

CINDY WOODSMALL

New York Times Best-selling Author of *The Winnowing Season*

The background of the cover is a warm, golden-hued photograph. In the foreground, a young woman with her hair pulled back, wearing a white Amish-style head covering and a red dress, looks down with a somber expression. Her hands are clasped in front of her. In the background, a man wearing a straw hat and suspenders walks away from the viewer across a field towards a body of water under a sunset sky. A tree is visible on the left side.

A Love Undone

An Amish Novel of Shattered Dreams
and God's Unfailing Grace

A Love Undone

BOOKS BY CINDY WOODSMALL

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*Plain Wisdom: An Invitation into an Amish Home
and the Hearts of Two Women*

CINDY WOODSMALL

New York Times and CBA Best-Selling Author

A Love Undone

An Amish Novel *of* Shattered Dreams
and God's Unfailing Grace



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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*To Bobby Miller,
a rare and remarkable man who loved our niece
with noble honor and gentle strength
and did so during the heartwarming times
as well as the heartbreaking times.
Although you are now dwelling on this planet
without the love of your life,
Tammy's love and faith continue to reach out to you
through the dogwood tree
that defies all science by blooming year round
as a concrete reminder that regardless of how it feels,
nothing can separate us from the love of God.*



I



Rosanna peered out the kitchen window, trying to see through the sheets of rain. What was taking her husband so long? Had the wheels of his rig gotten buried in mud somewhere? After days of hard rain, the ground was saturated. Or was her very social husband simply visiting with his brother, thinking he had more than enough time to get Rosanna to Viola Mae's house?

Rosanna glanced at the clock. Viola Mae had called two hours ago, thinking her labor may have begun. Perhaps it had, but from her experience as a midwife, Rosanna was pretty sure Viola Mae's first child would take all night and perhaps half of tomorrow before entering this world. And that was *if* Viola was actually in labor.

Nevertheless, the young mom-to-be had to be seen tonight. Rosanna drove herself when the weather was good or even half-decent, but her easygoing, supportive husband insisted on driving her whenever there was snow, fog, or heavy rains. If Rosanna's examination indicated Viola Mae was in labor, Rosanna would stay the night, and her husband would return home.

She wished, and not for the first time, that the Amish in Winter Valley weren't so cut off from the rest of the world. The serenity of living in northwestern Pennsylvania couldn't be beat, but there wasn't a clinic or doctor in the valley, and after her *Mamm* passed away, Rosanna was the only midwife in the region. When at twenty

years old Rosanna had given birth to her first child, her own Mamm had delivered the baby girl, declaring the little one would also become a midwife. That was nineteen years ago, and Jolene was many wonderful things, but a midwife was not one of them.

A thud pulled Rosanna's attention to the happenings in the room. A book had fallen from the kitchen table. Her three school-age children were sitting around one end of the kitchen table, homework spread out in front of them as Jolene helped. Four-year-old Hope sat at the table with them, but she wasn't in school yet. She liked homework hour, though, and Jolene had her close to reading and writing already. But the child who required the most help was Ray. After his near-fatal accident three years ago, no one had believed he'd be able to attend school at all—no one except Jolene. Rosanna's chest tightened with anxiety when she considered how difficult an adjustment Ray would have when Jolene moved out of state.

The light aroma of cooked celery hung in the air. Dozens of jars of freshly canned goods filled half the kitchen table. She and Jolene had made good use of the last three days of rain, finally catching up on their canning of September's produce, especially the overabundance of celery for Jolene's wedding. They'd planted more potatoes than ever before just for the wedding feast, but they didn't need to can those. Her eldest child, the one Rosanna couldn't get through a day without, would marry and leave the state in a few weeks. Was Rosanna doing a decent job of hiding the grief she felt? As for her daughter, she was so excited to embrace her future she could hardly sleep.

Where had all the days gone between giving birth to her and giving her away to be wed?

Jolene glanced up from the mounds of papers and looked out the kitchen window. “Is that his rig coming down the road?”

Rosanna couldn’t tell, not yet. But she did notice her lone and beloved dogwood, the one her husband had given her as a wedding present. Most of its red leaves had been beaten from the branches, and it’d been looking rather puny the last few years. Would its roots survive such a drenching? At the end of last winter, she and Jolene had cut a few shoots from the tree, hoping to grow new trees before this one died. They should’ve started that years ago when the dogwood was still healthy.

“It’s *Daed*.” Jolene recognized his rig before Rosanna.

She didn’t have to ask Jolene to finish helping with homework or to get supper on the table. If Viola Mae wasn’t in labor and Rosanna returned home in a couple of hours, the kitchen sinks and counters would be spotless. Maybe the floors too if Jolene and her siblings got into another soapsuds battle. They loved those, and the upside was that the floors had to be mopped dry when they were through.

But on the nights when their Daed wasn’t home by eight, Jolene would put her sixteen-year-old brother in charge, and she’d retreat to the phone shanty to talk with Van Beiler for hours. Jolene’s loyalty to her brothers and sisters had a clearly marked line when it came to Van. Once he was home from work or arrived for a date or visit, he came first. Rosanna supposed that was how it should be, especially since Jolene was mere weeks away from her wedding. And when he’d said he thought the best place for them to live was in Ohio near his parents, Jolene hadn’t hesitated for a second. She’d said that as long as he was by her side, she could live anywhere and survive anything.

Later Jolene told Rosanna that Van wanted to move there to support Jolene's desire to do artwork. Painting and drawing scenery and animals and people weren't considered idolatry by the bishop in that district. Van was perfect for Jolene, but did he have to take her to Ohio?

Rosanna bit back her tears. Was it this hard for every mom whose child moved far away? She tried to focus on the bright side of today. "Despite the rain it will feel good to get out. Except for church the Sunday before last, I haven't been off this farm in weeks."

Jolene picked a pencil off the floor. "If you feel cooped up, you should've gone out with Van and me the other night like we asked."

Rosanna clicked her tongue at the absurdity of that idea—her on a date with them. It was ridiculous, but the invite had tempted her and made her feel loved.

Van would make a wonderful son-in-law. He was thoughtful and kind, and he and Jolene were so good together. Rosanna had absolutely no doubt they'd make a strong family unit. Van was older than Jolene, and she had been in love with him since he'd moved here to work in his uncle's blacksmith shop when she was fifteen. But Van hadn't noticed her until two years ago. To hear him tell it, he wasn't interested in finding somebody. A girlfriend came with too many responsibilities for his liking, especially since he was still a teen. Then one day he'd barreled out of his uncle's blacksmith shop hurrying to grab lunch at the nearby bakery, and he saw Jolene trying to open the door to the bakery while balancing a basket of pastries. He said she'd owned his every thought since.

Rosanna had never seen a man as much in love as Van was, so she couldn't begrudge him for taking Jolene to live elsewhere. Since

Jolene had never really been allowed to paint, maybe she'd give it a try and decide it wasn't that important to her after all, and then she and Van would move back.

A mother could only hope.

The door banged open, and her husband walked in carrying a large package. His blue eyes held the same zest for life she'd fallen in love with more than twenty years ago.

She put her hands on her hips. "Benny Keim, what have you done this time?"

He grinned. "A surprise for Jolene. But first"—he held up the gold, shiny box—"cookies."

"Benny." Rosanna frowned. "Not before supper."

He walked over to her. "But I need to distract them." He raised his eyebrows up and down. What did he have up his sleeve?

"Fine."

He kissed Rosanna's forehead, and then he pointed at Jolene. "You stay put."

Jolene grinned and pointed at the floor. "Won't budge." But she looked quizzically at her mom, and Rosanna shrugged, feeling a tingle of excitement.

Her husband set the box on top of the homework papers and opened it. "Only two cookies for each of you until after supper."

Benny returned to Jolene and unbuttoned his coat, revealing a brown paper package about the size of a flat shoebox pressed against his chest. He held it out to her. "It's not for anyone to see except you."

Jolene kept her back to her siblings and opened it. Before Rosanna could see what it was, her daughter's eyes filled with tears, and she engulfed her dad. "*Denki*," she whispered.

Rosanna's heart sang, but she hid all joy from her tone. "Well, let's see what he's done this time."

Jolene released him and let Rosanna peer over the brown paper. Paintbrushes. While she was hoping her daughter wouldn't like to paint and would talk Van into returning here to live, Rosanna's husband was encouraging her to paint. "I can't believe you."

Benny put an arm around her shoulders. "She's been obedient all these years, Rosie. We couldn't have asked for a better daughter. Let her enjoy the gift."

He was right, but it was so hard to let Jolene move that far away. He released Rosanna and touched the paintbrush with the longest bristles. "When I ordered them, the lady on the phone said they're the very best."

Jolene shook her head. "No, they aren't." She hugged him again, tears trickling down her cheeks. "*You're* the best."

Benny grinned, his face red from the fuss Jolene was making over him. "Well, we'd better go before Viola Mae's husband passes out from panicking."

Rosanna opened her special kitchen drawer, lifted the false bottom, and waited as Jolene put the contraband next to a few forbidden photos of the family. Jolene's radiant smile warmed Rosanna's heart. This time next month Jolene would be married and finally living under a bishop who would allow her to discover if she had a gift for creating artwork. That thought would bring Rosanna a lot of comfort when she desperately missed her daughter.

She put on her coat, and before long she and her husband were in the buggy, lumbering toward the next town. It'd be nice if she weren't the only midwife in this area who could help deliver babies.

Maybe one of Rosanna's other daughters would enjoy such fulfilling work. Torrents of rain fell from the sky, and she was grateful her husband drove her in foul weather and never complained that birthing babies was an interruption to their home life.

Memories of yesteryear filled Rosanna's heart. When Jolene was little, they'd played dolls, snuggled while reading, attended church, and caught fireflies. By the time she was three, they began to welcome new babies, tend the garden, and end the day playing simple board games. As she grew, they sang while canning goods for winter, sewing clothes for the little ones, and washing mountains of diapers. Jolene's childhood days had rolled in and out day after day.

As much as Rosanna tried, she had never learned how to grab hold of even one day and make it stand still. In what seemed like a blink of an eye, Jolene's school days were behind her, and at fourteen she began to work for the local bakery. Not long after that she'd shared her greatest secret just with Rosanna—her dream of one day marrying Van, if only he'd notice her. He'd moved to their district at seventeen years old to apprentice under his uncle, and all the teen girls had their eyes on him. Especially Donna Glick, Jolene's most ardent competitor since they were schoolgirls.

The rig wobbled hard, and she was pulled from her yesterdays, feeling sudden concern for today. The rains fell harder the farther they went. Could her husband see the lines on the road? She couldn't.

Benny gripped the reins tightly. "We have to turn back." The alarm on his face assured her there were worse things than letting a new mom deliver a child without a midwife.

She nodded.

But before he could turn the rig around, something hit one of

the wheels, and the rig jolted hard and then seemed to float several feet.

What was happening? Rosanna's head spun, and nothing seemed to make sense. Why was Benny pulling back on the reins but the rig continued to move?

Their carriage struck a yellow sign with the symbol for a river, and the rig floated right past it. "We're in the river!" Her husband's scream pierced her heart.

The rig tipped, and water rushed inside. Benny's strong hands pulled her out.

The world became a blur of muddy snapshots. Branches of trees overhead. Debris floating downstream with her. Gray raindrops hiding the sky.

Two weeks later

Jolene stood at the kitchen sink, her hands in sudsy water as she stared out the open window. Rays of golden light spread across green fields with patches of brown, dying grass. The dark silhouette of almost-barren trees reminded her of ink art from one of her books. The weather was tranquil, just another beautiful fall evening before sunset.

The serenity of it contradicted their reality. The heavy rains were long gone, leaving two deaths in their wake. Viola Mae had given birth to a healthy son at four in the morning, delivered into the hands of a shaky mother-in-law. Mom and baby were fine. But it had taken a rescue team four days to find the bodies of Jolene's parents.

Then the Amish community had put two caskets in the ground. Since that day a week ago, whether awake or asleep, Jolene continually saw Amish men holding on to ropes as they stood on each side of the grave, lowering two pine caskets into the ground.

Jolene's vision blurred, but she was used to her eyes brimming with tears these days. The world felt huge and gray, as if she could become lost in the vastness of its fog, and yet the air itself seemed to press in on all sides trying to squeeze the breath right out of her.

Warm hands rested on Jolene's shoulders. "Jo." Van's lips were near her ear. She tried to answer him, but the more days that passed,

the harder it was to respond to the world around her. She'd been strong for her siblings at first to help guide them through the process, but now her strength seemed gone.

Was the bishop right? Would her parents expect her to accept the decision her uncles had come to?

Van squeezed her shoulders reassuringly. "We need to talk before the others return."

It couldn't be time for that already. She looked at the clock. How were the hours slipping by into nothingness? At her request Van had sent home all her Amish relatives, friends, and church leaders earlier today. She, Van, and her siblings needed to talk among themselves before tonight's meeting.

Tonight. The thought of it stole her breath—if she was actually breathing. Nothing felt real. Absolutely nothing.

"*Kumm.*" He eased her away from the sink, and she watched as dirty water and melting soapsuds fell from her hands and plopped on the floor. "Leave it." He guided her toward the kitchen table.

Her siblings were there, each in a chair. Had he called them to gather, or had they been sitting at the table while she'd been at the sink *not* washing dishes? Their eyes were fixed on her. Jolene's heart thudded. She'd dreaded this chat to try to separate their emotions from the honesty of their needs so she could understand what was best for them in the long run.

Jolene sat looking at her five siblings—Josiah, Michael, Naomi, Ray, and Hope. Van moved next to her, ready to speak for her or to her as needed.

Twelve-year-old Naomi cleared her throat. "What will happen to us?"

Jolene intertwined her fingers, noticing how wet her hands were. It seemed odd how grief magnified little details while blocking out the big things. She was keenly aware of the damp smudges her hands were making on the table right now, but she couldn't recall what they'd eaten for dinner...or if she'd thought to provide drinks.

Ray climbed into her lap. Since he was eight years old now, Mama had said he was too big to sit in Jolene's lap anymore, but at the moment he felt as tiny and frail as a kitten. Was that feeling God's way of letting her know how Ray felt? Hope moved to the side of Jolene's chair, and Jolene shifted Ray to one leg and put Hope on the other.

They were orphans now, and by the looks on her brothers' and sisters' faces, they were well aware of what that meant. After a few years would Hope remember their parents? Would Ray have more than scattered memories of them?

Jolene licked her lips. "Your uncles have offered a plan." It wasn't one she liked, but what could she do about it? Her siblings would be separated, living with different uncles. Their uncles had large and growing families, and they felt they could take only one child each—with the exception of Uncle Pete. He had all sons so far, and he and his wife were willing to take both Naomi and Hope back to Indiana with them. But the fog engulfing Jolene wasn't thick enough to keep her from seeing how awful that plan was.

Van drew a deep breath. "It won't be possible to stay together, but if we can, we'll give you say-so concerning which uncle you'd like to live with."

Her siblings gasped, and all except sixteen-year-old Josiah burst into tears.

Jolene's face flushed as her feelings of helplessness changed to anger. What was Van thinking to blurt that out? After much discussion among themselves, her uncles and the church leaders thought it was the only solution to "the situation," but Jolene had not agreed to the plan. When did a family, its hearth and home and loyalties, become no more than a *situation*?

A vision of the pine coffins being lowered into the ground circled to the forefront of her thoughts again, and she knew the answer—when the ones who had created the family died.

Josiah rapped on the table, and Jolene looked at him. "This is the plan—to divide up what's left of us like a litter of puppies?" He studied Jolene, his tender heart evident in his eyes, but he seemed confused by her willingness to consider what her uncles and the church leaders wanted.

She lowered her eyes, looking at the smudges of water on the table. "It's a plan made by good people who love us."

Van slid his hand over Jolene's. "It's okay if you're not ready to accept your uncles' offer yet, but it isn't as if there are a lot of choices, Josiah. At your age I doubt you can begin to understand what it takes to feed, house, and raise a family like this."

Did Van hear himself?

Jolene pulled her hand from his. "Do not talk about us as if we're cattle that need to be rebranded and sold at auction."

Van nodded. "Sorry. I don't mean it that way. You know I don't."

Fourteen-year-old Michael glanced at Josiah before turning to Jolene. "Why can't we live here with you and Van?"

Was she really supposed to marry next week? She couldn't find

one familiar thought or feeling. How could anyone marry in such a state? “This house is a rental and not one Van and I could afford.”

“We don’t own it?” Ray asked.

She shook her head. Her parents actually owned very little, but Mama had always said it’s what owns your heart, not what you own, that matters. Mamm had given birth to all her children under this roof, but Jolene couldn’t see any way they could hold on to it. But couldn’t she and Van hold on to the children? It’d be a really tight fit, but they could make do in the carriage house apartment in Ohio with all her siblings, couldn’t they? Had Van really considered the possibility? All she could recall was his guidance on what he needed her to do. Perhaps they needed to talk about what *she* wanted.

“Josiah, would you take the children upstairs and read to them?” Had they finished *Charlotte’s Web*? She’d begun it with them the night her Daed didn’t return. When Viola Mae’s husband had called the phone shanty around eight thirty that night, Jolene had been on the phone with Van. So she’d switched over to see who was calling, thinking it might be Daed saying that he’d been held up talking with the dad-to-be and that he’d be home soon. He often stayed with Mamm and visited with the expectant Daed. But it hadn’t been her Daed on the line. That’s when she learned that her parents hadn’t yet made it to their destination. It should have taken them forty minutes at the most to arrive at Viola Mae’s, but they’d been gone more than three hours. When Viola Mae’s husband called back at midnight to say they’d never arrived, Jolene knew...but she kept snuggling with her younger siblings, who would fall asleep and wake, asking for Mamm and Daed.

Jolene should remember if they'd finished the book in the following days, shouldn't she? As much as she loved that book, the words had been meaningless to her as she filled the hours reading aloud, giving the children some small reprieve from their new reality.

Josiah nodded and stood. She kissed Ray and Hope on their heads and sent them off. Josiah waited for the younger ones to go up the stairs. "I vote no to separating us"—his eyes filled with tears—"if it matters what a sixteen-year-old thinks. I'm willing to do all I can to keep the little ones together. Not for me or you, but for them."

Van propped an elbow on the table and rubbed his forehead. "You're a good man, Josiah, and I've wrestled with those same desires since the day we learned your parents died, but taking on that responsibility is no life for Jolene or you."

Josiah dipped his hands into his pockets and stared at the floor, probably trying to gather his thoughts. Their dad often teased his oldest son that he was as scattered as hayseed shooting out of a spreader, but Daed promised him he would produce a bumper crop in due time. Would he? If he did, would Jolene see it come to fruition? Their uncle in Ohio wanted Josiah to go with him. Josiah lifted his head. "Maybe our response to this tragedy isn't about *us*. Or how to piece it together so we can be as happy as we would've been if our parents had lived." Josiah stood straighter, looking his sister in the eyes. "Maybe we were given life and are in this family for *their* sakes."

Jolene's heart felt as if it had stopped beating. How did a person of so few words say something that profound? As the eldest Keim

daughter, was she put in this place for such a time as this? She nodded at her brother. "Maybe so."

He went upstairs.

Van turned to her. "Jolene, you're not thinking straight. How could you be? You need to trust me when I say it's too much to take on. Hope could easily need to live with us for maybe twenty years." He stood and began to pace. "You've made great strides with Ray, but everyone has known since the day he was struck by lightning that he could end up needing to live with his parents for the rest of his life." He paused. "What about us? We'll start adding our children into the mix within a year or so of marrying. We can't do what you're considering, Jo. I'm telling you that spiritually, emotionally, physically, and financially we can't."

A hint of beautiful, warm light filtered through some of the fog, and she had a fleeting moment of clarity. Was his insistence on the decision she needed to make the cause of some of her confusion? "We can't, or *you* can't?"

"We. One hundred percent, Jo." He closed the gap between them. "We are in this together. But there's no time to prepare ourselves emotionally to take this on, not with the wedding next week."

She couldn't believe the words that came to her, but she let them flow from her unchecked. "Then we need to postpone the wedding."

He nodded. "A few weeks or months might help. It would give us time to get everyone situated."

"Can't we talk about keeping them together?"

"Jo, that's all we've been talking about."

Was it? While she'd gone through her days in shock, he'd been

a constant support, showing his love for her and his grief over her loss, but he'd also assured her at every turn that she needed to follow the guidance of her bishop and her uncles.

A knock on the door interrupted them, and a moment later Uncle Calvin and Aunt Lydia walked in. They spoke a greeting, as did each of the men in the procession of uncles and church leaders who also entered. The last person to come in was an unfamiliar, middle-aged *Englisch* man.

After Lydia asked Jolene and Van if they needed anything, she went to the kitchen sink and began washing the dishes Jolene had left. Calvin moved to the empty seat next to Jolene. He rubbed her shoulder as he sat, but he didn't say anything. What could he say? Make silly small talk or assure her that everything would be fine? Of all her uncles, he was the most like her dad, and during the meetings she found herself watching him for clues of what she should do. But for the most part, he'd been quiet and stoic.

The church leaders and her other uncles had definite opinions about what had to be done, and they seemed weary of walking softly around her now that their minds were made up. She tried not to take it personally. They had families and businesses to get back to. But she was grateful that Calvin had not let them bully her into agreeing before she was ready. Despite having eight children of their own, he and Lydia had asked to take the one child no one wanted—Ray.

The men filled the chairs, and some remained standing. There was no small talk, and Lydia didn't offer to make coffee or bring them a slice of cake. The group was short on protocol and tradition these days.

"Jolene and Van,"—Calvin motioned to the *Englisch* man—

“this is Douglas Piedmont. He’s a guardianship lawyer who’s here to help us know what we can and can’t do. So any questions we have, we can ask him.”

The men began to talk softly, reaffirming which child would go where and what furniture went with each child and discussing how to get out of the long lease her dad had signed on this place.

As their voices mingled into an indistinct mumbling, Jolene prayed. What should she do? She looked at Van. Would he stay by her if she chose to keep her siblings with her? If she lost him, she’d lose the life she had been dreaming about for the past four years. And she’d probably have a nervous breakdown, whatever that was.

Rambling thoughts swirled inside her brain, but Josiah’s words returned to her: *maybe we were given life and are in this family for their sakes.*

She tapped Calvin on the forearm, and he motioned for the group to be quiet. “What do I need to do to keep my siblings with me?”

An uproar followed—some men saying that she was dead wrong and that the children would pay the price and some complaining that a young girl shouldn’t have this kind of say.

But the lawyer held her gaze for several long moments. “Actually”—he clicked his pen, staring at her until the men became quiet—“it’s a viable question. You’d have to go before a judge and prove you’re a suitable guardian. You’d need a steady income, an affordable place to live, and home visits by the court—all of which I’d help you set up without cost.”

Was this stranger on her side? Aunt Lydia grabbed a dishtowel and dried her hands as she crossed the room and stood beside her husband.

Calvin glanced at her before he leveled a look at Jolene. "No one expects this of you. Don't let a false sense of responsibility cause you to take on more than you should. But if it's what you want, I'll back you in it."

Lydia put her hands on her husband's shoulders. "We will back you in it."

Is this why Calvin had been so quiet? Was he unwilling to hint that she should keep the siblings together and unwilling to support her giving them up?

"You would need to stay in state with your siblings, at least until the courts are satisfied about your capabilities."

She focused on the lawyer. "I don't know a place where we could afford to live."

Calvin nodded, frowning. "This house belongs to Old Man Fisher two districts over. He's cantankerous, but maybe he'd give you a bit of leeway, at least until we can figure out something else."

Lester Fisher scared her, reminding her of the irritable grandfather in the book *Heidi*. Try as she might, she'd never won the man over, not even a smile. Even his children and grandchildren avoided him. "It's worth a try."

"Keeping your siblings is a monumental task," the lawyer said. "They're traumatized and scarred. Grown adults struggle to help children cope with this kind of loss, and you're only nineteen." He tapped his pen on the yellow paper with its blue and red lines.

"Jo, please," Van pleaded. "They need to be in a home with two adult parents, not a teen sister and her twenty-one-year-old husband." His voice trembled.

Fresh pain seared her as she realized where this conversation was

leading. He hadn't wanted a girlfriend because of the responsibility. She'd been surprised when he'd asked her to marry him, thinking he'd wait a good five years or more, but he'd said he loved her too much to wait.

Oh, how she didn't want to lose him.

A door slammed, rattling the kerosene lanterns on the kitchen table. The sound had come from upstairs, and she sat perched, listening, ready to run or relax based on the next few seconds. A thud echoed. And another. And another, each harder than the previous one, and she raced up the steps. She glanced in her bedroom. *Charlotte's Web* lay on the floor. Its spine faced the ceiling, looking as if it'd been dropped there. The rocker where she often sat while reading swayed back and forth. Her bed was crumpled where the younger ones should be sitting or lying on it while Josiah read to them. Muffled voices floated from somewhere, and she knew her destination. "Ray?" She hurried into the boys' bedroom.

Michael, Naomi, and Hope stood in the middle of the room, eyes large and focused on the closet.

"Kumm on," Josiah whispered at the closet door. He shifted the kerosene lantern in his hand. "Don't do this, Ray. Not now."

Ray sobbed—short, muted noises, probably crying into a blanket or pillow. Jolene's heart broke. She knocked on the closet door and tugged. "Ray." When she encountered resistance, she recognized the pull of Ray's suspenders, a favorite trick of his for securing the closet door when he wanted to be alone. She leaned her head against the frame. Whether together or apart, how were any of them going to survive their loss? Choking back tears, she had an urge to sing their parents' favorite song. The lyrics wobbled as she began. "What

a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.”

Her siblings joined her. “O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”

How many evenings had they sung that song as a family before dispersing to go to bed?

The suspenders ricocheted against the door, and she knew he’d either lost his grip or released them. When she opened the door, Ray was sitting against the wall at the back of the closet. His flashlight sat upright on the floor, illuminating the small room. He looked tiny and overwhelmed as he held his favorite stuffed toy in one hand, probably what he’d been sobbing into, and a bat in the other. He’d knocked five or six holes in the wall with the bat before sinking to the floor in a heap. This image pretty much summed up her youngest brother when he was overwhelmed—a childlike gentleness mixed with the occasional destructive outburst. But he never lashed out at or near people. She sat next to him.

He curled against her. “I’m sorry. I know that was wrong. I didn’t—”

She ran her hand over his silky hair. “It’s going to be okay, Ray. It doesn’t feel like it to any of us right now, but it will be. Can you trust me on that?”

He held on to her tightly. “What will happen to us?”

She wished she knew. “We will stick together.” But she was a girl facing adult tasks, and it terrified her. Would her brothers and sisters be more scarred in the long run if her best efforts to do them justice were pitiful?

He gazed up at her, and she saw relief overtake his grief for a moment. "Together? Really?"

A knot formed in her stomach, but she put on her best parental face and smiled at him. "Together."

His eyes filled with tears. "I'll do my best to be good. I promise."

"Me too." Tightening her grip around him, she kissed the top of his head and began singing the song to him again. Josiah, Michael, Naomi, and Hope piled into the closet with her, snuggling into a huddle of Keim legs and arms as they held each other.

Van came to the door and peered inside.

Jolene swallowed hard. "I can't let them be scattered to the wind."

Hurt etched itself deep in his face as he nodded. Was that a look of compassion for her and her siblings or heartbreak for himself?

Maybe he already knew what she was just beginning to see. The life they'd wanted was already gone, whether they housed the children or not. They could never be the couple he'd been dreaming of because she was no longer the girl he'd fallen in love with. But she would be. Someday. And she longed to ask, Will you wait for me? Wait for me to raise my siblings? Wait for me to heal and become me again?

But that was too much to ask of anyone. All she could do was hope he'd remain her friend until he fell in love with the person she was becoming.



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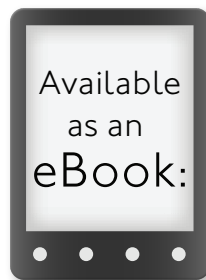
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