


C O N T E N T S



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CHAPTER 1



Karolina Plett lifted the steaming kettle with care. Doing dishes by herself was getting old already. And it had only been a week since her big sister, her adored big sister Minna, was married. She poured the boiling water into the steel dishpan and added two dippers of cold water from the bucket at her feet. Rubbing the bar of yellow homemade soap, she created lots of bubbles. Then she emptied the contents of the steaming kettle into the rinse pan. These dishes were going to get washed fast, she determined. No matter how unfair life seemed, or even how lonely, she was not going to incite Mam's wrath or even her dour looks. She knew Mam would not help her. She never did and that was that. Karolina seldom stopped to consider why. It was a fact that would not change by thinking about it a lot.

But tonight she was in a "thinking mood," as her sixteen-year-old brother Cornelius (or Knals, as he was commonly called in their native *Platt Deutsch* dialect) defined it. She hated her "thinking mood" because it made her feel depressed and sad. But she felt helpless to break it. What was a girl to do? She had a lot to figure out and had to do it sometime, right? She would much rather be singing at the top of her lungs. Even more, she wished she were out with Knals right now, doing the chores. Often her "thinking moods" involved

tears. It had been especially bad these last three years since Pa had died.

Not only did she miss Pa intensely, but Mam was more difficult than ever. And lately even Knals was not himself. Just yesterday she had asked him an innocent question and he had yelled at her in outright anger. Oh, Knals was never very mild, but angry? That was strange. Too strange. And Knals was whom she needed to think about tonight. Maybe . . . maybe she was glad she was not doing chores with him after all.

Last night he had been forking hay from the mow while she fed the two young calves. Their two Red German cows munched on fragrant hay as warm steam rose from their huge bodies. Milking time was the best part of the day. She had not thought out her insulting question, though. She had simply asked it. She was curious, that was all. Her friend Helena had told her that the village church had a very small instruction class this year and that it bothered her father, who was a preacher. More young people ought to be joining the church, he had said. And that conversation was the only reason she had called up to the loft.

“Knals?”

“What?” Another sheaf of yellow hay landed near her feet.

She held the bucket more firmly between her knees so that the butting calf would not knock it to the floor when she looked up at Knals. He was so tall, so nice. Her heart swelled. How she loved this big brother. “Knals, are you joining instruction class soon?”

“Stupid question,” he answered as he turned back to lift another fork of hay.

She blew a wisp of stray hair from her face and held the nearly empty bucket tighter. The calf jostled and pushed, attempting to get the very last drop. She looked at Knals again but he had turned his back. “Why is it a stupid question? You are sixteen and almost seventeen. Lots of young people your age get baptized,” she called out.

He turned around and glared at her. "You are a pain of a little child. Stop this nonsense now!" He jabbed his fork into a sheaf of hay and pointed a finger in her direction. "Get out of here!"

Though repulsed by his uncharacteristic behavior, Karolina was not to be cowed. She stuck her tongue out at him. "I am not little! I am all of twelve and nearly thirteen. Can't you see I am feeding the calves? You want to finish all the chores alone?"

"Be better than having you preach at me!"

"You call that preaching? A simple question is preaching?" She dropped the bucket and ran toward the house. Not sure how she would tell Mam what had happened, she veered off into the orchard. A brisk north wind nearly sent her into the warm house for refuge, but no, not now. She had to think, and that was all she had done ever since. Think. And worry.

She stayed out there till Knals came looking for her. "Still outdoors in this cold? Come inside. Mam is worried about you."

"I'll be in soon, but I am not coming in with you. I don't know why you have to act so terrible. We have enough trouble in this family without you acting up too." Her assault turned into tears and sobs. "Oh, Knals, why? Why did Pa have to die?"

He took her hand and led her to the house, but did not answer her a word.



Why indeed? It was the same question that Knals asked himself every day. Sometimes many times a day. Tonight he was doing chores alone, all because of his surly outburst to Karolina's question. Mam had decreed that Karolina would do the dishes this evening if all they could do out in the barn was fight. Not that she knew what they fought about.

It wasn't that Knals did not like Karolina. Not at all. Now that Minna was married, Karolina was the only one left to him. One little sister. He would do anything for her, really. He would even . . .

die for her. If only Johnny had lived. His older brother had been trampled to death under a horse's hooves when they still lived in Prussia. It was the very horse that was supposed to have brought them to Russia in style. Instead, they had traveled on foot. Mam, baby Karolina, and their belongings had been transported on a rugged two-wheeled cart pulled by an old horse. He had only been four at the time, but a mixture of fierce feelings still overwhelmed him whenever he recalled that trip.

Sometime, perhaps, he could sort out his turmoil of emotions from his past. Right now he had to focus on the present. But how could he? It was all crazily tangled with his rough past. Take Mam, for example. She was always so dreadfully sad. Knals loved his mother fiercely, much like he loved Karolina. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not seem to please her.

A familiar cycle repeated itself frequently. He would feel sorry for Mam, curled up crying in a corner. He would go sit beside her and hold her hand until she pulled it away and muttered, "Just go do the chores" or, "I am all right." Helpless to solve her problems, he would work feverishly, hoping to alleviate her pain. She smiled occasionally, and he would hoe harder than ever, or chop more firewood. Then she would snap and find fault with something he was doing. In despair, he would quit trying, because the tirade would usually continue for several days. Nothing he could do would please her. She would rant and rave and fume. Sometimes she would even slap him. It made him feel worse than a whipped cur. He and Karolina had learned long ago to keep out of her way as much as possible on those days. After Mam's rage, her tears would come.

Hans Toews, Knals' sister Anna's husband, had taken him under his wing since Pa had died and had tried to explain Mam's moods to him. "There are three things that hurt her. The first is that she still needs Jesus in her heart. Second, she misses your father intensely, just like you do. Another huge thing for her is Katharina. You know about Katharina?" Of course he knew. He even faintly remembered

that lovely older sister. She had disappeared in Prussia when he was not much more than a baby. Mam never believed that he remembered her; he had been too young. But he did! A lovely tall girl had held him in her warm arms. Her face had been wet. Whenever he mentioned that part to Mam, she cringed. It was proof that he did remember, and it spiked her painful guilt.

Mam felt guilty because she had been so mean to Katharina before she disappeared. It was her excuse for not coming to God in repentance. Whenever one of the *Ohms* addressed her about salvation, she said, “No, I am too wicked. Too wicked. If Katharina were alive . . .”

Knals himself was not always sure about repentance and coming to God. Oh, he understood it all right. It had been taught clearly enough all the years he had attended church. But what was the point of giving allegiance to a God who had taken away his only brother in death, and now his father? Not to mention that they had so little money that they would never be able to pay off this little piece of land in the farming village of Sparrau, Molotschna Colony, Russia . . .

Sparrau. He smiled to himself. Sparrau meant “sparrow meadow.” He had laughed when a boy from the neighboring village had called him *Sparling*. He dropped another sheaf of hay and flexed his arm muscles. “Not much of a sparrow,” he told himself. It had been easy to rout that scrawny young man. Just a fun fight, of course, but he did not think that young man would ever call him a sparrow again. He dropped the hayfork and stretched his arms. It was easier than ever to reach up to the low beam that ran through the middle of the barn. He had started that when he turned thirteen. Back then he had hardly been able to reach it when he jumped. Now he reached up and easily grazed the rough-hewn lumber with his fingertips. He flexed his muscles and effortlessly lifted a bag of grain from the floor into the feeding trough.

Where had his thoughts gone? Oh, yes. Sparrau, owning land. He groaned. None of his developing height or strength would pay for the