

Lies of Omission: A Hanneke Bauer Mystery
By Kathleen Ernst

Chapter 1

As Hanneke Bauer watched the Milwaukee shoreline come into focus beyond Lake Michigan's choppy waves, she wondered if she would even recognize her husband. An unsettling thought, really. Gracious! This might be a most awkward reunion.

Frau Gruber, who'd elbowed through the other eager passengers, settled at the *Tempest's* railing beside her.

"Almost there," Hanneke said.

"Almost home," Regina Gruber corrected.

Yes. *Home*. Hanneke's grip tightened on the rail. It was May, 1855, and at age twenty-eight she finally had a home of her own. That home lay beyond this lake, beyond the raw port city. God willing, she and her new husband would soon have children around their hearth as well.

She squinted against the glaring sun. There—somewhere on the docks stood Fridolin Bauer. Her husband. She knew him best from his letters, from the cramped lines of brown ink that suggested thrift and foresight. Eight months earlier they'd had two weeks of conversation, then just the one day and night as true husband and wife. But some things she remembered: blond hair parted on the right, worn long and combed away from his face. A thick beard. The hands of a provider, long-fingered but reassuringly broad and callused. A delighted smile when the first night star appeared, hinting at an inclination to dream of knowledge behind his trade. Hesitant speech; an endearing reticence that suggested not ignorance, but a shy respect. Warm hazel eyes that glinted with a promise: *I think we'll do well enough, you and I*.

And since Hanneke had cast her lot with Fridolin Bauer, she prayed he was right.

Regina sighed. “I wish your husband still lived in Milwaukee. Why he left a good job in the city to buy a farm is beyond my understanding. You’ll be isolated out there.”

Soon, Hanneke promised herself. Soon she would be free of Regina’s endless criticisms. “Bookbinders are losing work to new machines,” Hanneke said lightly. “But farmers will always be needed. Besides, I understand that there are many German families near Watertown. I won’t be lonely.”

Regina shook her head with pained resignation. “You must promise to accompany your husband if he brings crops to sell in the city. We’ll have coffee and *kuchen* while you tell me all about the farm. You have my address?”

“Yes.” Hanneke patted her valise. She’d written Regina’s address on the back of her receipt for passage, and tucked it away with her legal documents and the letters Fridolin had sent during their months apart.

“Good.” Regina flinched as a wave slapped the ship and sent a fine spray toward the travelers. “Well, all you can do is make the best of things. It’s best to face the future without regrets.”

“I have no regrets,” Hanneke said firmly.

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Milwaukee, hailed as the “German Athens” in Fridolin’s letters, bustled around the swampy low ground where the Milwaukee River spilled into the Great Lake. Church spires poked heavenward. Gently rolling hills rose beyond the city. It does look like home, Hanneke thought, understanding in a more visceral manner why so many German-speaking immigrants had made their way to Wisconsin.

The waterfront was lined with warehouses, stacked barrels and crates awaiting transport, freight wagons hitched to sturdy teams of Belgian and Percheron horses. They flicked their tails at flies but otherwise waited patiently. One team reminded Hanneke of the dark draft horse her father had owned when she was a child.

And did Fridolin own horses? Had she even asked? Hanneke tried to think as she slid a hand beneath her bonnet, checking for loose pins. There was so much she didn't know about her new home. So very much.

Well, all would be known soon! She pressed her palm against an anxious flutter in her belly. None of that! she told herself sternly, and willed the flutter away.

When the ship docked the crew scrambled to secure it. The deck felt oddly still beneath Hanneke's feet. Gulls wheeled overhead, screaming, diving for scraps. Final plumes of smoke drifted from the steamship's stacks.

"There's Herman!" Regina cried, waving her handkerchief. "Do you see your husband?"

Hanneke squinted again, trying to turn the milling crowd into discernible individuals. "Not yet." Then she was jostled away from the rail by another immigrant eager for his first good look at Wisconsin. Hanneke didn't mind. Although she was excited to finally be close to the farm she'd spent the long winter trying to imagine, something told her to cherish these last few moments of the freedom she'd so enjoyed on the long trip.

When the captain finally decreed that passengers might disembark, Hanneke joined the throng funneling slowly onto the gangway. *To earn respect, it is important to dress well when in the city*, Fridolin had written. While on board the *Tempest* Hanneke had seen the derisive glances some travelers of British descent aimed at the German men in their broad-visored caps, heavy pants, oft-mended coats, and long beards; the women in their coarse skirts and kerchiefs.

“More *Dutchmen*,” one Yankee had muttered. So today, in honor of her arrival and their reunion, and because it was Sunday, she’d donned a silk dress the color of sumac berries. She’d worn it to exchange matrimonial vows with Fridolin back in Köslin, in the region of Pomerania, Prussia. She also wore a lacy shawl she’d knit of her own hand-spun merino wool. After the wedding, when Fridolin had returned to America, she had wiled away many winter hours working with her smallest needles. She planned to wear this shawl, her very best work, to the Wisconsin wedding reception Fridolin had promised.

Even on shore, a brisk wind blew from Lake Michigan. The air smelled of fish and tar. Compared to the ports of Bremen, New York, and Albany, the Milwaukee docks presented manageable chaos. Several steamships bobbed against their moorings. Dock workers—mostly white, but a few free Negroes too, Hanneke noted—hoisted trunks and bales of goods with ease. Dock men hauled merchandise in wheelbarrows along trestle-and-plank paths laid over the river gullies. Yankee businessmen shook hands with colleagues. Boys played hide-and-seek amidst stacks of fresh-cut lumber and cordwood. The babel of various German dialects, English, and other languages she couldn’t identify was overwhelming as friends greeted friends, captains shouted at their hands, merchants called for draymen. Cart men lined the waterfront, yelling offers of their service. Runners from local hotels waited as well, bellowing the virtues of their particular establishment: “Here for the Hoffman House! Clean rooms, low price!” Hanneke also heard a dozen voices calling the names of their loved ones.

She did not hear Fridolin Bauer’s voice, calling *her*.

Clutching her valise, Hanneke stepped away from the flow of passengers and carefully scanned the crowd. Had her premonition been correct? Were she and Fridolin both waiting, looking, not recognizing the other?

Regina Gruber shoved through the throng, her hand tucked in the elbow of a man wearing a work clothes and sturdy boots. “Hanneke, this is my husband Herman.”

“Frau Bauer.” His smile was friendly. “Welcome to Milwaukee.” Herman looked freshly scrubbed but the unmistakable blend of tannic acid and animal hide lingered. He worked in a tannery.

“How do you do,” she said politely, trying to ignore the discomforting sense of being a woman alone in a world designed for pairs. Not here. She had not expected to feel that here.

Regina frowned. “Your husband hasn’t come?”

Needing to busy her hands, Hanneke reached into her knitting pocket and pulled out the half-done wool sock dangling from four needles. “I’m sure he’ll be along any moment.”

“We’ll wait with you,” Herman said easily. “We’re in no rush.”

Which was a kind lie, no doubt. Hanneke couldn’t imagine any tradesman feeling easy about taking time away from his work.

And so they waited. Herman lit a long *meerschaum* pipe and was soon puffing out smoke. Regina chattered about Milwaukee: the beer gardens, the Turners, the musical groups. Hanneke nodded, all the while watching for Fridolin. The single men who’d disembarked collected their luggage and trudged away. Some of the family men went to make lodging arrangements, leaving their wives and children sitting with feather beds and trunks.

As the minutes ticked by, Hanneke felt increasingly uncomfortable. She finally turned to Regina and Herman with what she hoped was a confident smile. “I can’t hold you up any longer. Fridolin must have been delayed.”

“You did wire him from Albany?” Regina asked. “He knew when to expect you?”

“I did.” *I’ll come to Milwaukee in advance of your earliest possible arrival*, Fridolin had written. *I’ll be waiting*.

Herman rubbed one earlobe with fingers stained the color of tea. “We can’t just leave you here.”

“I’ll simply proceed to the hotel,” Hanneke said briskly. “My husband stays at the *Gasthof zum Deutschen Haus*. Do you know it?”

Herman’s face cleared. “Yes, of course! They call it Hotel Wettstein after the owner. Other than Germans, the only people who stay there are Yankee businessmen wanting to learn the language.”

Hanneke claimed her trunk, and Herman found a runner from Wettstein’s who heaved it into his cart. Regina gave Hanneke a hug. “Contact us if you have any trouble,” she called, as Hanneke climbed into the cart.

“*Danke schön!*” Hanneke waved. “I’m sure all will be well.”

She wanted to believe that, but as the Grubers turned away, she stopped trying to hide her unease. After an eight-month separation, she did wish that Fridolin had not been delayed! The man who’d written such respectful letters would not have let something of little consequence keep him from the dock.

The driver snapped the lines and the cart lurched into the traffic of the city where Fridolin had lived for three years. Hanneke tried to place him on these streets, to imagine him striding to work, meeting friends at the *biergarten*. Beyond the marshes near the docks, small log cabins gave way to two-story frame and yellow-brick homes with gardens and henhouses and stables behind. Poles for gaslight stood at busy intersections. Telegraph lines tethered the city to places beyond.

They quickly reached the business and shopping district, crowded with pedestrians, buggies, and coaches. Hanneke wanted to enjoy this drive as she had, unexpectedly, enjoyed her brief visits to Bremen and New York. How exciting it had been to see the multicolored flags flapping from the forest of masts on the docked ships, and to imagine where their journeys had taken them! She had sucked in the newness of it all, satisfying a long-suppressed craving.

Now, though, uncertainty dulled the thrill of discovery. “Is it far to the hotel?” she asked.

The man’s cheerful grin revealed several missing teeth. “No. Just to the market square. If you need anything during your stay, you’ll find it there.” He clucked suddenly to his horse, pulling the cart adroitly out of the path of a heavy wagon loaded astonishingly high with beer barrels.

“I won’t be in the city long,” Hanneke assured him.

“Where are you heading?”

“Northwest of here. My husband has a farm near Watertown.”

He nodded. “I’ve heard it’s good land around Watertown. They’re growing a lot of wheat out there.” He laughed. “Not the Forty-Eighters, of course.”

“Of course,” Hanneke murmured, to be polite. A revolutionary democratic movement had swept through the German states in 1848, led largely by well-educated men. After the uprising failed, many of those disappointed “Forty-Eighters” had felt compelled to emigrate.

Wettstein’s Hotel was a three-story brick building. As the driver parked in front, two jeering school-age boys—perhaps ten—ran past the cart. Hanneke pulled her shawl more closely about her shoulders.

“Be off, rogues!” the driver barked.

One of the boys threw a handful of dust and pebbles at them, startling the horse. “Shh, boy, down now,” the driver called, his tone soothing now, keeping the lines taut until he was sure the horse was calm.

The boys laughed, yelling over their shoulders. Only after they’d disappeared around a corner did Hanneke’s brain belatedly discern what they’d been chanting, in an execrably accented semblance of her native tongue: “Dirty Germans! Dirty Germans!”

“Don’t mind, ma’am,” the driver muttered. His cheeks had flushed an angry brick red. “Most people are grateful for all the good things Germans contribute to the city. You’ll be welcome here.”

“Yes, of course,” Hanneke murmured, although at that moment, she couldn’t imagine feeling any less welcome. She remembered something Fridolin had said in one of his first letters: *A certain anti-foreigner spirit has simmered in some quarters here for years, and I am afraid it may come to a full boil in Wisconsin this year. But there is no need for alarm. Good German men won’t allow themselves to be treated as something less than those who happened to be born on American soil.* The note had given her pause, for some in Köslin—those souls who knew everything about everything, and gloried in spreading their wisdom among those who did not wish to listen—said that immigrants were in danger of a cool reception...and mercy, was Hanneke sure she really wanted to travel all the way to America?

“Let me help you down,” the driver said patiently.

Hanneke managed a smile and took his hand. She’d forgotten those comments when Fridolin’s later letters had been filled with only affectionate descriptions of her new home.

The driver shouldered her trunk and led the way inside. She glanced at the people passing through the entryway; at those visible in the dining area beyond. No Fridolin.

She approached the desk clerk with a steady smile. “Herr Wettstein?”

“*Ja*. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking for Fridolin Bauer.”

“Fridolin Bauer?” The proprietor blinked, then stroked his long beard as he considered her.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “He should have arrived a few days ago.”

“Fridolin often stays here,” Herr Wettstein conceded. “And when he was here last—three or four weeks ago, I’d say—he did mention that he intended to return this month. But he hasn’t come.”

Hanneke’s valise suddenly felt quite heavy. She set it on the floor. “He—but he intended to be here by now,” she said, as if insistence might make Fridolin appear from behind the counter. “Perhaps...perhaps he arrived while you were away from the desk? Could someone else have noted his arrival?”

“I don’t think – ” the proprietor began, but something in her expression made him swallow the words. He dutifully thumbed back a few pages in the big ledger book, scrutinizing the scrawled names. Finally he shook his head, not unkindly. “No, I’m sorry. Fridolin is definitely not here.”

“I see.” Hanneke took that in, turned it over in her mind.

“Do you wish to rent a room? It’s six shillings a day, or seventy-five cents American. That’s with three meals.”

Six shillings. Keeping the exchange rates clear in her head was an ongoing struggle—francs, schillings, florins, kruezers, cents. One thing was clear: the little reserve in her reticule had dwindled alarmingly. Almost all of her dowry money had been signed to Fridolin before he left Germany, as agreed in their marriage contract, allowing him to improve the farm before her

arrival. He had instructed her precisely on anticipated costs, but on several occasions since leaving home two months before she'd been obliged to spend more than expected.

"Is there transport to Watertown?" she asked.

Herr Wettstein nodded. "It's a day and a half by stagecoach on the Watertown Plank Road. Next departure isn't until tomorrow morning, though."

"I see." Hanneke considered her options. Well, there was nothing for it. The afternoon was almost gone, and she was loathe to hire another driver and submit herself to the Grubers anyway.

The proprietor was waiting. "Yes," she told him. "Yes, I will need lodging for the night."

He reached for a steel pen and poised his hand over his ledger. "Your name, please?"

"I am Frau Fridolin Bauer."

Shock flashed in the proprietor's eyes, quickly masked with bland professional courtesy. So, Hanneke thought, last month Fridolin told Herr Wettstein that he was coming back in May, but didn't tell him *why*. If Fridolin often stayed here, he must have more than a passing acquaintance with the proprietor. They were on a first-name basis, after all. Surely most any man would have announced with some pleasure the impending arrival of his wife.

So...why had Fridolin not done so?

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"Watertown!" the stagecoach driver bellowed. "The Planters Hotel!"

God be thanked for that, Hanneke thought. The stagecoach trip had felt more interminable than her voyage across the Atlantic. Her bones ached and her eyes felt sandy. The feather bed at the Milwaukee hotel had seemed luxurious after the *Tempest*'s wooden berth; the stagecoach inn where she'd slept the night before, although plain, had been clean. But both nights, gnawing

apprehension had robbed her of rest: Where is Fridolin? Why hasn't he come? What has happened?

In the coach she'd been compelled to squeeze between a fat woman carrying a huge potted fern on her lap and an elderly man who snacked on garlic cloves. Hanneke had tried to study the dictionary Fridolin had sent her, but the coach's jolts and heaves made reading impossible. Instead she strained to look at every passing farm wagon, buggy, and rider, hoping to recognize her husband.

Now Hanneke climbed stiffly from the coach. She took a quick look around, hoping to see her husband hurrying forward with an anxious apology: *My dear wife, I'm so sorry! My wagon broke an axle... I've just recovered from a terrible fever...my stable caught fire....we're together now, though, and all is well.*

But Fridolin was nowhere in sight.

Don't succumb to panic, Hanneke ordered herself. She blew out a long, slow breath. What next?

The plank road ended at a block of hotels, taverns, inns, and other businesses. The Planters Hotel, a three-story frame building, looked clean and comfortable. Fridolin had never mentioned it, though. She thought with unexpected longing of Regina Gruber's offer of hospitality. You should not have been so proud! Hanneke scolded herself. Having one friend in this new country would have been worth any dose of scolding or criticism.

The driver clambered to the top of the stagecoach, unlashed the ropes binding the luggage in place, and began tossing pieces down to his waiting assistant. Hanneke watched her fellow passengers collecting their luggage or directing porters. All right, then. She needed to find someone who could tell her how to reach Fridolin's farm.

One of the porters pointed to her trunk and said something in English. She recognized the word ‘luggage,’ but no more. “*Sprechen sie Deutsch?*”

“*Ein bisschen,*” he said. A little.

“I wish to go to the Buena Vista Hotel,” she said. *It is a fine German hotel*, Fridolin had written. *A gathering place*. The man nodded, hefted her trunk, and set out, splashing carelessly across the street through the muck.

Hanneke followed more slowly, picking her way on an improvised walkway of planks. She knew from Fridolin’s letters that the town had grown along the Rock River. That river powered mills and factories at the heart of the city. The main street was busy with buggies, workmen pushing handcarts piled with bricks or lumber, the occasional farmer driving stout wagons loaded with sacks of flour or baskets of spring peas and lettuce.

The porter dodged traffic with practiced ease but Hanneke was breathless before he stopped and gestured to a sign on a three-story frame building. The hotel was adorned with black, red, and gold banners—Germany’s national colors. “The Buena Vista,” he said, pronouncing it ‘Byoona VISSta.’

Hanneke followed him inside. He set her trunk in the entryway, then turned expectantly.

Gott in Himmel. At this rate, she would be destitute before ever finding Fridolin. She fished a coin from her purse. “*Danke schön.*”

A murmur of voices and the vinegar-gingersnap tang of sauerbraten wafted from the open kitchen door at the back of the hall. She put a palm against the entry wall to steady herself. She’d eaten nothing since breakfast, and she was tempted to search out the dining room before hunting for Fridolin. She might fare better if she ate before facing—facing whatever news was waiting.

But...no. That wouldn't do.

She turned resolutely to the taproom on her right. Small tables crowded the room, with a billiard table in back. Mounted glassy-eyed stag heads adorned the walls. Several men were arguing enthusiastically. For a dazed moment she thought she was hearing English, and wondered if she'd come to the wrong place after all. Then her brain sorted the sounds: Latin, surely. This was a place where educated men—scholars, professionals—came to socialize.

When she stepped into the room the argument paused. Other patrons glanced up from their steins or cards. She was glad she'd dressed well and demurely.

Hanneke stepped to the bar. The tender, a portly man, was spooning pickled eggs from a crockery jar onto a china plate. "Good afternoon," he said politely in High German. "The *Gesang Verein* is meeting on the third floor."

He assumes I'm here for a social club, Hanneke thought, feeling very tired. "*Danke schön, nein, Herr...Wiggenhorn?*" Yes, she was sure of it. *Wilhelm Wiggenhorn runs the place, Fridolin has written.* "I'm looking for Fridolin Bauer. He owns a farm near here. Do you know him?"

"Fridolin Bauer?" Herr Wiggenhorn's hands stilled as his jolly look faded. A man sitting at the closest table looked up sharply from his newspaper.

Hanneke felt her heart take on weight, like a wheelbarrow being loaded over-high with bricks. Any more burdens and she might not be able to trundle the load. "*Ja. Fridolin Bauer.*"

The tavern keeper set down the spoon. "I am sorry. Fridolin..."

I am about to know, she thought. Whatever is wrong, whatever the problem—I am about to know.

"You see, you have come too late." The man spread his hands. "Fridolin Bauer is dead."

