

Autumn, 1900



*“The boy’s simple, I tell you—must take after your side of the family.”*

Karl Richter always spoke his mind. His wife, Klara, had long become immune to his toxic remarks, her disregard manifesting itself in dismissive retorts of practicality and common sense.

“He is still a baby. No one expects a four-year-old to eat perfectly.”

“Baby? Bah! I was eating with knife and fork before I could talk. Look how he only uses his left hand.”

Klara drew in her scant eye-brows, challenging her husband with a scowl that wrinkled her nose in a most unflattering manner. “Karl, don’t be so ridiculous. Max will use his right hand soon enough. I will speak with the nanny. Consistency—that is the key.”

She nodded and smiled at her golden-haired child, though she made no attempt to soothe him with a gentle stroke or hug. Seemingly annoyed by this moment of tenderness, Karl frowned and continued to rant.

“How often must he be shown? I’ve lost count the number of times I’ve taken things from his left hand. He just doesn’t get it.” He raised his right index finger and shook it earnestly at his wife. “And I’ll not have a child of mine with such a defect.”

“Left-handedness is no defect.”

“Of course, it is. Everything is designed for the right-handed. It will put him at a disadvantage—it could even be dangerous. I’ve heard that lefties are more accident prone. Besides, he’ll be ridiculed, and he’s already too sensitive as it is.” Karl pinched and twisted the lobe of Max’s ear and though Max did not cry out, a tear trickled down the boy’s cheek. He quickly wiped it away with the palm of his left hand.

“See! Again, he uses the wrong hand.”

“Karl, leave the boy alone—you will turn him against you if you keep this up.”

“Such a baby. Look how he cries.”

The little boy turned to his mother, his lower lip trembling. She frowned but, in a most unusual gesture, opened her arms to him.

“Klara, do not mollycoddle the boy.”

“But Karl—”

“Enough!”

Max pulled away from his mother and ran from the room, barely able to see through his tears, down into the kitchen and out of the manor house. He stumbled across the yard, landing on the cobblestones, grazing his knee. More tears. Though in pain, he did not call for his mother or nanny. Instead, he ran to the field beyond the wooden fence that skirted the estate, past the avenue of elms and up a gently sloping hill to his special place, the old oak, where he crouched beneath its canopy and rocked himself into an exhausted sleep.

It was mid-afternoon, and the sun shone sporadically through passing clouds of ashen grey. A cold gust swept over the boy, curled like a kitten, waking him from his slumber. With his pain now forgotten, Max extended his arms and released a yawn, rubbing his eyes and gaping up into a hostile sky—a flash, a boom, a drop of rain.

The thunderstorm exploded, discharging a sheet of icy water that drenched the child in an instant. Max scrambled to his feet and ran, fighting the onslaught of rain as it pelted down, obscuring his vision to a hazy blur. Though muddy and sodden, he ran into the house; to the drawing room, where his parents and sister sat propped in their usual places like marionettes, having coffee and cake.

“Oh, my God. Look at the mud—and on the Persian rug!”

Karl grabbed his son by the ear, dragging him from the room to the kitchen, where staff looked on with sympathetic eyes.

“Look at you. Full of mud! How could you come into the house like that? No respect—but I’ll teach you!” Taking a seat, he drew the boy around, laying him on his lap. A whack, a whimper, another whack, then another. Karl paused to listen to the sniffling of his son, who, to his credit, withheld the urge to cry out aloud.

Satisfied that justice had been served, Karl hustled Max back to the drawing room.

“Now, you clean up after your mess. Go get a bucket of water and a cloth and be sure to use soap. God help you if you leave a stain behind!”

It was a hard lesson learnt by one so young but one that Max would never forget—that the fine Persian rug meant more to his father than he ever would.

## Summer, 1917

### *Karl went to war and Max did not.*

For three years war-ravaged Europe, though no one knew exactly why. Apparently, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie by the Serbian nationalist secret society had something to do with it. King George V of Great Britain and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia had a misunderstanding with their cousin Kaiser Wilhelm II of German, and now most of Europe was at war and Germany was living off turnips.

“Your father is home?” The girl, barely sixteen, caressed her long corn-coloured hair, preening herself in the mindless fashion of an adolescent.

“Only for two weeks. The sooner he returns to war, the better— I can’t stand having him around.”

Klara’s warning had come to pass: Max had turned on his father with a loathing deeper than the house of Hades, unable or unwilling to move beyond the juvenile defiance of youth. At twenty-one, he considered himself the man of the house; his father, an unwelcome stubborn old man to be tolerated and antagonised at the very least.

Max helped his girlfriend from the carriage, directing her towards the stairs leading up to the front door of ‘*Rittergut Gross Eiche*’, a grand manor house circled in a skirt of lush pastures and hemmed by elm and silver birch trees on the fringe of Meissen, Saxony.

“And we’re having pot roast?”

“Yes, with carrots and peas and *potatoes*—not a single turnip.” He winked playfully, though she met his enthusiasm with an uneven squint.

“How is it that you have all this food and the rest of us are eating pig scraps?”

Max half-smiled, displaying a covert dimple that only appeared when he became smug. “People are keen to trade on the black market when you’ve got coal, and we have plenty of it. Our pantry and cellar are fully stocked with food, and I intend to keep it that way. Which reminds me; I must ready my rifle—Chef’s had a problem with city hamsters in his vegetable garden.”

“City hamsters? Are they like gypsies?”

“They’re thieves from the city, but I’m sure some would be gypsies.”

“The Good Lord says that those that have should share with those that have not.” She looked about the lavish foyer: its walls lined with oak, its floors covered in hand-made

encaustic tiles, and she lowered her voice. “I sure they’re not thieves—just starving people desperate for food. You’re not going to shoot them, are you?”

Max shrugged. “The potato famine is not my problem...survival of the fittest and all that. Now,” he said, “remember to eat with your mouth closed.” He swept a stray lock from Anna’s face, pinning it behind her ear. “And don’t mention anything yet. Promise?”

Anna nodded, her eyes widening as she crossed her arms over her stomach. “I feel sick, Max—I’m so nervous. You’ve tried to teach me too much, and I’ve already forgotten what cutlery to use.” The young woman smoothed down the folds of her new dress, a sensual design of fine Irish cotton with a bodice of see-through lace that clung to her full figure like a second layer of skin.

“I do like this frock though. Thank you for buying it.” She leant over, pouting her lips to receive a kiss she knew would follow.

“Yes, it looks nice,” Max confessed after securing the kiss. “Makes your breasts look big.”

Anna glanced down at her cleavage. “Do I look cheap?”

“No, not much. I’m sure my father will be most appreciative.”

They passed through another set of double doors.

“Hurry,” he said, pulling her almost against her will towards the drawing room, where he waited for a moment before rapping on the door.

“Come in, come in.”

They entered and shuffled across the parquet floor, traversing a room cluttered with furniture and ornaments of the finest quality and detail, a fanciful salon of tassels and silk, antique mahogany and studded leather.

“Anna, these are my parents—Herr and Frau Richter.” He released his grip on Anna’s hand, firmly shunting her towards his parents and like a doe struck by a beam of light, she froze with a bewildered stare.

“I am pleased to meet your acquaintance,” she stammered before stepping back alongside Max, taking care not to tread on his boots.

The couple eyed the young pair at length. Klara toyed with a strand of pearls about her neck, while her husband drummed his fingers on the wooden arm of his chair, and it occurred to Max, as he watched their familiar mannerisms, how deliberate his parents were in their ploy to unnerve them. He took Anna’s hand once again, noticing his mother’s critical glare.

“Anna,” she announced, “where are you from?”

“Lommatzsch, Frau Richter. My father is the village butcher, though he has left to fight in the war.”

Silence followed, leaving little doubt that this was not entirely to their satisfaction. Her lips parted to speak, perhaps to explain herself further, but she faltered, pulling her hand free from Max’s intense grip, and Klara allowed herself a faint smile.

“Come, let us eat,” Karl exclaimed, hauling himself from the chair with a groan and raspy cough that drew little sympathy from his wife.

“I’ve told you to stop smoking,” Klara scolded, though her words were ignored as they usually were by her stubborn husband. They proceeded to the dining room like a papal procession, Herr and Frau Richter followed by their son and his hapless girlfriend, where the interrogation continued.

“So, tell me, Anna, what do you do? Are you still at school?”

“I have to work... in my father’s butchery....”

“Anna wants to be a school teacher,” Max announced over her stammering. “She loves children. Isn’t that so, Anna?”

Anna nodded, though her embarrassment rose like a rash, reddening her cheeks and welling her eyes. Taking a fork and butter knife, Anna commenced her meal by stabbing and tearing at a piece of venison, oblivious to the frowns cast by her hosts.

But Max could see it all. He could see how they judged her by her common dialect and subservient manner, not to mention her poor choice of cutlery. He knew what they were thinking and he hated them for it.

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He placed his arm around her waist, drawing her closer into his side.

“I felt so stupid, Max. I know they hate me. The look in their eyes made me want to die.”

Max looked about him, as though he had no interest whatsoever in what Anna said, finally offering what he considered to be a reasonable explanation. “My parents are not naturally warm and friendly people. They can be quite aloof—even with me.”

Anna looked earnestly at Max. “My parents would never treat you like that.”

“Probably not. But then, I’m not likely to be a disappointment to them, am I?”

“What! You arrogant pig.” She slapped him hard across the face. “I never want to see you again.”

Max grabbed her wrist and held it fast. “That was uncalled for—I only spoke the truth.” His manner remained calm and it was clear by Anna’s gaping mouth, that she was bewildered by his cool demeanour.

“I suppose you’re right. I did not intend to hit you, but you can be so blunt sometimes.”

“Well, you better get used to it if we are to marry.”

Smiling, Anna stroked the cheek that she had struck only a moment earlier. “Let me kiss it better.”

They walked up to the old oak on the hill, hand in hand, taking in the late afternoon breeze that swept over the fields. Max picked a wild daisy that he slipped into her hair. She grinned at the gesture, reassured for a moment that all was well again between them. But a frown soon replaced the smile. “I do not want to walk any further. I feel rather tired.”

“But we’re almost there.”

“No, Max—it’s just a big tree. We can do it another time.”

As though triggered by a switch, Max’s mood went from calm to that of rabid hostility, where every facial muscle twitched and his eyes grew black and narrowed to serpent-like slits. “It’s more than just a tree,” he sneered through clenched teeth and Anna’s eyes grew wide.

“I’m sorry—you are right,” she stammered. “It’s a magnificent tree... I am just tired.” She patted her belly and smiled nervously, and for a moment Max’s temper tapered.

“It’ll not be long before it shows.” His tone was flat, unemotional.

“Why are you angry with me?”

“You don’t know what angry is. And if you think my parents were unreceptive today, just wait until they find out about that.” He pointed to her stomach, and Anna looked down over the delicate lace of her bodice to the soft fold of linen about her waist. Her bottom lip began to quiver.

“Oh, for God sake—don’t start crying.”

“Why are you so horrible to me? What have I done now?”

“You’re too sensitive.”

“I can’t help feeling what I feel.”

“And I don’t care what you feel.”

The words struck Anna like a slap and she glared in shock at Max.

“Don’t look at me like that.” He stormed off up the hill, leaving Anna to cry amongst the daisies.

And cry she did for half an hour before eventually wandering up the hill to the tree after him, where she apologised, as she always did, for her childish and selfish behaviour.

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“Please, Herr Richter, do not move so much.” The painter squinted at his subjects, positioned so that Karl stood towering over his wife, dressed in a fashion befitting royalty and seated on an ostentatious Louis XV armchair. “Could you kindly move to the left—just a little... please.”

Karl snorted and shuffled to the side, raising a brow at the painter.

“Yes, yes, that is good. Now—stand still.”

Karl responded with a yawn. “This will be the last sitting.”

The painter glared at Klara. “But Madam, I need more time— this is such a large piece.” He stepped from the canvas that stretched a metre-and-a-half in height and a metre in width, holding his palette and brush before him. “One cannot rush the creative process.”

“Bah! Creative process! I still don’t understand why we don’t simply have a photograph taken. All this expense...for what?”

“Karl, darling—you cannot compare a painting with a mere photograph. A painting captures so much more of its subject. Isn’t that so, Herr Rudl?”

The painter nodded.

“And once it has been framed in gilded gold filigree, this magnificent piece of art will adorn the wall, there, above the mantle for all to admire for generations to come.” She waited for her husband to concede, as she knew he would.

“Let’s get on with it, then.”

Klara winked at the painter, who smiled at this mastery of Klara’s manipulation, before resuming his work. She continued to stroke her husband’s temperament.

“When must you return to your post? You must surely be missed by your men?”

“Soon enough. I just hope they’ve dealt with those damn Russian wolves.”

“You refer to the Russian soldiers as wolves?”

“No, I mean ‘wolves’. They kept attacking us. Even the Russians were being attacked.”

“Surely, your men can fight off a few hungry wolves?”

“A few? More like a plague. We shot at them with rifles and machines guns, tried to poison them and even used grenades. But they were starving and there were just too many so we called a truce with the Russians.”

“Really?” The painter, bemused by what he heard, could not help but join the conversation. “You stopped fighting because of wolves?”

“Yes—not only that, but we combined our efforts to rid the battlefield of this vermin by rounding up the packs to cull them.”

“So, what will you do when the wolves are gone?”

“Go back to fighting, of course.”

The painter rolled his eyes and resumed his work.

“I will never understand you men. Reasonable and rational when it comes to dealing with wolves, yet stubborn and stupid to continue fighting a pointless war.”

“Enough, Klara. I do not wish to speak any more on the matter.”

Klara drew in her lips, and after a moment’s thought, prodded her husband along a different, though equally annoying path. “Max has been doing well running the factory I should think?”

“We shall see after I study the accounts today.”

“You should speak with your son about his...distraction. Now, before things get serious.”

“Serious? The boy is only having fun with her. She is, after all, well endowed.”

“Don’t be so vulgar. What if Max falls in love with her?”

“He’ll not fall in love.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“It’s just not in him.” Karl glanced sideways at his wife, who seemed indifferent to his revelation. He pondered for a moment before continuing. “Besides, she is simple and apart from the obvious, can offer him nothing.”

“But what if she were to fall pregnant?”

“Oh, Klara, stop it. You’ll make yourself sick worrying about such things. Max knows better than to tie himself to this trollop. It will pass.”

He looked across at the painter, who tactfully diverted his gaze to the canvas. Annoyed that his wife had raised such a private matter in the company of an outsider, Karl abruptly stepped from his place. “I must go, I have to check on things.”



He drove to the factory near their coal mine in Dresden-Gittersee. It was a massive building, though ugly, with concrete walls of grey and a flat roof sheeted with corroded tin. Inside, the plant was divided in two, one half dedicated to processing, where water was extracted and the brown coal pressed into dry briquettes. The other side functioned as a workshop for the construction and maintenance of mining machinery. To the south of the factory, like an infected boil, protruded a structure known only as 'the bureau', the inner sanctum of the Richter empire.

Karl entered the office, seating himself behind a desk strewn with rubbish. He rummaged through a pile of papers, uncovering a leather-bound ledger that appeared to have had a mishap with spilt coffee. Sweeping the remaining sheets of paper from the desk onto the floor, he proceeded to study the accounts, fanning through the pages and shaking his head disapprovingly. At ten past nine, Max walked into the room.

"Hello, Father. What are you doing here so early?"

"I'm doing what you obviously have no time to do." Karl threw the ledger across the desk at his son. "The figures are either wrong or you're running this company into the ground. Perhaps you, not I, should have gone to war."

"Don't blame me for avoiding conscription."

"No, I blame your mother, but that's another story." Karl opened a lower drawer, removing a bottle of brandy, and porcelain cup and saucer. He studied the unopened bottle before breaking its seal and pouring himself a nip, downing the tea coloured liquid in a single swig. He eyed his son over the rim of the empty cup. "My brandy not good enough for you?"

"I don't drink while at work."

Karl poured himself another cup. "Give it time."

Max watched his father finish the second cup before daring to speak. "I'm going to the floor; we have a new line operating today."

"You'll stay here. We have something to discuss."

Max took a seat, noticing the mess on the floor. He spied a trinket carved in ivory by his feet, retrieving and studying it as though he had never seen it before. It was a pill box that clicked whenever opened and closed. He smiled smugly. Click. Click. Click. He gazed up briefly to gauge his father's reaction. Click. Click. They sat in silence, but for the random clicking. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.

"Stop that."

Max placed the pill box on the desk in a slow, taunting manner, and the two men stared at one another like rivals at a chessboard.

“What bothers you then, Father?”

Karl took another swig. “I think you know already.”

He was right. Max knew that it would only be a matter of time before his parents voiced their displeasure at his choice of female companionship. At least they had not embarrassed Anna over dinner. But now he would be told, clearly, of their disapproval.

“You know she is not what we would expect of a future daughter-in-law. Your mother is worried that she will deliberately fall ...” He paused and changed his tack. “Son, you know that someone from her background will try anything.”

“It’s too late.”

“What do you mean?”

“She is already pregnant.”

A scarlet hue rose from Karl’s neck, flushing his cheeks so that they matched his red bulbous nose. He rose slowly, placing clenched fists down on the desk, leaning in so that his eyes pierced those of his son.

“She is ill-bred. I’ll not taint our bloodline with peasant stock.”

“Bloodline! What are we but wealthy? No blue blood runs through our veins.”

“Your sister has married well and I will see to it that you also marry someone befitting our status.” He filled the cup and pushed it to his son. “You’ve gone quite pale. Here—this will fix you up.”

Max eyed the brandy, tossing it back and throwing the empty cup against the wall where it burst, sending shards of fine Meissner porcelain across the room.

“That was a good cup. Such a waste...but at least you used your right hand.”

*You bastard*, Max thought, but he daren’t say it. There were better ways to stir the old man.

“So, Father, what do you suggest we do about Anna?”

Karl signed. He twirled the tip of his moustache as he thought, drawing out the drama and watching his son’s impatience grow. Finally, he leaned back into his chair and with an air of malevolent superiority, he spoke.

“I shall discuss it with your mother. But make no mistake, you will be held accountable, one way or another. It’s time you grow up and act like a man.”

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The following day, after a sleepless night fuelled by more brandy and indigestion, Karl confronted his son. “I will speak to the girl’s parents. Your mother and I agree that the child must be adopted out so that no connection can be made back to us. We must sever all ties to this child—and the mother. You are never to see Anna again. Ever. Do you understand?”

Though not surprised by this declaration, Max still found himself shaking with contempt. “She will not agree to such a thing.”

“I’m afraid that she has little say in the matter. She and her family will be well compensated for their...co-operation.”

Max clenched his teeth, grinding them so his jaw ached. His eyes grew black and he felt the rage build. But to lose control now would serve no purpose. Max could never win an argument with a man that was always right, even when he was wrong. As a colonel in the Imperial German Army, Karl Richter was a man with few friends, but many cohorts eager to do his bidding. Max had long learned that his father always knew what to do and who to use and most of all, he always got his way—always. He steadied his breathing and lowered his gaze submissively.

“As for you—I think that it is time for you to join the war. Here, your mother and I differ, but we have come to a compromise. I will see to it that you are accepted into the Prussian Military Academy in Berlin. Hopefully, the war will have ended before you see combat.”

“But who will run the business?”

“Your mother is more than capable. She certainly could do no worse than you.”

“Supportive as always, Father. I look forward to disappointing you in my military career.”

Karl acknowledged his son’s sarcasm with a smirk, dismissing him from the drawing room with a wave of his hand. But as Max wandered down the hallway towards the kitchen, his mood lifted. Escape—he would no longer be under his parent’s thumb.

Max had wanted to join back in 1914 when he was eighteen, but his mother had argued that he should be the one to run the factory, sparing their only son from serving time on the front. Instead, Karl enlisted as a commissioned officer, starting as captain and quickly rising to the rank of colonel where he took advantage of his position to further the private interests of the family business.

He had accused Max of running the business poorly, but this was a falsehood; the mine and factory had never been so productive. The demands of war had guaranteed its success, and Max had capitalised well on their good fortune, with turnover and profit almost doubling in a year. But Karl could never bring himself to acknowledge his son’s accomplishments, let alone

praise him for them. Instead, he was compelled to compete with him, berate him and torment him at every turn, just as his own father had done to him and his grandfather before him. The Richter clan had a long but dysfunctional lineage of self-sabotage that seemed to defy the odds.

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The pebble bounced off the wall, landing at her feet. Anna tossed another similar sized rock up at the window, only this time her aim was good and the pebble struck the glass with a flat clink. She tried again with a slightly larger stone. Max appeared at the window, and on recognizing Anna, gestured for her to wait for him. A moment later he appeared.

“What are you doing here? It’s late.” He looked about him, checking that no one had seen him leave the manor. “How did you get here?”

“I walked.”

He rolled his eyes. Taking her by the elbow, Max led Anna, now four months pregnant, down to the stables where he lit a lamp and ushered her into an empty stall.

“Why have you come?”

“Max, is it true?”

“What?”

“That I have to give up our baby and never see you again? Is that what you want?”

“No, it is what my parents think is best.”

“But what do you think? Do you not love me?”

Max held his tongue. He looked at her contorted expression, as if in pain, the glow from the lamp making her appear more ghoulish than human, and, he suddenly turned away.

Her anger grew. “Answer me! What is wrong with you?”

“I cannot marry you. To have a child out of wedlock will shame us all.”

“So, it is true what my mother has said. You and your lot will simply wipe your hands of all responsibility.”

He did not want to argue. As far as he was concerned, the matter was done. “You will be taken care of, financially speaking.”

Her eyes bulged and she struck at his cheek, though his reaction was fast and he caught her wrist before the slap marked his face.

“Let me go,” she yelled.

“Be quiet. I’m taking you home.” He pulled her from the stall to the family automobile, a Podelus parked inside the stable, opening the passenger side door. “Get in.”

“No.”

“Get in or so help me, I’ll throw you in.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Max promptly scooped her up into his arms, though he gasped at the unexpected weight of her. “You’ve put on a few pounds.”

“A few pounds? It’s bad enough that you man-handle me, but now you insult me.”

Max lowered her back to the ground and impulsively kissed her on the lips.

“What are you doing?”

“I love how your nostrils flare when you are angry,” Max said and he smiled broadly.

Anna stood open-mouthed. “I don’t understand you at all, Max. You act as though nothing has happened.”

He scratched his chin and with a shrug, dismissed her comment entirely. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

He helped Anna into the vehicle, and only when they drove beyond the gates of the estate did he finally disclose his thoughts.

“I am not a good person, Anna. I cannot love you as you need to be loved.”

“You are wrong. Your love is exactly as it should be.”

“No, Anna. I am NOT what you think I am. Trust me on this—I will cause you nothing but unhappiness.”

She cried into her hands for the rest of the journey and only when they pulled up alongside the shop front of the *metzgerei*, did she cease her sniffing. A honey glow shone down through the window above the front door, and Max thought how quaint and homely it looked within. “Looks like someone’s still awake,” Max said.

Anna wiped her nose and eyes with her sleeve. “Mama will still be awake. She doesn’t sleep well since Papa left for the war.”

He nodded as if he understood, though he knew that his own mother lost no sleep over his father absence. “Are you all right?”

She stepped from the automobile. “No, Max—I am not all right. But I shall not be your problem any longer.” She disappeared through the door.

Max waited, looking up at the glow from the room above until all went dark. He exhaled slowly, his relief at having avoided all responsibility affecting him like a drug. “I’m sorry, Anna,” he said, and in that moment, Max was sincere. But like the light above, his emotions soon darkened and he was left feeling nothing.