

The
HOPE of
REFUGE

AN ADA'S HOUSE NOVEL

CINDY
WOODSMALL

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

Praise for
The Hope of Refuge

“What a beautiful story of hope and renewal! Cindy Woodsmall’s *The Hope of Refuge* is an honest and moving portrayal that rings with authenticity. It warmed my heart long after I finished reading and reminded me that new beginnings are possible, truth frees, and love can make all things new, if only we can learn to trust again.”

—MARLO SCHALESKY, award-winning author of *If Tomorrow
Never Comes* and *Beyond the Night*

“Cindy Woodsmall’s *The Hope of Refuge* takes the reader on an emotional journey into the heart of Amish country and the heart of a very human heroine. A compelling novel of love lost and found with realistic characters from two very different worlds which become, beautifully, one.”

—KAREN HARPER, *New York Times* best-selling author
of *Deep Down*

Praise for Cindy Woodsmall

“A skillfully written story of forgiveness and redemption. Woodsmall’s authentic characters illustrate beautifully how wounded souls can indeed be mended.”

—SUSAN MEISSNER, author of *The Shape of Mercy*
and *White Picket Fences*

“Cindy Woodsmall writes *real*—real people, real conflicts, real emotions. When you open her book, you enter her world and live the story with the characters.”

—KIM VOGEL SAWYER, author of *Where Willows Grow*
and *Waiting for Summer’s Return*

“Reaching deep into the heart of the reader, Cindy Woodsmall pens a beautifully lyrical story... She paints a vivid backdrop of Amish and Mennonite cultures with fascinating detail and memorable clarity. Fans of this genre will be thrilled to discover this new author.”

—TAMERA ALEXANDER, best-selling author of *Rekindled*

“Like the stitches on a well-loved quilt, love and faith hold together Cindy Woodsmall’s *When the Soul Mends*, the brilliantly written third story in the Sisters of the Quilt series. With deft plotting and characters that seem to jump off the page, this novel offers the timeless truth that forgiveness is the balm which heals all wounds and a blanket for the soul.”

—KATHLEEN Y’BARBO, author of *The Confidential*
Life of Eugenia Cooper

“What a vibrant, strong, emotional story!”

—GAYLE ROPER, author of *Fatal Deduction*
and the Seaside Seasons series

“Cindy Woodsmall’s characters wrapped themselves around my heart and wouldn’t let go.”

—DEBORAH RANEY, author of *A Vow to Cherish*
and *Remember to Forget*

The
HOPE *of*
REFUGE

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The Sound of Sleigh Bells

When the Heart Cries

When the Morning Comes

When the Soul Mends

The
HOPE *of*
REFUGE

A NOVEL

CINDY
WOODSMALL



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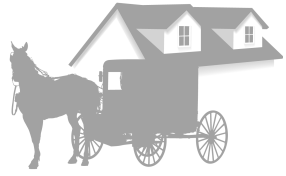
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To Justin, Adam, and Tyler

The Hope of Refuge *shares the story of several moms—their strengths, weaknesses, joys, and sorrows. I dedicate this book to you because each of you woke a different part of me before I even felt you move inside me. When I held you in my arms, it seemed my very DNA shifted. Without conscious effort, you stirred me with a challenge to be your mom—to become more than I ever was before. I found strength where weakness had once been. As you grew, you stumbled on weaknesses I hadn't known existed. But because of you, I discovered that life had a euphoric side. And I learned that where I ended—where my strength, wisdom, and determination failed—God did not. For Him and for each of you, I am eternally grateful...*





Prologue

“Mama, can you tell me yet?” Cara held her favorite toy, stroking the small plastic horse as if it might respond to her tender touch. The brown ridges, designed to look like fur, had long ago faded to tan.

Mama held the well-worn steering wheel in silence while she drove dirt roads Cara had never seen before. Dust flew in through the open windows and clung to Cara’s sweaty face, and the vinyl seat was hot to the touch when she laid her hand against it. Mama pressed the brake pedal, slowing the car to a near stop as they crossed another bridge with a roof over it. A covered bridge, Mama called it. The bumpiness of the wooden planks jarred Cara, making her bounce like she was riding a cardboard box down a set of stairs.

Mama reached across the seat and ran her hand down the back of Cara’s head, probably trying to smooth out one of her cowlicks. No matter how short Mama cut her hair, she said the unruly mop always won the battle. “We’re going to visit a . . . a friend of mine. She’s Amish.” She placed her index finger on her lips. “I need you to do as the mother of Jesus did when it came to precious events. She treasured them in her heart and pondered them. I know you love our diary, and since you turned eight, you’ve been determined to write entries about everything, but you can’t—not this time. No drawing pictures or writing about any part of this trip. And you can’t ever tell your father, okay?”

Sunlight bore down on them again as they drove out of the covered

bridge. Cara searched the fields for horses. “Are we going to your hiding place?”

Cara had a hiding place, one her mother had built for her inside the wall of the attic. They had tea parties in there sometimes when there was money for tea bags and sugar. And when Daddy needed quiet, her mother would silently whisk her to that secret room. If her mama didn't return for her by nightfall, she'd sleep in there, only sneaking out for a minute if she needed to go to the bathroom.

Mama nodded. “I told you every girl needs a fun place she can get away to for a while, right?”

Cara nodded.

“Well, this is mine. We'll stay for a couple of days, and if you like it, maybe we'll move here one day—just us girls.”

Cara wondered if Mama was so tired of the bill collectors hounding her and Daddy that she was thinking of sneaking away and not even telling him where she was going. The familiar feeling returned—that feeling of her insides being Jell-O on a whirlybird ride. She clutched her toy horse even tighter and looked out the window, imagining herself on a stallion galloping into a world where food was free and her parents were happy.

After they topped another hill, her mother slowed the vehicle and pulled into a driveway. Mama turned off the car. “Look at this place, Cara. That old white clapboard house has looked the same since I was a child.”

The shutters hung crooked and didn't have much paint left on them. “It's really small, and it looks like ghosts live here.”

Her mama laughed. “It's called a *Daadi Haus*, which means it's just for grandparents once their children are grown. It only has a small kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bathroom. This one has been here for many years. You're right—it does look dilapidated. Come on.”

Seconds after Cara shut the passenger door, an old woman stepped out from between tall rows of corn. She stared at them as if they were aliens, and Cara wondered if her mama really did know these people.

The woman wore a long burgundy dress and no shoes. The wrinkles covering her face looked like a road map, with the lines taking on new twists as she frowned. Though it was July and too hot for a toboggan cap, she wore a white one.

“Grossmamma Levina, ich bin kumme bsuche. Ich hab aa die Cara mitgebracht.”

Startled, Cara looked up at her mama. What was she saying? Was it code? Mama wasn't even good at pig Latin.

The old woman released her apron, and several ears of corn fell to the ground. She hurried up to Mama. “Malinda?”

Tears brimmed in Mama's eyes, and she nodded. The older woman squealed, long and loud, before she hugged Mama.

A lanky boy came running from the rows. “Levina, was iss letz?” He stopped short, watching the two women for a moment before looking at Cara.

As he studied her, she wondered if she looked as odd to him as he did to her. She hadn't seen a boy in long black pants since winter ended, and she'd never seen one wear suspenders and a straw hat. Why would he work in a garden in a Sunday dress shirt?

He snatched up several ears of corn the woman had dropped, walked to a wooden wheelbarrow, and dumped them.

Cara picked up the rest of the ears and followed him. “You got a name?”

“Ephraim.”

“I can be lots of help if you'll let me.”

“Ya ever picked corn before?”

Cara shook her head. “No, but I can learn.”

He just stood there, watching her.

She held out her horse to him. “Isn't she a beauty?”

He shrugged. “Looks a little worn to me.”

Cara slid the horse into her pocket.

Ephraim frowned. “Can I ask you a question?”

She nodded.

“Are you a boy or a girl?”

The question didn't bother her. She got it all the time at school from new teachers or ones who didn't have her in their classes. They referred to her as a young man until they realized she wasn't a boy. Lots of times it worked for her, like when she slipped right past the teacher who was the lavatory monitor and went into the boys' bathroom to teach Jake Merrow a lesson about stealing her milk money. She got her money back, and he never told a soul that a girl gave him a fat lip. “If I say I'm a boy, will you let me help pick corn?”

Ephraim laughed in a friendly way. “You know, I used to have a worn horse like the one you showed me. I kept him in my pocket too, until I lost him.”

Cara shoved the horse deeper into her pocket. “You lost him?”

He nodded. “Probably down by the creek where I was fishing. Do you fish?”

She shook her head. “I've never seen a creek.”

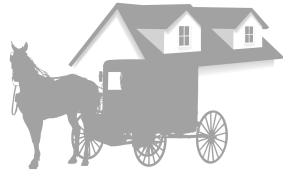
“Never seen one? Where are you from?”

“New York City. My mama had to borrow a car for us to get beyond where the subway ends.”

“Well, if you're here when the workday is done, I'll show you the creek. We got a rope swing, and if your mama will let you, you can swing out and drop into the deep part. How long are you here for?”

She looked around the place. Her mama and the old woman were sitting under a shade tree, holding hands and talking. Across the road was a barn, and she could see a horse inside it. Green fields went clear to the horizon. She took a deep breath. The air smelled delicious, like dirt, but not city dirt. Like growing-food dirt. Maybe this was where her horse took her when she dreamed. The cornstalks reached for the sky, and her chest felt like little shoes were tap-dancing inside it. She should have known that if her mama liked something, it was worth liking.

“Until it's not a secret anymore, I think.”



One

Twenty years later

Sunlight streamed through the bar's dirty windows as the lunch crowd filled the place. Cara set two bottles of beer on the table in front of the familiar faces.

The regulars knew the rules: all alcoholic drinks were paid for upon delivery. One of the men held a five-dollar bill toward her but kept his eyes on the television. The other took a long drink while he slid a hundred-dollar bill across the table.

She stared at the bill, her heart pounding with desire. If earning money as a waitress wasn't hard enough, Mac kept most of their tips. The money the customer slid across the table wasn't just cash but power. It held the ability for her to fix Lori something besides boiled potatoes next week and to buy her a pair of shoes that didn't pinch her feet.

Would the customer even notice if I shortchanged him from such a large amount?

Lines of honesty were often blurred by desperation. Cara loathed that she couldn't apply for government help and that she had to uproot every few months to stay a few steps ahead of a maniac. Moving always cost money. Fresh security deposits on ever-increasing rents. Working time lost as she searched for another job—each one more pathetic than the one before it. Mike had managed to steal everything from her but mere existence. And her daughter.

"I'll get your change." *All of it.* She took the money.

"Cara." Mac's gruff voice sailed across the room. From behind the bar he motioned for her. "Phone!" He shook the receiver at her. "Kendal says it's an emergency."

Every sound echoing inside the wooden-and-glass room ceased. She hurried toward him, snaking around tables filled with people.

"Keep it short." Mac passed the phone to her and returned to serving customers.

"Kendal, what's wrong?"

"He found us." Her friend's usually icy voice shook, and Cara knew she was more frightened than she'd been the other times.

How could he after all we've done to hide? "We got a letter at our new place?"

"No. Worse." Kendal's words quaked. "He was here. Broke the lock and came inside looking for you. He ransacked the place."

"He what?"

"He's getting meaner, Cara. He ripped open all the cushions, turned mattresses, emptied drawers and boxes. He found your leather book and... and insisted I stay while he made himself at home and read through it."

"We've got to call the police."

"You know we can't..." Kendal dropped the sentence, and Cara heard her crying.

They both knew that going to the police would be a mistake neither of them would survive.

One of the waitresses plunked a tray of dirty dishes onto the counter. "Get off the phone, princess."

Cara plugged her index finger into her ear, trying desperately to think. "Where's Lori?"

"I'm sure they moved her to after-school care." Through the phone line Cara heard a car door slam. They didn't own a car.

A male voice asked, "Where to?"

Cara gripped the phone tighter. "What's going on?"

Kendal sobbed. "I'm sorry. I can't take this anymore. All we do is live in fear and move from one part of New York to another. He's...he's not after me."

"You know he's trying to isolate me from everyone. Please, Kendal."

"I...I'm sorry. I can't help you anymore," Kendal whispered. "The cab's waiting."

Disbelief settled over her. "How long ago did he break in?"

From behind Cara a shadow fell across the bar, engulfing her. "Hi, Care Bear."

She froze. Watching the silhouette, she noted how tiny she was in comparison.

Mike's thick hand thudded a book onto the bar beside her. He removed his hand, revealing her diary. "I didn't want to do it this way, Care Bear. You know that about me. But I had to get inside your place to try to find answers for why you keep running off."

She swallowed a wave of fear and faced him but couldn't find her voice.

"Johnny's been dead for a while. Now you're here...with me." His massive body loomed over her. "I'd be willing to forget that you ever picked that loser. We could start fresh. Come on, beautiful, I can help you."

Help me? The only person Mike wanted to help was himself—right into her bed.

"Please...leave me alone."

His steely grin unnerved her, and silence fell in the midst of the bar's noise. Thoughts of how to escape him exploded in her mind like fireworks shooting out in all directions. But before she could focus, they disappeared into the darkness, leaving only trails of smoke. Fear seemed to take on its own life form, one threatening to stalk her forever.

He tapped her diary. "I know it all now, even where you'd hide if you ran again, which is *not* happening, right?" The threatening tone in his voice was undeniable, and panic stole her next breath. "I know your

daughter just as well as you do now. What happens if I show up one day after school with a puppy named Shamu?”

Cara's legs gave way. Without any effort he held her up by her elbow.

After she'd spent years of hide-and-seek in hopes of protecting Lori, now he knew Lori's name, her school, her likes and dislikes. Shaking, she looked around for help. Bottles of various sizes and shapes filled the bar's shelves. The television blared. Blank faces stared at it. The man who had given her the hundred-dollar bill glanced at her before turning to another waitress.

Apathy hung in the air, like smog in summer, reminding her that there was no help for people like her and Lori. On a good day there were distractions that made them forget for a few hours. Even as her mind whirled, life seemed to move in slow motion. She had no one.

“You know how I feel about you.” His voice softened to a possessive whisper, making her skin crawl. “Why do you gotta make this so tough?” Mike ran his finger down the side of her neck. “My patience is gone, Care Bear.”

Where could she hide now? Somewhere she could afford that he wouldn't know about and couldn't track her to. A piece of a memory—washed in colorless fog—wavered before her like a sheet on a clothesline.

An apron. A head covering. An old woman. Rows of tall corn.

He dug his fingers into her biceps. Pain shot through her, and the disjointed thoughts disappeared. “Don't you dare leave again. I'll find you. You know I can...every time.” His eyes reflected that familiar mixture of spitefulness and uncertainty as he willed her to do his bidding. “I call the shots. Not you. Not dear old Johnny. Me.”

But maybe he didn't. A tender sprig of hope took root. If she could latch on to that memory—if it was even real—she might have a place to go. Somewhere Mike couldn't find her and she wouldn't owe anyone her life in exchange for food and shelter. Doubts rippled through her, trying to dislodge her newfound hope. It was probably a movie she'd watched. Remembering any part of her life, anything true, before her mama died

seemed as impossible as getting free of Mike. She'd been only eight when her mother was killed by a hit-and-run driver as she crossed a street. Things became so hard after that, anything before seemed like shadows and blurs.

As she begged for answers, faint scenes appeared before her. A kitchen table spread with fresh food. A warm breeze streaming through an unfamiliar window. Sheets flapping on a clothesline. Muffled laughter as a boy jumped into a creek.

Was it just a daydream? Or was it somewhere she'd once been, a place she couldn't reach because she couldn't remember?

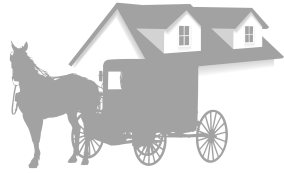
Her heart raced. She had to find the answer.

Mike pulled the phone from her hand, a sneer overriding the insecurity he tried hard to cover. "You're more afraid of one thing than anything else. And I know what that is." He eased the receiver into its cradle and flipped the diary open. "If you don't want nothing to cause the social workers to take her..." He tapped his huge finger on a photo of Lori. "Think about it, Care Bear. And I'll see you at your place when your shift is over." He strode out the door.

Cara slumped against the counter. No matter how hard she tried, she landed in the same place over and over again—in the clutches of a crazy man.

In spite of the absurdity of it, she longed for a cigarette. It would help her think and calm her nerves.

Clasped in her fist was the cash the two men had given for their drinks. She rubbed it between her fingers. If she slipped out the back door, no one at Mac's would have a clue where she went. She could pick up Lori and disappear.



Two

Ephraim and Anna Mary gently swayed back and forth in his yard. Chains ran from the large oak tree overhead and attached to the porch swing. The metal chain felt cool inside his palm, and the new spring leaves rustled overhead. He held out his free hand to Anna Mary. Without a word she smiled and slid her soft hand into his.

This small sanctuary where they sat was surrounded by tall hedges on three sides. The fourth side was open and had a view of a pasture, livestock, and a large pond. The hiddy—as he called it—afforded privacy that was hard to come by on Mast property. Ephraim had created the concealed area when he returned to the farm nine years ago, appreciating that his family wouldn't enter unless invited.

Storm clouds moved across the night sky, threatening to block his view of the stars and the clear definition of the crescent moon. Even without his telescope, he could pick out the Sea of Crisis and to its left the Sea of Fertility.

Anna Mary squeezed his hand. "What are you thinking about?"

"The gathering thunderhead." He gestured toward the southwest. "See it? In a few minutes it'll ruin my stargazing, but the spring showers will be just what the corn seed needs."

She angled her head, watching him. "I don't understand what you see night after night of looking at the same sky."

During the few evenings she joined him out here, she paid little attention to the awesome display spread out across the heavens. Her inter-

est in an evening like this was to try to get inside his head. She wasn't one to say plain out what she thought or wanted, but she prodded him to talk. It tended to grate on his nerves, but he understood.

"Vastness. Expanse beyond the darkness. Each star is a sun, and its light shines like day where it is. I see our God, who has more to Him than we can begin to understand."

She squeezed his hand. "You know what I see? A man who is growing restless with the life he's chosen."

Inside the Amish ways that had called him home years ago, he'd found peace. But at twenty-four she wanted promises. He'd been four years younger than she was now when he began moving about the country, free of all Amish restraints. But when he was twenty-three, his stepmother had called, telling him his *Daed* was ill and the family needed him.

He had to come home. His *Daed* had caught a virus that moved into his heart and severely damaged it. Ephraim needed to take over his father's cabinetry business and provide for his *Daed*, pregnant stepmother, and a houseful of younger siblings. It didn't matter that part of the reason he had left was because he disagreed with his father remarrying so soon after his mother died. And here he was, nine years later, still not quite fitting into the role forced upon him.

The sound of a horse and buggy pulling onto the gravel driveway caused him to stand and head that way. Anna Mary followed closely behind. As they crossed through the small opening of hedges, he saw his sister and Mahlon pulling the rig to a stop.

Deborah held up a plate covered in aluminum foil. "Birthday cake." She showed him a knife, clearly hopeful of celebrating this long-awaited day. Mahlon stepped out of the carriage and helped Deborah down.

Ephraim had known today was on its way, but it was hard to believe the time had come to give her what she wanted.

Two years ago, at nineteen, she'd come to him, wanting to talk about marrying Mahlon. Since it wasn't Amish tradition for a girl to ask for her father's blessing, let alone a brother's, it'd surprised him. But he'd found

himself unwilling to lie to her and yet unable to tell her his concerns, so he had simply told her she needed to wait. Then he'd grabbed his coat and headed for the door...and away from Deborah's mounting frustrations.

But she'd followed him. "Ephraim, we aren't finished talking about this."

He'd slid into his jacket. "Actually, I think we are."

The disappointment in her face had been hard for him to ignore.

"Until when?" she'd asked.

Convinced a couple of years would be enough, he'd said, "When you turn twenty-one."

If she'd decided to ignore him on the matter, he couldn't have stopped her. But she'd thought his only reason for telling her to wait was that the family needed her, so she'd done as he'd wanted without question. Today she turned twenty-one, and she'd just spent most of the day celebrating her good fortune with Mahlon and his mother, Ada. Sometimes Ephraim wasn't sure who Deborah loved the most—Mahlon or Ada.

But his sister stood in front of him now, hoping he'd say she was free to marry during the next wedding season. He glanced to Anna Mary, who waited quietly. Her eyes radiated trust in him and hope for Deborah and Mahlon.

Ephraim had two sisters between his and Deborah's age, but they'd married a few years back and moved to Amish communities in other states. When it came to marriage, no one had interfered with their desires.

In spite of his remaining reservations, Ephraim motioned. "*Kumm* then, and I'll light a fire and brew us some coffee. Then we'll talk."

Deborah passed the cake to Mahlon and mumbled something about the dessert that made Anna Mary laugh softly.

A horn tooted, causing all of them to pause. A car pulled into the driveway behind Mahlon's carriage, and Robbie rolled down the window. "Hey, I took my truck in like we talked about, but the mechanic has to keep it for a few days. Do I need to rent one to drive you to a job tomorrow?"

Ephraim shook his head. “No. Mahlon and I’ll load a wagon and hitch horses to it. We’re putting in cabinets at the Wyatt place about three miles from here. I have work lined up at the shop for you and Grey.”

“Ah, you must’ve known.”

“Ya. When you mentioned the mechanic, I rearranged the schedule. It seems every time you get work done to make your truck run better, it doesn’t run at all for a while. If it’s not ready by Tuesday afternoon, we’ll have to rent one. We’ve got a job in Carlisle on Wednesday. You know, I never have mechanical problems like this when I take my horse in to the smithy.”

A toothy grin covered Robbie’s face. “The truck should be ready before then. I gave the mechanic the shop’s phone number and told him to call us as soon as it’s ready.” Robbie motioned toward Mahlon. “So you’ll go with the big boss, and I’m working with the foreman. They don’t intend for us to have any horsing-around time, do they?”

“They never do,” Mahlon scoffed.

Robbie laughed and started backing out of the driveway. “I’ll see you guys in the morning.”

“Sure thing.” Ephraim turned his attention back to the group. “Anyone besides me ready for some cake?”

Deborah smoothed the folds of her apron. “Well...I’m more interested in talking to you about what we came here for.”

Ephraim nodded. Mahlon had set his cabinetry work aside and left the shop hours earlier than usual today. Unfortunately, it seemed that Mahlon found it too easy to leave work behind and go do whatever pleased him on any given day, regardless of how much Ephraim needed him. But his sister’s love for Mahlon never wavered, and it was time Ephraim trusted her instinct.

Mahlon looked a bit unsure of himself. “She’s twenty-one today.”

“So she is.” Ephraim shook his hand, silently assuring him he’d ask for no further delays. “Then it’s time plans were made.”

Deborah threw her arms around Ephraim's neck. "*Denki.*"

Her thank-you was unnecessary, but he returned the hug. "*Gerngschehne.*"

She released him and hugged Anna Mary, both of them smiling and whispering excitedly.

"Ephraim?" His stepmother's voice called to him.

He looked back toward his Daed's house and saw Becca crossing the field that separated their home from his. Between business and family, some days he didn't get a break. But he'd put boundaries around parts of his life, and that helped. Of his family members, only Deborah was allowed to enter his home at will, because she tended to ask for very little and always did something helpful—like cook supper or wash dishes.

"Is Simeon with you?" Becca hollered.

"I haven't seen him since before suppertime." But he knew he wasn't far. His brother had a secret—an innocent kind that eight-year-old boys liked to keep.

She continued toward them, and they moved to meet her halfway.

"He's been missing since then." Her hands shook with nervousness as she wiped them on her apron. "This is the third time in two weeks he's disappeared like this. You have to put a stop to this, Ephraim, before he lands your father in the hospital again. He just doesn't seem to understand how frail his Daed is."

"Does Daed know he's missing?"

Becca shook her head. "Not yet. I hope to keep it from him. And when Simeon gets home, I'm tempted to send him to bed without supper."

"Don't say anything to Daed. Simeon's not far. When I find him, I'll see to it he doesn't do this again."

"Denki." Without another word she left.

Mahlon looked across the property. "You want help, Ephraim?"

"No sense in that. Just stay here and help Deborah get a fire going in the cookstove and a pot of coffee on to percolate." He looked to Anna Mary. "I'll be back shortly."

“If you don’t take too long, we’ll save you some cake.” Anna Mary cocked an eyebrow, mocking a threat. He suppressed a smile and mirrored her raised eyebrow.

He started to leave when he thought of something. He pulled a large handkerchief from his pocket. “Can I take a piece of that with me?”

“Does this mean you’re planning on being gone too long?” Anna Mary removed the aluminum foil.

His eyes met hers, and he chuckled.

Deborah cut a slice of cake and laid it in the handkerchief. “Here you go.”

“Denki.”

Mahlon chuckled. “You gonna bribe the boy to come home?”

“Something like that.” Ephraim slid the squishy stuff into his baggy pocket. “Be back soon.” He strode off toward the back fields.

He walked between the rows of freshly planted corn and onto what he still referred to as Levina’s land. Although she’d not been related to his family, Levina had always been like a grandmother to him. When she passed away, he bought the old place, mostly because it connected to the property where he’d built his home.

Under the gentle winds of the night, thoughts of his life before his father’s illness nagged at him. When he’d been called to come home, it gave him a reason to leave a world that offered as many different types of imprisonment as it did freedoms. But what bothered him was that each year since he’d returned, his family seemed to need him more, not less.

When he walked down Levina’s old driveway, his attention lingered on the conjoined trees that stood nearby—full of majesty and recollections. Habit dictated that he run his hand across the bark as he passed by. Just one touch caused a dozen memories.

Flickers of dim light shone through the slits in the abandoned barn, and he was confident he’d found his brother—half brother, actually. After he crossed the road, he pushed against the barn door, causing it to creak as he opened it.

With a lap full of puppies, Simeon glanced up. “Ephraim, look. I’ve been working with ’em today, and I’ve spotted a really good one for ya.”

“And I spotted a *Mamm* who’s ready to send you to bed without your supper. It’s after dark, Sim. What are ya thinking? If she finds out what’s causing you to run off, she’ll haul these dogs out of here. And the pound is just as likely to kill them as find them a home.”

“The mama dog is missing.” Simeon picked up the smallest puppy and hugged it. “I saw somebody outside the barn while I was walking this way. He took off when he spotted me. You think he stole the mama?”

“Makes no sense to take an old mama dog and leave the pups.” Ephraim placed the puppy in the haystack where Simeon had made a little bed for the mutts. “Look, don’t pull another stunt like this—staying out past dark and making your *Mamm* worry—or I’ll put these pups in the auction myself. Got it?” Even though he was twenty-four years older than Simeon, he hated it when he had to sound like a parent. He should be a brother and a friend, but his role was more than just a provider.

Simeon’s eyes filled with tears, and he nodded.

Ephraim picked up the lantern. “Now, let’s go.”

His brother’s shoulders drooped as they left the barn. Without another word Simeon headed for the edge of the road to cross it. Ephraim went toward the back pasture.

“Ephraim?”

He paused. “Well, come on. We can’t find the mama dog going that way. I just came from there.”

Simeon wiped his eyes with the back of his hands.

Ephraim pulled the handkerchief out of his pocket. “I brought cake. If we get anywhere near her, I’ll bet she’ll get a whiff of this and come running.”