

BURG LINGENFELS, NOVEMBER 9, 1938

The day of the countess's famous harvest party began with a driving rain that hammered down on all the ancient von Lingenfels castle's sore spots – springing leaks, dampening floors, and turning its yellow façade a slick, beetle-like black. In the courtyard, the paper lanterns and carefully strung garlands of wheat drooped and collapsed.

Marianne von Lingenfels, niece-in-law of the countess, laboured joylessly to prepare for their guests. It was too late to call off the party. Now that the countess was wheelchair-bound, Marianne had become the de facto hostess; a hostess who should have listened to her husband and cancelled the party last week. In Paris, Ernst vom Rath lay in a hospital bed, the victim of an attempted assassination, and in Munich the Nazis were whipping the country into a frenzy for revenge. Never mind that prior to the event no one had even heard of vom Rath – an obscure, mid-level German diplomat – and that his assassin was a boy of seventeen, or that the shooting was itself an act of revenge: the assassin's family was among the thousands of Jews huddled at the Polish border, expelled from Germany, barred entry by Poland. The Nazis were not deterred by complex facts.

All the more cause to gather reasonable people here at the castle,

away from the madness! Marianne had argued just yesterday. Today, in the rain, her argument seemed trite.

And now it was too late. So Marianne supervised the placement of candles, flowers, and table linens and managed the soggy uphill transport of champagne, ice and butter, potted fish and smoked meats, potable water and canisters of gas for the cookstove. Burg Lingenfels was uninhabited for most of the year, with no running water and a generator just strong enough to power the countess's Victrola and a few strings of expensive electric lights. Hosting the party was like setting up a civilisation on the moon. But this was part of what kept people coming back despite yearly disasters – minor fires and collapsed outhouses, fancy touring cars stuck in the mud, mice in the overnight guest beds. The party had become famous for its anarchic, un-German atmosphere. It was known as an outpost of liberal, bohemian culture in the heart of the proper aristocracy.

By mid-afternoon, to Marianne's relief, the wind began to blow, chasing away the day's gloom with gusts of clear and promising air. Even the stone walls and the moat's sinewy water looked fresh and clean scrubbed. The chrysanthemums in the courtyard glistened under racing patches of sun.

Marianne's spirits rose. In front of the bakehouse, an architect acquaintance of the countess's had transformed an old carriage horses' drinking trough into a fountain. The effect was at once magical and comic. The castle was an elephant dressed to look like a fairy.

'Albrecht,' Marianne called as she entered the long, low library, where her husband was seated at the imposing desk that had once been the count's. 'You must come and see – it's like a carnival!'

Albrecht looked up at her, still composing a sentence in his head. He was a tall, craggy-faced man with a high forehead and unruly eyebrows that often gave him the appearance of frowning when he was not.

'Only for a moment, before everyone gets here.' She held out her hand. 'Come. The fresh air will clear your head.'

'No, no, not yet,' he said, waving her off and returning his attention to the letter he was writing.

Oh, come on, Marianne would have normally chided, but tonight, on account of the party, she bit her tongue. Albrecht was a perfectionist and workaholic. She would never change this. He was drafting a letter to an old law school acquaintance in the British Foreign Office and had sought her opinion on alternate sentence constructions many times. *The annexation of the Sudetenland will only be the beginning. I urge you to beware of our leadership's aggression versus If we are not vigilant, our leader's aggressive intentions will only be the beginning . . .*

Both ways make your point was Marianne's response. *Just pick one*. But Albrecht was a deliberator. He did not even notice the irritation in her tone. His own emotions were never complicated or petty. He was the sort of man who contemplated grand abstractions like the Inalienable Rights of Man or the Problems of Democracy while shaving. It rendered him oblivious to everyday things.

Marianne restrained herself to a demonstrative sigh, turned, and left him to his work.

Back in the banquet hall, the countess scolded one of her young disciples from her wheelchair: 'Not Schumann,' she said, 'God forbid! We might as well play Wagner . . . no, something Italian. Something decadent enough to shock any Brownshirt idiot who comes tonight.'

Even in her old age, the countess was a rebel, followed at all turns by young artists and socialites. French by birth, German by marriage, she had always been a controversial figure. As a young woman, she had hosted evening salons famous for their impromptu dancing and intellectual arguments on risqué subjects like modern art and French philosophy. Why she had married the proper, fusty old count, a man twenty years her senior and famous for falling asleep at the dinner table, was the subject of much not-very-kind speculation.

For Marianne, who was the product of an oppressively proper Prussian upbringing, the countess had always been an object of admiration. The woman was unafraid to step beyond the role of mother and *Hausfrau* into the fray of male power and intellectual life. She spoke her own mind and did things her own way. Even from their first meeting years ago, when Marianne was a young university student courting her professor (Albrecht), she had wanted to become a woman like the countess.

‘It looks wonderful out there,’ Marianne said, gesturing towards the courtyard. ‘Monsieur Pareille is a magician.’

‘He is an artist, isn’t he?’ the countess proclaimed.

It was nearly six o’clock. Guests would begin arriving at any moment.

Marianne hurried upstairs to the chilly hall of bedrooms where her girls were holed up in an ancient curtained bed, a relic from the castle’s feudal past. Her one-year-old son, Fritz, was at home in Weisslau with his nurse, thank God.

‘Mama!’ Elisabeth, age six, and Katarina, age four, shrieked with delight. Elfie, their sweet, mild-mannered au pair, glanced up at Marianne with a beleaguered expression.

‘Isn’t it true that Hitler is going to take back Poland next?’ Elisabeth asked, bouncing on the mattress.

‘Elisabeth!’ Marianne exclaimed. ‘Where did you get this idea?’

‘I heard Herr Zeppel saying it to Papa,’ she said, still bouncing.

‘No,’ Marianne said. ‘And why would you think that was anything to be excited about? It would mean war!’

‘But it’s supposed to be ours.’ Elisabeth pouted, stopping mid-bounce. ‘And, anyway, Herr Zeppel said the Poles can’t manage themselves.’

‘What nonsense,’ Marianne said, irritated that Albrecht had allowed the child to hear such talk. Zeppel was the overseer of their estate in Silesia and an ardent Nazi. Albrecht tolerated the man’s nonsense because they had grown up together: Weisslau was a small town.

‘But it *was* ours, wasn’t it?’ Elisabeth insisted. ‘Before the war?’

‘Elisabeth,’ Marianne said, sighing, ‘you concern yourself with what is *yours*, please – and that includes the book you are supposed to be reading with Elfie right now.’

The child exasperated Marianne with her endless obsession with possession. She seemed to have absorbed the national sense of aggrievement, as if she, personally, were the victim of some great unfairness. She had so many advantages but always wanted more – a newer dress, a prettier skirt. If she received a bunny, she wanted a dog. If allowed a bonbon, she wanted two. In her mind, the world seemed to lie entirely at her disposal. Marianne, whose upbringing had been characterised by firm parsimony and restraint, was constantly appalled by this demanding, presuming creature she had raised.

‘Elfie –’ She turned to the *au pair*. ‘Will you see to it that the candles are out by eight? The girls may come down to the landing, but no farther.’

‘But –’ Elisabeth began, and Marianne shot her a look.

‘Good night,’ she said, giving an extra squeeze to sweet, quiet, dark-haired Katarina and kissing Elisabeth’s maddening little brow.

On her way downstairs, Marianne paused on the landing to observe the hall below, its stone archways illuminated by candelabras. The flickering light lent the room an exciting, almost spooky glow. Early guests had begun to arrive: the men in waistcoats and tails, a few in uniforms with gaudy new Nazi insignias stitched on the lapels; the women in fine new dresses. Under Hitler, the economy was growing strong: people had money, once again, for silk and velvet and the new Parisian styles. From a throne-like seat in the middle of the hall, the countess greeted her guests, her wheelchair carefully hidden away for the evening. She was a mountain of blue and green silk, the likes of which no other German woman of

her age (or any other) would wear. Her laugh rang out strongly for someone in poor health – had there ever been a woman who loved a party more? And there, bowing before her, was the guest who elicited this peal of laughter: Connie Fledermann. Marianne felt a rush of excitement. Who else received such a welcome? Connie was a great favourite of the countess's, a star in his own right, a man whose boldness of character, wit, and intelligence rendered him beloved by all – a charmer of ladies, a receiver of men's trust and confidences. No one, from crazy Hermann Göring to somber George Messersmith, was immune to Connie's charisma.

'Connie!' Marianne called as she approached.

He turned and a grin spread across his face.

'Aha! The woman I have been waiting for!' He lifted her hand to his lips. 'You are looking lovely.' He cast his eyes up to the landing. 'Will I get to see my princesses or have you put them away?'

'Put away,' Marianne said with a laugh. 'I hope.'

'Alas.' He placed his hands over his heart and feigned collapse. 'Well, at least I get to consort with the queen mother. Come' – he extended his arm – 'meet my Benita!'

Marianne's smile stiffened. In the drama of the past week, she had forgotten. Martin Constantine Fledermann was to be married. It seemed impossible. Even with the date set (two weeks from today!), it still had the ring of a lark gone too far.

But he was earnest, even nervous, as he took Marianne by the elbow. 'You must befriend her,' he said. 'She knows no one. I told her you would be her ally. And' – he turned to her – 'you know she will need one here.'

'Why is that?' Marianne asked. 'You are among friends.'

'True,' Connie said. 'But she is not.'

Marianne frowned at his circular logic, but there was no time to question it because suddenly there she was, Connie's Benita, a strikingly pretty woman with the kind of flat, Nordic face that emanated placidity. Her blonde hair was plaited and wrapped around her head in the style so adored by the Nazis, a Wagnerian

Brunhilde in an honest-to-God dirndl dress. She stood between two young men who worked with Albrecht in the Foreign Office, both of whom looked delighted. Marianne felt an unusual pang of jealousy. It was not that she envied the younger woman's beauty or palpable air of sexuality (she herself had long ago carved out an alternate road to male regard), but at this moment, in the company of these three men – two silly, overeager boys and one dear friend, childhood sweetheart, luminary of the opposition – the other woman's beauty left her nowhere to go. At thirty-one, Marianne was an adult in a child's play, a schoolmarm among excitable students.

'Excuse me, boys,' Connie said, making a show of elbowing one of them aside, 'I need to reclaim her.' He put a hand on Benita's arm and pulled her towards Marianne. 'My love,' he addressed Benita (how odd it was to hear him say this), 'meet my – what shall I call you?' He turned to Marianne. 'My oldest friend, my sternest adviser, the person who keeps me most honest?'

'Oh pish, Connie,' Marianne said, trying to tamp down her irritation.

'Marianne,' she introduced herself, and extended a hand to the young woman, who, she judged, could not be much over twenty.

'Thank you,' the girl said, blinking like a startled deer. 'How nice to meet you.'

More guests arrived, and Marianne could feel them pressing towards her with hands to shake, welcomes to issue, politics to discuss. There was Greta von Viersdahl, already trying to catch her eye; since Hitler had invaded, Greta spoke of nothing but the winter clothes she was collecting for the Sudeten Germans, so recently 'returned to the fatherland,' so long 'oppressed by the Slavs' . . . Marianne wanted no part of Greta's politics. Impulsively, she took Benita's arm. 'Give us a chance to become friends,' she said over her shoulder to Connie, already leading Benita through the back door and into the lantern-bedecked courtyard.

‘How beautiful!’ Benita exclaimed.

‘Isn’t it?’ Marianne said. ‘Like a fairy tale. Countess von Lingenfels has a talent for the amazing.’

Benita nodded, staring wide eyed.

‘So tell me about yourself before we are swarmed with admirers,’ Marianne said. ‘Was your trip all right? Have you found your room?’ She hurried through the necessary questions, half listening to the girl’s replies.

From all around, she could feel people’s eyes. ‘Remind me how you met Connie.’ Marianne plucked two champagne flutes from a table and handed one to Benita, who accepted it without thanks.

‘We just met in the town square, really,’ the girl said. ‘I was there with my troop – my BDM troop –’

‘Good grief! The BDM? How old are you?’ Marianne exclaimed.

‘Oh no – not the one for little girls – for the older girls, Belief and Beauty. I’m nineteen.’

‘Ah.’ Marianne patted her arm. ‘Positively ancient.’

The girl glanced at her.

‘Aren’t these lovely?’ Marianne pointed at the white chrysanthemums and dark autumn anemones arranged in pots along the balustrade. High above, pale clouds scudded across the dark sky. And in the distance, the woods were inky in the twilight. ‘So the town square . . .’

Benita sipped her champagne and coughed. ‘It’s not much of a story. We met and talked and then later we went out for dinner.’

Marianne rested her glass atop the courtyard wall. ‘And now you are to be married.’

‘When you say it like that’ – Benita hesitated – ‘it sounds odd.’

Marianne smiled and cocked her head to the side, knitting her brows. She had learned this scrutinising expression from the countess and found it proved helpful at drawing out confessions and explanations from children and family members, even grown men.

But it did not have the desired effect on the girl. Instead, she

seemed to find her mettle, squaring her shoulders. 'There were a few things in between.'

'Of course,' Marianne said. Why had she taken this interrogative tack? The girl was to become Connie's wife. It would do Marianne no good to have started off this way. 'I'm sorry – I don't mean to pry.

'Come.' She glanced around the rapidly filling courtyard for an opening and, with relief, spotted Herman Kempel, one of the rubes who had been so smitten with Benita earlier. 'Let's go and talk to your latest admirer.'

As the night wore on, a kind of giddy, reckless energy took over. A comical figure in lederhosen and knee socks played an accordion – was he someone the countess had hired or a local guest? – and people began folk dancing on the uneven cobblestones. Women even kicked off their shoes, despite the cold. And inside, the American jazz trio the countess had invited finally arrived. They played ragtime in the great hall while a number of the bolder, more cosmopolitan guests demonstrated dances with silly names like the Big Apple and the Lindy Hop. Somehow, despite the improvised stove and lack of running water, the chef presented a steady stream of delicacies: traditional pork meatballs with a delicate parsley sauce, plump white steamed dumplings, and silver-dollar sausage rounds. But also novelties – asparagus wrapped with paper-thin ham, jelly moulds, pineapple flambé, and caviar toast . . . like the music, the food spanned the gamut of German cultural life.

Marianne drifted in a haze, not of alcohol (the hostess never had more than one glass of punch – this too she had learned from the countess), but of relief. She had managed to continue the immodest tradition of the harvest party, even as the nation was swept up in this wave of rigid and peevish militancy. And she had managed to transcend her own upbringing (how mortified her

father would be to see her throw a party featuring jazz dancing and champagne toasts) and provide these people with something lovely, liberating, and ethereal.

Buoyed along by this thought, she greeted guests, checked on the drinks behind the bar, the food on the buffet. 'The countess junior!' a jolly, quick-tongued cousin of Connie's cried, wrapping a thick arm around her shoulders. 'What a party! But where is your esteemed husband? And all his high-minded friends! I haven't seen a one of those trolls for the past hour! Are they holed up in some sort of elite gathering without their old chum Jochen?'

'No, no.' Marianne waved him off with a kiss on his cheek. But his question was a good one. Where *was* Albrecht? And for that matter Connie and Hans and Gerhardt Friedlander? She had not seen them for some time. Albrecht had probably pulled them into the library to review his letter. The thought irritated her. Albrecht's sobriety – his constant ability to focus on the world beyond what was directly beneath his nose – felt like a reproach. He was right, of course. Poor Ernst vom Rath lay in some hospital bed and thousands of Jews slept out in the cold borderland. Germany was being run by a loudmouthed rabble-rouser, bent on baiting other nations to war and making life miserable for countless innocent citizens. And here they were, drinking champagne and dancing to Scott Joplin.

In a state of defensive irritation she burst into Albrecht's study, where, yes, there they were – all her missing guests: Albrecht and Connie, Hans and Gerhardt, Torsten Frye and the American, Sam Beverwill, and a few others, many of whom, like Connie, worked as staff officers in the *Abwehr*, the military intelligence office.

'What's this?' she said, trying to make her voice light. 'A secret, serious party? The countess will not be pleased to know you're all skulking about in the study instead of dancing.'

'Marianne –' Albrecht said.

'Albrecht! Let your guests come out and enjoy the evening –'

As she spoke, she noticed a new person in their midst: a short,

dark-haired man, balding, with a kind of intensity to his homely face. The energy in the room was odd; the men's faces remained grave and unchanged by her appearance.

'I'm sorry,' she said to the new man. 'I don't believe we've been introduced.'

'Pietre Grabarek.' He stepped forward and extended his hand. A Pole. Albrecht and Connie both had many contacts in the Polish National Party.

'Marianne von Lingenfels. The wife of your sober host here,' she said, gesturing towards Albrecht.

'Marianne –' Albrecht interjected again. 'Pietre has traveled from Munich with some alarming news. This evening –'

'Vom Rath is dead?' A chill swept over Marianne.

'Dead.' Albrecht nodded. 'But that is only part of it.'

Marianne felt uncomfortably at the centre of this small group now, all scrutinising her reaction. This was not a position she was used to: the ignorant one.

'It seems Goebbels has given orders for the SA to incite rioting, destruction of Jewish property. They're throwing stones through shop windows and looting, making a sport –'

'Not a sport – a battle! An organised attack!' the man interrupted.

'– of destroying people's lives.'

'How terrible!' Marianne said. 'Did Lutze condone this? What does it mean?' Lutze was the head of the police, the SA – an unpleasant man she had recently met and disliked.

'It seems so,' Albrecht answered.

There was a shifting of glances and bodies.

'It's descent into madness – Hitler is exactly the maniac we've suspected!' Hans exclaimed, but no one paid attention. He was a sweet, foolish boy. *There are thinkers and there are actors*, Connie had once said. *Hans is an actor*. Albrecht had balked at this dichotomy, though – so black-and-white, so reductive and unforgiving. Action should follow thought and thought should include careful

deliberation. But this was not Connie's way. He was more of an actor himself, and his views, while informed and considered, were rarely mulled over and always absolute.

'It means shame for Germany in the eyes of the world,' Albrecht said.

There was a general swell of affirmation.

'And suffering,' Connie said. 'It means suffering for many, many people . . .'

Silence fell across the group as sounds of laughter and strains of the accordion filtered through the leaded windows.

'And it means reasonable citizens must take action,' Connie continued. 'We are not all thugs and villains. But we will become these, if we don't try to make change.'

It was a bold statement, a challenge almost, and Marianne watched it register on the men's faces with varying results. Hans nodded dramatically, captivated. Eberhardt von Strallen, clearly disapproving of such rash talk, flicked at the lint on his lapel. Albrecht frowned thoughtfully.

'It is our duty,' Connie said. 'If we don't work actively to defeat Hitler, it will only get worse. This man – this zealot who calls himself our leader – will ruin everything we have achieved as a united nation.' He continued, 'If we don't begin to mobilise like-minded people against him, if we don't begin to actively enlist our contacts abroad – the English, the Americans, the French – he will draw us into a war, and worse. If you listen to the things this man says – if you really listen, and read – it's all there in that hideous book of his, *Mein Kampf*; his "struggle" is to turn us all into animals! Read it, *really* read it, *know thine enemies* – his vision is medieval! Worse than medieval, anarchic! That life is nothing more than a fight for resources to be waged between the races – this "Master Race" he likes to speak of and the racial profiles he has devised – these are the tools he will use to divide us and conquer.'

Marianne had heard Connie's views before – how many times had they talked late into the night around the fire in Weisslau?

Hitler was a madman and a thug, they were all in agreement. Ever since the *Putsch* this had been clear. Connie, as well as Albrecht, had spent a good portion of the last years assisting the victims of the National Socialists – Jews who wanted to emigrate, imprisoned Communists, artists whose works were banned. *Without law*, Albrecht always said, *we are no better than the apes*. His work was as much to uphold and strengthen the law through practice as it was to win each individual battle.

But Connie had given up on the law, increasingly castrated as it was under the Nazis. He was a born dissenter and a believer in direct action. It was one of the things Marianne loved most about him – Connie, her childhood playmate, dearest friend, and the man she most admired, other than Albrecht, of course. He had always been an agitator, a passionate champion of what he felt was *right*. As children, he and Marianne had spent summers with their families at the Ostsee, and Connie had always led them on quests against injustice, plotting to reveal the hotel concierge's unkindness to dogs or some wrong-headed parental prejudice. And usually he prevailed, through sheer force of character or single-mindedness.

'... We *must* find ways to work against him,' Connie continued. 'Not only to bring the attention of the world to his ugly aspirations, but to take action ourselves. If we sit by and judge from behind the safety of our desks, we will have only ourselves to blame. So I suggest we commit to active resistance from this day forward. To trying to steer our country from Hitler's destructive path.'

Connie finished. Sweat had formed around his hairline and he was out of breath.

There were murmurs and nods among the men gathered.

'I agree with the principle.' Albrecht spoke slowly into the swell of support. 'But active collusion against our government – this government – is a dangerous thing. And we have wives and families to consider. I am not suggesting we should not, only that we think carefully –'

'Your wives and families will support you,' Marianne interrupted, surprising herself and the rest of the room. It came out like a rebuke. Albrecht was always so measured, slow, and *thoughtful*. A plodding tortoise to Connie's leaping stag.

'All of them?' von Strallen asked wryly.

'All of them,' Marianne repeated. Von Strallen was a chauvinist. He told his silly wife, Missy, nothing and took her nowhere. Poor Missy, treated like a dumb fattened cow.

'And bear the risk?' Albrecht asked gently.

'And bear the risk,' Marianne repeated.

'All right,' Connie said, turning his intense gaze upon her. 'Then you will see to it that they are all right. You are appointed the commander of wives and children.'

Marianne met his gaze. *The commander of wives and children*. She knew he did not mean to belittle her, but it smarted like a slap.

The meeting – if that's what it was – broke up, and with a sense of unreality, Marianne headed back to the party to resume her hostess responsibilities. Conversations rose and fell, the jazz trio played, and from the landing of the stairs someone recited Cicero in Latin.

But outside, beyond the castle walls, terrible things were happening. Marianne could imagine Hitler's thuggish Brownshirts swarming the streets, swaggering and shouting with their air of unchecked violence. She had seen them marching in a parade last summer in Munich. Two of the men had broken formation and rushed towards her across the pavement. For a moment she had stood frozen, afraid that she would be attacked: but for what? Instead they knocked down the university student beside her and kicked him as he curled into a ball, their shiny black boots hammering at his back. It had happened so fast that she simply stood. *Why? What did he do?* she asked a man standing beside her when the SA were gone. *He did not lift his hand in a*

proper Heil, the man whispered as they bent to help the poor student to his feet.

For days afterward she saw those men's faces as they rushed at her: ordinary, middle-aged faces flattened and made stupid with violence.

'What is it? You look as if you've seen a ghost,' Mimi Armacher said, interrupting the memory. Mimi was a sweet woman, a distant cousin of Albrecht's whom Marianne had always liked.

'I've just heard –' Marianne faltered. What to call it? It was something from a less civilised time, and for which she had no vocabulary. 'We've received news from Munich that there is rioting – the SA – beating people, breaking down Jewish properties –'

'News?' Mimi repeated, as if this were the incomprehensible thing.

'From a friend of Connie's who's just arrived,' Marianne explained.

'Oh, how awful,' Mimi said, and her face fell. 'In all the cities?'

Others gathered around. Marianne was aware of Berna and Gottlieb Bruckner at the edge of the group, and Alfred Klausner: Jewish friends whose own positions here in Germany were increasingly difficult. Generations of assimilation no longer seemed to set them apart from the eastern immigrant Jews Hitler was obsessed with deporting. No one was safe.

Marianne felt exhausted suddenly. 'That's what I understood.'

'Destroying property?' someone asked. 'At random?'

'Jewish property,' Mimi asserted with chilling crispness. 'Only Jewish properties.' She turned to Marianne. 'Isn't that what you said?'

Marianne stared at her. 'I don't know.' She drew herself up. 'Does it matter? Our government is unleashing bands of thugs.'

'It is the beginning of the end,' the countess pronounced dramatically when she heard of the destruction that would later be referred to as *Kristallnacht*. 'That Austrian will ruin this country.'

With that, she went up to bed.

Marianne envied her freedom. She herself would have to shepherd this party to its bitter end.

As the news spread, guests with government roles or substantial properties in nearby cities took off down the hill, speeding drunkenly around curves, honking and flashing their headlights. They were followed, more soberly, by the few Jewish guests. A few voyeuristic idiots drove to the neighbouring town of Ehrenheim to see how far the rioting had spread.

By the champagne fountain, Gerhardt Friedlander argued with the Stollmeyers, a set of drunken, ruddy-faced twins who were devoted Nazis. The crowd cleared a nervous circle around them.

‘The conspiracy of world Jewry will not stop at murdering vom Rath,’ one of the Stollmeyers ranted. ‘We must take action against them –’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ Gerhardt spat. ‘Vom Rath was killed by a deranged seventeen-year-old, not a conspiracy.’

‘A deranged seventeen-year-old who was a Jew and a Bolshevik,’ his opponent argued, ‘who wanted to destroy the pride and unity of the German *Volk* . . .’

Marianne could not listen. This absurd Nazi blather was everywhere, ripe for adoption by the likes of the simple-minded Stollmeyers. How had those two ever made the guest list? Thank God Gerhardt was there to put them in their place.

In the great room, the jazz trio had disappeared (back to Berlin? Had they been paid?), and some dolt tried to play a Nazi marching record on the Victrola only to be pelted with a round of hot *Frikadellen* from the chef’s latest offering. The gawkers who had driven to Ehrenheim returned and seemed almost disappointed to report that no, nothing was afoot. What did they expect? The town was thoroughly and pigheadedly Bavarian Catholic. It had no Jewish inhabitants or businesses.

Undaunted by the news or the departures, the cook contin-

ued to offer delicacies: a new round of pork roasts, apple tortes, a *Frankfurter Kranz*. And the bartender poured drinks.

Marianne wished the remaining guests would leave. They were all self-absorbed, and frivolous. But still the party limped along towards a slow death.

Around midnight, she allowed herself a moment of privacy in an empty trophy room decorated by some von Lingenfels hunter of yore. Its walls were bedecked with pale, delicate skulls of deer and mouldering taxidermies of boar, bears, even a wolf. A cruel room, but it would do. She would rest for five minutes. Any longer and she would never return. As she sat, the expression fell from her face and the slackness that replaced it made her feel old, a mother of small children in a suddenly savage land.

‘Aha!’ A voice came from behind, and two hands fell on her shoulders before she had the chance to turn: Connie. She had thought him long gone – either back to Berlin to repair the damage or off to bed with his fiancée, a changed man with a new set of habits. But here he was. His intransigence reassured her.

‘Caught you,’ he chided.

‘Oh, Connie,’ she said, turning. ‘Should I tell them all to go home? It’s so strange to have this party when beyond it, God knows –’

‘Let them stay.’ Connie sank into the chair opposite her own. ‘They’re too drunk to leave anyway.’

‘I suppose.’ Marianne sighed. ‘What’s happening out there?’

‘Well,’ Connie said, leaning back. ‘Greta von Viersdahl is impersonating a goose on the dance floor, old Herr Frickle has found a new strumpet to sit on his lap, and someone I don’t know is vomiting into the moat.’

‘Oh dear.’ Marianne smiled.

How many parties had they attended together? Too many to count since their days as children. And Connie was always an entertaining reporter – an interested observer of the human animal.

It was what had forged their friendship: the aptness of his perceptions, and her own appreciation for these as a person less gifted with insight.

‘And Benita?’ she could not resist asking. ‘Is she sleeping?’

‘She’s a good girl,’ Connie answered, stretching out his legs, the firelight creating comically long shadows of his shoes. His handsome face looked tired. There were circles beneath his eyes.

‘Does that make it easier or harder for her to go to sleep?’

Connie shrugged. ‘She was exhausted.’

Marianne pulled herself more upright in the chair and stared quizzically at her friend. ‘What does she think? About this rioting and thuggery, about what’s happening in the world?’

Connie rolled his head over the back of his chair to look up at her. Even exhausted, his face was strikingly handsome: the fine, clear features that had made him beautiful as a boy had never thickened or dulled. Instead they’d become sharper, and straighter – still capable of startling her with their symmetry.

‘You don’t approve of Benita,’ he said. ‘I knew you wouldn’t.’

‘That’s not fair, Connie – why would you think –?’

‘I know you,’ he said.

‘What – am I not an open-minded, accepting person who is happy to see her friend in love?’

Connie narrowed his eyes. ‘Open-minded, yes. Accepting, no. You are exacting.’

Marianne frowned. ‘Well, she *is* young.’

Connie laughed.

‘Will she be a partner to you? In all you do?’

Connie sat up suddenly, and for a moment Marianne was afraid she had gone too far. But he did not storm off. He turned his chair to face her and leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. ‘Not like you and Albrecht, no,’ he said. ‘But there are other kinds of unions. And I love her.’

She was surprised by the intensity of his declaration. Was there, in his assertion, an implicit criticism of her own marriage?

‘You must promise me something,’ Connie said.

‘What is it?’ Marianne frowned.

He reached forward to take her hand and a shock raced through Marianne at his touch.

‘If things go wrong – and they may go wrong – you must help her. She is a simple girl and she won’t deserve whatever mess I might drag her into.’ An uncharacteristically diffident, almost boyish look passed over his face. ‘And you must help her raise my child.’

‘Your –?’ Marianne began, astonished. ‘She is –?’

Connie nodded. ‘Will you promise me this?’

‘Connie, of course I will, you know I will, but –’

‘Is that your word?’

Marianne studied his face, as serious as she had ever seen it, and felt a chill of premonition.

‘You have my word,’ she said softly, and felt the full gravity of her promise well up around them.

And then, in a moment that Marianne would replay in her mind again and again, not just that night but over the years, long after Connie was dead, Albrecht was dead, Germany itself was dead, and half the people at the party were either killed, destroyed by shame, or somewhere between the two, he leaned forward and, with the same intensity he had used to extract her promise, kissed her. It was a kiss that dispensed with any trappings of romance or flirtation, that leapfrogged (and here was a question that would gnaw irritatingly, irrelevantly in her mind forever) maybe even over desire, straight into the sea of love and knowledge. Here were two people who understood each other. Here were two people aligned in something greater than themselves.

Who pulled away first? In all the replaying, this was never clear to Marianne. And had the moment lasted minutes? Seconds? It

was both crystal clear and full of confusion. For days afterward she could feel the place where Connie's hand had brushed the hair from her cheek. It shivered in memory, hot and cold at once.

'Connie,' she said when they were once again apart. He leaned forward and brought her hand to his lips. But before she could think what to say, what to ask, he rose and was gone.

PART I

BURG LINGENFELS, JUNE 1945

The entire cart ride from the train station to Burg Lingenfels, Benita lay on the musty hay bales in a half stupor, no longer caring what she looked like: a slut or a vagabond reclining in the open air, making her way across the country with all the dignity of a sack of potatoes. She was sick. Her stomach churned, and the sockets of her eyes ached. Possibly it was from the sausage Marianne had brought – rich, flavourful meat, the likes of which had not passed through Benita's lips for years. She could not think of it now without retching.

The train trip from Berlin had taken them three days, including one night in a transit depot crowded with every wandering rape victim, bereft mother, and wounded soldier west of the Oder. Benita was sick to death of desperate people. Berlin was bad enough, with its carousing Russians and half-starved virgins hidden in cellars, its countless dead – some still buried in the mountains of rubble – and its stinking, overcrowded bomb-shelters-turned-refugee-camps. And the route west had been even worse, clogged with all manner of suffering and human detritus. It was as if the great continent of Europe had shrugged and sent everyone rolling. Benita had no illusions. She was an animal like the rest of them, no more concerned with their pain and suffering than they were with hers.

The cart bumped over the rutted hillside, and the clouds above bounced in time across the sky, round and friendly, as innocent as they had always been. They were the best thing she had seen in weeks. Her mind drifted in and out of exhausted slumber.

In Berlin, sleep had been rare. If it wasn't the Russian captain barging into what was left of Benita's bombed-out flat, it was some other bastard who didn't yet understand that she belonged to the captain. That was how it worked in the half structure once known as 27 Meerstein Strasse. And then in the mornings, the Russian soldiers played boisterous card games at the kitchen table, and Frau Schiller, frightened old bag that she was, banged pots and pans, cooking the illicit goods the soldiers gave her to prepare for them. Benita hadn't slept a full night since Berlin fell, which was a mercy, maybe. Because with sleep came dreams. And her dreams were a distillation of every horror from the past year.

When the cart stopped, Benita woke with a jolt. They had arrived at Burg Lingenfels. She scrambled to sit, and spots swam before her eyes. When they subsided, there it was: the castle, exactly the same and totally different from how she remembered it. Rough stones, deep-set leaded-glass windows, and giant, intimidating oak front door. The building itself was untouched – what was another war to this ancient fortress? But it possessed none of the grandness that had so overwhelmed her when she'd first seen it at the countess's party. All the candles and music and pretty dresses, the fancy cars parked helter-skelter along the hillside . . . it was hard to believe that was only seven years ago. It seemed to belong to another lifetime. Now the aristocrats and artists and intellectuals who had so intimidated her were dead, broken, or irrevocably guilty. And no better off than she.

'You remember it?' Marianne was saying, lifting Martin down from the wagon – sweet Martin, Benita's precious boy, love of her life, the child she had thought she would never see again.

She nodded and tried to climb out of the cart.

'Let me help,' Marianne said. 'You are exhausted.'

Benita willed herself to step over the side and drop to the ground. She would walk with her son. But Martin was already ahead of her, following Marianne's eight-year-old boy, Fritz.

'What a healthy child. That is a blessing,' Marianne said, taking Benita's elbow.

And despite the many years since Benita had seen her, despite the fact that she had never even known Marianne, really, that she had – if anything – been irritated by the older woman's assurance and quick tongue, she allowed herself to be guided.

When Benita woke the next morning, the sun was rising, pink behind the black outline of the chestnut tree, the stable, the crow perched on the roof. The scene reminded her of the silhouette cutouts she'd cherished as a girl: quaint two-dimensional forms of children frolicking, dirndl-clad maidens dancing, steepled churches rising over sleeping towns. She had always stopped before the artists' stall in the Saturday market and admired these black-and-white visions of an uncomplicated life.

She rolled over and surveyed her surroundings. The room had once been used as a pantry – the walls were lined with empty shelves and an ancient butter churn sat in the corner. It smelled of damp stone and, faintly, of pickling vinegar and Christmas spices. Old smells, baked into the walls.

Martin lay curled beside her on the thin mattress, his blond hair spread fanlike on the pillow, his sweet, perfectly formed features made fragile by sleep. He was such a handsome boy – beautiful, really. Even more so than Connie had been. And seeing him there, under the blanket (and to have not one but *two* blankets and *two* mattresses), Benita was seized with an urge to gather him up and press her face into the soft skin of his neck, to breathe in the smell of boy and youth and sleep. She wanted, almost, to consume him – this best, most perfect piece of herself. She wanted to *become* him and in so doing become herself

again. Benita Gruber, town beauty, innocent nineteen-year-old, a girl out of a silhouette.

But she let him sleep. His breath stirred the fuzzy threads of the blanket. He shuddered as she watched. What haunted his dreams? The blare of bomb sirens and the screech of planes over Berlin? The dead bodies they had stepped over in the rubble? Or God knows what from the 'Children's Home' the Gestapo had sent him to after Benita was imprisoned. She had never seen it. It was Marianne who had – miraculously – found Martin when Benita had given him up for dead. *It was a typical Nazi establishment*, Marianne had said of the home, *lots of marching and no learning*. Being Marianne, she focused on the ideology and not the creature comforts of the place. Was there enough to eat? Were the caretakers kind? Had there been time to play? These questions remained unanswered. But Marianne had found Martin and returned him to Benita, and for that Benita owed her everything.

She must have drifted off again because when she next opened her eyes, the room was empty. Benita sat with a start. Where was Martin? The blood raced to her head and then away. Surely he was all right. The war was over. They were not in Berlin anymore, they were at Burg Lingenfels, in the American zone, and it was safe here. They were under Marianne's care.

But still, he had been taken from her once. She couldn't survive it again.

Benita pulled a skirt over her nightgown and raced down the dark stone hall. Breathlessly, she found her way to the kitchen. It was empty. No sign of Martin, or anyone. Then she spotted movement outside the window. Two little figures – Fritz, Marianne's boy, and Martin, crouched in the courtyard, poking sticks into a puddle. Relief flooded through her.

Thank you, thank you, dear God, for protecting my son . . . the prayer was involuntary, a nervous remnant of her Catholic upbringing. The religious pleas of her youth had returned to her in prison and served as an anchor in the endless sea of silence.

Without them, she was sure her mind would have drifted away. She did not believe in them, but still, they had saved her – not God, just the words.

She knew she was lucky to have been sent to prison and not a concentration camp after Connie was executed for his role in the assassination plot. Ultimately, this was how all her yearning for nobility and a good marriage had paid off: as the wife of a traitor with a noble Prussian bloodline, she had received solitary confinement rather than death. She could recognise, if not yet laugh at, the grim humour of this. But the blankness that had entered her during that time lingered. She had spent too many hours staring at the ceiling, the backs of her hands, the corner of her cell where the paint was chipped. It was only for Martin's sake that she now tried to overcome this.

As Benita stood watching the boys, Marianne banged into the kitchen, pulling a small cart of carrots and cabbages and even raspberries, which Benita had not seen in years. 'God bless Herr Kellerman for keeping up the garden,' Marianne exclaimed. 'There are not many men who were seeding potatoes and carrots last spring – and certainly not on someone else's property.' She was flushed, and her hair formed a frizzy halo around her head. 'Benita! How did you sleep, my poor dear? Have a bowl of porridge.' She gestured at a pot on the stove.

'Thank you,' Benita said.

Marianne was already removing a bowl from the cupboard – fine china, blue-and-white Meissen. 'I can't say it's tasty, but it's edible.' She plopped a helping into the bowl and set it on the table. 'Sit. You are meant to eat and rest.'

So Benita sat.

She watched Marianne empty the cart, a whirlwind of vigorous, chaotic activity. The war had not changed her as much as it had everyone else. She was still an enigma to Benita, a woman capable of tracking Martin to some obscure Nazi hideaway but incapable of managing her own hair. When Benita first married

Connie, she had marvelled at the woman's paradoxes. Marianne loved to entertain but cared nothing about food or fashion. She would slave away preparing the house for a fabulous party only to come down wearing last year's dowdy dress. She would invite the most distinguished members of the Foreign Office and intelligence corps to dinner and then serve her cook's homely *Sauerbraten* and *Wildschweingulasch*. She was an abstracted, disorganised mother to her children but an organised and efficient manager of adults.

She was not a beauty with her strong, almost mannish features and high cheekbones (a falcon face, Benita had once said to Connie and been thoroughly scolded). But she was compelling, and in moments, her face achieved a kind of graceful symmetry that was striking. It was a face you could not easily forget.

At the salons and weekend parties Marianne and Albrecht hosted in the beginning of the war, Benita had watched the handsome barons and counts and noble youths of Germany's most aristocratic families hang on Marianne's every word. They had jostled playfully in a style of speaking that made Benita feel stupid. Were they joking or serious? Teasing her or mocking one another? In the presence of Connie's fancy friends, Benita had found language an obstacle rather than a bridge to connection, but for Marianne it seemed a smooth and direct road that always rose to meet her feet.

'Why, you're still in your nightclothes!' Marianne exclaimed, glancing up from the vegetables she was unloading. 'Did you find the clothing I left in your room?'

Benita blushed. She had risen in such haste and completely forgotten to dress. 'I'm sorry – I was rushing.'

'Sorry! Pish. Nothing to be sorry for. It just doesn't seem like you. But then of course no one can be expected to be like themselves anymore, can they?' Marianne lifted the cart by its handles

and pushed it back out of the kitchen door. 'As long as you have what you need.'

At that moment, Marianne's two daughters appeared in the doorway, carrying a bucket between them.

'Just in time,' Marianne cried. 'We have milk for you, Tante Benita!'

Benita was not sure which surprised her more – the presence of milk or the title *Tante*, 'aunt.' Somehow lowly Benita Gruber, last of a long line of toiling Westphalian peasants, had become *Tante* to the von Lingenfels girls.

'Say hello, girls, and introduce yourselves,' Marianne instructed.

The girls approached – dark haired and tall, maybe ten and twelve. Katarina and Elisabeth. And Benita remembered their two little heads peering down at the guests from the landing on the stairs at the countess's party. She had wished so fervently to have a daughter like them, a sweet girl to dress in dirndls and christen in delicate, frothy white. It seemed quaint now – an innocent dream. Who would want to introduce a girl to this world? Thank God Martin was a boy.

'Here,' said Katarina, the younger of the two, as she dipped a cup into the bucket and extended it to Benita. 'It's delicious.' She had a sweet, shy manner about her, with long, thick eyelashes and awkward coltish limbs.

'Where is Martin?' the older girl, Elisabeth, asked. She was the sharper of the two in both look and tone.

'Out in the courtyard – you didn't see him?' Benita sprang up to look. The puddle was now abandoned. 'He was with Fritz, playing –'

She started towards the door but was stopped by Marianne.

'Let him be,' Marianne commanded. 'It's good for a boy to be free.' Taking in Benita's face, she softened her voice. 'All is very safe here, Benita. Really.'

* * *

In her room, Benita pulled on the battered brassiere and the vest that she had washed and worn so many times its seams were nearly gone, the drops of blood across the belly now faded to innocent-looking brown splotches. She found a washbasin and a pitcher of water on an otherwise empty shelf. She splashed some on her face and pulled back her poor brittle hair, knotting it at the nape of her neck.

There was a loud rap on the door. 'I'm leaving shoes here for you,' Marianne's voice said. 'See if they fit.'

Benita's own were a badly worn pair of boots she had stolen from a bombed-out flat that she had joined the women of her building in combing through. No one asked what had become of its inhabitants – lying dead under the rubble of the bombing or safe in the countryside or killed in a concentration camp. The shoes had been cheap to begin with and were now nearly worn through.

Benita waited until Marianne's footsteps receded to retrieve the new boots. They were certainly the finest she had ever come into contact with: dark green, barely worn, with an elegant, distinguished heel. The leather was soft and smooth, and against it, her finger felt monstrously chapped. They were too fine for a woman with such hands, the kind of boots she had once dreamed of wearing. It seemed a cruel joke that this would be that day. *Be careful what you wish for*, they seemed to taunt. She could not put them on.

When she emerged, dressed, Martin sat at the kitchen table between Elisabeth and Katarina. His mouth was stained with raspberry juice, his eyes round at the sight of so much food.

'Ah, that's better!' Marianne said of the clean white shirt and wool skirt Benita now wore. 'The shoes didn't fit?'

'No,' Benita lied.

Suddenly there was a gurgling sound from Martin, and the little boy's face turned red.

On either side of him the girls blanched.

'Oh!' Benita exclaimed, feeling his shame as if it were her own. Of course his poor belly was not used to all this fruit. He had probably eaten God knows how many bowls of porridge, and now the berries, and whatever else. The stink was putrid – full of the bile of a dysfunctional gut.

'Poor boy,' Marianne said. 'We should not have fed you so much!' She held out a hand to him, taking charge in her usual calm, competent way. 'We will have to find you a new pair of pants.'

Slowly, humiliatingly, Martin rose, the back of his pants stained and the stench growing worse.

'Come.' Marianne nicked her head. 'I know just the thing.'

'Benita,' she added over her shoulder, 'would you give that pot a stir?'

Benita nodded and watched as Marianne disappeared with her son.