

*Set me as a seal upon thine heart,
as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death;
jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are
coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.*

SONG OF SOLOMON 8:6

Prologue

NOVEMBER 15, 1991

THE WOMAN EDGED along the dark hallway, testing each floorboard with her bare toe until she reached the nursery. She stopped and placed her ear against the peeling door. The only sound she heard was the wind rattling against the windows of the old house.

Turning the knob, she hesitated in the shadows to see whether Phoebe or one of the children had heard. No one moved.

Last week, she had stolen up to the third floor during dinner, but Phoebe had caught her hovering over her baby's crib, mesmerized by the green flecks in her little girl's eyes. She had endured the punishment like a true follower, until Solomon banned her from seeing her children for a month. Phoebe was in charge of the kids, and if she needed any help, she would ask.

And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

She'd become too selfish, loving her girls more than she loved God, and Sol knew it. He had purchased a train ticket for her—one-way, to Berlin, so he could direct her spiritual growth without interference. She would leave in the morning.

She wanted to feel God's presence, to obey his will, but every time Sol left her room, she felt empty instead. She'd failed God. And she'd failed her family.

Her fingers brushed over the seal that marked her arm. They could

beat her to death if they wanted; she was ready to die. But she couldn't leave her children alone. Not with him.

Moonlight swept across the room, and she glanced over the line of twenty small beds crowded into the icy room. The older children slept on mattresses along the floor, and the younger ones were secured in the cribs by the drafty dormer windows.

Johanna slept in the third bed along the wall.

She tiptoed across the wood, knelt beside her daughter, and threaded her fingers through her hair until Johanna stirred in her sleep and opened her eyes. "Mommy?"

She leaned down and lifted her little girl. "I've got you, sweetheart." Johanna wrapped around her neck and nestled into her shoulder. The child's long legs dangled down to her knees. When had her baby grown into a girl?

A cloud darkened the room, and she waited until the cloud passed. Then she whispered into Johanna's ear. "Where is she?"

Johanna lifted one of her arms and pointed to the first crib along the window.

"I'm going to pick her up," she said quietly, "and then we're going to run."

Johanna squeezed her neck, her gentle voice trembling. "Don't drop me."

She kissed her daughter's cheek. "I won't let you go."

She took a careful step toward the window and then a second one. Wind blasted through a crack in the glass, and Johanna shivered in her arms.

Another soft step.

The crib was only a few feet away now. She moved Johanna to her left hip so she could snag her baby with her right arm.

One of the boys cried out in the darkness behind her. She took a step back and saw Michael's curly blond hair thrashing on the pillow. She placed her hand on his head until he stopped shaking. She wished she could rescue all the children, take them someplace where they would be safe and warm.

Maybe she could come back later and steal all the little ones away, but tonight she needed to focus on saving her girls.

Another step forward. Johanna's hair was soft on her cheek, hands wrapped around her neck.

God had entrusted her with these children. No matter what Sol or anyone else said, she had to get them away from here.

The floorboard groaned under her weight, and her shoulders shook as she lept back and waited in the silence. And the darkness.

There were three more steps between her and her baby. She would pick her up and run toward the forest. Once they made it to the trees, Sol would never catch them.

As she stepped forward again, Michael bolted up. She bent down to comfort the boy, but it was too late. He shrieked as if he'd seen a ghost.

A flash of light blinded her for an instant, but it wouldn't stop her. She lunged toward the crib.

Phoebe slapped her hand away from her daughter. "What are you doing?"

A few other children cried out, but not her daughter. She could see her sleeping between the wooden slats, her black hair tangled around her forehead.

Phoebe held out her arms. "Give Johanna to me."

Her heart pounded as fear snaked through her skin. She would not leave her daughters with Sol.

Phoebe shone the light in her eyes. "I'll call him if you don't hand her over right now."

Adrenaline shot through her body, and she lurched forward. Phoebe couldn't stop her. She would grab her baby and run.

Phoebe stretched her arms across the crib and screamed. "Sol!"

She pushed forward, but Phoebe blocked the crib and yelled again for Sol.

She squinted through her tears to see her baby one last time. God help her. If Sol caught her, she'd never see either of her girls again.

She turned and ran—out the door, down the hall. Sol called out to

her, but she didn't stop. She stumbled down the winding steps and into the kitchen.

The cold tile jolted her bare feet, but she didn't break stride as she raced toward the back door. Freedom.

The door smacked the wall behind her as Sol threw it open. He pointed his cane at her. "Where are you going?"

Johanna trembled in her arms as she turned and locked his gaze. His velvet robe hung crooked over his shoulders, and his long, graying hair made him look a couple decades older than forty-five.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"You're not leaving." He took a small step as he steadied his words. "You belong here with your family."

She pressed her palms into Johanna's back as she moved toward the door. "She is my family."

"You're too young to raise her." His cracked lips eased into a smile, his outstretched arms welcoming her back into the fold. "There's so much you need to learn."

Johanna's tears soaked through her mother's clothes and puddled on her shoulder.

"They need someone strong to care for them." His voice dropped to an eerie calm. "Someone to show them the way."

She froze, her legs anchored to the tile. He knew her obsession to be a good mother, her insecurity that her children wouldn't grow up with faith. He knew her too well.

"You can leave if you want, but don't force Johanna into the world." His bad leg faltered, and he grasped the kitchen counter to steady himself. "She will be safe with us."

She shivered. Sol would teach her daughter about sacrifice and sin and purity—and most of all, how to love as Christ loved the church.

His gaze moved from her to Johanna, and he devoured her with his stare. "I'll take care of her until you return."

With her daughter clutched in her arms, she threw open the door and raced down the steps. She didn't care what he did to her, but she would never let him have her girls.

The frosty grass stung her toes as she raced toward the forest. Wind pierced her skin.

"Damnation!" Sol shouted from the open door. "Is that what you want?"

Light flooded the yard, and she wheeled around for one last glance at the man who had embodied God's love for her. His cane batted the sky as he blasted her with a vulgar round of words.

She switched Johanna to her right hip and ducked into the shelter of brush and leaves.

"God will kill you!"

She could hear the rush of the river, the seduction in the wind.

She'd take Johanna to a safe place. Then she'd come back to rescue her baby before Sol hurt her too. She'd care for her family. Far, far away from here.

Sol's curse carried in the wind. "And he'll kill the girl!"

Chapter 1

SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER

SECONDS AFTER ELISE FRIEDMAN stepped onto the concrete platform, the doors slammed behind her and the train raced toward a dark tunnel. Wind flooded the underground station, and she shivered as she moved away from the tracks.

Her dad had told her about the bone-chilling air that settled on Berlin in the fall, but she'd forgotten his warning until she stepped outside the hotel this morning and was blasted by the brisk wind rushing through the German capital.

The platform vibrated as another train rushed into the station, and Elise pushed through a mob of tourists, toward the light that carved a channel through the passage.

When she'd called her dad from the airport last night, she'd answered his latest inquisition about her travel plans. Of course, the only reason she was here was because *he* wouldn't answer any of *her* questions.

He wouldn't answer questions, but he had no problem dumping advice on her. He warned her against all the evils of a big city. Traffic. Crowds. Dark streets. Men. Not any specific man—he thought they were all bad. She assured him that she'd be too busy studying to get into trouble. Of course, he thought she'd come to Germany in search of information for her honor's thesis, but today's research was personal.

The tunnel swerved right, and she followed the dim passageway. She'd read about this station in her guidebook. After the Berlin Wall went up in 1961, the U-bahn had continued to speed by this platform on its course between western stations, but it never stopped. For

twenty-five years, armed guards had ensured that no one got off the train—and no one got on.

She jogged up the concrete stairs and emerged onto the busy Unter den Linden. Colorful tourist shops and cafés had replaced the browns and grays of the former East Berlin, and lime trees lined the grassy strip in the middle of the road with cars, buses, and bikes speeding down both sides.

At the end of the street, the quadriga atop the Brandenburg Gate blazed gold in the sunshine, the majestic horses claiming victory over the city below. Elise stared up at the gilded gate as she waited with the crowd of tourists at a crosswalk. Her tourist book had devoted two entire pages to the gate. A symbol of Nazi power in the 1940s, it later became a symbol of freedom.

Some Germans had joined the Socialist Unity Party without a fight after World War II. Those who balked were forced to toe the party line. But a divided family cannot stand, and in 1989 thousands of East Germans gathered on this street, at this gate, to demand that the government tear down the border that had severed their city and country from the free world.

When the wall finally came down, East Berliners raced to the other side of the gate and discovered that the western side had left them behind. Though some East Germans thrived in the new world, others wanted to return to the safe arms of Communism.

She was shocked when she read how many Germans wanted to revitalize Communism, swapping their freedom for the security of the East German days. She didn't get it. There was nothing more important to her than freedom. If she'd been born behind the Iron Curtain, she would have escaped or died trying.

The bright green Ampelmann, one of the few symbols left over from East Germany, flashed on the crosswalk signal. Elise crossed the street and kept walking with the crowd until she saw the sign for the Hotel Adlon at the base of the Brandenburg Gate.

The entrance was guarded by two bellmen with shiny gold buttons on their uniforms and caps. This place was an obvious fit for an ambas-

sador, but not for a country girl trying to glean information about the past.

The clock over the bus stop beside her read ten minutes past noon. Through the hotel's window, she could see the in-house restaurant. Addison Wade was probably sitting in there, drinking a wine spritzer and rechecking her diamond-studded watch.

If only she had gotten up when her alarm rang this morning instead of succumbing to jet lag. She'd wanted to be early to this meeting. Confident. Prepared.

The wind blasted down the street, and she batted the wisps of dark hair out of her eyes. When she brushed her fingers over her wrinkled white blouse, she saw a faded patch of sepia that had smeared across the buttons and stained the left side.

She groaned. A half hour earlier she had grabbed a cup of coffee and a muffin from the hotel lobby before she dashed toward the train station. Now she was wearing her breakfast.

She wouldn't care if she were meeting with one of her professors today, or another student, but lunch with the U.S. ambassador was a different story. How could the ambassador take her seriously when she looked as if she'd been splattered with mud?

She'd gone for a classic look—a simple white blouse and black skirt, and ended up with a scary resemblance to one of the pigs that her dad kept on the farm. Whenever she tried to dress up, something always happened to bump her back to the status of a country girl. Not that she minded, not usually. She loved her family's farm and the country air and all the cats that she'd rescued over the years and brought home. On days like this, though, she wished she could manage to stay stain-free for just an hour.

With both arms crossed over her ribs, she marched toward the hotel and tried not to think about her blouse. If she didn't hurry, Mrs. Wade would call for her car, and Elise would lose the chance to ask about her mother.

She rushed up the trail of red carpet and in through the hotel's glass doors before the bellmen could stop her. The lobby was painted a stark

white with wrought iron balconies overlooking the tile floor. The smell of cigar smoke clung to the chairs that were grouped in twos and threes, each one upholstered with the red or yellow shade of autumn leaves.

In the middle of the room, water cascaded from the tusks of four elephants into a marble fountain. A lone woman sat by the fountain, her chestnut hair pulled back in a twist. She dangled an ebony-colored sandal off her toes as she skimmed a newspaper.

Elise rushed toward her. “Ambassador Wade?”

The woman stood up and reached out her hand. “Please call me Addison.”

“I’m Elise Friedman. Catrina’s daughter.” She grasped the ambassador’s hand, her nerves rattled. “I’m so sorry I’m . . .”

Addison glanced down at the stain on her blouse and tried to repress her smile. “You look just like your mother.”

She pointed at her blouse. “Minus the coffee?”

“I thought I’d missed out on a new trend.”

Elise grinned. Maybe Mrs. Wade wasn’t wound as tight as she’d imagined.

The ambassador folded her newspaper. “Your e-mail surprised me.”

“I’d like to ask you a few questions about my mother.”

“I don’t know how much I can help you.” Her gaze shifted between Elise and the newspaper. “I didn’t know her very well.”

Elise pinched the zipper on her backpack and pulled it open. She was tired of people stumbling around the truth. Tired of the lies.

She rifled through the top of her pack until she found the picture that had sat on her parents’ dresser for years. Her parents’ wedding day.

With a quick glance down, she handed the photo to the ambassador. Her mother’s dark hair was swept over the shoulders of her red and white sundress. Sand covered her toes, and she waved a straw hat toward the camera with a rare smile. Her arm wrapped around the shoulders of another woman, Addison Wade.

Addison’s voice cracked as she took the faded picture. “Where—did you get this?”

“I want to know what happened to her.”

Addison motioned her toward the restaurant at the side of the lobby, the picture clutched in her hand. “Surely Steve already told you the story.”

“He told me *a* story.” She stopped walking and faced the ambassador. “But I want to know the truth.”