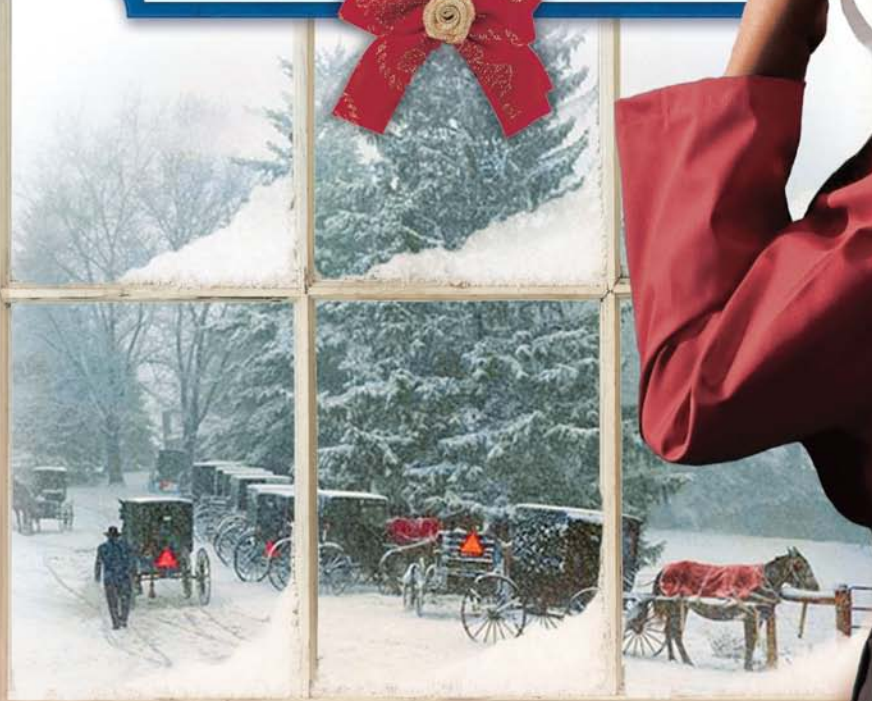


CINDY WOODSMALL

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

The CHRISTMAS SINGING



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The Christmas Singing

Cindy Woodsmall

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One

Cold darkness and the sugary aroma from the cake shop below surrounded Mattie as she slid a solid-colored dress over her head and tied her white apron in place. The Old Order Amish here in Ohio didn't wear the black aprons—a difference she enjoyed—and only those involved with baking wore the white apron from the waist down. After brushing her hair, she fastened it up properly and donned her prayer *Kapp*. Who needed a light or a mirror to get ready for the day? She'd been wearing similar clothes her whole life, and the Ohio Amish pinned up their hair in much the same way as she had back in Pennsylvania.

Now, cake decorating—that required good lighting and great attention to detail. And her favorite season for making specialty cakes—Christmas—was right around the corner.

Ready to take on a new day, she hurried down the rough-hewn steps that led into her shop, lit a kerosene lantern, and pulled on her coat while going out the back door. Before getting to the woodpile, she paused a moment, enjoying Berlin's lights. Illuminated white bulbs hung like beacons against the dark night. Although she missed her *Mamm* and *Daed*, this was home now, not Pennsylvania.

She scanned the silhouettes and shadows of nearby homes and shops. The golden full moon had a silky glow around it, a ring almost as clear and defined as the moon itself. What would it look like if she designed a cake with a halo?

Eager to make notes, she loaded wood into the crook of her arm and went inside. She dumped the logs in the bin and then stirred the embers in the potbelly stove and added kindling. Before her first customer arrived, she'd have the place toasty warm.

The shop was old and narrow, but Mattie loved it. When the previous owner, a man who sold saddles and such, decided to sell his place a few weeks before she moved here, her brother James had helped her buy and remodel it. They'd torn out all the old counters, workbenches, and shelving.

The ceiling, floors, and walls were made of unfinished exposed wood. She'd put in a huge display case along the left wall, and a couple of small tables sat to the right. A gas-powered commercial oven and stainless-steel sinks ran the length of the back wall, and her work station, where she pieced together and decorated her cakes, sat a few feet away. Even in cooler weather, keeping the place warm without electricity wasn't much of an issue with the heat radiating from the oven and the wood stove. Hot summer weather was a little more problematic, but the many windows helped.

She began searching for her spiral notebook, which she often referred to as her brain. The pages of her combination sketch pad, scrapbook, and journal were covered with drawings, doodles, and pictures from magazines and newspapers. It'd been a gift for her twelfth birthday, and although the gift giver had broken her heart seven years later, she still appreciated the book. Her day planner was in the back of it, with the types of cakes she needed to make, due dates, and all her clients' names and phone numbers. Without it she wouldn't know how to run her store.

She knelt and looked under her work station. It was there, maybe two feet away. Reaching as far as she could, she touched the edge of the thick binder and grabbed it. Now where did she leave her pencil?

Is it behind your ear, Mattie Lane? Gideon's voice washed over her.

She shuddered, detesting hearing him inside her head, especially with the added use of the pet name *Mattie Lane*. *Lane* was not a part of her given name or her surname. When they first broke up, his voice had played constantly in her mind, but after three years these whispers of the past were rare.

They'd been good friends most of their lives. He was three years older than she, and it had stung when he began dating at sixteen. But worse than seeing him with other Amish girls was seeing him with *Englischer* girls. At eighteen, he'd stopped seeing others and told her that he'd decided to wait for her.

Their first date had taken place on her birthday, Christmas Eve, and she'd attended her first singing with Gideon. The magic of Christmas seemed to surround both of them as their voices rose in celebration of Christ's birth and the blessing of being together. Nothing in her life had ever compared to the emotion of that night, not even owning her own shop. For the next three years, they enjoyed the glorious Christmas singings together.

And then she caught him.

Her heartbreak had been compounded by confusion. *Nothing* had prepared her for his betrayal.

Pushing those thoughts away, she found a pencil lying on the sink and jotted down notes about the halo. Then she made herself a quick breakfast. Before she'd swallowed the last of her coffee, she had four dozen muffins and four dozen cupcakes in the oven.

The cowbells hanging on the door chimed numerous times throughout the morning, and by noon she had sold the usual amount of baked goods for this time of year and had taken three new cake orders—for a birthday, a bridal shower, and a summer wedding. She couldn't think of anything more exciting than running *Mattie Cakes*.

She went to the phone and dialed her Mamm. One of the things she loved most about owning a shop was the permission to have a phone handy. She called her Mamm at least once a day.

Few women were as remarkable as her mother. She'd been forty-seven when she got pregnant with *Mattie*. But Mamm's health issues progressed from inconvenient at the time of *Mattie's* birth to life threatening by the time *Mattie* turned sixteen. *Mattie* had spent much of her life fearing she'd lose her mother. But when *Mattie* hesitated to move from Pennsylvania to Ohio, her mother had refused to let her stay in *Apple Ridge*.

After ten rings the answering machine clicked on. Since Mamm was seventy and her phone was in the shanty near the barn, *Mattie* rarely reached her on the first try of the day.

At the beep, *Mattie* said, "Good morning, Mamm and Daed. This is your adoring, favorite daughter calling." *Mattie* chuckled. "Being the only girl has perks... Anyway, I'm having a great day, and I want to hear about yours. I'll call back at two thirty. I hope you're dressed warmly. Love you both." If *Mattie* established a time she'd call back, Mamm never failed to be in the phone shanty, waiting to hear from her. Daed had set up a comfortable chair and a gas heater out there. She talked to her Daed too, but he didn't stay on the line long.

The bells on the shop door jingled again, and a cold blast of November air burst into the room.

Mattie's almost-five-year-old niece came barreling through the door, bundled up in her black winter coat and wool scarf over her prayer Kapp. She wondered if *Esther* had walked the half block from her house to the shop by herself or if the little girl's mother was trailing behind, pushing her double stroller. *Esther* had four older siblings, but all of them were in school during the day.

"*Mattie Cakes!*" the young girl cried.

Mattie chuckled at Esther's excitement. None of her nieces or nephews called her Aunt Mattie these days, but she found this nickname adorable.

Esther ran to her, clutching a silver lunch pail. "You didn't come home to eat, so I brought you some food."

"*Denki.*" Mattie wasn't surprised when Esther held on to the pail. Her niece loved toting things.

Esther began her routine inspection of the store, beginning with the sink full of dirty cooking utensils. She enjoyed coming to the shop, and Mattie hoped that in seven or eight years, Esther might want to learn the trade. Esther's older sisters didn't seem to have any desire to make cakes.

Sol walked in, carrying a bow, a quiver full of arrows, and his camouflage duffel bag. He set it all behind her work counter, looking more confident than he used to. "Hi." He flashed a quick smile before looking down. Sometimes shy, he didn't keep eye contact for long.

They'd begun seeing each other on special occasions more than two years ago. Now they saw each other regularly, and unlike Gideon, Sol found getting along with young women a challenge. He was reserved and tended to mumble, but they liked being together.

When the bell on the door jingled again but no one came in, Sol hurried to open it for Mattie's sister-in-law as she pushed the stroller into the room.

"Did you forget something, Mattie?" Dorothy asked. "Like coming home for lunch?"

Mattie glanced at the clock. "Sorry. I didn't realize how much time had passed."

Dorothy sighed. "I've heard that before."

"And you'll hear it again," Sol mumbled. A grin sneaked across his face as he stole a glance at Mattie. She wanted to hug him, but he liked to keep his distance before a hunt. He didn't bathe or shave for a day or two before leaving, not wanting to scare off the wild game by smelling of soap or aftershave.

Mattie held out her hands for the pail. "Thank you very much, Esther. If your Mamm doesn't mind, I think you should pick out a cupcake."

Esther gave her the pail and gazed up at her mother.

Dorothy hesitated, probably calculating all sorts of mom things—like how many sweets Esther had eaten this week, if she'd had her fruits and vegetables today, and if Mattie was spoiling her. "Oh, all right."

Esther clapped and hurried to the display case housing the decorated cupcakes. "You made turkey cakes!" Each one had a tiny turkey head made of marzipan and tail feathers of icing.

"*Ya*, I did."

Dorothy stood near Mattie's work station and craned to see the display case. "You made so many."

"It's Thanksgiving next week. People have placed orders for most of those and will pick them up late this afternoon. I'll make even more for tomorrow's orders. The Englischer girls and boys have class parties before they're out for the holiday next week. This year I've gone an extra step. The feathers are not only a different color from the frosting, but they have a mildly different flavor too." Mattie opened the wood stove and stoked it before adding another piece of wood. "I think it's some of my best blending of colors and tastes yet...for cupcakes designed to look like turkeys."

Dorothy set the brake on the stroller and moved to a stool. "I still don't understand why you go to that much trouble for something that will be devoured in less than two minutes."

“Only the cake is gone. The memory will last much longer, perhaps days or a month or a lifetime. Just look at Esther.”

The four-year-old was talking to herself, or to the cakes, as she tried to choose one.

Dorothy’s face eased into a smile. “I guess I do understand. You know, come to think of it, James and I still talk about the ten-year anniversary cake you made for us.” Dorothy sighed. “But we want to see you more. You sleep here and skip meals. At least hang the Out to Lunch sign and come eat with us.”

Sol pulled a flashlight out of his bag and made sure it was working before taking a seat on his usual stool at the far end of her work station. “Would you feel better if she gave her word that she’d try to come home for lunch from now on?”

Dorothy laughed. “Ya, it would make me feel better...even though I know it won’t change a thing.”

Mattie held up her hand as if taking an oath. “I will do my best not to lose track of time and to follow all your advice.”

“Wait until you have little ones and are trying to herd them toward the table,” Dorothy teased.

Sol winked at Mattie. They were in agreement on this topic—they’d definitely marry one day, but it’d be a while. “Until then, your sister-in-law can make her own decisions.”

Dorothy turned to her. “So what has you so preoccupied this time?”

Mattie grabbed her notepad. “Look at this.” She opened the spiral-bound book and tapped the rough sketch of her halo cake. “Wouldn’t this be an unusual wedding cake?”

Dorothy leaned in, wearing a slight frown. “I suppose if I were an Englisher, it’d snag my interest. Is that a net? Is it edible?”

“Oh, ya. And it’s not a net. It’s a halo...of sorts.”

“How on earth will you get it to surround a cake in midair like that?”

Mattie splayed her fingers and waved her hands over the notebook. “I can do magic.”

Dorothy chuckled. “Ya, magic that takes weeks of hard work.”

A car horn tooted. Sol stood. “That’s my ride.”

“What zone are you headed for?” Mattie put several cupcakes in a bakery box.

“C.” He shoved his flashlight into his duffel bag.

She was sure he’d told her the zone before, but she didn’t try to keep his hunting schedule straight any more than he tried to keep up with the type of cake she needed to bake next.

He slung the bow and quiver over one shoulder and his duffel bag over the other. “We’re going to a campsite in Hocking Hills. I have several tags, so I hope to bring back a few deer.”

“The venison will come in handy this winter at the soup kitchen.” She passed him the box of goodies.

“Denki.” He studied her for a moment, grinning. “Don’t get into any trouble while I’m gone.”

It was his way of telling her that he cared. “I won’t.”

He opened the door. “See you in a few days.”

“I’ll be here.” Mattie returned to her open scrapbook, wondering if she could fashion the framework for the halo out of hardened sugar.

Dorothy sighed. “Isn’t there a limit on how much wild game the local charities will accept? Sol told James that he’s going on a seven-day hunt less than a week after Thanksgiving.”

“Ya. He is.” Mattie pointed at her chicken scratch of a sketch. “I think I know how to make the halo. What if I made an edible dowel from my crispy rice concoction and anchored—”

“Something’s wrong,” Dorothy cut her off.

“With the halo idea?”

“No.” Her sister-in-law placed her hand on the notebook. “I know Sol builds pallets from his parents’ house, but even so, how does he manage to get off work so much?”

“As long as he meets his quota each week, he can spend the rest of his time doing whatever he wants. He works long hours some days so he can take off when he wants. Is that a problem?”

“No...” Dorothy turned pages in the book without looking at it. “Honey, everyone in the family likes Sol. But...”

Mattie folded her arms, ready to defend herself. With seven big brothers, she knew how to stand her ground. “But what?”

“I keep waiting to see in you the zest that young people in love always have. It seems there’s no more now than when you started courting two years ago. Am I wrong?”

Mattie shrugged, hoping to keep the conversation short. “Sol has all the traits I could want in a husband. Zest isn’t on the list.”

Dorothy leaned in. “When you love someone enough to marry him, you find him fascinating. You love being in the same room with him. You desire to bear his children. You have a bond that’s so powerful you’ll gladly overlook the things about him that will drive you crazy years later.”

“What Sol and I have doesn’t fit that description, but our bond is strong. Maybe letting each other pursue outside interests is more important than you think.”

“He’s not one of your brothers, Mattie. After fourteen years James and I still arrange our days to get as much time together as possible.” She looked up at Mattie. “He draws me, Mattie, and I, him. People in love should have that.”

Mattie once had that kind of relationship with Gideon, and Dorothy knew it. What she didn’t understand was that Mattie and Sol’s relationship was much better, at least for her. “Dorothy, I know you want the best thing for me, but you have to trust me. Sol and I are very happy.”

Dorothy nodded, not looking convinced, but Mattie wasn’t bothered by what she or the rest of the family thought. She knew what being with Sol meant.

The bell jingled, and more cold air rushed inside along with Willa Carter and her son. Excitement danced inside Mattie. The whole time she’d worked on Ryan’s birthday cake, she looked forward to seeing his eyes light up when he saw it.

“Happy birthday, Ryan.” She closed her notebook and set it aside.

“Mattie!” Dorothy lifted the sketch pad off the wood stove. “Think...please.”

“Oh, yes. Thanks.” She thought in English and used it easily these days, a result of having regular contact with her non-Amish customers and friends. She turned to the little boy. He was so cute in his blue jeans and cowboy hat. “How old are you today?”

Ryan held up four fingers. “I’m this many!”

Mattie stepped out from behind the counter. “You are so big!” She turned to Mrs. Carter, who was jamming her car keys into her bright red purse. “How are you today?”

“Frazzled.” She unbuttoned her plaid coat. “I forgot this place sat so far back from the other stores, and I parked halfway down the block.”

Dorothy shifted her stroller out of the center of the floor. “We’d better go.”

Mattie grabbed a small dessert box and moved to the case of cupcakes, where her niece stood. “Did you decide which one you want?”

Esther pointed one out, and Mattie boxed it up. “Here you go.”

“You eat the lunch we brought,” Dorothy whispered.

“Okay.” Mattie mocked a loud whisper in return.

Esther shook her little forefinger at Mattie. “I’m comin’ back to check after I have my cupcake and milk.”

“You do that.” Mattie held the door for them before returning her attention to Ryan. “*Kumm.*” She went to the refrigerator, and as she removed the plastic cover from the cake, the smell of chocolate wafted out. She carried the cake over to Ryan.

Ryan gasped. “Mommy, look!”

A smiling teddy bear stared up at them. The three-dimensional bear had come out just as she’d hoped, and the look in Ryan’s eyes made every hour of effort worth it. This wasn’t her first time to create a bear cake, but she’d used the new specialty tips that had arrived earlier in the week, and the results looked even better than she’d imagined. Its claws, paws, and facial features nearly jumped out of the box.

“It’s perfect, Mattie.” Mrs. Carter’s smile reflected appreciation. “When my girlfriend told me about your shop, I never expected such excellent work.”

The pleasure of this moment would linger with Mattie for a long time. “Denki.”

“I have a daughter turning thirteen next month. She ice-skates, does ballet, and plays basketball. Think you could design a cake around one of her activities?”

“Sure.” Mattie grabbed her scrapbook and flipped it open. “Or I could do one that showcases all three.” She showed her several pages.

Mrs. Carter pointed at a triple-tier cake. “That one.”

“I can put a different sport on each tier.”

“She’ll love that!” Mrs. Carter turned away quickly, scooping up Ryan, who had begun to race around the small store.

Mattie jotted down a few notes, feeling exuberant, then set the book aside. “I’ll call you next week, and we’ll make specific plans. Let me help you with this cake.” Since Mrs. Carter was parked so far away, Mattie moved Ryan’s cake to a stainless steel utility cart and grabbed her coat.

Mrs. Carter secured the squirming boy in one arm and pulled out a check she’d already written.

Without glancing at it, Mattie slid it into her coat pocket and wheeled the cart toward the front of the store.

“I hate asking you to leave the store unattended, but he is so wound up.”

“I don’t have anything baking in the oven, so it’ll be fine.”

Sol sat in the front passenger seat, half listening to the conversation between Amish Henry, his brother Daniel, and the driver, Eric. All were a little younger than he and eager to be on this trip.

Eric turned down the radio. “So my neighbor, the one with two hundred acres who hasn’t let anyone hunt on it for more than thirty years...”

That caught Sol’s attention. “Thirty years?”

“Yeah, he’s always been real picky about who he lets on his property, but he said we could hunt it. Says the deer have really been ripping up his cornfields the last few years.”

“Let’s do it!” Amish Henry said.

“There’s a catch,” Eric said. “His mother is elderly and doesn’t want to hear gunshots or have hunters stomping around on the land, so we’d be limited to Christmas Eve and Day, because they’ll be away visiting relatives then.”

Reality overtook Sol’s moment of excitement. “I’m out. I can’t go on Christmas Eve. That’s Mattie’s birthday, and she’s got a thing about us attending the Christmas singing.”

“Must be nice to have a girl,” Daniel said. “I might give up hunting altogether if I had one.”

“Not hunt at all?” Sol laughed. “If that’s what she wants, you’ve got the wrong girl.”

Eric clicked on the turn signal. “Why don’t you hunt just in the morning on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day? You could probably tag your quota and still be back before noon. Come on, man. It’ll be great.”

“Ya, maybe.” Sol tapped the dessert box that held the cupcakes. “I want to talk to Mattie before I agree to anything.”

Eric pulled into the parking lot of a fish-and-wildlife store. “I need to get a few things.”

They all piled out with him. Sol didn’t need anything, but it never hurt to look around. He went to the knife case to see if they had anything new.

“Can I show you a particular knife?” the man behind the counter asked.

“Nah, I’m just looking. Thanks.”

A girl stopped beside him, and his peripheral vision told him she was Amish. She pointed at various knives. “He’d like one of every kind he doesn’t already have.” He recognized the voice. Katie King.

Sol’s insides knotted, and he stepped away from her. Their eyes met, and she smiled. She had dark hair and even darker eyes. He’d always thought she was pretty. But looks weren’t what mattered to him. It was the way two people fit into each other’s lives that really meant something.

His gut twisted with nerves, and he wished she’d leave. Mattie had never once made him uncomfortable, even when they first talked after the singings. She was the one who had approached him each time, but she did it in a reserved way—not staring or saying anything that he didn’t know how to respond to. He’d never asked to take a girl home from a singing. Mattie, in her quiet, self-assured way, had asked him.

Katie put one hand on her hip. “I sure see you out with your friends a lot. I guess you shy guys have to stick together. It’s a shame though, ya?”

Sol shrugged, not at all sure what answer she was fishing for. He never knew how to carry on a conversation with someone like Katie—all bubbly and blabbering about nothing at all. Mattie said what needed to be said and talked about things that made sense.

Amish Henry stepped out from an aisle, looking as if he wanted to rescue Sol but wasn’t sure how. “You about ready?”

“Ya.” Sol nodded. “Bye.” He started to leave.

Katie stepped in front of him. “I think it’d be neat to climb a tree stand in the early morning hours and wait for dawn.”

Sol wished Mattie would suddenly appear. He didn’t understand women at all. Was Katie just being silly? He took another step back, studying her shoes, which were half covered in mud.

Katie angled her head, catching Sol's eye. "I hope you have a good trip." She turned and walked off.

Sol drew a deep breath, wondering if he'd ever get over some people making him feel as if he had a ten-pound block of ice in his gut.

Amish Henry adjusted his black felt hat. "I think she was hoping you'd ask her for a date."

The words jolted Sol. Her small talk and mannerisms made no sense to him, but maybe Amish Henry was right. He watched her leave. "Nah. She just wants to sit in somebody's tree stand."

"If that's what she wants from you, she'll never get it. Climbing into your tree stand? No way."

Sol laughed. "Kumm on. Let's find Daniel and Eric. We've got a long way to go before we can set up camp."



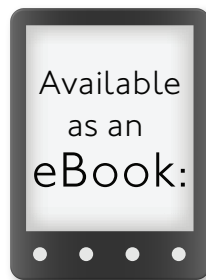
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