

CINDY WOODSMALL

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

The SOUND of SLEIGH BELLS



The
SOUND
of
SLEIGH
BELLS

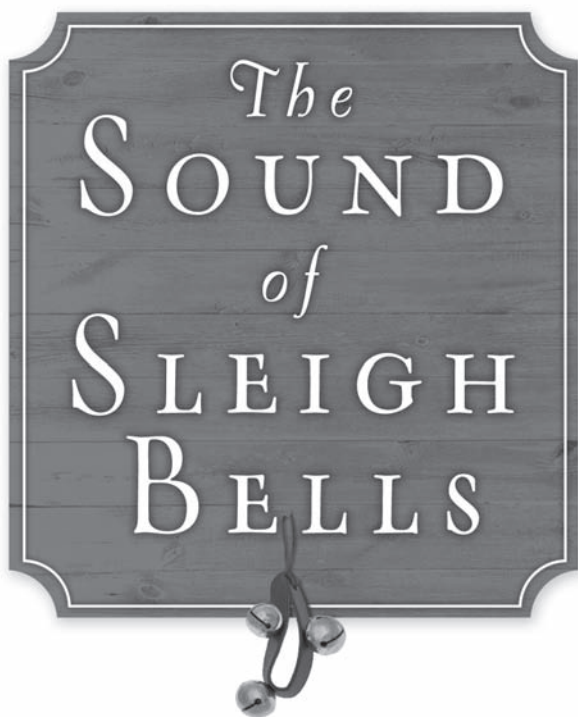
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CINDY
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*To one of the most splendid blessings in my life,
Miriam Flaud*



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 Emanuel. 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.”

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