

AMY K. SORRELLS

# *Before*

*The world is trying to break her,*

# *I Saw*

*but grace will set her free.*

# *You*



## *Praise for Amy K. Sorrells*

### *Then Sings My Soul*

“Flashing back between the present and [the] past, Sorrells stitches together a beautiful story of family and belief that illustrates the importance of closure and the peace derived from faith. Recommended for readers interested in realistic fiction in the style of Kate Breslin, Kristy Cambron, and Chris Bohjalian.”

*LIBRARY JOURNAL*

“*Then Sings My Soul* is the most phenomenal and heartrending story I have ever read. This struck my heart and soul and will remain in my memory forever. The horrific treatment of the Jews during the Holocaust will never be forgotten. Amy K. Sorrells could not have described the events happening with more authenticity . . . than she did. If this story doesn’t ‘get’ you, no others will.”

FRESH FICTION

### *How Sweet the Sound*

“This book will turn your emotions inside out and grip your heart with a clawed fist before pouring acid—and then balm—over the wounds. You have been warned. Now, by all means, go buy this unusually edgy and entirely moving inspirational novel and read it for yourself.”

SERENA CHASE,

*USA Today*

“Debut inspirational novelist Sorrells opens her story powerfully . . . Sorrells will likely move many readers of faith, and she’s worth watching.”

*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

“You could read *How Sweet the Sound* because you love a well-told story, but Amy Sorrells delivers so much more. Here the depths of pain mankind can inflict meets the unfailing grace that waits to heal all who’ll come.”

SHELLIE RUSHING TOMLINSON,

*Belle of All Things Southern, author of Heart Wide Open*

“With poetic prose, lyrical descriptions, and sensory details that bring the reader deep into every scene, Amy K. Sorrells has delivered a lush, modern telling of the age-old story of Tamar. But that’s not all. With a full cast of colorful characters and juxtaposed first-person narratives woven through, this story dives into the Gulf Coast culture of pecan orchards and debutante balls, exposing layers of family secrets and sins. In the end comes redemption, grace, forgiveness, and faith, but not without a few scars carried by those who manage to survive the wrath of hardened hearts. Bravo!”

JULIE CANTRELL,

*New York Times* bestselling author of *Into the Free* and *When Mountains Move*

“*How Sweet the Sound* is one of those books you want to savor slowly, like sips of sweet tea on a hot Southern day. Achingly beautiful prose married with honest, raw redemption makes this book a perfect selection for your next book club.”

MARY DEMUTH,  
author of *The Muir House*

“Meeting these characters and stepping into their worlds forever changed the contour of my heart. Sorrells’s words effortlessly rise from the page with a cadence that is remarkably brave and wildly beautiful.”

TONI BIRDSONG,  
author of *More Than a Bucket List*

“Filled with brokenness and redemption, grit and grace, *How Sweet the Sound* is a heartrending coming-of-age debut about God’s ability to heal the hurting and restore the damaged. Sorrells deftly reminds us that no matter how dark the night, hope is never lost. Not if we have eyes to see.”

KATIE GANSHERT,  
author of *Life After*

“A stirring tale of loss and redemption. Amy Sorrells will break your heart and piece it back twice its size.”

BILLY COFFEY,  
author of *When Mockingbirds Sing*

“A daring and enchanted story, Amy K. Sorrells’s *How Sweet the Sound* beckons readers to a land of pecan groves, bay breezes, and graveyard secrets rising up like the dead on Judgment Day.”

KAREN SPEARS ZACHARIAS,  
author of *Mother of Rain*

*Before I Saw You*



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*Before*

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*You*



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Hope means everything when you've got nothing, and hope's all I have when I leave my brother, Jayden, to check on the baby rabbits.

It hadn't been hard to find their nest during the day. The swirl of grass and fur the mother had spun together around the shallow burrow gave it away when I'd nearly stepped on it a couple days prior. Though nearly midnight now, the August wind rustles hot through the leaves and creaking arms of the ash tree stretching over the moss-lined patch of brush I'd marked to remember where the nest is at night. When I see the red scraps of yarn haven't moved from where I put them over that morning, I know their mother isn't coming

back. I use a twig to nudge the leaves, and I glimpse the rise and fall of the frail, downy chests, fluttering like there isn't enough air in the world to satisfy them.

I've been watching the mother rabbit for a while now in the mornings, my baby brother, Jayden, in my arms, taking his first bottle of the day as the horizon turns teal, then pale yellow like the cinquefoils while the western sky still glares black. If I'm still, she can't see me watching her through hazy sliding-glass doors. Isn't hard to tell her from other rabbits just passing through on their way to the meadow. As wild as she is, she has habits—the way she nibbles on the same patches of overgrown clover and sedge fruits, the way her nose and ears twitch, always looking out for predators. She is a good mama. That's why I suspected when I didn't see her three mornings in a row something was wrong.

"Fox got her, prob'ly," Sudie said yesterday.

Sudie's my neighbor, a wildlife rehabilitator—that is, when she's not taking care of the cemetery on the outskirts of town. I've been following her around ever since I can remember, learning that when it comes to wild creatures it's important to watch and wait. Plenty of folks come across a bunny nest thinking the babies are orphaned, but most of the time they're not. If those folks watched and waited, they'd see the mama come back at night, once, maybe twice, and just long enough to nurse them. Keeps predators from finding them as easy as if she was there all day long. If those folks knew to put crisscrossed strings on top of a nest like Sudie taught me, they could tell whether

the bunnies—kits, as she likes to remind me—are truly orphaned like these.

I kneel and set the shoe box next to the nest, adding a handful of dew-damp grass to the clean, dry rags inside. The night smells thick and rich, like coffee grounds still warm from brewing. Nudging the leaves aside again, I see the kits can't be much more than a week old, their eyes still shut tight as if trying to keep the world out. They hardly look like bunnies except for their ears, long and laid back flat on their heads. I count a total of eight kits before I lift them one by one into the box. They squirm at my touch. Even so young, they recognize I am not their mother. The sides of their chests flutter against the palm of my hand, their heartbeats so quick they feel more like a tremble than a rhythm. It's a wonder something so small and helpless will be strong enough in just a handful of weeks to leap across meadows and fend for themselves.

I think about Jayden again, the glow in the window of our trailer across the field of high grass and milkweed reminding me I need to get back to him. I hated to leave him at all tonight, but Sudie's knee is acting up again—forty, sometimes fifty hours a week at the cemetery's a lot for a woman in her sixties. And the bunnies won't last another night without something in their bellies.

The last of the eight kits curls against the backs of the others as I lay it in the box. I cover them all with one of my clean hair bandannas and stand, the box weighty with the life inside. Overhead, the moon shines through the thick

summer leaves, the white bark of the sycamores reflecting back like bones. Big brown bats dart overhead, chasing moths, mayflies. I hear laughter in the distance, then realize it's not laughter at all but barred owls carrying on like old ladies on a front porch complaining about the heat.

"The heavens proclaim the glory of God," Studie likes to remind me when we're outside together. I can't hear all these sounds and feel all these creatures around me without sensing that's true.

Dew soaks through the canvas of my sneakers as I traipse toward her trailer, and I glance again toward our place. I'm out of earshot to hear if Jayden is crying. Mercy, I hope he's quiet. Before I came out here, I made sure he was settled in good in his crib that's in the room we share. I patted his tummy until the worry lines on his brow faded. I waited until the pacifier lolled out of his sleep-slackened mouth before leaving.

*Lord, please let him be still.*

He's been a hard baby to quiet since birth. Seems like every second of the day he requires swaddling or holding or both, and the cold and fever he's been fighting just adds to his fussing. Studie says it's no wonder he's having such a time, *considering*, and I try to keep that in mind when the crying starts to feel like too much of a burden since Mama's no help. He's better than he was when he was a newborn, but the company Mama's keeping on this particular evening isn't the kind to put up with a screaming baby. That much they made clear.

Mice, maybe a snake, maybe a raccoon, scuttle away as I invade their spots in the quiet meadow. Ahead of me is Sudie's place, three down from ours, the last in a long line of mobile homes, rust stains running down the sides of most of them. Side by side they sit angled like white dominoes or tall, empty cartons of cream tipped over and forgotten, some on concrete, some still on wheels as if they held out hope of leaving someday.

Shady Acres is the name of our trailer park on the outskirts of Riverton, Indiana, tucked away tight in a curve of the Ohio River as if God himself is trying to hide us from the rest of the world. It's clear from the looks of the place none of us including Sudie have much besides hope, and not even that most days. Somehow she makes her poor-paying job at the cemetery, caring for herself and all the critters work. If something needs taking in, she takes it and finds free goat's milk from a farmer down the road, hunts for bugs and plants in the woods, even grows a few vegetables in her backyard next to the cages she keeps out there.

Sudie stands at the screen door waiting for me. June bugs, gnats, and mosquitoes swarm the struggling glimmer of her porch light. "Consider the lilies," she sighs, as she always does. The hinges creak open as she welcomes me and this next collection of needy critters. "If the good Lord feeds the birds, surely he'll feed me and these."

I don't know anybody besides Sudie—'cept maybe Reverend Payne—who takes the Lord's Word as flat-out truth and who doesn't worry about whether the food stamps

or disability check will last the month, if the propane will last the winter, or if we'll lose another neighbor too young.

"I can't stay," I say, setting the shoe box on the counter, clean but stained from years of use. Next to the sink is an old green soda bottle, a couple of wild daisies stuck in the top of it. Along the opposite wall are wire cages and glass tanks of all kinds of sizes. Several brown bats hang, indifferent, from the screen lid of one cage. From another, the shiny, bead-like black eyes of a couple of adult squirrels follow my movements. And from another, a Cooper's hawk turns its head to one side to get a better look at me. I am not as familiar to them as Sudie.

"I know." Sudie nods in the direction of my place, her brow furrowing because she knows the reason for my worry. She turns her attention to the box and lifts up the bandanna. "How many kits?"

"Eight."

She turns the water on to let it warm, then brings out small syringes, paper towels, and powdered milk replacer to make up a batch of formula. There's a hand-painted scrap of wood hanging above the sink that reads, "In you alone do the orphans find mercy. Hosea 14:3." This is how she thinks of the critters. Her orphans.

"It's a wonder any make it at all," I say as Sudie lifts one out of the box.

The bony ribs and limbs look even more angled and weak in the light of her kitchen than they did in the woods. She takes a syringe of the formula and presses the tip of it against

the side of the kit's mouth. The front and back legs push against Sudie's hand as if trying to get away, but I've learned they push against their mother when they nurse from her, too, nature's way of helping her release more milk. Still it always looks like they're struggling, awkward and blind to the fact someone is trying to save them.

"I'm sorry I can't stay." And I am. The first few hours of a new rescue are intense.

"It's all right. I'll settle them. You come by when you can," she says, using my bandanna to dab at drops of formula on the kit's nose, which is raised in protest to the hard plastic syringe.

Outside, the heat presses down on me, and I cough back the shock of the thick humidity. In the distance, an engine starts, then revs several times before squealing onto the main road. The blue flicker of a TV glows from one neighbor's window. The muffled sound of glass breaking against a wall echoes from another across the way.

I think about Jayden, alone with Mama and her company, and I run toward home.