. Was everyone so interested in the new women's club, or did they only mean to enjoy an hour of escape from their overly excited children? If the latter, Augusta wouldn't blame them. As much as she loved teaching the youngest children residing in or near Alexandertol, the last day of school was always a difficult one, with children too eager about beginning the planting season to pay attention.

Weariness from the long day—and her typical end-of-the-session doldrums—tugged at her. Maybe she should have stayed home, after all. But she needed something on which to spend her hours until school began again in late fall. A women's benevolent society, briefly mentioned by Reverend Hartmann at the close of last Sunday's morning worship service, seemed a worthwhile pastime. She wanted to know more about it.

On the dais at the front of the church, Martina Krahn noisily tamped a stack of pages on the pulpit. The woman was older than Augusta by only five years but already mostly gray haired with deeply imbedded frown lines forming a V between her eyes and framing her thin lips. She clearly wanted everyone quiet so she could begin. Augusta should take a seat.

She rose on tiptoe and searched for an open spot. Of course, all the back benches were full. Walking to the front would garner the notice of every woman in the room, and especially Martina's. Something Augusta preferred to avoid. Martina had a way of withering others with her stern glare. Augusta—nearly forty years of age, a seasoned schoolteacher and mother to an eleven-year-old daughter—shouldn't be intimidated by the other woman. But she was. Based on how a hush had fallen following the sharp *clack-clack-clack* of paper against wood, she suspected she wasn't the only one cowed by Frau Krahn's authoritarian demeanor.

Augusta hurried up the center aisle to the second bench from the front and seated herself. Martina's frowning gaze flicked in her direction, and it seemed as if the V in her brow pinched even tighter. Then her dark eyes swept across the entire group. A tiny facsimile of a smile relaxed her ordinarily tense features.

She swept her arms open in a graceful gesture. "Welcome, ladies, to the first meeting of the Alexandertol *Frauenverein*."

Augusta drew back slightly. Had she misunderstood the preacher's announcement? Or had she missed a previous gathering when the decision to form a group had been made? She hadn't realized this was an official meeting. A murmur rolled through the room, and Augusta looked over her shoulder at the others. Several women stared at Martina, their confusion evident.

Elsie Weber shot to her feet. "Frau Krahn, I came to learn more about what this ladies' club is about. If this meeting is for members, I should leave. I always consult my husband before making commitments to clubs and such."

A few other women nodded their agreement, and all across the benches, pairs put their heads close together and whispered to each other. Augusta had no husband to consult. Her dear Leopold lay at rest in the Alexandertol cemetery, gone for over

five years now. But she preferred to pray about the things to which she committed time and energy, to be certain they were God's will for her. She hadn't addressed her heavenly Father even once yet about joining a Frauenverein.

Martina waved her hands at the group, frowning again. "Ladies, ladies, you remind me of a coop of clucking, nervous hens. Of course we aren't an official club . . . yet. But is this not our first meeting to discuss the possibility?"

Augusta contemplated Martina's opening statement welcoming them all, and she swallowed a chortle. In Martina's mind, this club was already established. Most likely with her serving as leader. Martina headed up every quilting bee, every church picnic, and every wedding party. She'd even tried to organize the school Christmas pageant last year, but Herr Elias, the teacher for the older children, tartly informed her that he and Augusta were capable of the task and sent her scuttling. Martina hadn't attended the program.

Although Herr Elias had gloated about putting the strong-minded woman in her place, Augusta took no pleasure in squashing Martina's quest for leadership. She and her husband were the only childless couple in town, which probably left Martina with extra time on her hands. But Herr Elias had been right that he and Augusta were better suited for organizing the school pageant.

As for this organization, wouldn't the minister's wife, gentle Berta Hartmann, make a more personable leader for a benevolent club? Augusta didn't have nerve enough to voice the question aloud, but a couple others attending the meeting might. If they challenged Martina, there very well could be a fight for control of the coop. Augusta hoped she wouldn't see feathers fly in the sanctuary of the church this evening.

"Please have a seat, Frau Weber, so we may continue," Martina said, her voice sweet but her gaze narrow.

Elsie plopped back onto the bench and folded her arms.

Martina cleared her throat, and the whispers ceased. “Perhaps I should begin tonight’s meeting by sharing where I found the idea of starting our own Frauenverein.” She lifted a strip of newsprint from the pulpit and held it out with much pomp. “I cut this article from a recent issue of *Der Grüttlianer*, which is published in New York City, New York, and mailed to Gerhard each month from his cousin. The article tells about the impact the local Frauenverein has had in comforting those who became widowed or orphaned during the voyage from Germany to America, helping them feel at home in their new land, and meeting their needs for shelter, food, and friendship.”

Martina’s eyes shone as she spoke, and some of Augusta’s weariness lifted in light of the woman’s sincere passion.

“The first Frauenverein, established over forty years ago, limited itself to reaching out to members of its own congregation. But, eventually, it expanded as needs arose and extended its benevolence to the sick, infirm, or otherwise suffering or needy. I believe we should start the same way, reaching out to the widows”—her gaze briefly slid to Augusta—“and orphans in our own community. Later, if we become aware of people outside of Alexandertol who need a helping hand, we could extend it.”

Lucinda Klein, one of the older members of the church, rose from her seat. “Frau Krahn, exactly what kind of ‘helping hand’ will we extend?”

“Food supplies, clothing, or medical care.” Martina answered so promptly it seemed she had a script ready for recitation. “Perhaps housecleaning, gardening, or tending to children.”

Tending to children? Augusta’s heart skipped a beat. She knew a family who had need for this type of benevolence.

“Are these not the types of acts family members perform for one another?” Lucinda dabbed her face with a wrinkled handkerchief. “Is there truly a need for such a club in our commu-

nity?”

Elsie Weber stood again. She nodded so enthusiastically the frilly brim of her bonnet bounced like butterfly wings. “Oh, yes, there is need. While I don’t know of any orphans living in Alexandertol, we do have several older widows who often need firewood cut or lack the provisions to carry them through the winter months. My Franz has taken unsold bolts of cloth or wilted vegetables from our store shelves to these women on many occasions. He’s also sent our oldest boys to do chores for them.”

Lucinda’s forehead furrowed. “If someone’s already seeing to these needs, why start a club? I hope no one asks me to chop firewood. And I don’t want to sound petty or selfish, but I need the vegetables from my garden to feed my husband and me. At my age, it’s all I can do to grow enough for the two of us.”

Now Berta Hartmann stood, leaned forward, and tapped Lucinda’s shoulder. “Frau Klein, maybe we could put you and your husband on the list to receive benevolence, since your boys both moved to the city and you don’t have someone else to look in on you.”

Lucinda’s mouth fell open. “Heinrich and I have no need for charity.”

Agnes Bauer, who’d been sitting on the very back bench, strode up the aisle to Lucinda and put her fists on her hips. “Frau Klein, there is no shame in accepting help.” Then she turned to Martina and held her hands out in a gesture of defeat. “But her attitude is common. Most people are prideful. They don’t want to admit that they need help. Even if we start this club, will we have an opportunity to serve anyone? I, for one, don’t have time to waste searching for people who need help if those people won’t accept it when we offer it.”

More mutters broke out.

Augusta watched Martina look from one speaker to another.

The woman's normally stern expression changed from consternation to confusion and then dismay. Augusta felt as if she was witnessing the fading of a treasured dream. Although she couldn't admit to a great deal of fondness for Martina Krahm, her heart rolled over in compassion. She understood the pain of crushed dreams.

On impulse, she stood and blurted, "Frau Krahm?"

Every woman hushed and shifted her attention to Augusta.

Having a roomful of children intently gaze at her was very different from capturing the focus of a group of adults. Augusta's face heated, but she drew on her classroom demeanor and squared her shoulders. With her gaze fixed on Martina's startled face, she said, "I know who could be the first recipient of benevolence from the Alexandertol Frauenverein."

Martina's eyes sparked with interest. "Oh? Who?"

Augusta raised her chin, triumphant. "Herr Rempel and his sons, Folker and Walden."

Martina

Herr Rempel? Martina pressed her palm to her suddenly jumping stomach. Of course Augusta meant well. Of course she couldn't know about— But Martina couldn't possibly— She shook her head slightly, attempting to shoo the rattled thoughts from her brain. Then she gathered her dignity and forced a stiff smile in the schoolteacher's direction.

"I think you misunderstand the purpose of the Frauenverein, Frau Dyck." My, how calm and sensible she sounded when her nerves jangled like the bells on a fire wagon. "What does it say in James 1:27? 'Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction.' The Frauenverein will seek to honor this biblical instruc-

tion. We will minister to the widows and orphans in our community.”

Surely, somewhere—if not in Alexandertol but in a town nearby—there was an orphaned boy who needed her as much as she and Gerhard needed him. Would this club finally lead her to the son for whom she and her husband longed?

Augusta was still standing, her fine brows pinching together in either puzzlement or obstinance. Martina didn’t know the woman well enough to be certain which. Either way, she needed to squelch this idea of ministering to the widower Rempel. She shifted her attention to the group at large.

“Now that you know what the Frauenverein is about, who is interested in becoming a member of such a club?”

It seemed every woman in the room turned into a statue. They sat, hands clasped in their laps, staring straight ahead at Martina with uncertainty etched into their faces.

Unexpectedly, anger swelled in Martina’s chest. What was wrong with them that they had no desire to help their fellow citizens? Guilt swallowed the burst of anger. Who was she to judge them when her motivation was far more selfish than selfless? Still, she couldn’t run this club all by herself. She needed members for it to be a real Frauenverein and not just a desperate woman’s attempt to satisfy her husband’s need for a son to raise.

She formed a sentence of encouragement in her mind, then opened her mouth to deliver it. Augusta Dyck raised her hand. Hope ignited within Martina’s soul. “You wish to be part of the club?”

“I do.”

Martina clapped her palms together. “Wonderful!”

“And I also wish to discuss Herr Rempel’s need for benevolence.”

Mercy, wasn’t this woman determined? Martina assumed her

sternest frown. "Frau Dyck, it is kind of you to think of Herr Rempel, but we must remember that this club will minister to *widows* and *orphans*. Why, you should be on the list of possible recipients given that you are a widow and your daughter's a half-orphan." She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry, but ministering to men could lead to impropriety."

Someone in one of the back pews—probably Agnes Bauer, the town's most prolific gossip—tittered, the soft sound seeming to shout speculation.

Augusta's face flamed pink.

Martina hurriedly added, "We must limit our assistance to those mentioned in the verse in James." Then she scanned the faces again. "Who else would like to join?"

Martha Gotwals stood. "I'm interested, but I need to speak to my husband first. How often will we meet, and how much time will it take to be part of the club? He'll want to know these things."

Martina had already thought these details through and answered without hesitation. "We will meet on Friday evenings here in the church, as we've done tonight. When we meet, we will discuss possible recipients. If there is only one need, one person can volunteer to meet it. If there are several, we can divide them amongst members or, if necessary, recruit helpers outside of the club. But I don't believe membership will require more than an hour a week for meetings and perhaps another hour or two for service."

"Thank you." Martha sat.

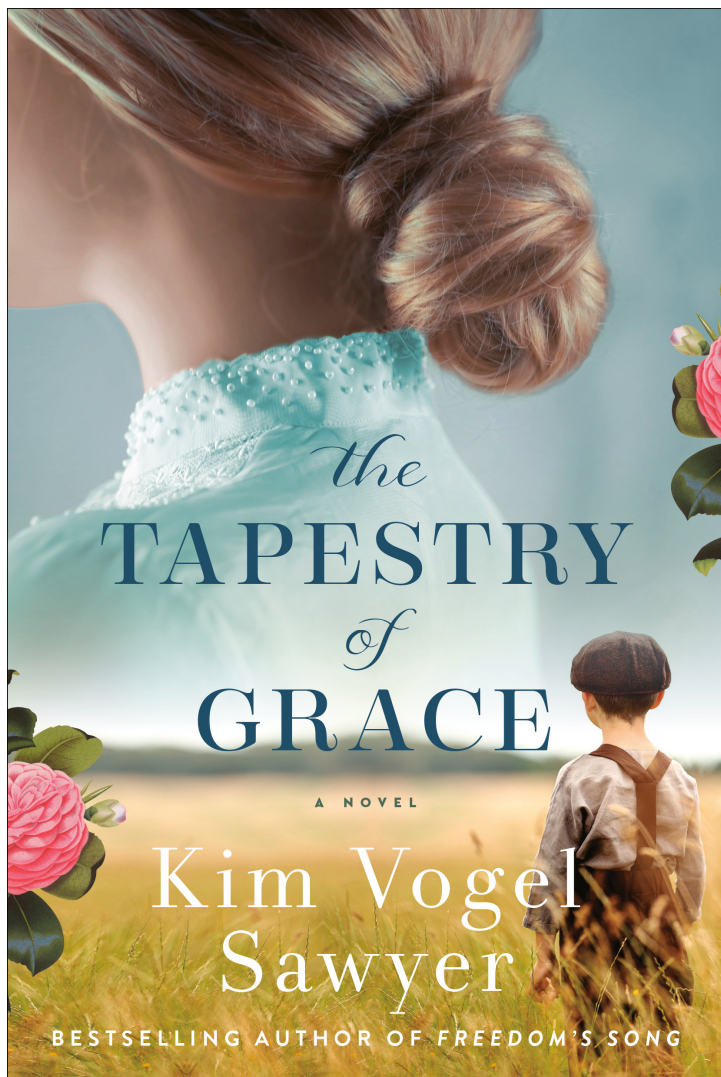
Martina steepled her hands and pressed her fingertips to the underside of her chin. "All right, ladies, a show of hands, please. Who would like to be part of the Alexandertol Frauenverein?"

Hands went up from various locations on the benches. A smile burst in Martina's heart and found its way to her face. She felt it rounding her cheeks—a wondrous feeling. She bounced

her smile over each of the women holding a hand in the air, silently counting, and she reached the twelfth hand. Which belonged to Augusta Dyck.

Martina's smile briefly faltered. "Thank you, ladies. Will those who raised their hands please gather on the front benches? We must assign the positions of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. Everyone else, you are dismissed, but please know you are welcome to join the club at a later time if you change your mind."

Martina inwardly rejoiced. She had a club. Now to secure the position of president. If her plan went well, by this time next year her husband would have his son. And she might regain her husband.



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