

ELSA

I rub my eyes and stare at my parents. I must have heard them wrong. I *must* have. Half of me wants to ask them to repeat what they've just told us. The other half is terrified of hearing the words again.

'You can't be serious,' Otto says before I have decided which way to go. 'You're sending us away? This has to be some kind of a joke, right?'

Vati turns towards my brother. 'Do we look like we are joking, Otto?' he asks, his voice husky and dark.

'But – but things aren't really so bad, are they?' I ask.

'How bad do you want them to get, Elsa?' Vati replies. 'It's not enough that neither you nor Otto is allowed to join the youth groups with all the other children? Not enough that I have no work, that you are not allowed to walk in the park, ride your bicycles, go swimming! Not enough that our friends are disappearing on a daily basis?'

Mutti puts her hand on his arm. 'Darling, go gently on the children. They don't need to think about all of this.'

‘But, Stella, that’s just it. They *do* need to think about all this. We have to face what is happening.’

‘We *are* facing it,’ Mutti replies calmly. ‘I am with you on this decision. But still, we don’t need to ram it down their throats.’

Vati lets out a breath. ‘Very well,’ he says. ‘But the decision is made. We just have to sit tight and wait till we are given our date. But it will be soon.’

‘Soon? Like, weeks away?’ Otto asks.

‘Days, more likely,’ Vati confesses.

‘Days?’ I croak.

Mutti is crying openly now. ‘My babies. Believe me, if we thought we had any other options, we would take them.’

‘But why can’t you come with us?’ Otto asks. My big brother, the one who always tries so hard to be tough and strong and capable, sounds as scared as me.

‘They won’t let us,’ Vati replies. ‘We are not allowed out of the country. But you children have a chance. And your mother and I will not sit here and let the chance go by without reaching out to grab it.’

Mutti kneels in front of Otto and me. She takes our hands. ‘You are the most important things in our lives,’ she says. ‘There is nothing that I care about as much as you.’

‘Then why are you sending us away?’ I ask. My throat hurts and I can barely get the words out.

‘Because we want you to live,’ Vati says simply.

‘We’re living now,’ I argue weakly. ‘Can’t we just carry on as we are?’ I think about the last time we went through this, leaving my two best friends. In Prague I have only one true friend. I can’t bear the thought of saying goodbye to Greta.

'It will only be for a short while,' Mutti says. 'Just till all of this passes over. You'll be back in no time.'

'Can I tell Greta?' I ask.

'No!' Vati is firm. 'We can't let anyone know that you are going. We all carry on as normal until I get word of the date you will leave. When that comes, we will all travel to the train station after nightfall. We have papers for you already. It is all organized. You will go to Holland and then get a boat to England. You will be looked after every step of the way. There are good people out there who will make sure you are safe.'

Mutti tries to smile at us both. 'And then, when everyone is sick and tired of Hitler and it is safe to come back home, we will collect you,' she says. I know she is trying her hardest to convince us that everything will be fine. And because I can't bear to see her trying so hard to hide her sadness, I give in.

'Okay,' I say. 'We'll do it.'

Otto half-shrugs, half-nods. 'We understand,' he says.

But I know he's lying just like I am. We all are. How could any of us understand that our lives are really in so much danger that Otto and I have to travel to another country, one where our parents aren't even allowed to follow?

I'll do it. I'll go. But I refuse to understand – because that would mean accepting the reality of what our lives have become. And I'm not prepared to do that.

LEO

I couldn't stop staring at the document in my hand. 'Is it real?' I asked Mama. 'We can truly leave Austria?' I didn't want to let myself hope. Just that day, we'd been spat at twice while we waited in the street to be seen. And on the way home I'd been tripped up by a boy walking the other way, just to make his friends laugh. And they did.

People laughed at us every day now. They called us names whenever they saw us. They delighted in letting us know our place in Nazi-run society.

Not that we needed reminding.

Our place was at the bottom of the heap. Nothing came below the Jews.

'It's real,' Mama insisted as she took a chair into her bedroom. 'Here, help me reach the cases.'

I followed her into her room and held the chair while she climbed up to reach the shelf at the top of her wardrobe. She pulled down two cases. We were allowed one each. One case each to fit our whole lives into. That was it.

By the end of the week, our home would officially belong to

the Nazi regime, along with everything in it. All we would own would be whatever we could fit into two cases and our passports with the big red 'J' for Jew stamped on them, in case anyone mistook us for something other than the dregs of society.

I took my case to my bedroom and began to pack. Soon it was almost filled with clothes, books, a few toys and some odds and ends.

I opened the drawer by my bed and took out the photograph from my ninth birthday.

Sitting on the side of my bed, I squinted at the photo. It was hard to believe it was only three years ago. It felt like a lifetime. The carefree smiles on our faces – I couldn't imagine smiling so freely like that ever again.

The last happy day of my childhood and the day we had met Mr and Mrs Stewart. A tickle and a chase and a trip over a lady's foot. And to make up for it, an extra ride on the Ferris wheel and a piece of *Sachertorte*. That was what we had given them.

And in return they were offering us a whole new life.