

# SUMMER OF FIRE

**Karen Bass**



**Coteau Books**

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*To Nathan, Jason and Kristen -  
three unique and wonderful gifts in my life.*

## Chapter One

Groggy. Queasy. That's how Del felt as she struggled to wake up and make sense of an announcement in German. One word – Hamburg – pumped alarm through her. This was her stop; if she missed it, who knew where she'd end up?

She jumped up and tugged her suitcase off the shelf above the train window. It bumped her shoulder on the way down and she staggered against the leather seat across the aisle. She grabbed her backpack as her erratic heartbeat rapped out her desire to be at home. To be anywhere but here.

The train stopped. The passenger in front of Del pressed a button on the side and the doors opened. Del hoisted her suitcase and lurched onto the platform. After the silence of First Class, the noise bombarded her.

She stood on the platform – that's where her sister, Cassandra, had said she'd be – and gaped. She'd travelled with her parents so was used to big airports but she'd never seen a train station this colossal. Arched steel beams and glass. Tracks and more tracks, each pair with a platform running between them, a set of stairs and escalators at one end with another set a football field away. At both ends, the stairs led up to stores. People everywhere.

Del's train pulled away. She searched for Cassandra or Mathias but no familiar faces greeted her. She started looking at signs. A big one above the train maps read *Hauptbahnhof*. The word sounded familiar. Del groaned as her sister's directions came to mind: *Don't get off at Hauptbahnhof. We'll meet you at the next station.*

She told herself not to panic. So she'd gotten off the train one stop too soon; she was in the right city. A city she'd never visited.

A city where people didn't speak English. She only spoke English. Maybe panic was a good option.

A double-decker train stopped on the other side of the platform. People gushed out of blue-and-yellow cars like running water. As they surged past Del wondered if she should follow them. At least she'd be moving. The thought made her muscles freeze. A cramp seized her right calf. She pushed her red suitcase over, sat on the hard shell and massaged her leg. All she wanted to do was cry, but not in the middle of the busiest train station she'd ever seen.

Black shoes stopped beside her. A balding man in a navy uniform with a red "DB" on the pocket said, "*Brauchen Sie Hilfe?*"

Had she done something wrong? Del felt her brow wrinkle. "English?"

He motioned toward someone behind Del, then gave her a slight smile. "Mein english ist not so good. I ask if you want help."

"Oh. That'd be great."

A woman in a matching uniform joined them. He spoke to her in German and she crouched by Del. "Are you hurt? Do you need help?" Her sandy hair was in a tight bun so she looked like a grouchy librarian, but her voice was kind.

Del was so relieved to hear clearly spoken English that words tumbled out. "I got a leg cramp, but my real problem is that I got off the train too early and my sister's waiting at the next station, only I'm here and I don't know how to get there. I don't even know where there is."

The woman straightened, so Del also stood. The woman addressed her partner in German. After he responded she asked, "Were you not to get off in Hamburg?"

"No. I mean, yes. I'm supposed to be in Hamburg, just not here." Del pointed at the *Hauptbahnhof* sign.

"*Ach so.* You were to disembark at Dammtor Station?"

“That sounds right.”

“And your sister waits there?” Del gave a small nod. The woman asked, “Has she a mobile phone?”

“Mobile? You mean a cell phone? Yes! I have the number.” Del set her suitcase upright, rested her backpack on it and fished out her wallet. She handed a piece of paper from the billfold to the woman. “Can you help me call her?”

The woman spoke to the man again, then led Del toward the centre of the platform. “My partner will continue our rounds. I will help you, then rejoin him.”

“Are you police?”

“*Polizei?* No. We are security for *Die Bahn.*” She tapped the “DB” insignia. “The train company.”

The woman pointed Del to a sickly pink phone, showed her the right change and helped dial. Del’s leg jittered. Her shoulders slumped when the voice mail recording came on. Cassandra was on the phone. Del hung up and rubbed her stinging eyes. She dialed again, held her breath. “It’s ringing.”

“I will leave you. If you need more help go to our office by the main entrance.” The woman pointed across the station, then strode away before Del could thank her.

“Fedder,” a sharp voice said.

Del hesitated. It sounded sort of like Cassandra. Before she could speak, angry German words battered her ear.

“Cassandra?”

The German cut off midstream.

“Cassandra, is that you?” Del hated how timid she sounded.

“Of course it’s me. Where the hell are you, Delora James?”

“I... got off the train too soon.”

“Tell me you’re at least in Hamburg.”

“Yes. In this absolutely huge –”

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“You’re at Hauptbahnhof? Mathias said that’s what happened, but I assured him I’d told you not to get off there. I tried calling Die Bahn to confirm you’d gotten on the train.”

Cassandra’s brusque tone irked Del. “You thought I’d take off? Thanks a lot.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What happened?”

“I was sleeping. We pulled into the station and all I heard was the announcer saying something about Hamburg. I guess I wasn’t quite awake and got off without thinking.”

A sigh. “Well, stay put. Mathias was so certain you debarked there he’s on his way. I’ll wait for you two here. Where are you?”

“Where the train unloads.”

“On the platform? Don’t move. I’ll call Mathias and tell him where to find you. Stay where you are.”

“You’ve said that three times.”

“Mathias should be there soon. I don’t want any more mess-ups, Delora.”

“I’ve told you that I don’t like that name. I don’t call you Cassie.”

“Don’t argue. Look, if I’ve been rude... I just get tense when things go wrong. Stay by the phones so Mathias can find you. I’ll call him now.”

The line went dead.

Del dropped the receiver into its cradle. Talking to Cassandra was like talking to their mother. It left Del feeling wrung out, and it didn’t help that she was so tired she felt sick. She laid her suitcase down again and sat, backpack hugged to her chest. She fought to keep her eyes open.

Mathias was a few metres away when Del spotted him. She’d only met him three times when he and Cassandra had come home to visit; her impression had been of a quiet, serious man.

Now he looked grim-faced. Del stood and exhaled, expecting to be bawled out.

Her brother-in-law halted within arm's length, looked Del up and down, then gave her a smile that crinkled out from his pale blue eyes. "*Wilkommen*, Del. Welcome."

Del returned the smile. "I thought you'd be mad at me."

He picked up her suitcase. "Yours was an easy mistake. Come, we must get to Dammtor before Cassandra calls out a search team."