

VIENNA WAITS FOR YOU

(working title)

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©2025

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Translated to English from the German edition by the author,  
*Vienna Waits for You aka Don't Take Any Shit From Anybody*

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## Chapter 1

The auditorium still shakes. Leaving the stage, Billy loosens his tie and shirt collar to the beat of his footsteps, off and away along a windowless corridor. With every stride, his fans' keep pace demanding *Encore!* Crescendo imminent.

He gave his all, swinging a cable spinning his mic stand in the air like a Corsair propeller, and somersaulting off the piano. Sweat still streaking down his temples, he's faced now with a catacomb of solemn cement halls. *Which one leads to his dressing room?* At last,

### *BILLY'S WARDROBE*

Sharpied on white vellum framed inside a brass rectangle screwed to an olive-drab door. He's relieved to have found his way back here—down steps, left, along the corridor, then up another half-flight and twice to the right—he charges in, taking several dancing jumps, struggling to peel off his jacket. Drenching perspiration has his white linen shirt transparent. *Well, that confirms it!* he thinks, *My ancestors were polar bears!* Billy's always hot.

His gaze falls beyond the cluttered dressing table. Reflected in the mirror, a telegram stands on end between the hairspray, deodorant, and a hairbrush, discretely positioned by a helpful aid who clearly did agonize over where best to station the missive marked "*Confidential*" without risking its discovery by anyone but its intended recipient.

Cotton-mouthed, Billy shivers in the silent room. Could it be *the* telegram? He swigs an *Evian* and steps into surreal *camera oscura* moments, approaching his blurry silhouette in the mirror as "*Telegramma Poste Italiane*" comes into focus backward. He is in Milan. He imagines the Morse code tapped somewhere else in the world and transmitted via thin copper wires to this wafer-thin paper. Before he can open it a roadie barges in gripping a walkie-talkie. "*Roger that!*"

The young man is shouting into the two-way radio. Billy turns to the event technician who is urgently pressing its large orange button. “One minute ‘til encore. We’re coming.” He holds the door open for Billy to pass through.

Bending to grab his sodden jacket he’d flung on the floor, Billy follows the roadie back toward the stage. The neon tube in the stairwell ceiling hums and flickers in a staccato rhythm. The pattern of orange and black circles on the roadie’s short-sleeved shirt reminds Billy of a dimly lit dance bar somewhere in Wisconsin. *Encore!* grows louder; they walk faster.

The roadie’s shaggy head swivels around. “Awesome show. Unbelievable.”

Lost in thought about his telegram, Billy finally nods and claps the young technician on the shoulder. “You’ve got a lot to learn. This is a compliment-free zone—We’re backstage!”

Back on stage behind his mic, his cheering crowd erupts in applause.

“I think there was something else. We forgot a song,” he says, wedging his harmonica from his pocket. Getting seated at the piano, he wonders about that telegram, *Could it be the answer to the question that’s been gnawing at me for twenty years?*

A black and chrome contraption on the piano waits for Billy. He picks it up and wags it at the audience. “Do you know what this is? I know it from Bob Dylan.” He places the harmonica rack into position between his lower lip and chin. “At first, I thought, ‘What happened to Dylan? Did he have a car accident or something?’” Billy secures his *Hohner* into the rack grips. “But I was wrong. It’s a harmonica holder. Thanks to Bob Dylan. Applause for Bob Dylan.”

Billy’s fingers settle on the piano keys, and after eight seconds playing, his lips breathe life into the harmonica. By now, a die-hard Billy Joel fan knows, the song everyone has been waiting for is his 1973 hit single.

*“Cause he knows that it’s me,  
they’ve been coming to see  
to forget about life for a while...”*

“*Piano Man*” is the highlight of his two-hour concert.

*“Cause, we’re all in the mood for a melody  
and you’ve got us feeling alright.”*

On this night in Milan, the song’s usual six minutes feel like an eternity to Billy, eager to finish and read that telegram.

*Lalaaa, ditty-daaah  
Lala, ditty-daaaah... dada...*

He sings the waltz on tenterhooks, his heart throbbing in his head, alternately hot and cold. He doesn’t want to feel this way and doesn’t understand the tricks his body is playing on him. He doesn’t tolerate them either. Why should he? He’s Billy Joel. He is the “*Piano Man*”—on the *US Billboard Charts* nigh fourteen weeks. His song has gone *Gold* and *Platinum*, sold millions of copies. He’s never needed anyone. He’s not afraid. Of anything. Certainly not of his father. But then, there is that telegram, hiding squarely between the hair spray, deodorant, and brush. He wants to retreat and beeline his underground dressing room.

By the time he reaches it, after his generous encore, already everyone is sitting around. Backsides of groupies, technicians, musicians, and his tour manager hide stains and holes in a light blue couch. Booze and stogies’ ghosts remain—hideous mute witnesses to the substance abuse of innumerable past stars.

“Give me five minutes,” Billy requests; the jolly entourage file out.

Alone, he holds the telegram envelope in his hands.

*“To: Mr. William Martin Joel”*

Its milky transparent window makes it difficult read. *What if it's just a normal congratulatory telegram?* Is the artist's body enduring the hot-cold heart palpitations and dizziness for nothing? His patience taps out; he shreds open the envelope and gingerly removes the telegram. *How can they print such an important message on parchment thin as toilet paper?* Billy reads.

*“Sender: Columbia Studios, 73-75 Petty France Street, SW1, London.*

*Message: We have located your father. Stop. He lives in Vienna, Austria.*

*Stop. More details by phone or in person. Stop.”*

## Chapter 2

His teacher at *Fork Lane Elementary School* sweeps his rosewood cane at the colorful illustration of a painted turtle affixed to the wall.

Suddenly, he yells, “Duck and cover!”

Simultaneously, 23 seven-year-olds drop to the floor. Girls in floral dresses with white aprons and bows in their hair, and neat-pressed boys, their strict side-parts thrown askew as they slide under wooden desktops, ink-stained or carved with Cupid hearts. Each child’s face tucks safely between little knees; each little head is safe under little hands—safe from Russian nuclear invasion. Crouched in the fourth row beside the window, Billy Joel waits for the drill’s *all-clear*, peering up at the sky. It’s early May; in a few days he’ll be eight. Outside, the sun is shining, and it is one of the first warm days of spring 1957. Nevertheless, the classroom window must be shut; the teacher says that the atomic bomb may explode at any time without warning. Kids who ride the school bus must drop into the center aisle on the floor where it’s easier to *duck-and-cover* and children are less likely to be injured by flying glass *when the Commis strike*. Billy is really glad when school is dismissed for the day, and he can walk home.

In Hicksville, Long Island, five streets run parallel, crisscrossed by five, then a wide avenue. Front yard, wooden house, garage or carport, then another front yard—with or without flowers—wooden house, garage or carport. It goes on and on. Today, Billy ambles up the second street toward his house, passing a white-painted fence built of horizontal wooden slats that remind him of the bars on his sheet music, interrupted every ten steps by a vertical post. His hand skids along the top slat as he counts his steps with metronomic precision, then stretching to make

each as broad as possible—*six, seven, eight*, and *whoaah*, his hand becomes a jet plane on the ninth step, flying over the top of the post and ascending into the sky.

Reaching home, he pauses at the carport, hearing piano music waft from inside, comingling with the breeze. Piano music means his father is home! Billy rushes in only to be enveloped by a hug and his mother shushing the boy, her index finger pressed to her pursed lips.

“Your father’s only been back an hour and needs to play to relax from his business trip.”

Billy inhales dinner aromas promising a pot roast and Black Forest Torte as he listens through the sealed living room door. Hunkering on the floor duck-and-cover style, ear-to-wood catching every note his father plays of Ludwig van Beethoven’s “*Moonlight Sonata*” that Billy recognizes, he’s already learned it himself. *If you can play the piano like my father, you must be a happy person*, thinks the boy. When the door suddenly opens inward, Billy tips over sideways into the living room, landing in a fetal position on the modern checkered floor of red, black, and gray vinyl-asbestos tiles.

“What are you doing here?” his father asks sternly, looking down at him.

“Just listening,” replies the boy.

“But you won’t be able to hear much even in here. This lousy American piano makes sounds that are barely audible to the human ear. Even if you sit right in front of it.” With a brisk wave of his hand, father directs son to sit properly at the round dining table. On its white polka dotted turquoise plastic tablecloth, his mother is setting the table in silence. “Do you know what this one is?” his father asks and, without waiting for an answer, begins to play again.

“Beethoven!” Billy exclaims confidently.

His father stops. “You’re not supposed to talk while I’m playing.”

Billy raises a hand apologetically. His father's back straightens, gaze fixed, he keeps pulling the left corner of his mouth outwards. The child tries to interpret the grimace. "*Does that mean he's unhappy with his perfect playing? Billy considers, Or with me?*"

A fork clatters accidentally against one of the dinner plates. Music stops.

"Sorry," Rosalind whispers to her husband, as she sets the third steaming dinner plate on the polka-dots.

"Silence and respect for music seem to be things that don't exist in this house."

Billy watches his father storm out, slamming doors, stomping up to the second floor, Helmut's ire a resonance unto itself. Three aromatic meals remain untouched. For a while, Rosalind Joel and her son wait for the man-of-the-house to return; when the pot roast and potatoes have long stopped steaming, mother and son dig in. Just the two of them again today. Rosalind puts her hand on Billy's. He looks up at her, uncertain. She smiles lovingly at her only child. The late afternoon sun low in the west, shines through the porch into the dining and living rooms. For once, Billy does his homework voluntarily; today he's not going outside to play with neighborhood kids. After all, his father is back home after a four-month business trip. Likewise, today, Miss Francis comes to the Joel home for Billy's piano lesson. Normally, he walks to her house at the end of the street for his weekly session. "*Off We Go to Music Land*" was the first song he learned. Having played the piano for three years now, on this day, he plays Mozart, Chopin, and—like his father—Beethoven. However, Billy doesn't always play the pieces exactly as they are written on the sheet music because he finds that too boring. Billy plays classical music, but renders it his own new, idiosyncratic creation hinting at the boy's innate sense of humor. Like his father, Billy sits down carefully at the piano and, straight-backed, quietly infuses

the air with the “*Moonlight Sonata*” that his father has just played like a virtuoso before the botched dinner.

“Press the pedal,” Miss Francis advises. “Then the harmonies linger and blur like watercolors.”

The boy brings forth quiet broken triads, very delicate in *pianissimo*. Then, without warning, Billy’s feet release the pedals. Long, lingering notes become short, rhythmic strokes. The piece picks up speed, taking on the groove of modern jazz or swing, with small improvisations and additional compositions allowing only hints of the original work to shine through. Abruptly the lesson ends when the door to the living room slams open, and his father hits Billy in the face with the flat of his hand, so hard that he falls off the piano stool. The little boy remains curled on the floor. Howard Joel, aka Helmut, raises his fist above his head, pointing to the sky and shouts in his native German, “*Nie und nimmer!*”

“Never ever!” he reiterates in English, as Helmut’s German is his default when emotional. Calmer, yet deathly serious, he emphasizes, “Never again do I want to hear you messing around with Beethoven like that.” Without another word, Helmut *Howard* Joel leaves the living room, and on his way out, he elbows his teary-eyed wife standing in the doorway. “Every single hour of piano lessons for this child is money down the drain, Rosalind!”

Billy’s eyes spill over. It’s his eighth birthday in a week. He fears his father won’t want to be there on his big day, due to this *egregious* mistake.

### Chapter 3

It's last call for *Flight OS 89* to Vienna-Schwechat.

"Sir, that's not hand luggage," chastens the friendly flight attendant in her wine-red uniform and black cap.

Billy's military green duffel bag slung over his shoulder contains essentials for a brief sojourn. He wears a black tshirt, black trousers, and sunglasses which he slides out to the tip of his nose and squints charmingly over the rim. "But look, I can carry my luggage with one hand."

"That's Billy Joel." The well-intentioned flight attendant blanches, receiving her colleague's whispered reprimand. Her color gradient pinks up to burgundy, blooming across her cheeks, nose, brow, ears, and right down to her throat.

"For you, we will close an eye, Mr. Joel," she stammers.

Grateful that she will *turn a blind eye*, Billy smiles at her mangling the English idiom. "*Germish*" the linguistic spawn of German and English has been familiar to him since early childhood. His father Helmut had sometimes struggled with the differences between the sentence structures of German and English, Billy recalls as he squeezes the green duffel bag into an overhead compartment. From the seat in front of Billy's window seat, he hears whispering. The nose of a 10-year-old boy with round wire-rimmed glasses appears between two headrests as Billy gets seated.

"Hi," says Billy softly, aiming to remain as inconspicuous as possible.

The lad's mother utters German sibilants, grasps her son's shoulders, and presses him back into his seat. The restless boy sighs, grudgingly leaning his head against the oval window of the plane. Billy too fixes his gaze out the window, as the plane taxis for liftoff, until a bank of

clouds spreads out below them like a glittering mountain range made of cotton wool. Reaching altitude, he hears his name.

“Mr. Joel, it is such an honor to welcome you on board today. May I offer you a glass of champagne?” A louder-than-necessary mid-30s flight attendant with radiant blond curls wears a matching gold badge on her lapel that denotes her as *Flight OS 89’s “Chief Purser.”* Her volume triggers at least a dozen breathless heads to pop and swivel toward Billy—beside, behind, and in front of him—like a choreographed Broadway routine.

“Thank you. Very kind.” In one gulp, Billy empties the offered flute of champagne. He places it back on the Chief Purser’s tray and resumes cloud gazing.

The little boy in front of him turns back to toss a scampish wink at Billy who smiles appreciatively at his co-conspirator and gets comfortable for the eight-hour flight to Vienna.

Apart from that telegram between the hairspray, deodorant, and brush, his record company had not provided Billy with much information, mainly because they themselves had so few clues to go on in the first place. *His name is Howard or Helmut Joel, he must be about fifty-three, working for General Electric as a television technician or salesman for twenty-some years, somewhere in Europe.* Given that all sleuthing was conducted pre-internet, with neither *Google*, email, nor cellphones, all related rotary-dial phone calls to Europe had to factor the six-hour difference in time and, at this point is telecom history, a hugely inflated cost. So, off-peak, at 1:00 a.m., two secretaries from *Columbia Records* had to report to “*The Church*” at 207 East 30<sup>th</sup> in Manhattan, in order to place calls from office rotary phones to all branches of *General Electric* across Europe, including partners and suppliers, between Continental hours of 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m., when European offices opened. The task at hand? Ascertain, *Does a certain Mr.*

*Helmut Joel work there?* After weeks of graveyard-shift overtime, translation snafus, and pointer fingers numb from dialing rotary—*bingo!*—the secretaries confirm that Helmut Joel resides in Vienna, Austria.

Now, as Billy nods off against the airplane window, he savors the fact that in a few hours, he will see his elusive father for the first time in 20 years.

## Chapter 4

Billy turns nine, and he's thinking, *She's been doing this for weeks!* Rosalind Joel pushes one of the chairs from the dining table over to the window, sits, and stares out at the street for hours on end. *She used to just wave to me from the window when I left for school in the morning.* Now his mother sits there day after day.

"Mom, what are you doing at the window all the time?" asks Billy, drinking directly from the orange juice jug as he hangs on the open door to the refrigerator, its condenser throttling like a dying old Edsel.

"Just looking." After a pause, Rosalind adds, hopeful, "Maybe he'll come back."

A year earlier, Billy's father left home with two suitcases. Since then, Helmut's monthly checks arrive punctually in the mailbox on the fifth of every month. Otherwise, they neither see nor hear, neither hide nor hair of him. Rosalind Joel does learn that her husband has taken to living in Manhattan with his parents, her in-laws, Meta and Karl Joel. Yet, Helmut never shows up at Billy's home on Long Island again. Word on the street is that he leaves America for Europe.

Billy offers the glass jug of orange juice to his mother. She sips collegially.

"It has its advantages," he says, patting his mother's cheek. "We're the only house on the whole street where there's no shouting. And the only one where you're allowed to drink juice straight from the bottle."

"Go now." Rosalind smiles wearily and kisses her son on the forehead. "In ten minutes, you have to be at Miss Francis."

Billy slips into his anorak and shoves his music scores under his arm. Curbside, he glances back at his mother waving at him from the window. But Billy is recalling the piano

incident the year before that tripped a switch shortly before his father left; the five days between the slap and the boy's eighth birthday, his parents had not argued as much as usual. His father just stopped talking. Then vanished—longer and longer and longer. For 11 months and 225 days, Billy has been asking himself, *What did I do wrong?* At nine years of age, he still counts each new day his father stays away. In the boy's mind, he reviews the last days with his father, step-by-step. Billy wonders if his father was angered one time too many by the boy's habit of leaving his shoes about. *Is that a reason to move out?* Billy sometimes forgets to close the lid of the white Lester piano after playing. His father had always called the American-made piano a "dirty thing" anyway, so could closing the lid really make a difference? *That cannot be why he left us,* the boy reasons as he walks to his piano lesson. With so little within his control, the little boy can control one thing: whom to blame, and he blames himself.

"Hey, Billy! Where's your tutu?" three middle school boys holler across the street. Two more blocks to reach Miss Francis' house where she teaches ballet in addition to piano. Not to Billy, though. "Hey, Billy! I'm talking to you!" the biggest bully shouts again. Now they cross toward him. The two smaller bullies flank and grab him roughly, gripping his biceps. Billy's music scores fall in a puddle. The biggest bully sticks his face in Billy's. "Are you a little ballet princess, Joel?"

The cretin's lame rhetorical question is underscored by his first punch to Billy's gut. One of the smaller boys pulls Billy's ear. The tip of a shoe hits Joel's shin. Then the big bully slaps Billy across the face. The same cheek as a year ago.

"What's going on here?" a neighbor shouts beyond a slatted fence.

Three brawlers run off. Billy picks up the sheet music and tries to sop it off on his trousers. *I have to become a man*, Billy tells himself, and the next day the boy decides he will start going to the boxing club on 12<sup>th</sup> Street. *I'll be strong enough to defend my mother and myself. And I'll set things straight with the biggest bully.* Before the three bullies can get too far away, Billy hollers after them, “We’ll see each other again!” They laugh, fueling Billy’s determination.

With the bully’s red handprint on his cheek, Billy’s piano lesson with Miss Francis doesn’t go much better. He’s supposed to have practiced Mozart’s *Piano Sonata in C major*. He *did* practice. Every day. But always a little differently—faster, slower, and peppered with lots of extra variations. Every day, his mother has exclaimed, “What *are* you playing today? It sounds so different from yesterday!” And Billy’s cheerful reply is always, “It’s just the *adagio*.”

Now, with Miss Francis, however, the moment of truth is as blatant as the bully’s handprint. For her, he knows he must play the sonata just as it is annotated on the music score by the composer. She sets the metronome accordingly. Billy does his best to hammer out every note on the eighty-eight keys of Miss Francis’ piano. He pauses in the wrong places and only hits every other beat. He’s feeling syncopation; the metronome is not. Then he’s feeling the hot breath of a predator on the back of his neck as the teacher’s patience fades. He smells onions—Miss Francis’ lunch. Behind him, her stool pushes back with a loud creak and tips to the floor as she stands. Her menacing shadow looms over Billy’s hands that search the ivories to get it right. Miss Francis raps her knuckles three times on the piano lid.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” her voice pitches like a slamming door. Obedient hands recoil from the keys, expecting punishment. The imprint of the bully’s palm glows on the pianist’s cheek, red

as a *Stop* sign. The indignant tutor, many decades her pupil's senior, stands in judgement, her voluminous body hidden under a tented landscape of flowers that *Sears and Roebuck's* catalogue convinced her was a dress. "Your mother wastes money paying for your piano lessons." Billy has heard this before, embossed with a slap.

## Chapter 5

From the airport, a sky-blue *Mercedes 240 Diesel* speeds along a country road toward Vienna. Excited, Billy sits in the back seat, looking out at cornfields, their rich green stalks glowing golden in the morning sun.

“This is beautiful *Kukuruz*.” The chauffeur is informed about growing *maiz* and other types of corn in different regions of Austria.

*Should I hug him?* Billy lights a cigarette and lowers the window pondering. *Will I even recognize him? What'll we even talk about?* Would his father ever have come to see him? Was it a stupid idea to contact Helmut Joel and get on a plane to Vienna, in the first place?

“Do you have *Kukuruz* in America?” the driver tries again to strike up conversation.

“Yes, we have cornfields in The States,” Billy replies absently.

The driver concedes, adjusting his cap, and turns on the radio instead. To Billy’s surprise, he understands the radio announcer say, “*Guten Morgen. Hier ist Matthias von Ö3 Radio Wien...*” *Good morning*, Billy concurs, definitely it is. Billy’s father had often spoken German to him, so, he finds himself catching more fragments of the radio broadcast spoken in German. Deciphering, Billy gleans, “Next up, we’ll hear a young artist from America. Here’s Billy Joel with his single, ‘*Piano Man*’...”

Discretely, Billy reins in his head away from the cornfields, and sits back. Behind his sunglasses, his eyes shift left, and he scrutinizes the rearview mirror. However, the cordial professional does not let on whether he is impressed or not by the renowned musician chain-smoking in his livery. Billy’s gaze returns to the cornfield. *Does my father even know what I do? Who I ‘am’ now? Will he like my music? What if he doesn’t?* A thousand unanswered questions

nettle him, like the radio static that breaks Billy's train of thought, when the driver spins the dial mid-song. The old gentleman's gaze shifts between radio and road, as cornfields grow distant then obscure in a belch of diesel soot. Soon, rows of old houses cluster along narrow streets. Billy's driver steers vigorously, taking the curves with *brio*. In America, alleys this width are called sidewalks.

Their route meanders, flanking a river through the city center, and continues to chase the Danube westward toward hills dotted with vineyards. The taxi slows as they enter a suburb of Vienna, District 19. Once a rural wine-growing village, Grinzig's small farms with thick walls and windows no bigger than peepholes line cobblestone streets. The *Mercedes*' soft suspension adapts, herky-jerky, to each shift in the ancient pavement. Billy's gut lurches. Whether it is the stuffy air in the back seat, or the anticipation of reunion with his father, Billy cracks the window. *Gettin' closer*—Billy's hands are clammy. Midway along a snug street, the *Mercedes* brakes abruptly.

“Here you must get out.” *Germish*, again. “You must give me one hundred schillings.”

Handing over payment, Billy says, “*Danke*.”

“Good-day,” the driver replies in formal English.

Lobbing his duffel bag off the seat, Billy steps out. The driver steps on it, shrouding Billy in the fine diesel dust veiling the wall of sturdy old houses. He stands in front of a three-story house painted dark yellow: *Himmelstraße 17*. All the windows on the ground floor are shuttered. *So, this is where he lives*. It's nothing like Hicksville's bungalows with their front yards and carports. Beyond the statuesque multi-family buildings, picturesque vine-covered hills of the

Vienna Woods embrace Billy in 18<sup>th</sup>-century bucolic splendor. “*Heuriger zum Berger. Seit 1730*” is painted in old *Fraktur* script on the neighboring tavern—*Citizens’ Vineyard since 1730*.

*Wow*, thinks Billy, *Mozart and Beethoven might have hung out in this bar*. A man staggers out onto the street; clearly, he’s had a few. Billy contemplates doing likewise—a *cuppa’ courage* before knocking. It’s only 10:00 a.m., a tad early for boozing. Then again, in New York, it’s still four in the morning; heck, at this time of day, he himself has, on occasion *part-took*, as it were.

The front door to his father’s apartment building is open, welcoming. The air in the vestibule is damp and cool. Winter seems to have not yet left its plaster walls. Billy pivots and goes back out to the curb. Into the spring sunshine. One more cigarette, then he’ll brave it.

## Chapter 6

Inside, someone is playing *Mozart's Fantasy in D minor* on piano. It grows louder as Billy reaches a polished brass doorknob at the end of a long hall; the doorplate is engraved "JOEL." He inhales through his nose and lets the air burst out his mouth, then pokes the doorbell, pausing. *Never interrupt your father when he's playing the piano.* Slowly, he releases the white mother of pearl push-button, tripping the mechanism inside the door; brass on brass, a tiny hammer strikes a bell. Mozart stops. Footsteps approach. *Will I recognize him?*

When the oak door opens, familiar, prominent eyes regard Billy. Now he is certain that he would have recognized his father among thousands of men, in spite of his receded hairline.

"Good to see you." Helmut's first words to his son in 20 years. *Same voice.* He steps aside, motioning Billy inside where shoes, like soldiers, squarely line a baseboard. The granite threshold witnesses the two men embrace shyly, clapping each other three times on the shoulder as if they had last met up the night before at the *Biergarten*. "Please, come in."

The firstborn's eyes fall on children's footwear in the lineup as he unties his own laces and stows his shoes alongside. He follows his father along a dim hallway toward the living room. There, on a chest of drawers a framed photo catches his eye. Betraying his father's untold secrets, the black-and-white captures his father close beside a pretty stranger; in front of them, a little boy is grinning up at Helmut Joel whose hand rests on the child's shoulder. Billy forces his gaze away to the street-facing windows, now open, in the living room, then to its ceiling, nearly four meters high. Then to the oak floor, its parquet herringbone pattern traced by time, furniture scrapes, and former tenants' shoe scuffs. In the middle of the room a black *Bösendorfer* grand piano beckons.

“Would you like some?” His father points to a glass carafe into which black coffee is dripping through an orange plastic filter. Billy nods and tries to smile. Helmut places two white porcelain cups with saucers on the round dining table. “Milk? Sugar?”

“Black, thanks.” Billy lights a cigarette. He sucks nicotine deep and exhales it through his nose. “You wouldn’t know. The last time we saw each other I was still drinking cocoa.”

“And you didn’t smoke,” his father adds.

Helmut Joel’s hair is white. Thinner. He has a full moustache he did not have during Billy’s first eight years of life, and a protruding belly. In this moment, Billy cannot seem to remember the father of his childhood. Unopened mail lies on the coffee table. An envelope reads,

*“To the Helmut Joel family.”*

*That explains the photo, but...* “Isn’t your name Howard anymore?”

“My name has always been Helmut,” Billy’s father replies.

Silence.

Two grown men stare into coffee for a key that *must* surface. Billy clutches his duffel.

“Were you in Vietnam?” Helmut asks, gesturing to his son’s unusual travel gear.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Billy crosses his arms. “I have nothing against Vietnamese people.”

“I had nothing against Germans either,” Helmut Joel replies. Billy looks at his father for more. “But they had something against me.” After an awkward pause, he adds, “I had no choice. I had to fight them.”

## Chapter 7

It's evening. Helmut Joel must be about three years old. It's his earliest memory: he's sitting on a wooden handcart; the knees of his quality wool breeches are clean. Beneath him is an orderly stack of parcels in various sizes. Little Helmut's father, Karl, pulls the handcart from the front, while his mother, Meta, steers at the back. Like every evening, the Joel family squires the packages to the post office. All day long, Helmut's parents carefully fold laundry and a variety of fabrics, wrapping each piece in durable brown packing paper and addressing them by hand to destinations all over Germany, then binding each with twine. Bright young Helmut loves sitting on the mountain of packages. They squish, releasing air under his weight. Like a little king, he is ferried along on the cushioned chaise of his litter over bumpy cobblestones of 1926 Nuremberg, past St. Lorenz Church and Albrecht Dürer's house to the main post office.

Each week, the pile of parcels on the small handcart grows ever higher. Little Helmut is tasked with steadying the parcels, so they don't tumble to the street. The Joel family apartment is now bursting at the seams with orders, mainly from rural populations. Three years pass, and two dozen employees pack and ship countless parcels every day. At *Landgrabenstraße 46*, the factory building, "*J-O-E-L*" is proudly emblazoned on the chimney spire. While Germany's economy slides into crisis in the early 1930s, the "*Joel Laundry Factory*" flourishes. Six-year-old Helmut moves with his parents to a beautiful villa in the southern part of Nuremberg. He attends the *Uhland School* where he meets Rudi Weber who becomes his best friend. Thick as thieves, the pair spend every day together. Two exceptions prevail: when Helmut has piano lessons with Mrs. Hoffmann, and during religious education classes, when Rudi attends Catholic Catechism and Helmut attends Jewish "*Schul.*" Neither little boy, however, is raised in an especially devout

manner at home. They both celebrate Easter and Christmastide and eat roast pork and sausages, customary in Germany. Some days, Helmut is delivered to school, no longer on his sovereign wooden handcart but by his father's chauffeur. In fair weather Helmut and Rudi meet at the train station and walk together from there. On the way, the lads practice reading. They set rules and take turns pointing out words on public signage. Read it aloud faster and you score a point—most points wins.

“*M-A-R-I-E-N-S-T-R-A-S-S-E*”

Helmut blurts first as they pass Marien Street news kiosk. Rudi, reading from another ambient source of letters, parries and lunges, exclaiming,

“*D-I-E J-U-D-E-N S-I-N-D U-N-S-E-R—*”

Rudi stops short, unable to fathom the kiosk's frontpage news in *Der Stürmer*, above the fold.

“Come on, Helmut, let's move on.” Rudi pulls his friend by the hand, away from the antisemitic headline.

“*MISFORTUNE!*” Helmut wins the point. “*The Jews are our misfortune!*” Completing the sentence triumphantly, Helmut, cheerfully unaware, declares, “That point is mine, Rudi!”

As they walk on, Rudi glances repeatedly at his best friend, trying to detect any hint of resentment on his friend's face, but there is none. Since the age of four, however, Helmut Joel has witnessed annual *Reich* Party rallies with boisterous music and marches with banners and torches. Standing among the onlookers, he and Rudi take it as normal town celebration stuff, even admiring the seemingly brave hometown youths in their brown uniforms. With the years, the marches become more frequent, more orderly, more aggressive. During middle school, Helmut and Rudi's school route takes them past the *Obstmarkt* and *Hauptmarkt*, the fruit market

and main market having recently been renamed “*Adolf-Hitler-Platz*.” Other things change, as well. At school, Helmut and Rudi are no longer allowed to sit next to each other. In the back left corner of the classroom, a quarantine zone is for the four German students who now officially belong to an “inferior race.” They are Jews. During breaks, in the hallways the four are often kicked in the rear by classmates or struck in the head by apple cores.

Heading home through the park, Helmut and Rudi find themselves surrounded by several bellicose young men in brown shirts and trousers, shouting, “Hey! You’re Jews. Jews are not allowed in parks.” To Rudi, who is not Jewish at all, they bark, “You look like a Jew!” Helmut Joel lunges in front of his best friend, shoving the biggest of the group backwards.

“You look like a Jew yourself!” shouts Helmut. Seizing the moment of surprise, he grabs Rudi’s arm, and they run out of the park. Unsure if the gang of brutes still stalk them, they sprint for home, pulling clever feints and detours to lose the thugs. Only when they reach *Holzgartenstraße* do they double over, their ribs searing.

“Look!” Still gulping air, Rudi points to a high wrought-iron gate behind which an ostentatious estate deigns to kiss the street at a cobblestone driveway lined with neatly pruned boxwood all the way to a massive villa. Greek columns guard wide carved doors. Before them in the still air, a swastika flag hangs flaccid on a flagpole, spotlighted by evening sun. “That’s Streicher’s villa.”

Julius Streicher is Nuremberg’s biggest antisemite, appointed *Gauleiter*, leader of the Franconia region of Germany that includes Nuremberg, and above all the fascist is the publisher of *Der Stürmer*, the so-called “*German weekly newspaper for the fight for truth*.” *Stürmer* orders

banned books burned, forbids “real” German citizens from shopping at stores owned by Jews, and forces Jews to clean the streets with toothbrushes.

As the winded adolescent schoolboys catch their breath outside the formidable black iron gate of Villa Streicher, Helmut notices a hand-sized stone on the sidewalk.

“Bad idea, Helmut.” Rudi reads his friend’s mind and yanks him homeward.

On arriving at his own grand estate, Helmut Joel is surprised to see his father’s chauffeur waving as *Herr Schrödel* drives away, the Buick limousine empty of passengers. *Herr* Karl Joel is not usually home before seven in the evening. It’s barely five o’clock. When the maid opens the door for Helmut, she regards him sympathetically and gestures toward the home library door, his father’s habitual evening perch where family tiding are celebrated and discipline meted out. Helmut immediately assumes the latter, wondering, “*What have I done wrong this time?*” He cautiously opens the hardwood doors to the well-appointed family library and peers in. His father’s jacket is draped over the back of an elegant Biedermeier chair where Karl Joel sits with loosened tie. The latest issue of *Der Stürmer* is spread on the expansive desk, Helmut’s mother reading it quietly.

“Am I disturbing you?” Helmut deciphers their blank faces.

“Come in, son.” His father motions him over.

“Is everything okay?”

His mother slides the newspaper toward Helmut. “Read it yourself,” she says softly. She cannot speak its headline.

“*Karl Joel. The Nuremberg laundry Jew.*”

Helmut pauses to look at his worried parents.

“Keep reading!” Karl Joel urges his son.

*“There are misconceptions in Germany about the clothing manufacturer Karl Joel. This company is Jewish through and through. It is owned by Karl Joel, a thoroughbred Jew. He sends thousands of packages throughout Germany every week, including many to numerous party members, and does a huge amount of business. The Jew Joel laughs up his sleeve, he mocks and scoffs at the fact that he can make a fortune from the money of National Socialist-minded Germans. He uses the profits in a Jewish way and holds drinking binges where he has non-Jewish women and girls brought to him...”*

Helmut looks up from the newspaper, exclaiming angrily, “But that’s not true!”

“Go on,” his father instructs gently. “Read.”

*“...This is the Joel laundry factory with its pure-bred Jewish owner. We hope and wish that this request will suffice. We hope and wish that the Jew Joel will soon stop laughing and mocking...”*

Wryly self-deprecating Karl says, “Your father is finally famous throughout the country!”

“But... you’ve never been on a drinking binge. *Have you?* We must tell the *Gauleiter*. I know exactly where he lives.” The boy’s unseasoned truculence launches Helmut to point irately in the direction of the *Gauleiter’s* estate.

Calmly, his mother rests her hands on his. “*Gauleiter* Streicher invents his own truth, Helmut. And he repeats it until everyone believes it. We may need to go somewhere else, my darling.”

*Somewhere else? But what about Rudi? Can he come, too?* Helmut chokes down his questions. It feels selfish to burden his parents with his worries in this difficult situation. The boy remains silent, opting to express his rising storm of emotions at the piano. He plays Beethoven.

The next morning, Helmut's father, Karl Joel boards a Berlin-bound train to visit cloth manufacturer Fritz Tillmann and see about relocating *Joel Laundry* to Germany's capital city.

## Chapter 8

Billy still loves to hear his father play Beethoven on the piano. “*Für Elise*” fills the room as Helmut Joel’s fingers sweep across the keys of the black grand piano. It is one of the most famous pieces by the German composer, written sometime around 1810 in Vienna. Helmut, Billy believes, could have been a virtuoso; he could have become a world-famous pianist and probably would have loved that. The piano has always been the connecting element between the two Joels. That is why Billy asks his father to play now, *While our coffee cools*. Helmut obliges. Barely three minutes later, the performance ends.

“What do you do, son? Do you have a job?” Helmut replaces the red felt cover over the piano keys and closes the lid before he turns, solemn faced, to Billy.

“No. I don’t have a job in the traditional sense.”

“I see.” Helmut disappears into the kitchen to brew more coffee.

Billy stubs his cigarette and kneels by a glass-front credenza to rummage through his father’s vinyl collection, arranged in alphabetical order—*Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Chopin, Debussy, Handel, Haydn*, and *Joel*. Startled, he looks closer at the lineup to be sure he read correctly. After *Handel* and *Haydn* should come “*I*” not “*J*”. *Isn’t there a famous composer whose name starts with “I”?* But Billy sees no “*I*”—“*J*” only, and quite a few. Helmut Joel owns all Billy’s albums—ordered by year, “*Cold Spring Harbor*,” “*Piano Man*,” “*Streetlife Serenade*,” and even his latest LP, “*Turnstiles*.” Once again, Billy’s hands become sweaty. He sits down at the piano, opens the lid and thinks for a moment about where his father stows the red felt key cover. He lays it directly atop the piano, wipes his hands dry on his worn jeans, and begins to play “*Piano Man*.”

“What’s that? A waltz?” asks his father, deadpan, sticking his head out of the kitchen.

“Yes. A waltz. But not from Vienna.”

“Where is it from?” Helmut grins.

“I don’t know. Must be by some mediocre American.”

“Congratulations. People seem to like it. I’ve heard your songs on the radio a few times.”

When Helmut returns with coffee refills, he puts the red felt sheath back on the keyboard and closes the piano lid. His father could probably do this all day long. Billy, on the other hand, has been known to leave his own piano open for weeks, so whenever he walks by it, he can conjure a riff. To outsiders, these few notes seem to betray his mood. *When he hammers the keys loudly in minor chords, it’s best to stay out of his way. When he plays lovely variations, you can get absolutely anything you want from him.*

“My neighbor asked about you. She wanted to know if we’re related.”

“What did you say?”

“Yes, I said. Of course. But one needn’t tell them more than what is essential.”

“You don’t know much more than that, anyway.”

“True. But there was quite a bit about you in those colorful magazines. However, you’re right. We don’t know much about each other. Shall we go for a walk? I’ll show you Vienna.”

“Why do you live here?” asks Billy.

“Why not? Vienna is the world capital of classical music. It always has been. And I—”

He pauses briefly. “I was never really American.”

“What are you?”

“I was born in Germany, so I’m German.”

“But the Germans didn’t treat you well, did they?”

Helmut Joel shrugs. Then, after a short pause, he adds, “If your mother treats you badly, she’s still your mother. Isn’t she?”

“Yes... and the same goes for my father.”

## Chapter 9

*“I hereby kindly inform you that I will be relocating my business operations to Berlin in the coming months, with the exception of the laundry factory, I am therefore regretfully forced to terminate your employment as of June 30, 1934. However, you are free to relocate with the business to Berlin.*

*Sincerely,*

*Karl Joel.”*

After taking this dictation, Miss Krause, Karl Joel’s 25-year-old secretary, is pallid as the bland blouse she wears under a tailored plum twill worsted suit.

“But Herr Director Joel—” Her dictation pencil slips across the serge weave of her skirt as she stands protectively before her boss.

Karl Joel sighs. “This year alone, *Der Stürmer* has published seven hate articles against us. If it were just me, I could take it—let *Gauleiter* Streicher call me a ‘laundry Jew,’ and ‘bloodsucker,’ and a ‘whipper.’ But now he’s attacking my employees and even our customers. We have no alternative.”

“Herr Director, do you *know* for certain that things are any better in Berlin?”

“I went to Berlin. It is safe. Fritz Tillmann, the cloth manufacturer and *Gau* Economic Advisor, worked hard for us, for our relocation to Berlin. He negotiated with Streicher and Mayor Liebel for weeks so that we can move away from—” He tacks, choosing to focus on a hopeful future in a new city unfettered by extremist beliefs, and says decisively, “The *Joel Laundry Factory* will be relocated to Berlin. There is no *Gauleiter* Streicher there, and there the

Nazis are not as aggressive as they are here in Nuremberg. The decision has been made, *Fraulein Krause*. Please, write letters to all employees. Anyone who wants to can come with us at any time. That goes for you, too.”

At the train station, young Helmut stands with his mother, Meta Joel. Confirming what is cited on the manifesto, they count 160 railway cars loaded with *Joel Laundry Factory* goods and inventory departing Nuremberg for their new home in Berlin. Three-quarters of the staff give up home in Nuremberg to follow their revered *Direktor* to the capital of the *Reich*. It is a hot Monday in July and having completed the inventory Karl Joel—who always wears a suit, tie, and hat, even on summer days—strides quickly along the platform to join his family. He hugs his wife and kisses his son’s brow.

“You’ll join me soon. I’ve already found a beautiful villa in Charlottenburg.”

The summer is spent packing the Joel household in Nuremberg’s southern district and loading “*Kind und Kegel*” for transit on trucks. While Helmut’s mother and the maids wrap vases in tissue paper on a Persian carpet in the living room, the boy sits nearby carefully alphabetizing music scores by composer and laying them gently into boxes. He is interrupted only by his best friend, Rudi Weber, dropping by to invite Helmut to accompany him to the big parade for the *Reich* Party Congress taking place at the Zeppelin Field. Any distraction from packing is welcome, and Helmut finds military parades quite impressive. Reluctantly, his mother agrees to let the boys wander for the afternoon. Even after she cautions them many times to be careful out there, she remains at the open front door watching until Helmut and Rudi are out of sight.

Nuremberg is unrecognizable. The Gothic architecture of the Medieval city is all but erased under a shroud of red, black, and white. Saluting countless swastika flags, ten thousand

soldiers march on the Zeppelin Field—brown uniforms in tall black boots goosestepping in precise rows. Helmut and Rudi are overawed by the force and stomping militant rhythm of it all.

That day in Berlin, on the prison guard's radio, Karl Joel follows the spectacle. The liminal broadcast of the *Reich* Party Congress and the *Führer's* entry into Nuremberg penetrates even the iron doors of his cell. For the third time, "*Joel, the laundry Jew*" has been arrested. No reason is ever given. And this time, too, Berlin's *Gau* Economic Advisor Fritz Tillmann comes to Karl Joel's aid. And, with reliable German thoroughness, Tillmann presents reams of cross-referenced documents, each signed, stamped, and dated. Upon Karl Joel's release from prison, Tillman collects the entrepreneur for whom he has gone to great lengths to relocate to Berlin.

"Listen, Joel," As they walk to the savior's waiting chauffeured *Daimler*, Tillman jests, "Did I bring you all the way to Berlin so you can lie around in jail catching up on your beauty sleep? We need your economic contribution here, my friend!"

Karl Joel forces a wan smile and slumps into Tillman's limousine. "*Tannenbergallee 2-4, Berlin Charlottenburg, bitte*," he requests gratefully. The Joels' new home is impressive. Twelve rooms, a large garden where two fox terriers tear around yapping. A maid refreshes linens, a cook prepares meals, a gardener grooms lawns and flowerbeds planted strategically so some flower or other is timed to bloom right up until the hardiest winter shrub, the holly, set their blood red berries for the holiday season. And outside the Joel manse, Karl's elegant *Buick* chauffeured by loyal Herr Schrödel, awaits, ever mission-ready.

After the Joel family settles in Berlin, Rudi visits Helmut at least one weekend a month. In winter, they spend whole afternoons sledding down the small hill in the back garden. To optimize the run, they pour eight buckets of cold water on the crusty snow, so the sledding track

is slick, enabling them to blaze down twice as fast. At the end of Rudi's last visit before Christmas, best friends must bid farewell. At four o'clock, the truck from *Joel's Laundry*, which travels between Berlin and Nuremberg three times a week, is scheduled to fetch Rudi at the gate of the Joel villa. For safety reasons, Rudi is allowed to ride shotgun beside the driver, and the delivery truck bears no identifying logo or signage. Inconspicuous travel is most secure. An hour remains before Rudi is to be collected by the driver, dark clouds thicken, and with December's early dusk, poor visibility is certain; they expect the driver to be late. So, the boys run off to the north end of the Joel's gated estate, exploring. Armed with snowballs, Helmut dashes exuberantly after Rudi who ducks and dodges from the inevitable fuselage. When Helmut catches up to Rudi at the far fence abutting the forest, the two wrestle in the snow.

Suddenly, Rudi freezes. "*Shhh!*" He points toward the fence.

From the forest beyond it, the boys hear men singing loud marching songs. Torches flicker between the trees. These are not merely young soldiers in training. The group is known as *Hitler Jugend* aka Hitler Youth; they march by in aggressive lockstep on a road through the woods. Still as icicles, Helmut and Rudi crouch lower in the snowbank observing the young Nazis goosestepping by. Now it's clear what the chilling lyrics of the marching song convey:

"...when Jewish blood splatters from the knife..."

## Chapter 10

The blonde cannot be more than 23 years old. Cropped hair combed neatly to the side, the young man's stature is not imposing. His dark overcoat lapel boasts a swastika pin in its *boutonnière*.

"*Heil Hitler*," he cheerfully calls out to Karl Joel

In that moment, Karl is stepping out of his chauffeured *Buick* in the courtyard of the Joel company headquarters in Berlin-Wedding. Dozens of trucks drive in, are quickly loaded, and immediately depart the sprawling establishment. Curiously, no transport vehicle bears the company name. Karl Amson Joel is prohibited from placing advertisements of any kind, including his trucks' signage. And all parcels shipped by his firm must be marked with a "*J*" denoting not "*Joel*" but "*Jew*." Despite such impediments imposed by the Nazi regime, his company still generates a million Reichsmarks in sales. Per month.

To Karl, Fritz Tillmann introduces the Nazi as young and motivated. "A good friend from the Gau Chamber of Commerce and, an excellent dressage rider, to boot."

"Good afternoon," Karl Joel replies dryly, returning from lunch at home with Meta.

"Are you just now arriving from your lovely home?" asks Neckermann, having often admired the imposing Joel estate. "I see myself living in such a palace."

Too polite to refute the unexpected guest, Karl Joel dispatches Chauffeur Schrödel, instructing him to return with the *Buick* at close of day. Walking toward his headquarters main door, Karl listens to the continued nattering between his two Nazi visitors. Upon entering, Tillmann immediately leads the way and begins his tour of the *Joel Laundry Factory*.

“This is *our* workshop, Mister Neckermann. The hard-working German women pack and ship parcels containing every conceivable type of textile to destinations throughout Germany,” Tillmann explains proudly to Josef Neckermann.

With an authoritative nod, Neckermann greets factory employees, “*Heil* Hitler.” As Karl Joel follows behind Tillmann and Neckermann, he notices Tillmann repeatedly refers to “*our*” factory floor and “*our*” production capacity. The pronoun does not correspond to reality. With his wife, Meta, Karl Joel founded this company and owns it—the largest of its kind in all of Germany. But what is truth in times like these?

Seventeen years earlier, the Joels’ relatives fought for Germany as Germans in The Great War. Yet, all of a sudden, Karl is no longer considered a true German. Instead, a religion that he himself did not assiduously practice, now renders him and his family second-class citizens. Now, they are to blame—for misery, poverty, inflation, and soon, for WWII. The outlandish claims are repeated so often and with such intense vitriol that average German folk believe them.

“May I?” Tillmann’s question is more a statement. He proceeds past three administrators’ desks and Miss Krause, through the large double doors of Karl Joel’s office. “The director’s office. Please enter, Herr Neckermann,” The *Gau* Economic Advisor holds open the door for Josef Neckermann, then lights up a cigar from Karl’s burlwood humidor, and seats himself comfortably at Karl’s desk. With an inviting gesture, Tillmann offers Neckermann and Joel two narrow visitor chairs in front of *Herr Direktor*’s desk.

Miss Krause, the able secretary who has followed her director from Nuremberg to Berlin, follows them into the room. Stymied, she looks back and forth between the three men. “May I

offer the gentlemen some coffee?" she asks diplomatically, looking to her boss seated where she normally takes dictation.

"Please, Miss Krause," replies Karl Joel, further embarrassed when Tillmann leans back, puts his suede-shod feet up on Karl's desk, and crosses his legs.

"So, my dear Neckermann." Fritz Tillmann smiles. "What do you think of *our* magnificently lucrative operation?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking. It speaks to your leverage with the community, that you managed to bring this company to Berlin," replies young Neckermann.

Karl Joel speaks up. "I don't understand, gentlemen."

Tillmann interrupts immediately, "Joel, you know I rescued you from Nuremberg, and we here in Berlin are a little more lenient, shall we say, when dealing with your kind. But the situation isn't getting any easier, and you need to think of something. People don't buy from Jews anymore, and you can already see that in your buckling sales figures." Tillmann raises an index finger admonishing Karl Joel whose heart races faster. "It may well be that you will soon have to take an Aryan into your management team, and—let's be honest, Joel—would you want your neighbors gossiping because your mailed parcels have 'Jew' printed on them? You have to understand, people prefer to shop elsewhere. You have to do something and soonest." Tillmann claps his hands together at Karl as if to motivate him. "My friend Neckermann here is an outstanding young entrepreneur, a *Reichs* Party member with excellent contacts at the very top."

"I'm not selling," Joel feigns placid disinterest, and stands to show them the door.

The two other German men in the room smile smugly at each other. "As you wish, Joel." Tillmann swings his legs off the table.

The two other German men in the room rise. Glib Neckermann buttons the top button of his dark overcoat, and brays, “I’m young. Time is on my side. *Heil* Hitler!”

Two Aryan men leave Karl Joel’s office, knocking Miss Krause carrying in a laden coffee tray. The doors hang open. Cautiously, she peeks in at Karl still sitting on the *dictation* chair, his shoulders slumped.

That evening at home in Berlin’s fine Charlottenburg neighborhood, Karl closes himself inside his library, its door tight but never locked to his family. Out in the hallway, his son Helmut paces to and fro, eavesdropping on his parents. After two hours, he gleans that they are upset. *But why?* Helmut hovers, ready to high-tail it, lest his parents open the door and catch him spying on them. Through the keyhole, the boy watches. The library walls are lined with imported tiger maple panels reaching up to the ceiling. Flanking the room, sturdy wooden caracol steps spiral up to a catwalk balcony where the upper rows of books sequester the rarest tomes, as well as banned non-fiction and fiction novels, world literature, poetry, travelogues, and atlases. This sacred family room contains all the knowledge in the world, 12-year-old Helmut is sure. Schiller, Kleist, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Jules Verne, Büchner, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Erich Kästner, and a full set of Shakespeare’s *oeuvres*. “*EX LIBRIS. JOEL*” is stamped on the first blank page of every book. The great hall of wisdom instills contentment in Helmut, except that now the adolescent can see his parents’ tense faces.

Recoiling when his mother suddenly approaches the door, Helmut darts into the music salon several rooms away. From inside the bench, he grabs a music score and sits at the piano, pretending to study the notes. Seconds later, his mother rushes in.

“What are you doing, Helmut dear?”

The boy flashes sheet music for Chopin's "*Fantaisie Impromptu*" at her and drops his guilty eyes back down to the page just as fast.

"But you're not playing?" She's onto him.

"I didn't want to disturb you and father." That is true. "So, I'm trying to memorize the notes. Can I play now?"

"No. Your father is waiting for you in the library."

A few weeks later, the 12-year-old in suit and tie with a small gentleman's hat, grips a nubuck suitcase as he reluctantly boards a train car at the temporary *Platform 4* of Berlin's *Zoologischer Garten* Station. The Olympic Games are taking place in a year, and all the renovation work on the station must be completed by then.

"Come, my darling, you'll enjoy it there." Teary eyed, his mother settles her boy into his *courette* compartment before she exits to the platform to wave him off. "The journey to Munich will take eight hours. There you must transfer to the St. Gallen train." In Switzerland, Helmut Joel will attend *Institut am Rosenberg*, founded nine years earlier and renowned as one of the strictest boarding schools in Switzerland. "You'll be safe there, son," Helmut thinks of his father Karl Joel's parting words in the library at home which still rankle.

*What of my parents' safety?* The first puffs of steam expel from the locomotive, darkening the sky above Berlin station—a harbinger of the foulness afoot. When the locomotive lurches forth with a loud squeak, Helmut slams open the window to stretch his arm out to grab his mother where she cries on the platform. Waving her linen handkerchief, she runs alongside the train as fast as she can; Helmut grabs for her hand, snatching only her monogrammed hanky

as the modern machine pulses away faster and faster, belching a thick, black column of smoke into German skies.

Newly twelve years of age, Helmut will remember this moment for the rest of his life as the first time he ever weeps uncontrollably.

## Chapter 11

The gracious circular stairwell to the upper apartments is cool and dark. Were you able to fly down it at high speed, you would surely feel dizzy. Leading the way past it toward the building's exit to the street, Helmut Joel's hand rests casually on its chocolate lacquered handrail. Billy, in his Ray Bans, follows with both hands stuffed in his pockets. Helmut explains that the dense old horse-hair plaster walls take a long time to warm up in spring and never quite adjust to the temperature outdoors, granting inhabitants a reasonably cool climb up on market days. In autumn, on the other hand, when it gets cold outside, inside, summer's accumulated warmth holds well into winter within the protective walls.

Outside, Billy's father points out a small church two houses down. "Over five hundred years ago, winegrowers built that house of worship." Billy nods, listening, as Helmut shifts gears. "A rabbi says to God, 'Help, my son has become a Christian!' God replies, 'Don't worry about it. Mine has too.'"

Billy interrupts, adding, "The rabbi asks, 'And what did you do?'"

Helmut immediately replies, "I wrote a *New Testament*."

Billy recalls that on Long Island, at age nine or ten, a neighbor girl had asked him his religion. Billy had shrugged, *no idea*. At home, Rosalind had set him straight. So, the next day, Billy had informed the nosey child that he is Jewish. Agog, the little blonde had exclaimed, "Oh my God, you'll grow a horn on your forehead." For many weeks thereafter, little Billy had stood in front of the mirror and meticulously inspected every inch between his hairline and eyebrows, searching for the first nub of a sprouting unicorn horn.

With a spine-chilling screech, two bright red tram cars of Line #38 shoot out. Like a hissing snake, it banks a sharp left at Grinzinger Allee and a few teenagers with school bags jump off the rear of the second car.

“Come on. That’s ours,” says Helmut, picking up his pace.

Nearing the yellow Himmelstrasse apartment house, the train slows. With the ease of a squirrel, the 50-year-old leaps into the tram as it slowly starts rolling away. Billy chucks his cigarette, pushes his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose, and clambers after his father, as the tram picks up speed. At the small blue validation box, Helmut inserts two tickets he’d purchased in anticipation of Billy’s arrival. A *click-click* confirms the moment each ticket is stamped with the tram number, the day of the week, and the time. Sitting down beside Billy, Helmut watches his son looking out the window with interest.

“Wasn’t everything here full of Nazis thirty years ago?”

“Why *was*?” Helmut replies.

Billy turns to him in surprise.

“Once a Nazi, always a Nazi.” Helmut advises wryly.

“But we’re Jews.”

“Yes, and we’ll be careful not to rub that in everyone’s face.”

Some 30 minutes later, the train disappears below street level and comes to a stop inside a circular terminal.

“Schottentor,” a tinny male voice from the loudspeakers announces, “End of the line. All passengers please disembark.”

“We get out here, before it takes us right back where we came from,” instructs Helmut.

“Now we’re in the *first* district, where I have something to show you and then there’s a surprise for you.”

“*Surprise? What kind of surprise?*” Billy is dying to ask, but he holds back his childlike merriment. He knows too well that when his father says “surprise” it means he has no intention of saying anything further until he is good and ready. Pressing his father will only elicit a formidable scowl. So, Billy walks on like an obedient child beside his father, anonymous as the son of Karl Joel. In Vienna, no one recognizes Billy; were it New York, London, or Paris, he would be thronged for autographs. Here, in the easternmost city of the Western world, the star is free to be just his father’s boy. He wonders if he is less popular here, or whether people simply don’t expect a music icon besides Beethoven or Mozart to ghost through downtown Vienna on a Tuesday morning. In a magnificent pedestrian zone, a teenage boy approaches, hoisting his school bag over his shoulder and smoking behind sunglasses. The young man’s hair is flash-frozen with gel into a kind of Elvis coif; he stops, takes a drag, fixing his gaze on the Joels.

“A truant on his way to the coffee house,” Helmut Joel opines, and turns Billy down a small side street where a humbly clad old woman in a headscarf is sweeping the street with a broom made of straw.

“Why does this poor old woman have to sweep the street at her age?” Billy asks Helmut.

“Why poor?” his father replies.

“She must be over seventy. Why must she work at such an advanced age?”

“Maybe she wants to work, to have a job and still be a useful member of society,” Helmut replies with certain authority. Billy glances back at her. She doesn’t look tired, sick, or

exhausted. The Joels continue on, as if they are Viennese, and casually pass by the St. Stephen's Cathedral, with Helmut informing his son, "1245... the Giant Gate was built in 1245."

Surprised by its age, Billy pauses to take in its magnificence, then struggles to keep up with his father's quick pace, managing to walk alongside him as they pass the imposing cathedral and through a doorway. After a few meters, it turns out that the doorway gives access to a narrow cobblestone alley. Here, the houses look more ancient than in the previous city district. They stop in front of the house at *Domgasse Nummer 5*.

"We are here," Helmut announces. Billy looks at his father questioningly. Above the doorway, a sign inscribed "*Figarohaus*" identifies the old building. "Nowhere else in this city did Wolfgang Amadé Mozart compose as much as he did here inside *Figarohaus*."

## Chapter 12

*Der Führer's* plane from Vienna lands on time at Berlin-Tempelhof Airport. The city is in a dervish frenzy. It seems there are no longer any individual citizens, but one writhing mass of humanity. It is as if every man, woman, and ephebic child has been swallowed up by a hateful ecstasy, eclipsing any doubts they may have had about the new leadership. Today, in central Berlin, slogging through *Wilhelmstrasse* is impossible. Thousands of people crowd the old *Reichs* Chancellery Plaza at *Number 77*, so Karl Joel's chauffeur knows to detour via the Brandenburg Gate. As the *Buick* gains distance, the Berlin folks' chant to their *lieber Führer* fades, "Come out, or we won't go home today!" There is no sign of the mad spiral ceasing on this Tuesday, March 15, 1938, even though *Karnival* ended two weeks before. Increasing numbers of shop windows display signs, each more dystopian than the next, like, "*German Business*," "*Purely German Goods*," and, more bizarrely, "*Guaranteed German Fish and German Flowers*." The population of Berlin appears to have been uniformed in Nazi brown and black. Individualized clothing styles are scarcely sold anymore. From the Hitler Youth to the League of German Girls, the *Wehrmacht*, the SS, and the SA, Germans on this fateful Tuesday are armed to the teeth with toxic ideals. Presenting themselves in dull uniforms, otherwise-good Germans respectably disguise their conscience, while the idealism of youths sluices feverishly—*richtig ordentlich*—into the Nazi Gomorrah.

As the *Buick* drives further away from *Joel Laundry Factory*, Karl Joel having clocked-out early that day, fears for his adopted city in pernicious uproar. He had so hoped that the cosmopolitan spirit of the Olympics and friendliness toward other nations would continue after the Games. What did not stop was the incessant automation of the Nazi conveyor belt, a heinous

machine riling the masses with rallies, marches, celebrations sodden in violence and hatred—distractions disallowing folks time to reflect and come to their senses. Signs posted throughout the community, outside bars and restaurants, public venues, and at park benches, decry the unreadable: “*Jews not welcome,*” and “*Not for Jews*”. For several summers now, the words “*No Jews allowed!*” sully the entrance to the Wannsee outdoor swimming pool. Karl Joel is at the brink. Today, his and every company is forced to broadcast Hitler’s speech to employees, over loudspeakers in the factory halls. On the streets, on the radio, and in all the shops, *Der Führer* is barking at the nation. In this moment, there is no escaping this man’s hellfire and brimstone, even in the back seat of the luxurious *Buick* where Karl Joel reads the newspaper. In it, an advertisement catches his eye:

*“Travel agency on Meinekestraße.*

*Licensed emigration agent.*

*To South America, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile.”*

“Turn left after the Victory Column, if you please, Schrödel. I need to go to *Meinekestraße Nummer 8,*” Karl instructs his driver.

With the newspaper advert in his hand, Karl Joel enters the travel agency, where he is repeatedly asked whether he is emigrating.

“No,” he replies flatly. He is clear, he does not want to book an emigration trip, but a holiday cruise to South America that, in just under a year, will set sail from Southampton, crossing the Atlantic first to Cuba, then Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico. Finally, the luxury liner will continue on to New York and from there back to Europe.

The proprietor at the service desk, whose girth grossly exceeds the tailored waistline of his uniform, demonstrates his personal allegiance to his nation with his moustache matching that in the framed portrait on his office wall, the same portrait now seen throughout Germany in every public and private institution hoping to survive the reign of the lunatic dictator. The travel agency's obese proprietor, fancying himself a perspicacious authority flushing out suspicious pariahs, again asks Karl whether this is definitely not an emigration trip, as one would need different forms for that. Now, Karl Joel shakes his head no, as if bemused by the gouty service provider, and explains with neither irritation nor excitement, but as if speaking to an addled child, "I want to give this trip to my beloved wife as a wedding anniversary present."

"Then why are you booking two first-class cabins?" comes the shrewd inquisitor.

"Our son, Helmut, is graduating from school in a few months. A fine student. The trip is also a gift for him. Incidentally, if it's not an inconvenience to you, sir, at this time, I should like to pay the entire amount in cash."

"Well, in that case..." A gloating smile breaks on the travel agent's face as he rapaciously confirms, "I will issue tickets right away and wish you and your family an impressive journey. The *SS Arandora Star* is one of the most luxurious ships in the *British Blue Star Line* and was converted from a cargo ship into one of the safest and best cruise ships in the world just a few years ago." Karl Joel places the unbelievable sum of 600 *Reichsmarks* on the table—it is 100 *Reichsmarks* more than the bill amounts to. "But that's too much!"

"*Trinkgeld*," replies Karl, connoting the extra amount is a tip for the podgy Nazi's next *Biergarten Stammtisch*, "For you. My wife will ask me if I saw to it that our holiday shall go smoothly. You'll kindly save me that husbandly mortification, good sir? Oh, and no one but you

should find our private family celebration of interest. *Heil Hitler!*” Karl tucks the tickets in the inner pocket of his black cashmere overcoat and returns to his *Buick*, where his driver waits.

“*Heil Hitler* and thank you!” echoes into the street from the travel agency owner.

When Karl Joel arrives home, his wife, Meta, is reading their son’s letter from Switzerland for the fifth time.

“Helmut is doing well. He misses us and Berlin and Rudi. His schedule is too strict and structured, he says, but his grades are excellent, and he’s looking forward to graduation and coming back home to Berlin. What he misses most is not us but playing the piano.”

She laughs through her tears and reaches to wipe her eyes, but Karl blots her face with his kerchief, kisses her, then retreats to the library with his finest suit jacket appropriate for being seen traveling aboard a luxury cruise liner. With the help of his gold letter opener, he carefully slices open the seams inside both pockets. He slips the three tickets through the left pocket and into the lining, and through the right pocket and into the lining, he hides the fake passports that Miss Krause was able to obtain for him from an acquaintance. Then he calls the maid to him. While he watches, she must restitch the seams inside each pocket so the hidden items are inaccessible within the lining.

“Over sixty percent of Jewish businesses in Berlin have already been Aryanized,” Karl Joel tells his wife that evening over dinner.

Meta sighs, raising her glass to him and takes a large sip of claret. “Karl, the time has come. Either you sell now, or they’ll just take the company away from us.”

Her husband slides his plate aside, unable to eat a bite. Nodding, he stands, lays his cloth napkin on the damask seat cushion, and says quietly, “I know, Meta.”

The next day, Tillmann mews into the phone, “I’m glad you’ve finally come to your senses, Joel.” He leans back and scratches lint from his navel with his finger. “I’ll come over to your place today after lunch with Neckermann.”

This time Karl Joel presides, seated in his own chair behind his desk. Tillmann and Neckermann sit in the narrow visitor chairs before him. On this day, Neckermann wears a Nazi uniform.

“So, what do you have in mind, Joel?” Blue eyes flash above confident smiles.

“Take your time to look through this.” From a deep desk drawer, Karl Joel reveals an orderly compilation of documents. “Here you have our sales figures, developments over the last few years, costs, staffing levels, and profit breakdowns. Based on the auditor’s calculations, the *Joel Laundry Manufacturing Company* is currently worth around twelve million *Reichsmarks*.”

Grinning banshees Tillmann and Neckermann turn to each other before incendiary Tillmann drops a lit match on any chance of ever resuscitating his former kinsman’s trust. “Joel, do you know where you would be today without me?”

In the interest of Meta’s and his own safety, Karl ignores the question, and continues shuffling through his documents seeking the valuation report he himself prepared for his company. “Ah, here it is!”

Josef Neckermann takes it upon himself answer Tillmann’s question. “The Joels would be in the ashtray of *Gauleiter* Julius Streicher’s *Daimler* in Nuremberg.” Callous laughter chases the cruel comeback, and Neckermann’s tone turns a darker shade of dour, declaring, “And, not a penny more than two million Reichsmarks shall I pay for his company!” Two Nazis stand. “And as a gift, we let you take all your papers with you.”

They leave Karl's office. This time they close the door behind them.

### Chapter 13

“Mozart was simply not of this world. His music comes from somewhere else,” remarks Billy as he and Helmut leave *Figarohaus* where the genius Salzburg composer lived and composed for several years in Vienna. “Beethoven, on the other hand, was a human being. He fought against himself, against others. Against God. Against everyone. He squeezed every musical note out of his brain with all his might.”

“He, too, lived in this city,” says Helmut over his shoulder, adding, “Many houses in Vienna are marked as *Beethovenhaus* or *Beethoven apartments*.”

“Is that why you moved to Vienna? To be closer to his music?” Billy catches up with his father as they pass the south side of St. Stephen’s Cathedral.

The father considers his son’s question. Helmut Joel has never been a man of many words. Somehow, it is tattooed all over his face that he has lived through so much that he is left speechless. Billy would love to know what those scars are and what caused them. His father looks older than his years belie. Yet, he seems like nothing can faze him. Some people you throw a question at, and the answers just pour out of them. His father, on the other hand, reminds Billy of the gumball machine on the corner in front of them, where an eight-year-old is struggling with the coin-op. You put a coin in, turn the wheel over and over, but nothing comes out. You put another coin in, and then another, until eventually a hard, red, possibly chewable sugar ball appears in the dispenser. It’s much smaller than all the others. Maybe it tastes better or much worse than the others. You don’t know. Yet, you risk it.

Billy risks another question: “Would you have liked to be a pianist?”

“Yes,” Helmut replies immediately. “But the times I grew up in did not allow me to. After that... I was too old. Beethoven composed the *Fifth*, *Sixth*, and *Eighth Symphonies*, as well as *Fidelio*, here.” Billy and his father find themselves standing in front of the Pasqualati House at *Mölkerbastei 8*, on the former city wall of Vienna. Baroque and Biedermeier houses side by side in a dense row look exactly the same today as they did in Beethoven’s time. “Did you want to be like Beethoven?” Helmut wants to know.

“No. I like playing with the piano. And on the piano. But I never wanted to be a pianist.”

“The newspaper said you’re the *Piano Man*,” his father counters.

“You read that?” asks Billy.

“It was impossible to miss.”

Ever since his big international breakthrough some years before, Billy has wondered whether his father hears or reads anything about him. *Would he be impressed, or even proud?* And would he possibly get in touch at some point? Billy had requested that all mail his record company received for him should be forwarded to him directly, hoping beyond hope that a letter from his father might be among the fan mail. Apparently, Helmut Joel knew just about everything, but still had chosen not to get in touch.

“I’ve recorded other songs. Not just ‘*Piano Man*’.” He is almost a little self-protective.

“We were with Mozart. We were with Beethoven. That’s all in the past. Now we’re looking to the future.” Helmut Joel walks down a narrow path between a few trees onto the world-famous *Ringstrasse*. Cars in banana yellow and baby blue wind their way counter-clockwise in three lanes, with red trams clanging their bells to clear the way. He points to the left side of the street. “That’s the university.” Minutes of silence pass. “That’s the Votive Church.”

Billy takes in the imposing buildings with respect, but wonders what his father meant by “*Now we’re looking to the future.*” He wants to ask but doesn’t risk disturbing the peace because he doesn’t expect an answer anyway.

“Here, we’re on *Dr. Karl Lueger Ring*. Named after a highly antisemitic mayor,” Helmut Joel continues in the style of a tight-lipped tour guide.

“It’s nice to be here,” Billy interjects dryly.

“But now we must hurry. It’s high time you met someone.”

## Chapter 14

Rosalind Joel never meets another man. Since Helmut Joel leaves shortly after Billy's eighth birthday, there is only one male in the Joel household, and his name is William Martin Joel. Sometimes there are a few minor arguments, but unlike all his friends' homes, there is no strict patriarch in the Long Island household of Billy and his mother.

In 1965, teenagers at Hicksville High School are tormented with trigonometry, algebra, and statistics. Once again, Billy sneaks out of class and secretly goes to the music room, where there is a beautiful *Baldwin* grand piano that sounds nothing like the "dirty" old white *Lester* at home. On it, Billy begins to play *Tchaikovsky's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1*. He plays the piano chords and hums the orchestral parts, all while sensing that someone is standing very close behind him. Sensing a stranger's breath, he stops playing and turns.

"What are you doing?" Chuck Arnold the music teacher at Hicksville asks.

"I have to practice this piece by Tchaikovsky."

The teacher tilts his head in disbelief. "You have no idea what you're doing. Where are you supposed to be right now?"

"Trig... trigonometry," Billy stammers. "Please don't tell the principal. I already have so many problems."

Thoughtfully, Mr. Arnold rests his chin in his hand and seizes an opportunity to enlighten a young mind. "On one condition. From now on, you'll attend my Music History class."

"Deal!" Billy stands to shake Chuck Arnold's hand.

“*It’s been a hard day’s night,*” blares from Billy’s record player that night at home as he recounts to his two best friends, “And the best part is that Mr. Arnold is on the jury of almost every band competition on Long Island!”

“How cool is that!” His friends agree.

For twelve years, Billy’s mother forces her son to go to Miss Frances’ piano lessons, and after his eighth birthday, rain or shine every day. She saves up the money for lessons from her own pocket. Now that he’s in high school he has finally reached the point at which it’s starting to be fun. He no longer needs music books and doesn’t have to practice piano sonatas to perfection. He can play almost any melody he hears, create variations, add surprising embellishments, or simply leave out bits. The most important thing is that it goes down really well with the girls. If there’s a piano anywhere in a room at a party, Billy is already sitting in front of it, playing. Moth to flame, within moments, the first girl leans languidly against the piano, listening to *him*. Then a second and third follow suit. During long school breaks, he begins to perform “*Hound Dog*” written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller in 1952; Billy is inspired by Elvis Presley’s 1956 take on it. At first concentrating deeply on the R&B classic, the aspiring young Joel lets his head sink forward, only to throw it back dramatically with a casual, sweeping movement then he strikes the keys passionately. At least twenty girls start screaming. Billy’s goal is clear. He’s going to be a star. Just like the Beatles. Late one evening, he sits down at his desk and writes them a letter:

*“You guys are so cool. I want to be a rock star too. How did you do it? What do I need to pay attention to? And most importantly, what do I have to do to be as good as you guys? Best regards from Long Island,*

*Yours,*

*William Martin Joel.”*

A few weeks later, a reply from the Beatles’ management office in New York City arrives on the kitchen table.

*“Thank you for your letter to the Beatles. You can purchase a Beatles towel, a Beatles cap, Beatles tshirts in three different sizes, and the popular Beatles coffee mug.”*

Chalking it up to the nature of the business, Billy moves on, spending every night with his boys in the rehearsal room. They compose, play, and sing until two or three in the morning. School takes a back seat. Only Chuck Arnold’s Music History class does Billy never miss. Instructed to write his final paper on Richard Wagner, Billy asks Mr. Arnold, “Why not Mozart? Or Beethoven? Chopin and Debussy? Why Wagner of all people?” Grumbling, he starts in on the assignment. His detailed analysis ends thirty pages later with:

*“The music is better than it sounds.”*

Mr. Arnold hands him his certificate for the class. This is his first and only scholastic certification. Due to ditching English class too often, Billy Joel is denied his high school diploma. Nevertheless, his music teacher assures Billy with appreciation, “You should become a musician.” Billy is stunned. It’s the first time an adult has ever made such a suggestion to him. Rosalind Joel, too, is stunned, albeit not in a favorable way. Billy comforts his mother with an aspirational poster he draws himself, and sticks on his bedroom door:

*“Columbia Records instead of Columbia University.”*

## Chapter 15

*“Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Richard Wagner.*

*Conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängle.”*

The poster advertises the performance at the *Staatsoper Unter den Linden*. Directly below it, a Berlin advisory cautions,

*“Warning: Jews and pickpockets.”*

Karl Joel is relieved that his son is safe in Switzerland. His wife does not dare leave the house anymore, especially since the Gestapo put up a sign on the Joel family’s front gate:

*“Attention. Jews live on this property.”*

Her husband could be arrested again at any moment, and then what would happen to her? And today, a speech by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels is being broadcast over public loudspeakers throughout the city. Goebbels’ diatribe echoes across entire neighborhoods, “... Beware, for one day our patience will run out and then the Jews’ insolent mouths will be silenced...” On this day in Berlin, it is not by their clothing or appearance that Jews can be recognized, but by their posture. Innocent men, women, and children walk with their heads bowed, eyes downcast, moving along the edge of the street—granting wide berth to non-Jews—then quickly disappearing around corners. Their attempt to be inconspicuous is conspicuous.

*Dresdner Bank* spreads the word among its customers in the textile industry that Karl Joel wants to sell. Mistakenly, he believes that a larger selection of interested parties will increase his bargaining power. After all, he still has a monthly turnover of one million *Reichsmarks* and 850,000 consistent paying customers throughout Germany. But Karl Joel himself is no longer allowed to negotiate on anyone’s behalf. An Aryan commissioner must be appointed to take his

place in the sales talks. The commissioner assigned to him is his *friend* Fritz Tillmann. The potential buyer is Josef Neckermann from Würzburg, a member of the *Reiter SA* since 1933.

On July 11, 1938, Karl Joel is summoned to the office of Neckermann's lawyer to sign the purchase agreement. Joel is to receive the equivalent of a little more than two months' turnover: 2.3 million *Reichsmarks* for his empire that his estimates tally at over 12 million, not factoring all assets. He knows his only other alternative is far more grim, so he deploys his solid gold fountain pen he keeps on his person, in his finest suitcoat's breast pocket. Hidden deeper inside the lining are his family's new fake passports and tickets for the prepaid *holiday* voyage to the Caribbean. The nib of his pen touches the signatory line, but he stops.

“What guarantees do I have that I will actually receive the purchase price?”

“If I were you, I'd worry about my own security!” The attorney, who, incidentally, is Neckermann's father-in-law, snarls harshly.

Outgunned and outnumbered, Karl Joel remains silent and signs away his life's work.

Josef Neckermann takes the contract in his hand, blows three times on the wet signature, and regards the gentleman who under duress, is making him exquisitely rich. “Don't worry! I'm a man of my word. We'll meet tomorrow at three o'clock in my suite at *Hotel Kaiserhof* on Kaiser Wilhelmplatz. You know... where Göring celebrated his wedding three years ago. Or weren't you invited?” Bellicose laughter spews from Nazi sympathizers at the conference table. “Anyway, we'll discuss all the payment details tomorrow. *Heil* Hitler!”

Karl Joel leaves the law firm feeling depressed. Berlin is cloudy today, its temperature 20 degrees Celsius. It is pleasant enough to walk home, so he sends his driver away, and, because it is unclear to him whether he is even allowed to use the *Buick* now that rights ownership is

transferred to Neckermann. Several times as Karl makes his way home, he must hide in the shade of a tree or behind a hedge when marching units, police officers, or uniformed men approach. When at last, he arrives home, night has fallen. At the door, his wife collapses into his arms.

“I was so scared for you,” says Meta Joel, her eyes puddling.

“Everything’s fine.” He kisses her on the forehead. “Is anyone else still at work in the kitchen or upstairs?”

“No. I sent the ladies home,” Meta replies.

“That’s good. We’ll take four suitcases and pack. No mementos, only small valuables—cash, jewelry, watches. But make sure it’s not visible when you open the suitcase. Everything must be hidden... stitched into pockets and linings and your skirt hems, and lingerie.”

All night long, the two of them pack and unpack the suitcases, discussing what to take with them, Meta stitching valuables inside clothing, bags, and suitcases. The next morning at half past seven sharp, the Joels’ trusted chauffeur, Herr Schrödel, stands at the ready to open the rear passenger door of the *Buick*. Karl Joel remains at the front door.

“Mr. Schrödel, until yesterday you were an employee of *Joel Laundry*. That company no longer exists. It has been replaced by the *Josef Neckermann Clothing and Laundry Factory*. I am therefore sorry to say that I cannot require your services.”

Schrödel tips his cap and says, “*Herr Direktor* Joel, everyone has other things to worry about today, and I haven’t received any official information or instructions. Therefore, I am at your disposal today, just as I was yesterday.”

“Good.” Karl Joel nods gratefully and comes out to pat his loyal driver on the shoulder. “I have to meet with Neckermann in the *Kaiserhof* at three o’clock.”

“In case you are still planning to travel on holiday in the near future, I just wanted to mention that today would be a good day for it. If you wish, I could take your esteemed wife and vacation luggage to the train station and then wait for you at the rear exit of the *Kaiserhof*.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Schrödel. Please do pick up Mrs. Joel and the suitcases for our holiday voyage at two o’clock.”

“Very well, sir. If you don’t mind, I’ll wait here outside your door in the meantime in the event an unexpected need arises.”

Joel nods, sensing his driver knows more than he is letting on. “I owe you a debt of gratitude, Mr. Schrödel.”

At two o’clock sharp, the *Buick* sets off loaded with four suitcases and Mrs. Joel in the back seat. Meta turns around one last time and watches her home grow smaller and smaller through the rear window. Schrödel hands her a fresh cotton handkerchief of his own. She dabs her eyes. From Grunewald, they pass through Charlottenburg to *BerlinMitte* and *Bahnhof Zoo*.

Karl Joel having set out from the house when the sun was high, stops by his bank safe deposit box to collect a few more valuables that fit with minimal lumps in the pockets of his suit. And now he stands directly on *Wilhelmplatz*—Hitler’s *Reich* Chancellery is on one side, Goebbels’ Propaganda Ministry with its gleaming white façade on the other. The lime trees and lawns have been removed, and the subway entrance has been reduced in size for tactical reasons. Bronze statues of Prussian military figures now loom over the plaza on the east side, and Hitler’s favorite architect, Speer, has bumped out a balcony on the face of the *Reich* Chancellery annex, to create a balcony from which the Nazi boor can rail *staccato*.

Right on time, Karl Joel enters the pretentiously decorated hotel lobby. Six years earlier, the ceremony marking Adolf Hitler's official naturalization from Austria to Germany took place here, which was necessary because of his candidacy for the *Reich* presidential election. *If only he had remained Austrian*, thinks Karl as he climbs the monumental stairs to the third floor of the hotel, glancing out the grand window at the landing of each floor. He prefers to avoid the elevator, distrusting whomever might follow him inside. Reaching the landing, he checks the signage near a staff service door, choosing the hallway toward "*Suite 312*". Reaching the anticipated "suite" of Josef Neckermann, Joel knocks twice, once longer. He is made to wait.

"Ahh, Joel!" The Nazi pirate opens the door. Karl sees inside is actually just a *Room*. "Well, take a seat, Joel. Would you like some fruit? French champagne? We must celebrate."

Karl Joel waves off his *generosity* without a word.

Neckermann tries again. "You're a millionaire now, Joel!" He reinforces it with a brotherly slap on the shoulder, adding, "You're 100% liquid. Cashed out. No assets to worry about maintaining. No debt."

"Yes, yes." Karl appears unperturbed. "When will I get my money?"

"I can give you the good news right away. We have set up a trust account for you at *Hardy Bank* in the name '*Joel*' and have already written a check to transfer the full amount. As soon as your millions clear, the money will be transferred from '*Joel Trust*' to your personal account." Neckermann shakes Karl's hand. "All the best. All the best to you and your family. I'm afraid I must go now, Joel, I have a mail order business to run."

Neckermann opens the door, ushering Karl Joel out. Leaving the hotel room empty-handed, he is sick to his stomach. Unsure what recourse he has, he walks quietly and carefully

along the spotless red carpet of the hotel hallway, passing the service door marked *Staff* again, and descending the grand staircase. Taking one careful step after another, he then stops on the landing between floors *Two* and *Three* at the large window overlooking the street. Below he sees three Gestapo cars pull up, blocking the obsequious hotel valet. Nine men in plain clothes get out and quickly enter the hotel lobby. Karl Joel pivots, running back up the red carpeted stairwell, where he runs down the corridor toward *Room 312* and throws open the door marked “*Staff*” that lets him into a hallway clustered with brooms, buckets, and carpet sweepers. Once inside, he keeps running, faster now down the staff hallway. A door slams shut somewhere behind him. He doesn’t look back. The fine red carpet and gleaming chandeliers are long gone. The walls of the service corridor are barely painted, and flickering light bulbs hang from ceiling wires. It smells of vinegar. Finally, a service egress. To hasten, he skips every other tread. He hears footsteps a flight or two above him. Someone shouts, “There he is!” And after a pause adds, “No.” Another door slams shut.

Salvation appears: “*Emergency exit.*” Gratefully, Karl acknowledges the Teutonic penchant for signage. Gasping for breath, he depresses the iron crossbar with two hands—doors swing out. Karl Joel is standing in the service alley behind the hotel. Right in front of him is the *Buick*, its engine purring, Schrödel behind the wheel. When the *Buick* pulls away, Karl is still slamming his door shut.

“Locker 72,” the chauffeur dangles a key over the seat. “I’ve stored all your luggage. Mrs. Joel is waiting in the small café in the *Arrivals Hall*. It seemed safer than *Departures*. The train to Zurich leaves from Platform Four in an hour and twenty-five minutes.” Tapping his new Swiss wristwatch, Schrödel confirms, “Rather... and hour and seventeen minutes now, sir. All

the best, *Herr Direktor* Joel.” At the train station, the chauffeur gets out and, for the last time, opens the car door for his boss, then tips his cap and bows.

“Thank you, Schrödel.” Joel slips him an envelope containing 150 Reichsmarks.

The round headlights of the *Buick* limousine are spit-polished, and not a speck of dirt mars the spoked wheels. Schrödel opens the trunk and hands Karl his dark cashmere overcoat.

“Mrs. Joel said you seem to have forgotten this on the luggage, sir, when you left the house. Goodbye, sir.”

At *Arrivals*, Karl spots his wife at a small marble coffee table, sipping coffee, Meta’s straight lithe back positioned discretely toward the door. Everything seems to be fine. He heads to the baggage lockers, glancing confidently at his fine watch, the next model up from the one he’d gifted his chauffeur for Christmas. From Locker 72, he removes only two suitcases. The heavier ones. He leaves the two lighter ones inside the locker. With both heavy pieces of luggage, he returns to the café in the *Arrivals Hall* and heads straight for the table where his wife is sitting, still ignoring the other travelers biding time sipping coffee, reading newspapers. For a brief moment, Meta looks relieved to see him but smartly feigns indifference as he approaches her; as he struggles to pass her table with his two heavy cases, he drops the locker key on the black-and-white tiled floor right beside her. He sets the suitcases aside and bends down to pick up the fallen key, clearing his throat.

“Madam, I think this is your key.” He places it on the table with the engraved number “72” facing up, then tips his hat, and sallies on colossally burdened with heavy luggage. No *brownshirt* or plain-clothed mole was ever the wiser.

At Platform 4, Karl Joel stands at the fore, angled slightly to keep his wife in sight; Meta positions herself primly a bit further back. The Joels' two smaller leather suitcases now secure in her possession, she appears to be a pretty spinster traveling to visit family for a brief respite. A posse of young SA officers surveille passengers, alarmingly close by. No older than eighteen, the callow brutalists, harass travelers on the crowded platform; neither the fancy nor the beleaguered are immune to the *brownshirts*' patrol. Red swastika armbands hug their biceps that flex when shoving aside an elderly gentleman whose yellow star armband reveals to them that he is Jewish. He tumbles to the hard floor beside Meta who reflexively turns to offer the senior citizen a gloved hand, unluckily within the SS's line of sight. Unable to run to his wife's aid, Karl jostles his heavy luggage, as if clumsy, creating a ripple of motion among nervous bystanders. The *brownshirts*' faro of hatred turns to spotlight him.

“Please step back from the edge of the platform,” the loudspeakers echo. The crowd budges away from the tracks in a unified surge. The SS patrolmen separate themselves from the herd, their interest in Meta Joel dissipates as the train to Zurich pulls into Berlin, and more passengers crush forth to reach the train.

Safely thundering across the German countryside, Karl and Meta Joel rest in a train car shared with other strangers, grateful for the uneventful passage of a few hours; but sleep is out of the question. In the over-booked train, the Joels sit opposite each other, communicating only with subtle glances, as if they are strangers. None of the other six passengers seated in the same cabin make eye contact either. Fear congeals the air each time a German patrol comes through. Karl pretends to read the latest issue of *Der Stürmer*, placing the newspaper on his lap so its top half settles on Meta's knees across from him. *Gauleiter* Streicher's hate-mongering newspaper has

made its way from Nuremberg to help infect the rest of Germany. But right now, it helps Karl; beneath the newspaper, Karl's right hand is slowly reaching toward his wife's skirt. His left hand adjusts the paper, as if to read further, revealing to Meta that a *German Reich Passport* now rests on her lap. Her gloved hand slides to rest on it for a time while the other travelers look with irritation at Karl, noisily rustling the pages of the newspaper, as if he can't get it to flatten out. That is when Meta opens the passport briskly, recognizing her photo affixed inside. Below it she reads her new name:

*“Gertrude Krause”*

Meta tries to make eye contact with her husband, who is theatrically engrossed in his reading as the train reaches the German-Swiss border.

“Border control!” hollers a young official in a blue uniform approaching from the front of the carriage. His cap low over his eyebrows, keeps slipping lower; the boy strikes Meta as too small for the uniform he's been assigned to grow into. When he gestures for Karl and Meta Joel to show their passports, he asks Meta, “What are you doing in Switzerland?”

“Visiting my son at boarding school in St. Gallen,” she replies, her demeanor gracious.

“And you, sir,” the Swiss official asks Karl, “are you carrying any valuables?”

“No, Officer.”

The border guard takes Karl Joel's dark cashmere overcoat from its hook and searches the pockets, then asks, “May I?” He removes a white envelope from its inner breast pocket. Neither sealed nor labeled, the sumptuous linen rag bond vellum begs the curious to lift its flap. Fifteen smooth, green 10-*Reichsmark* notes inside seduce the new recruit. Chauffeur Schrödel, it seems, has sneaked his severance gift back in Karl's overcoat. Meta looks fearfully at her husband; she

fears Karl will be accused of bribery, given such opulent graft. The canny Swiss lad, son of a Lugano streetsweeper, looks around briefly at the other travelers minding their own business, and Schrödel's envelope evanesces into a pocket of the blue uniform. Without further ado, he glances at the passports of the other passengers, then makes his way through the crowded gangway, straight to the lavatory to re-count his windfall.

At Zurich Central Station, the Joels disembark. Despite the early morning hour, hoards bustle about the platform, rushing to connecting trains, hugging welcomed relatives. Some rummage through luggage, or sleep on benches. Navigating the mayhem, Karl and Meta head to *Hotel Schweizerhof* on *Bahnhofplatz*, one of the most expensive in Zurich.

"Ghastly expensive," Meta mutters to her husband at check in.

"Probably why it is the only place where there's still a room available," Karl murmurs and they follow the bellhop pushing the Joels' four bags on a *Schweizerhof* brass cart.

"It will be our home for one short night," Meta replies with a tired smile.

After a few hours of poor sleep, Meta schedules a telephone call to their son at his boarding school in St. Gallen for 7:30 a.m.

"We're in Switzerland, Helmut. We're never going back."

"Yes," is all 16-year-old Helmut Joel can say to his parents at that moment.

"Do you understand me, my darling? Helmut, we're never going back! We can never return to Germany."

Once more, Helmut replies, "Yes."

## Chapter 16

The candy store is located smack across from the school exit by the bus stop. *Lycee Francais'* bell triggers a stampede of hungry children scampering to sweeten their palate before heading home. Flailing shoelaces and school blazers stop, drop, and roll at a bored police officer corralling the boisterous youths from spilling into traffic. The Joels wait across the street, with Helmut keeping a sharp eye.

“What are we doing here? Is this the house where Schubert lived?”

“No,” his father replies, “Now comes your surprise. The future.”

Billy sees mostly blondes toting soccer balls under an arm, girls and boys between six and 14 years of age, atomic elements bumping into each other as more boil up and disgorge from school. Helmut Joel's palm shoots up, waving to a little child in a red pullover, blue trousers, and white sneakers. The cherubic urchin is the only one in the cohort of students who perambulates toward the gate. He waves back, obediently remaining beside the crossing-guard whose arms start to windmill the children across. Billy has the feeling he knows this boy.

“That's your little brother,” Helmut informs his eldest.

“Hello, Dad!” The little boy hugs his father.

“Who's that?” the child asks, pointing at Billy.

Helmut pauses briefly. “That's your big brother.”

“You're Bill?” Sheer glee beams up at Billy.

Towering above, Billy squats down and holds out his hand to his little brother. “Yes. I'm Bill. What's your name?”

“My name is Alexander. Alexander Joel,” he correctly states. “Would you like to come home with us? I can show you my toys.”

Billy glances up at his father and back to Alexander, “Sure, I’d love to. Show me everything you’ve got. What do you like to play with the most?”

“Ships!” replies Alexander, taking his big brother by the hand and leading him home along the path toward District 19, with Helmut Joel following his sons at a distance. “Dad told me you play the piano, too. Is it true?”

“Yes. I love playing the piano. I play a lot. Can you play yet?”

“Of course I can play the piano. I play Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, and Debussy. What about you?”

“I play my own music,” replies Billy.

Cruise ships, pirate ships, clippers, brigs, privateers, container ships, motorboats, a wooden Hinkley, a catamaran, and the *Titanic*—like the Titan Poseidon himself, Alexander reigns supreme over the ocean he reveals stoutly to his big brother. The port of Alexander is the cerulean region of a Persian rug in his bedroom. A foghorn blares, engines rev, canvas is trimmed to set sail. Alexander’s whistle blasts. And the brothers pilot their boats across the plush wool of Alexander Joel’s lagoon.

Adjacent to the child’s bedroom is the living room where Helmut clears away that morning’s cups and saucers to the kitchen where he prepares a meal for three Joels. When he calls his sons to the table, he reminds them to wash their hands.

“Not now, Dad. We’re playing,” Alexander hollers back, and closes the door to his room.

Billy is startled. He expects a thunderstorm; childish defiance would have been stanch, in his day. To Billy's astonishment, his father taps punctiliously on the hardwood door, a chronometer unable and unwilling to capitulate its authority to a child's repudiation of *right* domestic coherence. With aplomb, Helmut opens the door.

"Please, Alexander. Your meal gets cold."

"I'm not hungry," comes the guileless riposte as Alexander's privateer scuttles a battleship on the shoals of the Persian's silk fringe.

"I'm really hungry, Alexander." Billy adjudicates. "Can we please get something to eat?"

"Okay." Alexander surrenders yet his privateer sails on.

Half a plate of spaghetti later, Alexander is at the piano masterfully showboating his fleet of musical moxie over his sovereign black-and-white dominion. Mozart, Schubert, Bach, Chopin, and then Beethoven. *Piano Sonata No. 8, Pathétique* second movement, the *Adagio*. Flawless *legato*, soulful, profound. If Beethoven could hear this six-year-old play his composition, he'd be moved to tears as is Billy, spellbound by his little brother who is, to him, a wonder of the world, even before he hears Alexander's inversions in the next piece.

"One more!" Alexander plunges into a bewitching rendition of *Moonlight Sonata*. Billy's pulse quickens recalling their father's palm that catapulted Billy off the piano stool decades earlier for the crime of a racketeered interpretation of Beethoven's siren song. For its first six minutes, his little brother delivers a performance that would have prompted Billy's old piano teacher, Miss Frances, to applaud, her florid succor still itching to provide exegesis to burnish his immaculate calibration. For the remaining nine minutes, the stripling unmask the *Sonata's* embellishments with reckless energy, lathering the air with a rich slather of youth; cascading the

Joel home into tyrannical giddy siege, ignoring the instructions on the sheet music, Alexander continues the sonata faster, wilder, crazier. Billy peeks over at his father's reaction.

Indecipherable Helmut stands, lifts Billy's plate from the table, then his own, then Alexander's unfinished meal. Stacking with care, he lays the cutlery on top and withdraws to the kitchen.

## Chapter 17

One room. Three beds against one wall. A sink at the fourth, and in the middle stands a table with four chairs. The *Institut am Rosenberg* graduate elects not to sleep with his head near the wall but positions his pillow at the foot of the bed, nearest the chair where he drapes his clothes in the evening—a makeshift screen between himself and his parents. The Joel family’s temporary lodging is located on Nüscherstrasse 24 in the newly built *Apartmenthouse Muralto*. During his years in a St. Gallen dormitory, he longed for the elusive private spaces he had taken for granted back home in Berlin; now with Karl and Meta, Helmut feels even more cramped. The teenager reads Swiss newspapers, learning that 20,000 refugees have fled from Germany and Austria to Switzerland to escape the Nazis. Aware that all Switzerland is overrun by refugees, Helmut is thankful he and his parents are not having to scrounge for work or compete for a park bench to sleep on by the lake shore. After many weeks in the city, sharing small space with his parents, the aspiring pianist makes the determination to render straw into gold, like his resourceful parents.

Every day, his father calls Berlin and follows up with a letter, gently edited by his mother. The sale price for the *Joel Laundry* has still not been paid to Karl Joel’s personal bank account from the “*Joel Trust*” set up by Josef Neckermann and controlled solely by the latter. If Karl does not soon receive the money, the reserves he and Meta have smuggled out of Germany will erode. Living off principal not generating profit, Karl is tormented by the question of how to feed his family if he must build a new life on a new continent without any liquid reserves. Night after sleepless tossing night, he gets up as quietly as he can so as not to disturb Meta and Helmut; tiptoeing out to the hallway, he waits for the communal toilet down the hall to clear out. Ahead of him in line, other insomniacs also wait and share fetid accounts of Nazi savagery back home.

Rumors blister his heart—a pogrom, synagogues firebombed, shops looted. Karl Joel feigns deafness, pretending not to comprehend his fellow *émigrés*, so he does not have to endure invasive questions. He knows such discourse is not conducive to one’s privacy, his family’s safety, nor his own sound sleep.

Each morning between nine and ten o’clock—never later because Switzerland more so than Germany, is Chronos’ redoubt fortified by rules of punctuality, precision, and robust hygiene—the same clean-cut postman arrives in his crispened grey-blue uniform. Across his chest, the wide strap of an aromatic leather satchel reeks of mink oil, tallow, beeswax, and almond oil to match his sturdy burnished leather walking boots. From the bag, the Swissman’s soft, scrubbed fingers tweeze an envelope, and he announces, “*An: Karl Joel!*” handing it to Helmut who anticipates the morning ritual with other lodgers at the *Lavaterstrasse* hostel. Helmut runs it up to his father, while reading the return address:

“*Absender: Josef Neckermann, Tannenbergallee 2-4, Berlin Charlottenburg*”

“That’s our house!” Helmut exclaims as he bursts in on his parents. Josef Neckermann has not only taken over the founder’s company and employees, he has also moved into the Joel family estate—a practice of thievery common in Nazi occupied zones. Neckermann now sleeps in his bed, dines at his table, and rides in his *Buick*.

“Magpie,” mutters Karl, opening the letter. He reads. Once. Then a second time. His wife and son wait patiently until he speaks. “I am going back to Berlin.”

“No,” Meta implores, “We’ll never see you again. They’ll—”

Karl raises a hand for silence. “I have to make a phone call.”

Helmut watches his father leave the letter on the table and depart with his briefcase.

*I hereby confirm receipt of your letter dated November 24, 1938. I am unable to comply with your request to receive the settlement and all documents within 10 days. Due to your illegal departure abroad, I am not authorized to enter into negotiations with you. I kindly request that you refrain from sending any further correspondence, as it is not possible to provide any information following your illegal departure. If you come to Berlin, you will receive what you are entitled to. Heil Hitler.*

*Signed, Neckermann*

“No!” Meta Joel drops the letter and looks to her son.

Helmut understands his mother. The most the young man can do is shadow his father to the *Postamt* where the public phones are. Keeping a cloaked distance, Helmut follows. Like every day in Zurich, Karl Joel will queue at the American consulate in the hope of getting a United States visa, but first to the post office to telephone Fritz Tillmann, the *Gau* Economic Advisor in Berlin who had facilitated both the saving and demise of Karl Joel.

“Just come to Berlin on Friday, Joel. I’ll have everything sorted out with Neckermann and *Dresdner Bank* by then,” Tillmann assures Karl over the telephone. “Let’s meet at eleven o’clock inside *Café Kranzler* on *Friedrichstrasse*. I always help you out of a jam, Joel.”

Inside the public phone *cabine*, Karl Joel hangs up. Outside its narrow glass door, a sinew of men and women all want to call home, check on family, or try to help a loved one flee the *Third Reich*. Averting his face as he steps past them, Karl Joel exits the *Post Amt*, overhearing a

gentleman in a forest green *Lodenmantel* remark, “That’s the laundry Jew from Nuremberg, whom we read about in *Der Stürmer*.”

Forfeiting the US Embassy this day, the rankled Founder of *Joel Laundry Factory* buys a ticket for the night train to Berlin. Zurich *Bahnhof* is crowded. Locomotives hasten in and away, depositing more than they withdraw onto crowded platforms where folks embrace, cry, or sit stumped on a suitcase against a stucco wall. Befuddled in the mayhem, Helmut knavishly loses the trail of his sharp-eyed father and returns empty-handed to the one-room Zurich flat, explaining nothing to his mother. Since boarding school, Helmut Joel is quieter. Meta, on the other hand, is distraught. His mother is convinced that the letter’s closing line “*Come to Berlin, then you’ll get what you deserve*” is a trap set by Neckermann. She fears that her husband will be arrested and deported the moment he crosses the Swiss border into Germany. She insists Helmut go with her back to the train station to stop Karl. However, he refuses to be dissuaded from boarding the train to Berlin. Disillusioned, his wife and son stand on the platform in silence as the German *Reichsbahn* glides northward, from sanctum to suicide.

Karl’s border control into Germany goes smoothly, traveling under a false identity with only his briefcase. In his dark cashmere overcoat, he appears to be a regular Swiss businessman on a daytrip from the Alps. In Germany at dawn, the land flattens out under a cadaverous watercolor of silver, white, and slate grey splintered by shades of umber, ochre, and red impeding the sun’s ascent on the crepuscular horizon. Hoarfrost on brittle tree branches glimmers like *Morse Code* augury through the pallid fog—*long-short-long, long-short-long*. His meeting with Fritz Tillmann is in two hours.

Berlin is colder, damp, *nasskalt*. The streets have changed with the seasons since the Joels fled. Like ossified tears, opaque led white paint drips down from the *Star of David* and the word “*Jew*” painted across the exterior wall of tailor Aron Nussbaum’s house and other looted shops, their windows smashed, as well. Rotting desolation pervades this city, which just two years before presented itself to the entire world as a cosmopolitan, up-and-coming venue for the Olympic Games.

“Move on! Move on!” a tetrad of SS henchmen shout as one lurid wraith, shoving passersby. Three heel-worn gentlemen kneel submissively on the sidewalk, scrubbing fanatically with toothbrushes. Without complaint, each man rights himself to the dogged position and continues to labor every time the minacious SS thugs kick the Jewish businessmen forsaken by their fellow German countrymen and women. Circumventing the invidious tableau, Helmut Joel crosses the street, looking away. Like everyone else in Berlin.

“*No Jews allowed*”

Signage halts the likes of him at the entrance to *Café Kranzler* on the corner of *Friedrichstraße* and *Unter den Linden*. Taking no chances, even with his fake Swiss passport, Karl Joel scouts connecting streets for the service and deliveries dock behind the building and any other possible escape routes in case Fritz Tillmann’s Nazi associates lie in wait. The nearest street signs read *Unter den Linden*, *Mittelstraße*, *Charlottenstraße*, and *Friedrichstraße*. Surveilling the perimeter, Karl considers the structure and use of *Café Kranzler*, a city institution opened in 1825 by a Viennese confectioner’s apprentice who moved to Berlin. The establishment extends from the street-level café, up one flight of stairs to the next floor where there is a well-lit dining salon with a high ceiling and a fine view of the comings and goings below on the street. From

outside, Karl first enters the building at *Unter den Linden 25*, not through the main café door on *Friedrichstraße*. In the back hallway by the service entrance, an elderly lady wearing a headscarf is sweeping the stairwell and eyeing Karl suspiciously.

“*Heil Hitler*,” Karl Joel greets her in a formal tone and walks purposefully, as if he knows exactly where he is going—to the upper floor.

“Hello,” mumbles the crone, continuing to swing her broom.

Within the back hallway of the ground floor, Karl Joel tests the three doors leading off it. He carefully leans his ear to each door to determine from which the most noise emanates. He opens the noisiest one a crack and sees hustle and bustle of waiters and patrons, small circular marble-top tables and cushioned chairs, trays, cups and saucers, and the café's back kitchen. Finding no inner handle on the door, just a keylock without a key, he closes it quietly, leaving it slightly ajar. A second door accesses the upper floor of the *Café Kranzler* building; he goes up the stairs and finds a similar layout, with two other doors to apartments tagged with family names. A third door is a rear emergency exit of *Café Kranzler's* dining salon. Like its twin on the floor below, this door has a hall-side handle, but no handle on the café side, just a keylock. He peeks inside the café's sunny upper floor where few patrons sip from porcelain cups, enjoying quiet conversation. At the back where he stands, he notices an unguarded dumb-waiter cart loaded with flatware, white linen serviettes, tealights, and a number of thumb-size cardboard striker matchboxes with a purple cardboard drawer and rectangular cardboard housing of red marked “*Askov Zuendler*” in black, bearing the Nazi swastika and sword in black and white encircled by a laurel wreath. He swipes two little boxes of wooden matches. One, he empties and flattens, wedging it in the jamb to disable the lock, as he carefully closes the door. The other, he

pockets and goes back downstairs, ambling nonchalantly past the old woman, still sweeping. She ignores him as he explores the third door on the ground floor. Opening the third door, Karl is delighted to find sturdy wooden stairs into a basement. Descending into the dark, damp root cellar, he spies sprouted potatoes, dusty wine bottles, and a pile of heating coal. A makeshift placard is tacked into the mortar between crumbling red bricks:

*“Passage to Mittelstraße 62. Air-raid shelter.”*

Just enough bricks have been removed from the wall below the sign to allow an adult to squeeze through in a crouched position. Karl strikes a red-tipped wooden *Askov Zuendler* matchstick and follows the tunnel for several minutes into the basement of a neighboring house where his eyes adjust as he lights another matchstick, then climbs a flight of makeshift brick stairs up to a small arched doorframe. He burns away a scraggle of cobwebs to locate the door handle. Outside, he finds himself at the service dock around the corner from *Café Kranzler*'s main entrance, just two blocks from *Friedrichstraße* train station and his train back to safety.

Now to find an unobtrusive seat in the café, one that will position him suitably for escape. Ground floor or upper floor? Definitely a window seat. He needs a view of the street, entrance, and an unobstructed dueler's shot to his escape door. Returning to *Café Kranzler*, via the *Unter den Linden 25* rear service access, he passes the cleaning woman and her broom. With a polite raise of his hat, he opens the door to the upper floor of the café. In the upper hall, he slides out the flattened matchbook from the doorjamb as he peers through into the salon at the rear of the café's upper floor. He holds his breath watching for the waiter to seat a well-dressed young couple his son's age over by the large window and present them with stiff menu books full of pastries with fresh whipped cream. Nodding efficiently to the lovers, the waiter descends to the

main level via the grand inner staircase. Karl Joel enters nimbly through the rear emergency door, replacing the flattened matchbox between the interface of lock and jamb.

Karl Joel dawdles a bit, poking around the stack of matchboxes on the silent-butler cart, then meanders toward the inner grand staircase with desultory indifference to the few patrons inhabiting the vast salon. To the left of the grand stair he seats himself near the large window just as the waiter is returning up the inner stair, with a laden tray of goodies and fragrant coffee. The waiter looks confused as to how his new customer got past the main desk *maitre'd* unescorted.

“Sir, forgive me, I somehow—I was fetching—” He refers to the opulent platter of confections he is laying out for the young lovers at the far window table.

Karl replies with forgiving authority, “My colleague, Berlin’s *Gau* Economic Advisor Tillmann shall arrive presently. Bring two *lattes*. No cake.” Karl does not want to spring for Tillmann’s *latte*, nor any of it frankly, as he tries to conserve what little money he has left.

“If I may, sir,” offers the waiter, plucking a long stringy cobweb off Karl Joel’s head of curly salt-and-pepper hair, and enveloping it in a serviette as if it is something of great value.

Karl dismisses the waiter with, “*Heil* Hitler.” He will not, of course, explain the tunnel and his plan to escape out the rear door of the salon.

“Oh, Joel, I’m so sorry!” Fritz Tillmann arrives late, in a dark suit, swastika pin in his lapel. Smiling he declares, “I completely forgot that you’re not allowed in here anymore.”

“I’m here,” Karl replies phlegmatically and gets straight to it, “Tillmann, you sold my company to Neckermann—well below its value. To date, many months have passed, and the purchase price has not been paid to my personal bank account, yet the money is rumored to remain in a trust in my name, that is controlled by Josef Neckermann. What is going on here?”

Tillmann stirs the small spoon in his cup of latte incessantly. Finally, he sighs. “Well, Joel, I have some bad news for you.”

Karl Joel interrupts, “Listen. I have a detailed list. The value of all my goods, machinery, and other inventory alone is three and a half million. How could things get any worse than a company that generates twelve million in sales a year only getting two million?”

Tillmann regards him seriously. “As your representative, I signed an addendum to the purchase agreement.” He slides the document across the table.

Karl Joel reads:

*The parties subsequently agree as follows:*

*1) The inventory is valued at RM 5,300 (in words: five thousand three hundred Reichsmarks).*

Karl lowers the paper. “You cannot be serious. You saw it yourself and said it was worth three and a half million, not five *thousand!*” He continues reading.

*2) The stock is valued at the lowest invoice prices, on which a discount of 15 percent is granted, with hard-to-sell goods being valued at a 30 percent discount.*

His palms moisten.

*3) The buyer receives 500,000 Reichsmarks back from the seller because it is to be expected that claims may still be asserted by third parties.*

4) *Jewish employees must be dismissed, and Aryan employees receive a special bonus of one month's salary each. The buyer deducts the necessary amount from the purchase price.*

5) *The buyer does not pay the lump sum expense allowance of 12,500 Reichsmarks.*

Karl pushes the paper back across the table to Tillmann. “And what exactly is left in the end?”

“One million.” Tillmann first tries to strike a motivating tone. “And that’s a lot of money in times like these. Think about it, Joel.” When Karl remains silent, Tillman immediately becomes defensive, even pitiable. “You see, even we Germans have to tighten our belts a little.” He places a current daily newspaper on the table.

Featured is Austrian folk actor Paul Hörbiger collecting money as a role model for the “*Winter Relief Fund of the German People.*”

“Winter relief fund?” Karl scoffs. “Whom does this money relieve? Hitler and his rearmament?”

“Joel!” Tillmann reprimands, any gladness gone as his eyes shift to two SS vehicles pulling up outside the café. Nazi officers occupy each. “If I’m going to help you, there has to be something in it for me this time.”

“How much?” Karl asks, following Tillman’s line of sight to the street below.

“You’ll get one million, Joel. If I’m going to help you, I want a hundred thousand. I’m not greedy.”

The SS officers are still sitting in the two *Mercedes*, awaiting their signal.

“Fine, Tillmann, as soon as I have the purchase price in my personal account, I’ll have a hundred thousand *Reichsmarks* transferred to you.”

“I need some security.” Tillman smiles, pitiably. “What if you don’t pay me? Then I’ll have done all this for nothing. I need the ‘*incentive*’ up front, otherwise I can do nothing for you.”

Karl Joel lights a cigarette with an *Askov Zuendler*. *What other choice have I?* he wonders. From his briefcase, he removes his checkbook and signs a cash check for \$100,000 *Reichsmarks*, payable to the bearer. Swift as a *croupier*, Tillmann slips it in his breast pocket.

“It won’t be easy, Joel. Actually, it’s completely impossible. Yes, Neckermann has transferred the money to the trust account in your name, but since he’s the only one who has access to it, if he doesn’t want to—and he doesn’t—you’ll never see your money.” Tillmann stands and digs in his pocket for a few coins, placing them on the table. “*Heil Hitler.*”

He disappears down the inner public grand staircase and out the front exit. Joel watches him from his window seat as Tillmann crosses the street, nodding conspicuously at the *Mercedes*, prompting eight uniformed men out of their cars. Gradually, so as not to alarm the other salon patrons, Karl Joel gets up, taking his briefcase and his hat, and walks leisurely away from the main staircase, toward the back service hall door. Without looking back, he enters the upper hall, pocketing the flattened matchbox from the jamb and closes the door behind him. With a soft click, the door locks from the café side. This *click* is the starting gun for Karl Joel.

Similar to his escape from the *Hotel Kaiserhof* months before, he plunges down the back stairs, slows to saunter past the old cleaning lady still working her broom. He tips his hat and

palms her the last of his German coin, then leaps down the stairs into the basement, past coal and potato crates, and into the air-raid shelter tunnel. At its far end, he clammers up the makeshift brick stairs and opens the door. Removing its inner handle, he locks it behind him as he steps outside. Outside *Mittelstraße 62*, he stands in the small street to slow his panting. It's too noticeable. Slowly, he inflates his belly with air through his nose and lets a measured flow of breath silently escape his mouth. Calmer, he brushes his dark cashmere sleeves of any cobwebs and tucks his briefcase inside his overcoat. Strolling, pacing himself, he pulls his hat over his eyebrows and turns right toward *Charlottenstraße*. In the distance, he hears police sirens approaching. Up the street, an old woman in a Loden green coat is walking, burdened with bulging bags, two in each hand. Catching up to her, he tips his hat.

“May I help you carry your bags, Madame?” *She must have been very beautiful once*, he thinks when she smiles gratefully with her rheumy blue eyes.

“Thank you, young man.” She holds out her heavy load of tubers for him, and he accompanies her at her plodding pace. As they progress, she hooks her arm through his and looks up at him with a motherly smile, asking, “What have you been doing?”

“Whatever do you mean, Madame?”

With the slightest tip of her head, she refers to the police cars racing past them.

“Nothing,” he replies.

“I thought so. Like the rest of us.” Smiling, she leans against him as they walk.

Sirens fade away, in search of a lone Jewish fugitive with a briefcase, not a son with his elderly mother hauling tubers home from the market.

## Chapter 18

Billy's lustrous rocker mane with its natural wave reaches below the stylish long collar of his striped shirt. His deep side-part requires that he either hold his head at a perfect 50-degree angle until his neck is stiff, or he must continually whip it back or side to side so that those magnificent deep brown locks don't obscure his vision. He is playing in a band called "*The Hassles*." It is August 23, 1968, and the temperature outside is pleasant, 50 degrees Fahrenheit—ideal for a man who is always so hot. But today, Billy's not playing piano, today is the day of the New York Rock Festival where Jimi Hendrix is performing on stage. Billy and his friend, Jon Small, arrive at the Singer Bowl Stadium in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park built just four years prior, for the World's Fair. The two Long Island boys lug several long audio cables coiled on their shoulders as they approach the backstage entrance, blocked by burly security guards.

"Hey, let us through," Billy crows convincingly in a refined Upper-Class Oxford English accent. He's got an ear for it. Imitating accents and voices—really anything aural—has always been one of the most useful gadgets in his arsenal. He continues to posture like a Brit, badgering the security guards, "If you don't let us through now, Jimi's going to be really angry. He needs these cables right now!" Jimi Hendrix is a concert these two fans cannot miss. Since Billy and Jon have been playing in their own band "*The Hassles*" for quite some time now, they wager they are, therefore, Hendrix's *musical colleagues*, so to speak; by hook or by crook, Billy and Jon are getting in. Regular tickets are too much for the young men's budget, and besides, backstage is always way cooler.

The backstage guards built like bouncers look the teenagers up and down, and then the coiled cables, and magically, the backstage door opens for two Hicksville boys to pass right on

through the proverbial pearly gates to oblige the needs of “*The Guitar God*.” Emboldened by how the posh British accent trick works, the two run around backstage, engaging Hendrix crew members in conversation, and pretending to be busy with their cables while they find out as much background information as possible about the band and the performance that evening. *Perhaps*, they realize, their puckish inquisition might be a grave mistake, when they get called out by *The Voodoo Child*’s chosen henchman. “Hey, you two. Come here!” a dapper, lanky man with a blazing rack of gleaming teeth, shouts. Wearing jeans and an oversized *Jimi Hendrix* tshirt, he flags Billy and Jon and waves them over.

“Oh, my God, Billy,” Jon whispers, “That’s Keith Robinson. The best, most important roadie in the world. We’re done for.” Jon 180s, but Billy grabs his arm.

“Wait, we still need this cable for Jimi—” Billy says loud enough for Keith Robinson to hear him trying to cloak their charade from discovery. But the incisive Keith Robinson is already onto them and steps into a face-off.

“You two. What are you doing here?”

“We were asked to—um.” Billy stops himself to backpedal his own fib-web. He starts again; his posh English silver-tongue informs with respectful, waggish humility, “Jimi needs these cables so bad, and, hey, we came all the way from Long Island just to deliver’em *properly*.”

Billy tries to sound as British as possible.

“Why did he say that? From Long Island! That was the telltale bit of truth in the beautiful lie. As if Long Island were the cable paradise of North America!”

But even Billy 's finest Oxford English is no smoke screen to stealthy Keith Robinson who's been and done there and that already over the moon and back.

“You two—!” Hendrix's chief roadie looks down at the ground, lights a cigarette, and nods three times. “You're good. Really good.” He exhales abruptly at them, and Billy and Jon grin triumphantly. Keith adds, “Now go to the back of the truck and unload all the *Marshall* amps. I want to see'em on stage within thirty minutes.” He turns around and leaves the boys.

It takes forty minutes until all the amplifiers are on stage, along with Jimi Hendrix's two eighteen-year-old *musical colleagues* who watch the entire show from the wings. Their eyes shining, they play air guitar and sing along as four minutes of “*Hey Joe*” wraps the concert and Jimi Hendrix says, “Watch this” three times and launches into an extra guitar solo.

Keith Robinson walks up to the Long Island boys, pats Billy on the shoulder, and says simply, “Well done!”

Half-way back to Long Island, the hour-long drive to Hicksville, near North Hills, their unforgettable day is topped when Billy and Jon hear the radio announcer say, “And now some new music from the suburbs. From Long Island, for the first time on *WNEW-FM*, ‘*The Hassles*’ with ‘*You Got Me Hummin.*’” It's their song! Live on the radio. They honk, scream, drum their hands on the dashboard, and swerve between lanes. What an incredible moment.

It's almost 1:00 a.m. when Jon pulls the truck over to let Billy out at his home. Euphoric, the buddies exchange a cursory *man-hug* before the passenger door slams shut and Billy floats to the front door of his childhood home. The kitchen light is still on. *That can't be good*, he thinks. Slipping out of his sneakers, he keys the door and enters, shoes in his hand. Standing on the

upper landing his sister Judy flags him to be quiet. Judy is actually his cousin, but was adopted by his mother after Rosalind Joel's sister, sadly, died.

Judy tiptoes down to the landing, but it's too late. They cringe when from the kitchen comes slurring, "I can hear you. I know you're there." His mother has been reaching for the bottle more and more lately. Whenever Rosalind drinks, it seems anything can happen; she might laugh hysterically or cry like a baby. Often, though, she gets angry, screams, yells at her two children in frustration, and throws things around. *Abandonment grief, the soul-sucking thief.* At this point, Judy rolls her eyes. Billy knows that the tide is about to turn. Rosalind now leans against the door frame. "What do you look like? Can't you finally get your hair cut and find a decent job?" Best not say anything now. "Other people have to work. And you? You party every day, sleep until noon, and do nothing."

Judy is all the way down the stairs. "Come on, Mom. Let's get some sleep. You're absolutely right, we'll have a word with Billy tomorrow."

"But I don't want to. I, I can't sleep. Nobody can sleep here because of that good-for-nothing..."

Judy puts an arm around Rosalind, guiding her to her bedroom. Billy still stands in the same spot, shoes in his hand.

"*Life is either sadness or euphoria.*" Billy pulls out his little notebook and writes it down—good line for song lyrics.

## Chapter 19

“We go from Zurich to Basel, then up along the German-French border. At Strasbourg, we turn left.”

“Son, there is no ‘*up*’ or ‘*left*’ on maps,” Karl Joel corrects Helmut.

“Sorry, *north* along the border and *west* to Paris. From there, north then a slight curve to the left, so west again, and then north again. And then we’ll be in Calais.” Helmut’s finger on the map, his voice brightens, adding, “My first time at the sea!”

“That’s not actually the open sea.” His father corrects him again. “It’s the channel between England and France.”

“Well,” Meta Joel interjects, “if you stick your finger in it, does it taste salty or not?”

“Yes, it does,” Karl concedes to his wife. Helmut watches his father’s discomfort at being ribbed by her in front of their child.

“If it’s salty, then it’s the sea.” Meta assures her son, his finger still on the map.

As his parents continue to debate the Joel family plans, Helmut hears everything but avoids the queasy emotional frontier between them, and drops his eyes back to the map, continuing to trace the intended route from their one-room lodging in Zurich to Cuba and on to New York City. At Calais they will board the ferry to England in a few days.

Since Karl Joel’s recent empty-handed return from Berlin—where, Meta points out, he endangered his life in vain hopes of exacting justice in a criminal regime—he is more parsimonious than ever. Karl knows that Josef Neckermann and Fritz Tillmann deliberately deceived him from the outset, in order to get hold of *Joel Laundry Factory* for a song. He and Meta debate whether he was too naive, too trusting, too fearful, or whether there was anything he

might have done better to set things right before he lost. They lost everything. Sixteen years of hard work, day and night, weekends and holidays. Gone. Reputation, lost. Pride, lost. Dignity. And the Joel family's financial security. Karl came from nothing and now feels he has been returned to precisely that.

“You have us!” Meta smiles at him lovingly.

“And three *holiday* tickets for the *Arandora Star*,” adds Helmut, engaged in his map.

*The ark is full*, becomes the refrain of almost every country in the world when it comes to taking in Jews fleeing persecution in Europe. Switzerland closes its borders. USA sets an annual quota for Jewish immigrants, and the number of applications exceeds it tenfold. Starting in Zurich, the Joel family applies for a visa, month after month, wondering how long they will have to wait. Rejection or acceptance could come tomorrow, in three months, or three years. Most Europeans know a major war festers; cataclysm is well underway. No one believes that Hitler's avarice can have been satisfied since “liberation” of Austria and Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland resulting in annexation. The winter of 1938-1939 is relentless. Meter-high snow, freezing temperatures, and strong winds lend the majestic Swiss mountain landscape a menacing air.

Their locomotive slowly zig-zags up and around the last peaks of the Alps, then, just before Basel, it's full steam ahead toward France along the Rhine directly on the border with The Greater German Reich. En route to Calais, the Joels confer. Officially, the family is embarking on a vacation, with all passengers returning to their country of origin within a few months. Not a soul can know that the three Joels plan to disembark from the loop during the stopover in Havana and not return to Europe. With Germany to the north outside his *courette* window, Karl Joel sees that 100 meters to the right of the train tracks is the Rhine River—the river's midpoint is the

border to Germany. That country for which his forefathers went to war, is the land that was their home as a matter of course for generations. And that country is the land that, overnight, declared him and millions of other German citizens enemies of the people, *das Volk*, as in the antisemitic Aryan Germans. Notwithstanding, in the Joels' heart, Germany is home and will remain so forever. Meta follows Karl's gaze to their homeland. Tears spill. No one can speak.

A whole day and night pass before the train pulls into its terminus, the station at Calais. Helmut has all but memorized the map by the time he climbs out and looks up at the imposing glass structure supported by four towers on each side; the station protects passengers from the unpredictable weather conditions of the abutting Atlantic Ocean. Fierce sleet and wind greet the port city at the Strait of Dover, the narrowest point of the English Channel on this January morning in 1939. As the Joels leave the train station, a copy of *Der Stürmer* abandoned on a bench catches Karl's eye. The fascist rag is a memento that reminds him why he has escaped; he takes the German newspaper, rolls and stuffs it inside a pocket.

Trudging 15 minutes on foot from the train station to the port, the family of three lug six suitcases containing bare essentials and—stitched in hems and linings—undeclared items of material rather than ideological value. Dockside on clear days, you can even see the chalk Cliffs of Dover, only 34 kilometers away across the violent water in England. Today, in France, the ferry is barely visible as it docks at Calais. Even as the storm subsides, thick fog tumbles in from the sea. Helmut has said little for most of the journey. Now, for the first time in many hours, the 17-year-old speaks.

“The sea,” he whispers to memorialize his virgin sighting of brine and tumult. His eyes spark as he steps down onto the pier, and bends to touch the waves slapping the quay wall. His hand remains in the painfully cold surf as long as he can stand it; he forgets Chronos.

“Come on! We’ll miss the crossing,” his father calls.

Helmut puts a finger in his mouth. It tastes salty. He smiles. An hour later, pale as a corpse, he is on the floor of the ferry battling meter-high waves of the English Channel. When the ship dips, torrential tsunamis crush the deck and run off the bow, only to gush back down the stern a moment later. Few passengers can endure this three-hour ordeal without vomiting.

At last, they disembark at Dover and soon steam billows from the boiler as a locomotive pulls thirty-two carriages through English rain toward Southampton. Helmut’s gut still roils from the Channel waves, even though the sea is hours behind them. Along sprawling curves of steel rails to London, he counts the carriages in front of the Joels’ train car and those behind. The young man wants to distract himself and focus his eyes on the horizon. Supposedly, this alleviates the after-effects of seasickness. He wonders how he will survive the weeklong journey from Southampton to Cuba if their ocean liner encounters rough waters on high seas. His worries are unfounded. The *Arandora Star* is one of the most luxurious cruise ships in the *English Star Line* aboard which the swells that buoy her are imperceptible. Weighing over 12 tons at almost 160 meters long, the white giant, that will later this same year be requisitioned by the Allies as a WWII troop ship, towers over the port of Southampton eager to please passengers in more than 200 cabins in first class alone. During the trans-Atlantic voyage, Helmut and his parents will be indulged by a friendly crew, restaurants, bars, live music, a swimming pool, tennis court, and other kindly travelers.

As they board *Arandora Star*, Karl Joel looks back at their luggage, concerned that it still waits on the quay to be loaded. He waits until two stevedores label the Joel suitcases with the number “126” and heft them onto a trolley. This same cabin number coincides with Karl and Meta Joel’s new home for the next two weeks, while Helmet savors his own posh cabin, adjacent to his parents’. Each suite is equipped with a shower, beds and table secured to the floor, lockable cupboards, and two portholes onto the open sea. A big band accompanies the embarkation with the most famous melodies of American jazz. Helmut rushes around enthusiastically, showing his parents all the beauty and luxury the steamer has to offer. In the grand dining room, he stops suddenly, his mouth agape. He points to a grand piano in the center of the meter-high stage.

“M-m-may I—?” Without waiting for permission, Helmut parks himself at the piano and plays the third movement of Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata No. 14 in C minor*. Alchemized by sonorous melody, the tension in his face melts away; his grim locked jaw gives way to relaxation as his fingers fly over the keyboard, releasing the corners of his mouth to spring upward for the first time in a long time. His father wants him off the stage, but Meta dissuades.

“Look at our son’s face.” A gloved hand stays her husband. “We haven’t seen Helmut so happy since Rudi’s last visit to Berlin.”

Passengers and crew pause to listen to Helmut play. When he glances up at his parents, he is astonished to see scores of enraptured faces staring back at him. Uncertain, Helmut stands up, slumps humbly, and leaves the stage to applause.

“That was wonderful!” His mother beams.

Late in the evening, when the ship's band finishes playing, and early in the morning before the first guests emerge for breakfast, Helmut Joel sneaks into the dining salon and plays the piano. To him, it feels like spring has arrived on deck the closer they get to the Caribbean. In cloudless fair weather, the sun dances on nothing but calm sea all around. Turquoise above, azure below—everywhere, shades of blue Helmut has never seen in Europe. *How quickly the world can change*, he marvels.

Karl Joel locates the rumpled copy of *Der Stürmer* and climbs to the uppermost deck. There, the tired *émigré* lies down on a teak *chaise longue* and opens the hateful newspaper for a dose of all things divisive. On page four, under the headline “*Jewish Currency Speculators*” is the subheading “*Jewel Joel Emerges*.” He closes the newspaper; his head swivels, confirming that no one snoops over his shoulder. He stands and checks to make sure his son and wife are still enjoying themselves at the pool on the deck below. Their laughter fills his heart, as he retreats to his cabin with the Nazi memento. Closing the door, and he starts again:

*“Joel, Karl, Joel Laundry Manufacturer, No. 65 Utrechter Straße 15-17 and former house address Tannenbergallee 2-4, Berlin Charlottenburg, telephone: 46-42-31 and long-distance telephone 46-76-62. This is still listed today in the official telephone directory of the Reich capital under the letter J. However, Karl Joel is no longer in Berlin. On August 18, 1938, he chose to shake the dust of hospitable Germany from his shoes, which always looked as if they had been taken straight from the store. For a good three months now, he has been working diligently to suck himself onto the lifeline of the Swiss people and, just as he did for years here, to*

*become a disgusting leech on the body of the nation. As a 'souvenir' of his glorious days in hospitable Germany, he took jewels worth around four hundred thousand Reichsmarks with him across the border."*

Karl Joel meticulously creases the page then, in one swipe, rips it from the newspaper. He takes it into his private bathroom, pulls out his lighter, and sets it aflame over the toilet bowl. The remaining pages he crumples violently and stuffs in the trash. That period is over. There is nothing more to talk about and nothing more to read about. No one, whether in his family or on this ship, should ever be reminded of this past again. A new life begins. He has only now and future.

## Chapter 20

The dishes are washed. Helmut Joel's youngest is still sitting at the piano playing his heart out. The six-year-old stops when his father enters the living room, then begins a new piece, purely from memory. After a few seconds, he pauses and turns to his big brother.

“Do you know that one?”

Billy beams from ear to ear. “Of course. I wrote it.”

“Right! Bravo! One hundred points for my brother,” Alexander grins. “Ladies and gentlemen, listen now to Alexander Joel, live with a composition by his big brother Billy called ‘*Nocturne*’ from the album ‘*Cold Spring Harbor!*’” Little Alexander speaks as if he is the ring announcer at a boxing match in Vienna's Prater Park.

Billy observes their father, poised vigilantly behind him. Unfazed by this, Alexander's fingers minuet across the keys. After several minutes, he finishes, and Billy applauds.

“How do you know that one, Alexander?”

Their father interrupts, “That must be the shortest ‘*Nocturne*’ in the world.”

“Is that why you listened to it so many times in a row?” Inadvertently the boy outs Helmut, then continues with a counter-question to Billy, “Well, how do you think I know it?” He points to his father's record cabinet, and springs to it, flaunting all the *Billy Joel* albums and flourishing them across the carpet in front of his brother.

“Please stop that, Alexander. Don't make such a mess!” Helmut's words fall on deaf ears.

“That one's my favorite!” Alexander points to the black-and-white photograph taken on Harbor Road that appears on the cover of “*Cold Spring Harbor*” showing Billy with long dark hair and a mustache.

Billy winces. “Why?”

“Because it’s the funniest one. First of all, you can’t see hardly anything but your hair, and second, you sound like Alvin and the Chipmunks.”

“You cannot say that, Alexander!” Their father’s grave remonstrance is belated balm to Billy’s inner child.

Billy swallows, crouching to his little brother’s eye-level, and says softly, “Listen, Alex, I have to fly back to New York today.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m recording a new album in a couple months and I still have a few songs to finish.”

“Can I come with you, please? I can help you write songs!”

Billy smiles at him.

“That’s not possible,” Helmut interjects.

“I’ll make you a suggestion. If you and Dad want, I’ll invite you to visit me in New York while I’m recording my new album. Then you can be there when all the songs that will be on the album are recorded.”

“Yay!” The little boy jumps around in circles.

“How many more nights until we fly to New York, Dad?”

Helpless, Helmut just looks at his sons.

“Alexander,” Billy cuts in gently, for his father’s sake, and tries to tranquilize the boy’s ebullience, “I’ll send you and Dad two plane tickets, okay?” Billy throws his green duffel bag

over his shoulder and heads for the apartment door where he slips his feet into his shoes before stepping into the hall. Helmut and Alexander follow him to the base of the central stairs.

“Thanks for coming,” says his father softly; still his deep voice echoes up the caracol stairwell. Helmut holds out his hand, looking into his eldest son’s soul, and they shake.

Billy lifts his little brother in a bear hug, and Alexander octopus-wraps Billy’s neck with his skinny little arms. “I always knew you’d come one day!” he hollers, unleashing an infectious string of chuckles that ricochet around the plaster walls. Then he gasps, and whispers in Billy’s ear, “I have one more question.”

“Yes?” Billy nods expectantly.

“Can I sit by the window on the plane?”

“Promise!” his big brother whispers in his ear.

Billy has experienced and felt so much in the last eight hours in Vienna that he now needs some air. He waves to his little brother and father from the street, turns left, and disappears through the large, round gate of the neighboring wine bar.

“One glass of white wine,” Billy tells a waiter in a traditional green and red Austrian vest.

Seated in the courtyard on a bench at a long, folding wooden table, Billy’s attention drifts to the three musicians and a singer performing under the arbor festooned with grapevines. They play the last notes of the aria “*Dein ist mein ganzes Herz*” from an operetta by Franz Lehár. When the waiter places a jug of white wine in front of Billy, he gestures to pay right away.

“You Americans are always in a hurry!” the waiter remarks.

Billy gives him a bill and indicates that he wants no small change back.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” The waiter bows and moves on to the next table.

On the ground floor of the adjacent yellow apartment house, the windows are being shuttered again. Its owner is unaware that Billy remains close by, observing the voluptuous singer taking a deep breath, her ample cleavage spilling out of the neckline of her dirndl. The curls she has styled herself in her thin, dark blond hair are gradually going limp.

*“Sounds of home. You awaken my longing,”* she sings languorously into her microphone.

Billy takes a sip of wine and lights a cigarette. Slowly, it dawns on him what piece of music it is. He knows it from his childhood. It is his father’s favorite operetta, *Die Fledermaus*. Its lead female character is named Rosalinde. His mother’s name.

*Mom’s probably sitting in her little house in Hicksville now, like every afternoon.* Billy imagines his mother seated right where she waited for years for the man who—now just a few meters away from him—is putting his second son to bed. She is the heroine of Billy’s life. She never left him. She was always there for him.

He stubs out his cigarette, gets up, and flags a taxi. *“To the airport, please.”*

The driver cheerfully tips his cap, puts the car in first gear, and drives off. Billy turns to look once more at the entrance of the yellow apartment house. In a few hours, Helmut and his other son will come out of that door again. And carefree Alexander Joel will go to school with cherubic glee. Glad at the thought of a little brother, Billy smiles—*Nice to have him around.*

*OS89* is the flight that gets Billy non-stop to New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport. Before the seatbelt sign lights up, Billy pops two sleeping pills and washes them down with a glass of champagne. His thoughts of Vienna can wait; he falls asleep while the plane is still taxiing toward the runway. Somewhere off the coast of Newfoundland, he wakes up and still has enough time to digest it all.

## Chapter 21

It's a cool October afternoon in Manhattan, and it is the moment 22-year-old Billy has waited for his whole life. At his apartment door a *Special Delivery* package arrives by bike messenger.

*To: Mr. William Martin Joel*

*From: Family Productions, New York City*

It contains ten freshly-pressed vinyl records—his first solo album. Soon, his ten besties will join him for a listening session of “*Cold Spring Harbor*” for the first time. Holding his freshly minted album, Billy turns it in all directions, reading every word of the liner notes carefully. Two thousand copies have already been pressed. Onto the turntable he places the record and gently guides the arm with the tiny sapphire stylus over the grooves. The needle hovers. He waits to press *play* until everyone gets there. Of the two crates of beer he got for tonight, one is already chilled; the other is in the unheated hallway of the walk-up so it doesn't get too warm. When the doorbell rings, he buzzes in his friends who tromp up several flights with more beer and wine. The big moment has finally arrived.

“We'll start with the first song—a love ballad. It's called *She's Got a Way*,” Billy says solemnly after everyone has settled down on his old couch and floor or wherever they can wedge in near a stereo speaker. Billy turns on the amplifier, checks once more that the volume control on his sacred *Bang & Olufsen* system is turned up high enough and that the output switch is set to “*Phono*.” He releases the small switch that controls the arm's anchorage, the pickup slowly lowers, sapphire touches vinyl and finds its way into the first groove without a hitch. Eight times the same note, then the chord and singing begins. After the first two piano notes, Billy checks the speed control, which can be set between 33 revolutions per minute for LPs and 45 rpms for

singles. It is correctly set to 33. But the notes are coming too fast. Now Billy's voice comes in, singing,

*“She’s got a way about her.*

*I don’t know what it is,*

*but I know that I can’t live without her...”*

Puzzled looks flash between his friends. That’s too fast. Billy sounds like “*fuckin’ Mickey Mouse*”—Emma is the first to state the obvious. She buries her face in her hands so no one can see how bad she’s giggling. Then Jon can’t hold it in any longer and his belly-deep guffaw bursts out. The song hasn’t been playing for thirty seconds, but it cannot be heard anymore because everyone’s laughter drowns out the music.

“That’s not possible. What’s going on? It’s much too fast!” Billy yells, rips the record off the turntable and throws it out his apartment window like a Frisbee. Awkward silence. Then,

“There must be a mistake in the first pressing, Billy.”

“All the other records will be fine, Billy.”

“It’s just a minor thing, Billy. They just need to press the tape onto vinyl again at the right speed.” His friends try to calm and comfort him. “Come on, try one of the other records. You’ll see, it was probably just that one.”

Chagrined, he doesn’t want anyone to ever hear him sing like that again, so asks his friends to clear-out. When the last of them is out the door, he tests the remaining nine pressings, one by one, hoping the mistake was a one-off. But each one sounds like the first—way to fast. He plays *Dylan*, the *Beatles*, and the *Four Tops*. They sound normal. So, it can’t be his turntable. He opens another beer, picks up the phone and calls absolutely everyone—the label boss, the

studio, the producer, his management, but no one picks up at 10:00 p.m. So, half the night, he paces, oscillating between sadness, anger, and hope. As dawn breaks, he falls asleep on his couch. The fridge is devoid of beer and the ashtray spews cigarette butts across the coffee table.

“I don’t understand. Too fast?” Finally, the boss of *Family Productions* returns his call. “I didn’t notice. Are you sure, Billy?”

Billy yells into the phone, “See you in an hour at the studio and bring a pressing! I destroyed all of mine.”

Hungover in the same rumpled shirt, Billy shows up unshaven at *Ultrasonic Recording Studios* in Hempstead. His team are there on tenterhooks, trying to lather up optimism as they hyper-greet him. The sound engineer puts “*Cold Spring Harbor*” on the turntable as the label boss, producer, and studio boss scrum a stained couch about fault and finances. The recording booth on the other side of the plateglass is empty and dark. The engineer pushes up one of many knobs on the four-meter-long mixing console, the turntable spins, and *Mickey Mouse* regales them from four speakers. Everyone looks aghast. No one says a word. Silent, Billy stands fuming and smoking—*Enough already*. He shouts over *Mickey*.

“Enough of that!”

“The mistake—”the label boss, Artie Ripp, seizes responsibility like a champ, then takes a breath to think. In his signature short-sleeved button down, untucked over his paunch, he stands and delivers, “The mistake, Billy, must have happened when the recording tape was played back for pressing. It was too fast.”

*No shit, dumbass!* Billy stares him down and says, “That’s right! And what do you intend to do now?”

More silence.

Perplexity thickens as accountability dissipates. They all run the numbers in their heads knowing full well that the 2,000 pressings sent to the shipping company yesterday are on their way to record stores from New York to Los Angeles, and 300 were shipped to Europe—2,300 heads on this hydra without a kill-switch. Billy rubs his face into his palms. Then looks at his mute team.

“We’ll take the damn tape and press it again. And this time at the right speed.” He sighs. Done. Problem solved.

It’ll just mean a slight delay and re-release, and another round of publicity, and... The sound engineer curls his lips downward, his lower lip pouting, and shakes his head.

“That’s not possible. The original tape no longer exists,” confesses the sound engineer.

Silence deafens. Billy chafes in disbelief, his eyeballs congealing. He walks out, slamming the door with such force that three empty beer bottles on the grimy coffee table crash to the floor.

Three days, 300 kilometers on a motorcycle, and three evenings of heavy drinking later, Billy sits in Artie Ripp’s office on Monday morning.

“I’m sorry.” Artie Ripp explains like he means it and runs his thick manicured fingers through his brown hair in need of a cut. “But, Billy, we can’t *re-record* and *re-produce*. We don’t have the money. We thought that the sales of your LP would generate enough money for a new production, but it looks like ‘*Cold Spring Harbor*’ isn’t selling well at all.”

“And you’re surprised? Maybe you should’ve had Disney characters printed on the cover, then at least people would know what to expect,” Billy replies, resigned.

“That was really bad luck, but...” The record boss shrugs and smiles apologetically so Billy can see the Lauren Hutton gap between the music professional’s top front teeth, ideal for whistling—*whistling Dixie*, that is. “There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

Decidedly, today, Billy remains calm and solution-oriented. Today, he does not want to shout, knock tables over, or throw things against the wall. He has set his intention. But his intention mushrooms into something he’s got to get out of his system. When he stands up, he pauses, then in one swipe, clears Artie Ripp’s family photos aside, and leans in with both hands on the record producer’s desk.

“If that’s the case, then that’s it for our collaboration. I’m canceling our record deal, and I’ll never work with you again.”

Disaffected, Ripp rolls back in his executive chair, crossing his arms over his broad chest before he replies, “Then you’ll have to retrain for another industry. Because as a musician, everything *Billy Joel* ever writes, produces, or sings belongs exclusively to me.”

Billy now walks behind the desk to Ripp’s side and asks, “For how long?”

“As long as you live.” He grins uncertainly. There’s that gap again begging Billy’s fist to set it straight.

“You probably want my left hand, my grandmother, and all my unborn children too?” Now, Billy is shouting. “If you want, you can take away my rights right now!” His arm outstretched, he sweeps the entire desk clean. Files, letters, pens, teetering photos, the phone, and the computer hit the floor. “You’ll hear from my lawyer.”

Once again, Billy slams the door behind him so hard it reverberates the plate glass windows. This time, nothing crashes to the floor. Everything that could have fallen already has.

## Chapter 22

Turquoise, azure, cerulean, aqua. Surf. Sky. Sea salt on the skin. Tropical temperatures. Balmy breezes, birdcalls, and the sound of the surf lapping the quay. Karl, Meta, and Helmut Joel gambol down the gangway into paradise. There's music and singing. At the harbor, three men in white linen suits and straw boater hats play guitar, trumpet, and bongos. Then, Helmut's attention is yanked away, ensnared by a delicate beauty with dark curls in a bias-cut summer dress past her knees and kitten heels sashaying past to the beat of the music. The young woman glances to look at the arrivals, and her dark eyes reflect sunlight on surf right back at Helmut.

“Help your mother, Helmut.” Karl thrusts a heavy bag at his son.

The eyes of a teenage boy fresh from boarding school break rank to stare at the ground. Helmut's plummy cheeks burn. When he looks up again, the captivating brunette is gone. The place smells of gardenia, brine, fish, coffee beans, and cigars. Cars honk, people wave to each other, laugh and share tall tales at outdoor street cafés, drink rum, and smoke cigars. *Paradise*. Helmut reaches the shade of a royal palm tree and, taking in a thousand impressions, he sits on the suitcases he's been dragging.

He is tasked to remain in the shaded and guard all six pieces of luggage while his parents disappear into a small building behind him, the *Oficina de Inmigración*. Cuban authorities require passports, myriad forms, and fifty dollars per person for entry. Helmut wonders if he's allowed to take off his jacket in the heat. A brute of old *machos* across the small plaza from him gather by a park bench; they too, wear pastel linen suits, hats, and shoes with socks. Their white mustaches curve over smoking *cheroots*, *panatelas*, *belvederes*, *cohibas*, and *el habano* cigars.

The spirited gentlemen appear relaxed. They are laughing. It is kind laughter. Appreciative

laughter of old friends. No one here seems afraid. No one skulks or scurries. Folks *pasear* at their own pace driven only by the rhythm of the lapping waves. Helmut feels he has found his way out of a cold, dark Dante sub-hell into the light, into life. Surrounded by green hills, the city of Havana is bathed in white; the dome of the Capitol, watchful over the homes of Havana, reflects as a bright gold spot on Caribbean waters. Music strains new to Helmut drift on warm gusts off the ocean. *But where's the source of the music?* It's everywhere—*salsa, rumba, cha-cha, tango, mambo, bolero.*

Even Karl and Meta Joel come to relax here and grow more carefree once the family moves into their new apartment in the chic *Vedado* district. Exotic plants bloom in the garden and up the trellises on the white stucco walls festooned with *bougainvillea*, gardenias, and other fragrant vegetation. Within the rooftop garden, the Joels take their meals to a breathtaking view of the sea sparkling in all hues of green and blue. From now on, Helmut is hardly ever to be found at home. Mornings, he attends the *Ruston Academy* in a boxy two-story stucco building where he learns English, Spanish, and French, and afternoons, he roams city and beach with his new school friends. Mostly, the boys his age frequent wherever the young brunette beauties are to be found. Days, young ladies promenade at *El Encanto*, one of the most elegant department stores in Latin America, so Helmut and his pals window-shop *couture* and cosmetics, too. And evenings, the ogle of boys circulate among the many small bars where there is singing and dancing for both genders and families to enjoy. Some especially sweltering afternoons, Helmut manages to invite one or two girls to the cinema, where the latest Hollywood films are shown in grand old thick-walled theaters cooled by ceiling fans.

Havana is a city that never sleeps. Only Helmut's parents do, preferring to remain oblivious to the thrumming new life around them in Cuba. Karl and Meta still speak only German and are not granted work permits. They sit in the stuffy apartment all day long. In the early morning, before the sun bears down on the city, Karl sneaks out of the house, scouting for opportunity. He returns to sit with his wife during the endless sweltering days. And as soon as it gets dark, he can be found at the casino's roulette tables. It's the only place where—theoretically—he has the opportunity to win back what he lost. At the end of each night, he is even further away from his goal than he was the day before. Depressed at his continued losses, he visits the post office some mornings to make phone calls to Europe. Diligently he tries to help his brother and his family flee Germany.

This impassioned endeavor is also unsuccessful until, at the beginning of May, the good news arrives. Karl's brother has managed to get his family the last tickets for a crossing from Hamburg to Havana. To leave the Third *Reich* alive involves numerous bureaucratic hurdles and costs: 500 *Reichsmarks* must be paid for a ticket in tourist class, and another 230 must be deposited as a guarantee for a possible return trip; the *Reich flight tax* must be paid, as well as duties on all exports. And a temporary residence permit for Cuba can only be obtained by transferring \$150 dollars to the corrupt General of the Cuban Immigration Authority, Colonel Manuel Benitez Gonzales.

On May 13, 1939, the passenger ship, *St. Louis*, owned by the shipping company *HAPAG*, leaves Hamburg, destination Havana, Cuba. Aboard are 937 passengers, most German Jews. Among them are Karl's brother Leon Joel, his wife Johanna, and their son Günther. Helmut is delighted that his young cousin will join them in Cuba. His mother reserves a place for the 10-

year-old at *Ruston Academy* for the new school year starting in September. On the morning of May 27, Karl Joel looks out from their rooftop breakfast to see a huge ship mooring—her burgee flapping from her mast is the swastika.

“They’re here! That must be the *St. Louis!*”

The three Joels finish breakfast quickly and hasten to the harbor. Meta buys a large bouquet of *mariposas*, Cuba’s national flower, also known as the white butterfly flower. Arriving dockside, Karl wonders why the *St. Louis* is still moored out in the bay and not already tied off at the pier. Along with many other waiting Havana residents the Joels sit along on the quay wall. Soon, rumors begin to circulate. The *St. Louis* has not been granted permission to dock in Havana. More and more people crowd into the small immigration office building, trying to garner any hints, but no one gets an answer. Then the officials leave the building and lock it. Dozens of people rush at them, but they disband. It is now lunchtime—and *siesta*. Helmut meanders off with a few buddies to a nearby harbor bar where a bloom of young women dance *rumba*. After two hours, four uniformed Cuban immigration officials return to their post. The heat is stifling. Karl Joel’s tailored linen suit is soaked with sweat, and Meta’s white *mariposas* droop. At last, one of the Cuban officials emerges from the immigration building and leans a homemade sign against the door, and shouts in three languages,

“*MANANA, TOMORROW, MORGEN.*”

“What does that sign mean?” shouts an angry Frenchman whom Karl recognizes from the luxury cruise ship the Joels abandoned. *Another defector*, Karl surmises, and turns his attention to the sign to which the man is pointing. Hand-scrawled in Spanish on the same scrap of cardboard, it reads,

“*SIN PERMISO DE ATERRIZAJE*”

“It means, ‘*No landing permission*’ here at Havana,” translates a local in a linen suit.

A murmur ripples through the crowd, slowly dispersing. From there on, Karl goes to the harbor every day and waits for the ship from Hamburg hoping his brother on board shall be allowed to enter Havana. For a few pesos, a fisherman offers to ferry the three Joels out to the moored German ship the next morning. Already a week has passed since the *St. Louis* arrived. Karl accepts the offer and Meta, and Helmut join him in the little fishing boat. Helmut converses with the fisherman and helps him row out to the ship where dozens of small boats circle the ocean liner. Hundreds of *émigrés* stand at the taffrail, waving and calling down to their relatives.

“Joel! Joel! Leon Joel!” Meta, Karl, and Helmut try to get passengers’ attention, hoping Leon will show himself.

After the third circle around the ship, a man on the upper deck suddenly waves at them with both hands, hollering, “Karl! Karl! Here we are!” The fisherman turns his boat around and Helmut helps row as close as possible to the *St. Louis*.

“How are you?” Karl shouts up.

“Fine. They just won’t let us disembark.”

“What’s the problem?”

“We don’t know. They tell us nothing.”

“We’ll find out,” Karl assures his brother, and looks expectantly to his son who is the only one in the family who has learned Spanish. “We’ll be back tomorrow!”

Leon, Johanna, and Günther Joel give him a thumbs up. The fisherman turns his boat toward land. Everyone waves to each other. At the harbor, already a long queue wait in front of

the immigration building. Helmut would rather go meet his friends, but his father requires him to stay with him and his mother. Someone must translate the questions for the immigration authorities. After another hour of waiting, an official swaggers out. He gestures with his hand across his throat to indicate that they are closed for the day.

“*Cerrado! Manana!*”

“Closed ‘til tomorrow,” frustrated people mumble and leave.

“It’s only a matter of time,” Karl reasons, “They cannot send a ship all the way from Hamburg to Cuba and then send it back home without accomplishing anything.”

“Besides,” Meta adds, “everyone paid a hundred and fifty dollars for an entry permit to come into Havana.”

The next morning, the *St. Louis* is not in Havana Bay. Disappeared. The Cuban government has ordered the ship flying the Nazi swastika burgee from her mast to leave its territorial waters. Two days later, US President Roosevelt refuses to allow the ship to dock, followed shortly thereafter by the Canadian government’s refusal. On June 17, 1939, Leon Joel and his family, along with all the other passengers, disembark in Europe. Karl never sees them again.

## Chapter 23

For eight years, until his father chose to vanish, Billy heard this litany from Helmut: “Life is a stinking cesspool!” And maybe he was right. The mix of Billy’s first solo album was recorded on a two-track tape that simply ran wrong. No one buys “*Cold Spring Harbor*” and no one wants to be responsible for the mess. So, no one steps up to the plate. Billy pays the price.

Two suitcases stuffed with necessities are what’s left in his empty Manhattan walk-up. Furniture, records, and his beloved *Bang & Olofsen* system are already back at his mother’s house. His life’s treasures stacked in cardboard cubes reside in his childhood bedroom waiting for Billy. But he is not going back to Long Island. As a grown man who moved out to conquer the world, he cannot move back in with Mom. That would be the ultimate form of failure, on top of the broken record contract. Billy is despondent. So, he calls a trusted pal to couch surf.

Irwin Mazur, his friend and music manager, parks his old *Chevrolet* outside. Chucking his suitcases in back, Billy climbs into the passenger seat, lighting a cigarette as he glances briefly at the brick rental he is leaving behind. Since the *Mickey Mouse* debacle, his thoughts revolve around the absurd record failure, and his lousy maiden-contract that hamstringing him for the rest of his life.

“How could I have been so stupid to sign that?” Billy berates himself, then takes a hard look at himself and sees the dynamic is simple: The young musician wants so much to have a big career, so he clings to the first offer that comes along and loses everything forever. For as long as he can remember that dream is what he wants in life, and he still cannot imagine doing anything else for himself. “The only time I feel connected to something divine is when I play the piano.”

“Retrain!” Artie Ripp had said to Billy.

*In what? Mechanic? Mathematician? Civil servant? Teacher?* If you're an artist, you can only be an artist. Anything else is unimaginable. That's why Billy feels he is at his end even before his life has really begun.

The couch in Irwin Mazur's living room, that is Billy's new bed, is chestnut, mustard, and ebony. The pillow is bright tangerine, the blanket white-on-black checks. There he remains, curled up, all day and all night, counting circles and right angles on the wallpaper—that, too, is chestnut and mustard. Irwin Mazur comes home early one evening and expects to find Billy where he has lain in a heap for weeks. But today the couch is empty. Mazur assumes Billy's got his mojo back and ignores an open bottle of furniture polish from under the kitchen sink that's not entirely out of place on the dusty table. Mazur's belief is reinforced when he goes into the kitchen, and finds an empty coffee cup, full ashtray, and inked paper in Billy's handwriting.

*Oh, my, I'm goin' to the river*

*Gonna take a ride, and the lord will deliver me*

*Made my bed, I'm gonna lie in it*

*If you don't come, sure gonna die in it*

*Too late, too much given*

*I've seen a lot of life and I'm damn sick of livin' it*

Mazur is happy that Billy's starting again to write what appears to be lyrics, and leaves the note on the table, assuming Billy will be back for it later on. About an hour later, Mazur's phone rings. Billy is in the hospital, having tried to kill himself with a bottle of furniture polish.

Mazur tries for days, possibly weeks, before the hospital allows visitors. Because fresh air is supposed to be good for "psychiatric" patients, the hospital is located in a park not far from

Levittown. A four-meter-high wrought-iron fence with arrowheads pointing skyward surrounds the institution. “*Irwin Mazur*” is on the visitor list, so, Billy’s friend is allowed to drive past the checkpoint. Within the gated sanctuary for mental health, Mazur notices frequent signage parroting one consistent message that gives him pause:

“*WALKING PACE*”

Mazur’s *why?* is answered when, from behind a tree, a man screaming incomprehensible epithets jumps into the driveway in front of Mazur’s *Chevy*. Arms spread wide, the 20-something keeps keening at Mazur, who is too immobilized with alarm to lock his doors. In the next moment, the screamer is gone, into a thicket of trees. Shaken, Mazur drives even slower to the parking lot, gets out, and regards the psychiatric hospital in all its terrifying glory. The building has some 15 floors, each with at least thirty square peepholes. Every floor at the front of the building is riddled with these small chicken-wire windows—totaling 450 of them. Agita adrenalin has got Mazur’s music-math-brain running full-throttle. Finally finding the right entry door, Mazur stands in the foyer and tries to figure out the way to *Ward 42G* from a floorplan behind plexiglass on the wall. The ill-lit hallway is windowless. The floor is covered with grubby dark green rubber, and neon lights flicker on the high ceiling. At the far end of one hall, Mazur notices a janitor pushing a mop at a snail’s pace. All patients wear white jonnies. Some stare blankly right through Irwin Mazur, while others laugh hysterically, scream, throw themselves on the floor, or weep. Only a few are allowed to stroll freely down the hallway—providing their arms are bound behind their back with a loop. A teenager walks in front of Mazur. The boy is not especially tall, and very thin. *Kid probably hasn’t eaten much in a long time*, Mazur figures. Behind the boy’s back, his fists clench again and again. He presses the fingernails of one hand so deeply into the

flesh of the other that the open gouge bleeds. In the elevator, a woman drums against the plastic-covered padded walls. A supervisor in white scrubs stands beside her, downright bored. Mazur doesn't feel comfortable.

The clunking elevator doors open ponderously at the seventh floor. A sign indicates *Stations 40-48* to the right. Mazur barely recognizes Billy in a white, knee-length nightgown. Billy shuffles toward him holding an empty plastic cup in his left hand. Reaching Mazur, he immediately grabs Irwin's arm and whispers in his ear.

"You gotta' get me outta' here. They're all crazy."

Behind Billy, an eavesdropping patient in his thirties with tousled hair and one slipper is nodding in agreement, wide-eyed and pointing to himself.

"Billy, what have you done?" Irwin asks, genuinely aggrieved for his friend.

"Oh, just forget it. I took myself way too seriously. I'll never do it again. But I have to get out of here."

Hooking his arm through his friend's, Billy leads the way down another hall, at the end of which is a large sterile room. In the middle is a massive rectangular table where a kindly nurse sits dispensing meds. In front of her, patients stand close together, each holding the same plastic cup that Billy carries around with him.

"This is where they hand out the medication. I have to be here on time, otherwise they come later, tie me to the bed, and give me an injection." Billy obediently joins the line. When it's his turn, he says his name and adds, "Nurse, I'm really not crazy. You know I don't belong here."

"Of course, Mr. Joel. Just like everyone else here." Her motherly tone belies uncompromising determination, and she adds, "Nevertheless, we're going to take your pills

now.” In her presence, Billy is obliged to empty his cocktail of one green, two blue, and three red tablets from the plastic cup into his mouth. Then she takes her jug and fills his plastic cup with water so he can wash down the pills. “There you go. That wasn’t so bad. We did very, very well.” She motions for him to move along and turns her pleasant mien to the next patient in line.

Even more slowly than before, Billy rejoins Irwin. “You... you... you’ll get me out of here, right?” he implores.

“I promise.”

“Good. I’m getting tired again. I’m going to sleep. But hurry up. I have to get out of here.”

Irwin accompanies his friend to *Dormitory Number 8 in Ward 43G*.

A week later, Billy is released “on probation” into the care and sole responsibility of Mr. Irwin Mazur. Mazur is already waiting for him in the parking lot, leaning casually against the hood of his *Chevy*. They pile in. Billy’s handwritten note from the kitchen is on the passenger seat, “*Tomorrow is today...*” Mazur holds out the paper to Billy.

“And now you’re going to turn that into a song.”

“It already is one,” Billy assures.

## Chapter 24

“Can you please go down to the landlord and tell him we’re extending for another six months?”

Karl Joel instructs his son. Learning Spanish seems a waste of time to Karl. Cuba is a stopover. A forced respite in paradise until the Joel family visa from the *land of the free* finally arrives. The money Karl got from hocking jewelry and other valuables is still enough to scrape by. Thrift is of essence. Purchasing a daily paper for the latest news on their homeland is now a forbidden luxury; Karl scrounges up day-old newspapers left at cafés and soiled on park benches. The Joels no longer dine at restaurants once a week, or even *tapas* bars. Rooftop meals homecooked by Meta are the norm. In recent months, Karl Joel has been gripped by existential fear night after night. He counts in his mind. He counts the money he was cheated out of in Germany and tallies how much he has already lost at the casino in Havana. When he totals these sums, he feels his heart pounding in his temples. In the darkness, his eyes adapt; he starts to see outlines—table, lamp, vase of gardenias Meta picked from the garden, and by the *armoire*, his suitcase, impatient. Why unpack when the long-awaited entry permit to the US might arrive tomorrow? Besides, you never know when you may have to flee this place. War in Europe infects other lands and portends spreading beyond oceans to the world. Recent times cannibalize Karl’s soul just as Chronos devours his children. Furrows of fear engrave Karl Joel’s features during many months in Havana. Worrying about his family’s future is what robs him of sleep.

Helmut, on the other hand, seems to live entirely in the here-and-now. Since graduating from high school the previous summer, the teenager has been going every day to study electrical engineering at the Universidad de la Havana, which towers above the city. A group of politicized students who call themselves “*Los muchachos de gatillo alegre*” (*the boys with a happy trigger*)

are activists against all forms of discrimination. During breaks, they play chess. Twice a week, Helmut sits down at the chessboard with an activist three years his junior, who, although still in high school, is already politically active at the university. The lad has a penchant for baseball, politics, and the royal game. Twenty years later, as a revolutionary leader, Marxist theorist, and dictatorial president of Cuba, the young fellow will change the history of his country forever when he is known to the world as none other than Fidel Castro.

Evenings with Helmut Joel's friends in the myriad seaside clubs and bars, the German *émigré* favors the venues with music. Sometimes proprietors even let Helmut play the piano. These are the best moments for him—when his fingers glide over the keys conjuring mellifluous melodies, and the bar quiets. Talk and laughter fade away and everyone listens to Helmut Joel's Ludwig von Beethoven, as yet a stranger to Cubans. That is when Helmut feels completely himself again, playing late into the night.

The last note fades away. Helmut uncertainly lets his hands fall from the keyboard onto his thighs. Silence. A man of about forty-five, who sits at the table in the back right corner every evening, stands up and applauds. It is the American poet Ernest Hemingway, known throughout Cuba, and the world. The rest of the restaurant follows his lead and joins in. Helmut's cheeks flush. "Bravo!" the poet calls out. Helmut bows uncertainly and disappears among a group of his peers standing at the bar.

It is almost 11:00 p.m. on a September evening when Helmut plucks the housekey from under the mat. Inside the Joel apartment, a light illuminates his parents, seated at the table holding hands even as they look up at him.

“What’s happened? Did I do something wrong?” Helmut asks uncertainly. He feels a little dizzy. *The Floridita* bar offers ten different variations of daiquiri, all rum-based and loaded with sugar and exotic fruits. He may have drunk five of them tonight, bought for him by tickled patrons as he tickled the ivories.

His father holds up a yellowish piece of paper. “*Helmut Joel. Four, two, one, nine.*” Karl hands over the folded document; Helmut sobers, opening it.

*“United States of America - Immigration Visa No. 4219,*

*dated Sept. 16, 1940,*

*issued to Helmut Julius Joel.*

*Signed by George R. Hukins, American Consul in Havana.”*

“But—Did *you* get one?”

His mother beams. “We received a residence permit for the United States of America. We can finally move to our new home.”

The Havana moon reflects on an obsidian sea, the air clean and warm. “When?” he asks.

“As soon as possible,” replies Karl. “In the morning, we’ll go to the port for our tickets.”

## Chapter 25

Billy's cases are packed again.

“Thank you for everything, buddy, but I won't be staying on your couch any longer.”

“What'll you do now? Where'll you go?” asks Irwin Mazur.

“I don't care about anything I ever wanted to achieve, record deals, being a star, or groupies. I do what I do best. I write songs about my life, my experiences, my thoughts. Anyone who wants to can sing them. I'm out of the business and I just play the piano now.”

“But where will you live?” Mazur's Manhattan apartment is plenty big enough for two.

“I'll lay low for a while. I can't stay in New York City. No matter which studio I walk into or which stage I sing on, sooner or later he'll find out. Better he believes I'm no longer a musician. When Artie Ripp sees that he can't make any money off me, he'll release me from his lifelong contract.”

Later that day, Billy drops \$250 cash for a “like-new” *Datsun Cherry Kombi* at a used lot on Stone Boulevard. The bright green clunker starts right up. Its hippie salesman, whose moustache creeps past his collar, turns a sangfroid eye to Billy's motorcycle license. Billy throws his stuff in the back. His supply hub rides shotgun: 10 music cassettes, a six of beer, water bottle, snacks, and a carton of cigarettes are within reach. Driving west on Route 90, *the home of the brave* unfolds before him. Destination: Los Angeles. Not a soul knows him there; he can start over under a new name. Plus, the weather's nice. With every fly-over town he passes, he sheds ballast, a feeling of freedom burgeons inside. When his eyelids grow heavy, he looks for a motel—sleep, shower, continue driving across Ohio, Chicago, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, Utah. Temps climb, yet never does he doubt he's leapt out of the fire into a way cooler frying

pan. The *Datsun* windows are cranked down all the way to Las Vegas, his last stop before he passes Mount San Antonio in the south. After 10 days in transit, Los Angeles welcomes him around 2:00 a.m. Jim Morrison, Tom Waits, Janis Joplin, the Beach Boys, and Frank Zappa: from rocker lore, Billy knows that when they're in Los Angeles, they stay at the *Tropicana Hotel* on Santa Monica Boulevard. It's a small, thrift hotel with a black swimming pool where wild parties are rumored to be held until the wee-hours. He can't afford to bunk there for long, but it's the most auspicious place to kickstart his next attempt to bootstrap his career.

When Billy arrives in LA, however, there's no party at the *Tropicana Hotel*. Quite the opposite, in fact. Its doors are locked, lights are off. For the first time on his trip, Billy sleeps in his car, right in the hotel parking lot. At 8:00 a.m., he checks in, but his room's not ready before noon. Until then, he encamps poolside, flipping through the *Yellow Pages*. Neatly creasing the thin paper, he tears out listings for bars and clubs advertising live music. After a shower, Billy is back in his green *Cherry Kombi*, cruising La Cienega Boulevard. Musicians play at the *Troubadour*, and someone's always looking for a pianist, as is the case at *Corky's* on Van Nuys. There, Billy plays every evening until Christmas, trading his room at the *Tropicana* for a small North Hollywood apartment in a two-story building with a communal pool—although the pool strikes Billy as more of a big bathtub. It's impossible to swim laps without tangling with others.

*Corky's* lineup is junk. Billy's playing Christmas standards at the piano on December 23, when right beside him on the stage, the owner starts casting a young woman with a guitar and bongos. Not one stanza into '*God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*' Billy's fee gets slapped on the off-key piano.

“You're out!” the owner brays. “She's playin' now.”

Minutes later, exiting the parking lot, Billy pitches a hardball-size rock from his *Datsun* window. His aim has always been true—no need to rubberneck his homerun. Tinkling glass reminds him of the magic of Christmas snowflakes falling back East in Hicksville.

On the second day of 1973, Billy shows up at a Hollywood entertainment agency specialized in booking musicians for private parties and venues. His interviewer dispatches him to audition at a club in Koreatown called the *Executive Room* on Wilshire Boulevard. A week later, Billy starts performing evenings ‘til 2:00 a.m., five or six half-hour sets six days a week. He gets by, earning up to \$200 some nights with tips, but under the name “*Bill Martin*” so no one IDs him, especially his former record rep, Artie Ripp. The *Executive Room* becomes Billy’s new family, with John, behind the bar, who becomes a friend and slips Billy free drinks, and Paul, a real estate agent by-day who’s jonesing to be a writer. Listening to “*Bill Martin*” play, they are able to escape the matrix, as it were, just long enough to imagine everyday life successful and without loneliness. One very early morning returning from his steady gig, Billy finds his community swimming pool is inhabited only by children’s floaties and blow-up animals deflating sadly over its edge. Alone, he swims laps in the lukewarm chlorine cocktail and thinks about his co-workers and the different folks he performs for night after night. LA’s hot sunrise dries him off as he heads up to his apartment where he bangs out a song:

*“Now John at the bar is a friend of mine*

*He gets me my drinks for free*

*And he’s quick with a joke or to light up your smoke*

*But there’s someplace that he’d rather be*

*He says, ‘Bill, I believe this is killing me,’*

*As the smile ran away from his face.*

*'Well, I'm sure I could be a movie star,*

*If I could get out of this place.'*

*Sing us the song, you're the piano man,*

*Sing us a song tonight*

*Well, we're all in the mood for a melody*

*And you've got us feeling alright*

He places that jotted sheet of bond on top of a pile of song lyrics he's been inking since his arrival in Los Angeles. On the wall above his bed hangs a self-drawn sigil of *Columbia Records*. Bob Dylan is there, Janis Joplin, and soon Billy Joel will be too, he knows it. That's the record company for him.

The next morning, he charges into the office of Attorney Lee Colton, Esq., a former Los Angeles High School football player and passionate boxer. Colton runs his own law firm, representing numerous musicians against record labels. He's reputed to not be too squeamish with them. The counsellor, whose sport coat snuggles his muscular physique, welcomes Billy under his *aegis*. An hour later, after leaving Colton's office, Billy can still feel the firm handshake of the six-foot solon. *This is the right man to get me out of my contract with Family Productions*. Relieved, Billy climbs into his *Datsun*. *It's time I get my life back*.

Empty cans, cigarette packs, and junk-food wrappers obscure the passenger seat, like giftwrap on Christmas morning.

"Damn car key's gotta be here somewhere."

“Well, if you clear out your trash....” That warm voice wafting in his open window sure is familiar.

Billy looks up. A brunette beauty leans in casually against the door of his Datsun—beaming at him.

“With a view like this, we can stay here a little longer.” Billy grins, recognizing Elizabeth Weber, former wife of his former bandmate and friend Jon Small. They had spent a lot of time together years before. Too much, in fact. In the end, Jon had punched Billy and then Elizabeth bailed on both of them.

“What are you doing here?” Billy hops out and takes Elizabeth in his arms.

“You sent me a song.”

“Oh.” He looks down at the ground, ashamed. “That’s right, it was just a little demo tape. I thought you might be interested—”

“In how you feel about me?” she finishes his thought.

Billy clears his throat, opens the passenger door, and sweeps all the trash from the seat onto the floor. As he does so, Elizabeth spots something. She smiles affectionately, and from the floor, she picks up the lost car key and presses it into Billy’s palm. With a slight bow, he invites her to take a seat.

“Madame, your limousine is ready to depart.”

The two drive along Santa Monica Boulevard toward Beverly Hills.

“Do you remember which song you sent me?”

“Uhhh.” The sun beats down on the green metal roof of the Datsun. Billy finally answers her, “No.”

Elizabeth rummages in her handbag and pulls out a cassette tape, reading, *“This song is for you. Love, Bill.”* It is handwritten on the cover. She sheds the plastic case and inserts a tape into the car radio’s cassette deck. Billy lights a cigarette and focuses on the road. Resting his elbow on the sill, his forearm hangs out the window. He can’t let her see how fast his pulse is racing in his veins.

Off-handedly, he remarks, “The quality of the demo is not great.” Static bristles from the speakers, as the song plays,

*She’s got a way about her*

*I don’t know what it is*

*But I know that I can’t live without her*

*She’s got a way of pleasin’*

*I don’t know what it is*

*But there doesn’t have to be a reason anyway*

Elizabeth presses the *“FastForward”* and *“Rewind”* buttons at the same time. The cassette pops out.

“You see me. You understand me.” Her left hand takes his. “And another thing, your music is so versatile. So unique. Your lyrics are so full of love.”

Billy flicks his cigarette out the window and turns to her. “Every single love song is dedicated to you.”

“I know. And because you speak from the heart of every lover, you’ll be a global star.”

“I’m glad you say that, but I’m a prisoner of Artie Ripp. As long as he won’t let me out of my contract, I can only remain an inconspicuous bar pianist in Los Angeles.”

Elizabeth looks out the window in silence, then says matter-of-factly, “Okay. So, you want to pursue a career in music? That can’t be so hard. From now on, I’ll be by your side and support you as your wife.”

Billy grins. “My wife?”

“Yes. We’re getting married tomorrow,” she replies.

Now, Billy takes her hand. “Okay.”

## Chapter 26

A small, detached wooden cottage, a pool on the stone terrace, surrounded only by bushes, trees, and the hills of Malibu. This is the new home of Billy, Elizabeth, and Sean, her son with Billy's former bandmate Jon Small. The orange and white striped awning casts its cooling shadow on the balcony until late afternoon when the low sun scorches with full force, only to disappear soon after as a red glow in the Pacific Ocean. A grand piano beside a broad window offers a breathtaking view of the garden and valley below as well as the shimmering sea that continually changes, every hour of the day.

Five-year-old Sean is practicing his dives in the swimming pool when the white push-button phone, dangling from a twenty-meter cable, rings.

"Where is that damn phone again?" Billy hollers from his deck chair in the last shady corner of the balcony.

"I've got it!" Elizabeth dashes it over to him.

"This is Clive Davis from Columbia Records," a sonorous voice on the other end of the line says calmly.

This is the man who signed Janis Joplin, Santana, and Neil Diamond. Over a year ago, Billy gave a live radio concert on a station called W-MR in Philadelphia. Since then, the song "Capt'n Jack" has been the most requested song in the history of the radio station. The local promotion manager at Columbia Records told his company headquarters about this. After weeks of research into who the artist is and where he lives, the president of Columbia Records finally has Elizabeth on the phone today.

A year later, the album “*Piano Man*” is released on the world’s largest record label. Billy earns a total of \$7,768 from it. The rest goes to Artie Ripp’s Family Productions, Columbia Records, and a few others who bet on Billy Joel early on and secured their share of his earnings.

“Number 25 on the *Billboard* charts is nice, but we need a number one hit. So, back to the studio. I want a tape with a new album in a few weeks.”

On the walls of Columbia Records, a scant trace of white paint is visible beneath Gold Records in black frames. As he heads out, the A&R manager mentions to Billy, “Oh, by the way...” The man informs the artist that the new version of “*Piano Man*” had to be shortened, and it is now three minutes and sixteen seconds long. That is the maximum for radio stations, these days.

Billy slowly turns. He shakes his head. “That’s almost two and a half minutes less than the song is long! What did you do with the rest?”

A shrug.

Billy slams the door behind him.

“You need proper management.” Elizabeth sits across from Billy. The dinner dishes have been cleared away, little Sean is in bed, and the two of them are sitting on the balcony with a glass of red wine. “*Caribou Management*. They’re supposed to be the best. I’ve already checked them out.”

Billy nods. “Okay. Then let’s just get someone else on board who can make money with me.”

“Jim Guercio has produced over forty-five top-ten albums and twenty *Billboard* number-one hits.” Elizabeth is firmly convinced that he should produce Billy’s next album.

The first thing Guercio says to Billy is, “I like your stuff. You’re a great piano player. You could be America’s Elton John.”

“But I don’t want to be America’s Elton John. I am me and I have my own style.” Billy doesn’t believe in conforming to anyone else. Reluctantly and against his convictions, he nevertheless agrees to the suggestion to record his next album with Elton John’s band. After two days in the studio, Billy throws the keyboard across the room. “The last person in the world I want to be compared to is Elton John. And the last thing I want to do is make an Elton John album. Sorry, you’re good musicians, but not for me.”

Back in New York, Billy puts together his own band. He doesn’t want polished studio musicians from an island on the other side of the Atlantic. He searches on his own island—Long Island—and finds what he’s looking for. The new album is called “*Turnstiles*,” written, sung, and produced by Billy Joel, recorded with his own band in his hometown of New York.

“You still need a manager!” Elizabeth doesn’t give up.

“If I do, I need one who knows me. And who knows me better than you? You’re my wife!” Billy has been thinking for a long time about officially entrusting his best advisor, his smartest counterpart, his most loyal friend with his management. “Why don’t you manage me? You can’t do any worse than all the others before you.”

Elizabeth leans back, lights a cigarette, takes two puffs and says, “Okay. Let’s give it a try.”

A few days later, a large conference table, a desk with space for three telephones, filing cabinets and folders are delivered to the house. The newly founded management company is called Home Run and is officially run by Elizabeth Weber. She takes over all of Billy Joel's business affairs. Exclusively. She builds a kind of second band around the band, consisting of lighting and film producer Steve Cohen, sound producer Brian Ruggles, and booking agent Dennis Arfa. For more than five decades, Billy will work with no one else.

Accompanied by Elizabeth and his band, Billy tours the country for the next few months as the opening act for the Beach Boys, Billy Preston, Hall & Oates, and the Doobie Brothers, but Columbia Records is putting pressure on him. The big hit is still missing. George Martin, the Beatles' producer, is supposed to remedy the situation; Elizabeth arranges for him to see a show.

The concert goes well. Elizabeth and Billy then talk in the dressing room with George Martin; a half hour passes. Then, without another word, the star producer opens the door, and up and leaves. Seeing this, immediately, Liberty De Vito, the drummer, enters the backstage area.

“So? What did George Martin say? Did he like it? Oh my God—we played in front of George Martin. That's incredible.”

Billy stands up and takes off his tie. “Yes. He wants to produce me.”

“That's incredible.” Liberty is euphoric.

“But he wants to work with studio musicians. Not with you guys.”

By now the other band members have trickled into the dressing room. Everyone's holding their breath. “And... what did you say?”

A single glance can betray sadness or euphoria.

“Love me. Love my band.” Billy opens a can of beer.

Surprised looks.

“What does that mean exactly?” Liberty speaks for all of them.

Now Elizabeth answers, “It means that we turned down George Martin, and I’m going to find another producer for our next album.”

## Chapter 27

After six hours aboard ship, a delicate pencil line appears in the endless blue—a shoreline. From the bow of the *Ward Line*'s 155-meter-long white cruise ship, Karl, Meta, and Helmut Joel sail past the Florida Cays on *SS Oriente*'s weekly *Havana - New York* leg.

“That’s America!” Helmut exclaims. “Is that Miami?”

“Can’t be,” his father replies, “Must be West Cay.”

“*Key*—you pronounce it ‘*key*’ like the lock,” his son corrects. “Not ‘*caiiii*’!”

For three more days, Karl Joel’s vigil cleaves to the East Coast of the United States on *SS Oriente*'s port side. He is appetent for reassurance that they will not inadvertently get turned away and returned to Europe, like his brother. At Coney Island, the steamer veers northwest Chelsea Pier, the passenger terminal in New York Harbor. Most travelers congregate portside, beholding what they have waited so long to see. Their reverent “*oohs*” and “*aahs*” rhapsodize the stunning view. Karl, in his fine suit and tie, grips the taffrail as the long-awaited symbol of a free, peaceful, fearless life appears: the majestic Statue of Liberty. Meta Joel swabs her husband’s tears.

“Thank you for saving our family,” she whispers. Karl encircles her shoulders in his arms and kisses her brow. From a short distance astern, Helmut joins his parents.

“Did you see that? Up there. That’s the Empire State Building.”

Manhattan’s breathtaking skyline towers higher the closer they sail. A recorded voice blares over the loudspeakers,

*“Welcome to New York City. You are in the largest and most important port in the world. Ninety percent of all goods imported into the United States*

*come through here. Silk, cotton, linen, jewelry, chemicals, coffee, sugar, and many other goods are unloaded from more than five thousand ships from all over the world every year at the port of New York.”*

Karl Joel reflects grimly about his brother, stuck on the *St. Louis* in the harbor of Havana for weeks—forced to return to Europe. For the first time in a very long time, he feels a vise knot inside him slacken when the US Immigration officer taps a round seal twice on an ink pad and then, with a loud thud on each passport, acquits three Joels of the threat of Nazi butchery.

“*Approved*” appears below the seal, followed by an illegible signature.

New York City, however, portends to consume them in one wild gulp; Karl, Meta, and Helmut have never seen so many people, so much hustle, so many cars, so much bustling life all at once. A Black porter of about twelve offers to take their luggage from the port to the hotel for a small tip. He loads their six suitcases onto his ramshackle wood slats on wheels, then lifts the two poles at the back and shoves the Joel family’s remaining belongings into the throng of humanity. Karl walks ahead of the luggage, fearing someone might snatch a suitcase or that the boy might maneuver the entire kit into one of the many side streets where his fellow urchins could make off with all the Joels’ possessions. The route takes the family through Tribeca, past endless warehouses and factory buildings toward the first skyscrapers. Helmut and his mother walk behind the haphazard cart mindful of the hundreds of vehicles driving east along Chambers Street, honking, ringing bells, drivers shouting.

At *Broadway* the young porter leads the Joels two more blocks north, to a small hotel. “*HOTE*” flickers noble neon red in the window—*L*’s electrode long dead. The four-story brick building has a fire escape running past the windows up the front. The vestibule is so small that

only Karl and Meta can check in, while Helmut offloads the suitcases onto the stoop, aided by the adolescent porter, awaiting payment.

“Stairs in America are steeper and narrower than in Europe, it seems,” remarks Karl Joel, stepping out to tip the helpful lad.

When at last the family approach their “*HOTE*” room, Helmut’s mother raises an eyebrow at the pitiable condition of a tatty red carpet rumpling up the hallway. She reminds herself she is deeply grateful to be safe with her beloved husband and son in America, where things will be different. The key to their room too is different than a European key. Smaller, it must be inserted into a round knob with its serrated teeth facing up. Compared even to their Zurich lodging, the Joel family’s temporary room in New York City marginalizes every inch of floor space between four beds, one of which, at least, provides space to lay open two suitcases at a time. Sharing a wall, right next door, the only shower and water closet are in use 24 hours a day, unless broken, which is often. Throughout the night, a ceaseless symphony plays—toilet flushing, water running, men coughing, urinating, spitting, vomiting.

“Hmmm, ‘*Wassermusik*’ so close at hand!” Helmut jokes wryly, referencing Handel’s 1717 “*Water Music*” a composition of three Baroque orchestral suites. “Performed nightly here at *Wasserspiele Hellbrun*.”

His mother is delighted her son is feeling spritely, and shares in his repartee adding, “And we are so fortunate to have front row seats, my darling.”

Content and safe, Helmut pushes open their one small street-facing window, so rickety thin it does little to block out the cacophony on Broadway. He peers down at the flow of cars, taxis, bicycles, buses, and trucks—continual despite a shortage of gasoline. At the harbor station,

Helmut had seen a sign: “*Sorry. No gas. Don’t blame us. Blame Hitler.*” Helmut thinks, *America is completely different and yet similar.* The little things in everyday life look completely different; most are bigger.

“Lafayette Street runs parallel to Broadway. So, it can’t be far from us,” says Karl, spreading a map of New York City on the shabby table for his son to study.

“Broadway sinews like a sidewinder snake, parallel to nothing,” Helmut replies, “And the streets in this city are not only wider but also longer than in Germany.”

Karl and Helmut find that *425 Lafayette Street* is a whole ten blocks away from their hotel, the next morning, when they set off early for the office of *HIAS*, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, in the NoHo district, north of Houston and East 4th Street. A sign on the door remembers antisemitism predates Hitler’s reign of terror,

*“The society was founded in 1881 to help Jewish immigrants fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe.”*

When Karl and Helmut arrive, a line of hopeful new immigrants at the information desk keeps father and son waiting almost the entire morning until a representative of *HIAS* is available to speak to them. Meta, who has stayed in the hotel room, becomes increasingly anxious at the prolonged absence. *Are my menfolk lost?* She prays nothing has gone awry.

Around noon, the Joels head the queue at last. Ushered to sit across from a kindly man with nickel-rimmed glasses, father and son learn that New York City is home to people from over sixty different countries. Manhattan alone has more Germans than in Bremen, more Irish than Dublin, more Italians than Genoa. Here, all creeds live near one another, work together, and attend school together. Countless refugees live in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The

gentleman advises that a few streets away from Williamsburg Bridge, a nice two-room apartment is inexpensive and available for the Joels to move into, in a few weeks, when its current tenants move to Chicago. The gentleman hands Karl a note with the address and name of the landlord, along with a “welcome folder” containing information a new immigrant is likely to need for life in New York and a small German-English *Oxford-Duden Dictionary* that Karl Joel will carry inside his overcoat pocket from now on.

Four years pass from the time Karl and Meta Joels flee from their home in Berlin; with many months in Switzerland and years in Havana, they finally settle into a new home in New York City, overlooking the Williamsburg Bridge. With gratitude, they adapt and adjust to differences. Not only is America’s culture and language different from Germany, but the lifestyle, as well. Virtually nothing but their lives and wisdom and good-heartedness, remains of the Joels wealth and luxury. Seventy thousand refugees from Germany live in New York, the city that many jokingly call the “Fourth *Reich*” where they speak German, hold fast to their customs and traditions, read *Aufbau*, their own newspaper in their *Muttersprache*, and in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, they are reminded of the bustling Berlin of the 1920s.

Helmut quickly finds a job as a messenger for twelve dollars a week, of which his parents permit him to keep one dollar, which, at the time, has considerable buying power—certainly enough to satisfy a young man’s essential pocket money for transit and small indulgences. The remaining \$11 are pooled to help support his family. He delivers mail and packages containing hair ribbons for a company owned by a German, which gives Karl Joel an idea. Karl buys fabric ribbons and, just as he did twenty years earlier in the Joels’ nuptial apartment in Nuremberg, with Meta’s help, he sells hair ribbons. It is a business model that is not nearly as promising in 1940s

America as it was in 1920s Germany. The Joels do not get rich from it, but for the time being, it provides enough earnings for basic survival.

After years in Havana where Helmut Joel had little opportunity to devote serious study to the piano, he feels his dream of a career as a pianist is long atrophied. In addition, his father expects him to learn a proper profession, which is why Helmut enrolls at the City College of New York in Hamilton Heights, at the northern end of Manhattan. Every day, Helmut crosses almost the entire island by subway and bus to get from the Lower East Side to the university campus and the famous Harris Hall, an impressive building complex made of dark gray bricks with white-framed windows, turrets, pointed gables, and an oversized golden clock above the entrance. Thanks to his studies, young Helmut Joel is jubilant that he now has access to a piano on campus. In addition, he joins a jazz band with which he regularly performs at weddings, private parties, and funerals. And he plays in theater and opera performances at the university. Making music is still Helmut's greatest joy, if it weren't for his terrible stage fright. When Helmut steps onto a stage, he becomes stiff as a board, his facial expressions freeze, his voice trembles, and his hands go clammy. On the day of the school premiere of the opera "*The Pirates of Penzance*" the president of his university sits in the front row, and even Karl and Meta attend. Helmut's role is actually small and straightforward, but the fear of forgetting even his few short lines makes his hands tremble. While running his lines quietly to himself, Helmut keeps peeking past the curtain, into the auditorium. A full house. Even the nose-bleed seats are taken. Helmut continues quietly running his lines.

"Excuse me?" a soft feminine voice interrupts him. He looks up to see a beautiful brunette with bright doe eyes smiling at him. She asks again, "What did you just say? Just now."

“Nothing, I’m practicing my lines.”

“Can’t you remember it?”

“Yes, I can. At least I could last night.”

She holds out her hand to him. “I’m Rosalind, and you are...?”

“Helmut.”

“You don’t need to be nervous, Helmut, because then you won’t enjoy playing. Being on stage is a game. So let’s play, Helmut.” She takes him by the hand and pulls him behind the stage. “Let’s have a drink first. You’re not on stage for another thirty minutes, and I’m on even later than you.”

“Your name is Rosalind? Like *Rosalinde von Eisenstein* from *Die Fledermaus*?”

“Yes, like Rosalinde from *Die Fledermaus*.”

“That’s my favorite opera. Johann Strauss premiered it in Vienna in 1874.”

“I know. My family came from Europe,” replies Rosalind compellingly. “But I was born and raised here in New York City.”

At the curtain call, “*The Pirates of Penzance*” is cheered by the audience. Rosalind makes a point to stand beside Helmut as they take their bows. It’s over. She takes his hand. It’s cold. He said the right thing at the right time and was in the right place on stage, she assures him again. Karl and Meta leave to make their way home, as do Rosalind’s parents. When cast and crew finally head out, Helmut carefully asks Rosalind where she lives with her family. Southern Manhattan—just like Helmut.

The two set off together along the Hudson River, strolling Riverside Park for over three hours, telling each other about their lives. Rosalind’s family is also Jewish and moved from

London to New York after World War I. Her parents are free spirits who enjoy life and live rather carefree. They will probably never achieve anything, she thinks, but at least they are happy.

Helmut tells her about his childhood in Nuremberg and Berlin, his boarding school in Switzerland, his escape from Europe, and his hiatus in Cuba. The night grows cool and late. The salty moisture creeps up the shoreline and settles in Rosalind's feet and legs. She shivers, and Helmut relinquishes his jacket, placing it over her shoulders. As the couple segue from the West Side to the East Side, wind sweeps through the urban canyons of tall buildings. Helmut takes the opportunity to rest his arm around her, his hand on her shoulder. She looks up at him, but his gaze remains fixed straight ahead. So, she leans her head against him. He smells her hair. She smells wonderful.

From then on, the two spend every day together, as often as possible. Together, they commute to university, visit Coney Island amusement park, Bronx Zoo, Brooklyn Botanical Garden, and movies, plays, and concerts. Life is easier when you are in love and have someone by your side with whom you want to share everything. Soon they are talking about marriage and introducing their parents to each other. Rosalind is 21 and Helmut has just turned 20 when he arrives home one breezy evening in June to find an envelope addressed to him on the kitchen table. The sender is *Selective Service Headquarters*, dated June 20, 1943.

*“On the basis of the Selective Training and Service Act signed by President Roosevelt in 1940, the President of the United States of America hereby calls Mr. Helmut Joel to serve in the Army. Mr. Helmut Joel is to report at 8 a.m. on July 5 of this year for basic training for service in the land or naval forces of the United States at Camp Upton on Long Island.”*

Helmut hands it to Karl and Meta. “I must go back to Germany.”

## Chapter 28

The New York skyline scrapes higher now. Twin Towers. This year, they will be officially handed over to the money makers, with their loosely knotted ties, blazers tossed off rakishly, shirt sleeves rolled, and Wall Street stockbrokers shouting into several push-button phones at once when The World Trade Center opens in 1977. And Billy is on his way to JFK, Terminal 1. His return flight from Vienna to New York is uneventful. Until Newfoundland, he's comatose, then the remainder of the journey, he tries to process the emotional events of his eight hours in Vienna. One day there has changed Billy's world. Not only does he now know that he still has a father who does care for him, but he also has a divine little brother. And then there was that old woman sweeping the alley in Vienna, who now haunts his dreams. *Life is calmer when you live without rushing*; he thinks about the contented old crone with her broom in that Vienna alley. *When you always have a task to get back to doing*. Vienna, he thinks, is a refreshing break from the city that everyone says never sleeps. More importantly, Vienna is the city where he will always have loved ones waiting for him. A place far from the madding crowd.

With a slight squeak, the six wheels of the *Boeing 707-320C* touch down at *JFK*. Billy pulls out the small notebook he carries to jot down song lyrics and ideas. He writes:

*Slow down, you crazy child*

*And take the phone off the hook and disappear for a while*

*It's all right, you can afford to lose a day or two, ooh*

*When will you realize Vienna waits for you.*

This will be the ninth and final song on the album. In a few weeks, at Phil Ramone's *A&R Studios* on 7th Avenue, Billy will record and dedicate it to his father. This fifth studio album is

the first that Ramon produces for Billy. Phil has previously worked with Quincy Jones, Dionne Warwick, Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, Tom Jones, and Louis Armstrong, not to mention Phil Ramone, who was responsible for the legendary birthday song that Marilyn Monroe sang for President Kennedy. Ramone knows his stuff and would never allow a recording to be pressed onto a record at too high a speed. Billy has had nothing to do with Artie Ripp since LA.

*I'm a Brooklyn guy and I don't let myself be fooled. I'll destroy you. I represent CBS, and anyone who has me as an enemy can forget about Columbia, Epic, and all the other labels. And anyone who even talks to you will be my enemy. So do you think you have any chance of ever getting a foothold in this industry?*

That more or less paraphrases what *CBS* boss Walter Yetnikoff is *said* to have said to Artie Ripp whilst grabbing him by the collar and pushing him against the wall of his office. At the end of the story, Billy got his music rights back; Artie Ripp got almost half a million dollars more in his bank account and the assurance that he would continue to receive 20 cents from every *Billy Joel* record sold in the future.

Billy throws the military green duffel bag into the corner of his apartment on the 35th floor on the East Side. From his living room, he can see the Williamsburg Bridge. He immediately sits at the piano. B flat, F5 to G6. Over the next two hours, he composes a pop song that is 3 minutes and 35 seconds long, and then there's that poetic ink-spill from the plane. Billy always works out the music first and adapts lyrics to it. In his notebook scrunched in his jacket pocket he starts searching for words that fit the music. They have to make sense, tell a story, and rhyme. This part of his work always demands the most from him. He sits there for hours,

revising the words until he finds the right ones. He loves it when he's finished a song. But working out the wording... *oy vey*.

“We can go to the studio.” Billy says into the receiver of the wall-phone in the hall of his apartment. He stretches the curly phone cord to its limit, reaching the refrigerator and the desired bottle of beer. *The opener...?* Is in the living room. Too far to stretch. Instead, from his jeans pocket, he slides a cigarette lighter and skillfully leverages open the beer cap. “Monday? Okay. We’ll be there at eleven.” He hangs up and calls all the band members in turn.

The mixing console is at least five meters long, with turntables, tape machines, tape decks, another mixer with at least ten controls, and oversized speakers to the left and right. Phil Ramone looks through the glass pane into the recording room with the piano where Billy and his band have set up synthesizer, drums, saxophone, two guitars, and bass. He takes off his headphones and presses the talk button on the intercom system.

“Ready? ‘*Just the Way You Are*’ take one.”

The album recordings are progressing well. Whereas in the past at least fifteen versions of a song were recorded, here everything is perfect on tape after the fifth take, at the most. Phil has left the door to his recording studio open to dissipate the cigarette smoke. The melody for the song “*Just the Way You Are*” came to Billy in a dream. He wrote it down the next morning and a few hours later—the song! However, it is still unclear whether it will make it onto this album. Neither Billy nor the band are convinced.

“That’s fucking girlie pop!” Billy exclaims after the first take. “A damn wedding song!”

“Try playing it with a light samba beat,” Phil suggests Liberty DeVitto, Billy’s drummer..

At that moment in the hallway, music legends, Phoebe Snow and Linda Rondstadt walk by and overhear what Billy and his band are trying to do. “Oh, my God. You have to put that on the album. That song is awesome!” Both agree with conviction.

Billy allows himself to be persuaded.

Listening session at Columbia Records. For forty-two minutes and nine songs, the executives of the world’s largest record label sit opposite Billy, Elizabeth, and Phil. The platter of the *Dual 1222* turntable spins until the sapphire stylus reaches the last groove.

Billy lounges on the snail-shaped armrest of the dark brown Chesterfield sofa. Elizabeth sits at the front end of the upholstery in the middle, Phil reclined on the far left. They wait tensely for an initial reaction. The scratching sounds of the finished vinyl fill the room.

The artist & repertoire manager breaks the silence “It’s a nice album, but we don’t really hear a single.”

Like a viper hissing combatively from the thicket, Elizabeth interrupts. “Then you’d better find one, because we’re not changing a single note.”

No one expected that.

Elizabeth drives in her first stake. So that no one dares to contradict her. From now on, she just listens. She lets the men argue, give examples, repeat everything, and then start all over again. After almost two hours, the ashtray is overflowing, the wrestling match of arguments is over. Fatigue has set in. There is no result in sight.

That’s when she enters the fray.

“We’re ending this discussion now. Here’s my proposal: Columbia Records can choose the first single from the album, as long as I get to choose the second.”

Billy sits up. Everyone looks at him questioningly. “I’m not saying anything. I wouldn’t recognize a hit if I stepped on one.”

The sales manager whispers to the A&R manager. Phil Ramone pretends to know what they’re talking about and nods sleepily. All eyes are now on the record boss.

He has to make a decision now.

CBS boss Walter Yetnikoff stubs out the small stub of his cigar, stands up, and opens the window. The seconds he spends looking out feel like hours. Finally. He turns around.

“Okay. We’ll take ‘*Movin’ Out*’ as the single.”

The song works. It’s good, but it’s no smash hit. It reaches number 18 on the US sales charts.

Now it’s Elizabeth’s turn. She clearly decides on “*Just the Way You Are*.”

In the same year, this song becomes Billy’s first top-ten hit in the US *Billboard Hot 100* charts, goes triple *Platinum* worldwide, and wins two *Grammy Awards* for “*Single of the Year*” and “*Song of the Year*.” Less than twelve months later, Barry White releases the first cover version, followed by Frank Sinatra, Isaac Hayes, Kenny Rogers, Grover Washington, and many more.

Sir Paul McCartney, who once composed the Beatles’ greatest hits, is asked in an interview with *Rolling Stone* if there is a song in the world that he did not write but would have liked to have written. He replies: “*Just the Way You Are*.”

With over a million singles and five million albums sold, this song catapults Billy Joel to a whole new level. “*SOLD OUT*” is no longer just plastered on Carnegie Hall posters, but on

announcements for a total of 104 concerts that take Billy and the band from Madison Square Garden halfway around the world and back again within a year.

The Colosseum in Nassau also sells out, right down to the last seat. Billy and his band are in a private jet, approaching New York. *Without Elizabeth, we would never be where we are. I wouldn't even have put 'Just the Way You Are' on the album,* Billy thinks to himself as the lights of the city grow closer and closer, shortly before the Cessna Citation touches down on runway 04 at La Guardia Airport, formerly the site of the *Steinway* piano factory.

By now, Rosalind Joel has filled two folders with newspaper clippings about her son. Whenever he comes to visit her at her home on Long Island, she proudly shows him her collection.

“Mom! I know that interview, I gave it myself,” he says, trying to change the subject.

And the latest, when she hears on the radio for the first time that Barbra Streisand and Frank Sinatra are singing her son's songs, she is infinitely prouder. Helmut Joel in Vienna, meanwhile, seems to have politely pled The 5<sup>th</sup> regarding his eldest son's career. In response to the new LP “*The Stranger*” that includes the song “*Vienna waits for you*” dedicated to Helmut, acknowledgement arrives at Billy's in the form of his father's terse letter:

*“...I've noticed that you're getting played more and more on Vienna's youth radio station called Ö3. I had to promise Alexander that we'd come to New York for the recording of your next album. Maybe you could plan it so that it takes place during the Austrian school holidays.*

*Best wishes from Vienna, Dad.”*

## Chapter 29

Allied soldiers aim to eat spaghetti in the Italian capital by Christmas. Mussolini is history. Hitler's troops still occupy much of Italy even though most of the country favors the Allies who reclaim Sicily and Naples and now advance quickly to Rome.

After three months' basic training in Virginia, Helmut Joel is assigned to a combat battalion of the Fifth US Army under General Mark Clark and sent back to Europe at the end of 1943. He crosses the Atlantic on the same ship that brought him from Cuba to New York not so long ago, *SS Oriente*—confiscated by the US Army, she's conscripted for troop transport. Passing the Azores, she sails through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean, south of Sardinia, and on to Naples. It is the coldest winter Italy has seen in many years. For over three months, temperatures barely rise above freezing; American soldiers' equipment is inadequate for such weather conditions.

Immediately after docking, the troops receive their first briefing. "The Germans have built a defensive line that runs from west to east across Italy, from the Garigliano River and the mountains of Abruzzo via Monte Cassino and the Roccaraso and Casoli area to the Sangro River." The lieutenant points to the course of the defensive wall on a map with a cane. "This is the so-called '*Gustav Line*.' The mountains are high enough that the Nazis have an unobstructed view of us, but not so high that they cannot hit us. The rivers are freezing cold and deep enough to sink our vehicles and all of you. The Nazis can dam them up and then blow up the dams. The bastards have planted mines and will do everything—and I mean everything—to prevent any of us from getting through." He folds his arms. "We're coming anyway, and we'll chase those Nazi pigs back to their sauerkraut and dumplings."

Helmut is one of the few in the troop who knows what *sauerkraut with dumplings* tastes like. As a child in Nuremberg, it was a dish his housekeeper often cooked for his family. Just thinking about it makes his mouth water. Since he was called up for duty in the US Army, there has been hardly anything he has really enjoyed eating. Of course, he is also plagued by fear, because the prospects for this journey are not rosy. Together with his fellow troops, he will avenge his father, his uncle, his mother, his aunt, his grandmother, his little cousin, and everyone else whom Hitler drove out or killed. Now the time has come to settle the score.

In southern Italy, very few roads are paved. Every year in autumn, storms wash away the unpaved roads, which are mostly used by horsedrawn carts. The terrain is impassable. Helmut and his company walk alongside the Army vehicles loaded with equipment, ammunition, and weapons. Most of the time, however, they push the heavy equipment when the wheels get stuck in mud and it is impossible to move forward. His boots sink knee-deep into the cold mud, which has long since oozed into his shoes; with every passing hour, frostbite ravages his toes. He thinks of his girlfriend, Rosalind, and their long walks in Manhattan. Rosalind has promised that she will wait for him. Recalling the salty breeze off New York Harbor warms him now, though it used to chill his bones. Today it would feel like a summer breeze to him. Every evening in the tent, he sits close to the dim kerosene lamp to record his experiences of the day in letters that somehow never reach Rosalind.

The Rapido River is one of the first barriers Helmut's battalion must overcome. No one knows exactly what awaits them beyond it. Landscapes riddled with mines and Germans on every hill, just waiting to shoot Helmut and his brigade. Helmut thinks of his very best childhood friend, Rudi Weber. *What if I come face to face with him, or kill Rudi with one of my bullets?*

After only four days, things get serious for the first time. A maneuver that his battalion often practiced in drills becomes reality. A few hundred meters before the banks of the Rapido, Helmut's train comes under fire for the first time. Intuitively, the young men throw themselves to the side of the road into the bushes to seek cover. The Germans open fire from a nearby hill. Three troops are killed by direct hits—one of them less than a meter away from Helmut just a minute before. That young man's blood is dripping down Helmut's left cheek. Sensing it, his hand feels his face; he sees his palm is sticky with dark red, and he feels further for a wound on his own head. There is no wound, no shrapnel in him. *Don't move now.* The enemy troops are surely observing the result of their attack. Two US Army trucks are in flames. Isolated shots fire. Otherwise, it's dead silent. A deceptive silence. After a few minutes that feel like days, a young soldier from Texas ventures out from cammo cover. Helmut knows him. His father is a jazz musician; they live in Austin. During their Atlantic journey to Europe, the two talked at length about music and discussed how America gave the world jazz and Europe gave it Baroque and Classical music. The Texan doesn't seem to be injured either. Helmut cannot understand why the guy is getting up. Helmut is lying on his left side and keeps an eye on the restless fellow. With extreme caution, Helmut raises his head just enough to hiss at the Texan.

“Get down! They're watching us.”

Helmut will never know whether the Texan deliberately ignored his advice or simply did not hear him. The lanky fellow from Austin is exposed, looking around. There is a metallic sound, no more than a click. A bullet—perhaps a hollow-point—pierces the Texan's helmet and skull, lodging briefly in his brain before exploding it. Slowly, like water seeping out a leaky dam, blood pools in his helmet, then a thick red sheet runs down his face, covering its entirety in

viscose red. The final curtain. Like Helmut, he is 20 years old. For many hours, Helmut remains still as death, in shock, thoughts racing—to his parents, to Rosalind, to his long journey thus far in his life. *I did not survive all that in my younger years only to be killed by Germans after only three days of war, wrapped in an American flag for a trans-Atlantic crossing, once again.* At some point, when it is already dark, he hears a whisper, then sees the glow of a flashlight moving from one soldier to the next. *Please, not the enemy.*

An American male voice asks, “You okay?”

Speechless, Helmut can only nod at the blinding beam of light. Half of his platoon is dead from the attack. Hours later, the survivors reach camp. No one can sleep tonight. The 141st and 142nd Regiments of the 36th Division have been ordered to cross the Rapido River under the new moon tonight. In complete darkness, they drag hundreds of boats across muddy fields. Barbed wire impeding their path shreds many men long before they reach the river. Some soldiers step on landmines seeded by the Germans. The explosions trigger alarms, and hundreds of flares shoot into the sky. In an instant, it is as bright as day, and a barrage of mortar shells, grenades, and machinegun fire rains down on the regiments. Mountain troops and German *Panzer* grenadiers have been expecting this attack for weeks. They know the territory and they are battle-hardened. The night ends in disaster for the Allies. Thousands of soldiers lose their lives; only a handful reach the river and a fraction of those make it to the other side. At five in the morning, a commander runs through the camp and calls out the names of the recruits who are to report for duty immediately. Joel is among them. Together with five other soldiers, Helmut reports to the makeshift parade ground and stands at attention.

“Only six? Have all the rest been killed?” the commander asks, then gets on with it, “During your training, you were assigned to the Corps of Engineers. Now we’ll see what you can do. In a few hours, you have to build a bridge across the river.” Louder, he asks in disbelief, “What’s the matter? Do you need plans from the architect? We don’t have any. Grab your materials and fall in.”

A *pontoon bridge* consists of floating, interconnected elements made of metal and wood. To transport vehicles, the pontoons must be assembled in at least three rows. Helmut and his troops load a truck with the necessary bridge elements for constructing a pontoon bridge. Then they cross the fields toward the riverbank, walking single file in front of the loaded vehicle, and keeping an eye out for more German landmines. Thick fog hangs over the field, dawn slowly breaks and reveals the aftermath of the previous night: Corpses as far as the eye can see. Carnage, lifeless in mud. Severed body parts, arms, legs, heads. Helmut wants to look away, lower his head, or better yet, disappear to anywhere else, but he must be vigilant for landmines.

North of the river, two dozen soldiers from the 142nd Regiment hide, warily making themselves visible. Helmut and his men begin to connect the pontoon parts. Then they hear shots from the other side. Hand signals tell them to hurry. Meter by meter, they lower the bridge into the raging river until it reaches the other bank and is anchored there. The first soldiers cross cautiously until they reach the riverbank from which they set out a few hours earlier in the dead of night. They report that they are outnumbered by German soldiers and that barbed wire barriers and landmines are placed strategically in their disfavor across the landscape. Most of their troops have been killed or captured.

By evening, fewer than two thousand of the four thousand soldiers who set out the previous night have returned to base camp. Then, an explosion: Germans blow up the bridge. Helmut does not speak for over 24 hours. It is not until three days later that the Fifth US Army crosses the Rapido a few kilometers to the north. There, the next obstacle awaits them.

### Chapter 30

Billy stands on the stage of the *Riviera Theater* in Chicago, the legendary venue where, months prior *Blondie* opened for *Iggy Pop* performing with *David Bowie* on keyboard.

“When your mother tells you to listen to different music, do you do it?”

“No way!” the audience bellows back.

“And when your father tells you not to listen to your music. What do you say then?” he shouts into the mic.

“Nooooo!” the crowd roars again.

Then Billy pulls out the latest issue of *Rolling Stone*.

Richie Cannata, who plays organ, saxophone, flute, and clarinet in Billy’s band, slaps his hand over his eyes. “He’s not going to!”

But he does.

Billy shouts to the crowd, “And when Stephen Holden, a sleazy little reporter at *Rolling Stone*, tells you what to listen to, what do you say?”

Pandemonium hatches out and the crowd shouts, “No!”

Billy tears the music magazine in two. “Don’t take any shit from anybody!” He sits down at the piano and, like a whirlwind, begins to pound out his song, “*Angry Young Man*.”

“You know? Holden was in the audience tonight,” Richie Cannata says after the show.

“I hope so! He should hear that my audience is mature enough to form their own opinions and doesn’t need the unsuccessful A&R manager from *RCA Records*, who has never performed a song himself, let alone written one, to tell them what’s good or bad.”

“But the review wasn’t that bad,” Richie interjects.

Billy grabs another fresh copy of *Rolling Stone* and reads aloud:

*“Billy Joel is a flyweight, hyperactive Rocky Balboa on stage. He flatters his audience with the calculated charm of a ham actor. As obtrusively aggressive as Sammy Davis, Jr., he peppers his performances with gags. Billy Joel is neither a great singer nor a great songwriter...”*

He’s interrupted by drummer Liberty DeVitto, who’s holding a copy of *The New York Times*, “But, *The Times* says,

*“Joel’s best songs have an unabashed humor, a sad, sometimes exuberant feeling that still evokes faint memories of his friends from the street, and yet still fit into the Top 40. Joel’s lyrics can be snappy, witty, or biting. He’s at his best when he takes unsentimental journeys back to his native haunts or describes the dead ends and sore spots in middle-class life.”*

“Should we tear this one apart too?” Richie jokes, grinning.

“Make up your own minds,” Billy says, and heads back to his dressing room.

The album “*The Stranger*” is definitely Billy Joel’s big breakthrough. It holds the top spot on *Columbia Records* best-selling albums chart for over seven years, with over 10 million records sold. From September onwards, Billy and his band are on tour in America. Endless bus rides, long nights in hotels, lots of alcohol, sometimes drugs, and groupies. In early 1978, they continue on to Europe. England, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands are on the itinerary.

“Why isn’t Billy coming to Vienna?” young Alexander asks his father.

“You’ll have to ask him yourself,” is Helmut’s reply.

It's just after 7:00 p.m., and Alexander Joel has half an hour left before *lights-out*—school tomorrow! He turns on the small black-and-white TV manufactured by the company his father works for. He turns the power knob to the right and waits for the tubes to warm up.

“Dad, it's not working again,” he calls out, forlorn.

“Just wait a minute,” Helmut Joel advises.

After thirty seconds, the picture appears. Alexander Joel sits cross-legged a few inches in front of it. Commercials run—advertising detergent, cars, and sugar. Then a disembodied announcer's voice:

*“Only until Saturday, May 10, Neckermann is reducing the prices of all goods by ten percent. Hurry and take advantage of this sensational anniversary sale.”*

“Turn that off right now!”

Josef Neckermann is regarded throughout Germany, Austria, and Switzerland as a symbol of the German post-war economic miracle.

*“Neckermann makes it possible”*

The advertising slogan that every child in German-speaking countries knows. Everything from clothing to electrical appliances, motorcycles, travel, and even prefabricated houses can be ordered at competitive prices from *Neckermann's* 300-page catalogue. Helmut knows that the Nazi Neckermann stole the Joel family's company. He knows that his father laid the foundation for this success with the *Joel Laundry Factory*. Helmut never wants to hear or see the name Neckermann again.

“I said turn that television off, Alexander.” Helmut storms to the television, and yanks the plug from the wall socket. His young son stares at him in astonishment.

The phone rings. Alexander leaps to answer it. “Good evening, Joel family. Who am I speaking to and how can I help you?” Alexander speaks into the receiver, sounding tremendously bigger than he is.

“This is your brother.”

“*Billyyyy!!!*” Alexander exclaims, “Dad, Billy’s on the phone!”

“How are you, little man?” asks the brother some-twenty years his senior.

“Fine. Well, not really. Actually, I’m really bad because I have to go to bed soon and I’m not allowed to watch the TV.”

Helmut stands right beside him. “Give me the phone. Calls from America are expensive.”

The rule-bound boy hands the receiver to his father.

“Hey, Dad,” says Billy.

“Where are you?” asks Helmut.

“In Hamburg. I wanted to tell you that I’m still on tour in Europe, then off to Japan and Australia, but I’ll be back in New York in the summer to record my next album. It’s school vacation in Austria in July. Right? So, I wanted to ask if you want to come?”

Alexander folds his hands imploringly, begging his father. His lips forming, “*Pleeeeee!*”

Expressionless, Helmut looks down at Alexander. After a short pause, he says, “Okay. We don’t have any plans for July anyway.”

“Wonderful. I’ll organize everything and have two plane tickets sent to you. Give Alex my best regards.” Then Billy hangs up.

Alexander does a happy dance, hopping exuberantly to the piano, where he sits ceremoniously, throws the red felt keyboard cover on the floor, and starts playing Billy's song "*New York State of Mind*." Right after, he sings "*New York, New York*."

His father puts the red felt back on the keyboard to protect the keys. "Bedtime!"

Alexander's fingers continue to play under the red key cover, and he belts out, "*I wanna wake up in a city that never sleeps...*"

"Yes, yes, but you're still in a city that's very much asleep." Helmut picks him up; Alexander does his octopus wrap around his father's neck, legs around his waist, and presently, the youngest Joel is tucked snugly into bed. Helmut turns off the light. "Good night."

"Good night, Dad. And thanks for flying us to Billy."

### Chapter 31

Helmut Joel doesn't write anymore. No thoughts, no diaries, no letters. He doesn't speak either. His inner self is running in an emotionally secure mode. The only thing he pays attention to is when he peeks his head out of a trench and aims his rifle at enemy soldiers. He never shoots at them, but always over their heads; he fears that his dearest school friend, Rudi Weber, could be anywhere. Night crawling slowly through the half-frozen ground of a wooded area, he feels his way in the pitch black and mud. Helmut wagers that they must be close to the open field in front of Monte Cassino. They continue to advance. A Nazi could be lurking in every bush, behind every tree. Helmut pauses. He hears a noise. His eyes detect a human silhouette leaning against a tree trunk. He hears moaning and looks around. His troops are not nearby. He continues to crawl forward in the cold mud. Unseen by anyone, at a bush he turns right, crawling forward, then right again and approaches the tree, coming up behind it.

Helmut waits, listening to heavy breathing coming from the opposite side of the tree trunk where a seated soldier is still leaning. Silently, Helmut draws his Colt .45. In one leap, he unlocks his weapon and presses it between the man's eyes. It is a German soldier. An indefinable, bloody mass gapes from a hole in his skull already. He is dying. His gaze is fixed and empty. His mouth opens.

"Please," he whispers, raising his right hand and moving it toward his uniform jacket.

"Hands off!" Helmut presses the barrel of his Colt harder against the man's forehead.

The soldier lets his hand drop. "In my jacket," he groans, "A letter... to my dear mother. Please, can you—" He is too weak to continue speaking.

Helmut lowers his weapon and asks in German, "Where are you from?"

“Vienna. Her name is Anna Kn—”

“What’s her last name?” Helmut needs to know.

“Kn. Kn. Knecht.” The German soldier’s eyes suddenly light up, radiant. He looks past Helmut toward the bare treetops. Whom does he see? Is someone approaching? Helmut glances cautiously. No one’s there.

The soldier’s head tips forward.

Helmut quickly unbuttons his uniform jacket. The German uniform is of much higher quality than those of the US Army. A label is sewn into the thick lining:

*“Produced by Neckermann KG on behalf of ZLG -  
Zentrallagergemeinschaft für Bekleidung  
(Central Clothing Warehouse Association).”*

He reaches into the inside pocket of the dead German’s jacket, finding the soldier’s *Wehrmacht* book. Born in 1923. Just like Helmut. Three neatly folded pieces of paper are tucked in the well of the book. Dated the day before, hand-inked in German:

*“Dear Mom, my gut feeling tells me that I won’t make it. I hope these lines will reach you someday. Thank you for always being there for me and my siblings with so much love and dedication...”*

Helmut does not read further. He cannot. He closes the book, places it inside his own jacket, turns north and continues crawling. Dawn is already breaking to the east by the time he reaches the other American troops at the edge of the plain before Monte Cassino.

Above the city, proudly perched on the summit of a 500-meter-high mountain, stands a monastery that is considered a cultural monument of Christianity. Built in the sixth century, it is

known as the home of the Benedictine Order. Monasteries may not be used as fortifications in war, nor may they be attacked. However, this one is pivotal for military maneuvers, offering unobstructed views for miles around and is virtually impregnable.

For Helmut Joel's next maneuver, General Freyberg, who is from England, is in a strategic dilemma. If, as he believes, Germans are entrenched on Monte Cassino, enemy bullets could cost the lives of thousands more Allied soldiers. However, if this is not the case and the Allies attack, many civilians will die unnecessarily, and a centuries-old historical cultural monument will be destroyed. Nevertheless, General Freyberg decides to take the second course of action. The lives of the soldiers come first. Numerous units are assembled, ready to attack. The abbot of the monastery has been warned and is prepared to evacuate. Tonight, all troops will retreat to the forest before the US Air Force attacks tomorrow. Suddenly, hundreds of shiny silver Allied *B17* bombers appear in formation on the horizon and drop thousands of tons of bombs. One day earlier than agreed. Unlucky timing.

Helmut is lucky. Due to his brief few moments with the dying German soldier in the forest, obtaining the letter to the fallen soldier's mother Knecht, Helmut misses the first train of troops and is stationed in the rear, while hundreds of American troops are dying further ahead of him due to bombs dropped by their own army. Helmut later learns that the attack was moved up a day, "due to optimal weather conditions." Communication, however, appears to have snafu'd.

Shortly thereafter, word spreads among the soldiers that the Nazis had actually taken up positions in the mountains 300 meters north of the monastery, because the German general of the tank corps, Fridolin von Senger, is a devout Catholic with close ties to the Benedictine order

rather than a staunch Nazi. After the early Allied attack, the Germans quickly capture the remaining ruins of the monastery and open fire from there.

Trench warfare lasts for months and costs over 100,000 lives until the German Commander-in-Chief Kesselring finally gives the order to the last remaining German paratrooper battalion to surrender Monte Cassino on May 17.

On June 4th, the Fifth US Army under General Mark Clark enters Rome where Helmut and his troops are greeted with cheers by the Italian population. He eats what is probably the best spaghetti of his life. However, the road to Germany is still long.

## Chapter 32

Billy keeps sneaking around his mother's house, opening drawers, rummaging through old boxes in the attic, and even looking behind the books on Rosalind's shelves for letters from his father. It couldn't be true that she hadn't received a single letter from Helmut during the war, during their marriage, or after Helmut left the family. Billy is the most important male in his mother's life. Ever since Helmut left. And since Billy can find no evidence of loving words written for Rosalind, the abandoned son takes on this task himself. Billy starts with "*Rosalinda's Eyes*."

*When she smiles She gives everything to me*

*When she's all alone she cries*

*I'd do anything to take away her tears Because they're Rosalinda's eyes*

Rosalind never mentions that Billy dedicates the song "*Vienna waits for you*" to his father. Now, on the new album, she gets her own song. After almost 10 months on tour, Billy is back at *John F. Kennedy International Airport*, Terminal 1, downstairs at *Arrivals*. He is wearing sunglasses, a dark shirt, and black pants. If he had been wearing cutoffs and a floral golf shirt on this hot June day, he would not have been so easy to recognize. Perhaps he would have passed for a tourist. A dozen people surround him, hungry for autographs. Billy cranes his neck to look over their heads to see if his father and brother are out of international arrivals yet. Alexander is the first to run toward him, waving a colorful, completed coloring book. "Here! I did this for you during the whole flight!"

"Thanks, little man." Billy lifts him up.

"Why business class? That extra expense wasn't necessary," his father greets him.

Billy hugs him. "The main thing is that you're here. I'm so happy."

A black limousine is waiting for them curbside. Alexander clammers in testing all the buttons. Approaching the city, he presses his nose against the window, eager to see the first skyscrapers. As the *Lincoln* stretch crosses the Williamsburg Bridge, myriad memories vie for Helmut Joel's moods and mind. Returning to New York City for the first time in decades, he sees so much has changed. Almost 35 years before, he delivered hair ribbons as a messenger boy on these streets, for his parents. Today, he sits on leather seats in an air-conditioned limo. Baruch Drive branches off to the right. He points.

“Our apartment was behind that,” murmurs Helmut.

The car continues through Soho to 6th Avenue, then north, past Times Square to 53rd Street, two left turns, and the car stops at the corner of 7th Avenue and 52nd Street.

“Here we are,” says Billy, pointing to the entrance of *A&R Studios*, “And, fitting for the location, guess what my new album will be called?”

“‘*New York*’?” Alexander looks questioningly at his big brother.

“Almost! It's going to be called ‘*52nd Street*’.”

In the recording studio, the band has already finished setting up their instruments. The next morning, on the one-year anniversary of the successful release of “*The Stranger*” Billy Joel's next LP will be recorded. The media pressure is enormous. Will he be able to build on his success? How will it sound? Will it be more of the same comforting feel or a whole new Billy Joel *sound* that the world gets to hear?

“Hey, you must be Billy's father. And you, you must be little Alexander! So nice to meet you!” Billy's bandmates greet his relatives from Europe like old friends.

“Oh! May I?” Alexander points to a can of *Coca-Cola*.

“Sure, kid. And you? Would you like a beer, Mr. Joel?” asks Liberty, the drummer.

Helmut watches suspiciously as Billy helps his younger son open the can.

“Only half. Otherwise, you won’t be able to sleep tonight,” Helmut warns.

“No problem, Mr. Joel. If he wants to get over his jet lag, he should stay up late tonight anyway,” Steve Khan, the tour-hardened guitarist, interjects.

“Don’t forget, guys,” Billy says, taking the floor, “our new album isn’t called ‘*Son of a Stranger*.’ We’re doing something completely new tomorrow, and if you make a mistake—”

The band interrupts him, “Then we’ll make it a second time. That way, everyone will think it was on purpose.”

“Right.” Billy laughs.

His father shakes his head in disbelief at the world he has stepped into with both of his sons. At Billy’s mostly glass house in Oyster Bay that night, before dinner, Helmut and Alexander fall asleep right after their shower. Billy has prepared dinner, but the two are already wiped out. At three in the morning, he hears rustling downstairs in the kitchen where he finds his little brother and father foraging in the refrigerator.

“Sorry. We were so hungry.”

“It’s okay,” Billy smiles sleepily, cracks four eggs into a pan, and prepares a late-night breakfast.

“I just couldn’t sleep anymore,” Alexander explains.

His big brother strokes his cheek. Half an hour later, the frying pan and two empty plates are in the sink and Billy is back in bed. He could do with a few more hours of sleep before he

must be at the studio at ten o'clock. He has already finished most of the songs, but for some he only has the composition and fragments of lyrics.

At the studio, they start recording "*Rosalinda's Eyes*" and Billy watches his father for a reaction from behind the glass. Helmut hasn't spoken to Billy's mother in twenty-one years.

"Who is Rosalinda? Is she Billy's wife?" Alexander asks his father innocently.

"No." Helmut side-steps his little boy's question. "His wife's name is Elizabeth."

"Who else could it be?"

Helmut does not answer.

Then comes "*My Life*" that Billy wrote about his friend Tony Lawrence, who left his life in New York behind and went to Los Angeles to start a career as a comedian. At, "*I don't care what you say anymore, this is my life*," Billy looks at his father who is sitting behind the sound engineer, reading the newspaper. It seems as if he is completely unaffected by the song. After two songs, the band takes a short break.

"Well?" Billy asks as he stands in the hallway with Helmut and Alexander.

"The piano was completely out of tune on the last song," his father interjects.

Billy takes a drag on his cigarette. "Dad, that's on purpose. You'll never understand Elvis Presley."

Alexander nudges his father who replies politely, "You're probably right. Besides, who's that supposed to be?" Helmut winks.

"Do you guys want to go for a walk? Times Square is just a few blocks south," Billy suggests.

While his father and little brother venture out for a little sightseeing tour of Manhattan, Billy and the band start working on a song that doesn't have any lyrics yet. Billy's idea for the chorus is "*sodomy*." However, he is not seriously convinced it works.

"You can't sing that!" the producer and band object.

Half an hour later, the word "sodomy" is replaced with "*Honesty*," and a new song is born.

"Who am I to lecture other people about honesty?" Billy asks them.

"Someone who does not sing a commercial song about 'sodomy'." Phil Ramone ends the discussion.

"*Honesty*" becomes the third single from the newly recorded *Billy Joel* album, Number 1 in France, it's nominated for a *Grammy*, and praised by critics around the world as a "*great pop ballad*." Only *Rolling Stone* puts a fly in the ointment with, "*The sweet music of the song is sabotaged by the banal lyrics*."

### Chapter 33

Helmut Joel boards an airplane for the first time—a *Douglas C-47 Skytrain*. He and 27 other US Army troops strap-in. The flight from Rome to Nice is no longer than 90 minutes. They are being transferred to the south of France, as part of “Operation Dragoon.” And, at the same time as the troops landing in Normandy on D-Day, Helmut’s platoon will form a pincer movement from the west and south. The Nazis are to be surrounded on all sides. The German Army Group G already abandons almost the entire southern coast of France by the time the *C-47* with the call sign “*Sierra Seven*” touches down 10 feet above sea level on Runway 05 at Nice Airport. It is a hot, clear August day; the glaring sun mirrors off the Mediterranean Sea. Helmut casts a longing glance at the shades of blue where sky and water meld and blur in humid swelter. In Havana, he often watched the sea from his window throughout the day. Similarly, the French Mediterranean smells of fresh fish. French people sit at simple wooden tables in the shade, drinking red wine and playing cards. For them, the war is over; it’s been five years, and the hated Nazis have been driven out. They take everything in stride now, but the Americans’ presence no longer arouses any particular interest.

Soon, the Allied parties’ work is done there when German General Schäffer also raises the white flag at Fort Saint Nicolas in Marseille.

“Private Jooooeeel,” shouts a US Army officer. Helmut steps forward.

“I’ve never heard you speak, but according to my records, you speak German. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then come with me.”

As they walk, the officer explains that they have captured several Germans but have been unable to get any information out of them. “Either the Nazis don’t understand English, or they simply don’t want to talk.”

Helmut is obliged to facilitate, using his linguistic skills. A makeshift table is set up out of a few boxes, and in front of it a dozen or so disarmed German soldiers stand at attention.

“May I?” Helmut asks confidently in German and takes the Allied lieutenant’s place on the chair behind the table. He remains silent, folds his arms, nods, and looks at the German troops in front of him appraisingly. All eyes are on him. The Germans look as empty and fearful as Helmut’s superiors look expectant. Then he stands up and shouts at the top of his voice in German, “Most high-ranking senior soldier step forward!”

No one in the US Army has ever heard Helmut speak with any authority whatsoever, let alone so loudly. A German first lieutenant with a gold star on his lapel steps obediently forward. He seems flattered to be allowed to leave the ranks of the ordinary soldiers. Helmut’s strategy seems to be working.

Helmut pauses. There is absolute silence. Then he continues in his strictest, most militant German, “Well... tell me. There’s nothing left behind your lines. It’s all air, isn’t it?”

“Well, air. You can’t really say that. After all, the second PD is on its way.”

“Ah? The second tank division?” Helmut presses.

“Yes,” replies the prisoner.

“I see. Interesting. And how far away is it supposed to be?”

“Yes, far. Far.”

“Well, how far?”

“Well, four kilometers or so.”

Helmut turns to his superiors and translates the answers into English. The information is immediately passed on to the radio operators.

Then the captured German lieutenant addresses Helmut, “May I ask you: Why do you speak German so well? Are you German?”

“Yes.”

“But... how?” he stammers, “Why are you fighting for the Americans?”

“I am Jewish,” Helmut replies curtly.

“Jew? I thought there were none of you left.”

“Back off!” Helmut snaps.

*So, these are the people who shot at us. The people who want to kill me again,* thinks Helmut on his way back to his unit. The famous “*enemy*.” But this time, he is on the winning side. The tide has turned. A feeling of triumph overwhelms him, along with a node of happiness that he is now in a place where someone speaks the language of his beloved homeland.

“Well done.” His superior pats him on the shoulder. “Good job.”

Now it’s only a matter of time before the Germans surrender. In the final days of the war, die-hard warriors seek to take out as many enemies as possible, while others are utterly relieved that the horror is over.

Spring returns. Day by day, hints of delicate green buds and leaves sprout, obscuring brown and gray and gore. Under warm morning sun, Helmut and his company hike through enchanted meadows between rolling hills in the Saarland. Across the landscape this morning, songbirds inspire troops with a spring concert emanating from grasses, ferns, and shrubs where

the tiny creatures nest and woo. In flirtatious flight, their sleek feathers and plump bodies reflect in the wild Blies River and rippling ponds where minnows nibble bloated soldiers' corpses.

“Wait,” says Helmut, placing his right index finger on the trigger of his assault rifle and hustling toward a bush. “Something moved there!”

A few meters away, he takes aim and says in polished High German, “Come out with your hands up. You are under arrest by the United States Army.” Rustling. A branch moves. Helmut shouts, “I repeat. Come out with your hands up!”

An assault rifle flies out of the bushes, followed immediately by a pistol, and a man's voice barks in a Rhine-Franconian accent, “Yes, yes. I'll come with you. Can I finish what I'm doing, please? I'm just taking a squat.”

In April 1945, Helmut Joel returns to his birthplace, Nuremberg, for the first time in 10 years as a soldier in the US Army. It is a symbolic victory for the American army, as Nuremberg had always been a stronghold of the Nazis and the place where the berserk racial laws against the Jews were passed. Four days of bitter fighting left little standing of the old town with its many pretty neo-Gothic houses. Ruins, rubble, and destruction—slash-and-burn scorched earth. Helmut has been granted leave and wanders through the remains of the place where he grew up, reminiscing when he recognizes one of the few remaining landmarks and searching for friends and relatives. Above all, he wants to find Rudi Weber, his childhood best friend.

He heads toward the southern part of town, but no one can tell him where Rudi is. When he starts talking to people, they look at him suspiciously, as if he is a traitor. He decides to do what has served him well over the last few years; he remains silent. When he arrives in his

former neighborhood, only a wasteland of rubble, stones, and debris greets him. A single factory chimney still seems to be standing, however. He approaches it.

“It can’t be,” he says to himself, “It can’t be true.”

Of all the factories in Nuremberg’s southern district, only one chimney remains. Four letters on it stand out like a memorial over the entire neighborhood:

“*J-O-E-L*”

A one-legged man limps out of the ruins. “Well, Helmut? Look at that. Only your father’s factory is left.”

It takes Helmut a few seconds to recognize the man. It is Mr. Schrödel. His family’s loyal chauffeur survives, having lost a leg in the Russian campaign.

“Herr Schrödel!” Helmut throws his arms around him. “For God’s sake, what happened to you? And what’s going on here?”

The man smiles, even though his experiences are engraved in his face. “Everything’s fine, Helmut. We Germans deserve much worse, considering what we did to other nations.”

A few weeks later, Helmut reaches the final stop of his nearly two-year tour of duty as a GI in the US Army. He does not believe that anything could possibly surpass the grim scurrilities of war he has experienced so far, and the brutality and death that surround him on all sides. That said, he sees worse when he and his troops are deployed to liberate the Dachau concentration camp, where raw unbridled horror has reached its bastard nadir. Corpses piled, bodies emaciated. Bones. Flesh. Some prisoners’ souls still haunt bodies too weak to eat, too weak to ask for help or hum a comforting prayer for swiftest death. Industrialized genocide of the *outré*: compliant and non-compliant Jews, Blacks, Romani, Socialists, Communists, writers, journalists, artists,

musicians, homosexuals, priests and royal accomplices and other members of The Resistance, locked in squalid barracks, starved, beaten, experimented upon *sans* permission or anesthesia, tortured, shot, gassed.

Citizens of neighboring towns are forced to witness the collateral of National Socialism firsthand and are led across the parade ground to the barracks. With sleeve or hand, Germans and Allied liberators stanch the grizzled truth before they can inhale it into their lungs. Yet nose and eyes must bear witness; their abject disbelief and execrable disgust causes each of them to recoil from the necrotic results of years of senseless torment. Helmut drops, kneeling on soil sodden by bodily fluids and souls, he reaches for a fallen prisoner propped against a wall. Helmut carefully brings a spoon to the victim's cracked lips, hoping she can eat what meager provisions he carries. Her blackened eyes, sunken deep into the hollows of her skull are two shiny obsidian stones that still shine, asking her rescuer, *Why? Why did you take so long?* Her eyes shutter. Forever.

For Helmut Joel, the war is over. Dachau's stench infects his nostrils for years to come.

### Chapter 34

Karl Joel stands at the mirror in the bathroom of their small Manhattan apartment shouting.

“No! Never! I won’t do it!”

Wearing a dark suit and white shirt, he is all-thumbs tying his bowtie.

Coming to his aid, Meta coos, “Calm down. It’s our son’s wedding day. I don’t want you to show up at the ceremony in a foul mood.”

“But the nerve! How dare that guy write me such a letter!”

Karl Joel has received the letter from one Hugo Wilkens, a textile manufacturer in Augsburg, Germany. Herr Wilkens wants to join forces with Karl Joel, Josef Neckermann, owner of a mail order company named “*Quelle*,” and Gustav Schickedanz, in order to found a new company that will customize “care packages” for the needy post-war German population. Americans are financing this brainchild to hand out vouchers to exchange for goods procured by the new mail-order company founded by said new collaborative.

“What sheer cheek!” shouting again, Karl picks up the discarded letter again, and again reads aloud to his patient wife:

*“...However, it is essential that you, Mr. Joel, write a letter of exculpation for Mr. Neckermann, as he has unfortunately been imprisoned by the American authorities, is currently in prison, and is likely to be banned from practicing his profession. It would suffice if you wrote that Mr. Neckermann has always been a respectable businessman and that you have never perceived him as a Nazi... As you know, dear Mr. Joel, Josef Neckermann has always fulfilled his duty as a law-abiding German entrepreneur. I look forward to your response.*”

*Yours sincerely,*  
*Hugo Wilkens*

Karl hurls the letter to the floor and stomps it with his threadbare sock. “I’ll be damned if I do!” Meta has never seen her husband so upset. She listens as he continues, “Those bastards killed my mother and my brother, my sister-in-law, my nephew, our friends. They robbed me of my life’s work and stole our son’s inheritance. I’m going to do something completely different. I’m going to get every penny back. Even if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Very good, my love,” says his wife, who finishes knotting his bowtie, “But, Karl, the first thing we’re going to do now, today, is attend Helmut’s wedding.”

Helmut Joel, like many war Veterans, has not been the same since he returned from war. He is quieter. Only a fellow soldier knows what he countenanced during his years in Italy, France, and Germany. Helmut, like many war Veterans, never speaks about it, having hermetically sealed that part of himself. Occasionally, he flashes his grim sense of humor, although he does not laugh aloud like he used to. If a shard of wry wit strikes him like shrapnel, it incites only a twitch at one corner of his mouth.

At the altar, Rosalind beams at her husband-to-be. She has waited so many years for him, hoping and even praying, without any news. Then suddenly one day after WWII ends, Helmut shows up at her door. Today at their wedding at 141 Worth Street in Tribeca, Helmut stands a few blocks from the “*HOTE*” where Family Joel first clambered aboard *The American Dream* just seven years before. New York City’s Marriage Bureau welcomes the intended couple. Helmut is 24, but given all he has endured, he feels like an old man. Rosalind, on the other hand, a vibrant beauty with large, dark eyes and soft features, radiates the dream of romantic love. One year

older than Helmut, she has never seen anything but New York City since she was born Jewish in Brooklyn to first-generation parents. Now at the altar, she swoons beside the man she fell in love with while performing her small role alongside him in “*Pirates of Penzance*” at New York City College, the man who disappeared in war, the man she still waits for, hoping he will heal from the trauma of it. When Helmut says, “Yes. I do,” a moment later, she does too, and Miss Rosalind Nyman signs the wedding certificate, becoming *Mr. and Mrs. Helmut Joel*.

### Chapter 35

*“You got the day shifts, and I got nights*

*We go wrong at times, but we got rights*

*You got TV shows, I got crime*

*You got your room honey, I got mine”*

Billy’s new songs confide that his marriage to Elizabeth Weber has run its course. She was the one to whom he dedicated all his love songs, she negotiated fees and contracts for him, she convinced the record company to stick with him when they no longer believed in him. She was the perfect manager. Somewhere between tour plans at the breakfast table and interview approvals in the bedroom, his partner, his wife, and their shared laughter got hocked for business and career. He always wanted to have a family of his own. To do better than his parents. To make a promise and keep it. Just like swans do. At the age of 33, he comes to the scalding truth that people are not swans. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, his *ignis fatuus* reveals:

*“I’d like to have a little girl who thinks her dad is the greatest, and a little boy I could take fishing and teach to ride a bike.”*

That’s the nicest thing *Rolling Stone* prints about him at the time, albeit written not by a journalist quoting Billy verbatim. Then his “*52nd Street*” wins two *Grammys* and is named *Album of the Year*, yet the music press still denominates Billy Joel a commercial crooner. He responds with his new album “*Glass House*”—on its cover Billy winds up for a Major League throw *Yankees*’ style, but with a rock aimed at his own house composed largely of plateglass windows. The single “*It’s Still Rock and Roll to Me*” jumps from 0 to *Number #1* on the *Billboard Hot 100* chart and is also a reckoning with music journalists:

*“It doesn’t matter what they say in the papers,  
 cause it’s always been the same old scene.  
 There’s a new band in town,  
 but you can’t get the sound  
 from a story in a magazine  
 aimed at your average teen.”*

The response comes in the next edition from Paul Nelson, music critic for *Rolling Stone*:

*“Billy Joel writes smooth and clever melodies, and what many of his defenders  
 say is true: his music is infectious. But so is the flu.”*

Billy has had enough. In four years, he has released four albums and sold millions of records, cassettes, and concert tickets around the world. It has cost him his marriage. He can’t take it anymore.

“You just need to get away. Treat yourself to a vacation. I know a beautiful hotel in the Caribbean on the small island of St. Barts,” advises his friend, singer-songwriter Paul Simon, who newly reunites with his longtime musical partner Art Garfunkel. So, Billy goes on vacation for the first time in 10 years. Alone in the Caribbean... what can possibly go wrong?

During a stopover on the island of St. Martin, he notices a tall, blonde beauty waiting for a connecting flight with her gal-pals. He recognizes her immediately. “Christie Brinkley! Oh my God, she’s even more beautiful in real life than she is in all the magazines.” However, the famous American supermodel doesn’t notice him, although Billy plays record covers. Within his band, that term means trying to look like a record cover so that people will recognize you. But

his efforts are in vain... until two days anon. After a day at the beach in St. Barts, he is *still relaxing* in his Hawaiian shirt, sunburned red as a lobster, when—

—Three beautiful women walk into a bar. *No joke!* It's Christie Brinkley! Followed by up-and-coming model named Elle MacPherson. And a young Black woman with sparkling eyes and an unmanageable head of curls. She has never seen Billy before either. But Billy's old high school wisdom prevails: if you play the piano, you'll have success with women. And right there in that St. Bart's bar, he relocates his *relaxation* to the piano and pretends he's Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*. He plays classics from Sinatra to Bobby Darin. Soon, the three beauties are swanning around the piano, entranced. They admire the ease with which his fingers glide over the eighty-eight keys. The young lady with extreme curls teases him and begs him to play "*Respect*" by Aretha Franklin. After much cajoling banter, he fulfills her wish, and she plunges in singing "*What you want. Baby, I got it.*" Wow! Billy is speechless at the resonant impact exploding from *curly-top's* delicate body. A few years later, the whole world knows her as Whitney Houston.

For his next number, the pivotal factor, he knows, is to undergo metamorphosis before Christie's eyes—and make the decisive move. And so it goes, the transformation from *good piano* player to *rock star*. Billy plinks out the first notes of "*Piano Man*," granted without his harmonica, then before he cuts loose on it, Christie Brinkley exclaims happily, "Oh, my god. I love this song. They always play it on my favorite radio station in Paris. Do you listen to it too?"

"No, baby. I wrote that song." Cool as a cucumber, he plays on—for *her*.

The bar grows quiet. Guests nudge each other, their attention on to the pianist. Waiters stop to listen, letting dinners on serving trays get cold. Very slowly, like dripping honey, the

realization glazes the bar; Billy Joel has been sitting at the piano for hours playing for them. Thunderous applause follow, then a small bow from Billy. *Time for a change of location*, he thinks. And, back in New York, he writes the song “*Uptown Girl*” for Christie Brinkley, who also stars in the song’s music video. Two years later, in 1985, Whitney Houston releases her debut album and wins a *Grammy* for “*Savin’ All My Love for You.*” And on March 23 of the same year, Billy and Christie marry in private on a substantial yacht in New York Harbor. His little brother, Alexander, is the best man. Among the small group of hand-picked guests is a descendant of Hungarian Jews, without whom Billy and Christie might never have met. It is Paul Simon.

### Chapter 36

*“...Mr. Wilkens will confirm that I am the last person to harbor any feelings of revenge. But you will surely understand that I am trying to recover as much as possible of the assets that were taken from me by the authorities at the time. You would surely do the same in my place...”*

It's dated 1949. Karl Joel's reply to Josef Neckermann. Concise and clear. On his wife's advice, he lets a few weeks lapse to temper his ire before sending the letter. Today, they meet for the first time since Berlin, before the War.

“You can't possibly demand money from me. I don't have anything myself. Just look around you!”

Neckermann sits opposite Karl in the makeshift renovated lobby of a Munich hotel. Where once the evening light bathed the room in warm yellow through imposing arched windows, there is now a makeshift wooden shed. The building was hit twice by Allied bombs. Shady characters, their coat pockets bulging with contraband, shuffle through the once majestic lobby.

“You'll see that I can very well demand something,” replies Karl, who sits, accompanied by his lawyer.

“I don't own anything.” Neckermann tries to justify himself.

“What about your mail order company?” Dr. Peich, Karl's lawyer, grills him.

“That belongs to my wife, Annemarie Neckermann. I'm just the managing director.”

“And with what money was it founded?” Karl wants to know.

“The mayor and the city administration of Frankfurt granted us a guarantee for a loan from the Nassauische Landesbank.” Neckermann’s thin face is pale. The proud gaze of the SA member on horseback has given way to the mournful expression of a wool-clad wolf angling to appear innocent as a sacrificial lamb.

“We have information that a few months before the collapse of the German Reich, you acquired a large number of diamonds weighing over a thousand carats from the Reich Ministry of Economics?”

The pallor in his face gives way to a rising flush. Neckermann stutters, “Y-y-yes. But, but that was, um, the assets of the ZLG, the Central Warehouse Association. I had to exchange them for stable assets—”

Karl Joel interrupts, “The ZLG, a subsidiary of *my* company, that you founded, with which you produced millions of uniform jackets for the Wehrmacht.”

Cornered. Neckermann’s anger flares. “What does the ZLG have to do with *your* company? You had long since left by then! I paid a million Reichsmarks myself to form and incorporate the ZLG!”

“And where did you get that million?”

“I’ve had enough.” Neckermann stands abruptly. “If the Jews really believe they can make a killing off German *Wehrmacht* equipment...” He leaves the hotel.

Outside, his driver is waiting in a Mercedes.

That meeting marks the beginning of a legal odyssey that will last for years. The struggle of a penniless plaintiff residing in the land of the victors against legal technicalities in the land of the vanquished, where accountability is transmogrified into the rebuilding of a nation wherein

few acknowledge Neckermann's guilt. Karl Joel, who now spells his name with the Americanized "C" has signed an affidavit stating that he never did receive one shilling of the purchase price for his company and presents that Josef Neckermann had intended from the outset to defraud the *Joel Laundry Factory* founder, an unwilling conscripted seller. According to Karl Joel's American lawyers, the company Joel founded was worth an incredible 26 million Marks, over twice the 12 million Karl had once estimated, and even so, Joel did not even receive the ridiculous concession buy-out price of 2.5 million. So, on June 13, 1949, Karl-with-a-"C" flies to Würzburg for the main hearing before the US military government court. Forty-three witnesses are heard, and 72 pieces of evidence are examined. The verdict is fatal for Neckermann: four years in prison and a fine of 30,000 Marks. However, the first 12 months are suspended, and the remaining three years are suspended on condition that he reach a settlement with Joel and fulfill it immediately.

"A scandalous mixing of criminal law and civil claims," Josef Neckermann's lawyers conclude, and file an appeal.

Karl Joel's response to that clarifies that he is not claiming that Neckermann was a war criminal, noting that he couldn't have been, since he was classified as 'uk' indispensable on the *Führer's* orders. It was Neckermann's "war-time duty" to produce millions of jackets for the *Führer's* army. However, Karl Joel does claim on record that Josef Neckermann deliberately never paid the purchase price for *Joel Laundry Factory*. Neckermann counters that he duly transferred the purchase price to the "*Joel Trust*" account of the Berlin *Hardy Bank*, but that the Nazis confiscated it.

A year later, the cairns and middens in the proverbial landscape change. The reappraisal of the Nazi era fades into the background, and the Cold War against Russia becomes the dominant issue. The up-and-coming department store king, Neckermann, is completely rehabilitated and acquitted on all counts in Germany. In post-Nazi Germany under *The Marshall Plan's European Recovery Program*, economic reconstruction is the predominant focus, thus marginalizing interest and resources to doggedly rehash sanguinous Nazi atrocities. Newspaper commentators and politicians invoke the slogan, "*We must let the past rest.*"

Rebuild. Rebuild. Rebuild.

Yet, Karl is stubborn and honor-bound, declaring, "They can cover up six million Jews' corpses with a cloak of silence. But I'm still alive. They stole everything from us, and I won't rest until I reclaim what is rightfully ours." Karl bangs a fist on the kitchen table of Helmut and Rosalind Joel's small house on Long Island. Karl's one-year-old grandson Billy is alarmed by the sudden noise and cries. Rosalind lovingly comforts the baby, stroking the back of his head. Disquieted by the emotional tension in the air, the tot becomes more restless.

"Please go for a walk. We want to have an adult conversation here," Helmut grouses at his wife; he wants silence from the baby, out of respect for his father who continues denouncing Neckermann there at the table.

"Go for a walk yourself if you want to go for a walk," the new mother snaps, and coaxes a little cap on a thrashing baby Billy.

Helmut ignores her and turns to his father. "What will you do now, Papa?"

"I'm still waiting for a settlement offer from Neckermann. If I don't receive one, I'll sue again."

Five years later, *Carl Amson Joel* files a lawsuit for compensation with the Reparation Chamber at the Nuremberg-Fürth Regional Court.

“What an absurd name. *Reparations Chamber!* As if *repairs* can be made,” he scoffs to his lawyer.

Once again, Neckermann’s legal team rebuts that the Defendant is not aware of any wrongdoing. At the insistence of the Court, six hours of settlement negotiations take place in January 1955, in the very building where the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal had been held ten years earlier. Neckermann, having already been celebrated once again by reconstructionist Germans as the “department store king,” claims that he is in possession of only a few hundred thousand Marks. A compensation sum of two million Marks is agreed upon for the Plaintiff, *Carl Joel*. A few months later, Neckermann KG’s balance sheet is published in the German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*. It shows Josef Neckermann’s private fortune to be over nine million Marks. Naturally, Joel feels cheated.

“I am suing again. And this time twice. Once against Neckermann for fraud and once against *Hardy Bank* for 69,550 Marks in interest that should have been paid from Neckermann’s alleged transfer.” Over years, Karl explains each step of the hellish legal process to his son Helmut, who ultimately moves back to Manhattan to live once again under the same roof with *Carl* and Meta and the view of the Williamsburg Bridge.

“Can we talk about anything other than Dad’s legal battle with Neckermann?” Helmut asks his mother in a quiet moment, staring out the kitchen window at the New York skyline.

“Unfortunately, no,” she sighs. “He doesn’t want to let that scoundrel get away with it. But what are your plans now, son?”

“I can’t stand it here. I hate our neighborhood on Long Island. I argue with Rosalind whenever I see her, and I’m just not American. I need some time to myself, so I’ve asked my company to transfer me to Europe.”

Meta nods, always understanding her son.

The lawsuit against *Hardy Bank* is dismissed. The bank presents an original letter from Josef Neckermann, dated September 15, 1938:

*“In addition to my current account, I request that you open a second account for me, as discussed in person, under the name ‘Special Account Joel.’ I shall remain the sole authorized signatory for this account until I provide you with further instructions.*

*Signed,*

*Josef Neckermann.”*

Attached to the letter are bank statements chronicling the account balance dwindling to only around 400,000 *Reichsmarks* three months later.

“That’s the proof. He never intended nor wanted to give me a single Mark for my company!” Karl Joel is confident of victory. He rejoices, “The Higher Regional Court has overturned all previous decisions, and the Restitution Chamber will have to deal with my claims again!”

Four years further along comes the final disillusionment. The Third Senate of the Supreme Restitution Court in Nuremberg overturns the ruling of the Munich Regional Court. The settlement from 1955 is deemed appropriate. *Carl Amson Joel* and his wife Meta return to

Nuremberg as elderly people. With the money remaining from the settlement, they buy a small apartment in their hometown, so many, many hard years after their escape.

“If there is one place where Jews can feel safe today, it is Nuremberg,” Karl explains.

A few years later, his wife Meta’s life journey comes to an end in the city where it all began. On November 2, 1971, Carl writes a letter to Linda, a friend of the family:

*“Dear Linda,*

*I can’t describe how I feel. It hurts so much, especially because we were married for a lifetime. Forgive my poor handwriting; I’m writing with glasses filled with tears. The worst thing for me—after endless nights of grief—is the early morning. It is dark and hopeless. People say time will heal everything. I would be ashamed of myself if that were the case. It would mean I had forgotten Meta. I praise the moment when I will be called away. I am healthy, but always ready.*

*Helmut is doing well. He has remarried. A very well-mannered English girl named Audrey. On August 5, they had a baby boy. His name is Charles Alexander..”*

A few months later, Carl moves into a retirement home run by the Jewish Community, and Helmut lives in London with his new wife Audrey, whom he met in New York, and his son Alexander. After Carl suffers a stroke, Helmut brings his father to live with him. In 1982, Carl Amson Joel dies at the age of 93, eleven years after the death of his beloved wife. He is buried beside Meta in the Jewish cemetery in Nuremberg.

### Chapter 37

*There is a place in a man's life to which he drives as fast as he can and from which he returns as slowly and carefully as possible.*

Billy's olive-green duffel long retired, he carries two bags through the lobby, passing the news kiosk. He does not care to see the stacks of his photo gracing the cover. Behind his Ray Bans, he exits the imposing hospital on the corner of First Avenue and East 26th Street. Beside him a nurse rolls the patient in the wheelchair.

"Are you okay?" Billy asks, turning toward the wheelchair. The patient nods.

The sky is overcast; it is early 1986. There is no wind, and it is below freezing. The valet opens the rear sliding door of the burgundy *Dodge Caravan* for Billy. Assisted by the nurse, because it is the law according to the hospital, to wheel new mother's out to the curb, Christie stands and gets in, cradling a bundle of blankets in her arms. Nested inside is their child. On December 29, 1985, Christie Brinkley and Billy Joel have become parents to a daughter born at New York Hospital.

The minivan is toasty. Billy tips the parking attendant a \$10-bill for keeping it running for fifteen minutes. The baby girl mustn't catch a chill on her first car ride. On eggshells, the new dad drives the *Dodge* back through Queens Midtown Tunnel toward Long Island.

"Idiot!" he yells, swerving and cussing out a speeding driver blaring a *Ford F-150* horn.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I swore. I shouldn't do that in front of *her*," he apologizes, glancing in the rearview mirror at his wife holding their baby daughter.

"No problem. She's only two days old, I don't think she understood you."

“Who knows. She seems like an exceptionally intelligent child,” says Billy. Pausing, he asks again, “Are you alright?”

“Yes. No different than sixty seconds ago,” Christie replies.

“But really, okay? Not too hot or too cold? Should I adjust the heat? Would you like some water?” Billy reaches for the water bottle from the case on the passenger’s seat. He’s prepared.

At the age of 36, his greater wish has come true: he has a family of his own. He is a father. That life on tour is *done-zo*—jetting from one hotel to the next around the world, performing in front of thousands of people is now over. His family is his priority now. Maybe he’ll write songs and release albums eventually, but for the foreseeable future, his focus is on *that* woman and *that* baby. His little girl is called *Alexa Ray Joel*; “Alexa” being the female form of his Viennese brother’s name, and “Ray” as a tribute to one of Billy’s greatest musical heroes: Ray Charles, the “high priest of soul,” who, incidentally, had already fathered ten children with different women by that point. And musically, both whom Billy regards to be a role-model in every respect.

“Let’s do another one,” whispers Billy winking at Christie. The house landline rings. “*Noooo...*” On the sofa, Billy groans; finally, Alexa has fallen asleep on his chest after a tetchy tummy. Now would be the perfect opportunity for a little couple’s time at home, since a new baby’s needs preclude all else beyond eat, sleep, cuddle, coo, play, rinse, repeat. The Joel household subordinates to Miss Baby’s *discerning* lifestyle. Christie hands him the house phone, mouthing the name of the caller. “Hello?” Billy says into the receiver quietly enough so as not to wake the slumbering confection that is Alexa.

“Billy, it’s Phil.” Phil Ramone, his record producer is calling from the studio. Drums and wind instruments playing in the background strike a siren chord Billy has seldom felt during his “paternity leave.”

“Hey, listen up, Billy, I told Quincy Jones that you became a father and that you named your daughter after Ray. He told Ray, and Ray immediately said he’d love to sing a song with you on your next album. Think about it.”

*Whoaaaah!* Billy is elated that the great Ray Charles wants to record a song with him. It’s a real accolade and means more to Billy than any Grammy, *but*, “Phil, I don’t have an album.”

“Write one.” Phil doesn’t skip a beat. “It’s only nine songs. If Ray likes *one*...”

Phil’s call-to-arms marshals Billy’s mind, body, and soul flooding the new father with symphonic chords, sound fragments, riffs, instrument strains, and bits of lyrics. A melody is like an erection. Suddenly it’s there. Finding the right lyrics can be damn hard work that’s done in a few hours or weeks, or in an instant when the muses are feelin’ it. Happily, he regards the napping baby glued to his chest. As always, she uplifts Billy’s spirits; gently, he places a hand on her downy head and sings softly. It’s almost summer when after-dinner walks take place in the garden, according to Joel family heritage. He looks back on his life with gratitude and satisfaction. He has everything he ever dreamed of. A wonderful, healthy family, inspiring collaborators, various homes and vehicles, infinite resources to go or stay—in short, a life of creative, intellectual, and cultural fulfillment. Billy’s heart surfeits with love and abundance; it no longer hurts. He whispers “thank-you... for it all” then wonders to whom he owes it all.

Yes, to whom or what does he owe it?

His gaze drifts, alighting on the piano in the living room, its lid open, ready when he is. *It all stems from that thing*: his success with *it* has delivered his wife and daughter, health, hearth-and-home—without the piano, none of this would exist. A declaration of love, a tribute to the instrument that has carried Billy through all the stages of his life, led him to success, and comforted him in times of sadness, is exactly what he and Ray Charles must sing about; they share a love of the piano. Especially in times when the piano is increasingly supplanted by synthesizers and keyboards, someone must put this hallowed instrument back in the spotlight.

“Everything we are, we owe to the monster with eighty-eight teeth that sometimes menaces us, but from which we can usually coax the most beautiful melodies with our fingers,” he explains to Phil on the phone.

Billy takes Alexa to Christie, then picks up a pen and paper. First verse:

*Late at night,  
 When it's dark and cold  
 I reach out  
 For someone to hold  
 When I'm blue  
 When I'm lonely  
 She comes through  
 She's the only one who can,  
 My baby grand  
 Is all I need*

Ray Charles is thrilled with it. What Billy envisions will be a quick recording of “*Baby Grand*” in Phil Ramone’s studio turns into a jam session lasting several hours between Ray and Billy. Two grown men make music together with the joy of teenagers who have just discovered their instruments. In addition to Billy, other musicians are heard on other songs on the album—Steve Winwood on the Hammond organ and Cindy Lauper as co-writer and background singer on the song “*Code of Silence*.” That’s why Billy calls the album “*The Bridge*”—a reunion, of sorts.

Then comes the hole. Writer’s block. A title is still missing. For over three weeks, Billy sits every day in his writing studio, in the so-called *Pop Building* down in Soho, surrounded by dozens of crumpled paper balls that he’s bounced off the walls of the room. “It’s all crap!” he yells, tossing the overflowing ashtray against the wall. He has vowed not to shave again until he finishes the last song. He now has a spiky full beard, and the worst thing about it is that its prickliness makes his daughter cry whenever he tries to cuddle her. Billy needs some fresh air, so he grabs a coffee and goes for a walk on Mulberry Street. For Manhattan, the red brick buildings with fire escapes down the front are puny in this neighborhood. Their ground floor spaces have small shops, fruit stalls, a hair salon, newsstands, and cafés. Some have a bar below street level, from which you can only see hems and pantlegs passing on the sidewalk.

“Why? Why is everything the way it is?” he asks himself, disconsolate. In a florist window, Billy regards his own reflection. It reminds him of his father. The expression on his face, his eyes, the first wrinkles, and his thinning hair. “Dissatisfaction” is a word Billy’s father has always used to describe his own life. Was Helmut Joel always like this? Or is he this way because he realized that he could no longer become what he really wanted to be in this life? A great concert pianist nascent within him, silenced yet still struggles to play, to create, to be heard.

Or is it what Helmut saw and experienced? Things no one else but Helmut Joel can ever know about, things that torment him? Billy thinks about how there are many people in the world who ask themselves “why?” every day. They wait, hope for a miracle, wish to finally be discovered, and seen for their true genius, to escape the boring routine of everyday life.

Billy turns around, intending to head home to his wife, his baby, and his piano. On it, he intends to create a character: a man who is a passenger in his own life and asks himself every day why everything is the way it is. Why he is the way he is? But there is one place in the world where this man has meaning: Mulberry Street. There, everyone knows him, he is greeted, he feels safe; *there*, he is someone. The song is called “*Big Man on Mulberry Street.*”

Billy buys a disposable razor and heads for home.

### Chapter 38

Helmut Joel is a sales representative for the US corporation *General Electric*, thus he's obliged to travel constantly. The difference between now and before is that when he comes home, he is able to relax with his son and the piano. The two share a passion for classical music, opera, and operetta. Together they attend live performances of *Carmen*, *Die Fledermaus*, *The Magic Flute*, and *The Gypsy Baro*. Just as other fathers take their sons fishing on the Danube or skiing in the mountains, Helmut and Alexander visit the *Volksoper*, the *Staatsoper*, and the *Theater an der Wien*. To prepare for each foray, Helmut tells Alexander what the performance is about and plays the most important melodies for him on the piano.

It is important for Helmut that his young son, Alexander, sit in the front row, or in one of the front balcony boxes, so that he can have an unobstructed view of the conductor at work. At home again, Alexander Joel puts on the record of the opera he has just seen. Then, presiding before the mirror with a yardstick as a baton, he conducts. His greatest dream is to become a conductor one day. Alexander is inconsolable when Helmut is transferred by *GE* and the Joels must move back to London.

“I want to stay in Vienna!”

“The company needs me in London,”

“But I was already in London when I was born. Besides, they don't have an opera house there!”

“Yes, they have The Royal Opera House.”

“They don't perform Viennese operettas.”

“True. But we have no choice,” Helmut concludes the conversation.

England is Alexander's mother's home, but the boy doesn't jibe with London. His grades decline, music becomes an afterthought, and soccer becomes his new passion. Helmut decides to do for Alexander what Karl and Meta once did for Helmut during the Nazi regime. Helmut enrolls his son in a Swiss boarding school where the daily routine is strictly regulated, with no wiggle-room for goofing off. Alexander has no choice but to start studying again. Week by week, his grades improve, studying assiduously in the common room. There, a classmate plays passionately on the school piano, rekindling Alexander's love for music. Soon Alexander is devoting every spare minute to practicing the piano. And during the summer holidays, Helmut allows his son to return to Vienna to take lessons with Michael Hruby, an open-minded young professor at the University of Music and Performing Arts, who also plays in a jazz band.

Returning to London upon graduation from high school, Alexander Joel presents his parents with above-average grades, and says simply, "Here you go, the 'school leaving certificate' you wanted," whereupon he sits down at the piano and plays *Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 29 in B flat major*, considered to be the most demanding of all Beethoven's piano pieces. It is a work that demands the highest artistic capabilities from the pianist who must be adept enough to master its complex structures and govern its profound emotions. Hearing his grown child nail a supremely resonant performance, Helmut Joel is astonished. And frustrated. Realizing that he can no longer keep pace with his son's virtuosity, Helmut implodes on himself and decides to eschew the insurmountable. And so, it will be many years before Helmut parks himself at a grand piano again.

"What are you going to study, Alexander?" Helmut asks.

“Music. What else?” his son replies, surprised at such an obdurate question from his own father.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. You need to learn a decent profession, go to college. You can always play the piano in your free time.”

Once again, obedient Alexander Joel proves his *puissance* when he applies for one of the 29 highly coveted spots at Kings College in London. Secretly, Helmut thinks that with over 1000 applicants, his son’s chances are so slim that it is unlikely he will be accepted to study law there. He is wrong. Alexander is accepted and begins a special program that includes both English and French law.

Late one evening well into the first year, Alexander calls his big brother.

“Billy, I hate it. I hate law books and law. Law has nothing to do with justice.”

“Well, if you don’t want to be a devious lawyer, a slick prosecutor, or a mischievous judge,” Billy asks, “what do you want to be?”

“None of those. I don’t even want to be rich. I want to be a musician. Like you.”

“Is that just what you want, or is it all you can do? Because you can’t decide to become a musician. Just like you can’t decide whether you’re homosexual or heterosexual. If you’re born a musician, you can’t do anything else.”

Alexander thinks about that. “I think I was born to be a musician, Billy. But I don’t know for sure.”

“Good. Then here’s what you’re going to do. There’s a new Steve Haft movie in theaters. Robin Williams stars in it. It’s called *Dead Poets Society*. Tomorrow night, you’re going to go to the theater and see it. Right after that, you’re going to call me back.”

“Okay. I’ll do that.”

“And one more thing,” Billy concludes, “Take a notebook and pen. You’re going to hear some sentences that you’ll probably want to write down.” And sure enough:

*“Words and thoughts can change the world.”*

*“We read and write poetry because we are a species of human beings. And the human species is a passionate species.”*

*“Medicine, law, and engineering are noble pursuits, but poetry, beauty, romance, and love are our joy and reward.”*

In the dark cinema, Alexander scribbles into his notebook, “*Carpe Diem*.” There are so many worthy quotes, he cannot keep up. When, in the final scene, first one then the next and the next student actor climbs onto their desks, Alexander can’t hold back the tears. He remains in his seat until the cleaning staff are sweeping popcorn off the floor. When he gets home that night, he calls Billy, greeting him, quoting the film’s line referencing the eponymous Walt Whitman poem:

*“O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done.”* I know. I’m a musician.”

His elder brother leans back in his chair and smiles. “I’ve known that about you for a long time, Alexander. Now you just figure out how to do it.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” asks Alexander.

“The greatest invention of humankind is compromise. So, you have to give our old man something in return. To be precise, you have to take away Dad’s two worst fears. First the fear that you’ll become a penniless musician who spends the rest of his life busking in the breadline. Second fear... You must not become like me.”

“Why not become like you, Billy? You’re rich and world-famous!”

“It’s simple. My music is ‘*contagious. Like the flu*,’” he cites good old *Rolling Stone*.

“And Daddy doesn’t like that.”

“So, what should I do?”

Billy explains his idea to his brother: “You don’t want everything at once. You want a chance. You suggest to Dad that you take a year off from law school to prepare for the entrance exam at the music academy in Vienna. If you pass the exam and are accepted, you can study music. If you don’t make it, you go back to Kings College.”

Reluctantly, Alexander’s parents agree to the idea. Alex keeps it under his hat that it was Billy’s idea, just to play it safe. Fortunately, Vienna has two world-renowned universities where Alexander can submit his application to study his desired subject, conducting. One is the University of Music and Performing Arts, and the other is the Conservatory of the City of Vienna. He applies to both institutions.

When the year of preparation and waiting is over. Alexander is on Vienna’s *Reichsratsstraße* just behind City Hall, where opens the door to a travel agency. Four female travel agents, their desks in a semicircle near the entrance, look up to check him out. No other customers are in need of assistance except for one seated at the far left agent’s desk.

“I can help you, sir,” offers a delicate blonde with bright hazel eyes. Beside her desk drools a huge Great Dane, nonplused by the comings and goings of the shop.

“I’d like a ticket to London, please.” Alexander takes a seat in front of her.

“Round trip?” she asks, already typing.

“One way.” Alexander sighs, glum.

“That’s a shame,” she replies. “And when would you like to fly?”

“By month’s end.”

Armed with a *British Airways* ticket, Alexander trudges back to his apartment, unhappy. He reflects on his decision to leave Vienna that is prompted by recent news. That same morning, dropping by the music academy to check the posting of student application results, there in the display case in the foyer of the institution, he sees that the list of accepted students for the coming school year does not include Alexander Joel’s name. His dream is shattered. His career as a conductor ends before it has a chance to fledge.

With his one-way airplane ticket in hand, Alexander retreats to the 9<sup>th</sup> District. Not far from Sigmund Freud’s former home, is an older building where Alex’s small apartment must be emptied before his lease expires at the end of the month. In a trance, the crestfallen young man unlocks the entry door and checks his mailbox. *Mostly junkmail*, he thinks, and flops the stack of mail on the coffee table, then proceeds to pack for his imminent trip back to London. He disdains packing, so he turns on Vienna’s youth radio station *Ö3* to keep him company while he dillydallies with petty chores around the apartment, then procrastinates packing ever longer, eyeballing the tabled stack of newly arrived utility bills. Ultimately, Alexander condemns himself to sort through it—advert, advert, bill, advert, bill, a *Neckermann* sales flyer.

*What’s this?*

One envelope made of quality vellum reads, “*Conservatory of the City of Vienna*” on the return logo and is addressed to “*Herrn Alexander Joel.*” Alexander opens it with care.

*“Dear Mr. Joel,*

*We are very pleased to welcome you as a full-time student of conducting at our institution starting in the 1991/1992 academic year. We were extremely impressed*

*by your performance in our entrance examination. Please bring the following documents to our office by June 30 at the latest....”*

Alexander rushes to the landline; giddy with glee, he laughs as he dials the rotary. It is 6:00 a.m. in New York City, but Billy’s got to be the first to know.

### Chapter 39

Several hours drive north of New York City, in Up-State New York, there are many pristine lakes. One, picturesque Canadarago Lake, nests in a rolling green landscape of meadows surrounded by hills. A pretty villa with a lake view sits on one of those hills. And in front of it stands a silver-gray *Mercedes Benz* in the shade of the multi-car garage, with a yellow “N” emblazoned on its roof gable. Here in America, no one would think it more than a pretentious emblem. However, that very “N” is known throughout Germany as the signet of the *Neckermann Company*. The owner of the lakeside property is Johannes Neckermann, son of the company’s namesake, Josef Neckermann. Standing there in the bright sun waiting for the journalist to arrive, Johannes scrunches his forehead, and the corners of his mouth draw downward when he recalls once again that he is no longer heir to a legend’s legacy, that of Germany’s most prominent entrepreneur, Josef Neckermann.

After the collapse of the Neckermann family’s business empire, Josef sent his son Johannes to the University of New York to study business. Thereafter, Johannes came to advise companies, trade in art and fine wines, and give interviews in areas of his expertise, including the Neckermann legacy. Some have referenced *tell* of Johannes Neckermann’s plaintive remarks about rigged games that led to hostile takeovers by his father’s competition and banks rumored to have been blamed for such things. What a great injustice this economic life hath spawned, it seems, for Johannes’ future, as the son of the personification of the German economic miracle had, *once upon a time*, shone-so-promising. Johannes recalls his teenage years when, every morning chauffeured to school, everyone waited for him, looked at him and whispered as soon as the door of the limousine opened for the 14-year-old *son-of-a*— “That’s him!” they’d exclaim.

Everyone who was anyone, and many who were no one knew he was a Neckermann. He did not even have to be athletic, good-looking, bright, nor able to play the piano in order to be adored by certain girls and admired by certain boys. His father, as a post-war icon in his reconstructed homeland, ensured Johannes' future as heir apparent. But things happened to change that.

Now, the 50-year-old Johannes talks to the camera of the television crew that has traveled to Upper New York State all the way from Germany: "*Neckermann* had a name recognition rating of ninety-eight percent. *Volkswagen* only ninety-seven. My father was a thoroughbred entrepreneur, an innovative businessman who came up with new ideas every day." Johannes Neckermann wears a navy-blue blazer with a matching pocket square and a Nantucket red button down. He sits behind his imposing antique Biedermeier desk, sipping from a cut glass led crystal glass of water. The air is stuffy. The room is shuttered from the sunny day; Johannes Neckermann's expression matches it until the camera spotlights him for the best picture. "I don't really want to comment on the Joel case anymore," he side-steps the journalist's inevitable question. "Just this much I will say to you, the Neckermann family and my father, Josef, have often been treated very unfairly throughout this whole story. I just want to say: people should remember what two million *Deutschmarks* meant in 1955. We always look at the two million Joel received from today's perspective. If Mr. Joel had invested the two million in *Siemens* or *Daimler* shares in 1955, he would be a millionaire many times over today."

*Reality check! Pause. Rewind:* The journalist reminds the camera that in 1938, the *Joel Laundry* business is worth at least 10 million Reichsmarks (around 100 Million German Marks, 50 Million Dollars), and 1938 is the year Josef Neckermann moves—for free—into Karl Joel's luxurious estate, sleeps in his bed, eats at his table, having forcibly leveraged Nazi ideology to

take over Joel's company while condescending to pay just a fraction of its actual value. Josef Neckermann asserts he paid the reduced purchase of two million *Reichmarks* himself. The sum is reported to have been transferred to a trust account to which, according to the Hardy Bank, only Josef Neckermann ever has access, which is why the actual owner, seller, Founder Karl Joel, receives nothing but a big goose egg. Shortly thereafter, Josef Neckermann is appointed *Reichs Commissioner for Clothing* and is allowed to personally present his designs for the *Wehrmacht* winter uniforms to the *Führer* on his birthday. With three employees, Josef drives up to Hitler's bunker complex, the "Wolf's Lair." It is April 20, an early summer day. The four Neckermann representatives are led into a waiting room where Josef Neckermann instructs his three Loden-clad minions to demonstrate the "winter reversible jacket" he has had designed, which will later be called the "Neckermann jacket." After less than a minute, sweat drenched, the living mannequins' hair is sopped in fop sweat. For more than an hour, red-faced, they wait for the door to be thrown open by Adolf Hitler followed by his generals. "*Sieg Heil*, my *Führer*, and happy birthday," stammers Josef Neckermann. Then he expounds on the new jacket's facts and benefits—stylish, thick, windproof, and waterproof fabric, its impregnation of Opanol and its blanket-like padding of shredded wool together make it the right choice for the Reich's warriors. Hitler tugs at the sample's six buttons and nods with satisfaction, then raises his right hand to cheek level at Neckermann, bidding him *you-know-what*, and leaves the room. Nazi generals follow him out, their clomping shoes making a noisome racket as they go. And Josef Neckermann remains with his employees on the verge of heat exhaustion.

Shortly thereafter, Adolf Hitler orders three million reversible winter jackets in various designs from the dashing young entrepreneur. To help Neckermann fulfill the order, Jewish

forced laborers, women, men, and children, who are condemned to live crammed together in ghettos, sew day and night until their fingers are sore.

The ghettos of Lodz and Theresienstadt are cordoned-off areas in Poland and Czechia, the former Czechoslovakia, that were originally built to accommodate 2,000 to 3,000 people. Instead, as many as 30,000 Jews vegetate there under catastrophic hygienic conditions and are forced to work continuously until the day they are transported to the extermination camps of Auschwitz; during their *tenure*, they produce the jackets that Neckermann then sells to Hitler's army. In Neckermann's autobiographical "*Memoirs*," the shrewd entrepreneur asserts, "*We gave the Jews work, helping them to survive.*" In it, too, he admits that he knew, "*The conditions in the ghetto were appalling.*"

Despite being part of the "*Reiter-SA*" and a member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, Josef Neckermann claims after the War, that he had *no idea* of the abject conditions under which enslaved, imprisoned people had to work for him, claiming he wanted to "*do good, create jobs*" being notably "*always careful not to be confronted with things related to Jews*," he said in an interview. His son, Johannes, apparently also particularly adept at side-winding the uncomfortable topic, has unfortunate deep furrows creasing his face as he sits in the villa by the lake in scenic Up-State New York. "That was all a long time ago. You have to let the past rest," Johannes Neckermann speaks for many in Post-WWII Germany.

Johannes recalls that, at age 22 during the Cold War, he learns that his father proudly announces the *Neckermann* company employs 18,000 people and has an output of over a billion *Deutschmarks*. Germans buy everything from his father's catalogue, which is over 800 pages long. Three hundred *Marks* off a television set, all-inclusive trips to Lebanon for only 675

*Marks*. West Germans raid their savings accounts for best-deal sales on birds, insurance, cooking spoons, clothes, trips, and even prefabricated houses—with a respectful nod to America’s catalogue retailer, *Sears and Roebuck*, founded in 1893. In the *Neckermann* department store in Frankfurt, Germany, employees excitedly spit-polish every nook and cranny including ceiling lights before the boss comes to visit.

Only the most important figures from politics and business visit Neckermann, and that sometimes helps in difficult situations. His old friend Dr. Hayler, once powerful in the Nazi Reich Ministry of Economics, was imprisoned in Nuremberg immediately after the war, together with the wealthy investor Friedrich Flick.

“Can’t you persuade your prison brother Flick to invest in my company? Our capital base is a little thin at the moment.”

Hayler sits opposite Neckermann, sunk deep into the dark brown leather couch in the meeting room, and takes a puff on his cigar. “Of course, you’ll get something out of the deal for your efforts.”

Pleased, Neckermann raises his cognac, swirling the amber liquid in its lead crystal glass. Beady eyes behind his large glasses become flashing slits whenever he makes a good deal.

His is a network consisting exclusively of “innocent followers” who support each other, even beyond the borders of the Federal Republic. They still exist in East Germany: the cheapest employees in the world, forced laborers in prisons, whose help can be used to increase profits.

Individual copies of the coveted “*Neckermann Catalog*” find their way as contraband over the great wall that divides Germany into two states at this time. In thrall, the citizens of the workers’ and farmers’ state pore over each colorful page bearing untold fantasies printed on

glossy paper. “It must be paradise over there. They have it made,” many East Block residents believe. East Germans can dream but not buy. Nothing is allowed to be delivered from West to East, to the Communist German Democratic Republic. And yet, Neckermann produces things there like cheap motorcycles, which he then sells at a high markup in his catalogue on the West side of the Wall, the side of the “economic miracle.”

Another example: Tatjana Sterneberg, age 22, lives in East Berlin, and falls in love with a charming Italian. They want to marry, so she applies for an exit visa to West Germany. Not only is her application rejected, but she is also immediately placed under surveillance by the East German secret police. A close friend of the young couple is recruited as an informant for the so-called “Hansel and Gretel” operation. Said *close friend* suggests to the two young lovers that they should flee the Republic. Tatjana Sterneberg agrees and is surreptitiously arrested compliments of the snitch. The Berlin City Court, located in East Berlin’s *Littenstraße*, sentences Tatjana to four years in prison and forced labor at the Hoheneck Women’s Prison, where Tatjana is given psychotropic drugs without her knowledge and forced to work 12-hour days; the least of the affrontery is that she works on substandard outdated sewing machines. The young woman is struck by the fact that the fabrics she must work on are of exceptionally high quality. Pure cotton, silk, linen, and cashmere are not normally available in Communist East Germany where cheapest polyester is *de rigueur*. Years later, after she leaves the GDR, thanks to the FRG having bought her freedom, and she is living in West Berlin, her husband gives her a fine blouse as a birthday present. Tatjana holds the garment in her hands, turns it around, feels it, looks at it closely under a light, and can hardly believe her eyes. She begins to tremble. Her birthday present is one of the items she sewed alongside her fellow prisoners in Hoheneck Prison. Her husband has ordered it

from the “*Neckermann Catalog*” that advertises blouses, skirts, and dresses at the lowest prices for *fashion-conscious women throughout Germany*. True to form, “*Neckermann makes it possible*” per the advertising jingle known throughout the country.

Johannes Neckermann is proud of his dad, Josef, because he has once again provided the cheapest product to the German people, with the best possible profit margins to the Neckermanns. However, Josef doesn’t want to talk about how this came about or the conditions for success. *Sales, sales, sales* is the company namesake’s doctrine. Neckermann’s prices are the cheapest. To achieve this, his employees sometimes have to work on weekends. A few rebellious female employees put stickers they made themselves on some sewing machines and typewriters that read: “*Neckermann, the old rider, keeps cheating us on Saturdays too.*” When employees call in sick, unannounced supervisors providing *courtesy wellness-checks* appear at their front door empty-handed. And if an employee enters fewer than 80 ship-to addresses per hour into the company’s customer data bank, they get a warning from the shift supervisor. Producers are also required to always deliver at the most favorable terms. “Whoever buys the most dictates the prices,” Johannes Neckermann proudly explains in an interview. Nevertheless, less and less is left over from year to year. The Neckermann financial resources are allegedly showing razor thin profit margins. *Losses exceed profits? But how? Suppliers are paid late, if at all. Where’d that money go? Banks are nervous. Known as the cat that always lands on its feet, is Josef Neckermann putting all eggs in some other discrete basket?*

“*To mark its 25th anniversary, Neckermann is once again reducing all prices by ten percent,*” booms the TV commercial, and the strategy seems to be working for now to trigger a gouty glut of purchases. Germans flock like shorn sheep-to-slaughter to so-called *sales*, filling

out thousands of order forms every day and they storm his department stores. “He always has the best ideas,” enthuses the personal secretary to the company boss. But this time, the nimble sleight-of-hand of Germany’s most-studied businessman overlooks a small detail that betrays the Neckermann *leger de main*. Nowhere is it written in indelible ink that the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary 10% sales offer is “valid only while supplies last.” Soon, supplies do not last when many products are sold out, yet Neckermann continues to take orders and payments, delaying fulfilling the orders while holding onto the payments. *Perhaps investing offshore?* And the mail order company must urgently buy more goods, while continuing to take orders and payments. But now his suppliers are setting the prices. At the end of the “sensational anniversary” the company—on paper—is seven million *Marks* poorer than before and bankrupt. Its main competitor, *Karstadt*, acquires or rather takes over *Neckermann*. “It was a hostile takeover. A long-planned conspiracy between *Karstadt* and the banks.” *Or was it?* Either way, Johannes Neckermann makes it apparent to the camera that he feels betrayed. His father is removed from its management and has to transfer 29 of his 34 million in private assets to his acquiring adversary as a dowry. *One wonders how much Karstadt stock his private trusts owned.* With the remaining five million, Josef retires to a posh-enough assisted living facility. Saving face, his children relocate, leaving Germany, some seeking to build new lives in America where no one knows them, and, given the current climate, no one cares. Once again, *Neckermann makes it possible.*

## Chapter 40

The young lady in Row 23 on the left raises her hand.

“I would like to ask my question in German.”

On stage, Billy is relaxed, leaning against a bar stool at the *Meistersingerhalle* in Nuremberg. In the audience, Helmut is seated in the front row. Alexander is on stage with his brother and translates the questions of those who only speak German into English.

“Do you have any memories from your childhood and youth that relate to your German-Jewish heritage?”

Before replying, Billy takes the microphone off the stand, stands up, buttons up his black jacket, paces back and forth, and takes a deep breath. “I remember exactly. There was this boy in my neighborhood. An Italian. His name was Vinny. Vinny Casa Mosino. He was a big guy who always wanted to beat me up. He comes up to me and says, ‘Hey, Joel! You killed Christ!’ And I say, ‘I didn’t do anything. And Vinny says to me, ‘You killed Jesus. And for that, I’m gonna kick your ass!’ So, Vinny punches me. That was one of my first experiences with being Jewish.”

It’s not a classical concert. “*Q & A - Questions and Answers*” is the name of Billy’s stage show that will be performed on April 9, 1995, to a sold-out hall in Nuremberg on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. Arno Hamburger, an old school friend of Helmut Joel and chairman of the local Jewish community, came up with the idea and persuaded Helmut and Billy to take part. And this is why Helmut is now being escorted onto the stage.

“This is a kind of family reunion. My brother is here and my father, who will now play with me spontaneously. Ladies and gentlemen. This is Howard Joel!”

Light gray pants, dark blue jacket, and tie. Helmut sits down at the second *Steinway* grand piano. Father and son improvise an American jazz standard from the 1930s together. The audience applauds; Helmut bows and returns to his seat in the front row again. Now Alexander Joel spontaneously grabs the microphone.

“I think we all want to hear one more song.”

From atop his piano, Billy grabs the thick black folder with song lyrics and sheet music and flips through it.

“Okay. This is for my father,” says Billy, and sings “*Vienna Waits for You.*”

Six months later, Helmut flies from Vienna to Nuremberg again. This time, however, the focus is on his younger son. “Alex is already doing it in his own unique way!” Helmut looks down from Box 2 in the first row into the orchestra pit. His wife Audrey has sweaty palms.

“That’s the typical Viennese style. You get the feeling that he’s conducting the orchestra with just his fingertips,” Helmut whispers, “Now he’s dancing around like a Spanish bullfighter again.”

In Alexander’s very first appearance as a conductor, the youngest Joel son already gives a foretaste of the way he will express himself as a conductor in the coming decades. With tremendous precision and ease, he gives the many different musicians their cues, winks, turns in circles, leans casually against the wall, entertains the audience and orchestra with small, barely noticeable jokes, and thus creates an unforgettable, grand whole. His parents are thrilled. Their son Alexander is conducting an orchestra for the first time.

“And in my hometown of Nuremberg, too.” Helmut has tears in his eyes.

Audrey rummages for a handkerchief. “And it’s the same operetta you conducted in New York in your youth, ‘*Die Fledermaus*’. Besides, that tailcoat really suits him exceptionally well.”

Audiences and critics alike are enthusiastic about the talented young conductor from Vienna. Over a thousand visitors to the Nuremberg Opera give him a standing ovation. After Alexander wins the *European Conducting Competition* in Spoleto, Italy, his first permanent position is just around the corner. In the capital of Austria’s southernmost province, Carinthia, he is hired as conductor at the *Stadttheater Klagenfurt* and will conduct Verdi’s “*La Traviata*” coming out of the gate. And even if he cannot always show it, Helmut Joel is very proud of his two sons. One is an internationally acclaimed American pop star, the other an up-and-coming newcomer to the classical music circuit who is just beginning his lifelong tour of Europe’s most important opera houses and concert halls. To his family’s delight, it will take Alexander Joel from Covent Garden to the Vienna State Opera.

Over decades, Helmut has bought a magnet with a national flag or city skyline in every country he has visited for his employer, *General Electric*. Now, on the refrigerator door of his large Vienna apartment, his magnet collection holds up a shrine of photos and newspaper clippings of Billy and Alexander.

The young director, Beate Thalberg, is examining the photos of Helmut’s highly talented musician sons. She plans to make a documentary about the two musical brothers. Helmut is leafing through family albums, showing her more childhood photos of his sons, when Thalberg’s gaze lingers on several black-and-white photos. A factory stretching across four blocks, dozens of trucks heading in and out of a courtyard, drivers greeting each other, hundreds of women sitting at long tables in a hall binding packages with twine or studios at myriad sewing

machines. Another photograph shows an elegant gentleman seated behind a desk; he is a true entrepreneur of the 1930s in a bespoke suit; beneath a moustache, his fine features hint at a kindly smile. For Beate Thalberg, the photos spring to life before her eyes—she hears noises, perceives movements, emotions, intentions. Yellowed images of a family’s long-lost success become a film.

“What is that?” asks the director.

“Oh, that’s the business my parents used to have.”

“What kind of business did you have?”

“We had a small laundry business in Berlin-Wedding.”

“In Berlin! But it doesn’t look like a small business?”

Helmut looks up. “All of Berlin is a cloud...”

She immediately finishes the saying, as if it were the test question for the secret identification mark of all Berliners abroad:

“And only I can be seen.”

The eyes of the two collaborators shine at each other in solidarity with their homeland.

“Are you from Berlin too?” asks Helmut.

He puts on a fresh pot of tea, and she tells him about her childhood and youth in East Germany, her studies in directing and dramaturgy in Leipzig, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and her new life as a director and screenwriter in Vienna.

Helmut wears a black turtleneck sweater and sits down on the stool in front of his piano. The familiar instrument imbues him with security, even if at this moment its only task is to support his left elbow.

“This business my father had was a textile mail order company.”

It is only months later that Thalberg will have researched that it was the second largest in Germany. A kind of predecessor to Amazon. From now on, she just listens. She never conducts interviews like a reporter. She asks one or two open-ended questions that provoke sharing of locked-away memories. People tell her things of their own accord. With Helmut, it's as if someone opens the floodgates. Years of pent-up feelings flow out from deep within him for the first time.

“They trained on weekends. The Hitler Youth, the SA, and the SS, right there in the forest next to us. That's where they did their exercises. My mother was always afraid. She trembled.” Helmut talks on and on about his childhood in Nuremberg and Berlin, the villa in Grunewald, school, and the great pain at age 12. At that time, he didn't understand why he was packed off to a boarding school in Switzerland. He recounts that his father had to sell the company, “To a certain Neckermann. Do you know him?” he asks the documentarist.

“Neckermann?” she replies.

Every child in Germany has known the name Neckermann for decades. The story of the Joel family, on the other hand, is unknown to most. Thalberg listens for more than two hours; Helmut is spent, having talked more today than he has in years. He has recounted his life, lightly, as if recounting a past holiday adventure. Like a chat peppered with punchlines and his own brand of pitch-black humor, for which there are no taboo subjects. Beate Thalberg is entranced by the history of this family and even more so by the man sitting opposite her. A friendly, elderly gentleman who has seen so much, experienced so much, and yet still has the ability to calmly look back on it all with modesty, charm, and humor. Many questions run through her mind. She

has leagues of research ahead of her, conversations with Neckermann, his children, and grandchildren, and entire landscapes of files to review. She and Helmut agree to meet again in six months. Next time, she will bring her camera crew.

The next day, Thalberg boards a train to Klagenfurt. Alexander will be her key to further information. “*La Traviata*” was a great success. Hans Landesmann, the concert director of the Salzburg Festival, has recommended Alex to the new director of the Volksoper in Vienna, Dominique Mentha. Alexander may soon conduct in Vienna as well. The evening sun glitters. The mountain peaks, still covered with snow, reflect in the gentle waves of the sparkling blue Wörthersee. On the terrace of the *Villa Lido*, Alexander and Beate sit sharing a pizza.

“I have two questions for you, Alexander. First, I can’t get access to the archives of the city of Nuremberg. I need your help with that. Would you fly with me to Nuremberg to dig up all the documents on the Nazi looting of the Joel linen factory and all the court records on the trials against Neckermann?”

Alexander agrees with a shrug, “I’m interested in that myself.”

“Second question. If Neckermann’s grandchildren agree to meet you and your brother, would you do that?”

Alexander takes a sip of his small beer. “I think that would be interesting. I hope that Neckermann’s children or grandchildren realize what their father and grandfather did. I don’t feel any bitterness, but I can’t speak for Bill. You’ll have to ask him yourself if he wants to do that.”

The two present Billy with the results of their research on his family.

“I didn’t know any of this. My father never talked about it. I’ve learned more about my family’s history today than in the previous forty years of my life.” Billy, wearing a blue and

white shirt, pulls up a chair with Beate Thalberg and his brother seated on the white couch in his Long Island home.

Slowly, the question marks disappear as his family history comes together. The brothers agree to meet Josef Neckermann's grandchildren in Vienna, hoping to understand even more. A few months later, Beate Thalberg is back at Helmut's apartment in Vienna. In the meantime, she has flown halfway around the world, conducted countless interviews, studied original files, and reviewed archive material. Many new questions have arisen. The escape to Cuba, the relatives who were sent back to Europe on the St. Louis, the arrival in New York. Once again, Helmut reconstructs his life, piecing together the puzzle pieces to form a picture. With every question the filmmaker asks, she activates synapses hidden deep in his brain, exhuming memories and triggering long-forgotten emotions. In the past six months, Helmut has aged. He seems slower and can no longer remember many things as well as he used to. It seems as if telling his story one time allowed him to then forget it forever.

Today is one of those rare days when his family is together in one place, in one city, in Vienna. In the evening, Alexander celebrates his debut as conductor of the Volksoper. At 7:00 p.m., Helmut, his wife Audrey, and Billy are united in the first box, in the first row of the Volksoper. Alexander steps in front of the orchestra in his tailcoat and conducts "*Wiener Blut*," an operetta by Johann Strauss Jr., at the end of which, after a series of misunderstandings and jealous dramas, all the characters come back together as couples and realize that "*Wiener Blut*" is to blame for everything.

Billy leans against the balustrade of their box, listening to the waltz music composed over 100 years ago, and thinkings of his ancestors. *It is our blood, it is our genes that unite us, we*

*cannot renounce our history, it is within us and we must learn to understand it in order to be free.* His brother is so much like him. But today, Alexander is celebrated, he is brought onto the stage, he takes a bow. Billy is infinitely proud.

Tomorrow, he will take the next big step that will help him better understand his family history.

## Chapter 41

Julia, Lukas, and Markus Neckermann travel to Vienna to meet Alexander and Billy, Karl Joel's grandchildren. For the first time, it will be a reunion of the next generation, the first meeting of the descendants of perpetrators and victims of World War II, recorded for Beate Thalberg's documentary. Billy is tense. He doesn't know what to expect. This is all quite new to him. Alexander and he wait in a conference room at the Hotel Astoria on Kärntnerstrasse. The spotlights are in position; the cameras are set up. Five chairs are arranged in a semicircle. The filmmaker will not be asking any questions today. Everything will be recorded exactly as it happens.

Helmut is not attending this meeting. Johannes Neckermann has not come to Vienna either. He prefers to give his statement at his villa on the lake, north of New York City. He has no interest in meeting Helmut Joel or his sons. The desire for a discussion, for understanding, perhaps even for an apology, is reserved for the next generation. It is raining. The three Neckermann grandchildren walk across the *Neuer Markt* under two colorful umbrellas, past the *Donnerbrunnen* fountain. The smiling siblings appear relaxed; the German economic miracle gene seems to be in their bones. Lukas and Markus wear dark suits, blue shirts, silk ties, and tony watches, while Julia wears an equally blue suit and a strand of pearls, perhaps for clutching. The grands have only recently learned that one of the two men they are about to meet is the famous pop star Billy Joel.

Seated in the circle, Billy starts the conversation with some friendly words: "The interesting thing is that I don't know nearly as much as I would like to know. I mean, I've

learned most of what I know now from my father during this interview. Apparently, parents and grandparents on both sides who survived the war don't want to talk about it."

"Oh really?" Julia Neckermann smiles, an interested psychology student in her second semester. "Have you never tried to talk to him about it?"

"I tried. But he doesn't want to talk about it. Either because of his trauma, his own feelings, or he just doesn't want to burden his own children with all that pain."

Helmut isn't talking now either. He's sitting alone in his own flat a few streets away, playing the piano. Beethoven.

Julia Neckermann describes that she was always afraid to ask her father and grandfather about those times, "I was always afraid of hurting their feelings, because they lived through a difficult time that they may not want to remember."

"That's how bad things happen in this world," Billy interrupts, "when people are afraid to ask questions, afraid to be different."

"The question is, what are the consequences of behaving differently?" Markus Neckermann wants to defend his family. "When you have the choice between possible death on the one hand and success on the other?"

"But there were also good people in Germany at that time. People who fought against the Nazis," Billy counters.

"The way my grandfather fought against the Nazi system was by giving people work and providing them with warm uniforms for the winter." Julia Neckermann struggles to posthumously stylize her grandfather as a resistance fighter. A certain Spielberg / Neeson movie jumps to mind for some observing the tense dynamic at hand.

Alexander joins in the conversation. “That brings us to an interesting question: Are you also responsible if you do nothing? To be precise, Josef Neckermann had money, he was always a rich man. He didn’t have to go along with it, did he?”

Valid point. Everyone’s thinking.

Billy crosses his arms. The penny drops. *Josef Neckermann was no Schindler*. To enquire after a “*list*” at this time, however, might serve only to powder-keg an otherwise unprecedented proactive first meeting of the minds of the Next Generation.

Now Lukas Neckermann, the third grandson, speaks up, “It was a war economy back then. Everyone who worked had to work for the war effort.”

His sister puts on her best economic miracle smile.

Alexander asks, “Do you think your grandfather regretted anything? Did he have a guilty conscience?”

Julia shakes her head vigorously. “No. No, no, no. Everyone went their own way back then. Everyone did their duty. They didn’t know what they were doing. They didn’t know what they were getting themselves into. They just kept going and going.”

Surviving. Getting by.

Billy sits rigidly, hands in his lap. He shoots a look out the window where the warm May rain has stopped. The room he is in certainly has a history. Stucco ceilings, wood paneling, old parquet floors. He doesn’t want to be *here* anymore. He hears no words of remorse, no act of empathy or contrition, and no acknowledgment of wrongdoing.

“None of you were even born back then. You don’t have to apologize,” Alexander says, lightening the cognitive dissonance.

Billy and Alex return to their father's apartment.

Billy will be playing concerts all over the world in the coming months, including in Europe, in front of hundreds of thousands of children and grandchildren of Nazis, followers, accomplices, and those who knew nothing about what was going on—but perhaps also in front of the descendants of a few genuine resistance fighters, who will cheer on the grandson of “Joel the laundryman” in Berlin, Munich, Dortmund, Stuttgart, and Frankfurt.

He makes no distinction. He sings for them all.

On June 12, his father's birthday, tens of thousands of Germans are expected to attend a concert at the Zeppelin Field in Nuremberg. This is the place where, 60 years earlier, Billy and Alexander's father, little Helmut Joel, watched the parade of marching soldiers at the NSDAP Party Congress. Shortly thereafter, Helmut and his parents fled Nuremberg to Berlin.

At their father's apartment, Billy puts his arm around his little brother and father. “We can thank our grandparents, Karl and Meta. If they had decided differently, we wouldn't be here today.”

## Chapter 42

Today is rehearsal day. Alexander stands casually in front of the orchestra in jeans and a tshirt.

“We’re pushing too hard. The singers can hardly keep up with us.”

“Right. Once more, please. Number 170. *Piano*. Not *mezzoforte*. One, two...”

He has already conducted at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf, the Bavarian State Opera, the *Semperoper* in Dresden, and for several CD and DVD productions. The venerable *Staatstheater* Braunschweig seats over 900 and is the oldest of its kind in Germany. General Music Director Alexander Joel is written on the door of his office. Alexander’s star is rising, while Helmut’s is slowly fading.

The doctors have diagnosed “dementia.” Helmut spends most of his time at home. He looks out the window and listens to music. His life is slowing down. A long, ten-year farewell begins. Helmut forgets the little things in everyday life. He looks for keys and remote controls, can’t remember what he had for lunch that same day, and asks the same questions over and over again. He keeps asking which opera Alexander is currently conducting. His long-term memory is still working well. Old photos jog his memory. He remembers details from his childhood, from skiing vacations in St. Moritz fifty years ago, and recalls his first visits to Billy’s house on Long Island. He can see it all in front of him. The big villa, the garden, the sea where Billy sails his boat every day.

In the meantime, it has become quieter there. The years spent in hotel rooms, airplanes, and on the world’s biggest stages have left their mark, with lasting consequences. The poster couple of the US gossip columns is history. Christie Brinkley and Billy Joel are getting divorced.

That was what he always wanted to avoid. Even as a child, he vowed he would do things

differently. He could never give up living with his child, taking her to school and putting her to bed at night. He feels he has failed.

Every other weekend is now “Pop’s Time.” Billy and 10-year-old Alexa spend Sunday afternoons together on the boat he named after her. To do so, he sometimes cancels concerts in front of 50,000 spectators. The hardest moment is when he takes his little girl back to New York to her mother in the evening and drives back to his big house alone.

Sometimes he stops at a bar and orders a glass or two of wine. With his baseball cap pulled low over his forehead, he finds a seat in the darkest corner of the bar, lights a cigarette, stares into his glass, and asks himself questions. How could my father have given up weekends like these? Why did he never visit me after he left? Did Helmut really forget about him for 20 years, or did his mother possibly prevent him from contacting him? Alexander had hinted at something like that once. Today, it doesn’t matter—as long as he’s with Alexa. Billy forgave his father. A long time ago. In his life, at least, it’s clear that no matter what his ex-wife might do, he would never, not in a million years, give up time with his daughter.

The bar pianist at the far end of the place starts playing a waltz. After the first three chords, Billy recognizes the song. He’s playing “*Piano Man*.” That too. The man behind the piano looks in his direction expectantly. Billy feels his eyes on the back of his neck. He turns to the bartender.

“The check, please!”

The house is large, beautiful, and very quiet. At home, Billy sits down at the piano and begins to play. There are no words for the emptiness that hollows him out. Music no longer needs

lyrics. He calls the eleven-minute classical piano piece, which he finishes at two in the morning, “*Soliloquy (on separation)*”.

He puts the sheet music in his fax machine. Loud beeps and screeches confirm a connection. It is already eight o’clock in the morning in Vienna when, in Alexander’s apartment on Schönbrunner Straße, the sheet music is printed from the dot matrix printer onto the thermal paper of the fax roll, with almost the same sounds with which it left Long Island seconds ago.

“What do you think?” Billy writes to his brother.

Alexander puts his coffee aside, cuts apart the pages of the rolled-up fax paper with scissors, clips them into the music stand of his piano, and begins to play. It could also be by Chopin, Debussy, Schubert, or Beethoven.

“It’s great. Go on!” Alexander scribbles under Billy’s question and sends the sheet back.

“I’ve been writing songs for this guy named Billy Joel for the last twenty-five years. He’s slowly getting on my nerves,” Billy says in an interview on the *NBC Morning Show*. “When I started writing music, classical music was the girl next door, and then suddenly this wild, chain-smoking chick came along, with dark mascara on her face and black fishnet stockings over her long legs. Her name was rock’n roll. I had a hot affair with her for a quarter of a century, but now, now suddenly there’s that pretty girl from next door again...”

“Hey. Kids are watching! We’re going to a commercial break,” says the director to the presenter into the small radio receiver hidden in her ear, invisible to the audience.

She turns to the camera, smiles, and announces the weather.

Right after the commercial.

Twelve pieces, one hour and sixteen minutes long. Billy's first classical album is finished.

"A ballet dancer won't be able to perform the perfect breakdance and vice versa. That's why it makes sense that Bill asked me to play this." Richard Hyung-ki Joo is a friend of Billy and Alex and a world-renowned pianist. He is recording the new, first classical piano compositions of the man everyone calls the Piano Man.

"Would you like the first part played like a suggestion, or would you prefer it stronger?"

"No, stronger!" Billy leans casually against the grand piano and watches Richard play. The new hall is the recording stage of the newly renovated Vienna Concert Hall. There are no more tapes spinning in the adjoining control room. Every note is stored on hard drives in crystal-clear quality using state-of-the-art equipment.

Alexander repeatedly joins in from the control room and makes suggestions to the two of them.

"It's my fantasy and at the same time a delusion that I think I'm a classical composer. So let's just call this thing what it is. '*Fantasies & Delusions*'," Billy explains at the album's release.

Alexander scratches the thread of cellophane film with his fingernails and opens the protective cover of the CD. He holds the cover of his brother's new album directly under his father's eyes. Helmut sits slumped in his favorite chair at the dining table. With his right hand, he twists a string from which hangs a tea bag filled with organic meadow herbs. Alexander inserts the CD and presses *Play*. Helmut watches the swirl that develops in his "*Best Dad*" mug as he twists the bag. He says nothing. In the Joel family, they either listen to music or talk. Background music to accompany words is rejected. Alexander sits down next to him. After nine and a half minutes, the first piece comes to an end.

“That was beautiful. What was that?”

“Your son wrote it.”

Helmut lovingly pats the back of Alexander's hand. “You did very well.”

“No. Bill composed it.”

Helmut nods. “Really, very beautiful.”

Alexander works all over the world, but lives in Vienna, like his father. The flight from Brussels lands at 11:30 a.m. He conducted “*Don Carlos*” in Antwerp. In his shoulder bag, he carries the 500-page manuscript of Richard Strauss’ opera “*Die Frau ohne Schatten*” (“*The Woman Without a Shadow*”). Alexander ignores suitcases spinning dully in circles on conveyor belts. He travels only with hand luggage, for good reason. Exiting the arrivals hall, he gets into the first taxi in line.

“To the Lainz nursing home, please.”

Helmut is now almost 88 years old. He has not been able to live at home for a long time. Since New Year’s, his health has deteriorated significantly. Billy feels like he never really got to know his father. He has also come to Vienna and is sitting in a taxi. From the Hotel Sacher, directly behind the opera house, he is driven to Hietzing, one of the suburbs. The hospital and nursing home are located there, in a sprawling complex of several old buildings, trees, park benches, and meadows. On this late winter Tuesday, the complex is shrouded in a veil of dreary gray tones. The shadows of the bare branches cast dark skeletons onto the gray facades of the buildings.

In front of the entrance gate, the two brothers greet each other with a warm hug.

“Geriatrics. Pavilion 8.”

Helmut has a single room. Outside his window, it’s snowing now. His sons bring dark chocolate from Belgium and red tulips from Holland.

“Dad, how are you today?” Billy leans over the bed. His father looks as if he has shrunk. And lost weight. “Don’t they give you anything decent to eat here?”

His eyes are expressionless. His gaze is empty.

“Come on, Dad. Let’s go for a little walk.” Alexander helps him out of bed.

Helmut hangs between his sons. Step by step, very slowly, the three of them shuffle through the corridors to the lounge. Dry sand cake and coffee from a thermos flask are laid out on a table in front of the window. An old piano stands in the back corner.

Helmut breaks free from his sons’ arms. Stooped, he takes small steps and heads purposefully toward the piano. He sits, deliberately placing his fingers on the keyboard, and begins to play softly.

“That’s...”

Alexander’s cell phone vibrates in his pocket. He pulls it out for a moment. A number from England. “Not now.”

He puts it back in the front pocket of his jeans and turns to Billy. His brother is standing half a meter behind him. His arms are crossed in front of his chest, his eyes moist. “*Innamorato, Suite for Piano*” is the name of the romantic piano piece that Helmut plays from memory, without a single mistake. It is from the album “*Fantasies & Delusions*” and was composed by Billy Joel.

Alexander turns to the side. He now stands between his brother and father. He looks back and forth between the two of them. Billy's head is bowed. With trembling hands, he pulls his Ray Bans out of his jacket pocket. He puts them on, turns around, and walks quickly out of the room. In the bathroom, he places his sunglasses on the edge of the sink. He turns on the faucet. With both palms, he splashes cold water on his face.

*Hopefully no one will come in now*, he thinks, looking at himself in the mirror. Clearly and directly into his own eyes, he stares. There is little Billy, sitting at the kitchen window, waiting for his dad to come home. There is fearful Billy, afraid that he has done something wrong again. There is disappointed Billy, reading hundreds of fan letters and autograph requests, but finding no mail from his father. All of this is written in the eyes that look at him in the mirror. Above all, their resemblance to his father's eyes stands out.

"Everything okay?" Alexander knocks on the bathroom door.

Billy dries his eyelids with a paper towel. "Yes, I'm coming." He leaves his sunglasses on the edge of the sink.

His father still sits at the piano, completely unchanged, playing Billy's classical piano piece about being in love.

The nurse stands in the doorway with her tray, listening dreamily.

At the end, there is applause. Helmut remains seated at the piano, hunched over, his hands on the keys. Everyone in the room expects a continuation, but there is none. Alexander helps him up, supports him with his right arm, and accompanies him back to his room. Billy walks a meter behind them.

“Do you know what piece you just played?” Alexander asks. His father stops, turns to Billy, smiles, and takes the next small step.

“Sleep well, Dad.” The blue floral nightshirt has almost completely disappeared under the white blanket. Alexander hugs his father and kisses him on the forehead.

Billy stands on the other side of the bed. He takes Helmut’s hand. “Goodbye, Dad.”

He slowly tries to break free; Alexander is already waiting at the door. But his father holds him back. Billy turns to him. The once strong man now seems helpless and fragile. He has long since lost the ability to speak. Only his eyes speak, conveying more than his mouth could ever express.

Billy nods.

Helmut lets go of his hand.

Silently, the two brothers walk across the light green linoleum floor toward the exit. It smells of chlorine. The information desk is unmanned; a handwritten sign reads, “*Break.*” An old woman in a wheelchair sits next to the elevator door. Every day, she waits here for visitors.

In vain.

Outside in front of the nursing home, Billy lights a cigarette. The snowfall has turned to rain. “*Attention. This path is not cleared when it snows and is not gritted when it is icy,*” says a sign. Dirty brown slush and pebbles stick to their shoes. Moisture creeps into their soles. A taxi should be here any minute.

In the car, Alexander listens to his voicemail:

“This is Peter Katona, casting director at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, London. I saw you in Antwerp and would like to invite you to conduct ‘*La Bohémé*’ at our theater.”

Alex’s father never learns of this.

The rickety white taxi turns a corner. The nursing home is no longer in sight.

On March 8, 2011, Helmut Joel dies in Vienna. He is buried in the grave of his parents, Meta and Karl, in Nuremberg. His sons remain best friends. More than that. They are family. To this day.

THE END