



# CHAPTER 1

Elizabeth Baer drew the last pan of buns from the smoking outdoor oven. They were done—three hundred perfect, crusty buns. She surveyed the neat rows on the sturdy worktable. Last night just before bedtime, she and two other kitchen servants had kneaded the dough to perfection. What a delight it had been to catch a few hours of sleep as the dough rose to twice its size in the huge kneading vats. Then they had shaped the zwieback into tiny balls and placed two side by side on the pans. The two balls grew into one as they rose. The girls had been watching the baking ovens ever so carefully for the last several hours. The rich aroma of yeast baking teased their nostrils, and Elizabeth smiled in satisfaction. Frau Plett would be delighted with the results, she was sure.

Their mistress was easy to please. Maria Plett was a pleasant, hardworking woman. The servants did not feel good about her working right by their sides. As a mistress of fifty household servants, surely she ought to leave the work to them! But when they told her so, she always laughed merrily and said she felt better working than sitting around. “I am going to be old soon enough. Just let me work.” They let her. Not only did she run the huge Plett mansion efficiently, but she also lived out before them her moral that hard work paid off in the end. She herself had taught Elizabeth the fine art of zwieback baking. And besides making their work pleasant, she insisted each of the girls should have regular time off to relax.

Yes, life was good for Elizabeth in the year of 1785. She stretched and yawned as she turned toward her parents' cottage. She could sleep while the great family was at church. The wedding feast later in the day would call for a lot more work.

Just so she could relax totally, she turned around and checked everything one more time. On the wood-fed stoves of the summer kitchen, large iron kettles of summer borscht were bubbling out their mixed savors of pork, beet leaves, tomatoes, and spices. Into the outdoor oven, so recently vacated by the golden buns, went the large pans of smoked sausage. Potatoes would soon be boiling in large vats over bonfires in the backyard. Then just before they were served, they would be fried to a golden crisp in rich amounts of smoked lard. In the cellar waited creamy butter, enormous bowls of cherry mousse, and fresh apple pies.

"What a meal," Elizabeth murmured. "What a meal—but nothing less than the best for Hans Plett's son's marriage feast."

Young Johann was the envy of all the village girls. Even the servant girls talked about him endlessly. Of course, they would never have had a chance with him. They were Prussians, and Prussian servant girls never married Mennonite men. That knowledge was ingrained deeply, as vivid a fact as night and day. But that did not keep their girlish hearts from doing somersaults when they saw him. It made for a terrific evening story if one of them had actually served him on that particular day.

Elizabeth had always felt such talk was nonsense. But the other girls assured her that when her turn came her heart would flip too. Her turn? She got it often. Frau Plett had chosen her to clean the upstairs rooms every week, and it was not unusual at all to meet up with Johann or one of his brothers. They were handsome young men, that was true, but it was all part of her work, and she had determined long ago that she would not allow her heart to get involved.

She never told the girls about her frequent casual

conversations with the Plett men. Their gossiping tongues would tear them apart.

Now today was Johann's wedding day. When his marriage had been announced a few weeks ago, the servants' gossip had doubled. This young bride—Katharina—had anyone seen her yet? It was said she was from a poor family. Was that true? Johann hated his father's money. Was that why he had chosen a poor bride? Was it true that she was sickly?

Elizabeth knew all the answers to these queries, for Johann had chosen her as his confidante. Why, she could never figure out. But that was just another part of servanthood. You made yourself useful wherever you could, even if it was just giving a listening ear.

When she reached home, she stepped into the whitewashed little cottage and sank gratefully into the feather tick bed, pulling the cover over her head. Her mother's crooning from the little parlor sang her to sleep.



At the village church, Johann stole a glance at his young bride. She was the tender age of seventeen, and he was only twenty. *Young, but perfect*, he thought smugly.

He focused his thoughts back on the preacher. What was he saying? Johann straightened his long back. This chair at the front of the church in the middle aisle at least supported his back. But he wasn't at all sure whether he would not rather be sitting on one of the many backless benches. He felt a multitude of ruthless eyes piercing his back. He wondered if Katharina hated the publicity as much as he did.

"Before us is a young couple, Johann Plett and Katharina Klassen. They have decided to join heart and hand in holy matrimony." Preacher Rempel's tones made it sound like the

most boring consideration. Perhaps it was. Johann shifted his large frame again. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Katharina's white hand tremble ever so slightly. She was scared! And he thought he knew why. Her life as the daughter of Herr Klassen, the village drunkard, was a nightmare. She had seen him, Johann, drunk only once. But did they really know each other as well as they should? Was she afraid she was making a mistake? He shrugged his shoulders lightly. He would be nice to his little wife, he determined. Too many women in their village suffered at the hands of their husbands. His wife would not be one of those. He smiled slightly at Katharina as the preacher asked them to stand. You weren't supposed to smile in church, that he knew, but couldn't you reassure your bride on your wedding day?

It was done. They were husband and wife. He held her petite hand securely in his large brawny one as they rode in style up the village street. Leading their own bridal carriage was the Plett family carriage, drawn by six immaculately groomed horses. Herr Klassen, sober for a change, looked back at them through bleary eyes. Johann's father had nearly refused to escort the bride's parents home, but it was the tradition, and so Hans grudgingly performed. Herr Plett simply could not understand why his son had chosen such a puny bride from such a low-down family.

From the bridal carriage, Johann noticed his father's stiff back. He knew all too well that his father had also seen his father-in-law's bloated face. "Your pa isn't feeling very well today, is he?" he whispered to Katharina.

She shook her head. "He'll be dead drunk by evening," she said, shuddering.

"And this time it will be my family's fault. This serving of strong drink at weddings makes no sense!" he hissed disdainfully.

“But it’s always been done that way, Johann.” She blinked her gray eyes in pain.

“Don’t I know? But that is not enough reason to keep it that way. That old row: ‘It’s always been done that way.’ Disgusting.”

She licked her dry lips, grasped his hand more tightly, and smiled shyly. “Don’t worry about Pa today. This is our wedding day. Look at the wheat fields, Johann! Do you see how they are ripening? Oh, I love harvest time!”

He smiled at her quizzically. Lately she had seemed somber and reserved. Particularly in the last several weeks. What had happened to the sparkle in her eyes that she’d had that first night they’d met on the village street? When they had courted secretly at night, it had been only the two of them, and she had shone. Well, no, not always. He remembered with a pang of shame that first kiss. She had not approved—not totally, anyway. But in the months that followed she had been happy . . . till when? The *Verlobung*, their engagement party; that was when she had changed. But why?

Katharina smiled wanly. The reality of what she was getting into had hit like a dashing wave on the *Verlobung* day. The Pletts’ sumptuous lifestyle frightened her. She nearly floundered in the thick of servants, clothes, and furnishings that were to be her lot in her new home. She would have backed out if it hadn’t been for two things. One was her father’s adamant push into this marriage. He saw advantages for himself. The other was Johann himself. She thought she loved him, but she was not always sure. He was handsome enough. He had never been mean to her, and he showered her with loving words and lavish gifts. But that was not enough. Did he really love her? She had asked him that burning question several times. His answer was always, “Of course, Katharina. Why do you think I asked you to marry me?”

“But why did you? There are lots of girls who come from richer homes.”