
THE LOVE THAT I HAVE
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MARGOT

JULY, 1944

1

For as long as I can remember, I've loved three things: the long summer holidays, my brother Walther and Adolf Hitler.

Out loud, I always put the Führer first, of course, and it's such a natural thing to thrust out my arm when teachers give the salute at the start of each lesson. Heil Hitler, I say, looking up at his picture above the blackboard, the same one that hangs in our hall at home. But sometimes I sense he knows my guilty secret – that warm, sunny weeks at the beach mean more to me than his portrait on the wall.

When I confessed this to my friend, Lili Martin, she grabbed my arm and said, 'You too, Margot? I'm the same! This war is going on so long. They said it would be over in months, but it's been years and years. We hardly ever have strawberries or anything nice to eat. There's barely enough bread some days and nothing at all to wear in the shops. Worst of all, we never have fun anymore.' Fun for Lili means boys. It does for me as well, if I'm honest and I'm as unhappy as Lili that there aren't any to dance with or kiss if we're daring, but holidays by the sea still top my list of treasured things.

There'll be no summer holiday this year, though. The Führer has other plans for me. Today I take my sister's place in the mailroom at the konzentrationslager because she has been ordered upstairs to type letters and file reports for the

officers. I even have her uniform which I pressed last night before going to bed and again this morning until Renate scoffed, 'Oh, for heaven's sake, Margot. You're not going on parade in front of the commandant.'

It's natural to be nervous, though, isn't it? I was a schoolgirl only last week and today I'll be working for the Reich. I'm glad about that, actually. At sixteen, I've had enough of school. Lili left months ago to train as a nurse and I thought about doing the same until Renate got in my ear. 'Please, darling, they won't let me be a secretary until I find someone to do my job in the mailroom.' And then the plea that I couldn't ignore. 'The Führer needs workers, even if the work isn't what you imagined yourself doing.'

I didn't eat any breakfast in case it all came up again and the same dread is back in my stomach now as Renate and I ride through the streets of Oranienburg, swerving to miss the puddles left by last night's rain. Already the sun is breaking through and since it's July the heat draws wisps of steam from the dampened road.

I used to ride these streets all the time when Walther and my other brother, Franz, took me to the Lehnitzsee to sail or swim. I wonder if Walther thinks of those times while he waits for the war to end in his prisoner-of-war camp. He's the oldest and I can't remember a time when he didn't tower over me, the youngest, casting a protective shadow that I basked in happily whenever I walked beside him. Will I ever walk beside him again?

These memories of my favourite brother push me towards a sadness that only makes life seem harder than it is. I sit up

straighter on the saddle and tell myself: even if there'll be no lazy days at the beach for me this year, at least I can enjoy the summer green of the trees lining our way. They don't care about shortages or how long it will be before they see their brothers again. Sunshine and rain are all they ask for, the roses too, their pinks and yellows in full bloom, and in the next street there'll be the red of cherries and the heavily laden arms of Herr Koder's apple tree, which Lili and I robbed so many times on our way home from school.

The houses we pass are steep-roofed with twin windows staring down into the street from the upstairs bedrooms – much like ours in Wilhelmstrasse. These days, most have a dejected look because there's no one to repair the shutters and window frames damaged during the winter or slap on the fresh coat of paint so many of them need. All the men are at the war, and the boys, too, down to the age where they need as much looking after as these houses.

We ride north through the outskirts of town and for a little way there are only trees and brambles on either side of the road. Then, new houses, built for the officers from the konzentrationslager and beyond them I can see its dull grey walls growing closer. My stomach tightens. I've never been this close before; close enough to see the way the concrete blocks have been thrown on top of one another in a brutal rush, as though the workmen didn't care how the mortar oozed out between each one.

'What are those white cones above the wall?' I ask.

'They're conductors. All the barbed wire here is electrified. Don't ever go near it.'

‘On the other side is where the prisoners live, isn’t it?’ I ask.

Renate glances across at me, as though she has finally noticed how scared I am. ‘Don’t worry. I’ve worked here for two years and never had to go into that part.’

We turn a corner and suddenly I’m riding between wooden huts towards a tall, white building. Except for the guard towers, it’s the only thing higher than the walls. In fact, it’s built into the wall, I see as we glide closer, with a gateway cut through the middle. On the other side of the heavy, iron gate I glimpse an enormous parade ground and then rows and rows of barracks.

‘You’ll be working in the gatehouse,’ my sister tells me as we lean our bikes against the last of the wooden huts. Then, before I’m quite ready, she leads me into a room filled with men older than our father. I didn’t expect them to be my own age, but these men look half dead! For a moment I hope Renate will whisper, ‘I’ve changed my mind, you can’t have my old job after all.’ I’d be pedalling back to Oranienburg before she’d finished speaking.

‘Guten morgen,’ she trills, and at the sound of her voice it’s as though sunshine has burst into the room. The weary heads of the old soldiers lift and turn her way, and I see that one of them is actually a woman.

‘They all love me here,’ my sister announces. ‘A few dream I’m their girlfriend and the rest treat me like a favourite daughter, isn’t that right?’ Her teasing draws sheepish smiles. ‘Listen everyone, this is Margot. Today I’ll show her what to do and then she can be your dream girl the way I was.’

Hot blood flushes my cheeks and I grin like an idiot, as I always do when Renate embarrasses me.

'Come on, I'll introduce you to the boss,' she says to me.

We walk the length of the room until we are standing in front of a desk that would take four men to lift. The man behind it is younger than the rest and he wears his jacket formally buttoned.

'Unteroffizier Junge, may I present Margot Baumann, my replacement as mail clerk.' Renate's tone is respectful as she addresses him.

When he stands, his body is crooked and he winces as he tries to straighten up. 'Welcome, Margot,' he says, and there's even a friendly smile. 'The work we do here is important. All mail in and out of Sachsenhausen comes through this office. We regularly handle letters from Reichsführer Himmler, himself, for example.' He pauses and I notice a sly glint in his eye. 'Perhaps you will be a better worker than your sister.'

Once we've moved out of earshot, Renate whispers, 'He used to drive a tank. Injured his spine – shrapnel or something.'

We're in the centre of the mailroom now, where two of the workers are sorting envelopes then tossing them into sacks. Sitting beneath the windows, two more are reading letters. While I watch, one crosses out half a line using a thick black pen. The most active worker in the room is a square-headed man standing at a counter covered in parcels. He pokes hopefully at a package he's just opened, then reaches in to draw out something that's caught his eye.

'Are you listening?' Renate asks in annoyance.

‘Oh, sorry,’ I splutter, returning my attention to her, but I can’t help stealing a glance at the counter. The prize turns out to be a sausage. The man sniffs at it. Then, clearly liking what he smells, he takes out a pocket knife to cut a slice from one end. When he rewraps the parcel, the sausage is left on the counter.

Renate takes me outside and points to the huts I’m to visit with my sacks. My job is to collect new mail as well, it seems. There are ink pads to be replenished and I learn where fresh envelopes are stored. ‘Oh, and I’d better show you this,’ she says, heading for the corner of the room furthest from the door. A barrel standing as high as my waist sits beneath a slot cut into the wall.

‘When this fills up with letters, it’s your job to scoop them out. Don’t worry about getting them all – besides, if you reach in too far, these old crocks will get a good look at your legs.’

‘Why shouldn’t I take all of them out of the barrel?’ I ask. ‘The ones at the bottom will have been there the longest, won’t they?’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ Renate answers lightly. ‘These letters are from prisoners. When the censors have time they check a few and send them on.’

‘Just a few? But you told me to scoop out as many as I can reach.’

‘Yes, to burn them.’

‘Burn them?’

Renate sighs in frustration, as though she can’t believe how stupid I am. ‘Prisoners’ letters don’t count. They are

mostly written by filthy Jews, or by communists or deviates and other enemies of the Reich. Their letters are a nuisance, really, because everything has to be censored and so many of our censors have been sent off to join fighting units.'

She points to the man I'd been watching at the counter. 'They concentrate on mail coming into the camp, especially parcels. Only if there's enough time after that do they look at letters from this barrel.'

'Then why do the prisoners bother to keep writing?'

'Because they don't know, of course.'

'Why not tell them?'

'Why do you care?' Renate asks with a puzzled frown. Then she leans in close. 'There are benefits,' she whispers. 'The prisoners have to buy the stamps and the paper and the envelopes. We split the money with the guards inside the camp, of course, but there *are* little perks we keep to ourselves.'

She nods towards the counter where the parcels are examined. The sausage! Now I understand.

2

It's Sunday, after my first week at the konzentrationslager and I'm lying beside Lili on the grassy slope we used to roll down, like dizzy, squealing logs, all the way into the waters of the Lehnitzsee. The war had barely begun back then; the younger of my brothers, Franz, was still living at home and Lili had thought she was in love with him. She's like that.

Lili's slim, almost skinny, and blonde like the girls you see around the Führer in newsreels. She has an open-mouthed way of staring out at the world, as though everything she sees would be amazing and full of fun if she could just find the key to open it up. I can't imagine life without her, even if we fight occasionally, which she says is a sign of strong character. I'm miserable when we're not speaking and always want to go to her house and apologise, whether I was responsible for us falling out or not. She's just that little bit more daring than me, and God knows I need a bit of excitement in my life.

Right now, she's smoking a cigarette rather grandly, as though an audience is watching her shoot grey streams towards the sky. When she offers it to me, I take it, even though Mutti will smell it on my breath and we'll have another row about how respectable German girls should behave. Respectable is just another word for dull, if you ask me.

'If the Russians knew how boring this place is, they'd go back to Moscow,' I say to Lili.

'Maybe we could bomb them with it,' she replies. 'There's enough boredom in this town to kill the entire Red Army!'

'I wish we could drop my mother on them. One of the Führer's secret weapons.'

Lili stares at me wide-eyed, that I could have said such a thing. Good. She might know me better than anyone else, but I can still jolt her image of me now and again.

I look out over the lake. When the sun is shining, the Lehnitzsee is so blue I want to eat up all its colour with my eyes and keep it for the dreary winter.

'If Jens were here, he'd take us sailing,' says Lili, drawing her boyfriend into our conversation – and not for the first time today. Jens is a good sailor, I'll admit that much, but after years of family holidays on Rügen Island, I can handle a boat pretty well myself.

'I could ask Herr Koder to lend us his,' I say.

Ah, but it's Jens Lili wants, not the sailing. He's in training for the navy and hasn't been home since Easter, although Lili had decided he'd be hers the Christmas before – and when Lili wants something, a line of tanks couldn't stop her. I doubt I'll hear Jens's name at all by *next* Christmas, though. It's not that Lili will discover his faults and fall out of love with him; rather, she's like a fire I saw once, burning through a field of summer-browned grass. 'There's no danger in it,' one of the men watching assured me. 'The flames will rush to the edge of the meadow then die down once there's no more fuel.' And he was right, there were limits the fire

couldn't go beyond. That's the difference between Lili and me. I dream of love that keeps burning until it lights up a whole landscape.

'Do you think love can last forever?' I ask her.

This is a question I've thought about a lot lately. I had a sort-of boyfriend last year, Ferdy, who told me that he loved me while we kissed. 'I love you too,' I said and let him explore inside my sweater until we both became embarrassed about being so intimate. Only weeks later I cringed at the sight of him.

'Love lasts forever in the movies,' says Lili.

'Movies only go for an hour or two.'

She snorts loudly. 'You certainly look convinced when we come out afterwards. Go on, admit it – you see yourself up on the screen kissing those men.'

I deny it, of course, shaking my head furiously, but Lili's right and she knows it. She jumps on top of me, pinning my hands to the grass. 'Go on, say you do,' she demands.

'Kissing's not love,' I say, remembering Ferdy.

'It's close enough for now,' Lili replies, rolling off me. 'Your problem is you expect too much, Margot. Underneath, you're a bigger romantic than I am.'

'Then why do you have all the boyfriends?'

'Because falling in love is fun, and why should we have fun like that only once in our lives? Love should be light, see-through, something to drape around yourself and test how it feels, don't you agree?'

'I do,' I answer immediately, and it's true that love should be so light in your heart it can lift you into the air.

See-through, though, something to drape over myself like fabric for a summer dress – that sounds flimsy. I want more than that.

'Do you still write to Jens?' I ask.

'Every week, sometimes twice.'

'Is he any better at writing back?'

Lili makes a face. 'Boys aren't natural letter writers. I don't expect him to.'

'Letters are my job now,' I say with a sigh. 'They fall like snow in my dreams.'

'What do you do? Sort them into piles all day?'

'Not me,' I tell her. 'Mostly I'm a pair of legs, so the others can stay in the mailroom. They're all old or crippled, so they do the sorting while I lug sacks from building to building and into the barracks.'

'Not the prisoners' barracks!' Lili looks horrified.

'No, only the soldiers' barracks outside the barbed wire. I don't even know how the prisoners get their mail. I know how they post letters though – through a slot in the wall. They end up in a big barrel and just sort of sit there …' My voice trails off as I think about it.

I never actually see letters being posted, but each morning the level in the barrel is higher, as though the prisoners are pixies in a fairy tale who do their work at night and leave it for me to find in the morning.

Lili is watching me, waiting, like I've left the story half told. And I have, I suppose. I don't tell her what happens to those letters. Or what is *meant* to happen; I've put off that task so far. It doesn't seem right.

'So the letters sit there …' Lili prompts me.

'I was thinking of Walther,' I say, giving her an answer at last. 'What happens to the letters he writes from his prisoner-of-war camp?'

'You said he hasn't written any.'

'No, I said that we haven't received any.'

Lili shrugs. 'Because he hasn't written any, that's why. He's a boy, like Jens.'

It can't be as simple as that. Even the most reluctant writer would let his family know where he was, what they could send to him; he would at least let them know that he was alive. I think of all the soldiers captured with Walther, thousands of them, dropping letters into a barrel like the one in Sachsenhausen and wondering why no one writes back. The ache of Walther's silence is suddenly a livid pain in my chest.

If I thought I could avoid burning the prisoners' letters altogether, Unteroffizier Junge soon sets me straight. 'The barrel is almost full,' he says when I'm barely through the door on Monday morning.

'I'll take care of it once I've made the first round of deliveries,' I promise.

No more putting it off then. When I return from the barracks I go to the barrel and stuff a handful of letters into an empty bag. What do I care? I ask myself, trying to sound like Renate, yet even as I remind myself the letters are from filthy Jews and others who've betrayed Germany, I know the answer. Somewhere in Russia a hand like mine might be

shovelling letters into a bag for burning, with a note from Walther among them saying: *I long to hear from you. Please write back soon.* I can hear the plea in my head, as clearly as if he's standing behind me.

The sack is full, the tide in the barrel has receded to halfway. That's enough for now. 'Where should I take them to be burned?' I ask the unteroffizier. 'Over there, where the smoke is?' I point out the window. 'There must be an incinerator or something on the far side of the camp.'

Unteroffizier Junge turns quickly to look, then shudders with pain from the abrupt movement. 'Smoke?' he repeats, before easing his body back to face me again. He stares into my face for a full five seconds before saying finally, 'No, that furnace is for a different purpose. There's an old oil drum between the huts outside. Here, you'll need this.' He hands me his cigarette lighter. 'Make sure each letter is completely destroyed.'

Completely destroyed! As if the job isn't hard enough already because of Walther. The unteroffizier doesn't just want me to get rid of these letters, it's to be like they were never written at all.

Standing before the drum a few minutes later, I take a fistful of letters from the sack then click my thumb on the lighter to create a flame. Or I try to anyway. The lid keeps falling onto the spark before it can catch. I take a closer look and see the cigarette lighter has twin lightning bolts spelling SS on both sides, not engraved but raised up a few millimetres – to give a better grip, I suppose. I know what those letters stand for. The Schutzstaffel is a special division

separate from the army. Renate told me it's their job to run all the camps like this one. There're dozens of them, she says.

Mutti wanted Walther to join the SS, but he refused. 'I want to fight on the front line, not round up Jews and Bolsheviks after the battle is over,' he said. There'd been a terrible argument about it, but Walther stood up for himself against all the shouting – a sign my brother had grown into a man, I decided. 'When I wear my uniform I want to see respect in people's eyes, not fear,' he told me afterwards, although I didn't understand what he meant. To me, one soldier was like all the rest.

With a flame burning at last, I light the first handful of letters and drop them into the barrel. It seems so callous, though. I wrote a letter to Franz only yesterday. My letters are important to him. He tells me so in every letter he writes back. And they're important to me, as well. They've made a big difference to the way I think about this other brother of mine who always used to take Renate's side against me. At times I hated him, but our letters have changed that, just like the past year has changed Franz. He's in France doing work he's not allowed to tell us about. He tells me other things, though, things I'm surprised to read – about how scared he is that he'll die slowly, in terrible pain, like he's seen others do. 'I didn't think this war would kill so many,' he wrote in his last letter. He says he can't tell these things to Mutti or Renate because they'll think he's a coward, but he trusts me to understand.

Of course, I never really hated Franz himself, only his teasing. I didn't *know* him as a person, that was the thing. He was just this big loud boy who was forever kicking a ball

or charging down the hall with his friends. It's strange, but being so far apart has made it easier for me to see him and, as each letter peels away a little more of who he really is, I'm discovering a second brother to love along with Walther.

All his letters end with the same words, *Write again soon*, so yesterday, after I got home from the lake, I sat for an hour making sure my words let him know how much we miss him. Now I'm dropping letters just like it into the fire, watching as the connection each writer hoped to make to a brother, a mother, a child gets eaten up until ashes are all that remain.

I begin to read the names on the front of the envelopes before letting each one slip from my fingers, and immediately regret it because now the writers of those letters are transformed from pixies working away in the secret night into human beings. 'Don't be so lily-livered, Margot,' I whisper. The Führer deserves steel in his people, not sentiment, and these people are enemies of the Reich. If only this scene were taking place in a newsreel.

A handful of letters remain in the sack. I rummage around to grab all of them in one fistful, and even as I do it the violence of my fingers closing over the last of the letters seems a travesty. I draw out my hand to stare at them, crumpled and at my mercy, the last ones with their words still alive. I look around; no one is watching. I stroll the few paces to where my bicycle stands against a hut and slip the surviving letters inside the rolled-up raincoat tied to the carrier rack.

On the ride home I lay down strict rules for myself. Anything that could possibly be a coded message I'll destroy. The

letters I send on will be ones like my family longs to receive from Walther.

At home I carry the letters to my room still hidden in the raincoat, which keeps them safe from my mother's gaze, but not that of the Führer in the hallway. For a moment I want to run into the vegetable garden and burn them after all. But then it occurs to me that, while the Führer is a great leader who deserves obedience, he's a compassionate man, too. I know this from everything I've heard about him at school and from the newsreels I see when Lili and I go to the cinema. He would understand what I'm doing.

After dinner, Renate goes off with her friends and I have our bedroom to myself. I lock the door and take the letters from under my mattress. I read a postcard first:

Dear Merte,
Gunter and I still have our health. The summer warmth is helping. Please send as many pairs of socks as you can because my only pair is mostly holes, and grit from the quarry gets inside my shoes. Parcels seem to come more often than letters. Gunter is cold at night. A cardigan for him and any food you can spare. With God's help I will be free soon to hold you close.
With love,
Herman

What a letdown! It could be a note sent by boys from the Hitler Youth hiking through the Black Forest. A cardigan and a pair of socks; it doesn't take much to make prison life more bearable, then. I choose a second postcard and read:

My darling,

I doubt I will see you again unless you can send more to keep me going. The rations here aren't enough to keep a man alive and they work us so hard. These days, I look like Uncle Ludy – do you remember? Please don't forget me. I don't want to take food out of our children's mouths, but whatever you can spare, even peelings. I love you and want only to be with you and our little ones. Give my love to Gissy, Marta and Eva.

I drop the card onto the bed beside me before its desperation leaks onto my fingers. This can't be right. The man is blackmailing his wife with pathetic pleas for food. Everyone's on rations these days; it's just part of the war, part of the sacrifice we all make for victory. I stare down at the card, not sure what to think. Cooking smells drift across the konzentrationslager all day long. How can anyone be starving, and who would post vegetable peelings in a parcel?

Then I think of the Führer's merciful heart and decide to send this card on anyway. The prisoner's wife can decide whether it's a trick.

Feeling good now, I take a letter from the pile this time. The handwriting is neat and stays precisely between the lines marked on the page so the writer could fit in as many words as possible.

Peter, my friend. I send this letter to you in the hope you'll know where my darlings are living. If you can see it into their hands, I will thank you from heaven.

My dearest love,

With this letter I bid you farewell. I have struggled to stay alive these three years only for you and Jordy. Last night at rollcall, all hope that I will see you again was snuffed out. I try not to think of it in the time I have left. Instead, I remember our love, from when I first saw you in your father's bookshop, until my eyes lost sight of you waving from the train in Hamburg. I thank your father every day that he saw how things would go before it was too late and that you were able to reach Sweden. How I wish I had trusted his judgement and gone with you.

I hope you remember dinners around my parents' table as fondly as I do. Dear Vati and Mutti are surely gone already, I know. I saw them crowded onto the wagons myself before it was my turn. If there is anything good ahead of me without you, it is that I will be with them again. My darling, my heart longs for you; it thanks you for your love and devotion and especially for the happiness you gave me every day and each time I saw your face. It's what I will see at the last. Raise Jordell as we would have done together. It will be hard alone, but I know you have the strength. You are young and might find someone to share the task with you.

Farewell, love of my life. If you meet Leah or Sam, Tante Devorah and Onkel Benjamin or any of those who loved me years ago, kiss and hug them for me.

Jacob

I read those last lines through welling tears. *Farewell.* How could a man write that word so calmly when he was about to die? I try to guess how long the letter has been in the barrel.

If it was at the bottom of my sack then it must have been near the top, posted only last night. The man might be still alive, or he might have died while I was standing over the oil drum. How many of the letters I burned this afternoon were like this?

I didn't know words on a page could be so sad – and yet they're beautiful as well. *The happiness you gave me every day and each time I saw your face*. This is a better answer to my question about love than anything Lili said yesterday beside the lake.

I want to know more about this man. Where did he live? Could I have come across him in the street? I look again at the name. Jacob. But that's a Jewish name, and so are the names he added as though with a final breath. Devorah, Leah, Benjamin. It doesn't seem possible that a filthy Jew could feel affection like this. They lack the human feelings for such tender emotions, but knowing that doesn't stop me folding the page as carefully as if it had come from Walther. If I don't send this one to its destination, I'll be the one without human feelings.