

## Chapter 1

*1880 Rokishkis, Lithuania*

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**I**nside his cold, stone castle, Lord Nicholas Serovich paced the floor while beating his hands across his chest to keep warm. He bit his lower lip and grimaced. Icy gusts of wind swung the black iron chandeliers back and forth so that candle wax dripped on the stone floor, making patches of sticky goop. Birch logs placed in the fireplace earlier by the servants were about to burn out; some had already turned to embers. The lord looked desperately across the kitchen to the dining room, where roughly carved chairs sat empty around a long table. He visualized the thirty or so party guests who, in their finery, would arrive at his castle in a few days for dinner and the annual Christmas ball, and yet, things were in such disarray.

“Kazimerias is late. He’s never late. He has no right to be with all that needs to be done,” the lord mumbled to himself. “Plus, he’s bringing along that son of his named Povilas. I asked the boy to make me some new hunting knives.” The lord walked across the stone floor in a different direction this time.

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A serf, Kazimerias Glemza, who had been the lord's cook for many years, was still technically a farmer, but he had raised himself up to be the personal chef at the manor house, which was quite an accomplishment. He cooked for all banquets, festive occasions, and for the lord's dining pleasure. He had acquired quite a good reputation in the region for making delectable meals from the finest ingredients. On this special occasion, the annual Christmas ball, Kazimerias was training Povilas, his fourteen-year-old son, as an apprentice.

*Where, where can they be?* The lord stopped pacing long enough to reach for and gulp down another vodka. This would help to warm him inside and to calm his nerves. Then he pulled his heavy cloak made of animal skins tighter about himself and paced some more.

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It was customary each day at 4:00 p.m. for Kazimerias to walk from his own thatched-roof cottage to the manor house to begin the evening meal. But this wasn't just any dinner, and he and Povilas were already an hour late. It was 5:00 p.m. on December 22, almost Christmas Eve. Preparations for the annual dinner and ball needed to be started without delay or they would never be done in time for the guests. But on this day, Kazimerias, along with Povilas, were still stuck inside their simple croft. Unfortunately, Kazimerias and his wife, Tekle, had descended into a heated argument. Too many times over the years Kazimerias had to be away, preparing for the lord's magnificent Christmas banquet and ball. This was the first year he was taking Povilas as his apprentice. Just as routinely as the Christmas ball came around, Tekle routinely put up her

annual fuss. This year was no exception. Now her frustration and anger were boiling over.

"I suppose he wants you to fix the food again. Can't he find someone else to do that work?" Tekle stood near the door of the cottage with her hands resting stubbornly on her hips. "I need you in the field and especially at home during the holidays. It isn't fair."

Kazimerias, who was a good-natured man, chuckled and puffed out his chest proudly. "Remember, Tekle, the lord has this fantastic Christmas ball only once a year. All the important lords and ladies from many kilometers away will be there. Furthermore, the lord has written on the bottom of each invitation that I, no one else, will be preparing the food, and that's what they'll expect. You'll see, too, that my continued good relationship and service to Lord Nicholas Serovich will benefit our children someday."

"Ha. I'll believe that when I see it," Tekle sneered. "He lives in the big manor house that he inherited from his father. The peasants were declared free about a quarter century ago, yet you still work three days a week in his fields and only two in your own. And we're taxed to death. It's as if serfdom never ended. Plus, this year you're taking away Povilas."

"Yes, I'm taking Povilas as my apprentice and also because he has made a set of hunting knives for the lord, a sort of Christmas present."

Povilas had been standing quietly in the corner, waiting for his parents to cease yelling at each other. He was a handsome fourteen year old with a particularly high forehead topped with a crop of wonderfully thick brown hair and pale blue eyes. He was also clever-minded. "Please, Mama. I want to give

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my knives to Lord Nicholas Serovich myself. I worked so hard making them. Please let us be gone.”

“Oh, Povilas, I know you love your hobby of metalcrafting. Your father and I are very proud of all you do. But with you and your father both gone, it will be so hard for me to deal with your brothers Alexander, Sergei, and Nicholas. They’re so active. It’s too cold to send them outdoors for very long.” Tekle began to wring her hands thinking about all the work that lay ahead. She was raised in a noble family and remembered what it was like having servants do the work. But, when she met Kazimerias fifteen years ago, she fell madly in love with him and forwent the life of privilege to be his wife and the mother of his children. Her fingers and hands now showed the evidence of her life as a farmer’s wife.

“My dear, dear wife, you’ll have to get ready for our family Christmas as best as you can by yourself. There’s no choice. The great lord is counting on me, as he has for many years, and I won’t let him down.”

Tekle sighed and sat down at the kitchen table with a loud plop. “At least tell me what you will make. And you had better bring some leftovers home.”

“You know I’ll bring food home.” Kazimerias smiled. “Ah, what am I going to make? Well, red meat is forbidden on Christmas Eve, so I’m going to prepare fish. Then I’ll create marvelous appetizers of selyodka, pickled herring in sour cream on black bread, and two of the lord’s favorite side dishes, potato pudding and cranberry pudding. I’m also making kasha. By the way, Tekle, can you get some dried grains together? I need wheat, barley, oats, peas, and beans, and I have to find some really good honey to go with it.”

Kazimerias rubbed his hand on his chin. "Sergei, Nicholas, and Alex can go scout for any nearby hives. I think I remember seeing one in the bramble thicket last summer."

At the table, Tekle straightened her blouse. Then she batted her eyelashes and with her hands fluffed out her long, soft brown hair. "After your work is done, can we all go to the village to celebrate with the other farmers' families? Maybe dance a jig or two?"

"Of course, dearest." Kazimerias blew his wife a kiss.

Povilas had listened to his parents arguing long enough. He interjected, "Mama, don't be so sad. I know what I'll make you for Christmas. It will be a beautiful shiny tin star for the top of our Christmas tree."

"Oh, Povilas, you do know how to make me happy. So, now be off with the two of you. I'll take care of things here. While you're away, we'll get things done. I'll see the parish priest about getting some holy water, and I won't forget to honor the saints. I'll have two apples, one for Adam and one for Eve, on the table when you return." Tekle put her hand to her temple. "Oh, sometimes I get confused with all the saints and their days, a custom stemming from our pagan roots."

"That's a very sensible plan. But please, Tekle, I beg your pardon, dearest, we must be off right now."

So, Povilas and Kazimerias went out the door and trudged through the snow to the manor house. Povilas carried his knives in a wooden box tied with a red bow. Kazimerias worried about how angry Lord Nicholas Serovich would be, but he was sure that the gift would put a smile on his face. All would be forgiven, and they would get to work right away.