

CINDY WOODSMALL

New York Times and CBA Best-Selling Author

Fraying at the Edge

THE AMISH of SUMMER GROVE, BOOK TWO

Fraying at the Edge

BOOKS BY CINDY WOODSMALL

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Ties That Bind
Fraying at the Edge

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NONFICTION

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and the Hearts of Two Women

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WATERBROOK

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FRAYING AT THE EDGE

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*In memory of Iris Summer Woodsmall,
January 15, 2016,
and to all loved and wanted babies
who never drew an earthly breath.
And to the parents who suffer,
searching for ways to survive a lifetime
of missed hugs, laughter, achievements,
hopes, and dreams.*



The Amish of Summer Grove series

The story so far . . .

Ties That Bind begins twenty years earlier. At an Amish birthing center, a single English college student, Brandi Nash, gives birth to a daughter as a fire engulfs the building. A few minutes later in a nearby room, an Amish woman, Lovina Brenneman, gives birth to twins, a girl and a boy. The midwife and Lovina's husband, Isaac, struggle to get the women and three babies to safety.

Chapter 2 of *Ties That Bind* moves forward twenty years, and Ariana Brenneman is trying to buy an abandoned café so she can help support her large family. She and her twin brother, Abram, have been working and saving for years to purchase it. As time is running out, Ariana's one-time friend Quill Schlabach offers to help her conduct a benefit to raise money, but Ariana wants nothing to do with him. Five years ago he broke her heart when he left Summer Grove in the middle of the night, taking with him Frieda, Ariana's closest friend. Although Ariana has moved on and is seeing Rudy, a young man she cares for deeply, she resents how Quill and Frieda deceived and betrayed her.

Quill tries to win Ariana's trust, knowing that if she will act on his ideas, she will raise the money she needs. Although Quill continues to conceal why he left with Frieda, he longs for healing between Ariana and himself. But his main purpose for being in Summer Grove is to help an unhappy, disillusioned family leave the Amish—Ariana's eldest sister, Sallome, and her family.

Ariana lets down her guard and trusts Quill's guidance. Although Rudy has reservations, he backs her as she, Quill, and Abram hold a benefit, which raises the needed money.

While Ariana and Abram are focused on the café, their brother Mark

sees a college performance in a nearby city and is struck by how much one actor looks like Salome. When Mark tells their Mamm, she seems concerned.

Lovina and Isaac ask Quill to investigate the background of this young woman. Quill obtains information that indicates the woman, Skylar Nash, is probably Isaac and Lovina's biological daughter. He contacts Skylar's parents, Brandi Nash and Nicholas Jenkins, and a DNA test confirms that she's not related to Brandi or Nicholas. The test also reveals that Skylar has drugs in her system.

Lovina struggles with the knowledge that her biological daughter seems so lost, and Nicholas, an atheist, is appalled that his daughter has been raised in an insulated, religious society. When he discovers that the midwife knew the two girls might have been accidentally switched at birth and did nothing about it, he threatens to sue her unless Ariana spends a year with him and Brandi, cut off from the Amish community. And Nicholas gives Skylar a choice—time in rehab or time with her biological family. Otherwise he will cut off all financial support.

When Ariana learns that she's not a Brenneman and that Quill helped uncover the truth, she once again feels betrayed by him and asks him never to contact her again.

Ties That Bind ends with Ariana leaving Summer Grove with Brandi and Nicholas to spend a year with them. And Quill picks up Skylar, confiscates the drugs she tries to hide, and drives her toward the Brenneman's home.

**For a list of main characters in the Amish of Summer Grove series,
see the Main Characters list at the end of the book.**

One



Summer Grove, Pennsylvania

The dark shadows lying across the living room floor were eerie, seemingly coming out of hiding as Lovina remained kneeling in front of the couch, her Bible open. The pale moonlight only intensified the darkness that surrounded her, as if the blackness were a picture of what was happening to her family. To her daughters.

She tightened her interlaced fingers. Her knees ached from the hours she had quietly sought God for the kind of help only He could give.

The daughter she'd thought she had given birth to two decades ago was gone, spending her first night with strangers in an *Englisch* home that by all accounts was worldly and in disarray. From what little she knew, that home was dysfunctional at best. She was terrified for the daughter she'd raised, the one who had none of her DNA.

Until recently Lovina hadn't realized that even God's faithful ones endured the kind of terror that had now entrenched itself in her heart. But maybe the truth was Lovina hadn't been faithful, not truly.

"God, please don't let Ariana or Skylar pay the price for my sin."

How would Ariana—Lovina's sweet, wide-eyed girl—survive for a year outside the Amish community she loved with her whole heart?

The daughter Lovina had actually given birth to was upstairs, sharing a bedroom with her sisters for the first time in her twenty-year life. The

image of meeting Skylar yesterday for the first time made Lovina break into fresh sobs. Her daughter had black nails that matched the dyed-black streak in her blond hair. And she wore jewelry, makeup, and revealing clothes. But none of that had twisted Lovina's heart in a knot like the hardness she saw in Skylar, as if bitterness had already destroyed her belief in life and humanity. The young woman wasn't hopeless. She had dreams but no apparent understanding that life and people were valuable. Even with all that, the most painful part of yesterday was when Skylar's driver, Quill Schlabach, handed Lovina the luggage and suggested she thoroughly inspect it to verify Skylar hadn't brought any drugs with her.

Lovina had set the luggage aside for a while and tried to connect with Skylar about little things—her hobbies, schooling, and such. Later, when the two of them were alone, Lovina went through the suitcase as Skylar sat on the bed, calmly and apathetically assuring her that she'd only popped a few pills on occasion and that a random drug test happened to catch her right after one such rare event. Lovina found no drugs, but Skylar's calm, detached behavior toward meeting her family, having a twin, and the drug search was disconcerting.

"Father in heaven, please strengthen Skylar to overcome all desire for pills—occasional or otherwise."

It was her fault Skylar was in this predicament. Just as it was her fault Ariana had been forced to leave here and go to a dysfunctional home. Would Lovina spend the rest of her life carrying this unbearable sense of blame?

When the floor creaked, Lovina lifted her forehead from her folded hands. Her husband stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, bathed in shadows and dressed in yesterday's pants with suspenders pulled over a white T-shirt.

He eased toward her, knelt, and put an arm around her shoulders. "God, help my Lovina," he whispered, and then he kissed her temple. "It'll be okay. It will."

Lovina didn't need or want false words of hope, but maybe God had spoken to Isaac. Maybe He hadn't. She wouldn't ask.

Skylar had spent a lifetime being indoctrinated in ways Lovina had little knowledge of. In fact, she would be in rehab right now were it not for these crazy circumstances.

Lovina's need to confess her sin to her husband weighed heavily. "The unbearable part is I did this."

"Shh." He held her tight, probably trying to ease her trembling. "No, my love. This isn't—"

"But it is. Please, I have to say it aloud to someone . . . at least once."

He nodded. "Then say it a thousand times if it will help."

Lovina wiped her tears. "When I doubted that we had the right newborn, I didn't push hard enough to get answers."

"But Rachel dismissed your fears."

"Rachel meant well, but as a midwife she didn't have a mother's heart. I should've pushed harder for answers then." She sobbed. "And twenty years later when I discovered the truth about the girls being swapped, I pushed too hard, too fast. Quill tried to warn me, telling me I needed to slow down. But I forged ahead, thinking Skylar needed the faith we could offer her. But we're in over our heads with that one. I see that now. I've upended both girls' lives. Ariana is there, and . . ." She broke into fresh tears. "I'm a horrible person, Isaac."

He wrapped her in his arms and held her tight. "God will forgive us."

Even he couldn't muster another denial of their guilt. This nightmare was Lovina's fault, and no matter how it played out, her daughters—yes, she considered both of them her daughters—would pay the price. Who knew how high a price? All the regret of her past failures and all the fear of her daughters' futures weighed on her mother's heart, squeezing and pressing until she didn't think she could take any more.

As much as she believed in forgiveness and redemption, she wasn't sure any existed for her. God could forgive her, and He could redeem her

from eternal damnation. But that wouldn't undo or erase two decades of planting and harvesting in Skylar's life.

Clarity came to her like dawn dispelling night, and she knew why the burden of her sin was so very heavy tonight. Darkness was stretching toward Ariana, and Lovina needed to pray fervently, because her sweet girl would soon be in a fight for her sanity.

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