



Three-in-One Collection

The Sound of Sleigh Bells

The Christmas Singing

NEW! *The Dawn of Christmas*

Christmas

— *in* —

APPLE RIDGE



CINDY
WOODSMALL

New York Times Best-selling Author of *When the Soul Mends*

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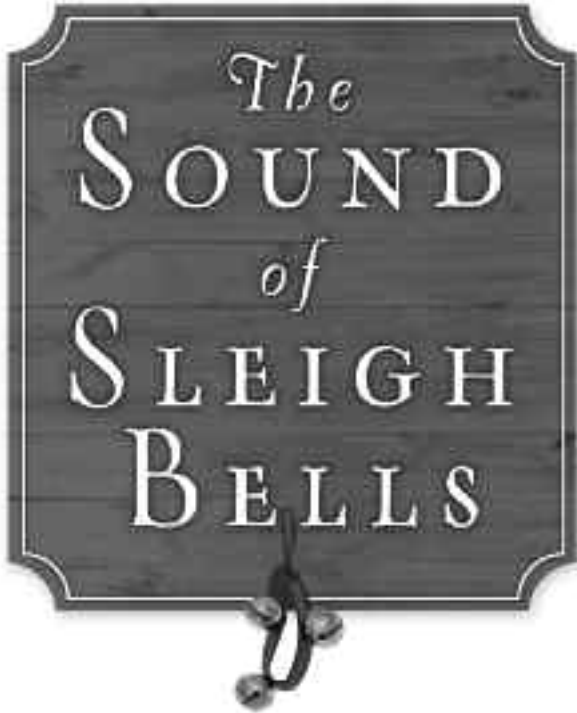
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Book I



CINDY
WOODSMALL

*To one of the most splendid blessings in my life,
Miriam Flaud*



One

The aroma of fresh-baked bread, shepherd's pie, and steamed vegetables filled Lizzy's house, mingling with the sweet smell of baked desserts. In the hearth a bank of embers kept a small fire burning, removing the nip that clung to the early-April air.

The noise of conversations rose and fell around Lizzy's kitchen table as her brother and his large family talked easily throughout the meal. His grown and almost-grown children filled the sides of her fourteen-foot table, and his grandchildren either sat in their mothers' laps or in highchairs.

Nearly four decades ago her oldest brother had put effort into finding an Amish bride. When Stephen found the right girl, he married her. He'd handled life well, and the fruit of it fed her soul. Lizzy had focused on her business and never married. She didn't regret her choices, not for herself, but she'd crawl on her hands and knees the rest of her days to keep her niece from the same fate.

Beth was like a daughter to Lizzy. Not long after the family's dry goods store passed to Lizzy, Beth graduated from the eighth grade and

started working beside her. Soon she moved in with Lizzy, and they shared the one-bedroom apartment above the shop. When Lizzy had this house built a few years ago, her niece had stayed above Hertzlers' Dry Goods.

Lizzy studied the young beauty as she answered her family's endless questions about her decisions in the middleman role between the Amish who made goods and the various Englischer stores who wanted those goods.

That was her Beth. Answer what was asked. Do what was right. Always be polite. Offer to help before it was needed. And never let anyone see the grief that hadn't yet let go of her. Beth had banned even Lizzy from looking into the heartache that held her hostage.

The one-year anniversary of Henry's death had come and gone without any sign from Beth that she might lay aside her mourning, so Lizzy had taken action. She'd prepared this huge meal and planned a social for the afternoon. Maybe all Beth needed was a loving, gentle nudge. If not, Lizzy had a backup plan—one Beth would not appreciate.

Over the din of conversations, the sounds of horses and buggies arriving and the voices of young people drifted through the kitchen window, causing Beth to look at her.

Lizzy placed her forearms on the table. "I've invited the young singles of the community for an evening of outdoor games, desserts, and a bonfire when the sun goes down."

Two of Beth's single younger sisters, Fannie and Susie, glowed at the idea. With grace and gentleness, Beth turned to her *Mamm* and asked if she would need help planting this year's garden.

It didn't seem to bother Beth that five of her sisters had married before her, and three of them were younger than she was. All but the most recently wed had children. Lizzy knew what awaited Beth if she didn't find someone—awkward and never-ending loneliness. Maybe she didn't recognize that. It wasn't until Henry came into Beth's life that she even seemed to notice that single men existed. Within a year of meeting, they were making plans to marry.

Now, in an Amish community of dresses in rich, solid hues, Beth wore black.

Through a window Lizzy saw the young men bring their rigs to a halt. The drivers as well as the passengers got out of the carriages. The girls soon huddled in groups, talking feverishly, while the guys went into the barn, pulled two wagons with plenty of hay into the field, and tied their horses to them. It was far easier to leave the animals harnessed and grazing on hay than to have to hitch a horse to its buggy in the dark. The young people knew the routine. They would remain outside playing volleyball, horseshoes, or whatever else suited them until after the sun went down. Then they'd come inside for desserts and hot chocolate or coffee before riding in wagons to the field where they'd start a bonfire.

Fannie and Susie rose and began clearing the table. Beth went to the dessert counter and picked out a pie. She set it on the table beside her *Daed*, cut a slice, and placed it on his plate. Then she slid a piece onto her Mamm's plate before passing the pie to her brother Emmanuel. She took her seat next to her mother, still chatting about the upcoming spring planting. Lizzy hoped her brother saw what she did—a daughter who continued to shun all possibility of finding new

love. Beth clung to the past as if she might wake one day to find her burning desires had changed it.

Fannie began gathering glasses that still held trace amounts of lemonade. "You've got to join us this time, Bethie. It's been too long."

Flatware stopped clinking against the plates as all eyes turned to Beth.

Susie tugged on her sleeve. "Please. Everyone misses you."

Beth poked at the meal she'd barely touched as if she might scoop a forkful of the cold food and eat it. "Not this time. *Denki*."

"See, Beth," Lizzy said. "Every person here knows you should be out socializing again. Everyone except you."

Beth's face grew taut, and she stood and removed the small stack of plates from Fannie's hands. "Go on. I'll do these."

Fannie glanced to her Daed.

He nodded. "Why don't you all finish up and go on out? Emmanuel and Ira, do you mind helping set up the volleyball nets?"

Emmanuel wiped his mouth on a cloth napkin. "We can do that."

Chairs screeched against the wood floor as most of the brood stood. Fannie and Susie bolted for the door. Two more of Beth's sisters and two sisters-in-law went to the sink, taking turns rinsing the hands and faces of their little ones before they all went outside.

Lizzy longed to see Beth in colored dresses, wearing a smile that radiated from her soul. Instead Beth pasted on smiles, fooling most of those around her into thinking her heart continued to mend. But her quieter, more stoic behavior said things no one else seemed to hear. Lizzy heard, and she'd shared her concerns with Beth's Daed, Stephen.

Beth took a stack of dishes to the sink and flicked on the water.

“You can leave that for now,” Stephen said.

She turned off the water and remained with her back to them.

Beth’s Mamm glanced at Lizzy as she ran her finger down a tall glass of lemonade. “Beth, honey—”

Beth turned. “I’m fine, Mamm.”

Stephen got up and piled more plates together. “Of course you are. And I’ll throw my favorite pie at anyone who says otherwise.” He stuck his finger into his half-eaten piece of chocolate pie, placed it in his mouth, and winked at Beth.

She smiled, an expression that probably looked real to her Daed but reminded Lizzy of fine silk flowers—only beautiful to those who aren’t gardeners.

“Beth, sweetheart,” Stephen said, “you know how me and your Mamm feel. We love you. It’s no secret that you’re different from our other girls. You’ve always had more of a head for business than a heart to find a beau, but now...well, we just want to make sure you’re doing okay. Since you don’t live with us, that’s a bit hard to know sometimes.” He set the dirty dishes beside the already full sink before he rinsed his hands and dried them. “Officially, your period of mourning was over nearly six months ago, but you haven’t joined the young people for a single event. You’ve not left the store for your usual buying trips. You eat half of what you should. You continue to wear black. And those are things a stranger would notice.”

“I...I could plan a buying-and-selling trip. It’ll take me most of the summer to get completely organized for it, but I can be ready by August. I know I should have sooner, but...”

Lizzy hoped Stephen didn’t fall for the diversion tactic Beth had

just thrown his way, but since Beth was listening to him without getting defensive, Lizzy wouldn't interfere.

“Good. If that's where you feel like beginning, I'm glad to hear it. I know the community will be too, because without you they can't sell near as many of their goods.” He walked to the table, took a seat, and motioned for Beth.

She moved to the chair beside him.

“But other people's financial needs are not what this is about. Tell me something good and hopeful about you—something I'll know in my gut is true—and I'll end this conversation right now.”

The four of them remained silent as shouts and roars of laughter echoed from outside. If anyone could touch Beth's heart and cause her to change, her Daed could. But the silence continued, and Beth's inability to think of anything hopeful to say made Lizzy sick with worry.

The grandfather clock chimed the half hour, startling Lizzy, but no one spoke. Long shadows filled the room, and she lit a kerosene lamp and set it in the middle of the table.

Whatever happened the night Henry died consumed Beth. When Lizzy arrived on the scene, her niece didn't even acknowledge her. The only words Beth spoke were the ones she whispered for days—*God, forgive me*. Lizzy had tried to talk to her about it, but Beth never broke her polite silence on the topic.

Beth's Daed cleared his throat. “I'll wait all night for an answer if I need to, Beth.”

Her eyes filled with tears, but it was another five minutes before she uttered a word. “I don't trust my feelings about...certain things anymore, Daed.”

“Then can you trust mine?” her Daed asked.

“Always, but I don’t want to be one of the single girls looking for a husband. Not ever again. Is that such a horrible thing?”

“It’s not what we’d figured on, but we can adjust.”

Lizzy repositioned her glass of lemonade. During church the singles sat separately from the married couples. Lizzy’s memory of growing too old for the singles and removing herself from them still stung. From that day on she’d carried the title of *alt Maedel*—old maid. She’d been older than Beth’s twenty-six years, and her prospects of finding someone had faded into nothingness. If Beth thought navigating life after Henry was difficult, Lizzy dreaded the pain that lay ahead for Beth when she openly admitted to the Amish world that she didn’t fit—not with the single folk and not with the married ones.

Stephen had yet to mention anything about the color of mourning Beth still wore. If she would wear something besides black, young men would gravitate to her, and she stood a chance of finding someone.

He covered Beth’s hand with his and bowed his head, silently praying for her. He lifted his head. “There’s somewhere you’d like to be tonight other than washing dishes or working in that stuffy office in the store. Am I right?”

“Ya.”

“Then go.”

Beth kissed her Daed’s cheek, told her Mamm and Lizzy she’d see them later, and left.

Lizzy moved to the window and watched as her niece walked past small groups of young people. She overheard both women and men asking Beth to stay. Beth shook her head, smiled, and waved

before making her way across the road and into the pasture near their store.

“You said nothing that will nudge her to change how she’s handling life,” Lizzy said.

Stephen placed his hands on her shoulders. “Henry’s death is the hardest thing this family has faced. Pressuring Beth isn’t the answer. Trusting God is.”

Lizzy stood in silence as Beth harnessed her mare to a carriage. She knew where Beth was going.

The cemetery.

Again. And again. And again.

“Please, dear God, move a mountain for her.”

Stephen squeezed her shoulders. “Amen.”

Two

Sitting inside her small office, Beth could hear the bell above the door softly jingle each time a customer came in or went out of the store. But the stack of paperwork spread out in front of her was a clear reminder that helping to run Hertzlers' Dry Goods was only a small part of her work.

When dozens of wall clocks chimed the noon hour, Beth jolted. Her day was getting away from her. She grabbed a utility knife and opened the box beside her desk. It'd been delivered that morning and contained stacks of her catalogs from the printer. After pulling one out, she moved the kerosene lamp closer. The heat from the small flame added to late summer's soaring temperature, but she needed the extra light to view all the details of the ordering magazine. The photos were of almost every item she carried, and they looked fantastic.

Lizzy will love it.

Beth's practice in creating a periodical had paid off. A few years back she had gotten special permission from the church leaders to use a camera for the purpose of developing a sales publication. Her first few tries were very clumsy compared to this.

She organized the papers on her desk and shoved some into her satchel. With her itinerary, a catalog, and stacks of order forms in hand, she blew out the kerosene lamp and left her office. As she stepped into the dry goods store, she noticed customers in every aisle, Amish and Englishers. She'd been focused on her trip plans for months, and she finally took a moment to actually see the place. Lizzy ran the day-to-day operation of the store, and by the looks of it, she was having a particularly good season.

Beth went to the door that led to her living quarters. As she climbed the darkened stairwell, the well-worn steps moaned, and the aroma of old wood filled her senses. It made her wish for time to sit on the steps and just breathe it in. Even after she rounded the first landing of the stairway, she could hear the buzz of customers in the shop below. Some days she didn't feel Amish at all. She only felt busy and overwhelmed. It took a lot of Englisher-type work to provide middleman services for a multitude of Amish districts, but she loved it.

"Beth?" one of the Petersheim girls called from the foot of the steps.

She stopped climbing and went back down the winding staircase. "Yes, Lillian?"

"Mr. Jenkins is here. He wants to place an order for his store."

"His appointment was last week, and he missed it. Does he think it's for today?"

Lillian moved to the first step and closed the door behind her. "No. He apologized for not being here when he should've. A family illness kept him away, but he's in the area today and hoping you'll let him place

an order before you leave on your buying trip. I told him you're leaving in a couple of hours, but that only made him more determined."

"Okay, I'll take his order, but I need to finish packing first. Help him look through the catalog and the display room while he waits, and take really good notes. It'll speed things along. And please tell him I have to be gone by two o'clock."

Lillian nodded and left.

Beth turned and headed up the stairway. In spite of her best efforts, which began four months ago, she still had too much to do before leaving. Half a dozen calls had to be made, and she needed to sort through her mail before the driver arrived. Right now she intended to finish packing. It wouldn't do to leave without plenty of clean clothing. It was hard enough to earn respect among the Englishers as a businesswoman when wearing Amish clothing, let alone dirty Amish attire.

When she stepped into her attic bedroom, she expected a few minutes of solitude. Instead, she found her aunt going through her closet. Lizzy's youthful face and bustling energy kept her from looking twelve years older than Beth. Her aunt carried a couple more pounds of weight than she had a decade ago, and her dark hair had a few strands of gray, but Beth thought she looked much younger than her actual age of thirty-eight.

Lizzy motioned at the closet and then faced Beth. "Have you discarded every dress you own that isn't black?"

Beth lowered her eyes and studied the pages in her hand. Black hid things—much like ever-darkening shadows in a deep forest. And as odd as it seemed, black helped her carry things too.

Secret things.

She tapped the itinerary. “If I’m careful to stick to the schedule, before my three weeks are up, I’ll be able to visit every Amish and Englisher store that we do business with—furniture, quilt, dolls, crafts—you name it. I have an appointment to see each owner, buyer, or manager we’re connected to in Pennsylvania and Ohio.” She held out the updated catalog.

“It arrived!” Lizzy stepped away from the closet and took the publication.

“I told you it was scheduled to get here this morning.”

Her aunt’s dark brown eyes reflected awe as she looked at each page. “Wow, Beth, this is the best one yet.”

“The community has waited a long time for me to resume traveling, and I intend for this trip to be very successful.” After setting the rest of the papers on her nightstand, Beth stepped around her aunt. She grabbed several dresses from her closet and tossed them onto the bed.

Lizzy removed the hangers and folded each dress. “Beth, honey...”

Beth swallowed, her mind racing with ideas of how to avoid the impending conversation—the one her aunt had started trying to have a few days ago. “Mr. Jenkins is waiting for me downstairs, and I have phone calls to make before Gloria arrives. Can you finish packing for me?”

Her aunt’s frame slumped so slightly Beth doubted if Lizzy even knew it’d happened. After emptying a drawer of her dresser, Beth shoved the stockings and underwear into the traveling bag.

“Ya.” Lizzy’s brown eyes met Beth’s, and her aunt smiled. “I know you wish you could change the past, but you have to let it go, Bethie.”

Beth had no doubt her aunt thought she knew what dark cloud hung over her. But she was wrong.

Beth grabbed the papers from the nightstand and gave Lizzy a quick hug. “Don’t start trying to mollycoddle me again. I think we can all agree that at twenty-six I’m a big girl now.”

“And I’m thirty-eight, but that doesn’t keep me from needing to hear what other people have to say.”

“I’ve heard you, Lizzy. You’re concerned, but you’re not hearing me. I’m fine.” She kissed her aunt. “Now help me with my list so I can get out the door on time.”

Her aunt nodded. “I’ll finish packing for you.”

“Denki.” Beth scurried downstairs.

Hoping to stay hidden so Lizzy couldn’t start another difficult conversation, Beth gratefully donated the next hour of her life to helping Mr. Jenkins place an order, then made the necessary phone calls. After sorting her business mail, she was down to her last task—finding where she’d laid her personal mail. She’d seen it sometime last week, although she wasn’t sure what day.

She stepped out of her office. “Hey, Lillian?”

Lillian looked up from the cash register, where she was checking out a customer.

“Have you seen a stack of six or seven letters with a rubber band around it?”

Lizzy came out of the storage room, reached under a nearby

counter, and smiled as she waved the envelopes in the air. “I wondered when you’d miss them.”

Beth moved toward her aunt. “I realized they were missing this morning. I hope to answer them while traveling.”

Lizzy pressed the letters against her chest, clearly not ready to give them up. “Gloria arrived. She’s loading your luggage and the box of magazines now and needed a few minutes to reorganize her van. Did you verify your reservations for tonight?”

“Yes, my dear aunt. You trained me well.”

Lizzy held out the small bundle of letters. “If these were business related, you’d have kept up with them.”

Beth loved her aunt like a sister and usually got along with her, but clearly they needed a break from each other. For the last six months, it had felt like they were two old maids bickering back and forth. Lizzy was sure she knew how to direct Beth’s life, and Beth was sure she didn’t.

Beth simply nodded as she took the letters. Some were from relatives who lived outside Apple Ridge, and some were from friends she’d met over the years during her annual or semiannual buying-selling trips.

With the rest of her paperwork inside her black canvas satchel, she looped her arm through Lizzy’s and led her through the aisles, around customers, and to the door of the shop.

When they stepped onto the porch, Lizzy wrapped one arm around Beth’s waist. “You’ll be careful, right?”

Beth pulled her into a hug, holding her for a long spell. “You drive

me nuts, but I do believe I love you more than any niece has ever loved an aunt.”

Lizzy took a deep breath that spoke of tears. “Are you sure you’re up to this trip?” She put a bit of space between them. “It’s hard to be away from family that long, and you’ll spend more time with Englishers than with Amish.”

“Months of planning and you ask me this now?”

In spite of August’s heat, Lizzy’s hands felt cool against her cheeks. “It’s your first time to go since Henry...”

Why did her aunt insist on stating the obvious? “I know that. I’m fine. I’ll always be fine, if for no other reason than to keep you from taking over my life and trying to run it for me. Do we need to tattoo the words ‘Beth’s fine’ on the back of your hand?”

“A tattoo?” The male voice behind Beth was clearly that of Omar, their bishop.

She turned to see his smiling face. His gruff-sounding question didn’t hide the amusement reflected in his eyes. Lizzy’s face flushed a bit as she straightened her apron. Beth swallowed, never quite sure if he was teasing or nicely sharing his opinion.

His eyes stayed on her aunt for several long seconds, giving Beth a few moments to find her voice. “Uh...well...”

The bishop laughed. “It isn’t a completely bad idea if it would get *somebody* we know to stop worrying so much.” His eyes and smile moved to Beth. “But I think it will take more than the ink in a tattoo to do that.” He gestured toward the van. “It looks like you’re about ready to leave.”

His sincere smile should warm her. It used to. But now whenever she was around Omar, her guilt pressed in heaviest of all—maybe because as bishop he might see into her, or maybe because he was Henry’s uncle. Sometimes she was sure he knew her secret.

The bishop leaned against the porch column. “Your Daed says you’ll be gone for three weeks, give or take a few days.”

Wishing she knew what to do with her hands, she folded her arms and nodded. At least today if he shook her hand, the sweltering heat provided a good excuse for her sweaty palms. “Yes. It’ll be a tight schedule, but I hope to get it all done.”

The bishop studied her. “I’m sure you will. You always have.”

She forced a smile, sickened at how she hid behind a facial expression. “Denki.”

Gloria shut the doors to the back of the van. “I meant to get ice for the drinks Beth asked me to pack. Lizzy, can I get some from your house?”

“Sure, I’ll give you a hand.”

Gloria grabbed the cooler out of the backseat, and the two women hurried across the road to Lizzy’s place. The bishop lifted the weight of Beth’s satchel off her shoulder, and she released it. He went down the steps, and she had no choice but to follow him.

Her insides trembled, but she reminded herself that no Amish knew her truth. Not even the bishop. And unless Henry returned from the grave to tell, none ever would.

Omar stopped under the shade of the walnut tree. “Those of us who knew Henry miss him, but we’re doing better.”

No one really knew Henry.

Hoping to keep the conversation as light and breezy as possible, she kept her response brief and hoped he took the hint. “I know. I am too.”

“Lizzy tells me otherwise.”

She shifted, wishing Lizzy would believe her and stop talking to Omar about it. Her throat tightened. “You know, if you keep this up, we’ll need a tattoo for you as well. It’ll say, ‘Beth’s fine!’”

The man chuckled. “Okay, you’re fine.” He straightened. “Just don’t bring back any forbidden items this trip. We’ve gone that route twice already, and I’d rather not repeat it, okay?”

“Ya, I know.”

That was eight years ago. Did he still see her as a teenager? At the time it’d seemed harmless to purchase enlarged photos and canvas paintings Englischers had made of the Amish. Beth had defended her decision by telling Omar she’d hired Amish to make the frames for the items, no Amish person’s face could be seen in any of the settings, they hadn’t posed for any of the pictures, and the items were a sought-after commodity by their Englisher customers. Omar felt that snapping photos as the Amish went about their quiet lives was an unwelcome intrusion and that her allowing such photographs to become a part of her business only encouraged Englischers to be bolder with their cameras. He said if she’d told the frame builders what she planned to do with their work, they wouldn’t have participated. She hadn’t agreed, but he had final say, and she ended up keeping the frames and burning the artwork. She still bought frames regularly and

filled them with nature scenes an Amish woman painted for her. Omar was a bit uncomfortable with nature scenes being sold for Englischers to hang on their walls and admire—as if they might fawn over them to the point of worship—but he allowed her to carry the items in the store. The man’s heart was in the right place—she believed that completely—but his ways were more conservative than a lot of bishops’. At times she wondered what life in Apple Ridge would be like if he hadn’t been chosen to be the bishop.

Lizzy and Gloria came out of her aunt’s house and crossed the street. With the cooler in hand, Gloria headed for the van. “You ready?”

“Ya.”

Hoping she’d return home with stacks of orders for Amish goods, she looked forward to what this time could accomplish. It’d been a while since she and Gloria had been gone overnight on business, but through the years, traveling with Gloria made for relaxed and enjoyable trips. Her shoulder-length gray hair always stayed pulled back in a loose bun, and her jean skirts with knit tops never changed with the English styles. She seemed as comfortable wearing the same look year in and year out as the Amish were.

Beth hugged Lizzy. “I’ll call you in a few days.” As she walked toward the vehicle, the bishop walked beside her.

“Oh, wait. I almost forgot.” Lizzy ran into the store, and Omar and Beth stopped.

Omar smiled. “Maybe you should just take her with you.”

“Uh, maybe not.”

A look of amusement and understanding flickered through his eyes. Fresh longing to confide her secret rippled through her, but hoping for that kind of friend was as childish as young Englishers wanting a fairy to bring money for a useless tooth.

The silence stretched between them, and Beth wrestled with her guilt. The store's screen door banged against its frame, ending the fight.

"I made your favorite spice cake." Lizzy placed the tin carrier in Beth's hands, gave her a quick hug, and opened the van door for her.

BOOKS BY CINDY WOODSMALL

AMISH VINES AND ORCHARDS

A Season for Tending

ADA'S HOUSE SERIES

The Hope of Refuge

The Bridge of Peace

The Harvest of Grace

SISTERS OF THE QUILT SERIES

When the Heart Cries

When the Morning Comes

When the Soul Mends

NOVELLAS

The Sound of Sleigh Bells

The Christmas Singing

The Scent of Cherry Blossoms

NONFICTION

Plain Wisdom