



THE
Angel
of
Forest Hill



CINDY
WOODSMALL

Best-Selling Author of *The Sound of Sleigh Bells*

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of
Forest Hill

BOOKS BY CINDY WOODSMALL

FICTION

Amish Christmas at North Star

Christmas in Apple Ridge

The Sound of Sleigh Bells

The Christmas Singing

The Dawn of Christmas

THE
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WATERBROOK

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THE ANGEL OF FOREST HILL

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 Shannon Marchese, my remarkable editor,

happy ten-year anniversary!

For a decade you've drawn out the very best from my meager talent.

You've been patient and steadfast in ways readers couldn't imagine.

You've helped me navigate much more than story lines and deadlines—

from joyous life events to grievous ones.

Time and again you've blessed me with my favorite part—

long, thought-provoking conversations about each story line,

where you share insights and parts of your heart

so I can better understand life and love and loss,

all in hopes of giving readers

the very best we have to offer with each story.

Thank you.



Rose clutched the wooden handles of her embroidered traveling bag, tightening her grip to stop her fingers from trembling. Why had she agreed to do this? She glanced at the hired driver before returning her attention to the view through the car window. Since getting in this car almost five hours ago, she'd watched as the familiar rolling farmlands of Pennsylvania had given way to the mountains of West Virginia. The tree-covered mountainsides were majestic, with every shade of gold and red foliage, but as night overtook the golden wash of the fall day, the beauty was silhouetted by the darkness.

The driver, a woman who looked to be the same age as Rose's *Mamm*, lowered the volume of the radio. "There's a restaurant ahead of us. We can stop if you need to."

“I’m fine now. Thank you.” That wasn’t true, but Rose would fight her nausea rather than give in to it again. Since leaving her house, they had already stopped at three places to give Rose a chance to get out, gulp in crisp air, and press a damp cloth to her lips.

The driver nodded and turned the radio up, continuing to listen as men discussed how to fix the country.

It seemed odd that there was no one around to criticize Rose for letting time melt away as she just sat here, thinking. She let her thoughts trail back to earlier in the day, when her life was a steady routine of hard work and familiar safety.



She and her Mamm had been getting breakfast on the table—a vat of steamy, brown-sugar oatmeal and panfuls of oven-toasted bread—when Nat Eash knocked on the back door. Her *Daed* welcomed him and invited him to join them at the table.

Rose grabbed a mug and poured coffee for him and then returned to ladling oatmeal into bowls for her eleven brothers. Her parents were dairy farmers, and she was the lone daughter of the twelve children. Work never stopped, not even when it was Christmas Day or when she was recovering from the flu that had landed her Mamm in the hospital.

The bishop studied her as he sipped his coffee. Finally he

cleared his throat. “Hard times come to all of us, and we must help carry one another’s burdens. The Forest Hill community is a small Amish district—only eight families—and they need our help.”

Had she ever heard of that community before? She tried to recall as she filled a bowl with oatmeal and held it out to her youngest brother.

“Do you know where Forest Hill is, Rose?” Nat asked.

The bishop’s direct question to her caught her off guard, and she dropped the oatmeal. Her Mamm and brothers yelling at her unnerved her even more, and her face afire, she was unable to find her voice.

Nat winced. “It’s my fault. Not hers.”

The complaining immediately ceased, and the bishop continued talking about the Forest Hill community and the needs of the strangers who lived there. A young woman had given birth but wasn’t doing well, and she had two other small children. Like many in rural Appalachia, the families in the district were facing hardships, and none of them could move in and help take care of three little ones.

While Rose served her brother a fresh bowl of oatmeal and cleaned up the spill, Nat described the strangers’ needs. But with her rattled nerves and her ongoing prayers, she barely heard him. *Dear God, if it’s not a bother, show me what to do, and let Your truth set me free.*

“So”—the bishop stood, head angled—“would you be willing to do this?”

She looked to her Daed for some clue as to what the man wanted and what answer she should give.

Her Daed nodded. “She will.”

Nat’s smile hinted of gratefulness, but he also seemed a bit reluctant. Had he hoped she would be allowed to make her own decision? “I’ll have a driver pick you up as soon as possible.” He placed his fingers on the table as if steadying himself. “When the call for help went out to all the districts, I immediately thought of you, Rose, knowing the family couldn’t find anyone better suited.”

Confusion pummeled her. Had she nodded in agreement? She couldn’t remember, but the next thing she knew, she was in her bedroom, and her Mamm was packing the traveling bag. “You listen to me, Rose Kurtz.” Mamm jerked clothes off the hangers and shoved them into the bag. “You mind your tongue and do as you’re told. I won’t have you being an embarrassment. They have no idea how absent minded you are. Do you understand me?”

“Where am I going, Mamm?” Rose sounded more like a child than a twenty-one-year-old woman. Truth be told, she usually felt like a child—unsure of herself, clueless, and with little say about her life.

Her Mamm pursed her lips, looking torn between anger

and sadness. “West Virginia, where, I guess, you’ll spend a month helping to look after this family’s two toddlers and newborn.” Her Mamm grabbed underwear from the drawer and thrust it on top of the clothes. “The bishop didn’t need to talk about how suited you are for this. That’s nonsense. There simply isn’t anyone else. Most girls old enough to leave home and do this are married or have someone they’re unwilling to part from for a month.” She put her hands on her hips and sighed. “I have no idea what I’m supposed to do with eleven sons to feed and no help. I guess that doesn’t matter to anyone.”

Did her Mamm consider how unnerving it was for Rose? She’d hardly been outside of Perry County, let alone out of state.

“Rose,” Daed called, “the driver is here.”

Mamm shut the traveling bag and held it out. “Go, and remember what I said.”

Without so much as a hug or an “I’ll miss you” from anyone, Rose got into the vehicle.



A car horn startled her. Rose opened her eyes and sat upright.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to hit the horn, but we’re here.” She turned onto a driveway.

Even through the darkness of a fall evening, she could tell

that the two-story home was fairly new. It seemed contemporary and custom-built and surprisingly stately for an Amish home. The familiar golden light of candles and lanterns poured through every window, and a dozen buggies were parked in the yard.

Nat had said the community was quite small—only eight families. If that was true, every one of them had to be here. If the woman of the house was incapacitated after giving birth during the wee hours of the morning, why had all these people come to her house? It didn't seem normal.

The driver turned off the car, staring at the house too. "This is it."

Rose craned her neck, looking at the second story of the house and wishing she didn't feel so uncomfortable and unsure of herself.

The driver unlocked the doors to the vehicle. "When your bishop called, requesting that I drive you here, I asked about the situation. Let me say that what you're doing—walking into a stranger's home and offering to help—is admirable. It's a tough situation. Young children will want only their mama. But I'm sure it'll be fine. You seem like a hardworking young lady."

Why was the driver, who'd said fewer than ten sentences in the last six hours, telling her how hard the next month would be? Rose was Amish, and the Amish knew how to buck up and get things done. Always. What difference did it make how dif-

difficult the time would be? Or did this woman know something Rose didn't?

Rose opened the car door, thanked the driver, and then held on tightly to her traveling bag as she walked up the porch stairs. A baby was wailing, the most pitiful cry Rose had ever heard.

As she lifted her hand to knock, an unfamiliar darkness settled over her, like a mist shrouding her, and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. She drew a deep breath and knocked. The door opened, and a gray-haired woman carrying a lit candle in a metal candleholder stared back at Rose. The candle fluttered and threatened to go out. The woman seemed mute, and tears ran down her face as the candleholder shook.

The home seemed to rumble with hoarse voices and muted sobs. Rose didn't want to be here. She turned and looked behind her, hoping the driver was coming in too. Instead she saw bright brake lights as the car pulled out of the driveway.

Rose drew a deep breath, hoping to respond the way a mature young woman should. "I'm Rose." She held up her traveling bag. "My bishop asked me to help look after the children."

"*Ach, ja*, of course that's who you are." The woman backed away. "I'm sorry. We . . . we aren't functioning well right now."

"I understand." Rose entered the home and closed the door. Despite the lit lanterns and candles, dimness filled the empty spaces in the large kitchen, living room, and dining area. Adults

milled about. A few younger people were huddled on couches in the living room. Somewhere in the house an infant wailed.

A man sat in a chair with two crying children clinging to him. *"Ich will mei Mamm!"* The older boy, maybe three, cried over and over that he wanted his Mamm. The younger child, who was maybe two, cried loudly, as did the infant Rose had yet to spot.

Rose's heart sank. Had the young Mamm died? Or maybe she'd had a home birth and was now in the hospital. But wouldn't the baby be with her?

The man held the boys tight. *"Es iss allrecht. Es iss. Ich promise."* As he kissed their heads and promised that everything would be all right, he noticed her for the first time. When their eyes connected, she knew without any doubt . . . His wife was dead, and he was shattered. She doubted he would remember this night or any other for a very, very long time. Grief had a way of enveloping a person's mind and memory like a thick fog, and most of what happened while a person was inside that fog would be lost in the mist. Or at least that's what her grandmother had told her.

An older woman entered the room, bouncing the screaming infant. Rose didn't know a lot about many things, but that was the cry of a very hungry infant. She turned to the woman who'd opened the door. "How long ago did the Mamm pass?"

"She left here in an ambulance at noon and died within the

hour. I don't understand it. She was fine for a while after the baby arrived. As soon as she showed the first sign of hemorrhaging, Joel called an ambulance. They rushed her to surgery, and we were sure they'd save her, but . . .”

“I'm sorry.” Rose wished there were better words at times like this, ones that could bring real comfort.

“*Denki.*” The woman gestured toward the baby. “We've tried to feed her, using every kind of man-made nipple and formula, but she's refused all of it.”

Dear God, if it's not a bother, show me what to do, and let Your truth set me free.

Possible solutions poured into Rose's brain, and she knew what needed to be tried next. “Is there a phone nearby?”

The woman nodded toward the front door. “There's a rotary phone in Joel's workshop.” She took a shaky breath. “I'm Sarah Dienner, Joel's Mamm. What did you say your name was?”

“Rose. Rose Kurtz from Perry County, Pennsylvania.” Rose set her bag on the floor in an out-of-the-way nook. An *Englisch* neighbor that Rose occasionally helped with laundry was involved with the La Leche League. If anyone could put Rose in contact with someone near here who could provide clean breast milk, that woman could. “If I could get breast milk and a special kind of bottle, would there be any objection?”

Sarah drew a ragged breath. “You do what you need to, and

I'll see to it that everyone backs you." She broke into sobs. "Grace's needs must be cared for. I . . . I'm not sure any of us, Joel most of all, can survive another loss."

Rose's moment of confidence disappeared as quickly as it had come. She could mess up pouring milk on cereal. What did she know about newborns, especially one without a Mamm? Rose could picture her own mother wagging a finger in Rose's face and telling her how miserably she had failed. But this loss would have much greater consequences than just another blow to her self-esteem.

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