

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*

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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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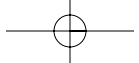
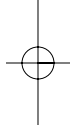
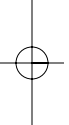
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To Justin, Adam, and Tyler

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.

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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?"

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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.