

LIES OF OMISSION

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*To my father, who was an eye witness to
the rise and fall of the Third Reich.*

Part I

KONRAD

Chapter 1

A hot wind smacked my face as I emerged from the Anhalter Bahnhof. Gone now was the *Berliner Luft*, once so famous, it had inspired popular songs. The September air was dense with the smoke of coal-fired furnaces, the fumes of thousands of automobiles, the aromas of restaurants cooking the foods of many nations. As I inhaled the familiar scents, I knew without doubt that I was in Berlin.

My pleasure in returning to that vibrant metropolis was blunted by the purpose of my mission. The telegram in my breast pocket pressed against me like a thorn. I had dodged the previous requests from Schacht's office: first a pleasant note, then a formal letter, several telephone calls, until finally, this tersely worded telegram. Only the week before, the assets of a competitor had been seized by the state. The owners were remotely Jewish, which probably had something to do with it, but clearly, the action was meant to be a warning to us all. Comply or be nationalized.

An increase in the steel allotment was not something I could order on my own. My cousin rarely questioned my decisions, but such an important matter could only be decided by the head of the House of Langenberg-Edelheim herself. Allocating more steel for government contracts would not sit well with Margarethe. She preferred to think our steel would be used to make surgical instruments, tailor's scissors, and petroleum drilling equipment. Swords or plowshares? We all knew how that question would be decided. Our shattered economy was gradually improving, but the gains were built on the faint rumble of war. Faint now but growing ever louder.

I dreaded another bloody conflict; I opposed it with all my being. I had been spared from the battlefield, but many of my friends had died or returned blind, limbs shattered, their minds gone—an entire generation of young men sacrificed. Twenty years have passed since the Great War. Things are worse now, not better.

While the taxi negotiated the traffic around Potsdamer Platz, I mentally prepared myself to match wits with Margarethe. She'd once told me that she had hired me for my "silver tongue." Unfortunately, now I needed

to turn it on her. Although the windows were open, the anticipation made me perspire. I've always hated sweating into a new suit, most especially that gorgeous pleasure of British tailoring chosen just for the occasion. A polished presentation is essential when dealing with Margarethe. Everything must be perfect down to the last detail.

As we entered the Grunewald district, I began to feel vaguely nostalgic. The Stahle villa on Winklerstraße with its imposing facade and walled gardens was still my official address, although I was rarely there. After my cousin's companion moved into the house in 1931, I felt like an intruder. Gone now were the intimate, late-night parties when Margarethe and I would lounge in our pajamas and drink brandy while we viciously dissected our friends. We no longer haunted the cabarets disguised as one another, both seeking our own sex. Katherine had put an end to all that. She had been raised strictly Catholic in her native Ireland and found our most ordinary practices too unconventional.

Despite this inconvenience, I am rather fond of Katherine. And really, I must always make an effort to be cordial because, according to official government records, Katherine is my wife.

The taxi let me off at the front door and I ascended the stairs. Krauss, the majordomo, showed not the least surprise at my unexpected arrival as he took my briefcase and hat. "Welcome home, *Herr Baron*," he said with an old-fashioned bow. He ushered me into the library so that I might greet my wife.

"Dear Konrad," said Katherine, rising to kiss me. "What a delightful surprise!" She looked even more lovely than I remembered. She is a delicate Celtic beauty in the style of the Pre-Raphaelites with hair the color of burnished copper, clear, blue eyes, a delicate mouth, and pale skin. That evening, she cut the very figure of a professional woman, entirely appropriate now that she had joined the practice of Berlin's pre-eminent gynecologist. Her afternoon frock was flowing and feminine, yet business-like. Her makeup subtly enhanced her considerable natural gifts. She even painted her fingernails and looked quite the sophisticate. Needless to say, I approved.

"Here, sit beside me, Konrad," said Katherine, speaking in English, her native tongue and the preferred language in Margarethe's house. "How lovely to have you home again." She gave my arm a little squeeze for emphasis. "What brings you to Berlin?"

"A desire to see my family isn't enough?" I asked with a wink, trying to charm her away from questioning my mission. Margarethe forbade any talk of politics in her house. The less said the better, she believed, and safer too, despite the absolute loyalty of her servants.

These were strange times.

Krauss delivered an icy pitcher of his famous martinis. Katherine declined—she rarely drank spirits—but after some cajoling from me, she finally agreed to have a glass of wine.

I glanced at my watch and realized it was odd for Katherine to be home so early. "No consulting hours today?"

"I try to keep Thursday afternoons free."

"Of course." I chastised myself for not remembering and picked up the book she had set aside to greet me. It was not the latest novel, of course, but a dense medical text.

"Hardly pleasure reading, Katherine. You work too hard. You must take time to enjoy life."

"Follow your own advice. How long have you been away on business?"

"Nearly a month," I admitted with a sigh. "Our mistress thinks industrious enterprise will keep me out of mischief."

"Oh, I rather doubt that's possible," Katherine replied with a wry smile. Her sudden flashes of perception always took me aback, especially given her innocent looks and convent background.

"Dear me, I've been away for ages!" I said, striving for a diversion. "You must tell me all the news."

"Well, let's see," said Katherine, striking a pensive pose. "Margarethe says she will sing in Gürtner's new *Rosenkavalier* this season," she said casually, although she was well aware this information had the potential to shock me. Among Margarethe's many talents was a world-class singing voice. She had never sung professionally, of course. For someone of our class, such a thing would be unthinkable. Or at least, it was.

"Oh, Margarethe's only toying with Gürtner," I replied.

Katherine shrugged, but I detected more than a lack of interest in my opinion. Her coolness on the subject of my cousin suggested something more, but at that moment, the door to the library opened, distracting me from further speculation.

My daughter shot into the room. The nurse, chasing behind her, looked alarmed to have lost control of her charge, even more so when the girl catapulted herself into my arms. "Papa!" exclaimed Fiona, "Krauss told me you were home!"

Fiona's hair, like Katherine's, was red. She was tall for a girl of six. Her mother was rather petite, so she had undoubtedly come by her height from my family. The child climbed into my lap with a little laugh.

"Papa, I learned French today. Miss Carter taught me to say 'hello, how are you?'"

"Let me hear, my darling."

"Bonjour, Papa. Comment ça vas?"

"Très bien, merci, ma fille. Et comment ça vas?"

"Très bien, aussi."

"Heavens, child. Your accent is quite good. You must speak French with *Tante* Margarethe. She's far more fluent than I."

"*Tante* has been teaching me Italian," my daughter announced proudly.

"Italian, you say? How very odd." I glanced at Katherine for an explanation, but she only shrugged.

The nurse looked anxious, so I eased Fiona off my lap and gave her a little nudge in the nurse's direction.

"She's become quite the young lady," I said to Katherine as the nurse escorted our daughter away. "You must be so proud."

Katherine sighed. "No credit to me. I'm so busy, I barely see the poor thing." She frowned and added, "Margarethe intends to send her to school in England soon."

I needed a moment to absorb this news. Of course, no one had thought to consult me about the decision. We had agreed from the first that Katherine and Margarethe would direct Fiona's upbringing, but the little

doll had stolen my heart, and I hated the idea of her going away. She was especially dear to me because I had never expected to be a father.

A moment later, my cousin strode through the door. Margarethe is an extraordinarily tall woman, standing only a few hairs shorter than I. Yet she is graceful in her movements, having the imperturbable poise that comes of being completely at home in one's skin. She embraced me as a man would, with a great clap on the back. Then she held me at arm's length and looked me over. As always, it was like gazing in a mirror. We looked so much alike, people often thought us twins. We were both towheads as children and still quite blond. After we turned forty, a few white hairs had begun to creep in—white, mind you, not gray.

"You devil, you might have told me to expect you," said Margarethe with a feigned scowl. She rang for Krauss and asked him to refresh the martini pitcher.

After we finished our drinks, Margarethe declared it was time for exercise. Since she'd given up cigarettes at Katherine's insistence, Margarethe had struggled for the first time in her life to maintain her slender figure. She saw a thickening figure as a sign of age. Nothing could be more distressing to a person of her vigor. Her response to this change was characteristically efficient and practical—renewed enthusiasm for athletics and an attempt to restrain her appetite. She even gave up chocolate, which she adored—a sure sign of her resolve.

I saw an opportunity for conversation, so I offered to join her in the basement gymnasium. While she labored on the motorized treadmill, I sat on the sidelines and went on about a Bette Davis film I'd seen. Although Margarethe grunted from time to time, I could tell she wasn't listening. During the serious part of the exercise regimen—the weight-lifting—I was forbidden to speak because Margarethe needed to concentrate, so I went upstairs to seek company.

I found Katherine listening to the wireless in the drawing room. Her forehead was furrowed and her auburn brows, knit in consternation. When I heard the agitated words emanating from the wireless, I perceived the reason for the frown—Goebbels was ranting in condemnation of so-called

“degenerate” art. Now really, how could a few abstract paintings be so dangerous? Katherine glanced in my direction with a questioning look. She often tried to elicit my opinion of the political situation, but I would honor Margarethe’s prohibition of political discussion despite having much to say on the subject.

How I missed those glorious days of the Weimar Republic, when I was in the Reichstag and Brüning’s right hand. The Great War and the revolution had bred chaos, and the inflation had nearly finished our economy, but our Center Party had been able to steady the nation for a time. Then we too were swept away in favor of the National Socialists and their *Führer*. What a vile man! His pale eyes were hypnotic, and that voice, that stunning voice, so convincing, it could summon the dead from their graves.

I shuddered at the thought of him and reached into my coat for my cigarette case. Katherine frowned in disapproval, so I moved to a respectful distance. The Goebbels speech had so unsettled me that I couldn’t immediately return to ordinary sociability. Instead, I picked up *The Times* and scanned the financial pages. Katherine, intuiting that I was in no mood for conversation, went back to her wretched medical book.

From the music room next door came the sound of Margarethe’s voice. After some scales and arpeggios, she began to sing the aria from Act II of *Der Rosenkavalier*, when Octavian, splendidly shining in a white-and-silver coat, announces that he has come to present the silver rose.

“Do you mind if I bring up the matter of the opera?” I asked.

Katherine shrugged. “I’m surprised she hasn’t mentioned it to you.”

“She doesn’t tell me everything, you know,” I replied with an unnecessarily catty smirk.

“I never thought so.”

“But, Katherine, her mother would be scandalized!”

“Not if Margarethe uses a stage name,” said Katherine, innocently revealing Margarethe’s strategy.

“Then Gürtner will lose the advantage of Margarethe’s following.”

My cousin sang publicly only for charity benefits and occasionally in amateur opera, but she had acquired some admirers—young women who

found more than her voice irresistible. I wondered why Katherine was never jealous.

“Evidently, he is so set on having her sing on his stage that he will allow her to appear incognito,” said Katherine.

“And what photograph will they use in the program?”

“Margarethe is very good at disguises, as you know.”

Not long after, Margarethe appeared in one of her disguises, dressed for dinner in a green Schiaparelli gown. She looked so utterly radiant that I decided to exchange my English suit for a dinner jacket.

The meal was preceded by a feast of oysters. Margarethe’s devotion to this shellfish borders on obscene. It was not unusual for her to moan appreciatively as the delicately fluted creatures reached her tongue or to wax eloquent on their reputed qualities as an aphrodisiac. That night, however, there was no mention of aphrodisiacs. During the entire meal, the ladies barely exchanged a glance. Margarethe tried to occupy me with discussion of the stock market, while silent Katherine behaved as modestly as a nun.

How odd, I thought, although a part of me rejoiced. Before Katherine came between us, Margarethe was game for any adventure, even an occasional aside. After Katherine, all mischief was banished from Margarethe’s life. Her watchword was fidelity. Her compass was stuck on true north. How utterly boring!

But now it seemed that something had gone awry. I tried to guess. It is said that men of my persuasion can be more sensitive than women to social cues. In fact, we share with all of our sex, the stupidity that comes of only noticing the surface. It’s the reason we are so good at appearing to be women when we dress in their clothes. All the details are impeccably executed, but we completely miss the complexity of females, which includes a toughness that burly men can only imagine. That’s why, when Katherine finally apprised me of the situation, she had to spell out the solution in great detail.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

After a dessert of chocolate torte, which my cousin virtuously declined, we repaired to the music room. Margarethe sang *Lieder* to Katherine’s

accompaniment, but my cousin was irritable and impatient. She complained about the tempo, chased Katherine off the piano bench and took over. She abruptly stopped in the middle of a piece that she herself had chosen and declared with a scowl, "I don't really feel like singing tonight."

I exchanged a worried glance with Katherine. She rose and offered Margarethe the barest peck of a good night kiss before she excused herself to see Fiona off to bed. This affectionless display heightened my anxiety. Something was amiss. No doubt of it.

Margarethe remained at the piano and began to play a Beethoven sonata. The familiar music soothed me, especially after being an unwilling witness to the tension in that house. Afterwards, I poured Margarethe a brandy hoping to induce her to relax. "Come, darling," I said, nudging her towards the sofa, "sit with me and tell me all your news."

One of the reasons Margarethe tolerates my presence is that I can amuse her. I cast about for a topic of light conversation. I had spent most of my adult life as a politician, so it is rather natural for me to slide into glib ease. First a little small talk, and then on to weightier matters. I politely asked after the children. Margarethe's son, Wilhelm, now twenty-two, was a medical student in Munich. He had chosen his mother's alma mater over being her pupil in Berlin. Margarethe's daughter had gone up to Oxford's Lady Margaret Hall, not Somerville, her mother's college.

"And can you believe it? Liesel wants to study medicine as well," said Margarethe. "I promise you. I've done nothing to encourage either of them to join the profession."

"Nothing except set a spectacular example. It must make you very proud." As their "uncle" and godfather, I was proud as well. I'd tried to fill in whenever I could for their dear dead father. He had perished in a boating accident when the children were very young. "Liesel intends to study medicine? A whole family of doctors. Whatever will I talk about when I visit?"

"You always find words, darling. You shall manage," said Margarethe, patting my shoulder. She reached into my dinner jacket for my cigarette case. Although I found the search deliciously intimate, I restrained myself

from a response, knowing it was Margarethe's way to take rather than ask. She is the only woman whom I have ever truly desired, but her feelings for me were quite simple. She only gave in to me out of indulgence or in times of boredom or loneliness—never since Katherine had arrived on the scene. Margarethe located the case, extracted two cigarettes, and lit them.

"What would Katherine say?" I asked as she passed a cigarette to me.

"Oh, she knows," she said with a sigh, "but I refrain in her presence."

"You smoke in secret?"

"Katherine needn't know everything I do."

Her perfectly arched brows came together in a pained frown. I began to realize that she was genuinely troubled.

"Grethe, my darling, what *is* wrong?"

"What's not wrong?" she replied testily. "Every morning I wake up and find that the government has insinuated itself more deeply into my medical practice. Were you aware that I am an affiliate member of the NSDAP solely because I am a panel-certified surgeon?"

"No," I said, genuinely surprised.

"Neither was I until a week ago. Today I received curriculum instructions from the Chamber of Medicine ordering me to integrate the concept of racial hygiene into my surgical lectures."

"I cannot imagine how much this disturbs you," I remarked impassively, although I was surprised to hear her say so much about the political situation.

"Oh, yes, just a bit." She sat up and stubbed out her cigarette. "Disgusting," she muttered. It was difficult to know whether she was referring to the cigarette or the Nazis. She got up to refill her glass. "I hate politics, but when the government attempts to rewrite science and dictate the practice of medicine, something must be done!" I sat up, interested to hear what she had to say next. "The racial theories of the National Socialists are utter nonsense," she continued. "How can any physician with the least knowledge of genetics give them any credence?"

"Grethe, you believe so fervently in the superiority of the nobility, I would have supposed you to be the most ardent Social Darwinist."

She gave me a withering look. "What do you know about science? And how can you possibly understand the ways in which science is being corrupted by ideologues and politicians, being one yourself?"

This accusation stunned me. How unlike her to be so personal. However much she liked to win an argument, she unfailingly honored the rules of engagement.

"Forgive me, Konrad. That was uncalled for. I'm tired."

From the pinched look on her face, I realized that fatigue was the least of it, and that she had revealed only the periphery of her anxiety. "Thank you for the apology, but it's unnecessary. You do look tired. Perhaps you should get some rest."

"Rest," she repeated with a sigh, "What a very good idea." She rose and kissed me. "Good night, my dear. How delightful to have you home."

Once I was certain she had retired for the night, I called her chauffeur and directed him to drive me to the stevedores' district in Spandau. We parked across the street from a brightly lit tavern and waited.

Watching the patrons come and go, I imagined being an alligator. Margarethe had recently sent me to Louisiana to look after her business interests there. A rough man I'd befriended in a Creole pub told me about the fearsome beasts and offered to take me into the bayou at night. Navigating by the light of a kerosene lantern hung on a hook at the prow, he poled his boat through the water. Lightning flashes overhead provided moments of illumination when I could see the sleek reptiles, their large, stony backs gliding through the dark water. My heart pounded at the thought of falling overboard and being at the mercy of those stealthy, silent killing machines. I imagined being one of them, as I sat in Margarethe's large, black Mercedes, its twelve cylinders waiting to stir into powerful wakefulness.

A young man with a great shock of black hair and chiseled features came out and lit a cigarette. I opened the window and called to him. As he turned, my eyes delighted in the prominent bulge in his tight trousers.