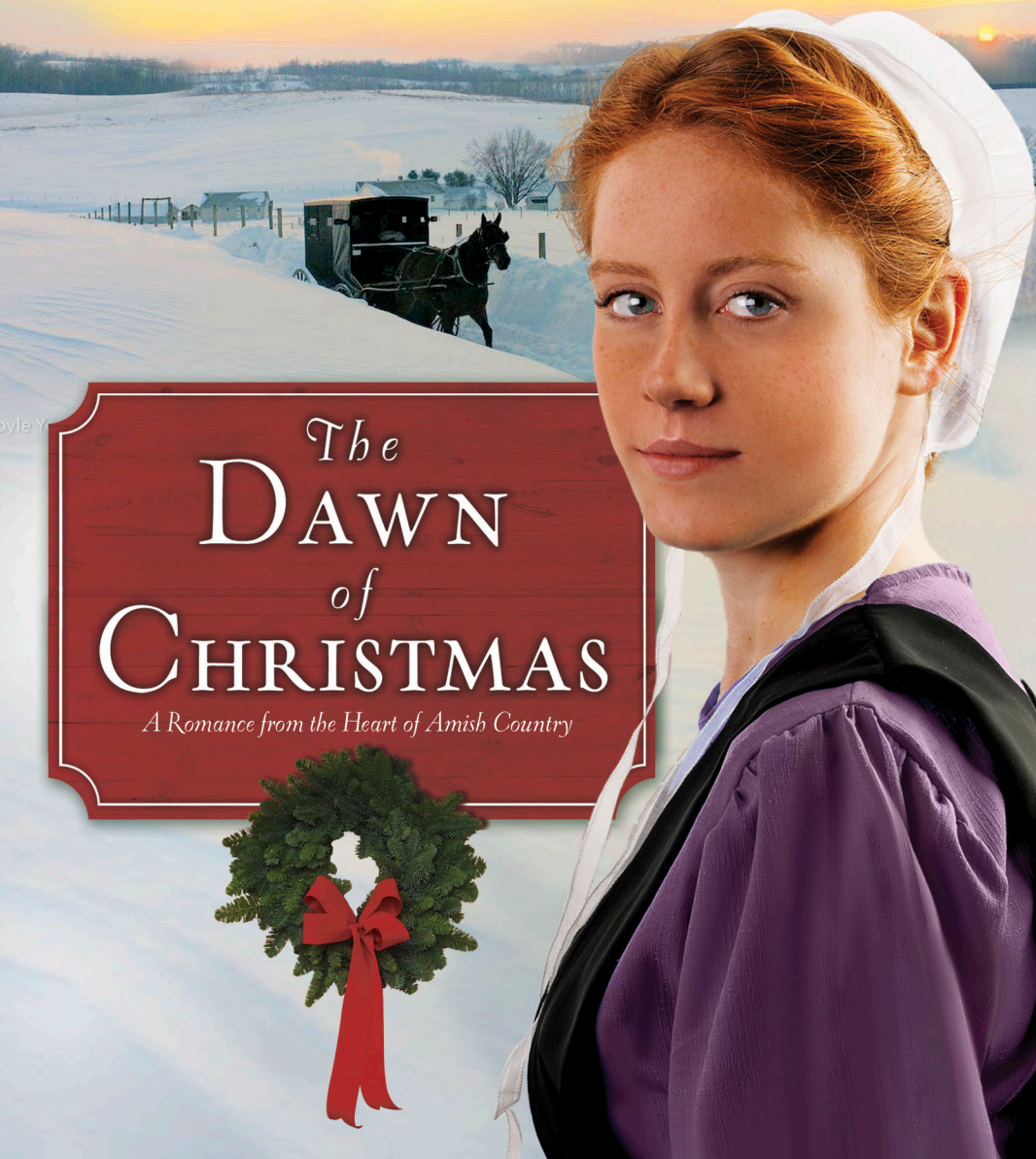


# CINDY WOODSMALL

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

## The DAWN of CHRISTMAS

*A Romance from the Heart of Amish Country*



*The*  
DAWN  
*of*  
CHRISTMAS

*A Romance from the Heart of Amish Country*



CINDY  
WOODSMALL



WATERBROOK  
PRESS

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THE DAWN OF CHRISTMAS  
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS  
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200  
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-0-307-73213-2  
eBook ISBN: 978-0-307-73214-9

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Jacket design by Mark D. Ford; cover photos: girl, Carie Hill; background, Dale Yoder

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
[to come]

Printed in the United States of America  
2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To our dear, lifelong friend Catherine Logan*



*Your faith is strong and stalwart, yet you understand  
the winds of change that sweep through the soul.*

*You've spent a lifetime going out of your way  
to help those who need or seek a transition.*

*You've tirelessly planted seeds of hope and courage  
in every person blessed to come into contact with you,  
and since I was a teen, I've considered it a privilege to call you a friend.*

*As my youth fades a little more each day,  
and I see the past with perfect clarity,  
I honor your wisdom and counsel and strength even more today.  
You own a piece of my heart.*



# One

Muffled voices drifted through the living room, but Sadie couldn't make out the words. She sat in a ladder back, avoiding Daniel's gaze by staring into a fireplace with its few fading embers. Family members, hers and Daniel's, peered at her with eyes full of pity and shock.

When Daniel had made his intentions known, folks whispered behind her back that little Sadie Yoder had finally snagged someone's attention and she better hold on for dear life. She knew that was true, but she hadn't cared what people thought, not one whit. Daniel Miller had moved to Brim from Tussey Mountain a year earlier, and he'd fallen in love.

With her.

Her, of all people. The one best known for being a quiet stick of a girl who caught no man's eye.

Every day that passed she'd thought her heart might explode from the joy of falling in love. When he'd asked her to marry him, well, she'd all but fainted from the excitement.

Daniel wasn't just any man. He was above her in every way. He was handsome and had a deep voice, strong shoulders, and a way of winning people's respect. At twenty-four, only five years older than she, he already had an established horse-trading business. She'd fully believed in him and felt honored he'd chosen her.

Now...

She lifted her eyes to meet his, and heartbreak stole her breath. If her legs could carry her, she'd get up and walk out.

"Forgive me." Daniel's lips barely moved, his whisper meant for no one but her. He looked as shocked and hurt by his behavior as she was.

She turned her attention back to the stone fireplace. It stood silent, the pile of gray-and-black ashes smoldering from a fire that once burned hot. A perfect depiction of her life.

A blur of crisp magenta folds swirled in front of her, and her cousin Aquilla knelt beside her chair. Aquilla's perfect oval face radiated beauty. Her blond hair framed her head like a halo, and her green eyes were mesmerizing. And all of it was able to steal Daniel's heart before Sadie caught a hint of what was happening.

"Please, Sadie."

Please? What was Aquilla thinking? Did she hope Sadie could also be convinced of her lie? Or did she want Sadie to have the power to erase their betrayal? their indulgence? their sin?

Daniel had been a perfect gentleman with Sadie, but what she'd witnessed less than an hour ago proved he was not unfamiliar with a woman's body. She could still see his hands embracing Aquilla, caressing her in a way that would haunt Sadie for years.

She had invited Aquilla two months ago to come from out of town to help prepare for the wedding. What a fool she'd been.

Aquilla clasped her delicate hands over Sadie's stained ones. "It wasn't as it looked. I promise. You misunderstood."

That was a lie. One Aquilla had already repeated a few times, no doubt hoping it would save her from gossip and from looking like the betrayer she was. Sadie kept her gaze fixed on the fireplace, wishing she could escape like smoke up a chimney. Everyone would leave later, but

how many would be unsure of what she'd actually seen? This would be her only chance to defend herself against Aquilla's lies to Daniel's family, but the words begged to stay hidden.

A mere hour earlier Sadie had been making last-minute alterations to her wedding dress. As daylight grew faint, she'd needed a new propane tank for the gas pole light in her bedroom. She hadn't even known Daniel had arrived for a visit. As she'd crossed the backyard, she'd breathed in the fall air and enjoyed the red and yellow leaves of maple and birch trees.

Then she'd opened the shed door. In a moment of time, as quickly as the hope of being loved had come to her, it had fled. Every hope of marrying Daniel shattered. The laughter of their future children silenced.

She'd run back to the house, fleeing a truth she could not escape. Once inside, she'd slammed the door tight, locked it, then fallen against the frame and wept. When she'd looked up, dozens of her relatives and Daniel's were staring at her. She'd forgotten they were there to help prepare for her and Daniel's wedding day.

Daniel and Aquilla had pounded on the door, demanding she let them in.

Sadie's *Daed* had hurried to her, asking what was going on, and she'd whispered what she'd witnessed. The emotions that crossed her Daed's face mirrored her own. He'd been the one to encourage the relationship, nudging the two of them together from the moment Daniel had arrived in the community. When Daed had opened the door to Aquilla and Daniel, Sadie had expected their guilt to be evident on their faces. But they'd looked only upset, and Aquilla's first words were a lie she didn't even stumble over.

Aquilla's eyes had glistened with tears, and her angelic face radiated sincerity. "I fell off a stepladder, and he caught me." She'd turned to face everyone in the room. "She's insecure about Daniel, imagining her worst

fears concerning him.” She’d wiped tears from her face. “Why would I want the only man she’s ever dated when I can date anyone I choose?”

Immediately the heads of loved ones had begun to nod, and murmurs rippled through the room. Daniel had stood by quietly, neither denying nor confirming Aquilla’s account. Her cousin had skillfully planted doubt in everyone’s mind, and in so doing, Sadie felt what little strength she still possessed drain from her. It wasn’t Sadie’s nature to defend herself, to stir anger and resentment when the argument would still leave people unsure of who was right.

If given time, would Daniel take up Aquilla’s lie too?

Sadie closed her eyes, trying to reconcile what was happening with what was supposed to take place tomorrow. She pulled free of her cousin’s hand and rose, hoping her legs would not fail her. Standing mere feet from Daniel, she stared into his eyes, remembering how they’d grown so close over the past months, talking for hours, laughing at things only they shared. She studied him now. Who was this stranger? What did he see when he looked at her? Did his heart break for all he’d forsaken?

He gazed at her. “I swear to you on my life, nothing like this has happened before or ever will again.”

She was tempted to believe him. But how could she be sure? Did he mean what he said, or would he say anything to end this nightmare?

She’d never know.

What she did know was that her family believed she’d remain unwed forever if she didn’t marry Daniel. Even rebellious teens weren’t gawked at or gossiped about like a woman who had never married—at least until the woman was past thirty. Then everyone accepted her fate without further discussion.

Daniel angled his head. “Don’t call off the wedding, Sadie,” he whis-

pered. "It'll cause a scandal. And there's no sense in trying to weather that."

Visions of him with Aquilla tore at her again. His mouth pressed against Aquilla's, his hands under her dress, roaming over her body. The pain struck again, so deep, so intense, Sadie longed to ease it. She only needed to nod, and he'd embrace her. Relief would rush through him and their families, and everyone would surround her with words of hope and encouragement. Her pain would ease.

But would it ever go away?

She feared not. Doubt would fade when she was in his arms, then grow as bright and scorching as an August sun when she wasn't.

Could she live with that? The seconds ticked by as she studied him, and anger grew in Daniel's eyes.

"Despite what you thought you saw,"—Daniel took a step back, talking loudly enough for most everyone to hear him—"Aquilla has told the truth, and I'm begging you not to call off the wedding over a misunderstanding."

His words hit hard, and she felt the weight of judgment from her family and his bear down on her. Trembling, Sadie struggled to catch her breath. She wasn't strong enough to cope with a broken heart and the fallout of people's disappointment in her if she chose to call off the wedding.

But was she strong enough to marry a liar?



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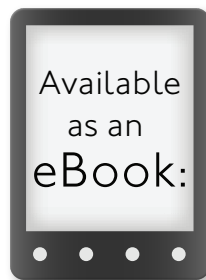
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