

storytellers' journal



New York Times best-selling
author Cindy Woodsmall

Redefining Women in Fiction *Q&A* with Cindy Woodsmall

Real women of the
WILD WEST
By Kathleen Y'Barbo

IT'S EASY BEING GREEN

By Melody Carlson

An Interview with Ray Quinn

from *The Night Watchman*

By Mark Mynheir

PLUS!

Book Reviews

See what other readers
are picking up!

Sneak Peeks

Chapter excerpts from
your favorite authors

Dealing with Infertility

By Marlo Schalesky

The Astral Expanse of Imagination

Some thoughts on reading to children

By Andrew Peterson

TALES of DANGEROUS QUESTS, FAIR MAIDENS and ALLEGIANCE GONE AWRY



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bookreviews



The Shape of Mercy

By Susan Meissner

Christian Retailing

Well-written and engaging from start to finish, *The Shape of Mercy* will be enjoyed most by readers who look for depth and opportunities for personal reflection in the novels they read. Mercy's saga is tragic and gripping, and as she finds her way into Lauren's heart through her diary, she will also find her way into the heart of the reader.

—Reviewed by Allison Hyer



When the Soul Mends

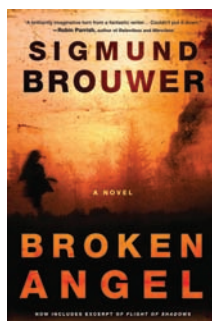
By Cindy Woodsmall

The Book Report, Inc. (FaithfulReader.com)

<http://www.faithfulreader.com/reviews/9781400072941.asp>

Throughout the series, Woodsmall reminds readers of the power of forgiveness, the importance of honesty, the damage that guilt can do, and the devastating results of long-held misunderstandings. She also throws in a few surprises, and some of the romances between characters come to unexpected conclusions. The ending provides a good dose of redemption and some needed closure.

—Reviewed by Cindy Crosby



Broken Angel

By Sigmund Brouwer

TheSuspenseZone.com

Don't start this suspenseful, fast-paced book until you have time to finish it. *Broken Angel's* cast of intriguing characters, combined with Brouwer's excellent writing and complex plot, make for a suspenseful, page-turning read. If you aren't already a fan of Sigmund Brouwer's writing, you will be by the time it ends.

—Reviewed by Gail Welborn



Bon Appetit

By Sandra Byrd

Romantic Times Book Review Magazine

In this sequel to *Let Them Eat Cake*, Byrd again entertains with descriptions of delectable food and, this time, with exquisite details of France as well. Foodies will delight in this novel, and anyone who adores romance will warm to the story. It's easy to identify with Lexi's struggles in life, because they mirror so much of what everyone experiences, no matter what their age.

—Reviewed by Melissa Parcel



Beyond the Night

By Marlo Schalesky

Romantic Times Book Review Magazine

This is a beautiful love story woven together with theological understandings and flashbacks. The reader will empathize with this college couple as they discover the inner spirit and healing love that will link them eternally.

—Reviewed by Lindy J. Swanson



Ruby Among Us

By Tina Ann Forkner

ArmChairInterviews.com

Forkner's writing is effortless, and you flow through each facet, growing closer to the heart of the story with each chapter. *Ruby Among Us* would be an astoundingly good novel for a seasoned writer; for a debut novel, it's a triumph. [This] is a gem of a novel—it feeds the intelligent mind while simultaneously nourishing the soul. *Armchair Interviews* says: Look for great things from this stunning new author, Tina Ann Forkner.

—Reviewed by Michelle Kerns



Dealing with INFERTILITY

By Marlo Schalesky
Author of *If Tomorrow Never Comes*

Dear God,
How could You do this to me? Is it some kind of cruel trick? That's the only explanation I can find to what's happened. Or should I say, what hasn't happened, despite the thousands of dollars we paid for in vitro fertilization. But it didn't work, even though I prayed so diligently, believed in Your power, had faith when hope seemed as faint as smoke on the wind. And still I'm barren, a word that describes more than the condition of my womb. It tells of the pain in my heart...

So writes a woman in the midst of the journey through infertility. These could be the words of Kinna Henley, the main character in *If Tomorrow Never Comes*. They could also be my words. Because I too have struggled through months and years of longing for a child, of treatments that fail, of hopes dashed. I, like Kinna, have discovered that there are few desires more powerful than the urge to have children of your own and see them grow and mature into adulthood. After all, even when I was a little girl and boys had cooties, I knew that someday I'd grow up, get married, and have children. Didn't everyone? As I entered adulthood, everything seemed to be going along fine. I met a wonderful man, got married, and on our honeymoon we had fun discussing what we might name our future children and how we'd bring them up the best we could to know and love God.

But the years passed, and no children came. No morning sickness, no rounding belly, no baby showers filled with cute little booties and boxes of diapers. Soon, hope turned to fear and trips to the mall changed to travels to the doctor's office.

Tests and more tests, fertility drugs and ovulation sticks became a part of my everyday life. But still, no babies.

Despite my ache of longing, the world continued as it always had. My friends had children, relatives announced the arrival of new babies, mothers wiped the noses of their toddlers and sent them off to Sunday school. And there my husband and I sat, alone and lonely, sure we were the only ones in the world who were denied the joy of having children.

Later I would discover that many couples have difficulty conceiving. For them, like us, and like Kinna and Jimmy Henley, infertility is a hard and heart-wrenching road. And sometimes, it can become a monster.

It sneaks up on you, taking a bite here, a nibble there. It feeds on your life, and on your relationships. And if you let it, it can devour a once-healthy marriage. Kinna and Jimmy faced the monster. And my husband, Bryan, and I have too.

Yet, for a long time in my own journey, I didn't recognize the monster. Then, one day, I saw it—in my reflection in the dresser mirror. There it was, staring back at me through the dullness in my eyes, the stress lines around my mouth, the droop of my cheeks. I didn't always look like that.

I remember how my gaze dropped to a photo that sat askew on the dresser. There, my husband and I grinned from the confines of the wooden frame. Bryan's arms looped around my shoulders in a casual embrace. Behind us, the waters of Yosemite Falls plummeted in silver glory. Back then, we were young, in love, and looking forward to a future filled with the promise of giggling children. Those were good days. I could see it in the shine of

my eyes, could hear it in the laugh that would spill from my lips a moment after the camera's shutter clicked. I could almost remember it, almost recall how easily Bryan and I used to laugh together, how he would tease me when I wanted to take just one more photo, how I would chuckle and skip away from him as I asked yet another stranger to snap our picture. But that was B.I.—Before Infertility—and those days were gone.

I sighed and traced my finger over the image of my face in the photo. Then, my gaze again rose to the mirror. Who was the woman who stared back at me from the glass?

Gone was the beautiful, sexy, loving wife my husband married. Instead, I felt like a baby-making machine that for some reason was broken. Barren. As a result, our love life had become sterile and mechanical. The purpose of intimacy was no longer to share our love, but to produce a baby. No longer to enjoy one another, but to accomplish a goal. We acted based on the reading on an ovulation predictor stick and according to the instructions given by our doctor. No more romance, no more spontaneity, no more passion.

Slowly, I turned from the dresser mirror, walked downstairs, and pulled a photo album from beneath the coffee table. Then, I sat on the couch and flipped through the pages. In photo after photo, I saw the joy of our life together. Bryan making a face at me from behind a glass of sparkling cider. Me grinning from the top of a tall boulder where I'd climbed during our summer trip to Yosemite. The two of us dancing at a friend's wedding. A snapshot of me, hair rumpled, as I sipped a cup

of hot chocolate at the breakfast table.

As I looked at the pictures, I realized that it wasn't just our love life that had changed. Our daily interactions had also been affected by the infertility beast. Once, I had been a normal, even-tempered woman. But now, the monster had nibbled away at me, leaving a person who constantly teetered on the brink of anger or tears. When Bryan was late to our appointment at the infertility clinic, I accused him of not caring. When he tried to tease me like he used to, I called him callous. When he said it would be okay if we never had children, I spewed hurtful words and ran to the other room. In my sane moments, I knew he was doing his best to understand me. But somehow, it just wasn't enough.

As I stood there, studying the difference between the woman in the photos

and the one who had looked back at me in the mirror, the thoughts I'd been fighting for months flooded over me. Bryan should have married someone else. Then, he could have had a family by now. How could he still love me? Did he regret the "I do" spoken so many years before? Could we ever recapture the love we once had? Would we ever feel normal again?

It seemed like every week that passed, every month when I found out I still wasn't pregnant, the monster grew stronger. Every day it chewed up a little more of the love between Bryan and I. Somehow we'd forgotten each other in this pain-filled journey through infertility. We'd forgotten how to really see one another, to rejoice in what we loved about the other. Instead, we'd become so focused on the goal of having a baby that we'd become blind to everything else.

We needed a change. I needed a change. Because how could I love a baby that God hadn't given me when I wasn't loving the husband that He had given?

A week later, the day came when the ovulation stick again read positive. But this time, I was determined to make things different.

That night I dressed in my best, black velvet gown. I curled my hair, put on makeup, and fastened on the special sapphire earrings Bryan had given me three years before. I bought a bottle of wild, new perfume and dabbed it on my wrists and ears. Then, I looked in the mirror and smiled. It was a forced smile at first, but at least it was a start, a beginning to recapturing the woman of fun and romance that I'd once been.

The first stars just started to peek from the evening sky as I set up our back patio table with candlesticks and our best china. My husband's favorite meal was bubbling in the oven and light music drifted from the stereo in the family room when he arrived home. I still remember the look of surprise on his face.

"What's the occasion?"

"Because I love you, and I love us." I lifted my chin and offered the smile I'd practiced earlier. "Tonight we're celebrating each other."

Bryan raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you're my wife?"

I grinned and pointed to the camera I'd placed on the table. "How many pictures do I have to take to convince you?"

He laughed. "Oh, only a hundred or so."

I picked up the camera and snapped his picture. "Now go up and change your clothes and hurry back. It's date night."

"Whatever you say." He jogged upstairs to our room while I finished preparing the meal.

As we sat down over baked lasagna and glasses of sparkling cider, I realized something. I felt attractive again. I felt alive. And I noticed how handsome my husband was, more handsome than the day we married.

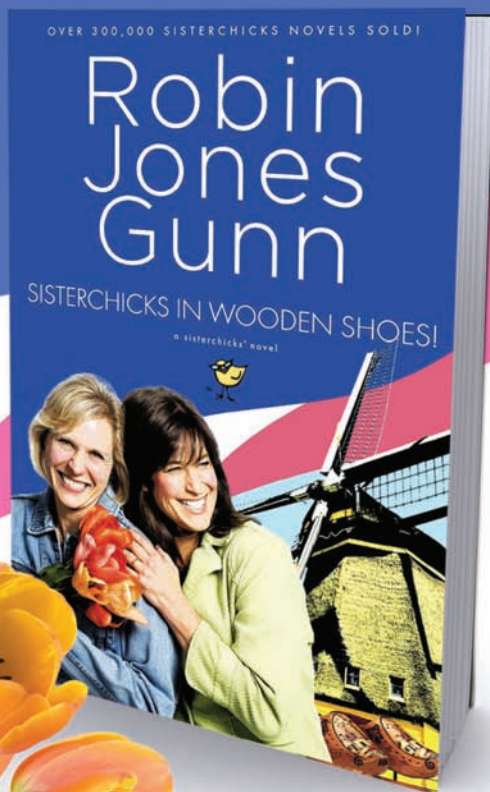
For the next hour, we talked and chuckled and reminisced about our favorite memories as a couple. Then, when we finished our meal, Bryan stood and reached one hand toward me. "Care to dance, m'lady?"

I nodded and placed my hand in his. There, under the moonlight we danced with my cheek on his shoulder and his mouth near my ear.

Welkom to the land of windmills, dutch chocolate, and wooden shoes!

SISTERCHICK® *n*: a friend who laughs with you till you cry and cries with you till you laugh; a gift from God.

An abnormal medical test result. A best friend in Holland. Summer trades fear for adventure among the tulips!



"We're going to make it through all this, you know," he whispered.

And for that moment, I believed him. There, beneath the stars, with my husband's arms around me, the monster of infertility grew weaker until I thought that perhaps, just perhaps, we might be able to survive the pain, the disappointments, the sorrows yet to come—if only we could remember to love each other.

After that night, we planned a special date night whenever the ovulation stick read positive. The next month, Bryan brought me roses and took me to my favorite restaurant. The following month, we snuggled in front of the fireplace and toasted marshmallows over the flames.

They were simple things, but important in reminding us to listen to each other and care. These dates soon became times we cherished as we focused on appreciating each other, on listening to one another and hearing the other's heart. In doing so, they took the pressure away from performance, away from the goal of making a baby, and instead gave us time to pay special attention to our relationship.

To my surprise, after a few months, we began to find it easier to enjoy each other during other, "regular" times like when we did yard work together or washed the cars or folded clothes. Soon, we found ourselves planning more trips together. With the expense of infertility

treatments, we didn't have the money for vacations at Yosemite Lodge anymore, but we could take a walk on the beach, or see a funny movie, or take a drive to the country to watch the sun set. On Saturday afternoons, we started to enjoy picnics in the park like we used to do in our college days before we were married—anything to help us remember how to laugh again, to remind us why we fell in love.

And that, I discovered, is how the monster of infertility is beaten, by me, and by Kinna Henley. It's beaten not by the miracle of having a child, but in the beauty of love, of laughter, and of rediscovering the woman who once smiled into a camera in front of Yosemite Falls. ■

Tips for When a Friend is Infertile

Do you know someone praying and hoping for their miracle child, someone dealing with the reality of infertility every day? Below are some suggestions on how you can help:

What not to do:

- Don't try to make your friend feel better by complaining about your own children or by telling her she's "lucky" not to have to deal with the stresses of having children.
- Don't offer unsolicited advice on how to get pregnant. Suggestions such as "just relax" or "if you just adopt" are not helpful.
- Don't give assurances that "God will give you a child." There are no guarantees that every couple will be able to have children. Children may not be in God's plan, and if that's the case, your words will only make it harder.
- Don't avoid any mention of children or pregnancy. Your awkwardness will only make your friend feel awkward in return.
- Don't offer reasons or excuses for God like Job's friends did. Telling your friend why God may not want her to have children is not only painful, it's presumptuous.

What to do:

- Do let your friend know that you're continuing to pray for her. Your support and caring will let her know she isn't alone, even in the hardest times.
- Do remember her on special days, such as Mother's Day. A simple note saying "I know this is a hard day for you. Just wanted to let you know that you're in my thoughts and prayers" can mean so much.
- Do be sensitive about asking her to be involved in children's ministries. Some infertile couples find joy in ministering to children, while others find it difficult. The same applies to attending events such as baby showers.
- Do feel free to ask questions. Infertility can be emotionally, physically, and financially stressful. Your friend will appreciate you asking how treatments are going and how she's holding up, rather than if the treatments are "working."
- Do provide your friend with a safe place for venting her spiritual questions and doubts. It is not unusual for those going through infertility to question God's love or fairness in the midst of this difficult time. A listening ear is more helpful than pat answers.



The longing for a baby.
The crushing blow of infertility.
The silver locket and mysterious woman
that can restore their *hope*.

With their marriage thinly held together by strands of the past, childhood sweethearts Kinna and Jimmy Henley must embrace the redemptive power of love before it's too late.

"A beautiful and bittersweet story of dreams crushed, but not destroyed. Of first love dying, but not yet dead. And of a merciful God who holds all our fates in his hands..."

—RICK ACKER, author of *Blood Brothers* and *Dead Man's Rule*



Real Women of the West

Monday Morning with Martha, Mae Winslow,
and Eugenia Cooper

BY KATHLEEN Y'BARBO

I'm fascinated by the Wild West, and have never been more intrigued than while I was researching for *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper*. My new novel follows New York heiress Eugenia Flora "Gennie" Cooper as she dreams of leaving the gilded confines of her Fifth Avenue home and venturing to wild and wooly Denver. She expects an adventure much like Mae Winslow, the heroine of her favorite dime novels.

From these stories, Gennie knows that Wild West women ride wild mustangs, rope cattle, and shoot apples off the heads of their buckskin-clad companions, all without breaking a nail or mussing their hair. They don't concern themselves with what they will wear, where they will sleep, or how they will get food, but this is the world of dime novels, and Gennie and I both learned that fiction and reality are two very different things.

So what did the life of a woman of the West really look like?

Walk with me through a morning in the life of the average western woman. Not fictional Mae Winslow, whose exploits strain the bounds of practicality and propriety, but rather a woman we'll call Martha, a wife, mother, and real woman of the West.

Monday Morning with Martha

In order to begin her day Martha had to climb from beneath the many quilts keeping out the Colorado chill and get dressed. Mae wore buckskins and boots and generally rose to toss on a handy costume in record time. Contrast this with Martha, whose wardrobe was governed partly by practicality and partly by a long list of rules of propriety. A nineteenth-century woman often wore multiple layers beneath her frock. These layers alone could weigh ten pounds or more!

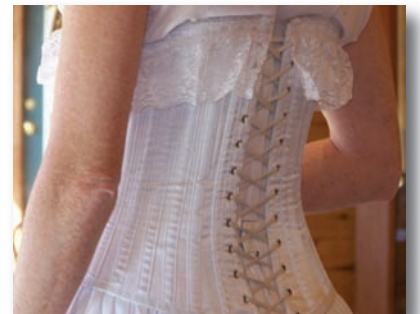
Hard to believe? Let's examine Martha's clothes from the inside out.

Before the layers of undergarments could be piled on, a proper lady would don her chemise, which was worn directly over the skin in order to keep the clothes over it from getting dirty and having to be washed too often. Looking much like a modern woman's nightgown, Martha's chemise was made of cotton or wool, although if it were an extremely cold day, she might pick one of chamois for extra warmth.

Along with the chemise, some women wore straight-leg drawers. Martha probably preferred them in the summer months. These drawers also covered her ankles, which were considered risqué to expose. In the winter, she added stockings that were made of wool to keep warm.

Next came the petticoats—plural. Martha enjoyed hoop skirts, which allowed her to reduce the number of petticoats she needed—usually seven but in this case only two. The first petticoat was worn beneath the hoop skirt to cover the limbs (a lady would never refer to them as legs) with a second one placed over the hoops to avoid those embarrassing hoop lines. Just like we often worry about panty lines, Martha was concerned that her own lines didn't show.

Over all of this comes Martha's corset, matching her chemise and stiffened with whalebones or metal. The experts of the day claimed that a corset encouraged good posture and thus good health, and, say what you will about this apparent instrument of torture, but I once attended an event where participants were encouraged to try one on. The consensus was that this garment provided the dual miracles of a drastically reduced waist and reduced back pain. When you consider the work some women of this century performed, it's



no wonder Martha needed back support. The fact that it also gave her back her girlish figure was no doubt a bonus.

Lest you think of Scarlett O'Hara's tight lacing as the norm, doctors actually warned women about the dangers of lacing one's corset too snugly. Rather, a properly fitted corset would support the back and bust while allowing the wearer to breathe normally. If Martha entertained ideas of a waist measurement in the teens, her inability to perform even the easiest of her daily tasks erased those thoughts immediately. Over the corset Martha wore a corset cover to avoid having the lines of her corset show.

Then came the bustle. Martha chose one that looked like an inverted hockey helmet, which folded to allow her to sit without crushing it and was more suited for the hard labor of the day.

All of this, and Martha hadn't even chosen a dress! Depending on whether she was staying in or going out, the outfit could be made in anything from homespun cotton to fine silk. Most of Martha's dresses were probably a skirt and blouse combination, even if they were made to look like one piece. This way she could wash or repair one part of the outfit without having to deal with the entire garment at once.

To her outfit Martha would add lace-up boots in leather and, of course, a bonnet. Were she bent on making an impression, Martha might choose a fancy hat over the serviceable bonnet. Then came the gloves and reticule—much like our modern purse, but usually made of fabric and closed with a drawstring. Toss a coat or cloak on over this

ensemble and Martha was finally ready to walk out the door.

Is it just me, or are you exhausted just thinking of how much effort went into getting dressed? And Martha had barely begun her day.

As Monday Morning Unfolded

Like most women of the West, Martha didn't live close to a town or a mercantile, where she could purchase such necessities as coffee, sugar, candles, and cleansers or bar soap. Instead she was responsible for making most of these items, so her morning began with roasting coffee beans, grinding them, hauling water from the creek, then chopping wood for the stove before she could even boil a pot of coffee. The candles lighting her way were handmade from tallow, and anything she cleaned with the ashes of last week's cooking fire.

Mondays were laundry day, which was in itself an ordeal of aerobic proportions. Unlike today, Martha couldn't just toss clothes into the washing machine and dryer, wait for the buzzer, then fold her perfectly cleaned and fluffed items.

Her husband's clothes probably reeked from being worn repeatedly during days of hard physical labor, and they might even be covered with lice. For that reason, boiling them was essential. It took about fifty gallons of water for just one boiling, and another fifty gallons for each wash and rinse. That's four hundred pounds of water Martha had to carry from the creek for one load.

Once the laundry was boiled, it had to be rubbed on a washboard and cleaned with caustic soap. She then rinsed and wrung out the garments by hand before hanging them out to dry. In winter the laundry often froze, forcing Martha to sling them about to scatter the ice crystals before bringing them back into the cabin.

No wonder Martha never worried about her waistline. It wasn't just the corset that kept her trim!

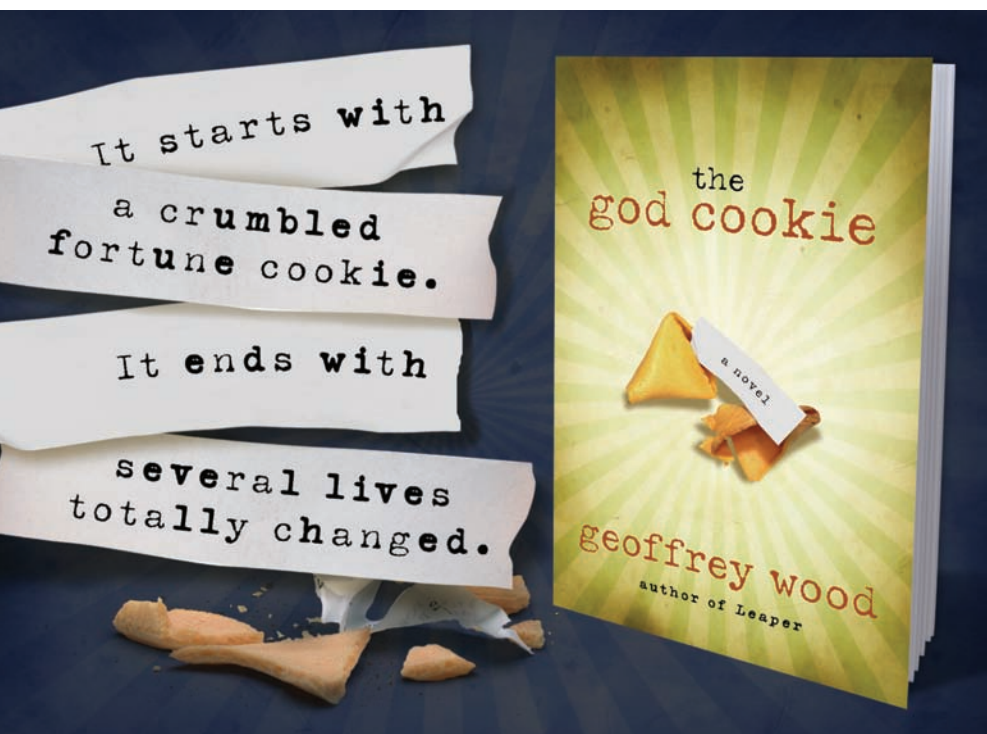
When she was done washing, there was mending to be tackled. A new outfit required a length of fabric, needle, and thread as well as considerable effort on Martha's part. While she might not live close to town, Martha probably owned at least one fairly recent copy of *Godey's Ladies Book*, which inspired her to create her own version of the stylish clothing found in its pages.

While Martha might have wished to be a lady of leisure like those found on the fashion pages of Godey's, she was more likely a mother with a number of children to tend to. If a baby was able to crawl or toddle about, much of Martha's day was spent keeping the child away from the fire. Older children were sent off to the one-room schoolhouse to learn their letters and numbers, but since Martha lived too far from town teaching was her responsibility too. When breakfast was done, she sat the older children around the table with a tattered copy of *McGuffey's Reader* while she scrubbed, sewed, or tended to whatever was bubbling on the stove. This was probably all done while balancing a baby on her hip.

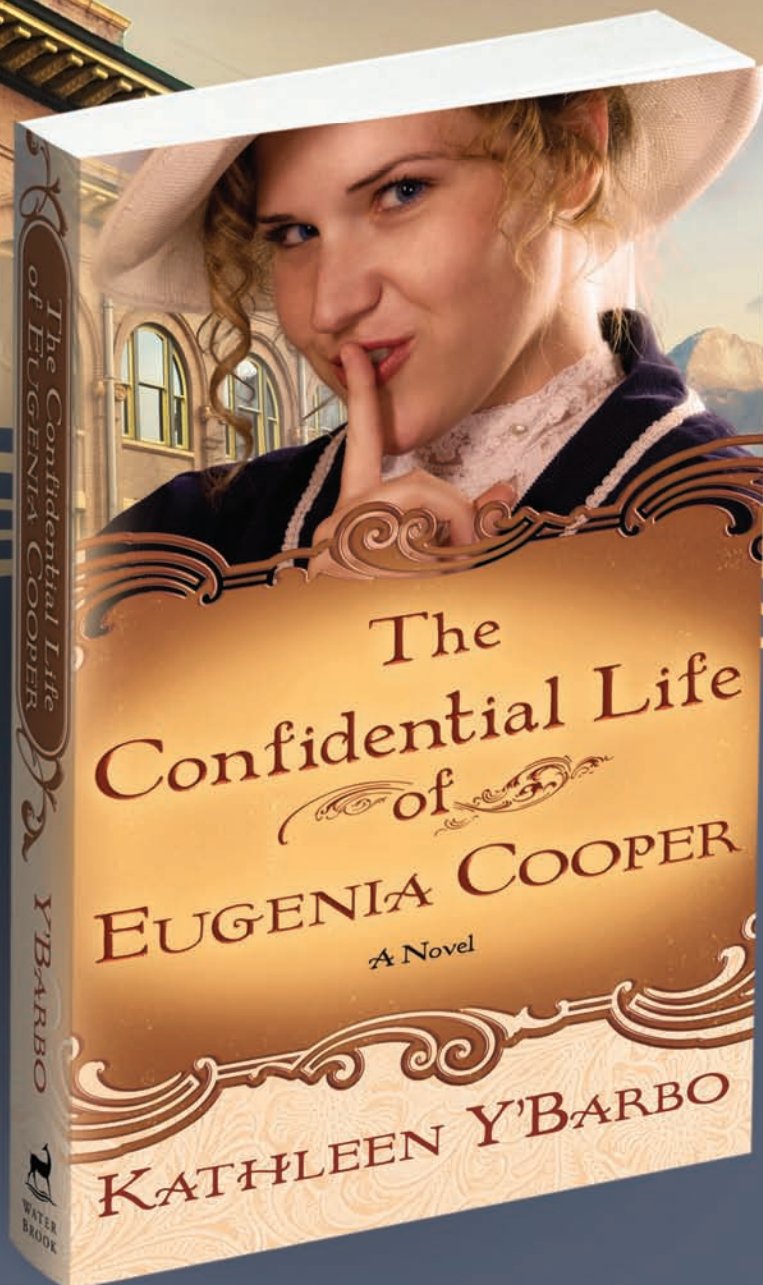
Martha saw to all of the day-to-day running of the house as the menfolk—her husband and older sons—worked from sunrise to sunset.

While the fictional Mae Winslow might ride her steady steed from town to town, living wild adventures, the real women of the West were more likely found gathering eggs or ashes, or walking to town in an ensemble that weighed more than a toddler.

Of course, Gennie Cooper considers none of this as she steps out of her posh and pampered Fifth Avenue world seeking adventure in the Wild West. However, she learns within the pages of *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper* that true adventures are not found in the fictional life of imaginary dime novel heroines but in being a real woman of the West. ■



When Gilded Age romance
collides with
Wild West danger,
anything can happen!



A New York socialite sets out to experience the adventurous life portrayed in her favorite dime novels—and finds herself up to her bonnet-strings in Wild West danger and romance. Drawn to an enigmatic silver baron, she must decide whether her future lies in rough-and-tumble Colorado or with the dapper banker awaiting her return.

Each gripping story
will have you
turning the pages
long into the night!



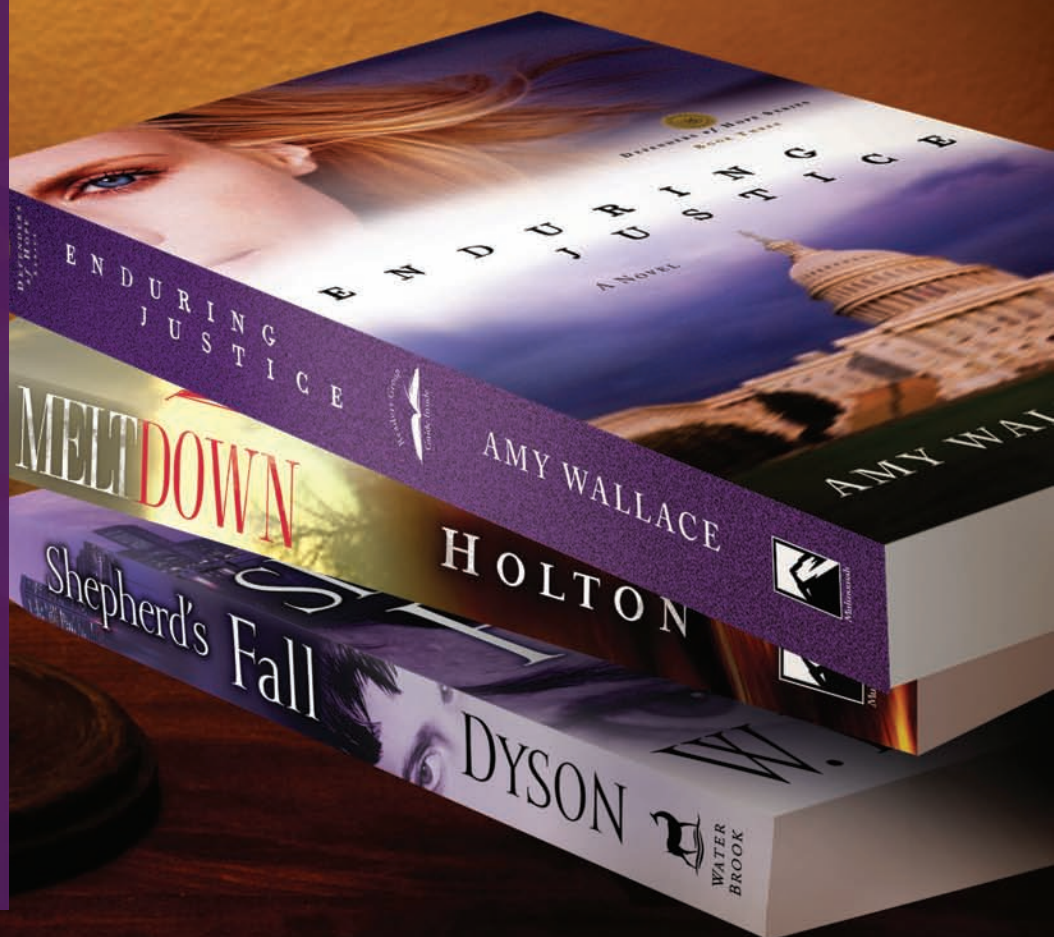
A white supremacist's well-planned assault forces Hanna and Michael to decide between executing vengeance and pursuing justice. When the attack turns personal, is healing still possible?



The global war on terror has reached catastrophic proportions, leading Task Force Valor to Chernobyl, where ghosts of past disasters are nothing compared to the nuclear nightmare about to unfold.



Bounty hunter Greg Price faces the most dangerous hunt of his life: the search for his kidnapped daughter. To save someone he loves, Greg must risk everything...but will it be enough?



Redefining Women in Fiction

Rather than creating flat, predictable heroines, acclaimed author Cindy Woodsmall explains how she's more than happy to break the mold with characters that ultimately discover their purpose and fullness in Christ in a myriad of life-shaping ways.

By CHRISTA A. BANISTER

Since all writers—fiction or otherwise—often opt to “write what they know,” it’s really no surprise that author Cindy Woodsmall doesn’t exactly stick with tradition when crafting her heroines, given her equally colorful life story.

Whether it’s the much-beloved Hannah Lapp from the *Sister of the Quilt* series or a feisty 26-year-old named Cara who grew up in foster care in her latest novel *The Hope of Refuge*, Cindy aptly showcases the strength of a woman.

And playing against type has certainly had its advantages, both for Cindy personally and for anyone who reads her work. In addition to offering page-turning plots fueled by engaging, multidimensional characters, Cindy also provides a vivid, well-researched glimpse into the Amish world. If that wasn’t enough to keep even the pickiest of readers intrigued, there are always plenty of food-for-thought moments. Whether it’s reexamining what true redemption really means or exploring the diverse roles of women within the fabric of society, Cindy demands a little more of her readers—rather than simply entertaining them.

Always the multitasker, Cindy now has two new books in the pipeline, the aforementioned *The Hope of Refuge*, the first installment in the Ada’s House series and the holiday-themed novella, *The Sound of Sleigh Bells*, which she now discusses in more detail, along with the mechanics of her writing craft and what inspires her.

First things first, what can readers expect from *The Hope of Refuge*?

Cindy Woodsmall: I’m really excited about *The Hope of Refuge*. It is a very different story with characters who aren’t as familiar with the Amish life as the first book. We have a 26-year-old heroine, Cara, who was not only raised in foster



care, but has struggled against everything from poverty and loss to a stalker, who connected with her while she was in foster care. She has these vague memories that reveal snippets of an Amish community, and she starts following them to discover what it was that she remembers and what it is that’s hiding in her childhood. When she finds the truth, the question is: is it enough to set her free?

That’s intriguing. So I have to know, was it difficult to leave Hannah Lapp and the Sisters of the Quilt series behind? How have you familiarized yourself with these new characters?

Cindy: Oh, those are good questions! It’s been a little hard to let go of Hannah. A little-known fact to readers is that she’s quite chatty, so she doesn’t just leave me alone real regularly. As an author you have to help develop a dialogue with your characters. They have to be allowed to speak so when you finish your scene and it’s written, they can speak up and say, “You know, I wouldn’t have said that,” or “I wouldn’t have done that.” These are the characters that I began writing with, so they’ve had a lot of years of speaking to me. I have to assure them, “It’s done. Be quiet now.” The fact that I can get into new characters and new

books helps them settle down.

To learn about the new characters—the Amish characters that come out of *The Hope of Refuge*—I got to spend time in the homes and in the lives of young people, which is not something I needed to do for the first series. And you know, in any culture, the young people see things differently and they are going to behave somewhat differently. I also spent a lot of hours watching movies and news clips and spending time with people I know from New York to get that inner-city New York feel and transfer that into the Pennsylvania Amish country. So right now, my inner voice has a New York accent!

That’s hilarious! Switching gears a little, one area explored in *The Hope of Refuge* is an Amish man’s struggle with an event that left him questioning whether to leave his community and join the military. Was this a difficult topic to explore?

Cindy: You know, it was a lot harder than I expected because I have older Amish friends, and I go to their community and stay with them year in and year out, so I thought I’d broach the subject and take notes like we normally do.

As I began asking the question, it became very obvious that there was a lot of hidden pain in the family members I was talking to. I soon realized this very scenario had happened to them, and it was a part of their family’s history. Now it wasn’t dealing with the same war, which would be the Iraq/Gulf war. It was a different war. They struggled with letting one of their own go and join the military. And how were they going to cope with that? How were they going to find a way to somehow make it okay in their understanding that this person wasn’t abandoning God. They were falling away from what they believed that God wanted them to do. So it’s been a little

more difficult than I expected, but we worked our way through it. I think that some of the people I've worked with have found more healing because of the openness of talking about it.

As if you weren't busy enough already, you've also written *The Sound of Sleigh Bells*. And one element of the novel features an Amish man who is an artist. Can you tell me of how some of the Amish feel about art and craft?

Cindy: Oooh, that's a touchy question, but I will aim to answer it. I'm going to compare it to how Christians feel about partaking of alcohol. We have some that feel in moderation, that it is Christ-like and allowable, and we have others that feel it must be avoided, and it's a sin to take part of it. In the Amish community, there will be bishops that feel any sort of carving, especially like we have in *The Sound of Sleigh Bells* is idolatry. We have two bishops in this book, and one does not have a problem with this type of artistry, and one feels that it is too close to being idolatry because the item is a two- to three-foot carving where you end up with a complete image of something

sitting. It's a struggle like a lot of things in our own culture. Once again it goes back to why I think people are interested in the Amish because there are things in our own culture, perhaps not as particular as having something carved, but *something* that is a struggle. Do we allow it? Is it against what God has said? Or is it fine and we're misinterpreting what He has said? This is a great way to get into and think about the different parts of how God might view something.

Really, *The Sound of Sleigh Bells* has it all: romance, mistaken identity and a seasonal setting. What type of reader might enjoy this shorter story?

Cindy: Definitely those who enjoy Amish fiction because it's centered with all of our characters being very Amish and having that from their roots for hundreds of years. I think this would be the perfect stocking stuffer. I could just see a woman Christmas morning, after the gifts have been opened and her family is content... I see her with a cup of coffee and a few hours to be renewed and reenergized by a story that has all the warmth and hope of Christmas. It stirs people's

fondest memories of Christmases past. I think *The Sound of Sleigh Bells* will reach a lot of women and encourage them and give them a little bit of a break to enjoy those memories of the past.

A mark of your work is that you create female characters with three-dimensional strokes. Why is this important to you?

Cindy: Women are remarkable beings. I think most godly women are vivid three-dimensional beings. If we see a woman who isn't, I think we're seeing a woman who has believed lies about herself or hasn't yet had the opportunity to believe in herself or explore who she can be. Although people may appear "stereotypical" to others, if we go beyond that "first impression" we usually find a person whose strength and spirit of determination far surpasses the conventional fulfilling of roles.

When you're developing your characters, what's important for you to keep in mind?

Cindy: I develop a character based on three main things: who her parents were, the character's genetic makeup

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and traits, and her personality based on learned behavior mixed with her innate responses to life. Those things have created who she is, including her moral beliefs. Then, when I place her in a circumstance, it's really not up to me to decide how she will respond. This character will react according to who she is.

Readers may not agree with what the character is doing, but once they understand who that person is, they can identify with why she did it that way.

What message do you hope readers will take away from the variety of women in *The Hope of Refuge*—the older widow, the single mother, the daughter caring for her ailing father?

Cindy: I sincerely hope each one is gently stirred in their faith to face what's in front of them. It's my prayer that their heart, mind, and soul are refreshed in the way they need for that day or time in their life.

What do you hope that readers will take away from reading *The Hope of Refuge*? And where did you get the inspiration for your latest leading lady?

Cindy: *The Hope of Refuge* is a book that's very dear to me because of the insight I received from Old Order Amish friends. Several Amish friends shared difficult stories of struggles and events that took place a generation after loved ones had left the Amish community. It's a journey that shares one woman's destruction and victory as she survived and then overcame what a previous generation had done. I hope the takeaway is that we're not separated from God's outstretched hand by our parents' sins and mistakes or by our own sins and mistakes.

Are the characters you've created women who you can personally relate to? Why or why not?

Cindy: I do relate to these characters. They are women who often feel backed into a corner with no acceptable way out. They feel confused, overwhelmed, and frightened. They also feel faith, hope, and determination. So their first goal is to survive the situation, but an almost simultaneous reaction is an unwavering passion to bring the most victory possible out of the situation, and inside of that, they find peace.

As a woman, you've sort of done it all...You're a wife, a mother, a success-

ful author. Did your characters draw inspiration from your own life?

Cindy: Well, if you live long enough you'll be surprised at what all you can get done. Seriously, we don't have to do it all right now in order to do it all. We can pace ourselves, keeping sight of our priorities at all times and refusing to allow what others want from us to rule our lives. My characters share a lot of different perspectives throughout their journeys and although, as the mothering type, I do share my wisdom with them, they don't always listen!

What was your "ah-ha" moment when you knew you had to write and create?

Cindy: Because I was unsure about pursuing writing, it took numerous ah-ha moments to convince me to get started, but one moment happened while reading a fiction book. I was powerfully touched when I realized I had a specific area in my heart that needed work. My attitude was off center and after my understanding was opened because of that book, I was never the same. It shocked me how much I was affected by fiction.

For me the road to giving writing a place in my life—a good-sized place—was a very long one.

If I began writing as a career, it would have been a huge adjustment for my family. I wouldn't be right there waiting to help them with whatever project they wanted. They would have to pitch in and help me with dinners, laundry, errands, household chores, and the gazillion other things it takes to make life work. My husband was a great supporter, feeling that it would be a mistake for me to live my life making him and the children everything. He never doubted that I should write if for no other reason than to express parts of myself I couldn't as a wife and mother. But I soon realized writing wouldn't remain a hobby. I had one certain story—the Sisters of the Quilt series—that seemed to beg me to buckle down and do my best to learn the craft of writing.

Your stories speak of a fullness of life that we can have through Christ. What does having a full life in Christ mean to you?

Cindy: It means that I'm not buried under the weight of who I am not—He is my shield (Psalms 3:3). It means that by faith He takes my pitiful best efforts

and makes them bear fruit beyond my wildest hopes—He exceeds above all that we ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). It means facing life with a heart-pounding joy because success over the circumstances isn't life's main purpose—faith is. (Hebrews 11:6)

Your most recent book, *When the Soul Mends*, appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Are you surprised at the breadth of readers attracted to fiction about the Amish? Why do you think they love this genre?

Cindy: I think it's an engaging lifestyle, and in many ways, it illustrates the kind of conflicts that people of faith face. We all have our moral guidance that we go by or specific boundaries that we have to live inside of, and then we have our daily lives that challenge and tempt us constantly. And we can really see a beautiful picture of that through Amish fiction by the boundaries they have set within their culture, and then the things that clash against them and tempt them to come outside of that. So it's a great picture of the work that Christ has done for us and the struggles we have on this earth.

You have a unique story about how you came to write Amish fiction. Tell me a little about that.

Cindy: I had an Amish/Mennonite best friend as I was growing up, and we had a lot of years of interaction with each other—going to each other's homes to spend the night. Neither set of parents were comfortable with that relationship, so we had to sort of learn to navigate around their disapproval. Each had their own set of concerns: her parents, of course, wanted her to keep to her strict rules of no TV. No radio. All sorts of things that were very important to them. My parents wanted me to enjoy the life I'd been born into, which meant that we watched TV and we went to movies, and they didn't want that questioned. So she and I—that's where the seeds began of connecting with the Amish. And then as an adult, I've had such a wonderful experience with reconnecting with the Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania. I have families that I go and stay with each summer and get to live like they do. It's a wonderful experience that gets to shine through in my books. ■

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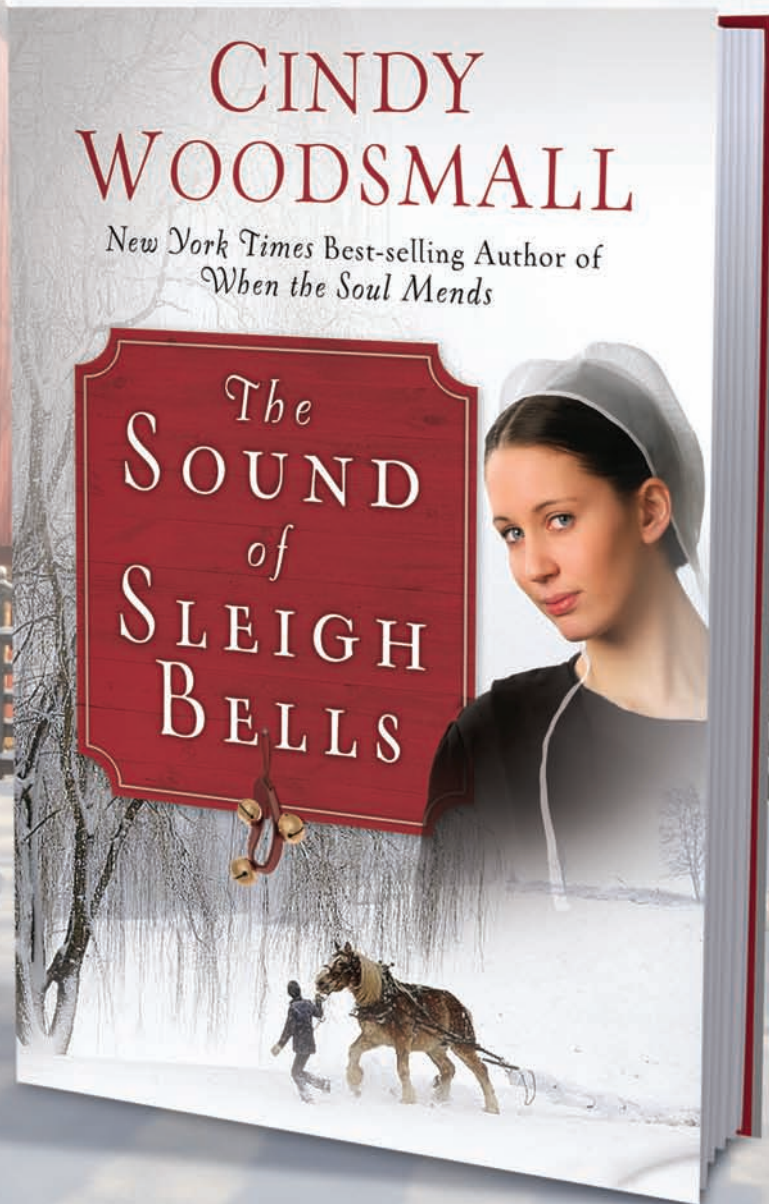
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It's Easy Being Green!

By Melody Carlson

I was green before green was cool—and I may be a fiction writer, but I'm not making this up! For starters, I grew up in the environmentally conscious state of Oregon where we've been recycling for a long time. Oregon acquired the first "modern" bottle recycling bill nearly forty years ago. But even before that I remember how we'd wash out our cans and flatten them—and it got pretty stinky if they were cat food cans. Eeuw! We also recycled things like clothes—remember the hippie days when a pair of "used" Levis could be transformed into a skirt, an apron, a handbag, or even upholstery? And we recycled furniture by refinishing or reinventing it—add some paint, shelves and hardware and what had once been a dresser got transformed into a hutch.

Not only that, but I remember teaching preschool and we had a specific unit that was all about conserving resources. The five-year-olds in my class knew how to turn off lights when they exited a room, and they could brush their teeth without wasting water. And I even had a garden where I "recycled" my cousin's horse manure (man, did that garden grow!). And I canned applesauce, peaches, green beans and tomatoes for my family. Okay, the truth is just remembering all this makes me a little tired. But back then it seemed like no big deal. Not only were we being kind to the environment, we were saving money too! Easy breezy.

Then as I got older and life got busier, I found it wasn't so easy being green. Time passed and the pace quickened and I found myself being careless about recycling, reducing and reusing (the three R's of environmental conservation). I felt a little

guilty but rationalized, I don't have the time. And after a while I believe it.

Thanks to my fictional teen character Maya Stark (*Diary of a Teenage Girl*) I have been reminded of my earlier commitment to be green. Maya is the fourth and final character in the *Diary* series and, although much of her life seems totally whacked out (thanks to a nutty mom) this teen derives a sense of control by being very environmentally aware. And in her *Diary* books, she includes "Maya's Green Tips" at the end of each chapter. Unfortunately Maya doesn't actually write her own diary books or her green tips (that's left to me, the author). But it was fun at first and a lot of the "new" things were actually pretty familiar. Of course, nearly sixty green tips later, I felt somewhat challenged to dig up just one more green tip.

I felt challenged in other ways too. While researching for *Maya's Green Tips*, I read up on the waste our country is responsible for, and I became concerned. Whether it was energy shortages, landfill issues, air pollution, or just over-consumption, it seemed to me that our nation was facing what could become a serious crisis. No one can just take and take and take and expect no repercussions. And yet that seemed to be what most of us were doing. We were over-using, over-consuming, over-wasting...and someday it was going to catch up with us.

As a result, my husband and I began to think a little differently. Yes, we got more serious about our lackadaisical recycling habits. And we began to consume less. And when we started a building project—recycling a tiny beach cottage—we decided to go about it in a very green way. To begin with, we didn't knock the whole thing down and start over, which some people thought was

crazy. But we decided to work with what we had and we chose to utilize green products that were environmentally friendly or created from sustainable resources (like cement "cedar" shakes for siding, bamboo floors, cement based tiles, and low VOC paints). We even recycled an old set of kitchen cabinets and installed an on-demand hot water heater. And we have a European washer/dryer combo that's supposed to use very little energy. Our thinking is that, yes, it costs a bit more now, but we plan to keep that cottage for a long time and the payoff will continue into our old age—in 2040 we might be living in one the most economical cottages on the planet.

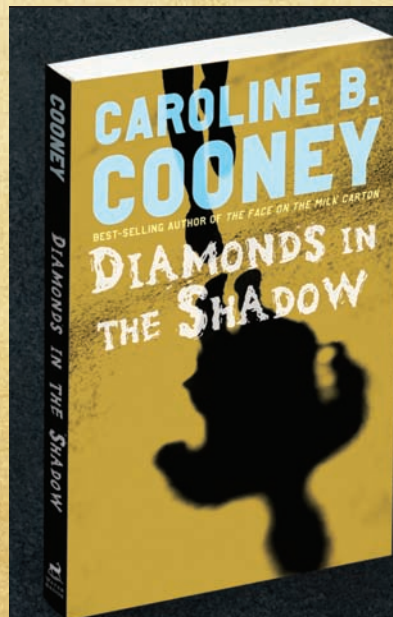
And now we're considering more ways to use less as we scale down our lifestyle—and it actually feels good. But perhaps the most surprising thing is that it really isn't as hard as I had tricked myself into thinking. Being green is actually pretty easy—and simple. It's a lot less complicated than the way we'd been living. There's a lot less pressure when you're consciously choosing to do more with less.

So is this my way (and Maya's) of challenging everyone out there to get on the green bus and embrace the Three R's? Not really. I think it's something everyone has to figure out for themselves. But what I am saying is that we shouldn't trick ourselves into believing we don't have time or that we're too busy to conserve. In some ways, it's not that different from telling ourselves we're too busy to spend time with God. Think again.

And, after all, as Maya likes to tell everyone—this is God's planet, and He expects us to take good care of it, right? So why not ask God just how He'd like you to do this? Because, really, it's not that hard being green. ■

Green tips from Maya's journal

1. "Dry clean only." Hey, did you know that 95 percent of dry cleaners use a toxic chemical called perc (perchloroethylene) that's bad not only for the planet but also for the workers who do the cleaning? And another thing most people don't know is that many clothes with labels that say "Dry clean only" can be safely cleaned at home. Many delicate items can be hand-washed with lukewarm water and shampoo. Yes, shampoo. It's very gentle. Another alternative is to spot-clean a garment (washcloth and a little soapy water) and then hang it in the sun to dry. The sun is a great natural disinfectant and cleaner.
2. Have you noticed how so many foods are "conveniently" packaged in these fancy-schmancy plastic containers? But did you know that these one-time-use containers not only make products cost more but also contribute a huge amount of waste to landfills? Why not look for foods that don't use so much packaging. And here's the other payoff—they will probably contain fewer preservatives and be healthier for you!
3. Here are a couple of natural gardening tips. (1) One teaspoon each of baking soda and dish soap combined with a gallon of water can protect roses against black spot fungus. (2) Coffee grounds make a good fertilizer. You can sprinkle them around the base of a plant or on the lawn or mix them in your compost.
4. You don't need to be vegan or even vegetarian to eat healthful foods. But a lot of people are confused about what is or isn't organic. So here are some tips: (1) You can't always trust labeling on packages. Even if it says "natural" or "organic," it might not be. To be sure, look for the USDA organic label. (2) If you buy fresh organic produce that's located next to produce that's been sprayed with pesticides, you may be taking home chemicals that have been spread by the automatic spray system in the grocery store. (3) Most processed foods are not organic. (4) The most important foods to buy organic are dairy, meat, and produce.
5. Where do old sneakers go to die? Unfortunately, most of them end up in landfills, where they might take hundreds of years to decompose. But there's another way out. Nike has a program called Reuse-A-Shoe that recycles old athletic shoes (even if they're not Nikes). Most Nike stores have collection barrels for old tennis shoes, or you can collect them yourself and send them to company. But here's what's very cool. The recyclable parts of the shoes (rubber, foam, and fabric) are chopped up into a material called Nike Grind that's used for kids' playground surfacing. And that's way better than piling them up in landfills. Visit www.nikereuseashoe.com for more information.



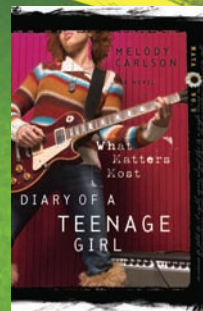
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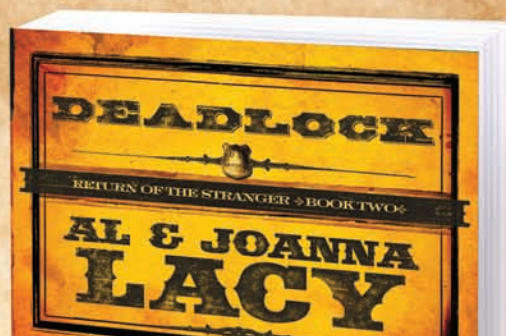
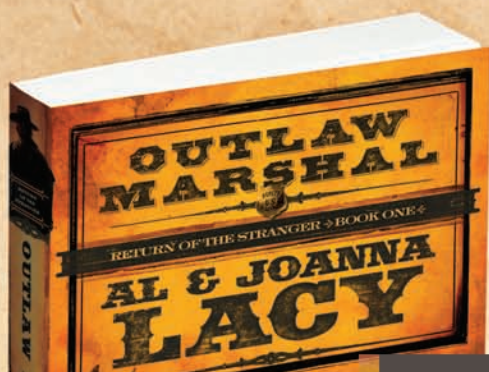
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An Interview with Detective Ray Quinn

BY MARK MYNHEIR

I first met Ray Quinn about four years ago when we were working on a homicide task force together, tracking down a serial killer who was plaguing Central Florida. Ten detectives from various agencies gathered together in that unit with a single focus—to catch this one vicious killer. While it was a great idea in theory, the problems begin when you get that many homicide cops together. Most detectives have strong personalities, to say the least. You don't find a lot of passive, wimpy people chasing down killers. That being said, Ray Quinn was the alpha dog of the pack. At our first meeting, Ray swaggered in with his Orlando Police Department badge clipped next to his belt and a Glock 9mm on his hip. His dark brown hair was cut short, but not military style. His hazel eyes darted around the room, making contact with each detective, sizing them up. He sported an athletic frame, and the former kick boxer moved about with the purposed gait of a cat, balanced like he could pounce at any moment. Ray Quinn was a fighter; any rookie cop could have spotted it.

Ray quickly took control of the whole operation. His cop instincts were good, better than most detectives I'd

known. But Ray was . . . a little difficult to work with. He had his own way about him and wasn't inclined to explaining himself to anyone. Ray just didn't play well with others and often ran afoul of the supervisors who were trying to keep the task force focused. Ray and I got along okay, mainly because I wasn't about to challenge him, and I would do some of his computer work for him without giving him any grief. He called me his "geek." So we developed a loose friendship during our time together. I'm not too sure that anyone could get real close to him; he didn't seem the type. But love him or hate him, Ray Quinn made that task force work. We caught our man, and Ray broke him in the interrogation. The suspect confessed to killing five prostitutes throughout Central Florida. The task force disbanded, and we all went back to our agencies. But I never forgot Ray Quinn.

I hadn't seen Ray since our task force days until he agreed to the interview. I had been keeping tabs on him, though, and his career. Over a year ago, he and his partner, Trisha Willis, were ambushed outside a house in Orlando. Trisha was killed, but Ray survived . . . barely. The shooting left him crippled,

and he had to medically retire from the force. Some of my contacts at Orlando PD told me it wasn't only his body that was injured in the shooting. The attack wounded his psyche as well.

Ray dropped out of sight for a while after that. I thought he was gone forever and then I read about him in the *Orlando Sentinel*, solving a string of homicides as the night watchman at a condo in Orlando. The tale intrigued me, as did Ray's remarkable personal journey. I knew then I needed to tell Ray's story.

We agreed to meet in the lobby of the Marriott World Resort Hotel in Orlando. I found a corner with two comfortable chairs we could use. Even though I knew everything Ray had experienced that year, I still wasn't prepared for what I saw. Ray, once athletic and vibrant, hobbled toward me, the brass tip of his cane echoing off the marble floor. He stooped some and dragged his right leg behind him, like a man thirty years his senior. Ray seemed unsure of himself and unsteady as he approached.

"Good to see you, Ray," I said, extending a hand.

Ray shifted his cane to his left hand and then took mine. "You've porked out a bit, Mark," he said. "Looks like



from THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

the writing life is making you look like the Pillsbury Doughboy.”

“Same old Ray,” I said. His body might have been wrecked, but his snarkiness was still a finely honed weapon. (I hadn’t really put on that much weight.) “I appreciate you agreeing to the interview.”

“Not a problem,” he said. Using the arm of the chair, he lowered himself down. He posted both hands on the handle of his cane, his eyes locked on mine. “I figure you can buy me lunch when we’re done.”

I had my legal pad at the ready. We made some small talk as I flipped on the digital recorder. “So, Ray, it seems like you’ve had an interesting year, especially the last couple of months. Can you walk me through what happened at the Coral Bay Condos?”

“It was all pretty crazy,” he said. “After I got shot, I retired and took a job as the night watchman at the Coral Bay Condos. A friend, Sgt. Oscar Yancey, told me that I was becoming a hermit and that I should get out of my apartment more. Oscar was the only cop who kept in touch with me after I retired. Working security wasn’t a bad gig—I had the nightshift, watching the security monitors and answering the phone. I could work my sudoku puzzles and mind my own business. It was quiet and

a good place to hide, until that night.”

“What happened with the murders?” I said.

“This pastor and a young girl, a stripper at a local club, were found dead in his condo,” he said. “Orlando’s homicide detectives, my old unit, cleared it as a murder/suicide—the pastor had killed his lover in a fit of jealous rage, so they said. Pretty tawdry stuff. But the case was all sewn up in a nice little package and put away forever . . . supposedly.”

“I remember the write up in the papers,” I said. “They pilloried the pastor and his ministry for weeks. It was ugly.”

“How did you get involved in the case?”

“At first, I didn’t want anything to do with it, and even though it happened in my condos, I stayed out of OPD’s way. That kind of stuff wasn’t my business anymore, and I liked it that way. Too many painful memories to deal with to get all wrapped up in the goings-on there. But the pastor’s sister, Pam Winters, found out I used to be a homicide cop and hounded me to review the case, to see if I could find any holes in the investigation. She was convinced that someone framed her brother and murdered them both. Of course, I thought she was a religious kook like her brother and wanted nothing to do

with that whole thing. But then I made a huge mistake.”

“What was that?” I said, leaning in, giving him my full attention.

“Like an idiot, I looked at the case file.” He tossed his hands in the air. “I couldn’t help it. It’s like I’m a homicide junkie or something, addicted to sorting through peoples’ shattered lives. As I reviewed the case, I found some serious problems with the initial investigation. Before I knew it, I was sucked into this thing and just couldn’t stop myself.”

“I heard you ruffled a few feathers along the way,” I said.

“‘Ruffled a few feathers?’ Nice cliché, Mark. Don’t give up your day job yet. But, yes, a couple people got a little uppity about my investigation . . . and then tried to murder me.” He raised his cane and opened his arms, as if displaying his crippled body. “Like that’s the first time anyone has ever tried that. I’m a bit like a roach—easy to hit, but hard to kill.”

“I see your sweet disposition has remained with you, even after being shot,” I said.

He shrugged. “I was chasing down a killer. Sometimes I left my manners at the curb and certain dirtbags didn’t appreciate that. But like the old days, I’m not inclined to give these murder-

ing thugs an inch, even if I'm hobbled up. All they did by coming after me was to ensure that I would never stop until I had them all behind bars."

Ray's eyes radiated the fire that I remembered from the old days—the Ray Quinn of the past, at the top of his game and on the hunt. Just talking about the case amped him up. He was still a cop at heart, no doubt.

I needed to switch the direction and tone of the interview and to dig a little bit deeper. "I was real sorry about what happened to you and Trisha. She was a class act and a great cop. Do you think about her often?"

Ray swallowed hard and released a deep, slow hiss. "Don't go there, Mark," he said with authority. He shifted his hands on his cane ever so slightly, making me wonder if he were about to jab the tip into my eye. Ray was formidable in any condition. Besides, I sensed that he and Trisha were a bit more than just partners. The ache of the staggering loss was still evident in his countenance. I'd give him some space there.

"Fair enough, Ray," I said. "What about this Pam Winters?"

Ray rubbed his chin and regarded me. Normally, Ray peppered answers back in rapid succession. That's just how his mind worked, swift and sharp like the cut of a Samurai sword. But he ruminated a bit on that question, letting several precious seconds tick by before he answered.

"She's . . . different," Ray said. His taut jaw muscles loosened. "She's not quite what I expected."

"What do you mean, expected?"

"When we first met, I thought she was a religious nut like her brother." He eased back and rested his cane across his legs. "But I was wrong, at least about her being a 'nut.' She certainly is religious, baiting me with God talk all the time. But there is something different about her. Something I'm not quite used to dealing with. She is genuine."

"You say it like it's a bad thing," I said. "She sounds like a real nice lady. You might want to hang out with her and listen to what she has to say."

"I forgot that you're one of those religious zealots too. You and Pam would have some wonderful conversations, trying to out-God each other. I'm sure it would be very interesting," he said,

rolling his eyes. "But, as I was saying, Pam is the real deal. You know how it is, after being a cop for so long you tend to think everyone's a scumbag, a liar, or has a hidden agenda. Pam's not that way. She just loved her brother and her God. Even if I didn't believe what she believed, I grew to respect her for her strength. Plus, she jumped right into the investigations and didn't take any garbage from me. Pretty tough little lady."

"Sounds like she might have piqued your interest in more ways than one," I said.

Ray squirmed and side-eyed me. I'd caught him off-guard with that. "Looks like your detective skills need a serious tune-up, Mark," he said. "You're reading a little bit too much into that. Sure she's attractive, intelligent, principled, caring, and has a decent sense of humor, and did I say attractive? Anyway, I can appreciate those qualities and still maintain a professional distance. I don't go ga-ga for every woman who breezes in and out of my life. So your way off base with that one."

"You're mighty defensive about that," I said.

Ray checked his watch. "Really, do we need to spend all day on this? I've got places to go."

"Nice deflection and avoidance, Ray. We'll move to a different subject." I thumbed through my notes and then continued. "I heard you had an assistant helping you out on this case. You replaced me with some guy named . . . Crevis? Tell me about him."

"Crevis Creighton," he said and then chuckled. "A bit naïve and a whole lot of ugly, Crevis is the biggest cop wannabe I've ever met. Imagine a spider monkey with red hair and bad skin. That's Crevis. We were working together as the night security at the Coral Bay Condos when this whole thing exploded. The kid started out as a real nuisance, always pestering me about police work and such. He has issues."

"I'm sure that went over well with you." I raised my eyebrows. "Please tell me you were kind to him."

A malevolent smirk creased his face. "Okay, I might have had a little fun at Crevis's expense. You know, some practical jokes and a little harmless teasing."

"I've seen your 'teasing,' Ray," I said. "It often borders on felony assault."

"Well, be that as it may," he said, "even as goofy as Crevis is, he came through when I really needed him. He has the heart of a lion and can fight with the best of them. There's more to him than I first thought, than anyone thought. The kid saved my life. I owe him for that."

"Between Pam and Crevis, it sounds like you had your own little homicide unit working."

"You could say that." He gave his attention to a group of people passing by and then returned it to me. "There were plenty of rough spots, working with amateurs and all. A couple of times I thought I was going to seriously bludgeon someone with my cane. But we survived and really started clicking as a team there at the end. It felt good to be running on a hot case again."

"So, Ray Quinn, where do you go from here?"

Ray tapped his finger on the cane handle. "After the shooting and losing Trisha, I wasn't sure that I could ever adjust to life outside of police work, or life at all for that matter. With the constant pain in my hip and leg, I was trapped in a nightmare that brought me to some very dark places. But since this case has been solved, I've seen a glimpse of what's possible out there, outside my expectations. Pam talked to me a lot about a greater purpose and stuff like that. I don't buy everything she said, especially about God and all, I couldn't ignore some serious points she made."

"Ray Quinn being introspective? Does this mean you're going soft on me?"

"Don't bet your life on it." He raised his cane, aiming it at my head. "It just means that I'm heading a new direction. Crevis and I are starting a business together—The Night Watchman Detective Agency. I like the name."

"Not bad, Ray," I said. "I think Orlando could use a good PI firm. I'm sure there's no lack of business out there."

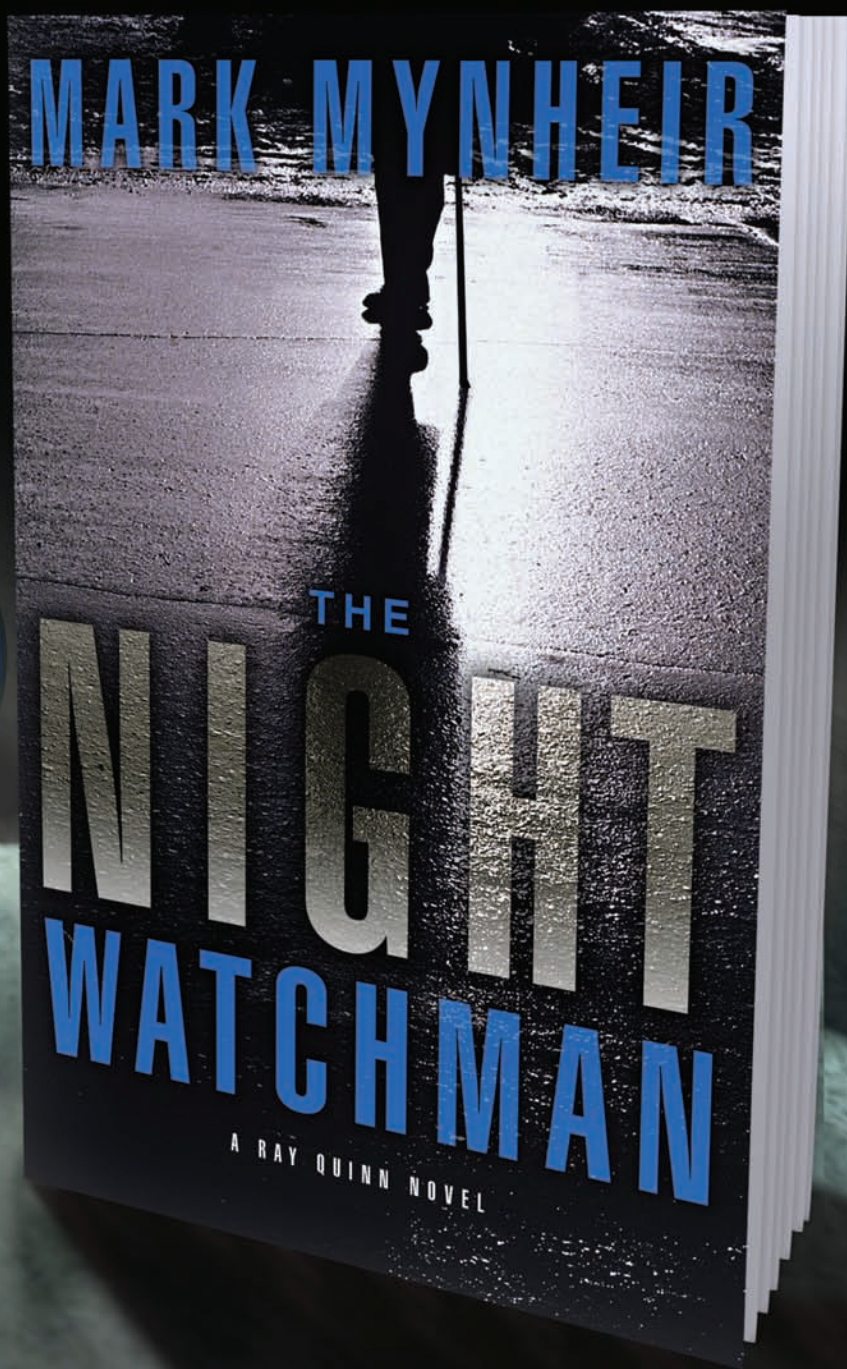
"I'll teach Crevis everything I know." He settled the cane to the floor again. "He'll make a good investigator and be a solid back up for me. He can do the physical stuff that I can't. We'll take the cases no one else wants."

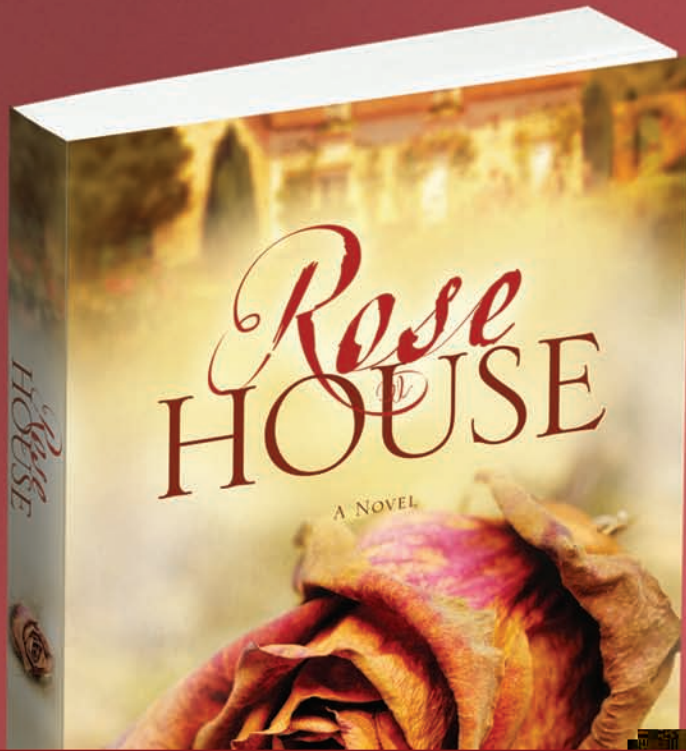
"Sound's like things are finally working out for you. I just feel sorry for the bad guys." ■

WHEN EVERYTHING IS RIPPED AWAY, CAN LIFE BE FOUND IN DEATH?



A barrage of bullets leaves detective Ray Quinn crippled and the love of his life dead. When a pastor and an exotic dancer are found dead in an apparent murder-suicide, the pastor's sister, convinced her brother was framed, begs Ray to help. As Ray chases down leads, someone is watching his every move, someone determined to keep him from finding out the truth—at any cost.





A *secret* painting on display of a widow's grief and sets



The Astral Expanse of Imagination

Some Thoughts on Reading to Children

BY ANDREW PETERSON

Let me tell you about the Editors.

I always read my chapters to them aloud, and in the process they've taught me much of what I know about writing. They're honest, but not unflinchingly so. Many times I can tell they're trying not to hurt my feelings, but their poor opinion of my work makes itself known in the way they fidget or snore or show no reaction at all. When they like a chapter, they smile, or they at least narrow their eyes and cock their heads thoughtfully. I can read them like a book. Often, after I share a chapter I'm proud of, they point out continuity issues that have escaped me. They tell me when my protagonist has said or done something implausible or out-of-character, and when the plot gets convoluted they stop me mid-sentence and insist I explain before I continue. They usually smell like sweat and mud and peanut butter sandwiches. They are my sons, and they are nine and ten years old. I call them the Editors.

I revised *On the Edge of the Dark Sea of Darkness* no fewer than six times. Then I let several friends read it and incorporated their suggestions. My brother, who's a much better writer than I'll ever be, edited it more than once, and I even read the whole thing aloud (with a lame British accent), all alone in my office—all these were indispensable to the writing process, not least of all the accent. But it wasn't until I printed out the manuscript, sat on the couch between my boys, took a deep breath, and read, "Chapter one

Janner Igiby lay trembling in his bed with his eyes shut tight, listening to the dreadful sound of the Black Carriage rattling along in the moonlight," that the story came to life. Only then did I see what worked and what didn't. Because I was looking at the story through their eyes, I acquired superpowers: I had x-ray vision. I could see through the skin to the organs inside. I had put lots of make up on the story, dressed it in fancy clothes, but none of that mattered like the heart and lungs and brain of it, and thanks to my boys I discovered tumors that had to be removed. Whole passages were exposed as dead weight. Subplots were superfluous. Sentences I thought were magical produced in my boys deep, satisfying yawns. The book is far from perfect, but it's a better work because of two little boys in their flannel pajamas who indulged their dad.

But it's not just criticism that I get from the Editors. Reading the book aloud provides a holy moment of connection that reminds me why I love to create. A few years ago I met an astronaut at one of my concerts. It was all I could do to contain myself, and after I calmed down we were able to have a normal conversation. He invited me and my family to Cape Kennedy to watch his next shuttle launch from the VIP viewing area. After I composed myself, I was able to thank him. Months later, we felt the earth shake from just a few miles away as the rocket broke the gravity barrier, then the sound barrier,

then the atmospheric barrier—and slipped into space. That's what it's like when I read to the Editors. All the writing and revising and map-drawing is enjoyable, but none of it matters to me like that moment of connection between my imagination and theirs. The story blasts through the barrier of the written page and enters the astral expanse of a child's imagination. And I get to be there when it happens.

When I started the Wingfeather Saga, it was with my three children in mind. We had read the *Chronicles of Narnia* together, curled up in the bottom bunk with a flashlight for all seven books, and the experience convinced me to follow through with my lifelong dream to write a story. But I didn't want to just write a story; I wanted to contribute, however feebly, to the canon of books that other parents might read to their own children. It's a uniquely rich and lasting way to experience a tale. The memory of the story itself is forever tied to the people with which it was heard and the voice that read it. In other words, the story in the book becomes less important than the story we're *living*.

Books were always around when I was a child, but because my dad was a hardworking preacher at a small church, we found little time to read as a family. But I have a fond and vivid memory of sitting with my family on bales of hay in the loft of my grandmother's barn, listening to my dad read *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*. I was ten. My thirteen-year-old brother was grumpy, so I tried to be

grumpy too, but deep down I was thrilled. I hung on every word. Now that I'm older I don't remember a thing about the book but I'll always remember the moment the book created, and that's the greater gift. I hope that when my boys are men they remember the creak of their bunk bed when I squeezed between them to read *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. I hope they'll remember the lame British accent I employed whenever Reepicheep spoke. And I hope they'll remember the way my voice thickened with tears at nearly everything Aslan said. I know I will.

When a grownup reads to children, there is magic. It's not just that the adult remembers how to be a child, but that adult and child alike are swept up in something ancient, and both draw near to their true selves. The children are called upward to the adulthood of adventure and sacrifice, and we are drawn downward to childlike wonder. For that hour on the couch, we hover in an ageless state I suspect is a taste of eternity.

By the time I finish the Wingfeather Saga, I'm afraid my boys will have outgrown it. But one day, as C. S. Lewis said in the dedication of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, they'll be old enough to read fairy tales again. I hope at least some of the time, they'll read them aloud. ■

**Below are
some of our family's
favorite read-aloud books:**

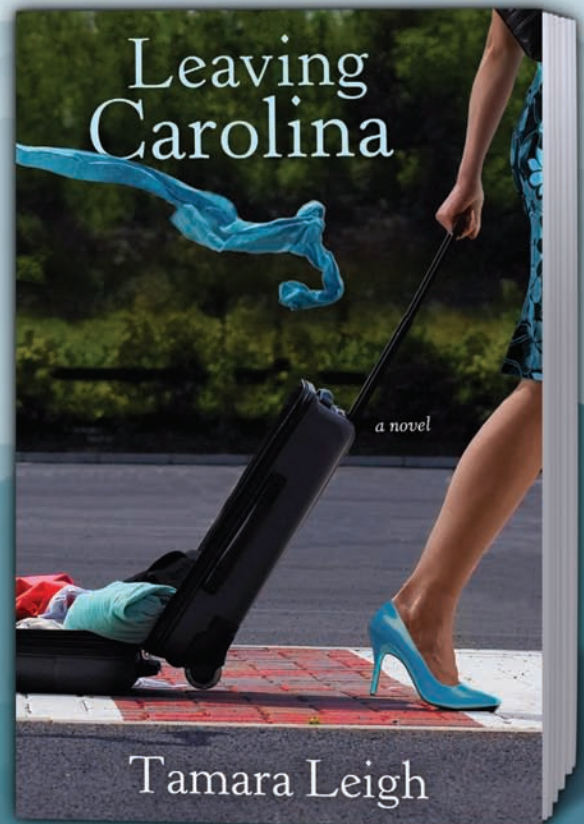
The Book of the Dun Cow, Walt Wangerin, Jr.
Watership Down, Richard Adams
The Jesus Storybook Bible, Sally Lloyd-Jones
Swan Lake, Mark Helprin and Chris Van Allsburg
The Tale of Despereaux, Kate DiCamillo
The Princess and the Goblin, George MacDonald
Redwall, Brian Jacques
The Chronicles of Prydain, Lloyd Alexander
The Wilderking Trilogy, Jonathan Rogers
The Tiger Rising, Kate DiCamillo
The Hobbit, J. R. R. Tolkien

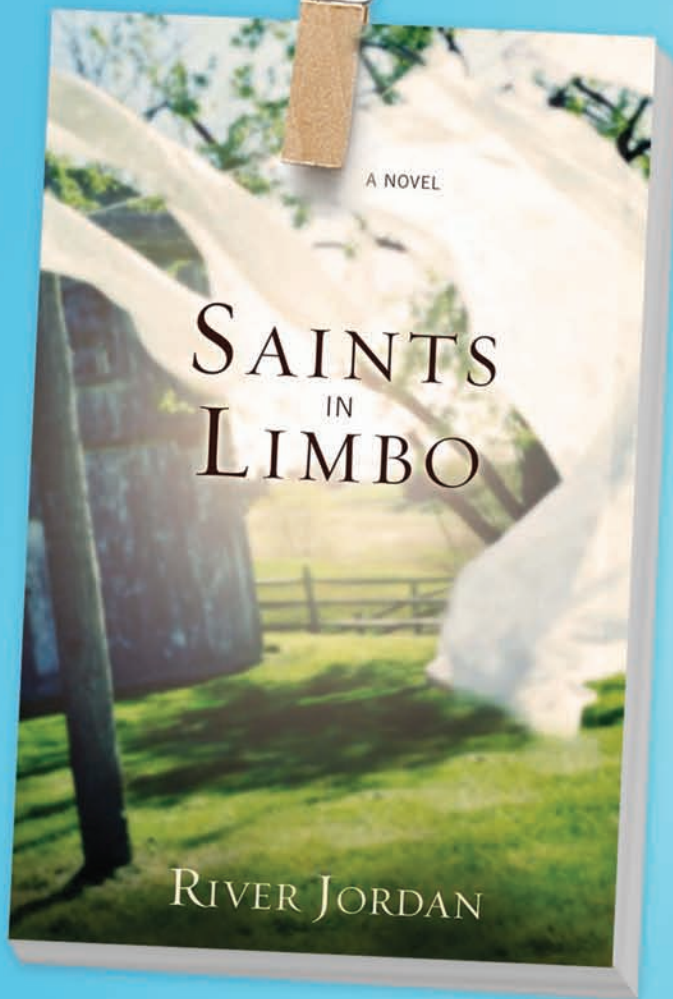
The Rabbit Room (www.RabbitRoom.com) is an online community of authors, songwriters, and pastors who are drawn together by a love of the Gospel and, among other things, stories. It's not uncommon to find in the same week posts about a Tom Petty album, a Pixar film, cheesecake, theology, and short fiction. It's also a book and music store. My kids ask me all the time when we're going to build the real Rabbit Room so we can live upstairs from the bookstore. "As soon as I sell the movie rights to the Wingfeather Saga," I tell them.

They say
 you can take the girl
 out of the South,
 but you can't take the South
 out of the girl.

This girl begs to differ.

PR consultant Piper Wick wants to persuade Uncle Obadiah not to change his will and humiliate the entire family...again. But when she works to head off a family scandal, she's surprised by the forgiveness she finds—and by a breathtaking pair of blue eyes.





Out of the whirlwind of
memory comes the
unexpected gift of hope.

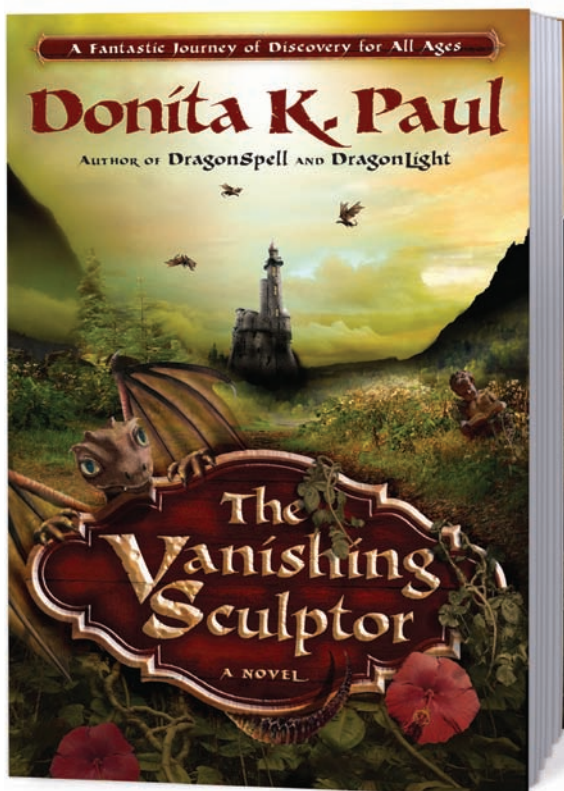
In this spellbinding tale, a lonely widow
receives a visit from a stranger. Will the
mysterious gift he leaves behind stir up old
regrets or reawaken her hope in the future?

“Strange as it sounds, River Jordan’s fascinating novel, *Saints in Limbo*, somehow reminded me of Walker Percy and Dean Koontz simultaneously. It’s that original...a wise, funny, joyful, and deadly serious book, written with a poet’s multilayered sense of metaphor, meter, and a page-turning sense of urgency.”

—ATHOL DICKSON, author of *River Rising*, *The Cure* and *Winter Haven*

coming soon!

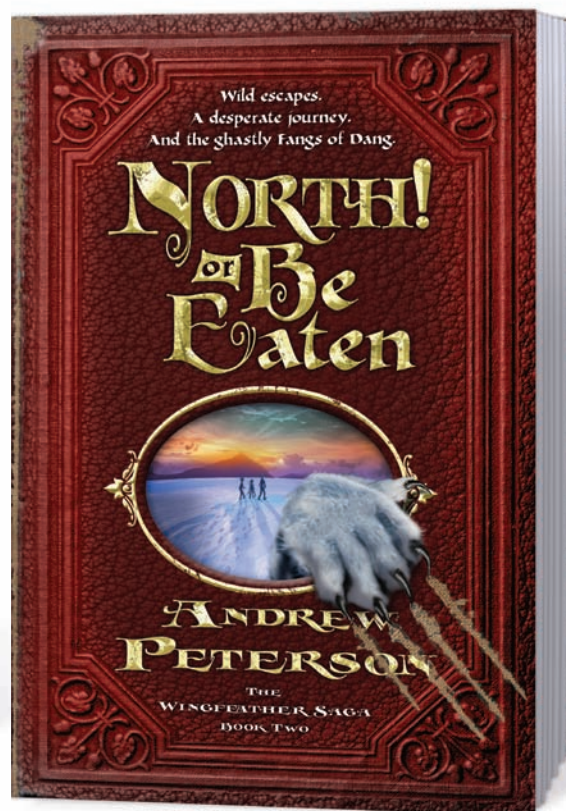
fantasy



on sale: June 16, 2009

Return to the world of Dragon-Keepers and discover a strange new continent, intriguing new friends, and fantastic, challenging adventures.

The Vanishing Sculptor is a fantasy that inhabits the same world as Donita K. Paul's DragonKeeper Chronicles, but in a different country and time, where there is little knowledge of Wulder and no acquaintance with Paladin. Join in the adventure, discover the beauty of knowing and serving God.

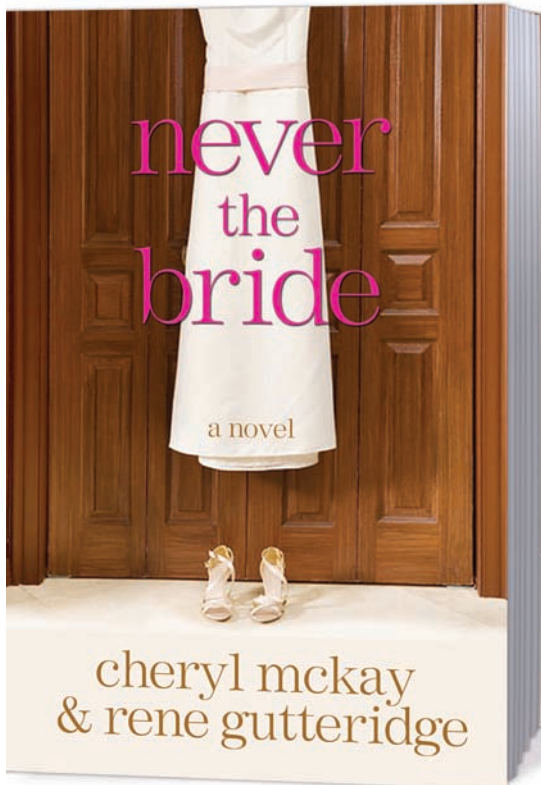


on sale: August 18, 2009

Get lost in the second novel in the acclaimed Wingfeather Saga...but beware the mighty bomnubble.

In book two of the Wingfeather Saga, escape with Janner, Tink, and Leeli Igiby, trusty dog Nugget, their noble mother, ex-pirate grandfather, and Peet the Sock Man, from the cruel Fangs of Dang. Author and songwriter Andrew Peterson delivers more breathtaking adventure in a tale for all ages.

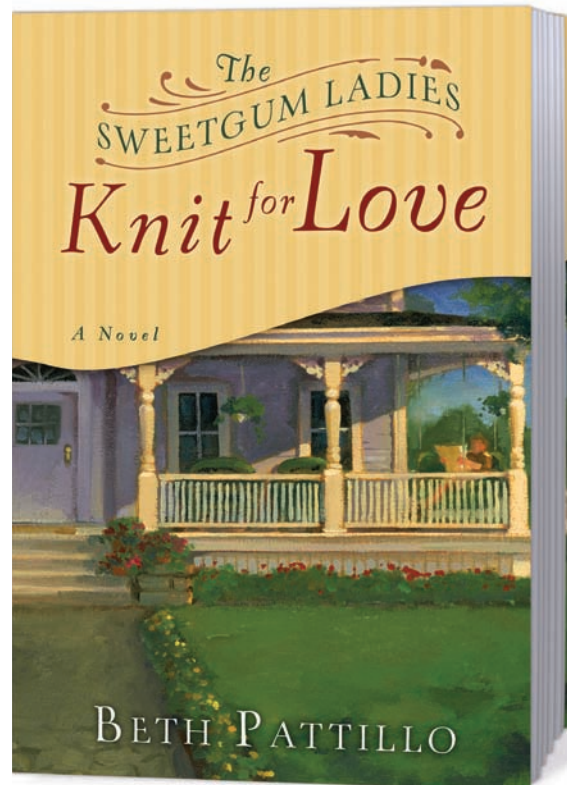
contemporary



on sale: June 16, 2009

Eleven Bridesmaid Dresses Don't Lie.

Jessie Stone believes in love stories, but decides it is up to her to write her own. What will it take to convince her that God has something better in mind? A romantic comedy with a spiritual twist, this is a story about losing control and getting more than any woman could ever imagine.



on sale: June 16, 2009

Six southern women are about to discover that nothing knits women together like matters of the heart.

Through conversation, knitting needles, and classic romances, an eclectic group of southern women reveal their heartaches, questions, and hopes. This charming sequel to *The Sweetgum Knit Lit Society* reminds us with warmth and humor, how the different faces of love impact lives.

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Use your skills

and the information found in *The Storytellers' Journal* to unscramble the words below.

Amish	Knights
Sisterchicks	Infertility
Cookie	Wild West
Baseball	Green Living
Refugees	Watchman
Photography	Roses
Windfeather	Forgiveness
Memory	

Answers on page 34

stay connected!



Do you love to read and review books?

Do you have an established personal blog on which to share your opinions?

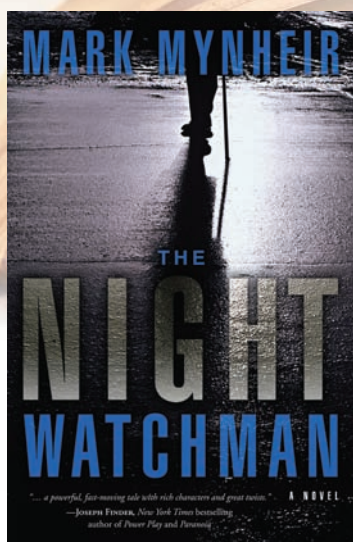
If so, you may be eligible to join upcoming blog tours for WaterBrook Multnomah titles.

As an approved blog reviewer, you'll receive a free, advance copy of the featured book in each tour in which you choose to participate. To submit your blog for consideration, please fill out the form at www.randomhouse.com/waterbrook/bloggingforbooks.

Are you on Facebook? Become a fan of WaterBrook Multnomah to be informed of the latest and greatest releases and have access to author videos, contests, and more!

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Chapter One

Just after I got out of my pickup truck, the two men stalking me had emerged from the shadows and then trailed me though the parking lot. They lagged behind me about fifty feet. I slowed my pace, not that I wasn't as slow as a tree slug already, to see if they would overtake me or hang back.

They hung back. Not good.

Any human at a normal pace should have passed me by now. I could feel their eyes punching holes in me, waiting for the right time to move. Since I wasn't up for dealing with any problems, I stepped it out as best I could. With a new-and-improved plastic pelvis and hip, along with ten-months of physical therapy, I should be able to hobble a little faster. No such luck. The cane and gimpy leg would only go so fast. Grandma Moses on a pogo stick could hop circles around me.

Using the rearview mirrors on the cars parked along Lake Avenue, I kept tabs on my new friends without being too obvious, a little trick I picked up when I worked undercover. No need to give them more of an advantage than they already had.

The big one, a black kid maybe twenty years old, wore a white wife-beater muscle shirt and black jean shorts. Mini-dreads jetted from his head like a frayed ball of yarn. The other kid, probably the same age, was an anemic white with a tattoo sprawled on his neck and a shaved head that glistened

The Night Watchman

by Mark Mynheir

under the streetlights.

With each glance I caught, they feigned like they were talking to each other, but I could sense they were planning to pounce. And why not? I was an easy mark—a crippled guy negotiating the Orlando streets alone at night. One more block to go until I was at work.

Eleven months ago I would have enjoyed this game of cat and mouse. But then I would have been the cat, a big hungry one ready to swallow those thugs like the rodents they were.

I hoped they were just playing a game.

I stole a furtive glance behind me, and my tails were nowhere in sight. I stopped and shifted all the way around. Gone. Must have headed up an alley. Maybe I was just losing my mind. Hadn't been out much lately.

I used to love the Orlando nightlife, the clubs and things to do; the pulse of the city at night energized me. It had changed so much in a short amount of time. Faster, meaner, a stranger to me. Like I was living on a different planet. I had grown up here, not long after Mickey scurried in, back when Orlando was more of a cowtown. Now it's a big city plagued with big-city problems.

As I approached the corner of Lake and East Jackson, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumber raced around the corner right in front of me, both out of breath. They must have sprinted down the alley behind the store to cut me off just before I reached the intersection.

This wouldn't end pretty.

"Hey, old man." The ugly white kid checked up and down the street, like felons do when they're preparing to do something monumentally stupid.

His buddy invaded my personal space on my left. "How about some spare change?" he said with an accent, maybe Haitian.

"Don't have any change." I eyed possible escape routes, though escape wasn't likely in my condition. And I

couldn't count on anyone to help me, or even to notice, for that matter. On this corner, in a city of over two hundred thousand people, I was on my own...as usual.

"Then give up your wallet, or I bust your head like your leg is." The black kid pressed in on me.

"Okay. Okay." I held up my right hand while leaning more on the cane with my left. "I'll give you my wallet. Just don't hurt me."

"Hurry up!" The white kid spit as he spoke, clenching his fists at his sides. "I ain't got all night." He was the alpha dog of the two. If they were going to attack, he would lead. He needed to be tamed. I reached back with my right hand, brushed past my wallet in my back pocket, and slipped my hand up into my waistband. I let go of the cane. The brass handle clanked as it bounced off the concrete, echoing around us. Huey and Dewey beaded in on it, drawing their attention down for the second I needed.

I unsnapped my Glock 9mm from its holster, then drew it to eye level, setting my night sights on the white kid's forehead. A stupefied look crossed his face, which must be a regular event for him. He wasn't so alpha dog now.

"The leg's busted, scumbag, but my finger works fine." I gritted my teeth and leaned forward. "You wanna test it out?"

Both raised their hands. "We're just playin' around, man." The black kid glanced toward his partner, who peered down the barrel of my pistol.

"I'm not. You got ten seconds to run before I call the cops. Ten. Nine." They were half a block away before I hit five.

Retired cops can legally carry guns, even if they're medically retired. At least I had that going for me. If not, I'd have been a quick lunch for those creeps. I thought about calling dispatch and reporting it, but something told me my new friends would think twice for a

while before robbing someone again, and I didn't relish the idea of being listed as a victim again on an incident report with my old department.

I slid the pistol into its holster at my back, then snapped it in. I combed my fingers through my hair. The May air was thick and still. The adrenaline surge from the game with my buddies wasn't all bad. For the first time in a while, I felt alive, energized. Too bad it would die down soon.

My cane lay on the sidewalk, which shouldn't have been a big deal. But everything was a big deal these days. As I stood without support, I felt like I was balancing on a dry, cracked twig ready to snap at any moment, sending me crashing to the concrete. My own legs were under someone else's spell, because they certainly didn't obey me anymore. I used to be able to roundhouse kick a heavy bag so hard it would bend in half. Now I had to mentally prepare to bend over and pick up my cane so I wouldn't fall on my face like an idiot...or worse, a helpless child.

I shouldn't have been too worried, though. Me and my physical terrorist—I mean, therapist—Helga, had been working on this. Her name really wasn't Helga, but I liked to call her that. A linebacker-sized woman with viselike man hands, sweet Helga and I would rendezvous three times a week—whether I wanted to or not. (If I didn't go to my therapy and doctors' appointments, I didn't get my medical retirement checks.) I imagine Helga's former job was as an interrogator in a Russian gulag somewhere deep in Siberia, slapping, twisting, and pounding confessions from the prisoners. I've cried out for mercy more than once on her medieval torture table.

I drew in a deep breath, then exhaled as we practiced. I eased down, shifting all my weight onto my left foot while rolling my right foot on its heel, stretching it out. Throbbing bolts of pain fired up my leg then my spine, like multiple shots from a Taser. I wobbled as my fingers brushed the cane, as if I were petting the head of a snake. My middle finger caught the lip of the hawk-bill handle, then drew it into my hand. I stabbed the tip into the concrete and pressed myself up. What a production.

As I righted myself, I took a second

to compose myself, the nerve endings in my lower half signaling their dismay and rebellion. I checked my watch. If I was gonna make my shift as the night watchman at Coral Bay Condominiums, I'd have to hustle. I'd hate to lose my new job. But then again, I didn't have much respect for someone who's never lost anything. My name is Ray Quinn. Eleven months ago, I lost everything.

Chapter Two

While I used to wage war in the streets against felons and thugs, my largest battle now was staying awake for an entire shift. The height of last week's drama at the condo was when Mrs. Ragland's Yorkshire terrier left an unwanted deposit on the carpet in the lobby. In a short time, my world had disintegrated into this.

I navigated my way across Jackson Street to the glass double doors of Coral Bay Condos. The eight-story building was about twenty-five years old. The sign above the doors read Where Luxury and Comfort Meet.

I rapped my knuckles on the glass. The doors were locked from 8:00 p.m. until 5:00 a.m., and my shift started at 9:00. The second shift guy, Hank Karpinski, was sitting in my chair at the front desk. Hank didn't move. I doubted he could hear me. He was easily a hundred and thirty years old and the only person on the planet I might be able to take in a dead sprint. I rang the door chime. His gray head bobbed my way, and I waved. He squinted, then pressed the metallic buzzer to let me in.

I pushed through the door. "How are things going, Hank?"

"Crazy as usual, Ray." Hank made his way around the counter. "Mrs. Campola is off her medication again. She's been mean as a snake all day, calling down and hollering at me."

"Sounds nice."

"Busy, busy, busy." The old man shuffled past me toward the door. "Watch Crevis tonight too. He's already here and fired up as usual."

"I figured." I eased into the cushioned swivel chair at the front desk, then propped my cane on the table next to me. Hank had kept my seat warm.

Four security monitors hung on the wall behind me, covering different areas of the complex—the front door, the

back, the underground parking garage, and the elevators. The front desk faced the lobby and the glass double doors.

Two maroon couches were in the lobby, so residents could sit and talk. At night, they were virtually unused, which was one of the reasons I volunteered to work the midnight shift. I could sit back in my little kingdom, alone, watching the world pass by. Like a wrecked voyeur of sorts, my life was more of a spectator sport now.

The job wasn't too bad, though. I answered phones, buzzed folks in and out, watched the monitors, and called for help if we needed it (usually an ambulance, since many of the residents were elderly). The pay wasn't great, although it did supplement my retirement benefits. A friend suggested I pursue a second job, if for no other reason than to get out of my apartment more. He might have been right.

Stretching out my right leg, I massaged it, hoping it wouldn't cause me too much discomfort tonight. The walk and near rumble left me a bit sore. I needed to talk with management about letting me park on the premises. I thought parking a couple of lots away would give me some exercise, but now I wasn't so sure.

I pulled my Sudoku Masters book from my pocket, then flipped to my current puzzle. I loved a good puzzle. As a kid, I wore out a dozen Rubik's Cubes.

"Ray!" Crevis Creighton rounded the corner from the first floor hallway and burst into the lobby. "I got a new knife at the flea market. Wanna see it?"

So much for being undisturbed. "No."

He plopped his size-twelve hoof on the chair next to mine and drew a dagger from a sheath tied to his boot. Crevis's face lit up as he held the blade in front of him.

Crevis was my nighttime coworker who walked the property while I manned the desk. I couldn't bring myself to say partner in the same sentence with Crevis; it violated all good standards of decency.

About my height, a good six foot, Crevis had a wiry build and was a little lighter than me (especially since I'd put on some pounds recently). With a bright red flattop haircut and long gangly arms, he resembled a spider monkey

with a pencil eraser glued to its head—with all due respect to the little primes who might have a couple of IQ points on him. He was in his late teens or early twenties and had ruddy skin, pitted with acne scars like a wall spackling job gone awry.

"Pretty cool." Crevis twirled the implement of war, mesmerized by the shiny dagger in a way that should cause concern to any person with even a rudimentary understanding of psychology. "Wanna hold it?"

"No."

Crevis held it out to me. I glared back at him.

"Okay, okay." He slid it back into its sheath and stood tall, his PR-24 police baton dangling on his web belt. The guy had every security gadget known to man on that thing—pepper spray, handcuffs, an expandable baton, plastic Flexicuffs, a flashlight, a Leatherman tool, and a Velcro pouch containing who-knows-what, and I didn't dare ask him.

"Wanna hear what happened at the flea market?"

"No."

"When I was looking at the knife case, these three guys were behind me. One of them started gettin' mouthy because he said I was standing in front of him. They all got in my face, so I stepped back, ready to go at it with them."

Crevis raised his hands and took a feeble karate stance. "I told them to bring it on. They just backed up and walked away. They were scared." Crevis planted his hands on his hips and puffed his chest out like it should have a large S on it.

"Lucky for them." They could have damaged their fists on his face.

"You know it." Crevis worked a quick series of jabs and hooks in the air, a triumphant smirk sliding across his uneven teeth. "They had no idea who they were dealing with. I'm a weapon of death and destruction."

This conversation needed to end. I glanced at the garage monitor and rolled my chair closer, seemingly fixated on the screen.

"You see something?" Crevis hurried around the front desk and went shoulder to shoulder with me, eyes locked on the monitor.

"I'm not sure. I thought I saw a

shadow or something move in the garage area by one of the vans there." I tapped the screen with my finger. Pausing a second for effect, I waved a dismissive hand in the air and leaned back in my chair. "It was probably nothing. I wouldn't worry about it."

"You never know. I'm on it." Crevis scampered down the hall toward the stairs, his gear rattling. "I'll call you if I see something."

Worked every time. One night I must have sent him to a dozen different shadows and movements. The kid had been lacquered in a healthy sweat before that shift ended. I almost felt sorry for him...almost.

After just a few minutes, Crevis crept past the garage camera, gazed back, and gave me a thumbs-up, as if I cared. Flashlight in hand, he slipped out of view. That should be good for a half hour, maybe forty-five minutes. His parents must have been hippies who ingested large quantities of narcotics in their day. There's no other rational reason why someone would name their child Crevis.

I positioned my chair so I could keep an eye on the monitors and the front door, then I returned my attention to my puzzle. Didn't want my back to the door; old cop habits were hard to break.

One of the benefits of this job was lots of time for my Sudoku. I checked the puzzle pattern to this point and added two more numbers when the buzzer drew me to the front door.

An attractive blonde in her late twenties knocked on the glass and waved. She wore blue jeans and a white shirt, and her hair was in a ponytail. I'd never seen her before. Then again, I hadn't been working here all that long.

"May I help you?" I said through the intercom, resting my unchallenged puzzle on the desk.

"I'm here to see my brother."

"Did you ring his unit?"

"He won't answer. Please let me in." She rested a hand on the glass. "I'm

worried about him."

I pushed the button, feeling a little guilty for not buzzing her in right away.

She hurried to the counter and leaned her elbows on it. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I haven't been able to reach my brother since yesterday. He hasn't answered his cell or house phone. This isn't like him at all." Her hazel eyes were a nice complement to her pretty face.

"What's his name?" I pulled the resident listing book from next to the telephone.

"David Hendricks."

I wasn't familiar with his name either. I found his number and picked up the phone. "I'll call his apartment." I got an answering machine with a man's voice, probably her brother, telling me to leave a message at the tone. I didn't leave one.

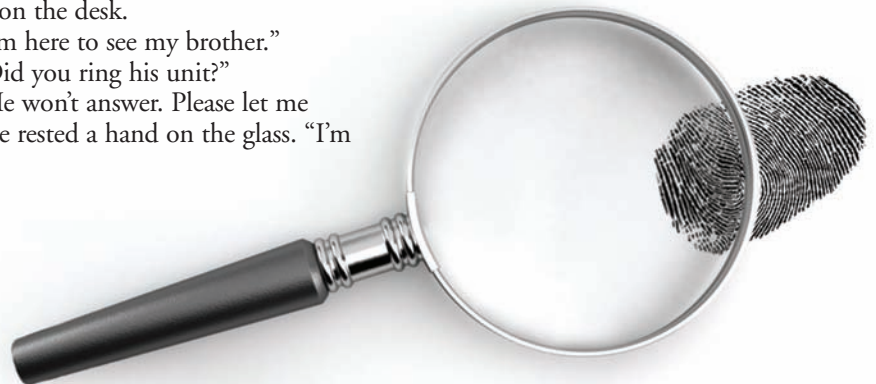
"Answering machine." I shrugged.

"Can you please let me in his apartment? He's a pastor and runs Outreach Orlando Ministries. He didn't show up for work today and didn't call in." Her voice cracked, but she caught herself and regained composure. "Something's wrong; I just know it."

After fifteen years of police work, I was pretty good at spotting trouble and troubled people. She was neither. I had the master key and would escort her up to his unit. I could have let Crevis do it while I attended to my puzzle, but even though I didn't know this lady, she'd given me no reason to subject her to Crevis.

"Hey, Crevis," I called into my radio. "You need to cover the front desk for a minute. I'm going to let someone in an apartment on the fourth floor."

"On my way." He was out of breath and no doubt running to the desk, as he did with every request.



She leaned over the desk and touched my forearm as I stood. "Thank you."

"No problem." I got my cane and started down the hallway. She followed.

"Everyone at the mission is worried. David is the most responsible person I know."

A pastor? Fifteen snarky responses piled up in my head like rush-hour traffic. I have a filter in my brain that's often "out of order" and allows whatever I think to flow way too freely across my lips. It's been my undoing more than once. But today, for some reason, I shut off the comments and didn't tell the lady what I thought of pastors, religion, or anything else, for that matter. Didn't know how long the filter would keep working, so I'd best get this done and finish my puzzle.

"What's your name?"

"Ray." I fumbled with the keys in my hand. "Ray Quinn."

"I appreciate this, Ray." She scooted ahead of me to the elevator and pushed the Up button. "I'm Pam Winters."

I nodded. Different last name than her brother, no wedding ring, but a rather fresh indent on her ring finger. Must be a story there. I pay attention to hands. When I was a cop, it was a matter of life or death. The hands were what could cripple or kill you. Not to watch them was a dereliction of duty. Now it was just an annoying remnant of my former life.

We were on the fourth floor before I knew it. Pam exited first, well in front of me. I did what I could to keep up with her brisk pace. She stopped at room 419 and knocked. No answer. I knocked.

I didn't want to be jiggling the door with the key and have some goofy, scared resident pop a few rounds my way. Maybe this guy just wanted to be left alone for a day. I'd had whole months where I didn't want to be bothered.

Pam tapped her foot and then pounded on the door. "David. It's Pam. Open up. Are you okay?"

I waited for a second. Still nothing. I unlocked the door and eased it open. "Mr. Hendricks, it's the night watchman. Are you all right?"

"David." Pam stepped around me as we entered the living room. No one

was there.

The living room was nice with an open kitchen area. Nothing opulent, but not a bad place for a single guy. Sure beat my digs.

Pam walked into the kitchen and over to the phone on the counter. The message light flashed.

I stayed where I was because I didn't feel comfortable milling around someone's apartment, but I didn't want to leave her alone here either, just in case I was being duped and she was some crazed stalker chick or something.

She called to her brother again and then moved down the hallway toward the bedrooms. As she opened a door on the left, her scream could have peeled paint off the wall. I ran forward as best I could, nearly stumbling in the hallway.

Pam halted at the doorway, hand over mouth, another shriek tearing through the air. I stepped into the room and found out why.

I pulled my radio from my belt. "Crevis, call 911 now!"

"What?"

"Call OPD right now. We've got two people down." I switched hands with my cane and grabbed Pam by the arm because she looked as if she was going to faint.

"Tell them it's a homicide."

Chapter 3

Crime scene tape is like flypaper for busybodies; the second you put it up, they all come buzzing around and stick to it.

Coral Bay Condominiums' fourth floor was as packed as a Christmas sale at Penney's. Orlando patrol officers had cordoned off the hallway and were keeping folks back from the apartment. I didn't recognize any of the uniforms. They were probably new. I didn't ID myself to them. No need to go through that rigmarole.

Crevis mirrored the movements of one of the officers and echoed the commands to step back. He would be tough to live with after this.

The crowd at the end of the hallway parted as a tall African American detective lifted the yellow tape and passed underneath. Sergeant Oscar Yancey, my former boss, checked in with the officer manning the crime

scene log.

Six-three with a sinewy build, Oscar sported his tailored gray dress shirt, slacks, and tie as if competing for best-dressed crime scene apparel. He'd win hands down. In his early fifties, Oscar was a cop's cop. Smart, diligent, tenacious. A good boss to have and solid backup when you're out with an ornery felon at two in the morning. No one messed with Big O. He'd been a sergeant in Homicide for a dozen years.

"Ray." Oscar smiled, hand extended. "Great to see you."

"Hey, Oscar." I walked toward him, leaving Pam still catatonic against the wall in the hallway. His hand engulfed mine. "How are Mimi and the kids?"

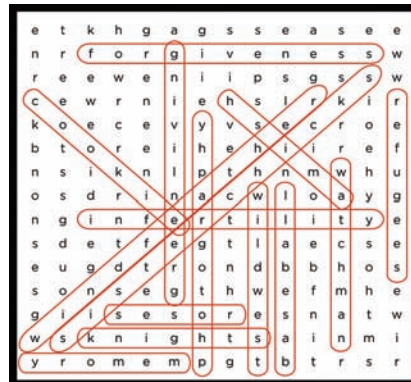
"Good." He nodded as he unbuttoned one sleeve and rolled it up. "We miss having you come around."

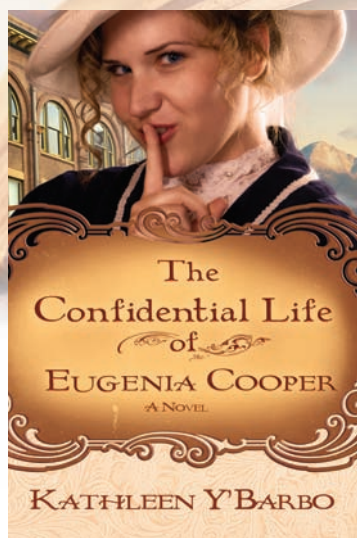
"Who's on call tonight?" I said before he could invite me to his house again. He'd been leaving messages on my machine about once a week. Sometimes I'd call him back, more often not. Didn't want to get into it with him again.

"Me." A shrill voice pierced me like an ice pick in the eardrum. I didn't have to turn around. Detective Rick Pampas just slithered into the crime scene.

A detective with the Criminal Investigations Unit in Central Florida, **MARK MYNHEIR** investigates violent crimes and writes riveting Christian fiction. Mark has worked on narcotics units, SWAT teams, and in a myriad of high-risk situations. His four novels offer a realistic glimpse into the gritty world of law enforcement and the rarely seen raw emotions behind the badge. Mark lives in Florida with his wife and three children.

Answers to word search on page 30.





The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper

by Kathleen Y'Barbo

Chapter One

The warning came too late.

Mae Winslow's finely tuned senses jumped as the fire bell rang, setting the populace into a motion akin to the stirring of a nest of hornets, and sending Mae into a fit of the vapors. Before the sounding of the alarm, the only stings fair Mae felt in the bleak light of dawn were from her heart and her conscience. She had disappointed dear Henry once again, allowing the calamity that dogged her steps to set her on yet another path leading away from the home and hearth he so freely offered.

Surely the longsuffering Henry understood that beneath her buckskin-clad exterior beat a heart that held nothing but love for him despite the vagabond life she must lead. At the moment, however, her mind must turn from the excess of emotional thoughts that Henry Darling brought and toward the situation at hand. With the practiced eye of one far too well-trained in the ways of desperate outlaws and lowly curs, she lifted the sash of the boarding-house window and lowered her gaze to the street below.

With the fresh wind came the bitter scent of smoke. Alas, the odor did not emit from below or from beyond the bounds of the quaint structure, but rather swirled from behind, as if seeping beneath the slightly crooked bedroom door.

Mae made to turn when a shot rang out. A bullet chipped away several layers

of paint on the sill and sent her scrambling to the floor. There, with her breath coming a bit freer, she crawled toward the bed, where her pistols hung on the bedpost.

"So," the fair jewel breathed as she wrapped her small fingers around the cold metal that had saved her life more times than she could count, "they've found me."

New York City, July 5, 1880

Something tickled her nose.

Eugenia Flora Cooper batted at the offending object, then opened her eyes to see that she'd tossed a fringed pillow onto her bedroom floor. A thud told her the book she'd been reading last night had gone flying as well.

The book, a brand-new episode of Mae Winslow, *Woman of the West*. Gennie sighed and pulled the silk and velvet coverlet over her head as she snuggled down into the soft feather mattress. Despite the fact she was required to attend a post-Independence Day breakfast with the Vanowens this morning, then catch a train to Boston at noon, she'd devoured every word of the dime novel last evening, staying awake late into the night.

After completing Mae's latest adventure, Gennie reluctantly closed her eyes. Even then, the story continued, this time with Gennie as the subject. She'd been running alongside a moving train full of stolen gold, her borrowed cowboy boots dangerously close to tripping her, when the dream abruptly ended. And, like Mae, she'd been fleeing the bonds of a man bent on prematurely tying her to home and hearth.

Gennie, like Mae, could admit no real aversion to marriage and family. In fact, she welcomed the idea of a life spent in such a way. Just not yet. Like Mae.

Perhaps that was what drew her to Mae's stories over other novels. It

seemed Mae was the only woman whose books never quite ended with a happily ever after. Each one promised it could—even should—and then the adventure took a turn, and so did Mae. By the end of the book, the bad guys were caught but Mae was not.

Someday, if Gennie ever had the nerve, she'd just head west down Fifth Avenue and keep walking until she reached South Dakota or Wyoming, Colorado, maybe, where she could pan for gold or dig for silver. Maybe save some hapless child or even a whole town from whatever evil preyed upon it.

Gennie smiled. Wouldn't that be an adventure?

Of course, Mama and Papa would miss her, but what a time she'd have riding runaway horses and fending off savage beasts with nothing but a broom and three wet matches. It would certainly be more interesting than painting flowers on china plates or embroidering her initials on handkerchiefs. Mama always had despaired of her stitching.

At the thought of her mother, Gennie bolted upright. It would never do for her choice of reading material to become common knowledge, even though she'd never understood the condemnation dime novels drew among her social set. Mae's adventures were tame compared to stories she read in the Bible. Surely the Lord smiled equally on the authors of such wholesome entertainment and on those who wrote more scholarly works.

Still, she should probably fetch the book and hide it with the others before the new chambermaid came in to open the drapes and draw her bath. Her secret had been safe with her previous maid, Mary. The dear Irishwoman carried off the books once Gennie read them. She claimed to be tossing them into a trash bin, but Gennie knew better.

At least Mary hadn't informed Simmons, who would have told her par-

ents at the first opportunity. Anything Simmons knew was destined for Papa's ear before the day ended, which was why Papa paid the elderly houseman so well.

But then Mama and Papa, along with fourteen-year-old Connor, were safely aboard ship heading for their silver anniversary tour of the Continent. Gennie smiled and sank back into her cocoon of blankets.

Surely a maid stumbling over a dime novel was beyond their concern. Perhaps she'd read the next dime novel in the drawing room instead of under her covers. Opening one eye, she peered across the pile of pillows and through the bed drapes to see only the faintest glow of daylight at the edge of the curtains. "Still early," she muttered. "Just a few more minutes and I'll..." She snuggled deeper into her pillow and closed her eyes.

"Miss Cooper, you've fallen back to sleep. Do wake up."

A blinding shaft of light intruded on her slumber, and Gennie fumbled for a pillow to cover her face. Finding none within reach, she struggled into a sitting position.

"I'm sorry, miss," the maid said, "but it's half past ten."

"Half past ten?" Gennie sputtered, suddenly alert. "How in the world will I explain to Mrs. Vanowen why I missed such an important event as her post-Independence Day breakfast?"

Gennie fought her way through the bed curtains and reached for her robe. As she tied the sash, she began to pace, carefully avoiding the pillows strewn across the Aubusson carpet. She'd also have to explain her absence to Chandler Dodd, although that prospect didn't upset her nearly as much as disappointing her father.

"Papa will be most upset," she said as she drifted toward the easternmost window and glanced at the midmorning rush on Fifth Avenue three stories below. "He so coveted a place on Mrs. Vanowen's list for Mama, and with this snub, she'll certainly be overlooked next time."

Mae Winslow, on the other hand, cared little for such frippery. If only...

"So sorry, miss." The hapless maid, Mary's replacement, ducked her head and inched forward, the silver tray she held wobbling with each step. "You see,

there's been a most upsetting problem with my sister's departure, and I—"

"Never mind." Gennie gave the tray a cursory glance, then pointed to the dressing table nearest the window overlooking the park. "Perhaps you'd like to tell all of this to our neighbor." She paused as the maid's eyes filled with tears. Gennie sighed. "Forgive me. I'm being awful. I'm exhausted because I stayed up too late."

Her heart sank. This was no way to begin with a new employee. "What's your name?" The dark-haired girl fixed her attention on her shoes. "Fiona, miss. Fiona McTaggart."

"Perhaps there's no harm done, Fiona." Gennie seated herself at the writing desk and pulled a sheet of paper from the drawer. Crafting two notes of regret that included only vague mentions of any specifics of her condition, she dried the ink, folded the paper, and then set her seal on the edge. When the wax hardened, she held the notes out to Fiona.

"Have Simmons send someone to deliver these, please." She paused to set her tone in what she hoped was a mix of understanding and firmness. "And then perhaps we will both be forgiven for our transgressions."

The girl grinned, then quickly seemed to remember her place. "You're every bit as nice as Mr. Simmons said you'd be. Oh!" She stifled a gasp. "Begging your pardon, miss, but I'd be ever so grateful if you'd not mention I forgot to wake you. I'm afraid I'd be out on my ear after my first day, and with my sister's leaving us this afternoon, I don't know how I'd take care of my mama and my ailing papa."

"Of course, I won't mention it. There'd be no purpose to it."

As Fiona scurried out, Gennie rose and turned her attention back to the scene unfolding on the street below. Several drivers had arrived with carriages, and liveried attendants milled about beneath a brilliant blue sky.

She let her gaze drift across the street and up the marble steps of the imposing mansion that sat on the corner like a wedding cake. The Vanowens' third floor ballroom stood at eye level, floor-to-ceiling windows open to the fresh July breeze. A lone figure swept the marble floor where, as a child, Gennie and her friend Hester Vanowen pretend-

ed to ice skate across the polished marble in their stocking feet.

Gennie's family returned the favor when Hester accompanied them to their house in Newport, where the long upstairs hallway opened onto a balcony that overlooked the lawn and the ocean beyond. Little imagination was required to believe that with just a bit of extra effort, one might be able to launch over the balcony's edge and soar into the clouds.

Hester only attempted it once, and thankfully the thick foliage broke her fall. Even better was that Mama and Papa were away at the time.

"May the Lord bless you, miss. Perhaps you'd like me to pour your coffee now?"

Gennie turned to see the door close behind the maid. "Yes, Fiona. Please do."

A flurry of activity across the street again caught her attention. Gennie shrank back from the window and peered around the heavy drapes as a cluster of guests emerged from the Vanowen home. Among them was the tall figure of Chandler Dodd. Clad in his usual top hat and ascot, he looked every bit the banker he was. As Papa reminded her often, a life spent as Chandler Dodd's wife would be most comfortable.

Gennie sighed. Chandler was not an unpleasant sort. Far from it. He could even make her laugh if he put his mind to the task. But a husband? She hadn't decided what that would be like, although if Papa insisted, she'd do as he said.

Still, she'd wondered on more than one occasion what Chandler would think of their Christmas tradition, what opinion he held of dime novels, and what he might think of a wife who wanted nothing more than a honeymoon in Deadwood or Denver instead of Rome or Athens.

One of her father's footmen dodged buggies and people to cross the street just as Chandler ducked into his carriage. Knowing the banker's first inclination would be to look up at the spot where Gennie now stood, she let the drape fall into place and turned her back on the window.

Thus far, she'd managed to escape any sort of private audience with Chandler, keeping their meetings to

public gatherings. Soon enough he'd come calling; today, however, was not the day for it. Not when her mind was occupied with thoughts of her month ahead in Boston.

Papa's Boston family was nice enough, but a month spent with them was a bit long, especially when she'd lack the comfort of escaping with Mama when discussions of politics became too tedious. Still, it would be better than a month spent alone in Manhattan, although if she had a choice, she'd prefer to be headed west for adventure.

Fiona, who had set out the breakfast and poured the coffee, waited with a linen napkin in her hand. Obliging her, Gennie sat and accepted the napkin. Fiona lifted the silver cover and revealed enough scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast to feed three hungry men.

"You've been a bit generous with the portions," Gennie said. "Perhaps when I return from Boston we might sit down together and discuss my preferences." She paused to stab at the eggs. "Has Simmons given you my schedule?"

The maid pulled a piece of paper from her apron pocket and unfolded it. "You're to be delivered to the train station at half past eleven this morning, and Simmons will send a man to retrieve you on August 7 at exactly three in the afternoon. Any correspondence you receive is to be bundled weekly and delivered to you in care of the Eddington Cooper family, Lake Street, Boston."

Gennie scooped up a slice of bacon and situated it across her toast, then indicated for Fiona to sit. "Correct." A thought occurred to her. "What will you do while I'm gone? Mary used to take the month to visit family along with me. She was from Boston."

Fiona shrugged as she perched on the edge of the settee. "After I accompany you to Boston, I'm to come back here and busy myself about the house until you return."

Gennie set the napkin atop her plate as an idea formed. "You know, Fiona, I believe I'll make this trip on my own." She met the maid's gaze. "Have you ever had an adventure?"

"An adventure?" Fiona seemed to consider the question a moment. "No, I don't suppose I have. I'm not nearly as brave as my sister."

"Tell me about your sister," Gennie said.

"My sister?" Fiona's eyes widened. "Oh, miss, she's the bravest thing you'd ever want to know, that one. I shall miss her terribly." She hung her head. "'Tis a pity."

"A pity?" Gennie took a sip of coffee. "Whatever do you mean?"

"We have a cousin, Katie, who's a governess. Well, she was a governess until she agreed to marry Angus. But she couldn't just run off and leave the girl without guidance, what with the men she lived with, so a promise was made. Either my sister or I would go and take her place so she could marry Angus. I couldn't imagine it, being so far away, but my sister, she's the brave one. Then she met a young man too. Now she's leaving him to go out and take care of Charlotte." Fiona shrugged. "There's nothing to be done about it, really."

Gennie shook her head. "Fiona, I'm confused. Start over. Something about your sister Charlotte, a girl named Katie, and her fellow Angus."

"No, miss. My cousin Katie married Angus last month. When she left her job caring for Charlotte, she promised Mr. Beck—that's Charlotte's father—she would send someone to replace her. My sister leaves on the afternoon train."

"Ah, so your sister's going on an adventure. How exciting."

Fiona shook her head. "No, you don't understand. My sister's met someone. In order to keep her promise to Katie, she has to leave behind the man she loves."

"And he can't go with her?"

"No, miss. He can't leave so soon. If only someone could mind the child until my sister and he are wed. It would only be a few weeks, a month perhaps." She met Gennie's gaze as if asking for a solution.

Gennie was the last person from whom a solution could be received. She had her own dilemma: a need for an adventure of her own, a Mae Winslow-sized adventure. But would she be brave enough to grasp the chance if it were presented to her? *If You bring the opportunity, Lord*, she vowed.

"I see." Gennie toyed with the gilt edge of the saucer. "And you are not up to taking that trip?"

Again Fiona's eyes told the story.

"I'm...afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?"

"Well, it's far. Very far. And me, I've

never even been to New Jersey."

Gennie moved the tray aside. "Where is this awful place? Shanghai? Siam?"

"No, miss." Fiona shuddered. "Denver."

"Denver, Colorado?" When Fiona nodded, Gennie rose and sucked in a quick breath. If You bring the opportunity, I will go. Had her prayers been answered so soon?

"Tell me again why your sister isn't keen on this opportunity. Is this child naughty?"

Fiona jumped to her feet. "Oh, no, she's a sweet one, so I've been told, though I understand she can be quite the challenge. My cousin cried when she left the family. That's why she was so particular about sending for one of us to take her place."

"I see." A plan began to hatch and with it came more pacing. "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to think carefully before you answer. If your sister were offered the chance, would she give her ticket to someone else?"

A puzzled look crossed Fiona's face. "You mean would she sell her ticket? I don't think so. But if there was someone suitable to take her place as governess to that little girl, well, I think she'd be glad to hand her ticket over." She paused.

"Begging your pardon, miss, but I feel I ought to remind you that you've got a train to catch shortly."

"Yes," Gennie said slowly, "but first, I need to write a letter to my Boston cousins."

"A letter to your cousins?" Fiona shook her head. "I don't understand."

Gennie kicked a pillow out of the way and settled at the writing table. "You'll understand soon enough. Grab your coat, Fiona, and tell Simmons to send the carriage around. This will only take a moment."

KATHLEEN Y'BARBO is the best-selling, award-winning author of more than thirty novels, novellas, and young adult books, with more than 850,000 books in print. A graduate of Texas A&M University, she is currently a publicist with Books & Such literary agency. The mother of three grown sons and a teenage daughter, Kathleen makes her home in the Houston area.



Never the Bride

by Rene Gutteridge and Cheryl McKay

You don't know me yet, so there is no reason you should care that I'm stuck on a highway with a blow out. But maybe we can relate to each other. Maybe you can understand that when I say, "Everything goes my way," I'm being sarcastic. Not that I'm usually dependent on such a primitive form of communication. I'm actually not very cynical at all.

I'm more of a glass-half-full-of-vitamin-infused-water person. Sometimes I even believe that if I dream something, or at least journal it, it will happen. But today, at eight forty-five in the morning, as the sun bakes me like a cod against the black-top of the Pacific Coast Highway, I'm feeling a bit sarcastic.

It's February but hotter than normal, which means a long, hot California summer is ahead—the kind that seems to bring out the beauty in blondes and the sweat glands in brunettes. I am a brunette.

Not at all troubled by it. I don't even have my hair highlighted. I own my brunetteness and always have, even when Sun-In was all the rage. And it can't be overstated that chlorine doesn't turn my medium chestnut hair green. Actually, it's the copper, not the chlorine, that turns hair green—but that's a useless trivia fact I try to save for speed dating.

I'm squatting next to my flat tire, examining the small rip. Holding my hair back and off my neck with one hand, I stand and look up and down the road, hoping to appear mildly distressed. Inside, I'll admit it, I'm feeling moderately hysterical. My boss flips out when I'm late. It wouldn't matter if my appendix burst, he

doesn't want to hear excuses. I wish he were the kind of guy who would just turn red in the face and yell, like Clark Kent's newspaper boss. But no. He likes to lecture as if he's an intellectual, except he's weird and redundant and cliché, so it's painful and boring.

A few cars zoom by, and I suddenly realize this could be my moment. Part of me says not to be ridiculous, because this kind of thing happens only on shows with a zip code or county name in the title. But still, you can't help wondering, hoping, that maybe this is the moment when your life will change. When you meet your soul mate. Like I said, I enjoy my glass/life half full.

Even as an optimist, I see no harm in being a little aggressive to achieve my goals. So with my free hand, I do a little wave, throw a little smile, and attempt to lock eyes with people going fifty miles an hour.

And then I see him. He's in a red convertible, the top down, the black sunglasses shiny and tight against his tan skin. He's wearing pink silk the way only a man with a good, measured amount of confidence can. At least that's the way I see it from where I'm standing.

As he gets closer, his head turns and he notices me. I do a little wave, flirtatious with a slight hint of unintentional taxi hailing. I decide to smile widely, because he is going fast and I might look blurry. He smiles back. My hand falls to my side. I step back, lean against my car and try to make my conservative business suit seem flattering. There's nothing I can do about my upper lip sweating except hope my sweatproof department store makeup is holding up its end of the bargain better than my blowout-proof tire did.

He seems to be slowing down.

Live in the moment, I instruct myself. Don't think about what I should say or what I could say. Just let it roll, Jessie, let it roll. Don't over think it. This thought repeats itself when the convertible zooms by. I think he actually accelerated.

So.

My makeup is failing, along with whatever charm I thought I had. I just can't imagine what kind of guy wouldn't stop and help a woman. Maybe I'd have more hits if I were elderly. I do what I have to do. What I know how to do. I change my own stupid tire. Yes, I can, and have been able to since I was eighteen. I can also change my own oil but don't because then I appear capable of taking care of myself. And I'm really not.

Practically, yes, I can take care of myself. I make decent money. I drive myself home from root canals. I open cans without a can opener. I'm able to survive for three days in the forest without food or water, and I never lost sleep over Y2K. But I'm talking about something different. I'm talking about being taken care of in an emotional way. Maybe it's a genetic problem. I don't know. Somehow I became a hopeless romantic. A friend tried the exorcism-equivalent of purging me of this demon when she made me watch *The War of the Roses* two times in a row, all under the guise of a girls' night, complete with popcorn and fuzzy slippers.

That didn't cure me.

I want to be married. I hate being alone.

I lift the blown-out tire and throw it in my trunk, slamming it closed. My skin looks like condensation off a plastic cup. I can't believe nobody has stopped. Not even a creepy guy. I stand there trying to breathe, trying to get a hold of my anger. I'm going to be late, I'm going to be sweaty, and I'm on the side of a highway alone.

"You need some help?"

I whirl around because I realize that I've just been hoping that even a creepy guy would stop, and since my world works in a way that only my negative thoughts seem to come to pass, you can see why the glass-half-full is so important.

The morning sun blinds me and all I see is a silhouette. The voice is deep, kind

of mature.

"Well, I did need some help," I say, fully aware that acting cute is not going to undo the sweat rings that have actually burst through three layers of fabric, so I don't bother. I dramatically gesture to my car and try a smile. "But as you can see, I don't now."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. But thank you very much," I say, for stopping after I'm completely finished. I trudge back to my car and start the air conditioner. Glancing back in my rearview mirror, I study the silhouette. He sort of has the same shape as the guy in my dream last night. My nightmare. It was actually a dream after my nightmare, where you feel awake but you're not. It wasn't the nocturnal version of Chainsaw Massacre, but it did involve taffeta.

He doesn't wave. He doesn't move. He just stands there, exactly like the guy in my dream. It's very déjà vu-like and I lock my doors. I put my blinker on, pull onto the highway, and leave him behind, driving below the speed limit on my flimsy spare tire all the way to work.

I work at Coston Real Estate. We're squeezed between a wireless store and a Pizza Hut. We stand out a little because of our two huge dark wood doors, ten feet tall and adorned with silver handles.

I push open one of the doors and walk in. Mine is the front desk. It's tall, almost BerlinWall-like. People have to peer over it to see me, and I look very small on the other side. When I'm sitting, I can barely see over the top of it.

I walk toward the break room, past nine square cubicles, all tan and otherwise colorless. Even the carpet is tan. On my left are the real offices with walls.

Nicole, inside her cubicle, sees me. "What happened to you?"

We've been good friends ever since I started working here, ten years ago. She's African American, two years younger than I am. She has that kind of expression I wish I could wear. Her eyebrows slant upward toward each other, like a bridge that's opening to let a boat through. It's part "you're weird" and part "I'm worried." She has sass and I love it. She's working her way up to senior agent and is one of Mr. Coston's favorites, but I don't hold that against her.

I don't answer because I'm busy staring at her new eight-by-ten framed family picture. It's very Picture People: white background, casual body language, all four

wearing identical polos and jeans. I love that kind of husband, who will wear matching clothes with his family. They're so adorable.

"Jessie, seriously girl, you okay? You've got black smeared across your forehead."

I tear my eyes away from the photo. "Blow out on the highway."

The eyebrow bridge is lowered, and she chuckles. "Honey, you look like you changed your own tire."

I put my forehead against the edge of her cube wall. "I did."

"Oh. Wow. I wish I knew how to change a tire."

"No, you don't. Trust me."

She reaches under her desk and pulls out a neatly wrapped gift. "For you."

I smile. I love gifts. I drop my things and tear it open even though I already know what it is. "Nicole, it's beautiful!" It's a leather bound journal with gold, embossed lettering and heavy, lined paper inside.

"What's the occasion?"

"It's February. I know how much this month... Well, it tends to be a long month for you, that's all." She points to the spine of it. "It sort of reminds me of the one I brought you back from Italy four years ago. Remember?"

"Yes, it does."

"So, my friend, happy February. May this month bring you—"

"Love." From my bag, I pull out a folder and slap it on her desk.

"What is this?" She says it like a mom who has just been handed a disappointing report card.

"Just look."

Carefully, like something might jump out and insult her, she opens the folder. She picks up three glossy photos of several potential loves of my life.

"They're hot, aren't they?" I ask.

"Too hot," she says.

"There's no such thing as too hot."

"Suspiciously too hot, like an air brush might be involved."

I grab the photos from her and turn them around for her to see. With my finger, I underline each of their names: CuteBootsieBoo, SuaveOneYouWant, OneOfAKindMan.

"Jessie CuteBootsieBoo. Mmm. Doesn't have a good ring to it."

"It's their instant message names, Nicole."

"Yes. And that makes it better?"

I sigh. "You have got to get into the

twenty-first century, you know. This is the best way to meet a guy."

"You can tell a lot about a man by what he names himself." She looks up at me and shakes her head. "Seriously. You set up a date with one of these and they'll show up with a beer gut, a walker, or a rap sheet."

"None of them rap."

Nicole stands, grabs my arm with one hand and my stuff with the other, and whisks me to my desk. She nearly pushes me into my chair and drops everything in front of me.

"Chill out," I say as she walks away. "This service guarantees background checks. But if you happen to end up needing a restraining order, they'll pay for it."

Nicole gasps and whirls around.

"I'm kidding." But I have her attention now. I lean back in my chair, looking at the ceiling as my hands feel the leather on my new journal. "This'll be the year, Nicole."

"You say that every year. Especially in February, which is why I got you the—"

I snap forward. "But I've never taken control like this before. Three online match sites, one dating service. They find what you want or your money back."

Nicole walks back toward me and leans over the counter. "I didn't realize QVC sold dates. If you order in the next ten minutes, do you get two for the price of one, plus an eight-piece Tupperware set?" She reaches for my chocolate bowl.

I scowl at her, but lift the bowl up so she can reach it. "What do you know about it? You got married right out of college."

"Don't remind me." She carefully unwraps her candy and takes a mini-bite.

"You never even had to try." I grab a piece of dark chocolate out of my candy bowl and get the whole thing in my mouth before she takes another bite.

Nicole shrugs and leans against the counter. "Sometimes you just gotta leave these things up to fate." She goes back to nibbling on her chocolate.

I swirl my hands in the air. "Fate, God, the universe. They've all been asleep on the job of setting up a love story for me." I stand up. "No. I am going to make this happen myself."

Nicole doesn't look up from her candy. "Do you even know what it means to be married? To be chained to another person for the rest of your life? To pick up socks and wash underwear and care for a grown

man like he's just popped out of infancy? Huh?"

I glare at her even though she's got eyes only for her candy. "It's got to be better than being alone. Or being a bridesmaid eleven times."

She bites her lip, and finally glances at me. "But you know how...you kind of need everything to be a certain way."

I nudge my stapler so it isn't perfectly perpendicular to my sticky notes, just to show her I'm able to handle disorder. I try not to stare at it because now it's really bugging me. "Are you saying I'm a control freak?"

"With OCD tendencies. You can't expect everything to be exactly how you want it if you want to live through a marriage."

I stand and start walking slowly toward the back bathroom. "I know what compromise means."

Nicole follows. "Then why do you get mad when I have to check with my husband before we go out? That's what marriage is. You can't even poop without someone else knowing."

I glance at her to see if she's serious. She is. Part of me wants to tell her about my dreamlast night. I always tell her about my dreams. But she's really pooping on my parade today. We get to her desk and she sits down. I walk on. I have these dreams. I'm talking nocturnal, not journal. Yeah, I dream in my journal. I admit it. I've written in one since I was fourteen, when I found a strange delight every time I drew a heart with aboy's name attached in squiggly letters.

But back to my nightmare. It started with me in a wedding dress. That's not the nightmare. That part was actually cool because I was in a dress I designed in my journal when I was twenty-two. The wedding march was playing. I love the wedding march.

Nothing can replace it. I cringe every time I hear a country song or bagpipes or something. My wedding, it's got to be traditional. I was making my way down the aisle, rhythmically elegant, one foot in front of the other. My shoulders were thrown back, my chin lifted, and my bouquet held right at my waist.

I once saw a bride carry her bouquet all the way down the aisle holding it at her chest. I shudder just talking about it. The train fluttered behind me, like it's weightless or maybe there's an ocean breeze not too far away. It was long, bright white, and

caused people to nod their approval.

I smiled.

Then the wedding march stopped, halting like a scratched record. I looked up to find another bride in my place, wearing my dress, standing next to my guy. I couldn't see what he looked like; he was facing the pastor. But the bride, she looked back at me with menacing eyes, overdone with teal eye shadow and fake lashes. I screamed. I couldn't help it. I closed my eyes and screamed again. When I opened them, I could hardly believe what I was looking at. A church full of people, looking at her. And what was I doing? Standing next to her in a bridesmaid dress.

Gasping, I looked down. Hot pink! With dyed-to-match shoes! I glanced next to me and covered my mouth. It was me again, standing next to me, in green. Dyed footwear. And there I was again, standing next to my lime self, this time in canary yellow. On and on it goes. I counted ten of me before I woke up, gasping for air, clutching myself to make sure I was wearing cotton pajamas.

"Thank God," I said, but as I looked up, I saw a man in my room. He was backlit against my window, like the moon was shining in on him, but I don't think the moon was out. A scream started forming in my throat, but I recognized that he was not in a stance that indicated he was going to stab me to death. There was no knife. Nothing but an easy, casual lean against my window sill. Truly, no less scary. The scream arrived as I clamored for my lamp. I yanked the string three or four times before it turned on, but when it did, the man was gone.

I realize I am standing in the middle of the hallway near Nicole's desk. She is gabbing on the phone, but looking at me funny. I go to the coat closet next to the bathroom. I always, always keep a spare change of clothes at work, just in case I have to do something like change my tire. Or someone else's. It's happened. I take out my least favorite suit, which is why I keep it here. It's lilac with a boxy neckline that makes me feel like I should be a nanny. I head toward the bathroom.

"Stone, get me the ad copy for the new Hope Ranch listings."

This is my boss, Mr. Coston, dragging me back to reality. He pops his head out the door as I pass by but yells at me like I'm down the hall. I don't think he even remembers my first name.

"Already on your desk, sir," I say.

He's in his sixties, with a loud but raspy voice and shiny silver hair that tops a permanent look of disappointment. "What happened to you?"

"Blown tire." I hold up my suit. "I was just going to change."

"Fine. Then get me a latte. Lighten up on the sugar, will you?"

"Right," I mumble as he disappears. "Lighten up on life, will you?"

I'm the office equivalent of a bat boy. I'm the coffee girl. It's this one thing that sort of drives me crazy about my job. I do a lot of important things, but when I have to run get coffee, I feel like I'm falling down the rungs of the occupational ladder. It makes me wonder. If I had a job I could get passionate about, would I be so desperate for a husband? I could drown myself in work rather than my dreams. Well, either way, I'm drowning, and that's never good.

After I change and decide I really, really dislike the color lilac, I grab my purse and head for the neighborhood Starbucks. It's five blocks away and I like that. It gives me time to walk and think on such things as to why Mr. Coston has been married for thirty-four years, the exact number of years I haven't been married. He doesn't mention his wife much and doesn't even have a picture of her in his office. He doesn't wear a wedding band and when he does take a vacation, it's with his buddies to golf resorts. It just seems like the world could better balance itself out, that's all.

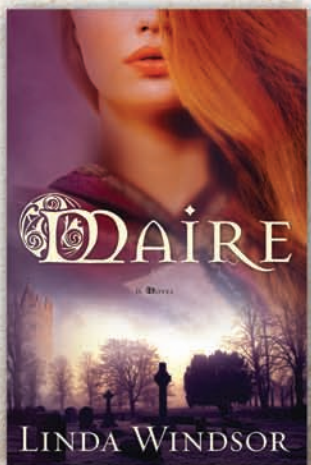
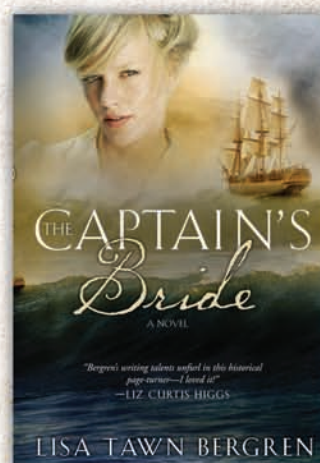
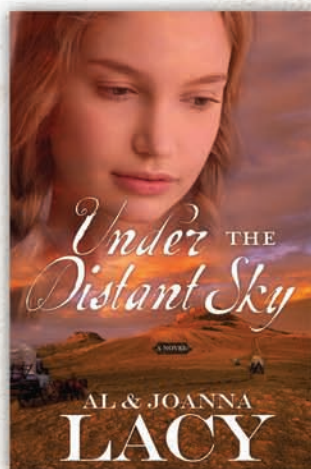
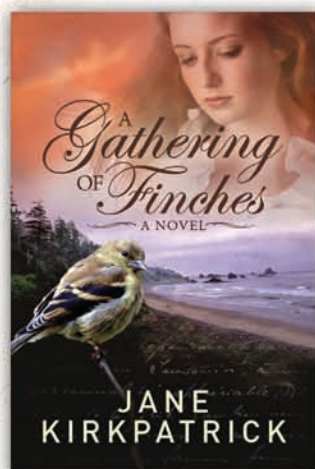
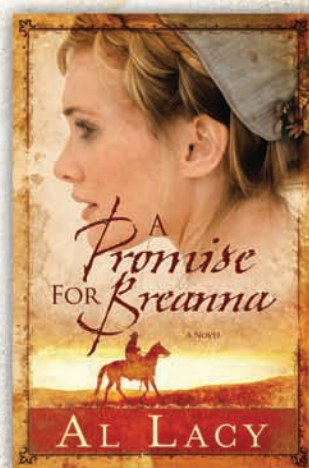
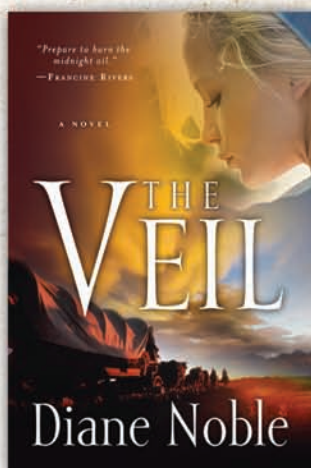
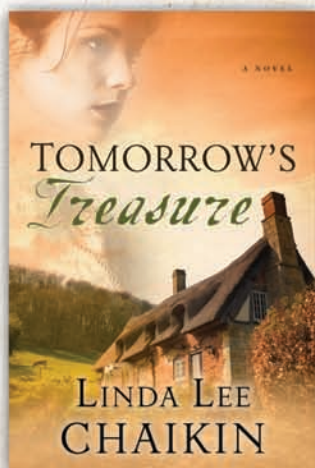
I'm nearly to Starbucks. People are leaving with their white and green cups of bliss. The putrid smell of coffee will soon replace the putrid smell of old rainwater evaporating underneath the sun. I'm not a coffee fan. I'm high strung. The feeling everyone wants by drinking coffee I have naturally, just like my chestnut hair.

I'm about to open the door, and then I see him, in all his glory.

CHERYL MCKAY is the coauthor (with Frank Peretti) of the *Wild and Wacky, Totally True Bible Stories* series, which has sold nearly two hundred thousand copies, and the screenwriter of the award-winning film *The Ultimate Gift*.

RENE GUTTERIDGE has published thirteen novels. Together, McKay and Gutteridge are the authors of *The Ultimate Gift*, a novelization based on the feature film and popular book by the same title.

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Stealing Home

by Allison Pittman

Chapter One - Ellie Jane

She took the job at the railroad ticket office quite by accident when her father, Sheriff Floyd Voyant, was summoned to the station to arrest the ticket agent who had shown up drunk to work one morning.

It was early June, just after graduation, and Ellie Jane—needing to stop by the post office anyway—had accompanied her father. At the insistence of Mr. Coleman, the station manager, she settled behind the desk to fill in for the afternoon. She had been seventeen years old. She never left. Some people, she supposed, might find it monotonous to sit in a little glass booth, day after day, but not Ellie Jane.

These were her finest hours, chatting with her fellow townspeople. She might ask, “Oh, do you have family in Tennessee?” or “Didn’t you just travel to Boston last month?” And the person on the other side of the glass would be forced to reply, even if grudgingly so, with averted eyes and terse comments. If she were to run into any of these same people in the town square, while running errands in the Picksville shops, they might walk right past her or make a quick detour into the butcher’s shop. But here, if they wanted her to slide that ticket through the little archway cut into the glass, they’d have to engage in a bit of conversation.

This afternoon, the first Tuesday in May, Ellie Jane was finishing her modest lunch of an apple, cinnamon butter bread, and tea, when a tentative knock at the glass window got her attention. It was Morris

Bennett, a little early to take advantage of passengers needing help with their bags.

“Miss Ellie Jane?” His voice was soft and muffled. “I got a telegraph message for you.” He slid a slip of paper through the arched opening at the bottom of the glass.

“Why thank you, Morris.” Ellie Jane sent him a smile few people outside of her family had ever seen. It was carefully controlled—an attempt to hide the excitement of such an occasion. Other people might receive telegrams every day from friends and family who lived in places they took the train to visit. But Ellie Jane’s whole life was here—equally divided between her little glass booth and the home she shared with her father. There was, of course, her brother, Dave, in Chicago, but his was a busy, exciting life that left little time for frivolous messages home.

She fished around inside her little cloth handbag to slip the boy a dime, which he took with a wide toothy grin and dropped immediately into his pocket.

“Anything else today, m’am?”

Ellie Jane checked the watch pinned to her blouse. “The two-o’clock will be here soon, Morris. Perhaps you’d like to stay and see if any passengers need help with their bags?”

“Yes, m’am.” He touched the rim of his cap and sauntered toward the platform, hands in his pockets and whistling.

Despite her curiosity, before opening the telegram, Ellie Jane carefully put away the remains of her lunch in her bucket, wiped the corners of her mouth with a pretty floral napkin, and removed the square sign telling any potential ticket buyer that the window was closed for lunchtime.

Then, with nervous fingers, she opened the envelope and saw that the message was indeed from her brother. Her reaction differed each time she read the short note: first a giggle, then confusion, then a rather cold fear. David was sending her a man. And he was coming on the two o’clock train.

Chapter Two - Ned

Ned Clovis had just drawn a straight black line under which he wrote a precise black total. He smiled at the number. Spring was a busy time for the feed store—new life all over the neighboring farms. So busy, in fact, that he thought maybe he should stay open all afternoon. But then he felt the vibration of the office clock chiming the hour. Two o’clock.

After blowing the ink dry on the page, he closed the ledger, stacked it neatly against the others, and took his well-worn newsboy cap from its hook beside the door. It was his store, after all. He was the reigning Clovis of Clovis Feeds. Had been since his father died. He could leave any time he wanted. And he always wanted to leave at two o’clock.

Six days a week for the past five years, Ned’s path to the two o’clock train’s baggage car led him straight past the little ticket booth where Ellie Jane Voyant sat behind the glass. Six days a week for the past five years, the window standing between he and Ellie Jane gave Ned the courage to offer her a wave, or a smile or, on days when he was feeling especially brave, a tip of his hat.

Six days a week for the past five years, two o’clock was his favorite hour, bested only by the time spent in church on Sundays where she sat two pews ahead of him, slightly to the left. Although she often returned his greetings in kind—a wave for a wave, a nod for a nod—in five years, Ellie Jane never left the confines of her little ticket office.

As Ned slicked back his curly dark hair in preparation for his daily greeting, he had no reason to suspect that this day would be any different. Perfecting an air of nonchalance, he measured his pace so he would turn and smile just as he passed the center of the window. Today, however, something was wrong. Ellie Jane wasn’t there.

Not wanting to appear affected, lest she be watching him, he cast a careful glance up and down the platform that rumbled with the approach of the train.

Seeing it in the distance, he abandoned his search for Ellie Jane for just a moment as he closed his eyes and imagined the sound of its whistle—the only noise capable of penetrating the thick packing of silence he'd lived with since he was twelve years old. As long as he kept his eyes closed, he could listen to the train and feel whole.

When the whistle stopped, he opened his eyes and saw Ellie Jane halfway down the platform. Her crisp white blouse billowed about her, standing out in clean contrast to those who wore their coats to combat a surprisingly chilly spring afternoon. Her hair reminded him of hazelnuts, both in its color and its undisciplined pile on top of her head. She seemed to be battling the breeze to keep all the strands tucked away.

This was his chance. He could make his way through the crowd, sidle up to her, tap her elbow, tip his hat. Maybe some miracle would give him the voice of a man rather than a goose when he asked, "Who are you meeting today?" Or maybe he could just gesture toward the train and assume an inquisitive expression on his face, which she would immediately understand.

He imagined her turning and giving him a response in a voice so loud it would capture the attention of the other people waiting on the platform. He wouldn't take his eyes off her lips, watching them for clues, knowing that she'd replied, "My brother, David," or "Miss Higgins's aunt."

No matter, he would nod in understanding, and they could stand there

together, side by side, waiting for the train. But he didn't make his way through the crowd—if such a small gathering could be called a crowd. He was about to take a step, really, when Ellie Jane motioned for Morris, ever ready to lend an open hand, to come to her. She bent to talk to him, her dainty hand resting on the boy's shoulder. When she was finished, the shock and smile on Morris's face made Ned wonder if she hadn't told him that he would be carrying trunks full of pretty girls and candy, a percentage of each he could keep as a tip.

Whatever the prize, Morris stuck close to Ellie Jane's side. When the train finally came to a halt, a blur of movement materialized behind the windows of the passenger cars. Ned imagined people gathering their belongings—umbrellas, books, children—and making their way to the front.

Meanwhile, the porter set out the tiny flight of stairs to carry the passengers safely from the car to the platform. One by one, disheveled women and men descended and made their way to waiting loved ones. Ellie Jane and Morris stood, expectant with each new arrival, then shrugged to each other as the former travelers filed right past them.

Finally, when the hands planted on her hips gave Ellie Jane a posture of resignation, one more passenger stood at the top of the steps. He was miraculously unrumpled in a pressed brown wool suit and a bowler hat sitting at a perfected angle over his left eye. His thin brown

moustache was trimmed to symmetrical proportion, and the rest of his face seemed so cleanly shaven as to rival the smoothness of his patent leather shoes.

Morris's face fell into slack-jawed rapture, and after Ellie Jane reminded him to hold out his hand for a handshake, he seemed entranced by whatever the man had pressed into his palm. So much so, in fact, that he had to be nudged in the direction of the baggage car.

Having dispatched the boy, Ellie Jane held out her own hand. The man took it, bent low, and gave it a kiss. Ned cringed at Ellie Jane's girlish reaction, bringing her other hand up to capture what must be a lovely giggle while allowing herself to languish in this forward embrace.

Worried about her honor, Ned strode across the platform toward the couple, ready to wedge himself between them, but just as he got close, the stranger stood to his full height, giving a clear view of his face. Shocked, Ned stopped midstride and turned on his heel, but not before tipping his hat to what must be the luckiest woman in Picksville, Missouri.

ALLISON PITTMAN is the award-winning author of *Ten Thousand Charms*, *Speak Through the Wind*, *With Endless Sight*, and *Saturdays With Stella*. A former high school English teacher, Allison is a full-time writer and serves as the director of her church's Theater Arts Group ministry. She lives in Texas with her husband and their three sons.

Three women. Three lives. Three stories.

All at a Crossroads of grace...



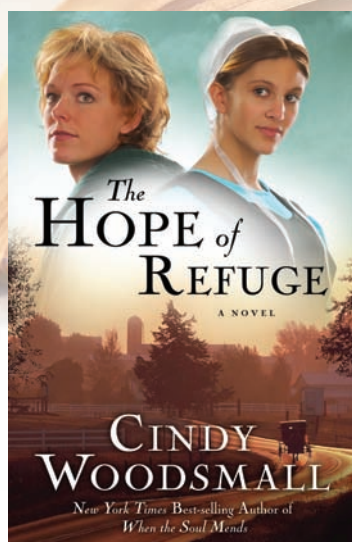
Gloria



Kassandra



Belinda



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 car 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 always said the unruly mop 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. You've grown so much since you turned eight, and you're a big girl, but you can't draw pictures or write words about it in your diary, and you can't ever tell your father, okay?"

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

The Hope of Refuge

by Cindy Woodsmall

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.

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 used to come here with my mama."

The shutters hung crooked and didn't have much paint left on them. "It's really small, and the shutters make it look 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. They only need a small kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom. This one has been here for many years. You're right—the shutters do make it look dilapidated. Come on."

Seconds after Cara pushed the passenger door shut, 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 roadmap. The lines took on new twists as she frowned. Though it was July and too hot for a toboggan cap, she had on a black one anyway.

"Grossmammi Levina, Ich bin kumme bsuche. Ich hab aa die Cara mitgebracht."

Startled, Cara looked up at her mama. What language did she just speak? 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. "Yvonne?"

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 a garden in a Sunday dress shirt? He snatched up the 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. She'd learned to make it work for her, like the time she slipped right past the teacher who was the lavatory monitor and went into the boys' bathroom to reach 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 ya let me help pick corn?"

Ephraim laughed in a friendly way. "You know, I once had 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 work-day 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.

"A couple of days, I think."

Chapter 1

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. He 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 rent. 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. She watched him remove 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."

Silence fell in the midst of the bar's

noise. Like fireworks shooting out in all directions, thoughts exploded in her mind. 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 foods. 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.

Chapter 2

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.

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 interest 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.

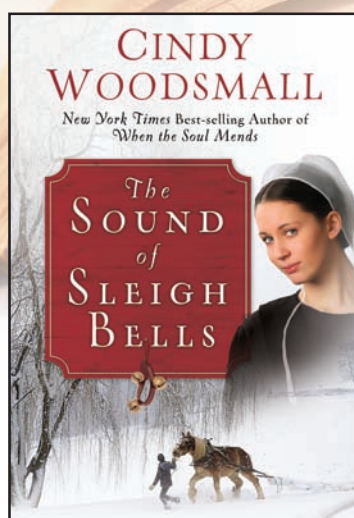
"Vastness. Expanse beyond the darkness. Each star is a sun, and its light shines like day where it is. I see our God, who has more to Him than we can begin to understand."

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.

Nine years later, he still didn't quite fit into the role forced upon him.



Chapter 1

The aroma of fresh-baked bread, shepherd's pie, and steamed vegetables filled Lizzy's house, mingling with but never overpowering 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.

Her brother had handled life right, and the fruit of it fed her soul. As a young man he'd put effort into finding an Amish bride, and when he found the right girl, he'd married her. Lizzy had focused on her business and never married. She didn't regret her choices most of the time, 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 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 stayed above Hertzlers' Dry Goods.

Lizzy studied the young beauty as she endlessly answered her family's questions about her decisions in the middleman role

Sound of Sleigh Bells

by Cindy Woodsmall

between those who produced Amish-made goods and the various Englisher 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 into the grief that threatened to destroy her. Beth had even banned Lizzy from seeing the pain that continued to hold 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. With so much time behind her, 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 afternoon 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 all but the most recently wed already 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 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 unhitching their horses and putting them in the pasture while the

girls huddled in groups, talking feverishly. The young people knew the routine. They would remain outside playing volleyball, horseshoes, or whatever else suited them until dark. 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 stay 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 it's time you started 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 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.

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

"You can leave that for now," Beth's Daed said.

She turned the water off 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."

Her Daed stood 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 weren't gardeners.

"Beth, sweetheart," her Daed said, "you know how me and your Mamm feel. We love who you are, even though you're not like any other Old Order Amish girl. We just want to make sure you're doing okay and since you don't live with us, that's a bit hard 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 more than 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 her brother didn't fall for the diversion tactic Beth just threw his way, but since Beth was listening to her Daed 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 is 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, 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 Lizzy 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."

Somewhere between falling for Henry and losing him, Beth had begun voicing doubts concerning her judgment. But like now, it didn't make sense.

"Then can you trust me?" her Daed asked.

"Always, Daed, but I don't want to be one of the single girls. 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, she hadn't yet dealt with the bitter awkwardness of admitting to the Amish world that she didn't fit—not with the single folk and not with the married ones.

Lizzy's brother 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.

Beth's Daed covered her 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.

Her brother 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 she was going.

The cemetery.

Again. And again. And again.

"Please, dear God. Move a mountain for her."

Her brother squeezed her shoulders. "Amen."

CINDY WOODSMALL is the author of *When the Heart Cries*, *When the Morning Comes*, and The New York Times Best-Seller *When the Soul Mends*. Her ability to authentically capture the heart of her characters comes from her real-life connections with Amish Mennonite and Old Order Amish families. A mother of three sons and two daughter-in-laws, Cindy lives in Georgia with her husband of thirty-one years.

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**A
FLICKERING
LIGHT**

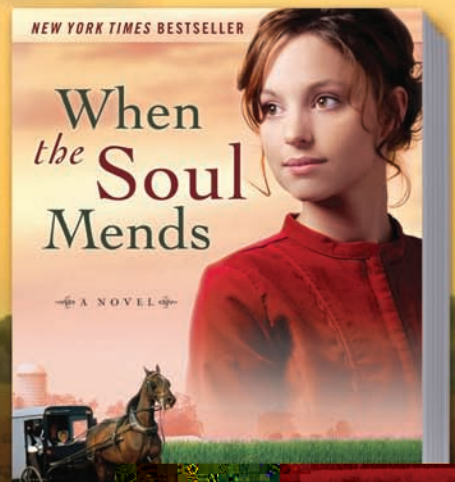
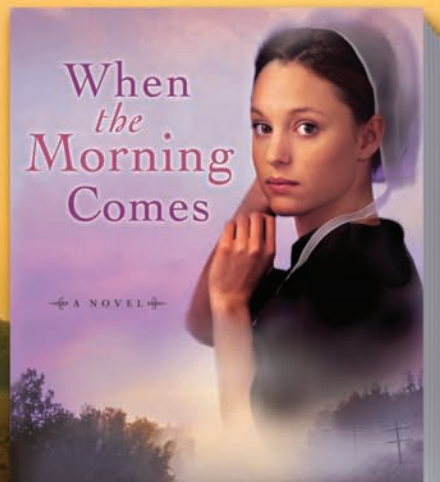
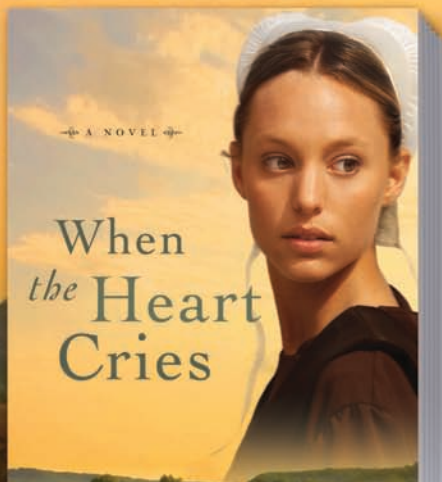
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