



The
SONGBIRD *of*
HOPE HILL

a novel

Kim Vogel Sawyer

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF FREEDOM'S SONG

The Songbird of Hope Hill

A Novel



KIM VOGEL SAWYER



WATERBROOK

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

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For Eileen.

You told me to write a story that says there are
no lost causes in heaven's eyes. You believed it
and showed it in the way you loved.

I miss you, my friend!

For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

—Romans 10:11

Chapter One

Early February 1895
Outskirts of Tulsey, Texas
Birdie Clarkson

“**G**irls? Girls! Hour to open!” Miz Holland’s grating call roused Birdie from a restless sleep. She stretched, and the ropes holding her hay-stuffed mattress squawked. She rubbed her eyes. When she’d gone to sleep eight hours ago, bright noonday sun was trying to sneak past the edges of the fringed window shade. Now those slivers of light were gone as nighttime cloaked the landscape. Her room was as dark as a tomb. Fitting, since what she did here made her feel dead inside.

She sat up and blinked several times, trying to discern the location of her bedside lamp. She didn’t dare break another one. The cost of replacement was too high. Slowly, she reached toward an hourglass-shaped object. Her palm encountered the cool glass globe of her lamp. She skimmed her fingers downward to the base, located the little tin of matches, and struck one on the flint. The flare pierced her eyes, and she squinted. She raised the globe, lit the wick, and put out the match’s flame with a puff of breath. Seated on the edge of her lumpy mattress, she stared at the lamp’s flickering glow and gathered the courage to rise. Dress. Go downstairs.

The other girls at Lida’s Palace didn’t bother lighting a lamp upon rising. They dressed in the dark. Birdie hadn’t been here long enough to learn the trick. But as soon as she’d donned her

“work gown” and brushed her brown waves that Miz Holland called her crowning glory, she would extinguish her lamp. Partly to save the oil, for which she was expected to pay. Mostly because she had no desire to see her mirrored reflection attired in the bawdy costume . . . nor anything else that took place in this small room.

Noises—the patter of feet on floorboards, the creak of drawers or wardrobe doors opening and then snapping closed, a dull thud followed by a muffled curse—filtered through the thin walls separating her room from the others in the old hotel. Miz Holland’s girls were readying themselves to receive the evening’s visitors. To earn her keep, Birdie must do the same.

Pulling in a breath of fortification through her flared nostrils, she trudged to the corner and removed her gauzy, emerald-green, lace-embellished gown from its hook. Her stomach churned as she slipped her arms into the thin fabric sleeves. How many men would come tonight? How many would choose her? Since she was so new, she hadn’t yet become anyone’s favorite. Some of the girls bragged about the number of men who favored them over the others. Birdie had no desire to win such a contest. Then again, a girl’s popularity secured her continued sanctuary in Lida’s Palace. Would she be cast out if she couldn’t be, as Miz Holland put it, more friendly?

Birdie inwardly shuddered. She wouldn’t be here at all if hunger hadn’t driven her a week ago to knock on the door of her mama’s old school friend’s home and request a piece of bread or a bowl of soup.

In her mind’s eye, she saw the woman’s scowl change to recognition and then to a conniving smile as she appraised Birdie from her wind-tangled hair to the scuffed toes of her dusty shoes. Birdie experienced again the trepidation that had tiptoed through her at Miz Holland’s sly assessment. Why hadn’t she run away? If only she’d run away . . .

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The angry thuds on the door made her jerk. Her thumb caught in the delicate lace at the cuff of her right sleeve and tore it. Groaning in regret, she hurried to the door, frantically tying her sash as she went. She flung her door open and discovered Minerva, the oldest of the girls residing at Lida's Palace, standing in the hall with her fists on her hips.

Minerva tossed her head, fluttering the feathers she'd woven into her fiery red braid. "Lida ain't gonna hold breakfast for you. She says come now." She twisted her lips in a sneer. "Look at you. You ain't even combed your hair yet." Her gaze dropped to the loop of lace dangling against Birdie's wrist. "An' it looks like you got a little repair work to do." Her eyes glistened with humor. "Some fella get a little eager last night?"

Birdie's face flamed. She shook her head. "No. I—"

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Course not. Why would he? Spin-dly thing like you ain't got nothin' worth buyin'."

Birdie pressed her chin to her shoulder and closed her eyes. If only it were true. Maybe Miz Holland would kick her out. But then how would she pay for travel to Kansas City, where Papa's sister lived? Birdie still remembered standing with her aunt at Papa's graveside six years ago, asking, "What will I do now? How will I go on without my father?"

Aunt Sally had put her arm around Birdie and pulled her close. "Dear girl, your earthly father's gone, but you still have a heavenly Father. He'll never leave you. You can lean on Him." She'd then taken Birdie by the shoulders. "What do you think about coming to Kansas with me? You can finish your schooling and work with me in my dress shop. Maybe your mama will send you, if we ask."

From the time she was little, Birdie had been handy with a needle. She could be a good helper for her aunt. Returning to a house where no kindhearted papa would sing songs with her or

kiss her good night held no appeal. But when Birdie asked for money for the trip to Kansas, Mama threw a tantrum and called her selfish. So Birdie had stayed. Until the day Mama left.

Fifteen dollars and eighty-five cents. That's what the station clerk at the depot said she needed to buy a train ticket from Tulsa to Kansas City. How many nights would it take to earn such a sum? And would Aunt Sally even welcome her, now that she'd—

Minerva's derisive huff pulled Birdie from her thoughts. The girl flounced toward the staircase, feathers gently waving, and called over her shoulder, "If you're wantin' breakfast, better hurry up before Olga eats it all. That one sure can't be called *spindly*." Her laughter rang.

Birdie folded her arms across her aching chest and hung her head, shame weighting her. Hunger had driven her here. She'd hardly eaten a bite since she arrived. She didn't want breakfast. She just wanted . . . out.

If only Papa hadn't died. Then—

You still have a heavenly Father. You can lean on Him. Aunt Sally's sweet words whispered through Birdie's heart. Even though Birdie's parents hadn't attended church regularly, Papa had sung songs about God, who Aunt Sally called the heavenly Father. Birdie wished she could call Him her own. But if there was a Father in heaven, He'd surely turned His back on her the minute she crossed the threshold of Lida's Palace.

The growl of wagon wheels on the hardpacked dirt driveway sneaked past the uninsulated walls. She broke out in a cold sweat. Customers were coming.

Ephraim Overly

The old Bradford Hotel hunkered against the gray backdrop of

evening like a giant cyclops. A cyclops, because only the front-door window—oval, with a border of leaded-glass diamonds—was backlit by lamplight. That glow, as soft as the first rays of dawn peeking over the horizon, was meant to draw a fellow in, make him feel welcome. Gooseflesh prickled Ephraim's arms. Now the hotel was a business called Lida's Palace. And he'd been to places similar to it with his father often enough to know this was no palace.

Beside him on the wagon seat, Father leaned forward and rubbed his palms together. "It seems we're ahead of the crowd tonight."

Ephraim glanced up and down the hitching rail running the full width of the building. Not a single wagon or saddled horse waited in front. "That's good," he said.

Father gave a stiff nod. "It is very good." He pointed. "Make a half circle and park at the end of the porch, facing the road. If anyone else arrives while we're inside, our wagon won't be blocked, and—if necessary—we'll be able to make a hasty departure."

Considering their visit to Lida's Palace a month ago, and the resulting mayhem when they left, Ephraim approved Father's suggestion. It had taken a week for the painful knot on his head from a well-aimed rock to disappear. "Yes, sir." He made a wide turn in the yard, the wheels stirring little swirls of fine dust that quickly whisked away on the evening breeze. "Whoa . . ." The pair of sorrel geldings drew to a halt, snorting, and Ephraim set the brake.

Father's jaw was set at a determined angle, his shoulders square. The shadow thrown by his hat's wide, flat brim hid his expression, but Ephraim didn't need to see him to know Father's eyes held a glint of fervor. The same glint that always appeared before he did battle.

Father slapped his knees and stood. "Come with me,

Ephraim.”

Ephraim gave a start. “But, Father, I—” He gulped. “I never go in.” Nor did he want to. He received enough ridicule and rejection as a result of his father’s frequent visits to houses of ill repute.

Father put his hand on Ephraim’s shoulder. “Come with me.”

When Father used his firm tone, Ephraim—although a grown man of twenty-six years—automatically obeyed. He hopped down from the wagon and trailed Father to the porch steps. Climbed the three risers. Trod to the door that led to iniquity.

Father grasped the doorknob and entered without knocking. Ephraim hesitated outside the threshold, his limbs quivering. “Son . . .” Father’s low-toned, simple command propelled Ephraim into the entry as the door clicked shut behind him.

Beneath his feet, scuffed penny-sized tiles still bore the name THE BRADFORD in black against white. His heart wrenched. If only it were still a hotel. Why did places like Lida’s Palace flourish when he and his parents prayed so diligently for the despicable business to end? He’d pondered the question many times over the past years, but he still had no answer.

A middle-aged woman in a ruffled red ball gown, her lips painted the same bright color as the sheeny fabric of her frock, sashayed across the faded carpet of the hotel parlor and stopped in front of Father. Her kohl-lined eyes narrowed. “You again?”

Behind her, at least a dozen young women lounged on sofas and chairs. All wore face paint similar to the older woman’s, but their clothing was unsuitable for public display. Ephraim didn’t know where to look, so he settled his gaze on the floor tiles.

“Yes, I am here again, Lida.” Father’s booming voice filled the room. “But tonight you have no ‘hounds’ to sic on me or my son.”

Lida chuckled, the sound almost sinister. “Oh, they’ll be

along soon enough, Reverend Overly. No preacher's ever preached a sermon good enough to keep 'em away." She paced back and forth in front of Father, her skirts rustling with the movement. "An' no preachin' has ever convinced any of my girls to leave me. They're taken care of here. Fed. Housed. Treated good. Out there?" She came to a stop, but the shadow of her waving hand came near Ephraim's toes. "Folks stick their noses in the air an' snub 'em. Won't give 'em the time of day. Why would they want to leave this warm home for cold rejection?"

Full laughter rolled, and Ephraim glanced at Lida's smug face before turning his focus to the floor again. "But go ahead, Isaiah. Give 'em your best sermon. It'll do me good to see 'em ignore you the way your *fine Christian folks*"—she made the phrase sound like a curse—"snub them."

Sweat tickled Ephraim's neck. He shrugged within his jacket, but the gesture did nothing to remove the uncomfortable weight of guilt her words inspired. *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. He'd been taught Jesus' admonition from his earliest memories. Churchgoers were surely familiar with the biblical instruction. But how many truly followed it? In truth, he struggled to love those who frequented establishments like Lida's and, equally so, the holier-than-thou people who mocked his father's ministry.

Father looped his hand through Ephraim's elbow and escorted him to the center of the room. "Ladies, this is my son."

Lida snorted.

"He can verify," Father went on in his strong, ever-confident voice, "everything of which I am about to tell you. What I will say is truth. Full truth, not manipulation or twisted truth, as you just heard from the mouth of your so-called benefactor."

What was Father doing? He'd never involved Ephraim in this way before. Ephraim's gaze unwillingly traveled across the prostitutes' faces. All but one stared directly at him. Some seemed

bored, others scornful. One, with feathers woven into her thick red braid, gave him a brash appraisal that made him want to hide behind Father. *Love thy neighbour*. Did Jesus ask the impossible? Ephraim looked aside.

“Certainly here you are housed and fed,” Father said, “but you have no freedom. Freedom is found in a relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ, who absolves all who ask from every sin.”

Ephraim had heard his father preach on salvation and the forgiveness of sin so many times, he could have recited the lines along with him. While Father shared the biblical account about Jesus assuring the woman who’d been caught in adultery that she could assume a new life, free of the dark blot of sinful choices, Ephraim silently prayed that these lost, broken young women who were loved by God would make a new choice this day to leave this place where men purchased their bodies and battered their souls.

“Come with me today. Come to Hope Hill, a safe haven, where you will receive an education. My dear wife, Ophelia, will teach you skills and help you find places of honest employment. You will earn a fair wage and needn’t sacrifice something to strangers that is meant to be shared as an expression of love to a devoted husband. Come with me now!” Father released Ephraim’s arm and held his hands wide in invitation. “A new life awaits. Who will come?”

Silence filled the room, save the steady *tick-tick* from a stately grandfather clock in the corner and the occasional chirp from a yellow bird flitting from rod to rod in a dented cage in front of the fully draped windows.

Ephraim held his breath, hoping some would rise, would come, as Father had bidden them. As he’d prayed they would. The girls, with the exception of a slip of a girl who sat with her chin pressed to her shoulder, her face nearly hidden by a veil of

wavy dark hair, shifted in their seats and seemed to look anywhere in the room except at Father.

Lida, smirking, sidled near. She slowly clapped in mock applause. "That was some fiery sermon, Isaiah, but like I told you, my girls ain't interested in what y'all's peddling. They're happy right where they are."

"Happy?" Father blasted the word. "Not a one of these girls are happy, Lida, and neither are you. You're helpless and afraid and guilt-ridden, and you think you're trapped. But what I told them applies to you, too. Come. Learn a new way of life. Find true joy, Lida. Jesus loves you, and—"

Lida turned her back on Father, waving her arms at the girls the way a hen flaps its wings at its chicks. "Upstairs, all of you! Stay there until I call you."

The girls stood, giving one another uncertain looks. Whispering, shoulders hunched as if expecting blows to fall, they inched toward the staircase.

Father walked alongside them. "You don't have to go upstairs. You have another choice. You have a chance for freedom. You can walk out the door."

Lida moved step by step with Father, shaking her head and murmuring, "Up those stairs away from this religious fanatic. Up, girls, up."

One by one, they mounted the stairs, none of them even glancing at Father. He grasped the turned finial on the newel post with one hand and held the other toward the girls. "Walk out the door into a new life, ladies!" Father's tone turned pleading, and Ephraim prayed for the girls to pay heed. "Come with us now. Come."

Lida released a little gasp and hurried to the door. She peered out, then turned with a triumphant smile. "Customers comin'. Your time's up, *Reverend*. Better scat before my hounds are on you."

Ephraim looked, too. A wagon with two men on its seat and a horse with a rider were turning in at the end of the half-mile long drive. Ephraim rubbed the spot where the rock had struck him. “Father?”

Father turned one more imploring gaze toward the girls. “Doesn’t anyone want to leave this life of pain for true peace and freedom?”

The last girl—the very thin one who’d never raised her face during Father’s impassioned sermon—stopped. She turned around, her pale hands holding her robe closed at her throat and her wide eyes shifting from Father to Lida to Father again. “I . . .” She swallowed. “I do.”