

THE CHRISTMAS BRIDE

A LEGACY OF LOVE NOVEL



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EMBER ROTH BOOKS

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth:
for thy love is better than wine.

— SONG OF SOLOMON 1:2

PROLOGUE



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Susanna couldn't concentrate on the Count's eloquent words, not when her groom stood just four paces behind her. Everything within her wanted to glance over her shoulder to see the color of Christian Boehler's eyes. And to see if there was a hint of love within them.

But she couldn't turn around. Her curiosity would only embarrass her future husband, with so many brothers and sisters behind them watching the great wedding, solemnly attentive, while her mind danced around the possibilities of life with her new husband and the adventure before them.

Instead of turning, Susanna fiddled with the ribbon that zigzagged up her bodice while trying to listen to Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf as he performed the ceremony from the front of the castle's great Saal. Even as she tried to cherish the significance of this day, the beginning of her marriage, and her journey as a messenger, she couldn't concentrate on what the Count was saying.

Her laboress had told her stories about Christian Boehler's dedication to their Savior and of his burden to share their Savior's love with the Indians in the Colonies. Her burden was

the same, but she also wanted to love her husband and be loved by him.

Susanna rocked back on her heels. God had given her a man who served Him, but would he love her as well, in their journey together, like a man should love his wife?

Eleven other brides were fanned out beside her in a giant horseshoe for the Great Wedding. Their grooms stood in a curved row a few steps behind them, and then at the back of the large hall were a hundred brothers and sisters on benches, witnesses to their matrimony.

Morning light stole through the lofty windows on both sides of the room, trailing like a veil down the ancient castle's hall. Outside the windows, rolling hills surrounded the German community and castle, blooming with the purples and yellows of spring color.

As Count Zinzendorf spoke to them about the blessed society of marriage and the beautiful mystery of it, Susanna's mind wandered far from the walls of Marienborn. For a moment, she longed to be roaming through the coolness of the hills this morning and talking to the Savior instead of marrying a man she'd never before spoken with.

If only she knew why Christian had selected her to be his wife.

Couples were divided into pairs for the wedding, and in front of each pair of couples stood an elder who would speak to them when the Count completed his sermon. She and Catharine Weicht and their grooms had been paired with Elder Seidner, a young minister who shifted the book of marriage vows back and forth in his hands as if the words burned his fingers.

Beyond the rows of grooms and brides and six elders—the leaders of their community—the regal Count Zinzendorf continued to speak. A large, imposing man, the Count had black hair and an aura that spoke of both power and love. Other

members of the German royal court powdered their hair white, but the Count rarely powdered his. Even without the powder and robes, his demeanor could intimidate his subjects if necessary.

The Count was a man who pursued the heart of God, and as part of this pursuit, he had opened up his estate to those persecuted for their faith, those known as the Unity of the Brethren. During the past thirty years, he had been leading all of them into deep, fulfilling relationships with their Savior.

Each bride was simply dressed, with a white cape draped over her bodice and a petticoat dyed blue or green. They all wore white haubes—caps with delicate pink or white ribbons tied under their chins. Widows wore white ribbons while the single sisters wore pink.

Susanna's ribbon was pink.

She blinked in the sunlight, her hands brushing the smooth ribbon that would change within the hour. If only her mother could have been here for her wedding day. She could almost hear the soft but determined voice of her mother, calming her fears, reminding her of her dedication to the will of their Savior and not to herself, reminding her of their Savior's love.

Her mother knew firsthand of this love. Their Savior had taken her to Him eight years ago while she served alongside Susanna's father as a messenger of the Gospel to the African people.

As Susanna stood before the elder, she pretended that her parents were sitting on the benches behind them. Her mother to comfort her. Her father to tell Christian about the Fritsche family's past and to talk to him about the future.

But she stood today in the company of her sisters instead of her family.

When she glanced to her right, Catharine Weicht winked at her, and Susanna smiled at the boldness of her friend on this somber day. In spite of her plainness of dress, Catharine was

anything but plain. The waves of her auburn hair were pinned up neatly under her cap. Her ivory skin was as pure and pretty as the edelweiss that bloomed wild in the hills around them. Instead of the humility borne by the other sisters, her friend's presence breathed the air of aristocracy that ran through her veins.

On Susanna's left side stood a young widow, a white ribbon tied under her chin. With her dappled skin and slightly crooked nose, Rebecca wasn't nearly as pretty as Catharine, but Susanna admired Rebecca for her devout relationship with the Savior. Even though she was just five years older than Susanna, Rebecca had already lost her husband on a mission to Greenland, and she'd made it clear she would never marry again. Yet here she stood, chosen like the rest of them. No one argued with the lot.

The Count had divided their community into groups and called them each a choir hoping, perhaps, that the many different personalities in each choir would learn to live in harmony. There were choirs for both married men and women as well as single choirs. Boys and girls choirs. The widows choir and the choir for widowers. Each choir was led by a laborer or laboress, and they lived, ate, and worshipped together like a family, separated from the other choirs.

Women remained with the Single Sisters Choir until one of the single brothers conferred with their laborer about the possibility of marriage to a certain woman. The elders prayed about their request and then put it before the lot, just as they did with every major decision in their community.

Sometimes the chosen lot was a blank piece of parchment that simply meant to wait. Sometimes the elders picked the paper that said "no," and sometimes they selected the paper that confirmed the marriage. The requested woman was then given the option to decline or to accept the proposal.

Together, Catharine, Rebecca, and Susanna had faithfully served in the Single Sisters Choir in Marienborn for more than

two years until the lot matched them with a man to wed. After the lot matched her with Christian Boehler, Susanna was given the opportunity to reject their marriage. But who was she to reject what God had so clearly ordained?

Even though she'd never actually spoken with Christian, she had watched him from afar. He was a respected member of their community, but even more than that, her heart sparked with the possibility of going with him to the new colony. She could roam the wilderness with Christian Boehler and share Jesus's love with people who might never have heard of Him. She would befriend the Indian women and be the best possible companion to her husband.

Behind her, the congregation began to sing "Oh Creator of my Soul." As Susanna mouthed the words, she glanced over at Catharine again and saw the graceful smile on her friend's face.

Catharine was the daughter of an English noble, her father once a member of Parliament who had left his esteemed position to join the United Brethren. He and Catharine's fashionable mother now traveled around Europe, sometimes alongside Count Zinzendorf, to speak with leaders about their church.

Even though she lived in the common room with all the sisters, Catharine still treated her sisters like servants. Susanna didn't fault Catharine for her upbringing or her demands—the Savior was transforming all of them—but she tried to gently remind Catharine that they all lived and served in humble circumstances. The sisters slept on the same straw mattresses and ate the same soups and breads at mealtime and worked side by side.

No matter how or where they had been reared, all the sisters were clothed in modest apparel today—though Susanna knew that Catharine wore maroon stockings under her long dress while the other women wore gray or blue.

Susanna hadn't been educated like Catharine. There'd been no governess for her or years of training at an exclusive

boarding school to teach her how to handle stress with dignity and grace. She often wrestled with the jealousy that conflicted with her devotion to both her Savior and her friend.

She wasn't jealous of the fine home where Catharine had been reared or the lofty manners that embarrassed the other girls. Susanna was jealous of Catharine's vast knowledge based on years of education in the finest schools for girls. Catharine could read and write and paint, and she knew about faraway peoples and places.

It was Catharine who had told Susanna about the town of Philadelphia and the wilds beyond in the tiny community of Nazareth, where Susanna and Christian would live when they weren't visiting the Indians. Catharine told her about the fierce warriors in the Colonies and the Indians who sought peace by sharing and even selling their land to the white men.

Susanna and Christian. Catharine and her betrothed, Elias Schmidt. They had all been selected to travel to the new colony of Pennsylvania after their wedding.

"Be content again my soul, for the Lord does good to you," the Count said when the singing ended, sharing the watchword for their wedding. "Do not forget it, oh my heart!"

Susanna's gaze wandered over the shoulder of Elder Seidner, out the wide window behind him to the hills. She knew she shouldn't wonder at Christian's feelings, not when she didn't even understand her own.

She wished her heart were filled with love for Christian, like what some of the other brides felt for their betrotheds, but fear filled the hollows of her heart instead. She admired the man behind her greatly, had admired him since the moment he'd marched through the gates of their castle five months earlier. Though she'd admitted it to no one, she thought him to be one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen, and she respected his strength and his passions and his desire to serve their Savior as a messenger in the Colonies.

But she didn't know why he'd chosen her.

The Count paused, and Elder Seidner motioned Christian and Elias forward. She felt Christian step up beside her, saw the outline of his shoulder beyond her own.

What would it feel like to have Christian Boehler take her in his arms and kiss her, as the laboress in their choir house described? What would it be like to lie next to him in the bedchamber? She trembled at the thought, not knowing whether it was from pleasure or from fear of the certainty that she would fail him.

She wasn't educated nor was she beautiful like Catharine. She didn't have the manners of politer society or even the knowledge of how to speak with a man. Her father had left for Africa a decade ago, and her memories of him were pleasant but few.

Every day in Marienborn, she saw both the married and single brothers—she sat across the aisle from them at the love feasts and the foot washings and the quarter-hour devotions—but she never spoke with them and certainly had never touched one of them. She didn't know how to be this man's—or any man's—wife.

Across the room, a minister began conducting the marriage vows to one of the other couples, and then all the ministers began to speak as they joined the men and women in front of them. Susanna listened as Elder Seidner joined Elias and Catharine in marriage. Then he turned to Christian.

“Brother Boehler, will you love Sister Susanna Fritsche as thy wedded wife, to live together in holy wedlock?”

As she turned, Susanna was close enough to see Christian's light brown eyes that were tinged with yellow in the sunlight. But she didn't see the hope in them that she desired. Or love. Instead, she saw regret.

Her gaze dropped to the hem of his black coat, and her

entire body shook from disappointment. Already she had failed the man, before she even married him.

The vow hung between them, waiting for his response.

Was it too late for them to change their minds? Maybe Christian could ask for another spouse before he left for Pennsylvania and Susanna could travel as a single sister?

She clenched the seams of her dress as she waited for Christian's refusal, but instead of rejecting her, he vowed to love her as his wife. Her stomach twisted like the cotton in her fingers.

How could Christian agree to to marry her when he regretted his choice?

The elder nodded at Christian's words and then looked to her. "Sister Fritsche, will you love Brother Christian Boehler, honor him, and be subject unto him in the Lord?"

Susanna's gaze wandered back to the window as she pondered the words. She could honor this man and even be subject to him, but why did the elder ask her to love him when Christian clearly didn't share this love for her?

She scanned the hills in the distance and wished again that she were outside so she could think, breathe. Just days ago, she'd been dreaming about marriage to a man like Christian Boehler, but she wanted her husband to look at her the way Elias Schmidt looked at Catharine—like a thirsty soul who'd discovered a desert spring. A spring he would drink from for the remainder of his life.

"Sister Fritsche?" the elder whispered.

She lifted her eyes, not to Christian but to Elder Seidner. How could the Savior require this of her?

The elder nodded at her again, urging her to answer. The other elders in the room were quiet, the vows of the other couples complete. Everyone in the room was waiting for her now. Watching.

Susanna took a deep breath. With God's help, she would

learn to love this man. And maybe one day he could learn to love her as well.

She summoned up the strength within her to match the confidence in Christian's voice.

"I will," she finally said. And she meant it.

Elder Seidner smiled. "I now pronounce you Brother and Sister Boehler."

Sister Boehler. The name echoed in Susanna's ears.

She had a new name now, a new identity.

But what would this new name require of her?

The Count began to pray. "Lord our God, You who have Yourself established and blessed the holy marriage, You wanted these husbands and wives to be bound together through the band of holy marriage, in order to do Your work together."

Beside her, Elias took Catharine's hand as the Count prayed. When Christian didn't reach for her hand, Susanna rubbed her fingers together. Even if her husband didn't love her, their marriage was blessed as holy, to work together as a couple to fulfill the greatest commission of all—to take the Gospel into all the world.

"In the name of Jesus Christ, our Head, Bridegroom, and Elder," the Count announced. "And in the name of our dear Father in heaven, we bring you honorably together and commission you to the colony called Pennsylvania."

The bell tolled above them. Trumpets blared in the courtyard below. One of the married women stepped forward and placed a haube over Susanna's hair, a white cap with blue ribbons, to set her apart as a married sister.

Catharine's parents gathered around Catharine and Elias to offer their congratulations. Another married sister kissed Susanna's cheeks, saying how blessed she was. And in the midst of the kissing cheeks and shaking hands, Susanna glanced across the room to search for her new husband.

She found him near the doors, shaking the hand of one of

the other newly married brothers, and she longed for a simple word from his lips. He didn't have to call her "beloved" or even "wife"; she would be content with just a kind word from a brother.

As she watched, Christian turned and searched until he found her face in the crowd. The clamor around her seemed to silence, and though he stood far from her, in that moment it seemed as if they were alone.

His hat against his chest, Christian slowly nodded to her. Then his broad frame disappeared out the door.