

*3 Romances from a Unique
Pennsylvania Amish Community*

THE BRIDES OF THE
BIG VALLEY

WANDA &
BRUNSTETTER
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CHAPTER 1

Belleville, Pennsylvania

Deanna Speicher hurried to set up her table at the flea market, all the while trying to keep her five-year-old son in tow. The place bustled with activity as other vendors did the same, unpacking boxes and putting prices on the articles they hoped to sell. Serious shoppers usually came before the initial crowds arrived, looking for the best bargains, freshest baked goods, and newly harvested produce—all part of the flea market appeal.

“*Mammi. Mammi.*” Abner tugged on Deanna’s dress with one hand while pointing in the opposite direction. “*En sack voll eppel!*”

“*Jab*, there are many sacks of apples. We will get some later.” Deanna spoke in Pennsylvania Dutch so Abner would understand. He knew only a few words of English but would learn more when he started school next August. One of the teachers would teach him, along with three other special-needs children. The other teacher in their Amish schoolhouse would give lessons to the remainder of the students.

Deanna removed several colorful quilted table runners and pot holders from the box she’d set on one of her tables; at the same time, she tried to keep an eye on her rambunctious son. Abner had

been born with Down syndrome. He was full of affection to those whom he recognized, but sometimes the child acted overly friendly with strangers. The latter gave her reason for concern. Here at the flea market, where Deanna came nearly every Wednesday to sell her quilted items, many strangers came and went, as well as people she and Abner knew. One person in particular always caught her son's attention whenever he visited the market or came by their house.

Deanna smiled. Elmer Yoder had been a good friend even before the tragic death of her husband a little over a year ago. Simon died after falling from their roof, attempting to replace missing shingles.

She had spent three months trying to manage on her own while dealing with the shock of losing him. Elmer had stepped in and given of his time during those painful days, coming over often to help with chores and entertain Abner while Deanna got other tasks and some quilting done.

One month later, Deanna's world fell apart again when her mother died from a brain aneurism. Her father was devastated by the loss of his wife of forty years. A few weeks after her mother's funeral, Deanna sold her house, and she and Abner moved in with her dad. It turned out to be a good arrangement. Dad helped them financially, and Deanna cooked his meals and took care of the house, since his pallet-making job kept him busy most of the day.

Deanna's stomach gurgled as the tempting aroma of fresh herbs, apple cider, and smoky cured meats reached her nostrils.

A good many people milled around, talking with friends, while others introduced themselves to sellers, but she saw no sign of Elmer.

Deanna sighed. *If he's here, I hope he drops by—at least to say hello. If he isn't too busy shoeing horses today, I'd like to invite him over for supper tonight.*

She turned her head abruptly when Abner shouted, "*Hundli!*"

Deanna looked in the direction he pointed. An elderly English woman moving past her tables had not a puppy but a full-grown dog walking in front of her on a leash. The woman wore a pair of dark glasses, which to some might seem strange on this overcast day in October. It didn't take Deanna long to realize the woman was blind; her dog was a service animal. Deanna wondered how it felt to live in a world of darkness. It would certainly be a challenge. She closed her eyes and opened them quickly, unable to imagine going through life with no vision.

As a man joined the woman and took hold of her arm, Abner hollered: "*Die hundli is gross.*"

"Yes, it is big," Deanna responded in Pennsylvania Dutch. "Only it's a dog, not a puppy."

Abner's pale eyebrows furrowed, but he didn't argue with her. She guessed to him all dogs were puppies.

What a shame your daadi isn't here to see how you're growing. An image of Deanna's tall, blond-haired husband invaded her thoughts as she placed the rest of her quilted items neatly on the tables. Abner took after his dad with sandy blond hair and pale blue eyes. Simon had been a hard worker and always provided well for them through his carpentry work. Now the responsibility of raising their son fell mostly on her.

If she made enough money today, Deanna hoped to use some of it toward a gift to give Abner for his birthday next week. Of course, her option was to make something for him, the way her

father had been doing out in the barn the past several weeks after Abner went to bed. Dad loved his grandson, and Abner couldn't get enough of him either. Deanna's father didn't have many free hours at home, but he always made time to spend a few minutes each day with her son.

Deanna's musings evaporated once more when a middle-aged English woman stopped at her table. "How much are your pot holders? I'm doing a little early Christmas shopping, and these will make nice gifts for some of my family and friends." She gestured to a stack of the more colorful ones.

"I am asking five dollars apiece."

The woman's eyebrows raised a notch. "Seriously?"

Deanna gave a nod. "Is it too much?" She'd never had anyone question the price of her quilted items before.

"No, not at all. I've seen pot holders like this go for ten dollars down in Lancaster County. Yours are quite reasonable." The customer picked up twenty pot holders and handed them to Deanna. "I'll take these as well as ten of your table runners."

"Those are fifteen dollars each," Deanna explained.

"Not a problem."

Deanna accepted the woman's money and put the items in a plastic sack. She'd no more than handed over the purchase, when Abner whipped around the front of the table. "Daadi! Daadi!"

A lump formed in Deanna's throat, watching Elmer approach, pick up Abner, and lift the boy onto his shoulders. In his enthusiasm, Abner knocked Elmer's straw hat off his head, revealing the lanky man's full crop of auburn hair. When it landed on the floor, she picked it up. In the time her son had known Elmer, he'd never called him "Daddy" before. Could it be because Elmer came

around so much and spent a good deal of time with Abner that the child now thought of him as his father?



Elmer grinned when Deanna picked up his hat and placed it on one of her tables. She looked so perky this morning, like everything was right with her world—a far cry from the sadness he'd seen in her brown eyes after Simon died. Elmer shared in Deanna's grief, for he and Simon Speicher had been close since boyhood.

Elmer stood silently, holding Abner's legs securely as he watched Deanna wait on a young English couple who had stepped up to her table. He'd never admitted it to anyone, but Elmer fell hard for Deanna way back when they were teenagers. But she and Simon began courting before Elmer had a chance to voice his feelings for her. Even if he had, she may have rejected him.

When Deanna married Simon, Elmer found it difficult to watch his best friend in the position he'd dreamed of holding. Because he cared about them both, Elmer wrestled with his unwanted feelings for his friend's wife. His heart ached whenever he'd seen them at church or any social event. Most times when he saw Deanna and Simon together, Elmer felt conflicted. It pleased him to see his best friend so happy, but at the same time he envied their contentment with each other. So as not to jeopardize his friendship with Simon, Elmer kept his emotions in check. As far as he knew, no one suspected how he felt about Deanna.

As time went on, Elmer accepted the strong bond of friendship with both Deanna and Simon. Inside, his conscience won out, for it was wrong to long for someone not meant for him. With God's help, Elmer had managed to let go of his feelings for

the woman who could never be his. Instead, he focused on his job and leisure activities, always praying that someday he would find the same kind of happiness his best friend had with a very special wife.

When Deanna became pregnant with her and Simon's child, Elmer faced another hurdle. Since he had never met a woman he cared about as much as Deanna, Elmer resigned himself to the likelihood that he might remain a bachelor, never knowing the joy of married life or experiencing the rewards of fatherhood.

Unaware of Elmer's original desire to make Deanna his wife, Simon had invited him over for supper many times for special occasions or simply to get together. Then after Abner came into the world, Elmer became like an uncle to the precious little boy. He loved Deanna's son as if he were his own. The little guy illuminated happiness right from the start, willing to give pure, innocent affection to everyone. When Abner learned how to walk, he never hesitated to go to Elmer, holding his arms out to be picked up.

Now his best friend was gone, and without planning it, Elmer's feelings resurfaced for Deanna. Until recently, he'd fought his emotions, guilt eating away at him for how he felt. But as time went on and Elmer offered his support and help to Deanna, he sensed her healing process had begun. Only then did he slowly reveal how he felt about her.

A few months ago, he'd begun courting her. Although Deanna had never spoken words of love to Elmer, the evidence showed by the way she reacted to him whenever he came around—like now, as their gazes met and a warm smile spread across her pretty face. Elmer had to hold himself back not to shout to the world that he

was in love with this special woman.

"*Gaul reide!*" Abner gave Elmer's hair a tug.

Deanna shook her finger at the boy. "Not now, Son. Elmer didn't come to the flea market to give horse rides, and you need to let go of his hair."

"Aw, it's okay." Chuckling, Elmer bounced his shoulders up and down. "How's this, little man? Does that feel like a bucking horse?"

Abner giggled. "Gaul reide! Gaul reide!"

"Okay," Elmer relented. "I'll give you a short ride, but then we're gonna come back here and help your *mamm*." He looked at Deanna to gain her approval and felt relief when she nodded.

"We'll be back soon." Holding tightly to Deanna's precious boy, Elmer trotted off at a fairly good clip. As he made his way around the exterior of the market, passing cars and plenty of white-top, yellow-top, and black-top buggies in the parking lot, Elmer's smile grew wider. Several people looked his way and waved. Elmer gave a nod in their direction, and Abner kept laughing. Elmer wished the game of horsey ride could last forever, but unfortunately, he had a real horse to shoe on the other side of town. Later this evening though, he planned to stop by Rufus Kanagy's place to see Deanna. If things went well, by the end of the day, he'd be counting the weeks till his and Deanna's wedding.