

ACTS OF CONTRITION

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Part I

MARGARETHE

Chapter 1

Finally, after standing in the operating theater for nearly fourteen hours, I could sit down and smoke a cigarette. Draped on the sofa like an old coat, I watched the smoke curl overhead. Cigarettes helped slake the hunger and were still plentiful, although finding a decent meal was impossible. The only offerings in the doctors' dining room were sandwiches made from tinned meat and the perennial cabbage soup that smelled like offal. Our Russian conquerors were trying to keep us fed, but there was never enough. We had food in Grunewald, but the S-Bahn hadn't been running for weeks, and petrol to fuel an automobile was impossible to find.

As I inhaled smoke from my cigarette, I reflected that Katherine would pounce on me had she caught me indulging in tobacco. In fact, she would never know, sleeping as she does in her stone sarcophagus in the crypt at Obberoth, forever beautiful, ivory-pale and still, even more perfectly a holy-card saint than in life.

Dear Katherine. I longed for her with all my heart. At least, she had been spared the horrors of those last days of the fighting and the privations that followed. Our once thriving metropolis was now a skeleton filled with rubble. Everywhere bomb craters pock marked the streets. The city stank of the unburied dead. We who lived, rich and poor, young and old alike, were hungry and exhausted from the long weeks of defending the city. Now enduring our "liberators" seemed but more of the same. They said it would only be a matter of days before the Americans arrived, but we'd heard such rumors before. An Allied pact prevented them from entering the city. The prize of destroying Berlin had been awarded to the Russians.

I stayed at the hospital because the sick and wounded kept coming. I treated them and sent them home, whatever homes they had—the bombing and the shelling had left so few habitable buildings standing. Half of those patients would soon be dead of dysentery or infection. Our conquerors cared nothing about what happened to them. The Russians were too busy stealing the treasures from Museum Island and raping our women. How many rape victims had I treated in the last week? A dozen? A score?

I'd lost count. A young girl arrived screaming in pain, her nipples bitten off by a Russian soldier. I have been a surgeon for more than a quarter century. Until that day, nothing ever made me turn aside to retch.

The Russians puzzled me. When I was young, I visited St. Petersburg with my father, who was a military attaché to a diplomatic delegation. Even then, youthfully naive, I was aghast at the contrast between the profound beauty of the palaces and theaters and the abject poverty of the ordinary people. Russia seemed to be a place arrested in time. The landed gentry still had indentured tenants, a practice the West had abandoned centuries ago.

At Edelheim, we had some household servants from Russia. Illiyana, one of the scullery maids, taught me Russian. She also taught me to hold a sugar cube against my teeth while straining my tea over it. Of course, this is considered barbaric in the British circles in which I was educated, but it is still the best way to enjoy a cup of tea.

The thought of tea brought memories of tiny sandwiches filled with deviled ham or cucumbers. My stomach suddenly became very musical. I remembered the few tablets of chocolate I'd put aside for my breakfast. I could eat them now. No, I would need just a bit of sugar, so that I could pick up my scalpel in the morning. But I needed a distraction from the symphony in my stomach. I considered taking a shower. Amazingly, the gas lines in our district still functioned, so St. Hilde's Hospital had steaming hot water. As appealing as the idea of the delicious heat dancing on my back might be, I found it impossible to get up. Not since I had been a surgical resident, decades before, had I felt so thoroughly exhausted. My arms and legs seemed chained to the sofa. No act of will could cause them to move. Doze a bit, I told myself, and then you can enjoy a hot shower. Sleep, like tobacco, helped one forget the hunger.

A loud noise jolted me to wakefulness. I sat up, listening carefully, although now all was quiet. I checked my watch and found it was well past four in the morning. I wondered if I had dreamt the sound. My dreams in those days were so active—sights from the day's surgeries, the servants at Edelheim rushing about to collect their things, the air raid that took Katherine from me. This last was the most horrible of all. I could see the

glass shard spiraling through the air in slow motion. As in the calculus conundrum, I could approach but never reach it.

Whenever I had this dream, my face was bathed in tears when I awoke. In fact, I was nowhere near Katherine when the shard tore the artery, and for that, I can never forgive her. Had I been there, perhaps I could have stopped the bleeding. I torture myself with this thought, although without instruments, there was little I could have done.

Again, the shriek. I suddenly found the energy to get up and go out into the hall, but there was nothing to see save a gurney standing against the wall. I walked down to where the corridors intersected. There, I finally discovered the source of the noise—the night nurse, Sister Berthe, pushed up against the wall by a man in a uniform. When I saw the red trim on his epaulets, I knew that our hour had come. The soldier had one hand over Berthe's mouth, the other at her throat. Clearly, his intentions were anything but gentlemanly.

I had the presence of mind to speak boldly. "What seems to be the trouble here?" I demanded in my most authoritative voice. He spun around, which fortunately had the effect of freeing his captive. I motioned to Berthe with a nod to move away, and for once, she showed some intelligence. She walked rapidly toward the main building. Her step was "precipitous" in convent parlance and considered a fault, but at that moment, it was exactly what was needed. Meanwhile, her attacker continued to stare at me, evidently surprised that I had addressed him in Russian.

"Who are you?" he asked, very obviously taking my measure.

"I am the doctor in charge."

"I see," he said with a snort.

I could guess from the lack of insignia on his uniform that he was an ordinary foot soldier. He was dirty and smelled rank, even from a distance. No doubt, he had not bathed in weeks. For a long moment, we stood, eyeing one another. He was much shorter than I, so I stood straight to make the most of my advantage in height.

"We have come to liberate you," he said, with a grin. His eyes were glassy, and his balance was uncertain, making it evident that he was

inebriated. We went back to eyeing one another, which was becoming tedious. I also became aware of the fact that I was trembling. Why hadn't I thought to bring the pistol from my office? I nodded to him, turned around and without looking back, began to walk quickly towards my office, barely restraining the impulse to run. I got most of the way down the corridor before he even moved. I was within a few paces of my office when I heard shouts and pounding feet behind me. Reinforcements had arrived. I ran.

They seemed to appear out of the air as they lunged at me. There were five in all. One grabbed me. I flung him off. Rife with adrenalin, I propelled him across the corridor where he fell against the wall. Another slapped me across the face and kicked open the door, breaking the lock. He threw me into the room and pushed me roughly against the desk. My leg hit the front edge with such force, I could actually feel the bone break.

The one in charge, a lower-echelon officer, as dirty as his fellows, barked orders to the others. They all smelled of cheap spirits. One hauled me up and flung me face down on my desk. It mattered nothing to them that my leg was broken, and I was unable to stand. One held my head down while one of his comrades ripped off my clinical coat and hiked up my skirt. They tore my undergarments, shredded the silk hose.

I am being raped, I thought, and for a brief moment, the idea was an abstraction. That is, before the first of them thrust himself into me. He was small. The pitiful little Russian had an equally pitiful and small organ. But it had been years since I had lain with a man. I was dry and tight and the pain as he entered was searing. I gritted my teeth. I can bear this, I thought, as I bore the pain of giving birth to my children or when Konrad stabbed me with his bright saber in our silly little duel.

But the next was larger and more brutal. I imagined the tissue tearing as he pounded into me. As many women as I'd entered either in love or through my medical practice, I'd always taken care. And no one had ever dared to hurt me during sex.

The next muttered as he took me: "Murderer's wife. Murderer's daughter. Pig aristocrat!" Evidently, this comrade was very loyal to the party.

I saw it all as from a distance. The filth of their bodies, dirt caked

under their fingernails, the rancid fumes emanating from their armpits, the insane pleasure on their faces as they spilled their miserable seed. Two more stepped up to take their turn. By this time, I felt nothing, although I saw it all, every detail, in my mind's eye—the tissue being torn again and again, the blood running down my legs, my body lurching forward with each thrust, the bone of my pubis pounding against the front of the desk. I imagined the bruise that would form there, a lurid purple that would eventually turn as yellow as jaundice. The officer sodomized me and then used his baton in me. I gritted my teeth to deny him the satisfaction of my crying out in pain. Finally, after each had taken his turn, they allowed me to sink into a heap in front of the desk, ironically in the very place where I had once dressed down so many staff.

“So, daughter of the murderer. We have liberated you,” said the little officer, kicking me. I pulled myself into a ball to protect the soft parts, so he began kicking me in the head, and the others joined in. I tasted their boots, the dust of a hundred hard marches and the blood of comrade and enemy alike.

Suddenly they stopped. I wondered why, so I opened my eyes. Their leader removed his gun from its holster. I rolled over, closed my eyes again and emptied myself of all thoughts and feelings. It is done, I thought. I felt no fear. In fact, I was very nearly grateful.

The report of the pistol startled me, and although I felt no pain, I could imagine the shot entering my shoulder. Even at close range, the sergeant was too drunk to shoot straight. The sturdy spine of the scapula had stopped the soft lead shot the Soviets used. I had dug out their bullets many times, mushroomed and large, from the flesh of German soldiers.

One of the foot soldiers took out his gun and fired. Surely, I am dead now, I thought. But I wasn't. The bullet grazed my forehead, just above the ocular orbit. Blood began to flow into my eyes, so I closed them.

I heard the door slam and their feet pounding the tiles as they ran down the corridor.

“*Frau Doktor*, you must eat something.” There was no mistaking Sister Berthe's nasal voice.

I could smell something relatively appetizing, the aroma of a soup mercifully lacking in the rotting cabbage seasoning. My eyes refused to open. I realized that they were swollen shut. I reached up and touched my forehead where I'd been shot and found a bandage over the wound.

"Sister Anna sutured it," explained Berthe. "It was bleeding so much." Undoubtedly, Anna had done fine work. She would have made an excellent surgeon, given the opportunity and an education.

I took inventory of my body. My shoulder ached. The sisters would never dare to probe for the bullet. The wound was probably starting to fester. Perhaps Anna would think to sprinkle some sulfa powder in it. As for my leg, I was aware that someone had splinted it. "You reduced the fracture?"

"As best we could."

The rest of me was just one aching mass of bruises. I could feel the rigidity in my abdomen, no doubt caused by internal bleeding. Not a good sign. They had catheterized my bladder. Wise, as the trauma of the rapes would likely cause swelling. The clarity of my thoughts was no surprise to me. For a physician, such thinking becomes automatic. Medical training forms personalities able to make judgments under the most harrowing circumstances.

Sister Berthe held up the cup so that I could drink some soup, which actually wasn't bad. I was ravenous and would have liked more, but it wasn't offered.

"I need a doctor," I said.

"All the doctors have left. But the Amis are coming here very soon."

"And the Russians?"

"They've gone. This part of town will belong to the Amis now."

"None of the sisters... hurt?"

"No."

I sighed in relief, which made my abdomen ache all the more.

"I want to sleep."

"Yes, *Frau Doktor*. Sleep. I'll stay with you."

Dear Berthe. I suddenly regretted all the times I'd thought ill of her or

fantasized about anesthetizing her and removing the adenoids that made her voice so unpleasantly nasal. And yes, she could be maddeningly stupid, but she loved me, and for now, that was the only thing I needed.

It was dark and very cold. I could smell the stones around me, damp, a bit musty. No one had to tell me that I was in the tomb. Beside me lay Katherine, ethereally pale, almost glowing in her pallor. Reverend Mother Scholastica had asked if they should bury her in the habit, which was certainly generous considering that Katherine had given up her vows more than a dozen years before. Perhaps there is something to the idea, once a nun, always a nun. Even so, I was glad to have rejected the suggestion, however well intended. Katherine would have hated to spend eternity in the habit of a sister of Obberoth. She belonged to me now, not to them. Instead, we dressed her in a beautiful blue gown that we'd ordered from Gerson's before the war. My household staff decided what she wore. I couldn't decide anything in those awful days.

Katherine turned to me and smiled. If I could see her this way, it could mean only one thing.

"Am I dead?" I wondered aloud.

"No, my darling. Not yet," she said.

At the sound of her voice, I began to weep.

"Oh, Katherine. I miss you so. Please, take me with you."

"My dearest, you know I cannot."

"But I'm so ill. I'm burning with fever." The walls of the tomb felt wonderfully cool around me. "Don't leave me again."

I took her in my arms, but despite the pink in her cheeks she was cold and her flesh, rigid. Her hands were clasped around the rosary her father had given her. There was a faded red rose at her cheek, just where I had put it before they had covered her with the stone.

I left her to wander the cloisters of Obberoth. It was unearthly quiet at that hour when the Great Silence is observed. My footsteps echoing against the ancient walls seemed deafeningly loud. Sister Elwina, one of my schoolmistresses appeared in the corridor. When I had last seen her a

dozen years before, she was an old woman, paralyzed and confined to her infirmary bed, yet now she was young again. Well, as young as I had ever known her to be, which is to say, middle-aged.

“Why are you out of bed?” she hissed, “Go back to your room at once!”

“But, Sister. I’m not a student anymore,” I explained. “I’m a grown woman, a mother, and a grandmother.”

“Get to your bed this instant, Margarethe von Stahle or I shall call the headmistress!”

The headmistress appeared. I knew her well. She is my grandaunt. But she was so young, just as she was when I was a student in the convent school. Her eyes, the pale blue of a mountain glacier, gave me a firm look.

“*Tante*, please tell Sister Elwina that she’s mistaken. I’m grown now. No longer a child.”

“My dear girl. You have never been a child, but you have always been a child.” My aunt has always been quick with instructive paradoxes. Surely, in a past life, she wore the mahogany robes of a monk in the Himalayas.

“But I am middle-aged now, *Tante*. And you are approaching ninety.”

“There is no time here,” she replied as if this were common knowledge.

“Then I am dead,” I said with amazement.

“No, child. You are very much alive. And so am I.”

“But I want to die. I am ready to die.”

“Nonsense, Margarethe. You cannot die. There is much work to do.”

“*Tante*, I have worked my entire life, and I am so tired.” Indeed, I was feeling quite drowsy. I longed to put my head down and slide forever into unconsciousness.

“You know exactly why you cannot die, Margarethe. Now, tell me the reason at once!”

This exchange was growing tiresome and reminded me too much of our little Socratic dialogues in my student days. It was one thing to play this game over Greek philosophy, quite another while I lay dying in my hospital in Berlin. Even so, I decided to humor her.

“Because it is my duty,” I replied, not making any effort to hide my boredom at being forced to articulate the obvious.

“Precisely. You are Countess Raithschau and Langenberg-Edelheim. You hold the titles to three noble lines. You must always do your duty,” she said solemnly.

“But *Tante*, Edelheim is gone. We abandoned it to the Russians.”

“Nonsense. Edelheim is still there. And there’s Raithschau, and Leichthal and Obberoth. Not to mention the children.”

“My children are grown. Elisabeth is safe in America. There is nothing more I can do for them.”

“But what of Elisabeth’s daughters and Katherine’s children?”

“Elisabeth will look after them.”

“And who will look after Elisabeth?”

“Oh, she has that handsome husband to look after her now.”

“Just as your husband looked after you?”

Her bringing up this subject was exceedingly irritating. My husband had been in his grave for decades, and it was I, who had looked after him, not the reverse. “That was different. It was my choice.”

“Very well then, Margarethe. Set duty aside. Do it out of love.”

“Now there’s a frightening thought—mothering my children and grandchildren out of love.”

She sighed. “Oh dear. What shall we do with you? You will never learn.”

Before my eyes she aged, looking as she did when I’d last seen her at Obberoth. When my mind sought an explanation, my aunt’s voice answered my unspoken question.

“You must be reminded that life is short and very precious.” She reached out her delicate, gnarled hand and took mine.

“*Frau Doktor!* Please wake up. You’ve been sleeping for days.” I was able to open one eye and saw Sister Berthe, her eyes filled with grave concern. “You’ve been so feverish. Sister Anna’s cleaned the wound again with antiseptic.”

“Sulfa powder,” I managed to whisper through swollen lips.

“Yes, she sprinkled in some sulfa powder.”

“The bullet must be removed. Tell her...to probe for it.”

“She says a doctor must do it.”

“She can do it,” I said, gripping her arm. “Tell her that I said so.”

Berthe looked anxious. She tried to mollify me by saying, “Doctors are coming. Ami soldiers were here today. They say a medical unit will be moving into the hospital.”

Worse even than the pain in my shoulder was the pressure in my abdomen. The bleeding hadn’t stopped. Without surgical intervention, and quite soon, I might indeed die. The sisters were also worried that I might not survive. During my stupor, they had called in Franz Borchert to give me the last rites, despite knowing I am an atheist and loathe religion.

Sister Berthe fed me a cup of soup with a few pieces of bread moistened in it. She followed it with some strong tea, I suppose, in the hope that I would remain awake for a while. But it was no use. It was simply impossible to keep my one good eye open. I dreamt of the shelling, the unending sound of mortar exploding around us for weeks before the Russians finally occupied the city. I gritted my teeth and cringed as each shot hit its mark. Then mercifully, all was quiet.

In the courtyard of Schloss Edelheim, the kitchen maids stood waiting with their bundles. The cart would come shortly to take them home to their families. Once they were gone, I would close up the house. My mother had gone ahead and so was spared witnessing these last, painful good-byes. Klowitz, the majordomo, had accompanied her on the train to Raithschau. Only Schrader, the under-butler, remained. Once our sad task was done, he would drive me to the station and then use the remaining petrol to reach his parents’ town in the West.

The cart drove into the courtyard and the maids queued up to hand their belongings to the driver. Old Gretchen, who had been working in our kitchen since long before I was born, began to bawl loudly. Naturally, the others joined in, and soon they were all sobbing. I fought back my tears. I was mistress of Edelheim and displaying my grief in front of the servants would have been unseemly.

Surely, they thought me cold, but I turned my back on them and walked away. I headed to the stables to distract myself. We had set all the

horses free, my thoroughbreds and Arabians, and all of my father's beautiful Trakeners. I had no illusion that any of them would survive. They would either starve or be slaughtered for their meat. Only my own mount, Röslein, the granddaughter of my favorite mare, remained tethered in her stall. I simply couldn't leave her to fend for herself like the others. She was a noble animal and deserved a better end. I mounted the saddle my American son-in-law had sent one year for my birthday. Despite the beautiful tooling, inspired by the designs of the American West, it was a proper English-style saddle, compact and without a pommel.

I rode up the side of the hill to the bluff that overlooked Edelheim. One last look so that I could remember. It was a beautiful day for late February, a bit too warm for the season, but the air was fragrant with the smell of thawing earth. I took off my riding cap and let the wind play in my hair. It was always so windy in that high place.

When I had worked up the nerve, I took my pistol from the holster clipped to my boot. Looking directly into the eyes of that beautiful and gentle animal, I shot her in the head. She thrashed for a few minutes before finally being still. I'd had occasion to shoot horses in my day, but killing this noble mount truly burdened my heart.

It took nearly an hour to walk back. Schrader was waiting for me beside the old Ford we used to drive around the manor.

"Will you lock the house?" he asked.

"Why lock the door? So they can break it down? If we leave it open, perhaps they'll be gentler." Privately, I doubted it.

Had I finally decided to lock the door? Now, I can't remember.

As we drove off, I looked back only once and imagined Röslein, my beautiful mare, whinnying in the courtyard.

I heard voices, women's voices. Of course, I recognized Berthe's and Anna's, but there was another, higher, sweeter, and her German, though accurate, had an accent, decidedly American. She spoke like someone who took care of her voice, as singers are trained to do. Certain parts of the range are reserved for making music. It makes the speaking voice somewhat less expressive, especially in a woman.

“No, I don’t want anyone else to touch her,” said this voice, which was very familiar, yet I couldn’t place it. “Just get the operating room ready, do you understand?” This was said with sure authority, but there was also a tinge of anxiety.

“Yes, *Frau Doktor*,” replied Sister Anna.

Ah, I was to be saved after all. If I could only open my miserable eyes and see the face of my deliverer. A hand took mine and gave it a little squeeze. The voice spoke to me in English. “Dr. von Stahle, it’s Sarah Weber. Do you remember me?” Sarah Weber. Of course, I remembered. She became my surgical fellow in 1938 because Sauerbruch had no time for her. How lucky I was to have someone who knew what she was doing, not some shoemaker! “I’m going to open your abdomen,” she continued. “There’s significant rigidity. I’ll also remove that bullet from your shoulder. You’re very lucky. On the x-ray, it appears that the spine of the scapula deflected the slug and kept it from penetrating. There’s also some repair work below.”

“My leg?”

“Sister Anna reduced the fracture. I looked at the x-ray. She did a great job. There’s nothing more there that needs doing. She also sutured the head wound and there will be hardly any scar. I guess she paid attention to your lectures about cosmetic suturing.”

Although it caused my face to hurt greatly, I smiled.

“We don’t have much time,” she whispered directly into my ear. “This isn’t my unit. I’ve commandeered your operating room for this procedure. I could pull rank because my CO has seniority, but we must be quick. I’ll do as much as I can.”

That was as much consciousness as I could muster. Once again, I dozed. When I woke again, I was being readied for surgery. Sister Brigitte was scrubbing my shoulder. The phenol wash was shockingly cold. She attended to the other sites, my belly from below the sternum to my pubis, which was shaved. Even with all that washing I felt rank from lying in bed for days and from being handled by all those filthy Russians.

Finally, Sister Anna arrived to put all the drapes in place. I have never been shy about my body, not even in front of the sisters. They had seen me

naked before, having come upon me in the dressing room before or after surgery, but now my nakedness seemed an affront. I was glad to be covered, most especially because it was chilly. The glaring light overhead hurt my eyes. Eye, I should say, as only one would open, and that partially.

While I waited, I occupied my mind with guessing Dr. Weber's strategy for dealing with me. Were I the operating surgeon, I would excise the bullet in the shoulder first. Using a local anesthetic, one could make quick work of that bit, then on to the abdomen. One could only guess what might be found there. If a splenectomy or some other serious work were necessary, it might require some time. After that, depending on how much I trusted the anesthetist, I would forge ahead and tackle the pelvic repairs, but the last wasn't critical and could wait.

Sister Anna returned, already scrubbed to assist, and Sister Marthe appeared to administer the ether. How lucky could I be? In a war-torn city, where I was one of the defeated, I had the benefit of one of the best surgeons I knew, as well as experienced and accomplished nurses working in a relatively intact operating room.

Presently, I saw Dr. Weber's calm, gray eyes above the mask. She began to explain how she would proceed. "I'm giving you Novocaine for the shoulder. I don't want you under too long, and I mean to get to the rectal and vaginal repairs for sure. That catheter could go septic, and we certainly don't want that." Naturally, I congratulated myself on anticipating her plan to the letter, proof that she had learned a few things from me.

She nodded to Anna and Marthe who rolled me over on my side. New drapes were placed, and not long after I felt the prick of a needle in my shoulder. I thought of all the soldiers who before the invention of anesthesia had only strong drink to dull the pain while a surgeon probed for a bullet. I could feel the pressure of the forceps moving about in my flesh but mercifully no pain. Within moments, Sarah grabbed the bit of lead. I knew it was purely psychological, but my shoulder felt better simply because I knew the bullet was gone.

"May I see it?" I asked.

She held the bloody lump in front of my face. Yes, it looked like all the

others—a small gray mushroom. She dropped it into a surgical basin. “I’ll save it for you...as a trophy.”

“How did you know?” I murmured.

“Oh, I know a few things about you.”

She sutured the wound, made a quick dressing, and soon I was on my back with the ether mask over my face.

“Think of something lovely,” Sarah said. “It will help you get to sleep faster.” I bristled. How dare she tell me what to do? Fortunately, she refrained from telling me how to breathe or to count backwards or any of that nonsense. Then the ether took hold of me, and I no longer cared.

Ether is a seductress. We all experimented with the gas in medical school. After late nights of study, we had raucous parties where ether replaced alcohol. Some students became addicted. There was no danger of that for me. While I found the experience pleasant, it was not nearly so wonderful as sex, which I had in abundance in those days.

Could that be so many years ago, before the collapse of the Empire and the end of our world? Lytton was still alive. Not only was he a prince of a man, he had the face and figure of an Adonis. Men worshipped him. While we were married, we occasionally shared one of his admirers, but he rebuffed my attempts to share my women with him.

He said that he had only consented to wed me because I was the one woman who could stir him. He was romantic enough to insist on the possibility of consummation. I saw this detail as a practical matter—I required heirs. When I asked him why he found me exciting, his reason did not exactly please me. He always said that I was so like a man. Of course, my physical form is in no way male, save that I am taller than most men and my face is strongly featured enough to be androgynous. But even Lytton agreed that my “masculinity” was purely mental. In fact, the physical aspects of my femaleness pleased him: my breasts and the curve of my hips, and yes, even the fact that he was required to enter my body from time to time in a conventional way. Sometimes he did it purely for our pleasure or to reassure me that he was my husband. How devoted he was. He left his family in England when I decided to return to Germany to study medicine. Like Harold and Vita, we were one another’s best friend and much more.

It seems strange to me that the ether brought on thoughts of Lytton. Why not memories of my other English lovers, Daphne, my first, whom I knew at Oxford, or Alexandra Calder who drove me nearly mad with her vacillation? While I lay under Sarah Weber's scalpel, it was not the living who called to me, but the dead. I saw Katherine again, and my father, and Wilhelm. Poor boy. He wants to come to me, but I refuse to allow it. How can I still love him when I know he died a coward's death? He keeps returning with that pitiful look in his eyes, pleading that he wants me to understand. As hard as I try, I simply cannot.

Sarah spoke to me in recovery. Her mouth was close. Her warm breath tickled my ear. "Margarethe," she said, the sound of my name nearly unfamiliar. There were so few still alive who had permission to use it. Certainly, I had never given Sarah Weber leave. No doubt she thought she could take liberties because I appeared to be senseless. "You're all set. And I took extra care with my sutures because I know you'll want to inspect them." She patted my hand. "You know what I mean."

I wonder if I smiled in my sleep.