

# CHAPTER 1

## JOSEF

1963, ISSYK, KAZAKHSTAN

JOSEF SAT WITH HIS two fellow pastors at a plain wooden table in Otto's house, the soft shadows of an August evening thickening around them. No one had bothered to light a lamp as the sun went down. From the next room came a low murmur of voices as Otto's wife tucked the children into bed, but around the table there was uneasy silence, each of them waiting for one of the others to speak.

"Christians have always fled from persecution," Otto finally said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table. "The Bible commands us to do so."

Even in the dimness, Josef could see the tense set of Otto's shoulders. Beside him, Alwin's profile made a silhouette against the deep blue outside the window. "What about those who cannot flee?" Alwin asked quietly.

Alwin was about Josef's age, and both men had three small children. Both had lived through the brutal Second World War and the cruel time of purges and starvation afterward. But they had not learned to know each other until they ended up in the same area of Kazakhstan.

"You know it is impossible for our whole church to get German papers and leave the country," Alwin added, shifting so that his entire face slid into shadow. "Would you as a pastor leave part of your church behind?"

Otto hesitated, but only for a moment. "As a father, I would leave with my family."

“But as a pastor?”

Otto put his head in his hands. “I don’t know.”

“And, Josef, what about you?” Alwin asked.

Josef did not answer at once. He had been living in denial, he realized, refusing to see the intensifying persecution here in the Alma-Ata region, downplaying the stories that came to him, pushing them all away.

Twelve years ago, he had been a prisoner in a Russian work camp, sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor for helping the Germans in Poland at the end of the war. After Stalin died, he had been released after only four and a half years. But four and a half years in a Russian gulag was long enough to leave him with difficult, painful memories. Talking about persecution meant revisiting those memories—because he now pastored an unregistered church in a country controlled by communist Russia.

Both Alwin and Otto looked at him, waiting.

“Have you spent time in a Soviet prison?” he asked. “Or a work camp?” He knew they hadn’t.

Both men shook their heads.

“Then you have no idea—” He stopped.

“God’s grace is sufficient for all things,” Alwin said, “even a Russian work camp.” He sounded glib, but Josef knew that Alwin had a simple but deep, unshakable faith.

Otto looked down at his hands.

Alwin gave them both time to say more. When they didn’t, he asked, “So you would leave if you had the chance, Josef?”

“I . . . don’t know. I haven’t decided. But it’s not . . . a decision to make lightly.”

“Let’s pray about it,” Alwin said, and the three men stood, pushing in their chairs and folding their hands on the smooth chairbacks, bowing their heads, their hearts heavy as they poured out petitions for God’s direction.

Afterward, there seemed to be nothing more to say, and they moved toward the door. Alwin stepped outside first. Although it was fully dark, Josef waited a few moments. He wanted to get home to Emilie and the children, but caution was a long-ingrained habit.

Beside him, Otto opened a cupboard on the wall and took out a flat parcel, wrapped in paper and smelling of mint. “My wife wanted me to give this to you for Emilie.”

“Thanks.” Josef tucked it into his pocket and turned toward the door.

“Can I have a word with you?” Otto asked, his voice suddenly urgent. “Privately?”

“Of course.”

Otto pulled the door shut. “This is something you must keep to yourself,” he said. He took a step nearer and bent down to speak in a whisper. “I know a way we can get to Germany. I know a man who will help us. If we want to leave, now is the time to do it.”

“Who?” Josef asked.

“It’s better if you don’t know. But I trust him.”

Josef laid his hand on the door latch.

“Think about it,” Otto urged. “For the sake of your wife and children. For your own sake.”

# CHAPTER 2

## EMILIE

EMILIE LOVED THE LONG summer twilights, lit with lavender and saffron, scented with hay, the bulk of the mountains strong and comforting against the darkening sky. And after the devastating flood last month, evenings seemed especially gentle now, the mild light softening the marks of destruction that still remained in their town—the jagged gullies along the road, the washes of mud in the yards and gardens, and the uprooted trees that hadn't yet been cleared away.

But when Josef was gone, she always felt slightly on edge, no matter how beautiful the evening. An hour ago, she had prayed with their three little ones—Margarete, Heinrich, and Karl—and put them to bed. Then she had knelt beside the table to pray. Now she simply sat thinking, her hands idle, while she waited for Josef.

Finally she couldn't fight drowsiness any longer. Maybe she would go to bed without him. Then the sounds outside jolted her wide awake: the stealthy tread of footsteps, a soft question, a low-voiced reply.

Though she couldn't hear clearly, she could tell the words were Russian, not her native German. She tensed, and one hand went involuntarily to her mouth.

More steps. She strained to hear. They were coming to her door. And the voices sounded clear, not drunk.

She half-rose, hesitated, and then stood and tiptoed across the front room to the door that opened into the closed-in porch. There she stood

for a moment longer, listening. Then she crossed the porch, unlatched the outer door, and pulled it open, stepping into the doorway and blocking it with her body. Three men stood outside. She couldn't make out their faces or tell if they were armed, but she could see the squared shoulders under their uniforms and the way they carried themselves stiffly, like men do who are used to marching.

"Good evening," she said quietly.

Only one of them answered. "Good evening," the one on the left said.

But the one in the middle spoke sharply. "This is the home of Josef Steffen?"

"Yes, sir."

"We must speak with him. Is he here?"

"No, sir."

"You are his wife?"

"Yes."

"We must come inside and look around."

"Please, sir. I'm telling you the truth. Josef is not here."

"We must come in."

"But, sir, my children are sleeping. You will disturb them."

The man on the right spat eloquently on the ground.

"Let us in," the leader said, "or we will come in by force."

All it would take, she knew, was a jab from one of their elbows or shoulders, and she—slender and barely over five feet tall—would be shoved out of their way. But she tried to hold them off a moment longer.

"Are you looking for Josef?"

"We want to see his house."

"Why? Do you have the right to enter an innocent man's house and search it at night?"

The man laughed, not pleasantly. "Innocent?"

"What has he done against the laws of our country?"

The man drew himself up, and his right hand went to his hip. Emilie still could not see if he was carrying a gun, but the movement frightened her. "We're not here to dispute with a woman," he said. "Let us in."

Reluctantly Emilie opened the door wider and stepped out of the way. The men, walking single file, brushed past her. Once inside, they flicked

on flashlights; the three beams arced over each other eerily, dancing off the whitewashed walls and the table and the chairs.

One of them went into the bedroom, and Emilie heard Margarete cry out.

Emilie made an instinctive move toward the doorway but then checked herself. “May I go comfort my little ones?” she asked.

“Stay where you are, woman,” the largest man said. He was shining his flashlight into the cupboards along one wall of the front room, and now he turned and pierced her with its beam. “Where is the Christian literature?”

“What—”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“We have no literature here.”

He stared contemptuously at her and called into the bedroom. “Check the beds.”

“Please, my children,” Emilie begged. Her heart thumped painfully, and she sent frantic, incoherent prayers heavenward. Watching the door, she didn’t know if she wanted Josef to come home or to stay away until this was over.

“They can go back to sleep after we leave,” the man said dismissively.

Emilie listened helplessly as the man in the bedroom roused the children and sent them out. They were all in tears, but only Karl was making any sounds. Margarete was carrying him, staggering under his weight, and Emilie took him and held him close. The other two huddled beside her, wide-eyed and silent, asking no questions. Somehow they knew they needed to be quiet.

The third man had gone into the kitchen, at the back of the house beside the bedroom, and Emilie could hear him opening cupboards and clattering kettles and dishes. Through the doorway into the bedroom, she could see the other man ripping the blankets off the beds and turning the thin mattresses over.

Josef and Emilie owned one Bible, and Josef had taken it with him that evening. Other than that, they had no books, no papers, nothing incriminating in the house. The men searched for half an hour before they gave up and left with a curt word of farewell.

Emilie followed them to the door to make sure they had really gone. As they crossed the small yard, one of them stumbled in a gully just

inside the fence, cursing as he regained his balance. They went through the gate into the street and clicked it shut behind them. Now that it was over, Emilie was shaking. She went back into the front room and collapsed into a chair.

“Who were they, Mama?” Margarete asked.

“Bad men,” Heinrich said solemnly.

“Where’s Papa?” Margarete asked.

“He’s still gone.” She pulled Margarete close and ran a shaking hand over her fair hair. “Thank God.” She stopped without saying more. Her children were too young to know what all she had feared while the men searched the house.

Heinrich began to cry aloud, and she hushed him gently. “Let’s pray again, and you can go back to sleep.”

But first she had to make the beds. Margarete, only four, helped her like a little woman. When the sheets and blankets were tucked in tightly again, they all knelt by the children’s bed, Emilie holding Karl, and Heinrich and Margarete on either side of her. She prayed aloud and tucked them in, Karl between the older ones. She bent down and kissed all three of them and hoped they could sleep, hoped they wouldn’t be tormented by dreams as she had been when she was their age and this kind of thing had happened in her home.

She stayed with them until she thought they had fallen asleep before stealing out of the room. In the kitchen, the men had not put the bowls and kettles back in their places, and she began setting everything to rights. A few minutes later, Margarete’s soft voice said behind her, “Mama, I can’t sleep. Can I be out here with you?”

“Yes, dear, of course you can.” Emilie bent down to give her a quick hug, and she felt the sting of unexpected tears. She blinked them back.

Together they put away all the kettles, plates, bowls, and spoons, and still Josef hadn’t come home. Emilie tucked Margarete back into bed and prepared for bed herself in the darkness. She checked the children once more and then climbed into the bed she shared with Josef on the other side of the room. She was still lying awake when she heard Josef come in quietly, take off his shoes, go into the kitchen for a drink, and tiptoe into the bedroom.

Neither of them spoke until he slid into bed beside her. “Are you awake?” he whispered.

“Josef, they came tonight.”

She felt him stiffen; he didn’t ask who. “How many?” he asked.

“Three.”

“What did they do?”

“Searched the house. For literature.”

“They didn’t hurt you or the children?”

“No.”

“And they didn’t find any literature.”

“I think it was a warning,” she said.

# CHAPTER 3

## JOSEF

MANY MINUTES PASSED BEFORE Emilie's breathing evened into the soft sounds of sleep, but it took much longer for Josef to relax. Deep into the night, while the gentle summer breeze stirred the curtains and the children breathed lightly in the bed against the far wall, Josef lay, staring into the darkness. Was God giving him a sign that it was time for him and his family to leave?

When he finally drifted off, his sleep was light and uneasy, and he woke again soon after the summer sunrise. In the front room, he took his Bible from the low stand along the wall and opened it on the table. But then he simply sat in front of it, thinking and praying more than reading. In the kitchen, Emilie opened the stove, stirred the coals, and made tea. He could smell it even before she carried two cups to the table, handed him one, and sat down across from him with the other.

Lazy tendrils of steam drifted up between them. Emilie sat with both hands curled around the earthenware cup, looking tired but not distraught. She was a thin woman, fragile-looking, but underneath the delicate build and behind the gentle blue eyes, a courageous heart beat with a fierce love for her family. What would she say when he told her about Otto's offer?

Before Josef could speak, Karl started crying in the bedroom, and she went to him, leaving Josef alone with his thoughts and his Bible. After a while Heinrich came out of the bedroom, sleepy-eyed and tousle-haired.

He climbed onto Josef's lap and snuggled down with a little sigh of contentment. Sunlight poured in through the windows behind Josef, turning the boy's hair to gold, and Josef held him tightly, resting his chin on his hair.

For the sake of this small son and his other children, Josef knew he would leave in a heartbeat.

But what about the rest of his church?

# CHAPTER 4

## JOSEF

1950, KRASAWINA, RUSSIA

JOSEF HAD BEEN LIVING in a barracks in Krasawina with his two sisters and two nieces when they came for him. He had known it would happen, and he accepted it with fatalism, but without faith. He had been raised in a Christian family, yes. He knew the Bible stories and the old German hymns. But he had never committed his heart to his parents' Lord. He was arrested for collaborating with Germans at the end of the war, not for Christian faith.

Commandant Kusminski had come in his own car on a still, hot August evening. Josef knew Kusminski, because he had been questioned before. When the sleek black car pulled up in front of the barracks and the man, heavy-faced and thick-chested, climbed out, a weight settled into Josef's stomach. Uncle Kladt had been arrested two weeks before; now it was his turn.

He went out to meet the commandant.

"Comrade Steffen," Kusminski said. "Get in the car."

No handcuffs then. Not a formal arrest. Not yet.

Kusminski drove him to headquarters and parked behind a gray van with the windows painted over—a prison transport van. He herded Josef inside and into an office where three men waited, smoking and talking. As soon as Commandant Kusminski appeared in the door, they fell silent, and Josef felt their eyes on him, hard and calculating.

"This is the character," Kusminski said.

All three of the men moved toward him. “You’re under arrest,” one of them barked. Another produced handcuffs, and the third started to search him. Commandant Kusminski sat down at the desk and lit a cigarette.

Josef watched the wraiths of smoke drift upward and wondered how long it would be until he could have another cigarette. He didn’t feel afraid, even with his arms twisted behind his back and the guard’s hands brushing coarsely all over him. He had already endured starvation and brutality at the hands of the Russians. What more could they do than they had already done?

When they finished searching him, they loaded him into the transport van and took him back to his apartment, searching it thoroughly while the women and girls huddled in one corner, their eyes large and frightened. Josef heard muted voices and hesitant footsteps in the hallway outside, and he knew a crowd was gathering.

Under his bed, the men found a suitcase already packed. “You were planning to flee,” one of them accused.

“No,” Josef said. “I was preparing for prison.”

The man turned and struck him on the side of the head with the palm of his hand, so hard that his ear rang. “So you know you’re guilty,” he snarled.

Even then, Josef wasn’t afraid. The fear came later, in staccato bursts and small vicious doses. It came when he was shoved into his cell that night and saw a long low box that looked like a coffin and he thought he would have to spend the night with a corpse, until he realized the box was his bed. It came when he sat facing a magistrate, handcuffed to his chair, with an officer sitting beside him who kicked him with his steel-toed boots whenever he deliberated too long over an answer; when a guard wakened him in the middle of the night and he thought, stumbling out of the cell at gunpoint, that he was to be executed; when he was locked into a pitch-dark train compartment with no idea how long he would be there or where he was going; when he was sentenced to twenty-five years in the labor camp, the judge speaking in a high monotone like the whine of a mosquito, with none of his friends or family in the courtroom.

After the sentencing, Josef spent ten days in solitary confinement. The early winter cold sent his breath rising in small white clouds. He sat on the bed, tucking his hands into his armpits to keep them warm, and