

WANDA &
BRUNSTETTER

Betsy's
RETURN

BRIDES *of* LEHIGH CANAL



BOOK TWO



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DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my husband, who's also my pastor,
and to pastors everywhere who give so much of themselves
in order to minister to the needs of their congregations.

Chapter 1

Summer 1896



*O*h, Papa, I'm so sorry." Betsy Nelson dabbed at her tears and sank to the bed in the small room she occupied in New York City. She had just received a telegram saying that her father had suffered a heart attack and would have to resign his position as pastor of the community church in Walnutport, Pennsylvania.

"It isn't fair," Betsy moaned, as she let her mind take her back to the days when Papa, newly widowed, had begun his ministry at the small church not far from the Lehigh Canal. Betsy had been a young girl then, barely out of pigtails. Grieving over her mother's untimely death, she had been an angry, disagreeable child, often saying spiteful things so

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others would feel as badly as she did. Even as an adult she had made cutting remarks and looked down her nose at those she thought were beneath her.

She remembered when she had tried to get Mike Cooper's attention. Besides being young, handsome, and single, Mike ran a general store along the Lehigh Canal. There'd been one problem—Mike was interested in Kelly McGregor, an unkempt young woman who led the mules that pulled her father's canal boat.

Betsy grimaced at the memory of the harsh words that had come from her mouth the day she'd invited herself to join Mike and Kelly on a picnic. They'd been talking about swimming, and Mike had admitted that he'd never learned to swim well. Betsy had turned to Kelly and asked, "What about you? As dirty as you get trudging up and down the dusty towpath, I imagine you must jump into the canal quite frequently in order to get cleaned off."

Five years later Betsy could still picture Kelly's wounded expression and see the look of horror on Mike's face.

"They must have thought I was terrible. I'm surprised the board of deacons didn't fire Papa because of me," she murmured. Yet despite Betsy's curt, self-righteous ways, the church leaders had remained patient with her, just as her dear father had.

Betsy closed her eyes, and a vision of Papa standing behind the pulpit came to mind. In his younger days he'd been a handsome man with curly, dark hair and gray blue eyes

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that reflected the concern and compassion he felt for others. He'd preached strong sermons from the Bible and played the fiddle with enthusiasm, and despite his disagreeable daughter, everyone in the congregation respected and admired the Reverend Hiram Nelson.

Betsy squeezed her fingers around the telegram, crumpling it into a tight ball and letting it fall to the floor. "It's not right that Papa should have to give up something he's done for so many years. If only his heart had remained strong. If only God would give us a miracle."

She stood and moved over to the window, staring at the street below. An ice wagon rolled past, probably heading to one of the nearby stores to make a delivery. Several horses plodded down the street, pulling various-sized buggies transporting businessmen to their office jobs. A newspaper boy stood on one corner, heralding the news of the day. A peddler selling his wares ambled down the road, pushing his cart full of pots and pans. New York City was always busy, even in these early morning hours.

Betsy leaned against the window casing and thought about how much her life had changed over the last four years. She'd left Walnutport in 1892, and soon after her arrival in New York City, where she was to meet with the mission board, she had been beaten and robbed. A gentle, caring woman named Abigail Smith, an officer in the Salvation Army, had taken Betsy into her home and nursed her back to health. By the time Betsy's wounds had healed, she knew the

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Salvation Army was a worthy cause and she wanted a part in it. Since that time she'd found a closer relationship with Christ and had joined others from the Salvation Army in numerous street meetings, often playing her zither, singing, and proclaiming the Word of God to anyone who would listen. She'd also spent many hours at the Cheap Food and Shelter Depot, which helped the poor and downtrodden obtain a new lease on life.

Betsy's ties with the Salvation Army had also presented her with an opportunity to volunteer at a local orphanage. She, who had previously been uncomfortable around children, now found pleasure in working with underprivileged orphans so in need of love and attention. For the first time in Betsy's thirty-one years she found herself wishing she had children of her own. She supposed some women were destined to be old maids, and she was convinced that she would be one of them.

Betsy's mind snapped back to the present situation with her father's ill health and his resignation from the church. A new preacher would soon be assigned to take Papa's place, and that didn't feel right to Betsy. Neither did Papa being sick.

A spark of anger ignited a flare of determination in her heart as she moved away from the window and knelt in front of the trunk at the foot of her bed. "I must set my work in New York City aside and return home. Papa needs me to care for him now."

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Dear William Covington:

The board of deacons from the Walnutport Community Church in Pennsylvania would like to interview you, for our previous pastor, the Rev. Hiram Nelson, recently suffered a heart attack and has been forced to retire. If you're willing to meet with us, please notify me as soon as possible.

*Sincerely,
Ben Hanson
Head Deacon*

William folded the letter he'd received yesterday and placed it on the rolltop desk sitting in the far corner of his father's study. It had only taken him a few hours to deliberate before he'd sent a telegram to Deacon Hanson, letting him know that he would arrive at the train depot in Easton, Pennsylvania, on Friday and would rent a carriage to make the trip to Walnutport. That would give him the opportunity to meet with the board of deacons on Saturday, as well as tour the church and parsonage. On Sunday he would meet the members of his prospective congregation and give them a sample of his preaching.

William strolled back across the room and took a seat on the elegant sofa his mother had purchased on her recent trip

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to England. He leaned back, stretching his arms overhead, and yawned. He was glad for this opportunity to be alone with his thoughts. His parents had gone to the opera tonight, and even though William's mother had tried to convince him to go along, he had politely declined, saying he needed time to pack for the trip and prepare his sermon.

William's gaze came to rest on the massive portrait of his father, hanging on the far wall. William Covington Jr. had been born into a wealthy family and had inherited all his father's business ventures after William Sr. died several years ago. William III had no desire to follow in his father's or grandfather's footsteps as a successful entrepreneur. The fact that William's father owned a thriving newspaper in Buffalo, New York, as well as several hotels, the new music hall, and numerous specialty stores, meant nothing to William. He had accepted Christ as his Savior when he was twelve years old, and ever since then, his strongest desire had been to become a minister. Three and a half months ago he'd graduated from the seminary in Boston, full of hope for the future and anxious to marry Beatrice Lockhart, his high school sweetheart.

William groaned as a vision of Beatrice came to mind—ebony hair and eyes the color of dark chocolate. Soon after they'd begun courting, Beatrice had agreed to marry him. The wedding had been set for the week after William graduated from seminary, and his future bride had seemed excited about the idea of being the wife of a "prominent minister," as she liked to refer to William whenever they were with

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her friends. But when William had informed Beatrice that his first church might be small and unable to pay him much money, she'd insisted that he give up the idea of becoming a preacher and go to work for his father. Certain that God had called him to the ministry, William had refused her request. Beatrice pouted at first, the way she'd always done whenever she didn't get her way. Then she'd finally given in and said she would abide by whatever William decided.

"She lied to me!" William shuddered at the memory of standing at the altar, waiting for a bride who never showed up. A note had been delivered by Beatrice's father. Beatrice had changed her mind; she didn't want to be a minister's wife after all. "*Too many demands,*" she'd written. "*It might take years before you're hired at a church that would be able to support us adequately.*"

William folded his arms and leaned forward, a deep groan escaping his lips. He could never trust another woman or get over the humiliation of being jilted by Beatrice. He'd thought she loved him for better or worse, richer or poorer, but he'd been sorely mistaken.

He stood, prepared to return to the desk and work on the sermon he would deliver to the people in Walnutport, but raucous yapping distracted him. His mother's Siamese cat raced into the room, with his father's English setter nipping at her tail. The dog had obviously sneaked into the house, probably because William had left the door ajar when he'd gone out for some fresh air after his parents left. Thanks to

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his carelessness, muddy paw prints now covered Mother's Persian rug.

"Lucius, come here!"

The dog ignored William and kept chasing the hissing, spitting cat.

William quickly joined the chase, hoping to capture his father's prized hunting dog and remove him from the house. But each time Lucius was within William's grasp, the animal eluded him. In the meantime, Princess, the pampered feline, hopped onto a small table, and Lucius leaped into the air and swiped at Princess with his large, muddy paw. The cat jumped to the floor, eluding the setter, but Mother's Parisian vase crashed to the floor.

"I'll never hear the end of this," William groaned. When his mother saw the mess, she would tell him that it would never have happened if he had gone to the opera as they had asked.

William looked up. "Oh Lord, I pray the church in Walnutport accepts me as its pastor, because I need to get away—away from Father's unreasonable demands, from Mother's persnickety ways, and from the memory of the woman who left me standing at the altar."