

WANDA &  
BRUNSTETTER

*Sarah's*  
CHOICE

BRIDES *of* LEHIGH CANAL



BOOK THREE



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DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my husband, Richard. Thanks for all the interesting things you've shared with me about playing on the towpath and swimming in the Lehigh Canal when you were a boy.

*The LORD seeth not as man seeth;  
for man looketh on the outward appearance,  
but the LORD looketh on the heart.*

I SAMUEL 16:7



# Chapter 1

*Walnutport, Pennsylvania—Summer 1898*



*W*<sub>o-o-o-o!</sub> *Wo-o-o-o!* The low moan of a conch shell drifted through the open window in Sarah Turner's kitchen.

Leaving a pan of bacon cooking on the coal-burning stove, she peered out the window. Although she saw no sign of the canal boat, the sound of its conch shell could be heard for a mile and signaled the boat would be approaching the lock soon.

"A boat's coming. Would you mind finishing the bacon while I go out to open the lockgate?" Sarah asked her mother-in-law, who stood at the counter, cracking eggs into a ceramic bowl.

"Sure, I can do that," Maria said with a weary-looking

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nod. A chunk of her nearly gray hair had fallen loose from the back of her bun, and her dark eyes looked dull and puffy.

Sarah's heart went out to Maria, who looked more tired than usual. Sarah feared that caring for the children was too much for her mother-in-law—especially since she'd begun having trouble with her vision.

*Wo-o-o-o!* *Wo-o-o-o!* *Wo-o-o-o!* The sound of the conch shell drew closer.

Sarah hurried across the room. She was almost to the door when her eight-year-old son, Sam Jr., raced up to her, bright-eyed and smiling from ear to ear.

“Can I help raise the lock, Mama?” he asked.

Sarah shook her head. “Sorry, Sammy, but you're not strong enough for that.”

“Am so strong enough! I ain't no weaklin', Mama.” When the boy pulled his shoulders straight back and puffed out his chest, a lock of sandy blond hair fell across his forehead.

“Of course you're not a weakling, but raising and lowering the lock is hard work, even for me.”

His blue eyes darkened as he tipped his head and looked up at her with furrowed brows. “How come ya always treat me like a baby?”

Sarah blew out an exasperated breath. “I don't treat you like a baby. I just know that you're not strong enough to raise and lower the lock. Now if you really want to help, run back

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to the parlor and keep an eye on your little sister and brother for me.”

“Okay.” Sammy thrust his hands in his pockets, turned, and shuffled out of the room.

With a shake of her head and a silent prayer for guidance, Sarah hurried outside.

As the flat-roofed wooden boat approached, she cranked open the upper wicket gates to fill the lock. Once it was filled with water, she lowered the upper head gate, and the boat was drawn into the stone walls of the lock. Then the upper head gates were raised and the upper wicket gates were closed, so that no more water could enter the lock. Next, the lower wicket gates were opened and the water rushed out of the lock. Following that, the lower gates were opened, and the boat was drawn out and into the lower level of the canal. Finally, Sarah opened the main gate to let the boat out and on its way.

As the boat moved on down the canal, Sarah headed back to the house, arms aching and forehead beaded with perspiration. This was hard work—too hard for a twenty-seven-year-old woman like her—and definitely too hard for a young boy. But she had no other choice. When her husband, Sam, died nearly a year ago, she'd taken over his job of tending the lock in order to provide for her three children.

She shuddered, thinking of the accident that had taken

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Sam. A boat had broken loose from where it was tied and floated to the lock, where it had jammed. Sam and several others had been trying to free the boat. While Sam was standing on top of the lock, his foot slipped, and he'd tumbled into the water. The boat shifted, and Sam's body had been crushed between the boat and the lock.

Lock tending could be dangerous work, and Sarah had to remind herself every day to be very careful in all that she did during the process of letting the boats in and out.

Sarah was grateful that Sam's mother lived with them and had helped to care for the children ever since Sam died. But with Maria's health failing, Sarah couldn't help but worry.

She thought about her own mother, who'd died of pneumonia a few months ago. Papa had given up canaling and sold his boat soon after that. He'd moved to Easton and taken a job at one of the factories where he'd previously worked during the winter. Sarah missed seeing both of her parents, but she understood Papa's need for a change.

Sarah leaned wearily against the side of the lock tender's shed and sighed. "Oh, Sam, I miss you so much. How I wish you were still here." Tears slipped from her eyes. How many more things would change in her life? How much longer would Maria be able to help out? Could she and the children make it on their own if Maria moved back to Easton where she used to live with Sam's brother, Roger?

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Sarah knew that's where Maria belonged, but could she convince her of that?



*"I hereby bequest to my grandson, Elias Brooks, my canal boat, with all the supplies and mules that go with it."*

Twenty-eight-year-old Elias looked over at his parents to gauge their reaction to the reading of his grandfather's will. Mother, with her light brown hair pinned tightly in a bun, sat with a stoic expression on her face.

Father frowned, making his smooth, nearly bald head stand out in contrast to the deep wrinkles in his forehead. "It won't be easy to sell that stupid boat," he said, glancing at Elias and then quickly looking away. "With the canal era winding down, I doubt the old man's boat will be worth much at all."

"How can you talk about your own father like that?" Elias's twenty-five-year-old sister, Carolyn, spoke up. "Grandpa was much more than an old man. He was your father, and a wonderful grandfather to me and Elias."

A muscle on the side of Father's neck quivered. "That man was never much of a father to me. Always thought about that ridiculous boat and how much money he could make haulin' coal up the canal from Mauch Chunk to Easton."

"It was Grandpa's money that allowed you to get the

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schooling you needed to run your newspaper,” Elias dared to say.

Father slammed his fist on the table where they sat in Clifford Moore’s law office. “How dare you speak to me like that!”

“Sorry,” Elias mumbled, “but I think it’s disrespectful to talk about Grandpa in such a way. He did his best by you, and—”

“His best?” Father’s face flamed. “If he’d done his best, he would never have bought that boat. He’d have stayed here in Easton and helped me run the newspaper, which is where he belonged.”

Mr. Moore cleared his throat a couple of times. “Can we get back to the reading of Andrew’s will?”

“You mean there’s more?” The question came from Mother, who’d begun twiddling her thumbs, a gesture Elias knew indicated she was becoming quite agitated.

Mr. Moore looked at Elias. “Your grandfather also left a note saying he wanted you to have his Bible. I believe it’s somewhere on the boat.”

Elias nodded. He looked forward to reading Grandpa’s Bible and searching for all the places he’d underlined in it. During the times Elias had spent with Grandpa when he was a boy, he’d enjoyed hearing Grandpa’s deep voice as he read passages of scripture each evening before bed. It was largely due to Grandpa’s godly influence that, at the age of

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sixteen, Elias had come to know the Lord personally. He'd been trying to live a Christian life ever since, which was why he couldn't let any of the things Father said today rile him.

Elias stared out the window as he thought about the summers during his teen years that he'd spent aboard his grandfather's boat. Father hadn't wanted Elias to go, but Mother had convinced him, saying she thought it'd be a good experience for the boy. Elias had enjoyed those days on the water, helping with various chores as Grandpa hauled load after load of coal on the Lehigh Navigation System. Grandpa hadn't expected anything from Elias except a good day's work, and he'd always offered his acceptance and praise. Not like Father, full of unreasonable demands, and critical of everything Elias said or did.

"I'll see that an ad is run in tomorrow's newspaper," Father said, bringing Elias's thoughts to a halt. "If we're lucky, someone who's still determined to haul that dirty coal up the canal might see the ad and buy the old man's boat."

Elias gripped the arm of his chair and grimaced. Grandpa deserved more respect, especially from his only son. But then, Father had never had any respect for Grandpa; at least not as far as Elias could tell.

Carolyn, her blue eyes flashing, spoke up again. "Please stop referring to Grandpa as an 'old man.'"

"I agree with Carolyn, and there's no reason for you to advertise Grandpa's boat in your newspaper either," Elias

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said, summoning up his courage.

Father folded his arms and glared at Elias. “Oh, and why’s that?”

“Because the boat’s mine, and it. . .well, it’s not for sale.”

Father’s dark eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“Grandpa wanted me to have the boat, or he wouldn’t have willed it to me.” Elias loosened his collar, which suddenly felt much too tight. He wasn’t used to standing up to his father like this. “If Grandpa wanted me to have his boat, then he must have wanted me to continue hauling coal with it.”

The wrinkles in Father’s forehead deepened. “Wh—what are you saying?” he sputtered.

“I’m saying that I’m going to quit my job at the newspaper and captain Grandpa’s boat.”

Mother gasped. “Elias, you can’t mean that!”

He nodded. “I certainly do.”

Father’s thin lips compressed so tightly that the ends of his handlebar mustache twitched up and down. “That would be a very foolish thing to do.”

“I don’t think it’s foolish,” Carolyn put in. “In fact, I think—”

Father’s gaze swung to Carolyn, and he glared at her. “Nobody cares what you think, so keep your opinion to yourself!”

She blinked a couple of times, pushed a wayward strand

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of honey-blond hair into the tight bun she wore, and sat back in her chair with a sigh.

“Perhaps your grandfather didn’t mean for you to actually captain his boat,” Mother spoke up. “Maybe he left it to you so you could sell the boat and use the money for something else.”

Elias’s face heated, and he became keenly aware that his left cheek, partially covered by the red mark he’d been born with, felt like it was on fire. “I think Grandpa did mean for me to captain his boat. Maybe to you and Father it would be foolish for me to do so, but I feel a strong need to fulfill Grandpa’s wishes.”

Father’s piercing blue eyes darkened like a storm cloud. “You take that boat out, and there will be no job waiting for you at my newspaper when the canal closes! Is that understood?”

Mother gasped again. “Aaron, you can’t mean that!”

“Yes, Myrtle, I most certainly do.” Father turned to look at Elias. “Well, what’s it going to be? Are you working for me or not?”

A sense of determination welled in Elias’s soul as he made his final decision. Rising from his chair, he looked his father in the eye and said, “I’m going to captain Grandpa’s boat, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”