TWO

MARGOT

August 24, 1944
Arrivals:
Women: 44
Children: 63 (girls—37; boys—26)
Total arrivals: 107
New total in Crystal City: 3,368

ALL THE NEW DETAINEES ARE JAPANESE THIS TIME. I PUT THAT IN MY notebook, too. *Total Japanese detainees: 2,371. Total German detainees: 997.*

Within my totals, there are subtotals: German-born prisoners who have come from Costa Rica. Japanese-born

prisoners from Peru. America has agreements with those countries, saying that Crystal City will house their enemies of the state in addition to our own. One of these girls has a Betty Boop decal on her handbag, so they must be American.

I check my notes from the last arrivals. This is the smallest group since I've been here. *Smaller train?* I write. Not enough housing for more people?

All the new detainees are inside the gate now. The fathers who have already hugged their families proudly introduce them around. One of the camp nurses, in a white uniform, funnels people through the medical tent for vaccinations and exams. Whooping cough. When my group came, fifty-four of us had whooping cough.

Mr. Mercer, a head taller than anyone else and looking upset, has taken off his suit jacket. There are circles of sweat under the tan of his shirtsleeves. His shoes are dirty. The bus must have broken down.

Is this shipment smaller because the country is running out of Japanese people to put into camps?

"Good morning, Margot."

I swivel to a man's voice, shielding my eyes against the sun. Thin lips, dark hair, a little older than my father. He starts to raise his right arm. "He—"

"Hello, Mr. Kruse," I interrupt, because I can tell how his greeting was going to end, and I'm still not used to it.

"Keeping an eye on everything for us?"

"Staying occupied. School will start soon," I say, though he probably knows that already. He has a daughter. "There was a delay, I guess, but they finished the buildings."

"The German school for you, correct?" When I shrug instead of respond, he raises an eyebrow. "*Not* the German school?"

I wonder if I should have nodded. The camp's chapter of the Bund advised German parents to send their children to the German school instead of the federal school. It's been published in *Das Lager*, spread among housewives. But Federal High School will be certified, with American teachers, like every other school in the United States. The German school will use a curriculum the Bund decides is appropriate. Mutti and Vati would never make me go to the German school.

"Heidi will be disappointed," he says. "She still talks about you. I'll send her to visit sometime, if she won't be a bother."

"Of course not, I like Heidi." She and I came on the same train; she'd been staying with an aunt until her parents sent for her. I helped unwrap her sandwiches; I told her stories about a girl from the Swiss Alps who shared her name.

Over by the fence, the newly arrived women straighten their children's collars and smooth down hair. After vaccinations, the next part of orientation is a family portrait. Every family is given one to hang in their Crystal City hut. Nobody ever expects it.

"What has your father been up to?" Mr. Kruse takes a cigarette out of his breast pocket and lights it, turning his head to blow the smoke away from my face. It's so hot it's hard to tell the difference between his cigarette vapors and the wavy lines of heat on the horizon.

"He keeps busy," I say neutrally, but his question has put me on alert. "Mutti got permission for a garden but she can't be on her feet much. Vati's building planter boxes."

Mr. Kruse looks amused. "Spending money on seeds when the US provides food for free? I wouldn't. Might as well take advantage of this prison. Drain their resources."

"*Wer rastet, der rostet*," I say automatically.

Mr. Kruse bursts into laughter. "He who rests *does* grow rusty. I'm glad to hear young people speaking German. Listen, have your father come find me. We could use another man at the swimming pool, especially with his training. We never see him at meetings. Tell him that, too. And your mother if she's up for it."

My insides tighten. Now the conversation has officially changed. Mr. Kruse will never see Vati at meetings. One meeting brought us here. He would never go to another. *Why did I not just say I was going to the German school?* I pretend to look for something in the crowd.

Straight ahead of me, a shock of bright blue. It's the flowered hat of a tired mother. She is tucked into a tall man's arm, and her younger daughter is wrapped around his waist.

But she has an older daughter, too, lean and pretty and

athletic-looking in a lavender dress. The older girl's shoulder-length hair is pinned back in a style I could never get mine to behave for. She hangs her arms stiffly by her sides, while her father tries to pull her close.

Don't be rude. Look away, I tell myself, but I can't.

While I watch, a piece of blue falls to the ground: a few of the fabric lilies. They land by the lavender girl's foot, silky and cool against her dusty shoe. She looks down but doesn't pick the flowers up. I would. We don't see beautiful things here. I would pick them up and bury my face in them, the way I used to with flowers on our farm. The girl's dress isn't quite the same color as the lilies, but almost. Another cool, beautiful thing dropped in the dust. I swallow.

The girl's cheek is now pressed against her father's sleeve, and a look flashes across her eyes. Something lonely and defiant that her family isn't meant to see, that nobody is meant to. Only, I *am* seeing it. The way her muscles tense. How she keeps her weight on her own feet instead of leaning in to her parents. In the middle of this dust, in the middle of these chaotic arrivals, I feel like I am watching a secret.

I shouldn't let myself think like this. Not about the girl, not about how much I miss home, not about any of this, so instead I make myself count the lilies on the ground.

Eight lilies. My lips are so dry. It's so hot.

She pulls away from her father, scanning the camp, and stops when she sees me. She's noticed me staring. My face flushes red and I quickly look down.

I don't understand what it would feel like, to finally be reunited with your father and refuse to acknowledge him. On my arrival day, I was sobbing. Vati, too. Only my mother was not, because she was still too hollow to cry. It had been six months since the two of us had seen my father.

I can't understand not wanting to hold on to your family and never let go.

Mr. Mercer has peeled himself away from the crowd, clutching his clipboard, searching for someone until he spots me and decides I will do. "Miss Krukow, isn't it? Could you do me a favor?" He wipes sweat from his forehead as he approaches, hesitating when Mr. Kruse coughs next to me. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, you're not." I stand and brush off my skirt, relieved that he's blocking the awkward stare of the lavender girl, relieved to have an excuse to leave my conversation with Mr. Kruse. "I mean, pardon me, Mr. Kruse. I don't mean to be rude."

"It appears we've had a bit of trouble with the arrivals," Mr. Mercer says. "The luggage is stranded, and meanwhile there was an outbreak of nausea. We need a spare set of clothing."

"Do you want me to get some from the commissary?"

He's already producing paper from his breast pocket and writing something down. "Here's permission for one skirt and a set of underthings. I think a women's size medium."

When he leaves, I realize I forgot to ask him which commissary. The Japanese have one, the Union Store, and we have

another. Ours, the General Store, has cigarettes, dry goods, American soft drinks, and German beers. The Japanese store must have mostly the same things, but I've never been inside. I've also never been inside one of the Japanese houses, or even on one of the Japanese streets, not after four months here.

In the German store, I show the clerk Mr. Mercer's note instead of the cardboard token I would normally use to buy things. They used to hand us clothes, based on sizes we wrote out on slips. Then they decided that shopping would be good for our morale. Now we get choice, but not too much. Curtains, dresses, tablecloths, all sewn from the same few fabrics. When a new pattern comes in, a line forms halfway across camp: women pushing homemade wooden carts, desperate to look at something new, anything new.

By the time I get back, the lavender girl's family is gone. The clothing I've just purchased is meant for an exhausted young mother. Her skirt has a blotchy stain and a sour odor rising from it. She dabs at it, embarrassed, with a wet towel.

"Good. Lovely," Mr. Mercer says, as I hand the woman the brown paper parcel. "Thank you, Margot, I'm sure that Mrs."—he checks his clipboard—"I'm sure Mrs. Menda will be relieved to be out of her soiled clothes."

After he leaves, the woman holds up the skirt I've brought her and looks at me.

"The nurse can probably show you a place to change," I tell her, realizing too late from her confused expression that she doesn't speak much English. "The nurse, that way." I

point toward the vaccination tent and keep pointing until the woman heads in that direction.

"Margot!" a voice says, and my insides curdle a little. I didn't realize Mr. Kruse was still around. "Did we make sure to be very helpful for the camp director?"

"It was just a small errand."

"Of course. We're all looking for ways to be useful. You know, I was thinking that if I brought Heidi around for a visit, I might also talk to your father myself about coming to some of our meetings. Do you think that would be a good idea?" He winks. "I'm asking you, because I know if you have a daughter's ear you have her father's."

A drop of sweat trickles down my inner arm, past the dusty crease of my elbow and the fold of my wrist before falling to the ground. *Do I think that would be a good idea?*

I'm not good at this. I'm not good at saying one thing and meaning another, at knowing how much I can disagree with Mr. Kruse, my elder, a man in an elected position.

"That's a lot of trouble for you," I say.

"It's no trouble at all. So could you tell him that? That I'll stop by? Wonderful."

And then he clicks his heels together, raising his arm parallel to the ground and poker straight. The gesture makes me sick. Even when it's not accompanied by words, which, thank God, it's not. He waits expectantly, but I can't return the salute. I can't look at it. I bury my face in my notebook again, hoping I can pretend I didn't see it.

"Good day, Margot," he says.

"Good day, Mr. Kruse."

I stare down until I think he will be gone. Mr. Kruse has that kind of voice, where even when he's not speaking very loudly, you can hear it from a distance. When I hear it, it always reminds me of the time when Vati took me into the empty grain silo and had me close my eyes and guess where he was, by the sound of his voice. It was a lesson about acoustics, he explained. Curves can amplify sound, making them seem closer than they are.

Here in Crystal City, I can always hear Mr. Kruse. It doesn't matter if he's shouting or whispering. His voice arrives to me like it's carried on the curved walls of a silo. By now he must be yards and yards away. Still, I can hear his words.

"Heil Hitler," he says to every man he passes, the greeting invented to honor a dictator who lives halfway around the world, but who is why we are here.

"Heil Hitler," Mr. Kruse says again, but this time it might be amplified in my imagination. *Heil Hitler. Heil Hitler. Heil Hitler.*

Margo blames Hitler for the position that she is in @ camp

BIG IDEAS
- identity
- honesty
- freedom
- choice