



WHILE
the
WORLD
is
STILL
ASLEEP

The Century Trilogy

PETRA DURST-BENNING

TRANSLATED BY EDWIN MILES

WHILE
the
WORLD
Is
STILL
ASLEEP

ALSO BY PETRA DURST-BENNING

The Glassblower Trilogy

The Glassblower

The American Lady

The Paradise of Glass

WHILE
the
WORLD
Is
STILL
ASLEEP

Petra Durst-Benning

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Let me tell you what I think of bicycling. I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world . . . It gives [a] woman a feeling of freedom and self-reliance . . . The moment she takes her seat she knows she can't get into harm unless she gets off her bicycle . . .

Susan B. Anthony, social reformer, 1896

Chapter One

Berlin, November 1891
Barnim Road Women's Prison

Josephine looked around anxiously. Beds lined up side by side, thirty in all. Iron bars gleaming cold in the light cast by the single bare bulb that dangled from the ceiling in the center of the room. The scene outside the barred window promised nothing better—a thin, dirty curtain was no more than a makeshift veil obstructing the view of a barren wasteland enclosed by a high wall.

Farther back in the prison dormitory, she could hear someone sobbing quietly. Jo turned around and saw a haggard, red-haired young girl with the round belly typical of pregnancy. They had been admitted at the same time. A picture of misery, the girl lay curled and crying on a bunk. Josephine wanted to tempt to console her, but then she changed her mind.

She had been awake for more than forty-eight hours. Her eyes burned and her head hurt. Her right shoulder was swollen and throbbing. Jo tentatively raised her arm a little, testing the joint. She could move her shoulder; at least nothing was broken.

She made her way hesitantly toward the bed marked “14,” the one the prison guard had told her was hers. She pushed back the thin sheet that was supposed to serve as a blanket. The mattress was covered with stains, and when she lowered herself onto it, it sagged in the middle, slack from the bodies of the many girls who had cried themselves to sleep on it, night after night. It was so cold that Josephine's breath hung in the air in little clouds.

So this was where they were going to try to cure her of her “conceit” once and for all. Josephine fought back tears as she lay down on the bed and wrapped her arms around her legs in a futile attempt to stave off the cold. She closed her eyes and waited for merciful sleep to come, but what came instead were memories of the night before.

Early that evening, she had been undecided: Should she go out, or would she be better off staying home? The weather had been wretched all day, and the endless drizzle and wet autumn leaves had made the roads slick. The wind carried with it the first bite of winter—making for less than ideal conditions. Still, she had decided to go out. An error of judgment, as it turned out.

Despite the foul weather and the fact that it was well after midnight, several local people had witnessed the accident and ran out into the rain from their warm houses. Someone put a blanket over Josephine while others ogled her as they would some strange species in the Berlin zoo.

“What do we have here, then?”

“My, did you ever see such a thing?”

“Leave her! What’s she doing around here?”

“The cops! Someone has to call the cops!”

Most of the people had been extremely hostile to her. But, in a thick Berlin accent, one old man said, “You’re luckier than you know, girl. If you’d spent the whole night lying on this icy street, you’d likely have frozen to death.” He wore pajamas and looked as if he’d jumped straight out of bed. Besides him stood an older woman with a bawling infant in her arms and a shocked expression on her face. She had plucked at Jo’s coat with her sharp claws.

“Young lady, what’s the likes of you up to at this time of night? And in that getup! That’s not right at all.” Her voice was shrill and full of reproach. It was she who bustled off to find a policeman. When the officer arrived, he fixed Jo with a suspicious eye and bombarded her with questions. “What’s your name? What happened? Why are you dressed in men’s clothes?”

All she had told him was her address. A horse and cart appeared, the horse’s mane tangled with straw. Josephine was lifted up beside the coachman on his box seat, and the officer squeezed up beside them. She summoned the last of her strength to hold herself upright on the box and not fall over backward. Only then did she notice that the skin of her right hand was scraped all over. The knuckles of her left hand were caked with blood and muck from the street. Maybe she would die of blood poisoning. *Let it happen right now*, she had thought.

When they had reached her home, the officer pounded on the door with his fist. A moment later, a window on the second floor opened and her mother, Elsbeth Schmied, stuck her head out.

Josephine had been so afraid that she nearly threw up on the spot. She wanted to drop dead there and there. Instead, she let the policeman lead her into the parlor, where she stood with her head hanging low, her shoulder throbbing.

“My daughter had what? An accident? In those clothes? We won’t have any of that in this house,” her father had said. “We’re honest people. I’m a farrier by trade, and I’ll be hanged before I let such a creature set foot in my house.” When her father finally looked at her, his eyes were filled with repugnance and contempt.

“This has to be some kind of mix-up. Our daughter does not go wandering around in the middle of the night,” her mother had said harshly. Then she had pulled her robe more tightly around her chest, pressed her lips together into a thin line, and stared straight ahead. Neither Josephine’s father nor her mother had said a word directly to her.

“Don’t go getting upset. The fact of the matter is that your daughter was involved in an accident out on Landsberger Allee,” the policeman had said with some irritation. “And she’s injured herself and very likely broken her shoulder. Don’t you think you should send for a doctor?”

Josephine’s mother glared at the officer. “If what you say is true, you can just take the little tramp away now!”

Josephine massaged her damaged shoulder as she lay on the prison bed. Now that she had stopped moving, it had begun to hurt even more.

The previous night her parents had not wanted to call a doctor. They would much rather have handed their daughter over to the officer on the spot, but he had given instructions that Josephine was to spend the rest of the night at home and then appear at the police station next to Görlitz train station at eleven in the morning the following day.

With heavy steps and a heavier heart, Jo had trudged into the laundry room. She did not immediately recognize herself when she looked in the shard of mirror on the wall. The grime and dried blood had transformed her otherwise striking face into an ugly mask. Her beautiful blond hair hung in dirty, matted locks. Josephine tried to contain her distress as she washed herself with cold

water.

—Later, in her room, she finally had broken into tears. It was all over! She had lied to her parents repeatedly. She had stolen. She had deceived. Because of her, Isabelle would get into serious trouble and maybe even Clara, too. Isabelle, with her lust for life and short temper. And pretty, petite Clara. They had been through so much together over the years, and now she had betrayed them. And how would she ever supposed to pay for the damage she'd caused? She'd probably be in debt for the rest of her life. Or would her father have to settle her bill?

Tormented by a thousand questions, Josephine had lain in bed and waited for the night to end.

She had made her way to the police station the next morning, accompanied by her mother.

Josephine moaned quietly. Had that only been a few hours before? It felt like a lifetime ago.

“Don't even think about getting comfortable,” one of the officers had said when she went to sit on the narrow wooden bench. “They make short work of young miscreants like you.” Then he had personally escorted her and her mother to the local court on Park Street, where her trial was to take place that same day.

From that point on, Josephine had experienced everything as though through a fog. The judge had been pale and young and very busy. His desk was covered with towering stacks of files, and he had to push one aside to see her at all.

“The question in this case is whether or not one can speak of insufficient insight into her actions,” he said after hearing the report from the officer. “If that were the case, an acquittal would certainly be conceivable . . .”

The officer frowned. “Your honor, the accused is no longer a girl of thirteen or fourteen; she will turn eighteen in a matter of months and be criminally liable for her actions. And according to her father—a respected farrier, incidentally—she was fully aware of the seriousness of her offense.”

“Well,” said the judge, turning to Josephine's mother. “Why hasn't the accused's father come in person to share his view of the matter?”

“My husband has to work,” she replied in a brittle voice.

“And how is it possible that your daughter is able to leave the house in the evening without your noticing? Your daughter is still a minor, which means you bear a certain degree of supervisory responsibility.”

“Don't talk to me about supervisory responsibility! She's always been a brat and a troublemaker! Our daughter never cared for rules. She has always put her own pleasure first,” she added bitterly. “What is it they say? Pride goeth before the fall. After all that has happened, I declare that our daughter is dead to us.”

Josephine had struggled desperately to come up with a suitable defense. Hadn't she labored day after day to the point of exhaustion to ease her father's workload? Hadn't she accepted any onerous task her mother had given her, in or out of the house? But she knew none of that counted anymore, though it had never counted. So she held her tongue.

The judge shifted another stack of files across his desk, then rose to his feet. As if at some secret cue, his secretary took out her pen to take down his judgment in writing.

“In accordance with the Penal Code of the German Empire, section fifty-six, paragraph one and section fifty-seven, paragraphs one and two, and in consideration of the gravity of the offense, hereby order that the accused be incarcerated forthwith in the Barnim Road Women's Prison. Given the young age of the prisoner and my unwillingness to deny her a certain potential for improvement, she is to be quartered in the newly created juvenile division. Daily work and lessons are to be undertaken. The period of incarceration is set at three and a half years.”

He had looked sternly over his desk at Josephine as he spoke. “The Barnim Road Women Prison is a great opportunity for young people like you who have slipped from the path of righteousness. I hope that during your stay there you will develop the spiritual maturity that is necessary to live an honorable life in peace and humility.”

When two officers led Josephine away, her mother did not even turn her head.

They had taken her clothes from her and handed her a coarse woolen dress. She was only allowed to keep her underwear and her shoes. A guard then led her to the dormitory and told her that she was too late for the evening meal and that she had better get ready for bed.

Josephine was indifferent to all of it.

She heard footsteps approaching, then a voice behind her, rough as sandpaper: “Well, well. You’re a newcomer. Bet she’s still got her own underwear, too. Not the miserable scraps we have to wear.”

A peculiar smell stung Josephine’s nose. A mixture of bad food and sweat—it seemed that her fellow inmates had surrounded her bed, but Josephine kept her eyes fixed stubbornly on the wall. She didn’t want to talk to anyone.

“What d’you think you’re staring at?” said a second voice. Someone jabbed her in the back with a sharp fingertip, and she heard the laughter of several young women.

“What the hell is this?” Josephine spun around in a fury and sat up on the edge of the bed. She recoiled at the sight of the ragged figures in front of her. These were the people she was supposed to share her life with?

There were ten or twelve of them, girls and young women, some of whom looked like they were her age, some younger—still children. But their faces looked unnaturally wasted and hostile. Deep furrows had formed where the fresh bloom of youth should have been. All of them were unnaturally pale. One girl had a broad, red streak across her cheek, like a stroke from a whip. Another had a scabby chin and forehead, as if she had just gotten through some kind of pox. Their hair was unkempt, their hands dirty—some actually bloody—and their fingernails neglected. The girls reminded Jo of the hordes of alley kids all over the city who had thought it funny to pelt her with stones or spit on her. She and Isabelle had made off as fast as they could whenever they saw them. A shiver of fright ran through Jo. It was hard for her to believe that not one of these girls was older than eighteen.

“Number fourteen’s my bed, so get up!” a tall, lean girl snarled at her and kicked her in the shins. The girl had deep-set gray eyes and no more than stubble on her head, as if her hair had been shorn to get rid of lice. Her eyelashes and eyebrows were pale, almost transparent. Josephine detected intelligence in her eyes, unlike the dull faces of the others, but they were ice-cold, too. The girl was not much older than Jo, but she looked thirty.

“But the guard said—” Josephine began.

“No one cares. *I’m* the one who decides what goes here. I’m Adele, and I say that this bed belongs to me,” the girl said firmly. She gave a nod to two girls, who positioned themselves on either side of Josephine. But Josephine stood up of her own free will before they could take hold of her. The last thing she wanted was a fight.

“Then where am I supposed to sleep?” she asked.

“Do I look like I care?” Adele replied.

Josephine looked around the dormitory. She was tired. All she wanted was to lie down and

close her eyes. She saw the red-haired girl cowering at the far end of the room. It appeared that several of the beds down there were free.

Josephine was halfway down the aisle when she realized that Adele was following her. She abruptly stopped and spun around. "What do you want now?"

The leader of the girls grinned and pushed past, blocking her path. "I'm not done with you. Give me your petticoat. I'm sure I can use it."

"You're out of your mind! I will do no such thing. If you want something from me, you'll have to come and get it." She planted her feet and stared at Adele.

Adele hesitated. After appraising her rival for a moment, she waved dismissively. "You're so big, your clothes wouldn't fit me anyway. Show me your other stuff!"

"What other stuff?"

"You must have brought all kinds of useful things. Soap, a comb, candy—show us what you've got!"

A strange excitement spread among the other girls. They exchanged looks and jabbed each other's elbows; one or two of them appeared to be holding their breath. They seemed to put great store in what was happening.

"You'd better do what Adele says," squeaked a small girl on the fringe of the group.

Josephine thought the matter over. This Adele seemed out for a fight. It would no doubt be wise to stand up to her. At least she would get some peace and quiet. With forced composure, Josephine squared off in front of her challenger, causing Adele to retreat in surprise. She even looked a little frightened.

"I don't have anything. I didn't have time to pack the crown jewels this morning," Jo said, then she pushed Adele aside. "Now leave me alone."

Adele furrowed her brow.

A murmur ran through the group of young women—rarely did anyone argue with Adele, and to defy her as Josephine just had was unheard of.

Jo sneered. She was not scared. Not only was she a head taller than Adele, she was also athletic and fit. Thanks to the many hours she had spent in the blacksmith's shop, she had broad shoulders, strong legs, and sinewy, muscular arms. Her training, too, had helped. She marched off, confident in the knowledge that she was physically superior to Adele and the others.

"Don't think you're getting off so lightly! You'll pay for that," Adele shouted halfheartedly behind her.

Josephine had just lain down on a new bed when she noticed that Adele and her entourage had turned their attention to the other newcomer.

"No, please don't take it. That hair clip belonged to my sister, who died. It's all I've still got of her," cried the girl. She was about fourteen and her mussed red hair made her look like some sort of wild creature. She let out a loud howl.

Jo closed her eyes.

"What else have you got?" one of the other girls asked.

"Nothing, I'm telling you." The redhead's voice sounded panicked.

"No such thing as nothing. Your undies. And your socks. Hand 'em over!"

Jo stood up, her exhaustion suddenly extinguished, and marched over to Adele and her gang.

There may have been plenty of things wrong with her, but being a coward wasn't one of them. She had resisted her tyrannical father's temper for years as he had tried to break her will. She had formed a hard shell as a result and wasn't about to let a beast like Adele get the upper hand on her first

day. Adele could claim that her word was law until she was blue in the face, but Josephine would not let her attack the weak.

Josephine's eyes flashed with anger as she grabbed Adele by the arm and took the hair clasp away from her. Without turning her eyes from her rival, she handed the bent piece of tin back to the red-haired girl.

"Leave her in peace, or you'll have to deal with me." Her voice was low and controlled, but a little firmer for that.

Adele's punch came without warning. Jo had no time to defend herself. The pain was so intense that she lost her breath for a moment. Then blows started raining down on her from all sides. Wailing, Josephine doubled over like a pocketknife and fell to the stone floor. A warm satisfaction spread among the other young women, who stepped back, murmuring and giggling.

The red-haired girl was beside her instantly. Her face was filled with fright and horror as she stroked Josephine's hair out of her face. "You're crazy. No one stands up to someone like that . . ." She whispered in Josephine's ear, fearfully keeping one eye on Adele.

"If you two aren't clear on who calls the shots around here, we can repeat this lesson anytime you like," Adele hissed, posturing victoriously.

Josephine groaned. One of the last punches had caught her in the middle of her ribcage and stung like a knife. Hurt. With the last of her strength, she pushed past the red-haired girl. She caught Adele's left ankle just before Adele could pull it clear and sent her sprawling on the floor.

Jo pulled herself up and dropped down with all her weight onto Adele's chest. She pinned Adele's arms to the floor. Breathing hard, she glared down at Adele and said, "Before today, I would never have attacked someone weaker than me, not in my wildest dreams. But you've just shown me how it's done!" She pressed her right knee hard into Adele's chest until she cried out in pain. Jo smiled. "Don't like the taste of your own medicine? If you don't want any more of it, then leave the girl alone. And me, too!" Then she released Adele's arms and, with a final sniff of contempt, stood up and turned away.

Chapter Two

The door of the barn creaks as the boy pulls it closed behind him. He is enveloped by darkness and the familiar odors of leather, hoof trimmings, and ashes. He listens, alert for the slightest sound, but none and nothing is in sight on this sunny Sunday afternoon. Not even a mouse peeps out from under the bales of hay stacked in the rear of the barn. His parents are away visiting relatives, and he has driven off his annoying sister, Josephine. He is in the smithy where his father works every weekday from eight in the morning to eight in the evening, and he is thrilled to have it to himself. He can hardly believe that he's actually managed to steal the key! He will make sure he puts it back in its drawer before his parents return.

The boy grins, then bars the door. He knows he is forbidden to be in there alone. His mother, father, and sisters all know how much he loves his father's tools. They have told him countless times that the tools are dangerous. But the grown-ups have no idea. The sharp knives his father uses to trim the hooves, the large rasps for filing them smooth, the clinch cutter, and the nails—all kinds of exciting toys.

But today the boy does not even glance at the tools. Instead, he goes straight to the forge where his father heats the horseshoes until the iron glows and they can be beaten on the anvil.

The boy loves fire. The red and gold flames, the heat, the crackle and snap—all of it is so thrilling. Lighting a fire is also forbidden, of course. Or rather, FORBIDDEN—in all capital letters!

When you burn newspaper, the art is in keeping a single page alight as long as possible. This can be done in a number of ways. You can wad the paper up in a special way, or poke it around with a small stick and slowly break it up into small pieces while it burns. It is also fun to wrap horseshoe nails in the paper first, and thin hoof trimmings wrapped in newspaper burn really well. The boy is still undecided about exactly which method is the best, but he plans to conduct several experiments today to find out. In his own fireplace. In the center of the barn, on the stone floor.

He opens the drawer where his father keeps the boxes of matches.

Forbidden. All forbidden.

"Felix? Felix, where are you? You rascal, where are you hiding?"

The boy's face tenses. Why does Josephine have to come looking for him just now?

All he needs is a few minutes to finish his tests for the day. He grabs a match and darts to the back door of the barn and bars that, too. All right. Now his dear sister can scream her head off!

He smiles.

He will sweep all the ashes together and open the door when he is done. "What's the matter?" he'll ask, meek as a lamb, and show Josephine his wooden horse. "I was just playing in the hay."

To reinforce the credibility of his excuse later on, he pulls out one of the bales of hay that

normally used to feed skittish horses as they are being shod. He pushes it into the center of the bar where he has set up his fireplace on the cold stone slabs. He prefers to think of it as his laboratory. Mr. Günthner, his teacher, has said that there are scientists toiling away in laboratories all over the empire, all hoping to make new discoveries. He hopes to be among them. Filled with scientific fervor, the boy crouches down.

He burns a twisted up sheet of newspaper and counts to twenty before the last ember goes out. A sheet loaded up with nails will hold the heat—and therefore the embers—until a count of twenty-three. The other trials have yielded worse results.

This time, the boy sets fire to a new sheet of paper, then takes two long, thin sticks, one in each hand, and carefully pulls the paper apart until he has two burning pieces. Good! How many pieces will he be able to separate the burning sheet into? And how long will they burn?

As he always does when he is concentrating, he pushes his bottom lip up and over the upper one. Four pieces, five . . . How annoying. The small ones burn up very quickly. A flake of ash sails in his nose, tickling him, and he snorts. The small draft causes one of the bigger burning scraps to fly up. It comes to rest at the base of the hay bale.

The boy jumps back in fright. A shudder rocks his twelve-year-old body. Hay burns like tinder. Every child knows that! It isn't for nothing that his father always stacks the bales as far from the forge as he can, around the outer walls. While the boy is still searching for something to extinguish it, the burning scrap of paper wafts up again and flattens itself like gold leaf against the hay bale. A few glowing yellow tongues of flame lick at the hay. The smell is pleasant, but fear enters the boy's eyes.

Father's leather apron! The heavy leather will put the fire out! The boy runs and yanks the apron from the wall, together with its hook. But when he returns with his heavy load to the bale, he finds it burning brightly. Small black fragments leap through the air like fleas.

He hears hysterical screaming from the entrance. "Felix! What's going on in there? Open up now!" Josephine. She just won't let go.

"I'll be there in a minute!" the boy calls back and begins beating frantically at the bale. Then he feels a wave of heat on his back. The other scraps of paper! With all his thrashing about, a couple of them have floated up and landed on the woodpile where he found the sticks. In the blink of an eye the bone-dry wood is ablaze. The billowing dark-gray smoke obscures the boy's vision and disorients him. He lurches back, trying to gather his senses in the growing heat.

"Josephine . . . Help!" The boy beats desperately at the burning wood with the leather apron, but instead of extinguishing the fire, all he does is send the embers flying. Small fires merge into larger fires and the crackling of the burning hay grows louder. The doors have been blocked by the fire. Paralyzed with fear, the boy stares at the flaming inferno, in the heart of which is a solitary black place: his father's forge, stone clad in steel. If he manages to get in there, he can simply wait until the fire burns itself out. Half-blinded by smoke, the boy feels his way toward the forge. One step. No, not that way! He slaps at his sleeve, which has almost caught fire. Another step. There, he is almost there. The unbearable heat. Don't think about it. Almost . . . almost . . .

The boy feels his knees give way. A few feet from the shelter of the stones, he collapses to the floor . . .

Josephine screamed and sat bolt upright in her bed. She looked around, perplexed. "Felix?"

"What was it? Bad dream?" someone beside her murmured.

Josephine blinked in confusion. The red-haired girl. Barnim Road Women's Prison.

Sweating and shaking, she sank back on her mattress. From farther back came the sound of snoring and someone moaning softly in her sleep, but otherwise the dormitory was silent. Beyond the

barred windows, dawn was breaking. An owl or some other animal let out a shrill cry, reminding Jo of freedom and better days.

She had always been the first to wake in the morning. “While the world is still asleep . . .” Words she had said so many times! At that hour, the world was hers, and only hers. She was free. She had looked forward to every new day.

Now, though, she sought desperately to go back to sleep. But she could not push aside her memories of her younger brother.

In the first weeks after Felix’s death, she had dreamed of him regularly. Strange, obscure dreams in which she sometimes saw the world through her own eyes, sometimes through his, as in the dream she had just woken from. The guilt had followed her into her sleep back then. But eventually the dreams had grown less frequent and she became absorbed in her own life again.

Her brother had died in the spring of 1889, on a beautiful and unseasonably warm Sunday. More than two years ago now. After church, her father, known to all as Schmied-the-Smith, told Josephine that he and her mother wanted to pay his sister a visit. Josephine was to keep an eye on Felix at home. She had been furious. When she was Felix’s age, no one had cared a jot about her. She would have liked to go visit her aunt, too!

She had watched listlessly while her little brother occupied himself with various activities. Then she had gone to visit her friend Clara, four houses down.

Clara was sick, and Josephine found her propped up among her lily-white embroidered sheets like a queen on her throne. She was surrounded by magazines, a glass of some deep-red juice, and a plate of pastries from the Ratsmann bakery. In the Berg family, being ill was always cause for celebration, like a birthday or christening. Ever since Clara had nearly died at the age of seven from an inflamed appendix, her mother, Sophie, would have liked nothing more than to keep her daughter packed in tissue paper. Josephine had always envied her a little. At home, it was always, “*Hurry up and get better, the work won’t get done if you’re lazing around in bed.*”

They had looked through the magazines, and Clara had fallen in love with one dress in particular. Jo found it hard to believe that Clara and her mother would make a special trip all the way to Kurfürstendamm Boulevard to purchase it. The clothes that Josephine and her sisters wore—purchased at Reutter’s Emporium, down on the corner—paled in comparison to Clara’s stylish wardrobe.

When they’d grown bored with browsing through the magazines, Josephine suggested that they pay a visit to Frieda, an older neighbor who would surely offer them some lemonade and let them sit in her garden. Besides, a visit to Frieda was always interesting. The old widow lived a life they could only dream about. No tiresome rules or duties, no dull daily routine. Ever since her husband had died, Frieda did whatever she liked, and Josephine admired her tremendously for that.

But Clara shook her head. “I’m sick. Besides, Mother doesn’t like my visiting Frieda so often. Just yesterday she said Frieda is the kind of woman who’ll put ideas into your head before you can say boo.”

Josephine had stayed on a little longer out of sympathy, but, enveloped by the intense smell of lavender and the bright floral wallpaper, she felt unable to last much longer. She stood up abruptly,

crossed to the window, and threw it open.

~~Luisenstadt, always so bustling during the week, had looked utterly lifeless that day.~~ Everything the residents of the district needed was within an easy walk: Just down from Clara's house on the corner, was the large Reutter's Emporium. Then there were bakeries, butchers, grocery stores, Clara's father's pharmacy, and Schmied-the-Smith's forge. A few narrow apartment buildings were across the road from the pharmacy, and among those was a single, tiny, freestanding house where Frieda lived. The lower end of the street was taken up entirely by Moritz Herrenhus's clothing factory, which extended almost as far as the park known as Schlesischer Busch. But the area had been going through a transformation of late: more and more skilled craftsmen were moving to the outskirts of the city where they could produce their goods more quickly and cheaply.

"Let 'em go," Schmied-the-Smith was often heard to say. "It may well be the end of the line for an old ropemaker's shop in the city, but horses will always need shoeing. I won't run out of work anytime soon."

Her father shod eight to ten horses every day, and it was often ten in the evening before Josephine was finished clearing and cleaning up the smithy. No one expected Felix to lend a hand. He was the little prince, after all. While she was no more than the maid. And he was the reason she had to miss out on visiting her aunt . . .

Work, work, work, from morning till night—that was all Josephine ever did! She had stared morosely out Clara's window and wished herself very far away.

Sophie Berg had appeared in Clara's room, interrupting Josephine's peevish thoughts. "There's smoke coming from your father's forge and on a Sunday at that—what do you think it could mean?" she had asked with a furrowed brow—

Josephine closed her eyes. She didn't want to remember. Not here, not now. But her thoughts would not stop. They rampaged through her head like wild horses.

The barn door had been latched shut from the inside. She could smell the stink of the fire and burning hoof trimmings as she shouted Felix's name. The little villain! How many times had his parents forbidden him from touching the matches? If they found out that he had been playing with fire again, they would blame her. She had hammered on the door with her right fist so hard that it hurt, her fury and fear growing with every passing second. "Open up!" Again, nothing happened. But she thought she heard a quiet laugh.

"Just wait!" Gathering her skirt, she had run into the toolshed in search of something large and heavy to break down the door. She grabbed the ax, ran back to the barn, and swung it with such force at the barn door that it fell out of her hands. The door did not open, but she managed to dislodge two of its boards with the force of the blow. Heat surged out through the gap, and the fire flared up a bright yellow, fueled by the fresh air.

Josephine's wrists burned and splinters drove into her flesh as she tore out the boards with her bare hands.

Dear God, watch over my brother. He is just a child. He doesn't know what he's doing. Dear God, take what you want from me, but watch over my brother.

She had prayed to God as she had never prayed in her life. But God was not there on that Sunday. The fire extinguished her prayers, as surely as it did Felix's life.

"Felix! Where are you?" Her voice sounded muffled, as if she were trying to speak through a heavy cloth rag. She squinted into the scorching sea of fire, and a stabbing pain throbbed in her ears as she groped her way forward into the inferno.

She was too late. Her brother had already perished in the flames.

Chapter Three

Breakfast was a scant affair that took place under the eyes of two surly guards in a cold, gloomy hall. The narrow windows were positioned in the upper third of the walls, and little light found its way through them. *It's like eating in a basement*, thought Jo, as she sat down at one of the outer tables. Could it be that the rooms that made up the juvenile section of the prison were actually underground? When she'd been brought in, she had paid no attention to things like stairways, but now, after a single night, she felt as if she'd been buried alive inside a tomb. She wanted more than anything to stand up and leave.

She felt Adele's venomous glare on her as she chewed on a dry roll and sipped at the weak tea. The leader of the gang was whispering with the girls sitting around her and pointed repeatedly in Josephine's direction. Once, twice, their eyes met. Jo knew she had better be on guard.

"So? Why are you here?"

Reluctantly, Josephine turned to the redhead who had sat beside her. She didn't even know the girl's name, didn't know whether she was really pregnant or she just had a strange figure. And she didn't want to know.

"Theft," Josephine replied.

"Is that all . . . ?" asked the red-haired girl, evidently disappointed. "I was tricked!" she added, then launched into a drawn-out story in which three friends, an old couple, and money hidden under a mattress all played a role. The fact that the old couple lay dead in their narrow bed by the end of the story didn't seem to trouble the girl much. She repeated several times that she had had nothing to do with it.

As if Josephine cared! She chewed in silence, wishing she were able to close her ears as easily as she could close her eyes.

"And I got tricked the same way with this." The girl thumped her stomach with her right hand. "He said he'd be careful and that we'd both have fun. Fun my foot! But I suppose one good thing did come of it. If I wasn't knocked up, they'd have stuck me in the prison in Moabit. They only brought me here because the women's prison has a birthing ward." The redhead reached out her hand. "My name's Martha, by the way."

Josephine had no choice but to take the extended hand. It was moist, and a few breadcrumbs clung to it.

"Jo."

"At least your name isn't too long!" Martha laughed. "It sounds more like a man's name. But from what I know about you, it fits. It sounds really . . . tough."

For the first time since this nightmare had begun, a gentle smile appeared on Josephine's face.

“Someone else once told me the same thing.”

—Martha, who obviously claimed Jo’s smile as a personal success, beamed. “A girlfriend? Do you have one?”

Jo bit a chunk of the roll but said nothing. Did she have friends? God, yes, very good friends—the best anyone could imagine! She had been friends with Clara since she could walk and had known Isabelle since they were both small. But she and Isabelle had only really become close about a year and a half ago. And then there was Lilo down in the Black Forest.

“They won’t want anything to do with me anymore,” Jo said. “Not after I got caught stealing from Isabelle’s father.” Jo felt nauseous at the memory of his actions on the night in question. Instead of talking to her, he had immediately filed a complaint with the police.

“Oh,” said Martha, but she did not look as taken aback as she sounded. “Friends!” She gestured dismissively. “They probably tricked you somehow and you didn’t even notice. That’s the second thing we have in common. The first is that we both got here yesterday.”

Josephine looked at Martha with annoyance. What nonsense was she spouting? They had nothing—not a single thing!—in common.

Martha grasped Josephine’s right hand and squeezed it. “I can be your friend, if you’d like.”

Josephine jerked her hand free. “Just because I helped you out of a jam yesterday doesn’t mean you have to stick to me like a burr! Let’s get one thing straight: in the future, you look out for yourself. I do *not* feel like—”

A shrill bell sounded, cutting Josephine off.

Karlheinz Krotzmann had just passed through the gatehouse of the Barnim Road Women’s Prison when he felt the old familiar rumbling in his stomach. His face contorted in pain as he surveyed the prison, which consisted of a U-shaped building housing several hundred inmates. The facility had been built a few years earlier by some notable architects, following a decision by the Royal Ministry of Justice. The left wing contained the apartments of the prison officers and the kitchens. The prison had its own boiler building and power plant that supplied the complex with power and light. Behind the main building were an orchard and a vegetable garden that were tended by the inmates. The architect had even added a prison chapel on the top floor.

Karlheinz Krotzmann sniffed. He would have bet that hardly anybody here had ever set foot in that house of the Lord. His discomfort increased with every step. Although the building was no more than twenty years old, everything looked dilapidated. The footpath that led to the main building was uneven and potholed; the walls were stained or covered in moss. The windows were grimy, the bars rusted . . .

These people are like animals! They destroy everything, without the slightest hesitation about the damage they’re doing, Krotzmann thought. He was glad that the start of his classes did not coincide with the release of the inmates into the yard. The idea of breathing the same air as murderers and thieves any more than he had to made him uneasy.

He had almost reached the main block when he saw the caretaker coming around the corner pulling a handcart stacked with tools. The man lived in a small apartment on the premises and was busy with repairs from dawn till dusk. *What a life!* thought Krotzmann with a shudder, and he gave the

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