



The
BRIDGE
of
PEACE

AN ADA'S HOUSE NOVEL

CINDY
WOODSMALL

The New York Times Best-Selling Author of
When the Soul Mends

The
BRIDGE
of
PEACE

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*In loving memory of the best, most dedicated
teacher in my life—my mom.*

*You were strong, gentle, wise, and flawed. You taught me to
read, write, and never give up on God. You taught me to
cherish friendships, be stalwart in hardships, and take great
pleasure in the little things life offers. I am grateful for
everything you took time to teach me, and I'm grateful for
everything I learned while you were simply being you.*

*It was your passing that caused me to begin writing,
for when I lost you, I lost a part of me.*

I'll miss you forever.





One

Quiet hung in the air inside the one-room schoolhouse as the children waited on Lena's next action. The curiosity she loved to stir in her scholars now filled their minds in ways she wished she could erase. The hush wasn't out of respect or desk work or learning.

Staring into defiant eyes, she stood. "Return to your seat, Peter."

With his back to the other students, he leaned across her oak desk. "Make me." The threat in his voice was undeniable. She'd spoken to his parents about his behavior, but they'd believed that their son was only kidding and that she was taking his words and actions all wrong.

Nothing about the conduct of this six-foot man-child hinted at humor. He wasn't teasing, but he was toying with her—like her barn cats did with field mice before killing their prey.

Feeling as unsightly as a wounded rodent was part of daily life for her. It even slipped into her dreams on a regular basis. But Lena was no mouse. When dealing with Peter, her will battled with her emotions. The teacher in her wanted to find a way to reach inside him, to get beyond the prejudices and surliness and find something of value. The rest of her simply wished he'd never moved to Dry Lake.

Still, she believed that most people had hidden wealth, good things within that made them more worthy than they appeared on the outside. For reasons that had nothing to do with Peter, she had to hold on to that belief.

She offered a teacher-friendly smile. "The assignment stands, and it's due tomorrow. Take your seat, please."

He slid her well-organized papers onto the floor and crawled onto her desk and sat. At fifteen he was the oldest student she'd ever taught—or *tried* to teach. He should have graduated sixteen months ago from an Amish school in Ohio, where he'd lived before moving to Dry Lake. Although she had no idea what happened to put him so far behind in his studies, he seemed to think *she* was the problem.

It would be easier to tap into his better self, or at least better behavior, if there was someone to send him to when he got this bad. During her *rumchpringe*, her running-around years, she'd used her freedoms to attend public high school. When her public school teachers faced a difficult student like Peter, they sent him to another teacher, a counselor, or a principal. If there was another adult nearby, Peter probably wouldn't consider it a game to try to take control of her class. Maybe she needed to talk about this situation with her *Englischer* friend Samantha. Surely with her degree in psychology and her working this year as a school counselor, she would know some helpful tips.

"At your desk, Peter."

"I'm not doing the work, and I better not get a zero."

She swallowed and drew a breath, refusing the temptation to scream at him. "You have the right to decide your actions, or maybe a better word is *inactions*, but you do not have the right to insist on what grade I can give." Hoping to continue with class, Lena walked around the desk and settled her attention on the first-grade students.

"Who has their penmanship papers done?" Her three first-grade scholars raised their hands. "Good."

She could feel Peter behind her, seething with anger that had little to do with her. Wondering if she should face him or keep her focus on teaching, she took Marilyn's spiral-bound notebook in hand and began looking over the young girl's work. "To your desk, Peter," she repeated as she made a smiley face at the top of Marilyn's page.

His breath was hot on the back of her neck as he whispered, “You won’t win, so don’t even try.”

The threat unleashed her anger, and suddenly she became its slave. Even while telling herself to ignore him as he was finally making his way toward his desk, she spun around. “You’re a bully, Peter. Do you understand that about yourself?”

His face and eyes became like stone. “I’ll convince the school board you’re the problem. They’re already whispering behind your back about how to get rid of you. I bet they only hired you because they felt sorry for you. I mean, what else would someone like you do, marry?”

His personal attack caused a storm of insecurities about her looks to rise within. But that aside, she was sure he was wrong about the school board wanting to get rid of her. She’d made one good-sized error they’d not been pleased with, but surely...

He slapped the side of his face really hard and laughed. “Look, I’m making my face blotchy like Teacher Lena’s.”

The younger students looked horrified as he mocked her. Some of the older boys laughed, but most were clearly embarrassed for her. Peter kept smacking the side of his face, egging on the class to laugh at his antics.

“Mandy and Rachel,”—Lena looked to the oldest girls in the class—“please take everyone outside for a brief recess.”

Peter sat on her desk again, but at least he’d hushed. Smirking, but silent. The room filled with the sounds of desks shifting slightly and the rustle of clothing and soft, padded shoes as her scholars went outside. Willing her irritation to calm, she took several deep breaths and focused her thoughts on what could be accomplished with patience and effort. Good memories of teaching moved into her mind. At twenty-three years old, she’d been teaching for five years, and with only a few exceptions, she’d basked in the fulfillment of it.

Soon her scholars were outside, and the room was quiet.

"I don't want to embarrass you in front of the class, Peter. I only wish you'd show that same respect to me. If you want to color the side of your face to match mine, there are still a few blueberries on the vine out back, but nothing you do to your face will alter the real problem, will it?"

"Not unless you quit."

"How will getting a new teacher solve anything? Why don't you try fighting against the part of you that has no regard for your future."

"I hate this place." He picked up a book and hurled it across the room.

Lena flinched as the text hit the ground, but she forced her voice to remain calm. "I understand that learning doesn't come easy for you, but I can help you overcome—"

"Learning comes plenty easy," Peter interrupted. "I just ain't interested."

She knew he struggled to learn, and maybe Samantha would have some suggestions about this too, but Lena's best chance of reaching him wouldn't be found in trying to make him admit to his difficulties. "Why not?"

"What do you care?"

"If I knew why, maybe I could help change how you feel."

He rolled his eyes. "I don't want your help. *Mamm* says I can't stop coming to school just because of my age, so I just want to pass the eighth grade this time and get out of here."

"Then do your work. If you're struggling, I'll help you."

"You teachers are all alike. You say that, but..."

Piercing screams of young girls vibrated the room, and Lena moved to the window. Aaron Blank's meanspirited bull stood mere feet from the ragged fence that separated the pasture from the playground. Elmer, a third-grade student, seemed to be harassing the animal with two eighth-grade students egging him on. She hurried past desks and ran outside. The older students banged on the metal gate with their hands while cheering for Elmer. The third grader poked a stick against the angry creature's face and nose while the younger girls squealed with fear and excitement.

Enraged, the Holstein tossed his head back and forth, slinging spit and mucus as it stormed at the stick, coming closer to the fence with each move.

“Boys, stop that right now.” While Lena hurried toward the boys, the older girls left the first and second graders at the swing set and ran toward them as well. Clearly the girls hadn’t been watching this group. Aaron had promised her that he’d fix the fence and keep this bull out of the pasture that bordered the school. Moving to a spot between the angry bull and the students, Lena took the stick from Elmer. She gestured for the children to back up. “Everyone return to the classroom. We’ll discuss this inside.”

As Mandy and Rachel encouraged the others to go inside, Lena turned to look at the bull. The massive creature could easily plow through the pitiful wire fence.

“One would think they’d know better,” she mumbled quietly, taking a few moments of serenity to gather herself. “Why would they do such a thing?” She glanced up to see Peter standing in the doorway, watching her. He was probably hoping the bull would come through the fence and destroy her. She sighed. *I think I’m looking at the source of influence over those other boys.* After a quick, silent prayer of thanks for everyone’s safety, she tossed the stick onto the woodpile and headed inside. Her students often hit a baseball or sometimes even a volleyball into this field and went after it. What if someone had done so today while others had that bull riled?

It was time for a lesson in using good sense. Surely even Peter couldn’t keep them from seeing the wisdom of not provoking the bull. But Peter had many of them viewing her with as much disrespect as he did. How she looked had nothing to do with the job in front of her—arming her scholars with skills that would serve them all their lives and keeping them safe while they were in her care.

After school she’d drop off a few of the children at their homes and

then do something refreshing before going to see Aaron about keeping that bull away from the schoolhouse.



As Grey left his barn and crossed the driveway, he smelled supper cooking—probably fried chicken by the aroma of it. Pieces of freshly mowed grass that were almost too small to see were scattered throughout the lawn. The porch and walkways were spotless, and the windows sparkled as the sun moved low on the horizon. A familiar, tainted feeling rose within him as he opened the screen door to his home.

His wife stood beside the oven, scouring a nearby countertop. She glanced at the clock and then to him. “Hey.” Her eyes moved over his clothing, and he knew the quick study of his outfit was to assess just how dirty he was today. She returned to the task in front of her.

“Hi.” He set his lunchpail in the sink. “Where’s Ivan?”

“At your Mamm’s.”

He nodded. The light in their five-year-old son’s eyes strengthened Grey. After he removed the plastic containers from his lunchpail, he rinsed them. “Been there all day?”

“Just since he got up from his nap. Supper will be ready by the time you’re showered.”

Inside her softly spoken sentence, he’d been dismissed and given respectful instructions to come to the table clean. He needed to bathe and change clothes before the school board meeting anyway, so he went to his bedroom. While working in the cabinetry shop, he’d seen Lena Kauffman drop children off at the Mast house. He’d considered stepping out and speaking to her for a minute to try to get a feel for her side of the complaints the Benders were lodging against her. But if she knew the board was meeting to discuss those criticisms, she’d want to attend. Michael Blank, his father-in-law and the chairman of the school board, had said

earlier this week that he intended to discover if the Benders had any real justification for their grumbling before he was willing to share any of the negative talk with Lena. Grey appreciated Michael's reasoning, but he doubted that Lena would. As a kid she'd had a fierce temper when pushed. It'd been many a year since Grey had seen it, so he was confident that hadn't played into Michael's decision.

The memory of Lena's brother provoking her beyond her control probably still stood out in a lot of people's memories. Her temper made her an easy target and caused her brother to declare war, so the harassment of Lennie became a full-time game as she was growing up. One time her brother had brought Grey and a group of friends with him on a romp through the woods. Soon enough they'd taken over an abandoned tree house. They were teens, around sixteen years old, and wanted a private place to get away from their parents, a place to talk freely and smoke a cigarette. But the playhouse was Lennie's, complete with books, papers, and a diary.

She must have heard their voices because she called out to them. When her brother realized she was climbing up the rope ladder, he'd shaken her loose, causing her to fall. Rather than going home, she raged at them while trying to climb the ladder again. Once she'd been dumped again, some of the guys pulled the ladder inside the tree house and dangled her diary and books over the sides. She'd thrown rocks at them, calling out the worst things her ten-year-old mind knew to say—that they all stunk and they looked like old mares. One of the guys began reading from her journal. Lennie's eyes filled with tears as she screamed for him to stop. Feeling sorry for her, Grey had freed her diary from the tormentors. He tossed it to her, but she kept throwing rocks through the oversize window frames until she pinged her brother a good one.

"Rumschpringe teens." Grey sighed. It was amazing the Amish community hadn't imploded from the turmoil they caused.

The dimness of the fading day settled over the quiet space as he

entered the bedroom. Beige sheers fluttered gently in the late September breeze. The bedspread was tucked crisp and perfect with the pillows adjusted just so, and not one item sat on the top of his dresser. He moved into the bathroom and turned on the shower. His razors. His toothbrush. His shaving cream. His combs. All lined up perfectly on a rectangular piece of white linen.

Plush, clean towels were stacked neatly on a shelf. He grabbed one, hung it on the peg near the shower stall and peeled out of his clothes. Feeling tempted for a moment to leave his stuff on the floor, he mumbled to himself to grow up. Elsie wouldn't say a word. Conversations didn't pass the threshold of the bedroom. Ever.

As the hot water and soap rinsed the day's grime from his body, he wondered if she ever missed him.

The discomfort of the thought drained his energy. For too long he'd searched his mind and heart for answers. At twenty-eight he no longer had much youthful nonsense in him. He tried to think and act like a considerate man, but whatever was wrong lay outside his grasp to understand. Was it his fault? Was it hers? He didn't know, and sometimes he was so weary he didn't care.

But giving up would only break them worse.

Sing for me, Grey.

The memory haunted him. How long had it been since she'd wanted him to sing for her? He turned off the shower and grabbed his towel. He knew of only one possible answer for their marriage—an avenue that might bring relief—but he'd have to be willing to publicly embarrass her and himself to pursue it. There had to be another way to find answers.



Two

Deborah closed her eyes, trying to block out a reality she could not yet welcome. Heat from the gas-powered stove continued to pour into the kitchen as it had since before daylight. The orders for baked goods were almost done for the day. With her eyelids shut tight, she tried to still the fresh ache.

Not one breath of air came through the open windows or screen door.

Still. Dry. Unmoving.

Exactly like her life.

He'd left.

Not only the faith. And his friends. And his mother, Ada.

But her.

Three months ago. Some days she could feel beyond the blackness and laugh again. But now was not one of them, not after receiving a note from him in today's mail. He hadn't actually written to her as much as sent money along with a scribbled apology. His admission of regret only stirred hurt and anger. He wasn't coming back. She wanted to burn the cash he'd sent. But how could she? She and his mother needed money. Badly.

The Amish community would help her and Ada if they knew of their plight. She and Ada had discussed telling their people, but now they couldn't accept anyone's hard-earned money since Mahlon had sent cash. She might not be able to make herself burn it, but she wouldn't use it. And when she told Ada about the *gift*, Ada would agree that they couldn't use it. They were on their own now. Truth was, in ways they'd not

realized until after Mahlon left, they'd been on their own for a really long time.

She slid her hand inside her hidden pocket, feeling the envelope thick with twenties. Once again, Mahlon had made life harder for her and his mother.

Drawing a deep breath, she opened her eyes, grabbed the bowl of frosting, and scraped up the last dollop of it and dropped it onto the cake.

The kitchen door swung open, and Cara waltzed into the room, her Amish dress spattered with paint and much of her short hair coming loose from its stubby ponytail and sticking out around her prayer *Kapp*. The young woman carried the confidence of being happy and loved, making Deborah wonder if she'd ever feel that way again. Deborah's brother Ephraim was thirty-two when he found love for the first time in his life. And even though he broke up with Deborah's closest friend in order to pursue the Englisher girl, Deborah had grown to love Cara too.

Cara glanced through the screen door, and Deborah knew she was checking on her daughter. "You about done?" She grabbed an apple out of the refrigerator, walking and talking much like the Bronx-raised Englisher she was. Or rather *was* until recently.

Deborah motioned at the load of dishes in the sink. "No. You?"

"For the day, yes. Though I'll never be done painting as long as the little elves keep building onto this old house each night while we sleep. Do you know how long it takes to paint the inside of a two-foot-wide, nine-foot-deep space? What did they do with a room like that in the eighteen hundreds? Show it to relatives as a guest bedroom? It'd keep down on guests, right?"

Cara's nonsense made Deborah smile, and she longed to be free to enjoy her days again.

Cara took a bite of apple and sat on the countertop. "Is Ada out purchasing ingredients for tomorrow's baking orders?"

"Ya."

“If I help you finish up, will you go to Dry Lake with me?”

Wondering whether to tell Cara she’d received a note from Mahlon, Deborah continued smoothing the frosting over the cake.

Cara finished her apple and then tossed it across the room and into the trash can. “Hellooooo?” She dipped her finger into the bowl and scraped some frosting off the side.

“Hmm?”

Cara licked her finger, hopped off the counter, and fixed herself a glass of water. “You made two of those cakes?”

“Ya. It’s a new recipe, and I’m taking one by Select Bakery and one by Sweet Delights as a sample of a new item on our list.”

Cara moved next to Deborah and nudged her shoulder against Deborah’s. “It’s one of those really bad days, huh?”

Deborah’s eyes stung with tears, but she didn’t respond.

“I expect grief will come and go for a while, but any idea why you’re feeling smothered by it today?”

Deborah pulled the envelope from her pocket and held it up. “Mahlon,” she whispered.

Cara’s eyes grew large with concern. “Oh no.” Her words came out slowly. “Deborah, I...I’m sorry.” Cara pulled Deborah into a hug. The tone of Cara’s voice and the warmth of her understanding surrounded her like no one else’s could. Cara knew loss and imprisonment of circumstances a thousand times greater than Deborah did. Cara placed her hands on Deborah’s shoulders. “Do you want to share what he said?”

It seemed a little odd how careful Cara was being with her words. Then again, maybe she thought Mahlon wrote to say he was coming back so she was withholding what she’d like to call him. Deborah passed her the envelope.

Cara pulled out the note and cash. She ignored the money and read the message. “Dearest Deborah, I hope you are well. I’m so very, very sorry for the pain I’ve caused you and Mamm. Please allow me to ease my guilt by

helping you financially. Mahlon.” Cara rolled her eyes, but she said nothing.

The note sounded just as detached as Mahlon had been in the weeks leading up to his disappearance. Hearing it aloud brought back so many memories, and Deborah felt stupid for not seeing the obvious until he humiliated her in front of everyone.

Cara replaced the money and note in the envelope. She again hugged Deborah and stayed there. The pain didn’t ease, but hope trickled in. “Patience, Deb,” Cara whispered. “Just keep muddling through. The pain always fades at some point.”

Deborah swallowed and tried to pull strength from somewhere inside her. She took a step back. “*Denki.*”

The back door swung open, and Lori ran inside with muddy hands and an even muddier dog. “Better Days!” Cara grabbed the dog by the collar. “Out.”

“Mom, you’ll hurt his feelings.”

“He’ll survive.” She shoved the dog outside and closed the screen door. “Although you may not. What have you been doing?”

“Mississippi mud cakes. Want to try one?”

Cara glanced apologetically to Deborah and shrugged. “It’s probably as good as the frosting Deborah just made.”

“Really, Mom?” Lori’s dark brown eyes reflected excitement.

“Afraid so.”

“What?” Deborah scraped frosting off the knife with her finger and tasted the fluffy stuff. “Oh, yuck!” She snatched the cake off the counter and slammed it into the trash can. “What on earth happened?” She grabbed the second cake stand and headed for the can.

Cara took hold of the sides of the stand. “What are you doing?”

“Tossing it out.”

“You’re going to let a perfectly gorgeous cake go to waste when we could use it to trick someone?”

As if rust had broken from Deborah's face, she smiled freely and released the stand.

Cara set it on the counter. "I vote we give it to Ephraim."

"Maybe. Did you know that my good friend Lena has long been considered the queen of pranks?"

"The schoolteacher in Dry Lake?"

Deborah nodded. "Remember the van wreck Ephraim told you about? The one our mother died in?"

"Yeah."

"Lena's mother was killed too, and Ada's husband, and seven others from the community, including your *Daadi*—your grandfather. It was awful for months. Anyway, Lena—who was about eleven by then, I think—had been looking for some way to make people smile again, especially her *Daed*. While in Philadelphia with an aunt, she found a plastic thing that looked just like a little pat of butter at a gag store. Her Daed never ate his biscuit or peas until the butter had melted. According to Lena, she put two hot *buttered* biscuits on his plate. He opened a biscuit and saw the little pat of butter, closed it, and waited for it to melt. Between getting other foods, sipping on his drink, and chatting, he checked the biscuit several times over the next five or six minutes. Finally he poked the butter, asking why it hadn't melted. When he touched it and realized it was plastic, he broke into an uproar of laughter. She said he laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks. There's been no stopping her since...except she hasn't pulled anything on me since Mahlon left."

"Then Lena it is."

"She hasn't been stumped or tricked in years. I'm not sure she'll fall for it."

"She might this time. It won't be expected." Cara dusted flour from Deborah's black apron. "An unspoken truce was called the day Mahlon left. She wouldn't dream of you pulling this on purpose. If we handle it

right and slice a piece for her while we visit, she'll probably eat nearly a whole slice, just to be nice."

"You know, I fear for my brother sometimes." Deborah giggled, feeling sadness loosen its death grip.

Cara's laughter came from a spring of contentment within her, and Deborah enjoyed a refreshing sip. Cara wasn't even close to being someone Deborah would have chosen for her brother. She'd been raised as an Englisher in foster care and often struggled to accept the Plain ways. She behaved like a sharp-tongued heathen sometimes without even realizing it, but as odd as it seemed, Ephraim respected her deeply. The longer Deborah knew her, the more she understood why her brother had finally fallen in love.

Deborah smoothed Cara's hair back and tried to pin the short strands where they'd stay under the prayer Kapp. It was no use.

Cara tucked a strand behind her ear. "Since no one's pulled a prank since Jerk Face left, I say it's time to end the truce."

"Mom, Ephraim won't like that you're calling names. Who's Jerk Face, anyway?"

"It doesn't matter." Cara turned to Deborah. "Does it?"

Deborah took a cleansing breath. "No, it...he doesn't."

They both knew it wasn't true. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Cara mocked a frown. "What'd you do wrong to make that frosting taste so bad?"

"I don't know. Is the cake itself just as bad?"

They moved to the tossed-out cake. Cara jabbed a fork in the very center of it, where it hadn't touched any part of the trash can. She took a tiny nibble and shuddered. "It's both frosting and cake."

"So what'd I do?"

Cara made a face. "Salt."

"Too much salt?" Deborah glanced to her work station. "How did I manage that?"

Cara shrugged.

Trying to recall what she'd done, Deborah went to the canisters and opened the one that said sugar. If she'd been paying any attention, she'd have realized that it held salt. Lori had filled them for her earlier today, but when? How many items had she made using salt instead of sugar?

"Lori," Deborah spoke softly, "when did you refill these canisters?"

"Today."

"No, honey, I mean when today?"

Cara put her finger into the canister and then licked it. "Yep, that's salt."

Lori shrugged. "Did I do something wrong?"

Cara placed her hand on Lori's head. "Nothing that another lesson with Ada about being a good kitchen helper won't fix. Besides, seven-year-olds are supposed to make cute mistakes. It's part of your job description. Did you fill the canisters before or after school?"

"After. I did it when Deborah left to get the mail."

Deborah sighed. "And then Deborah read her note and sank onto the porch steps in a state of depression before eventually making her way back into the kitchen in a complete cloud of confusion."

"And she began talking about herself in third person too." Cara winked at her. "Lori, honey, why don't you go upstairs and get cleaned up while Deborah and I tackle this kitchen mess and start making a quick supper? Ada will be back soon, and then we'll eat."

Lori headed out of the kitchen, and soon the sound of her tromping up the steps echoed through the quiet home.

Deborah grabbed a few dirty utensils off the cabinet and tossed them into the sink. "Ingredients in the wrong canister or not, I should have recognized the difference between salt and sugar."

"It's not a big deal, Deb."

She rinsed her hands and dried them. "Ya, it is. Money's even tighter than you know. Ada doesn't want to talk about it, but she's making deliveries

to all three bakeries because we can't afford to hire a driver. Hitching and unhitching the horse and wagon, along with her making the deliveries every day, cuts into our baking time, so our workday is getting longer and longer, but we've got fewer goods to sell."

"I thought the bakeries paid for the courier."

"They did...sort of. I mean they were taking money out of our profit to pay for them, so Ada's getting that money, and we're making the deliveries ourselves. Lately she has to wait until we make a few bucks off what we sold in order to buy supplies for the next round of baking."

"So"—Cara shrugged—"Jerk Face sent you money today. Use it."

"I'll starve first." Deborah couldn't believe her own tone as she spoke—or the determination she felt.

"Your brother wouldn't like that plan."

"You cannot tell Ephraim." She motioned to the six-foot stainless steel commercial oven. "He's already done too much for us. This place was unlivable until he gave so generously."

"I...I didn't realize he was the one..."

"Well he was. A few others pitched in a little, but in this economy there are too many in our community who are hurting. I can't ask them for help when Mahlon sent us money. Ada and I will have to succeed...or fail...on our own."