

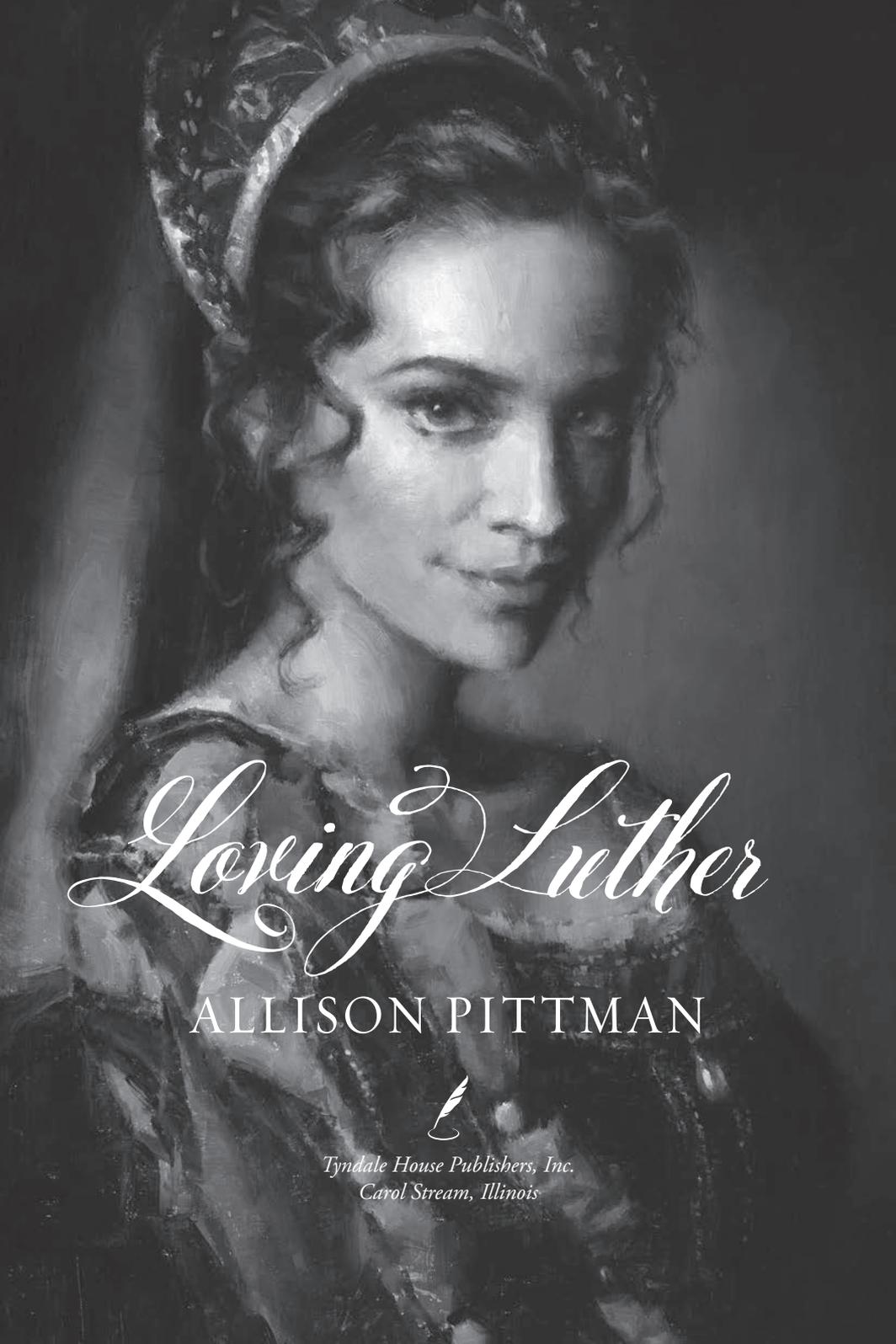
*Loving
Luther*

A NOVEL

ALLISON PITTMAN

LOVING LUTHER





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Loving Luther

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Loving Luther is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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Acknowledgments



*I*N THE SUMMER OF 2014, my agent, Bill Jensen, leaned over and whispered, “I have a fabulous idea for your next book.” We were having dinner at the Christy Awards, and while our tablemates discussed all things Book Industry, he told me about Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora. Literally—just the names. And I, a lifelong Southern Baptist who was nominated for a book about a party-girl flapper, thought to myself, *No way*. But then, as the evening wore on, and I had no award to accept, I read a Wikipedia page on my smartphone, and by the time Bill brought me my conciliatory drink, Katharina von Bora was alive in my head. For the rest of that summer, while I wondered if the smart people at Tyndale would ever entrust an Americana girl with a Renaissance woman, the entire story unfolded. Therese and Girt. Jerome. Martin. And Katharina, Käthe, Kat, Katie, and Kate.

So thank you, Bill Jensen, for knowing everything about everything and sharing your brilliant ideas with me.

And thank you, Jan Stob and the entire Tyndale team, for trusting me with this tale and being willing to keep it a secret for so long.

I am so blessed to be part of such an awesome community of writers. I love you, my Monday night group, for always being so encouraging, and refreshing, and energizing, and brutally honest! You are my prayer warriors and my family in Christ. Also, my ACFW chapter—how I love my Saturdays at La Madeleine, that dark wooden room. What strength we draw from each other. You all inspire me to work on and on, even when discouragement looms.

This book would not have happened without the daily (hourly?) messaging with Rachel McMillan. With you, my friend, the word *Luther* brings its own life, and you have held me up in some pretty dark moments of doubt. You are the best, though I have not saved you for last.

My last bit of gratitude extends to the women who live their lives—today, and in all generations stretching back to the birth of the church—in sacrifice to our Savior, Jesus Christ. I admit to falling a bit in love with the life of a nun: the sorority, the simplicity, the silence. There’s a beautiful serenity at the heart of service. Then I think about the glorious freedom I have in Christ. Freedom to know that my eternity is secure, even when my days don’t seem to be. How I am loved, despite my flaws. How I am held when the world seems shaky. How he has given me the perfect family for my moods and messes.

Finally, thank you, all my readers, for being so patient in waiting for this story to make its way to you. I’ve been waiting too. So for Beth Armstrong, who has been asking me almost every day for three years, “How is Mrs. Luther coming along?” Well, here she is.

I think she was worth the wait.



A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God's honor and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.

*It is true, then, that the soul is united to
God through love's affection.*

FROM *The Dialogue* BY CATHERINE OF SIENA, 1378

PART I



Benedictine Monastery, Brehna

1505—1509

CHAPTER I



*M*Y FATHER ALWAYS told me if I never took a sip of wine, I'd never shed a single tear. One begat the other, and only the common cup in the hands of a priest, the blessed wine of the sacrament, could offer peace. Only the blood of Christ could offer life. Any other was nothing more than ruin, a sinner's way of washing sin.

And yet he drank. Every night, the flames of our small fire danced in the cut glass of his goblet.

It seemed a silly warning, but for all of my brief childhood at home, I had only two sips of wine. The first over a year ago when, at the age of five, I begged for a taste at the grand table. The other just months ago, in the feast following Mother's

funeral. Then, true to my father's prophecy, tears streamed down my face.

So, too, as I stood in his embrace, the cold wind of November whipping all around us. Ice like pinpricks upon my cheeks. Perhaps I'd taken in a sufficient amount from the constant scent of wine on his breath, and from the traces left on his lips when he kissed me.

"My Katharina." He stretched my name, and I imagined it pouring out in a stream mixed with tears and wine. He knelt before me, the patched fabric of his breeches touching the last bit of unsanctified ground.

"Papa? Where are we?"

To answer, he took me by my shoulders and turned me to look at the foreboding stone structure on the other side of the iron gate. "A church, kitten. A house of God."

That much I assumed from the tall, arched windows and the lingering echo of the bell that had been tolling upon our approach. Six rings, and the sun nearly set. A new sound emerged in the wake of the bells. Footsteps, strident and rhythmic, displacing the tiny stones on the path beyond the gate. They carried what looked like a shadow—tall and black and fluttering.

Frightened, I twisted back in my father's embrace. "Papa?"

"Be strong, my girl."

Before I could say another word, I heard the screech of metal and a voice that matched its tone in every way.

"Katharina von Bora?"

"Papa?" I clung to him, even as he stood tall and away.

"*Ja*. This is my daughter."

A heavy hand fell on my shoulder. "Say good-bye to your papa, little one."

Good-bye?

Two days before, when Papa told me to pack a few things—extra stockings and my sleeping cap—into a small drawstring bag, he'd said nothing about leaving me at a church to say *good-bye*. In all our travel, the miles riding in the back of farm carts, the night spent among strangers at the small, damp inn, he answered my questions with platitudes about what a fine, strong girl I was, and how it was good to get away, just the two of us.

“Is it because of the new mama?” The woman loomed large, even with two days’ distance between us. Her stern commands, her wooden spoon ever at the ready to correct a sullen temper, her furrowed brow as she counted the meager coins in the little wooden box above the stove. “I can be good, Papa. I will work harder and speak to her more sweetly. I’ll be a good girl. I promise. Papa—*please!*”

I grasped his hand, repeating my promises, feeling victorious when he scooped me up off the ground. I tried to bury my face in his neck, but he jostled me and gripped my chin in his fingers.

“*Ruhig sein.*” His voice and eyes were stern. “Hush, I say. You are Katharina von Bora. Do you know what that means?”

“*Ja, Papa.*” I touched my hand against his grizzled whiskers. “Bearer of a great and proper name.”

“Very old, and very great.” He was whispering now, his back turned to the shadowy figure. From this height, looking down over Papa’s shoulder, I could clearly see that it was only a nun. A soft, pale face peered from behind a veil, while long black sleeves fluttered around clasped hands. A tunic over a plain black dress bore an embroidered cross, and in many ways she was not unlike the nuns I knew from our church back home. So why had Papa brought me here, so far away?

“But I don’t want to stay here, Papa.” I had to look down into his face, and it made him seem so much smaller.

“Be a good girl.” He set me back on my feet and bowed down to meet me eye to eye. “Grow up to be a strong, smart young lady. And do not cry.”

“But—”

His admonishing finger, nail bitten to the quick and grimy from travel, staved off the prick of new tears. “Strong, I tell you.”

“Are you coming back for me? After a time, after I’ve grown up a little? When I’m a lady?”

A weak smile played across his lips, and he cast a quick, nervous glance up to the nun. “Child,” he said, gripping my shoulders, “I am delivering you into the hands of God, the same God who once gave you to me. Could you ask for anything better than to be in his loving care?”

I knew, instantly, how I should answer. Thinking back to our small, dark home, with rooms shut away to ward off the chill. My three older brothers crowded around the table, squabbling for the last bowl of stew, and taking mine when there wasn’t enough. Now, with me gone, there would be more for everybody else. Not enough, but more. Maybe the new mama would smile a bit and not stomp through the kitchen rattling pots like a thunderstorm. Maybe my brothers would stop stealing bread and making their papa lie to the red-faced baker when he came pounding on the door. There would be one less body to soak up the heat from the fire, and more space in the crowded bed.

I stood up straight and wiped my nose on my sleeve. “I’m ready now, Papa.”

“That’s my good girl.” He kissed my forehead, my cheeks, then briefly, my lips. One kiss, he said, for each of my

brothers, and one final from Mother watching from heaven. The nun kept her own silent watch until the end, when Papa handed me the small bundle he'd been carrying over his shoulder for the last mile of our walk.

"No." The sister's sturdy hand stretched from within the long black sleeve. "She comes with nothing."

"Please, Sister—"

"Sister Odile, reverend mother of the convent of Brehna."

"It's just a nightcap," Papa said, not mentioning that it was the cap Mama—my mama—had stitched with small purple flowers. "And clean stockings and an apron."

"Nothing." Sister Odile tightened her grip and dragged me to her side.

Head low, Papa shouldered the bag once again, saying, "As it should be, I suppose."

I noticed the quiver in his chin and knew it was one of those times when I would have to be strong in his place. I needed to stand straighter, fix my eyes above, and set my mind in obedience. A pinpoint of cold pierced my shoulder where the gold band on Sister Odile's finger touched my flesh. Ignoring the growing grayness of the sky and the imminent demise of Papa's resolve, I took a deep, cleansing breath.

"You should start for home, Papa. It will be dark soon."

"Yes," he said. And that was all. In the next instant, I was turned toward the gate, then marched through it. Sister Odile's robes flapped against her, an irregular rhythm in the growing wind. For all I knew, Papa remained behind the iron bars, watching every step. Counting them, maybe, as I did. I listened for his voice, waiting for him to call me back, but if he did, the words were lost to the crunching of the stones beneath Sister Odile's bearlike feet. I myself felt each one through the thin, patched leather of my shoes. When we came

to a turn in the path, one sharp enough to afford a glance out of the corner of my eye, I saw the gate, with Papa nowhere to be found.

Then came the rush of tears.

“Stop that, now.”

To emphasize her command, Sister Odile stopped in the middle of the path, leaving me no choice but to do the same. I scrunched my face, calculating the distance between the looming church and the empty gate. Both were within a few easy, running steps. And I was fast—faster than any other girl on my street, and some of the boys, too. I could outrun my brothers when I needed to avoid one of their senseless poundings, and I could cover the distance from our front door to the top of the street before Papa could finish calling out my name in the evenings when he came home before dark. In an instant I could be free, back at the gate, squeezed through, and in Papa’s arms before the nun would even realize I’d escaped. Or I could fly, straight and fast, right up the path to the looming church. Surely Sister Odile’s cloddish feet and flapping sleeves would make her lag in pursuit. The height and breadth of the outer stone walls promised a labyrinth of dark corridors and twisting halls within. I could run away, hide away, lose myself in the shadows until morning, when the clouds might disperse and reveal a shining sun to direct me home.

Labyrinth. It was a word Papa taught me, reading from a big book of ancient stories. A monster lived in its midst—half man, half bull. *Minotaur.* I mouthed the word, feeling the dryness of my chapped lips at the silent *m*, and reached a tentative hand out to Sister Odile’s skirt, wondering if the voluminous fabric might not be hiding such a creature within.

“*Hör auf.*” Sister Odile slapped my hand away and

resumed our journey, doing nothing to allay my fear that I might well be in the custody of a monster. The size of the feet alone promised supernatural proportions, and now the woman's breath came in snorts and puffs like some great-chested beast.

"You want to run, don't you, girl?"

"No." The lie didn't bother me one bit.

Sister Odile let out a laugh deep enough to lift the cross off her frock. "Back out the gate, wouldn't you? And what if I told you to go ahead? You're little enough to squeeze right through, aren't you? You want to chase down your papa? Do you even know which way he went? Up the road or down?"

Every word in every question climbed a scale, ending in a high, gasping wheeze.

"If I did run, you'd never catch me. I'd disappear like a shadow." It's what I did at home, on nights when Papa wasn't there. I'd fold myself into the corners, away from the reach of the new mama's spoon.

"Not even a shadow can escape the wolves," Sister Odile said, her grip softening a little. "And hear me when I tell you this, my girl. That is all that waits for you outside these walls. Wolves ready to tear little girls into scraps for their pups."

This, I knew, held some truth, as Papa had often said the same thing. Still, my trust faltered. "And what is inside the walls?"

Sister Odile laughed again, but this time the sound rumbled in her throat, like the comfort of long-off thunder. "Great mysteries and secrets. The kind that most little girls will never learn."

"Like in books?"

"In the greatest book of all. And sacred language."

Our steps fell into a common pace, with mine trotting two to every one of Sister Odile's.

"I can read a little already," I said, my words warm with pride. "Papa taught me. I can read better than my brother, and he's eleven."

"Then your father has done a very good and unselfish thing, allowing you to come here. Let your *Dummkopf* brother fend for himself."

I stopped my laughter with the back of my hand. Fabian was an idiot, by all measures. Cruel and thick and lazy. He was the closest to me in age, and therefore the most likely to deliver abuse. Clemens was thirteen, and Hans a full-grown man, almost, and I wondered if they would even notice my absence. Our sister, Maria, had been gone for nearly a year, married to a solicitor's clerk, and had rarely been mentioned since.

"You can find peace here," Sister Odile was saying, "because we work to keep the darkness of the world away."

We'd come to a heavy wooden door with an iron ring fastened so high, Sister Odile had to stretch up on her toes to reach it.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

"There is another door on the other side of the building," Sister Odile said, "open to all who seek sanctuary. This one is just for us."

Us. I repeated the word.

"The sisters. And the girls. Other little girls, just like you. And bigger, too. We don't lock the door until after supper, and then don't open it at all after dark. You got here just in time."

The mention of the word *supper* brought my stomach rumbling to life, as loud as the sound of the sliding bolt and

creaking hinges. Whatever hunger I felt, however, knotted itself into pure fear at the image in the open doorway. No amount of black fabric could shroud the twisted figure of the old woman who stood, leaning heavily on a thick walking stick, on the other side. A stub of candle illuminated a face the likes of which I had never seen before. One eye clouded with blindness, thin lips mismatched to each other, and a cascade of fleshy pink-tinged boils dripping like wax down one side. In stature, she was not much taller than I, and I stood silent and still as a post under the woman's studious gaze. Then the single squinted eye was aimed up at Sister Odile, and a voice squawked, "She's too late."

"Sister Gerda." Sister Odile spoke soothingly as both greeting and introduction. "This is our newest charge, Katharina."

"Supper's over and cleaned up." Her lips moved like waves, producing a spittle that dripped unchecked down her chin. "Thought you made it clear to have her here by three o'clock."

"So are we to stay out here until morning?" Sister Odile brought me close to her side. "Or will you kindly allow us to come in?"

Sister Gerda muttered as she scuttled backward, opening the door wide enough for a full view of the entry, where another door—equally impressive—dominated the facing wall. The long, narrow room was lined with two wooden benches. Above each hung a tapestry, but the light was too dim to make out the images.

"Go and fetch her a cup of water," Sister Odile said, leading me to sit on one of the benches. "And some bread, too. I'm sure you're hungry, aren't you?"

I nodded, then said, "Yes, ma'am," in case it was too dark

for a silent response. An invisible prod from Papa prompted me to add, “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Kitchen’s closed up,” Sister Gerda said with a sniff. “Cleaned up, too. It’s nearly seven.”

“This wouldn’t be the first time somebody crept into the kitchen for a slice of bread after dark. Would our Lord not bid us to share what we have? Does our obedience to him snuff out with the sun? You’re a quick, silent little one, Sister Gerda. No doubt you can be there and back before the hour tolls. And should anyone comment, tell them you are there on my errand. *Schnell!* Before the poor girl collapses from hunger.”

I listened, fascinated by the rise and fall of Sister Odile’s tone. Demanding at first, then affectionate, authoritative, and almost playful at the end. Almost as if four different women spoke from within the habit, each spinning to show her face from behind the veil. This, I knew, was a woman to be respected, maybe even feared. While her size brought on a certain intimidation, a level of comfort came with it too. Stooping, she took the candle stub from Sister Gerda, touched it to a sconce on the wall, and handed it back with a sweetly whispered reminder to hurry. Then she went to one of the benches and settled her weight upon it, bringing out a creaking protest from the wood.

“*Komm her.*” She held out her hands, gold band winking in the candlelight. It was impossible to distinguish sleeves from shadow, but the face floating in the midst of the darkness was wide and smiling.

Without another thought, I took the few steps to cross the room and climbed up into the softness of Sister Odile. Arms wrapped around me, and I was absorbed in the deepest embrace I could remember since before Mama fell ill. I pressed my face into the warm, worn wool and felt the

rumbling of the sister's breath. Humming, now, a tune I did not recognize, but somehow knew to be ancient. Sacred. I closed my eyes, knowing it would be safe to cry now. The tears could flow into the wool, and as long as I did not snuffle, I could pour my fear and sadness into this woman. Instead, with each breath, I felt the block of fatigue from the journey begin to crumble, turning to little pebbles like those on the walkway, and finally to dust. I felt heavy, too heavy to cry. Too heavy to lift my head and ask where I might go to sleep. Too heavy to close my lips when I felt its pull.

The last thing I remembered was the coarseness of the cross on Sister Odile's breast pressed into my cheek, each stitch wrapped around the lullaby.