

SOMMERFELD
TRILOGY

KIM
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BYGONES



DEDICATION

For Connor and Ethan,
my precious grandsons.
You come from a long line of faithful saints.
May you carry that heritage into future generations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Were it not for the support and understanding of my family, words would never appear on the computer screen. So thank you, Don and my daughters, for allowing me the time to write.

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Finally, and most importantly, praise be to God for being ever present, ever loving, and ever able to carry me through life's pathway. May any praise or glory be reflected directly back to You.

*But now in Christ Jesus
you who once were far away have been brought
near through the blood of Christ.*

EPHESIANS 2:13 NIV



ONE



Henry Braun paused outside Jimmy's Dinner Stop and pressed his hand to his abdomen. Beneath his neatly tucked shirt his stomach churned. He couldn't decide if it was nervousness or excitement that had his belly jumping like a trout on a line. Either way, it didn't matter.

He hadn't seen Marie in more than twenty years. In his jacket pocket he carried a snapshot of her—one she'd enclosed in a Christmas card to her aunt Lisbeth three or four years back. But he didn't need it to remember her. A man never forgot his first love.

His hand trembled slightly as it connected with the smudged silver door handle of the café. As he tugged open the door, a wave of stale tobacco-scented air washed across him. Stepping inside, he allowed the door to drift shut behind him. He removed his hat, held it against his stomach with both hands, and stood silently, taking in the busy scene.

Nearly every booth and table was filled with noisy patrons, most of them men, probably truckers like Jep Quinn. Two waitresses, wearing pale blue knee-length dresses and white aprons, bustled between tables, pouring coffee from tall plastic containers and bantering with customers. Although both women appeared to be

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middle-aged, he picked out Marie right away. That nutmeg hair of hers, even cropped short into mussy curls, was unmistakable.

He remained beside a tall counter that held a cash register, waiting for someone to show him to a table. Curious gazes turned in his direction, and one man jabbed another with his elbow, pointing rudely before making a comment that brought a laugh from the other members of his group. Henry was accustomed to this treatment when he stepped out into the world. He averted his gaze and maintained his stoic expression.

After several minutes of waiting, the unfamiliar waitress waved a hand at him and hollered, “Hey, honey! There’s a spot over here. C’mon in!”

Henry pointed to his chest, his eyebrows high, making certain she meant him. When she smiled and quirked her fingers at him, he moved forward on legs still stiff from the long drive. He slid into the empty booth.

“You new around here? I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

The woman’s bright smile, meant to put him at ease he was sure, made him feel like recoiling instead. But it would be impolite not to reply, so he said in an even tone, “I’m just passing through.”

She gave a nod and a wink. “Well, welcome to Cheyenne. Enjoy your stay.” Slopping coffee into a thick mug and whacking a menu on the table in front of him, she added, “Just look that over, honey, and I’ll be right back to take your order.”

He raised a finger to delay her. “I don’t wish to order a meal, I only want to—” But she took off, and his request died on his lips. Leaving the coffee and menu untouched, he followed Marie with his gaze. How comfortable she appeared as she moved among the tables, smiling, sometimes teasing, laughing. . . . He had been so certain when she climbed into Jep Quinn’s semi she would quickly realize her mistake and return to Sommerfeld. To him. Now he felt foolish.

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Marie had obviously found her niche in the outside world.

Disappointment struck him, and he pondered its cause. Had he expected to find her cowering in a corner somewhere, overwhelmed and repentant? No. He had read the letters she'd sent to her aunt Lisbeth over the years. He came here knowing Marie had adopted the worldly lifestyle. The disappointment was personal.

His fingers twitched on the tabletop. Why hadn't she recognized him at once, as he had her?



“Hey, Marie, got a live one in booth thirteen.”

Marie balanced three plates on one arm and grabbed a basket of rolls with her free hand. Sally was fond of pointing out the most handsome men who entered the roadside café, figuring Marie needed a man in her life. Marie didn't second the opinion. But she sent her friend a brief grin. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Sally released a light chuckle and reached past Marie for the plates Jimmy handed through the serving window. “From the way he's dressed, he must be a preacher or somethin'. Check him out.”

Marie gave a quick nod. “When I've got a minute to spare.” She weaved between tables to deliver Friday's special—fried fish, hush puppies, slaw, and fries—to the truckers at table three. She placed the plastic basket of rolls in the middle of the table, scolding when one of them made as if to pat her bottom. She served him first and quipped, “That should keep your hands busy.” All three men roared. Smirking, she moved around the table and plopped plates in front of each customer. Hands on her hips, she asked, “Anything else I can get you fellas?”

The one with the roving hand grinned. “What I want probably isn't on the menu.”

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“You behave,” Marie warned. Although she’d had plenty of opportunity over her years of widowhood, she’d never engaged in flirtation with customers. Sally said she wasn’t the flirty type. Marie had always taken that as a compliment.

She backed away from the table. “If you think of something I missed, just wave a hand in the air.”

The men hollered their thanks and dug into their food. As Marie turned to head for the serving window, she remembered Sally’s comment and glanced toward booth thirteen. Her feet came to an abrupt halt right in the aisle between tables.

That was no preacher. Just a man. A Mennonite man. The plain blue shirt, buttoned to the collar, and black jacket with missing lapels identified him as clearly as advertising on a billboard. Her gaze bounced from his clothes to his face. His brown-eyed gaze met hers squarely, and she gasped. Her knees buckled. She reached for something—anything—to keep herself upright. Her hand connected with the shoulder of the nearest patron, and she heard a gruff voice call, “Hey, darlin’, whatcha need?” Her gaze remained pinned to that of the Mennonite man’s, who sat unmoving in the booth, his brown eyes unblinking.

“I—I’m sorry,” she managed, removing her hand. The customer shrugged and went back to eating. Sally dashed by, and Marie caught the sleeve of her dress.

Sally paused in midstride, her face crinkled in concern. “Hey, what’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I think I have.”

Sally shifted her gaze toward the booth, then back at Marie. “You know that preacher?”

Marie nodded slowly. “I need a minute. Can you—”

Sally smiled and patted Marie’s hand. “Sure, honey. Go ahead. I’ll cover you.”

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Her gaze still on the man in the booth, Marie mumbled a thank-you. Her sluggish feet didn't want to move. *Go. Walk. Have to see what he wants.* Finally her feet obeyed, and she moved as if wading through cold molasses.

He rested his palms on the blue-speckled tabletop and looked up at her. He was older now. His close-cropped dark brown hair was speckled with gray, and lined sunbursts marked the corners of his eyes. But he was still undeniably handsome. Unmistakably Henry.

His Adam's apple bobbed in a swallow. Her throat felt dry, too. One of her hands, as if of its own volition, smoothed her unruly curls. The touch of her hair made her conscious of her uncovered head, and embarrassment struck at the thought of her bare knees and the tight fit of her bodice. Things that had become commonplace over the years now left her feeling exposed and vulnerable. She felt her cheeks flood with heat, and part of her wanted to run away and hide. Yet her feet turned stubborn once more, refusing to move.

What was he doing in Cheyenne, Wyoming—hundreds of miles from Kansas? How had he known where to find her? Had her family sent him? A dozen questions threaded through her mind, but when she opened her mouth, only one word squeaked out. "Hi."

"Hello." His voice had deepened with maturity, but the timidity she remembered still underscored the tone. "You"—he glanced around the bustling café—"are very busy right now."

She licked her lips. "Yes, I am. I—I can't really take a break, but—"

His nod cut her off. "I understand. When are you finished here?"

"Four."

Another nod. "I'll wait."

The simple statement flung her back nearly two dozen years. She heard, in her memory, his pain-filled voice whisper, "*I will wait for your return, Marie.*" Now she wondered. . .had he?

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“Marie?”

Sally’s voice jarred her back to the present. She looked over her shoulder. Sally stood in front of the cluttered serving window, her arms held out in a silent gesture of *I need you*. Marie nodded, then spun back to Henry. “Don’t wait here.” She dug in her apron pocket, retrieved her keys, and twisted her apartment key from the ring. Slipping it into his hand, she said, “You can go to my apartment. The Woodlawn. Take the Broadway Avenue exit off the highway, then go ten blocks north and two east. The apartment building is on the corner of Carson and Twenty-third. I’m in Apartment 4B. Go in, make yourself at home. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She started to turn away, then looked at him again. “How did you get here?”

He pointed out the window. “I drove myself.”

She glanced out to the parking area. A solid black four-door sedan waited, dwarfed by semi trucks. Her eyebrows flew high in surprise, and she caught a hint of a grin twitch his cheeks.

“I’ve worked on cars all my life, and now I drive one.”

“Marie!”

Sally’s frantic call spurred Marie to action. “I’ll be home sometime after four.” She dashed to the counter and took the waiting plates. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Henry exit the café, then followed his tall form as he crossed in front of the window. Moments later, his car backed out of the parking lot and disappeared between semis.

“You gonna deliver those meals or hold ’em till the food is cold?”

Jimmy’s sardonic voice captured Marie’s attention. Her face flooded with heat once more.

“Sorry.” Turning toward the waiting table, she called, “Food’s comin’ right up, boys.”

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After serving the men, she sneaked a peek at her wristwatch. Still two and a half hours until quitting time. Her breath whooshed out. *I hope I last that long. . . .*



The brown-brick apartment complex was clean but showed signs of age. Concrete slabs, some cracked, served as porches to each unit. The grass, mostly brown and brittle, was sparse in places, exposing patches of dirt. Henry stepped onto the slab in front of the door marked 4B and shook his head. On the corner of the poor excuse for a porch, a clay pot held a clump of drooping plastic tulips.

So Marie still liked flowers.

Henry couldn't help but think of the large, rambling farmhouse that had been Marie's childhood home, its thick grassy yard scattered with bright marigolds, zinnias, and morning glories. After all that space and beauty, how could she live in a place like this? He sighed, sadness weighing on his chest.

Despite having a key, Henry felt like an intruder as he opened the door and stepped inside. The apartment was quiet except for a ticking clock and a funny noise—a *blurple-blurp*—he didn't recognize. For long minutes he stood on the little rug in front of the door and allowed his gaze to drift around the small area, uncertain what to do.

A long sofa, draped with a bright-colored quilt, stood sentinel along the north wall. In front of the sofa crouched a small chest. Its top held a short stack of magazines, a small black box with white push buttons, and two crumpled napkins. A spindled rocking chair heaped with pillows rested in the corner.

Across from the couch, on the opposite wall, stood a shelving unit with a large center section flanked by open shelves. He crossed to it, his fingers reaching to stroke the surface. He shook his head. At first glance, the unit appeared to be wood, but closer examination

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proved it to be wood-printed paper glued to a solid base. Artificial wood. . . and artificial flowers. Sadness pressed again.

From the center portion of the shelves, a large television set stared blankly at the sofa. The glass front was coated with fine particles of dust. On a shelf above the television, he located the source of the blurping—a small fish aquarium, with a bright-colored castle and three goldfish. Every now and then a little tube at the back of the square glass box sent up a series of bubbles, which bubbled as they rose to the top.

He watched the fish for a little while, his heart aching at the silent message they presented. Marie loved animals, but she probably wasn't allowed a pet in this apartment. Had she purchased the fish as a way to replace the memories of the dogs, cats, and lambs from the farm?

Shifting his gaze from the fish, he turned his attention to the photographs on the shelves. Each frame was unique—some wood, some metal, some pasted with beads or carved with flowers. A few of the pictures he'd seen before, in Lisbeth Koeppler's small sewing room, arranged in a simple album that rested next to the little woven basket that held every letter Marie had sent over the years. All of the photos featured the young girl Henry knew about but had never met.

He leaned closer, examining each photograph in turn, analyzing the girl's features. She had Marie's cleft chin and blue eyes, but not Marie's hair. A shame. That had always been Marie's best feature.

Now that hair was cut short into curls that waved helter-skelter on her head. So many changes. But what had he expected? Shaking his head, he turned from the photographs and crossed to the couch, seating himself on the edge of the soft cushion. Off to the side of the room were two open doorways. One led to the kitchen—he glimpsed a chrome-and-Formica table-and-chairs set—and the other to a

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hallway that, he surmised, ended with bedrooms. Such a tiny space compared to what she'd left behind. . .

Looking over his shoulder at the clock on the wall, he realized he would have a long wait. He clasped his knees and sighed, wishing he had brought along a book to read. His gaze found the television, and his reflection stared back from the large blank screen. Curiosity struck. What might be showing at two thirty in the afternoon on the television? But he didn't move to turn it on.

Except for the clock's *tick, tick* and the fish bowl's *blurple-blurp*, he sat in silence. Another sigh heaved out. At home he always had things to do, which made the time go quickly. *Blurple-blurp*. He looked at the clock again. *Tick, tick*. Sighed again. "I suppose I could look at one of these magazines."

Suddenly a noise intruded, a scratching outside. He rose as the door swung open and a girl—the one from the photographs—stepped through. She was humming, her head down, fiddling with something in the oversized brown leather bag that hung from her shoulder. She bumped the door closed with her hip and brought up her gaze, swinging her hair over her shoulder at the same time.

The moment she spotted him, she let out a scream that made the fine hairs on the back of his neck rise. Her hand plunged into her bag, and she yanked out a tiny spray can, which she aimed at him. "Don't come any closer. I'll shoot you. I swear I will!"

He brought up both hands in surrender, although he could see no threat in that little aerosol can.

"Who are you?" she barked, her blue eyes wide in her pale face. The hand holding the can quivered, but she didn't back down.

"My name is Henry Braun." He kept his voice low and soothing. The girl's wild eyes made his stomach turn an uneasy somersault. "I drove over from Sommerfeld to see your mother."

"How'd you get in here?"

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“Your mother gave me the key. See?” He pointed to the chest in front of the couch, where he’d placed the house key.

Still scowling, the girl inched forward and snatched up the key. Keeping the can aimed at him, she growled, “You stay right there. I’m going to call my mother. Don’t you move!”

The girl backed through the doorway that led to the kitchen and disappeared behind the wall. He heard some clicks, then the girl’s voice. “Jimmy? This is Beth. I need to talk to Mom.”

Henry crept to the front door and let himself out, then perched on the concrete stoop. He would wait out here for Marie. That girl of hers was crazy. For the first time since he headed out on this journey, he wondered if Lisbeth Koepler had made a mistake.