



*WITH
YOU
ALWAYS*

JODY HEDLUND



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For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand,
saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee.

Isaiah 41:13

CHAPTER 1



NEW YORK CITY
JUNE 1857

Elise Neumann stared out the cracked third-story window to the muddy street below, watching the omnibuses and carriages slog their way through the muck. Pedestrians dodged puddles as they hurried along. A lone newsboy stood on the street corner attempting to sell his papers, his cheeks and hands black with ink. Even at the early morning hour, the city was bustling.

To think that only a day ago these dangerous and dirty streets had been her home.

Behind her came Marianne's soft whisper. "How long have you been awake?"

Elise turned. "Not long." Her sister's face still shone from the hard scrubbing she'd given it yesterday when they arrived at the Seventh Street Mission. It wouldn't be quite as easy to wash away from their minds the trauma of being homeless orphans.

She was still pinching herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming, even though the rumbling of her stomach told her she was very much awake.

“I’m going to work today,” she told Marianne quietly with a glance to where the other three children lay on pallets. She didn’t want to wake them yet. She hoped they’d sleep all day.

Marianne brushed back her wavy brown hair that was still in need of a washing. “Miss Pendleton said we didn’t have to start today, that we could take a few days to rest.”

“We need the money.” They had none. In fact, they had nothing but a small sack of clothes and belongings to remind them that they’d ever had parents or a home. With each passing day, it was becoming more difficult to remember a time when they’d been happy and safe together in Hamburg, when both Vater and Mutti had been alive, when Vater had his thriving bakery, when they had everything they needed and more.

At a faint scuttling, Marianne shuddered and hugged her thin arms across her chest. Elise had slept deeply last night—the first time since Mutti had died over a month and a half ago—and she hadn’t heard the rats in the walls or the cockroaches on the ceiling. But in the quiet of the early morning, their cacophony of skitters and squeaks had been all too loud.

Miss Pendleton, the owner of the newly opened Seventh Street Mission, had explained she was still in the process of cleaning up the massive building that had once been a brewery. When the brewery had closed several years ago, gangs and thugs had taken over the unused building, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake.

Bullet holes dotted one wall, while another had a jagged gap that had been hastily patched. The ceiling was coated in black soot, evidence someone had burned a coal fire for warmth. The floor had been swept, but a residue of grime remained.

It was better than the streets, Elise reminded herself. Much better.

Even more important, Miss Pendleton had promised her and Marianne one of the coveted seamstress positions in her workshop. Elise planned to put the promise to the test that very morning. She was desperate for a job. She'd promised Mutti on her deathbed she'd take good care of her siblings, and so far she'd failed to do so.

Besides, she couldn't rely upon Miss Pendleton's or the Seventh Street Mission's charity. Already Miss Pendleton had provided them several meals yesterday. She'd given them dry blankets and pallets. And she'd sent for a doctor to care for poor little Nicholas. At one year of age, the elements and lack of food had quickly taken a toll on the infant. Thankfully, except for dehydration, the doctor hadn't found anything wrong with the boy. After a day of rest and plenty of fluids, color had begun to return to his cheeks.

"Stay with the children." Elise combed her hair back with her fingers and began to plait it. In the scant light coming through the window, her thick blond hair appeared gray. She didn't doubt that it was. The dust of the streets engrained every fiber.

Marianne didn't argue. Even though she was only a year younger than Elise's nineteen years, Marianne had always deferred to Elise. It made Elise's job of caring for her siblings easier. They listened to her without question. But the weight of responsibility could be unbearable at times, especially because she couldn't seem to take care of them the way they deserved.

Elise's fingers snagged in her hair. They were chapped and red from the exposure to the rain. And stiff. She just prayed she could make her fingers work to do the detailed stitches that would be required of her.

Marianne brushed her hands aside. "Let me do it."

Elise relinquished her hair into Marianne's deft but tender

fingers. In no time, Marianne had her hair braided, coiled, and pinned at the back of her head. Elise pressed a kiss against her sister's cheek in thanks and then tiptoed across the room.

She paused above Sophie, who was sandwiched between Nicholas and Olivia. Sophie had her bony arms draped protectively across each of the children. For the first time in weeks, Sophie's pretty face was smooth, devoid of worry lines. Elise almost thought she could see the girl's dimples in her cheeks. They rarely made an appearance anymore.

In sleep, Sophie looked so vulnerable, almost as helpless as Nicholas and Olivia. Sophie was petite and hadn't begun to change into a woman yet. She could easily pass for a child of ten instead of fifteen.

Elise sighed. Maybe now in a safe place, with steady meals, Sophie would begin to flourish. She desperately hoped today would be the start of a better future for them all.

She made her way down a rickety stairway until she reached the first floor. After returning from the privy in the back alley, she followed the sound of voices and low laughter. The hallway was narrow, illuminated only by the open doors of rooms near the front of the building. The scent of fresh paint was strong, along with the lingering odors of vinegar and lye, a sure sign Miss Pendleton had already labored hard to make the first floor of the building usable.

Before Elise reached the workroom, she stopped and took a steadying breath, then forced herself to step inside. She found herself in a workshop filled with women sitting at long tables, sewing shirts. Their chatter tapered to a halt, and soon all eyes focused upon her.

None of the faces looked familiar. Many of the women held raised needles, dangling with thread. Others had needles jabbed

through linen. The tables were covered in the cut pieces of men's shirts in various stages of construction. Though Elise had sewn vests at her last job, she was familiar enough with seamstress work to recognize the different tasks the women had been assigned. Some were stitchers, others finishers, and still others embroiderers.

Rumors abounded about new machines that could do the sewing in place of hand-stitching. Like everyone else, Elise couldn't imagine how a contraption of metal could be as accurate or thorough as a human.

While she never thought she'd end up a seamstress, it was one job in New York City available to women. Most sweatshops were already full, but Miss Pendleton had guaranteed her work. And she was counting on it. Desperately.

She searched the room for the petite, dark-haired woman wearing black mourning garments. However, Miss Pendleton was not present.

"May I help you?" A woman spoke with an English accent, pushed away from one of the tables and stood. She was tall with pale skin, which made the dark circles under her eyes more visible. Her drab brown hair was parted severely down the middle and smoothed into a coiffure. Her plaid dress of silk and taffeta, which at one time had probably been stylish and elegant, was now faded and ragged.

"I'm looking for Miss Pendleton," Elise said. The moment she spoke, the curiosity in some of the faces changed to mistrust, even anger. Seven years after immigrating, Elise couldn't shed her German accent. And apparently these women weren't German, which meant they were probably Irish.

Unfortunately, the Irish and German immigrants couldn't ever seem to get along. Roving gangs from either side were

always fighting one another in the streets and alleys. Both ethnic groups had large populations here, and they were competing for the same limited jobs and homes.

“Miss Pendleton is not available.” The tall woman’s eyes weren’t hostile, merely curious.

“Miss Pendleton told me I could find work here.”

The women exchanged glances among themselves. Elise’s stomach cinched. Was there no work after all? Had Miss Pendleton misled her?

“As you can see,” the Englishwoman said, “we have no more room for additional workers.”

Elise surveyed the spacious room once again and this time noted there were only four women at each table. Each had her own work surface with plenty of natural light from the windows, as well as oil lanterns positioned throughout the room.

The sweatshop she’d worked in previously had been a small tenement apartment. Up to twelve workers had squeezed into a room that was a fraction of the size of this one. They’d had little lighting and only their laps to work on. “I don’t need much space.”

The Englishwoman glanced over her shoulder at one of the tables to a curly redheaded woman, who pursed her lips and gave a curt shake of her head. Her eyes and her pretty freckled face were street-hardened, lacking any compassion in a world where the competition for survival was brutal.

“You will need to find work elsewhere,” the woman said again, almost apologetically.

Elise was tempted to protest—or beg. She considered herself a woman of some pride. But after living on the streets once already, the thought of returning sent a rush of panic through her. She wasn’t afraid for herself but didn’t want to expose her

family to the danger again. “If you give me a chance, you’ll see I’m an excellent seamstress.”

“I am truly sorry,” the woman said.

“What will I do?” The desperate question slipped out before Elise could contain it.

“Yer young and pretty,” said the redheaded woman. “The men’ll like ye well enough.”

The implication made Elise’s scalp crawl. “I’d rather die than sell my body.”

“My, aren’t we a proud one,” said another lady from a nearby table.

“Aye,” said another, almost spitting the word through a scowl. “You’d do it if it meant you didn’t have to watch your wee one starve before your very eyes.”

Others began to speak up, and angry voices escalated around the room. If their gazes had been unfriendly before, they turned downright hostile now. Elise took a step back. She couldn’t understand why her simple statement would make the women so angry. Prostitution was wrong. Why were they crucifying her for taking a stand against it?

Unless . . .

Elise clutched the doorframe. She’d been so tired yesterday that she had a hard time focusing on Miss Pendleton’s explanation behind the Seventh Street Mission, but somewhere in Elise’s mind she vaguely remembered Miss Pendleton mentioning that the women in the workshop had been rescued from a life of degradation. Had she meant prostitution?

All traces of hope fluttered away, like flower petals falling to the floor waiting to be crushed. She may as well leave. There would be no work for her here, not as a German woman. Especially not now that she’d insulted them.

Elise turned from the workshop and started down the hallway back the way she'd come. She'd let the children sleep as long as possible, get one more meal, and then they'd be on their way. But where would they go? Would she be forced to return to Uncle's, even though the situation there was intolerable?

What about Reinhold? Her friend had offered to marry her in order to provide a place for her family, despite his barely being able to afford to care for his own mother and siblings, and his aunt and her children. He was probably worried sick about her by now. She'd had no way to contact him since they'd run away.

"Elise" came a voice from down the hall.

Elise pivoted to see Miss Pendleton entering the building. Behind her came the brawny Reverend Bedell. Although he had a kind face, he was big and broad-shouldered, a giant of a man who wasn't afraid to use his fists. Elise had seen him break up a fight once, and he was impressively strong. Miss Pendleton had told them yesterday with pretty pink cheeks that she and Reverend Bedell were engaged to be married, and the wedding would take place just as soon as her time of mourning for her mother was over.

Miss Pendleton rushed toward her with short, clipped footsteps. She was petite and thin, her face delicately angled and almost severe. But what she lacked in size she made up for in determination and purpose.

"I'm surprised to see you awake so early this morning." Miss Pendleton held herself with a poise and grace that reminded Elise all too keenly of their differences in social status. She knew better than to lump Miss Pendleton together with other rich aristocrats, and yet Elise struggled not to feel some resentment toward the woman.

If not for Count Eberhardt, her family would still be happily

together in Hamburg. Vater would still have his bakery, and she would be working alongside him doing what she loved with the people she loved. All it had taken was one minor offense against the calloused count for him to decide to ruin Vater's reputation with a false rumor.

Elise could never forget the deep grooves in Vater's forehead and the despair in his eyes when he finally realized he would have no more customers to buy his breads and pastries.

"I hope you found something to eat in the kitchen." Miss Pendleton stopped close enough that the freshness of her clothes and hair, a flowery scent, made Elise self-conscious of her own deplorable stench, the sourness of her unwashed body and clothes.

"I only need food for the children," Elise said.

"You must eat something too. I insist." Miss Pendleton nodded toward the stairway that would take her to a kitchen and dining room on the second floor. Although the rooms were still under construction and far from finished, Miss Pendleton had a simple fare available for the workers to buy for a small fee.

From down the dimly lit hallway, Elise caught a glimpse of the tall Englishwoman standing in the doorway of the workroom. When Miss Pendleton followed Elise's gaze, the woman retreated into the room.

"You mustn't consider working today." Miss Pendleton regarded her with keen gray-blue eyes. "I thought I made that clear to you last night."

"Yes, but—"

"You will be my guest here for a few days. Then when you've regained your strength, I'll introduce you to the supervisor, and she'll give you a position suited to your abilities."

"The women told me there's no more work to be had here."

“Nonsense.” Miss Pendleton spun and began to retrace her steps down the hallway. “I’ll introduce you right now.”

Elise didn’t move.

At the door to the workroom, Miss Pendleton stopped and motioned to her. “Come now. Don’t be shy.”

Elise wasn’t shy. She was simply realistic. But even as she doubted Miss Pendleton, the questions surfaced as they had before. If she didn’t work at the mission, where else would she work? Where would she find a place to live? Could she subject her family to living on the streets again?

Miss Pendleton smiled at her with a warmth and kindness that somehow reassured Elise everything would be all right. Surely after Miss Pendleton’s introduction, the women would accept her and overlook her insult. Surely they could forget the initial misunderstanding.

When Miss Pendleton beckoned her again, Elise returned to the workroom.

“Ladies,” Miss Pendleton said as she stepped into the room, “I’d like to introduce you to our newest worker, Elise Neumann.”

Silence greeted Elise. And downcast eyes. In fact, no one looked at her except the tall Englishwoman.

Miss Pendleton’s brows rose, the response clearly not what she’d expected. “Miss Neumann assures me she’s quite skilled in many aspects of sewing. So I’m certain she’ll be an asset to our business.”

Still the room was silent. The noise from the busy street drifted in through the windows, which were already wide open on the June morning to allow the coolness of the early hour inside before the heat of the day became unbearable.

“Mrs. Watson?” Miss Pendleton smiled at the tall woman, who was standing a short distance away at the head of one of

the tables. “I’m sure you’ll be glad to have someone of Miss Neumann’s experience join you. Oh, and her sister will be working with us too.”

Mrs. Watson didn’t return the smile. Instead she glanced at the redheaded woman again, who had focused her attention on the shirtsleeve in front of her, busily dipping her needle in and out of the linen.

Miss Pendleton’s smile wavered, but she reached over and squeezed Elise’s arm.

Mrs. Watson cleared her throat. “Miss Pendleton, I am afraid we do not have any room at present for more workers. Perhaps when the workshop across the hall is ready . . .”

“I’m sure we can squeeze in two more temporarily.”

“There are other women already waiting to work here, women we have had to turn away.” Mrs. Watson’s voice dropped to almost a whisper.

Miss Pendleton gave Mrs. Watson a sharp look. “I’m well aware of our problem of having to turn away women. And it breaks my heart every day. I want to help everyone and eventually I hope to assist many more.”

Mrs. Watson fixed her attention on the floor, which except for a few loose threads was surprisingly clean.

“In the meantime, Mrs. Watson, I pray for God to guide me to those He wishes me to help, which I believe includes you and all the women in this room. Hereafter it also includes Miss Neumann and her siblings.” Miss Pendleton raised her chin as though daring anyone to defy her.

No one spoke.

“They are the first boarders here,” she continued. “And soon I hope to open the doors to many more who need a safe place to live.”

From the few rapid glances some of the women exchanged, Elise had the foreboding that they would see the news as favoritism and would like her even less.

“So, Mrs. Watson, can I count on you to welcome Miss Neumann and her sister into our workroom?”

Mrs. Watson nodded. “Yes, ma’am. We shall do our best.”

“Good. I’m very glad to hear it. After all, we want to extend the same grace and love to others as has been extended to ourselves, don’t we?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mrs. Watson said again.

Though Miss Pendleton seemed satisfied with her answer, Elise couldn’t shake the feeling that her new job was doomed from the start. As much as she needed the help of the Seventh Street Mission, she suspected sooner or later she would have to find her hope and help elsewhere.