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**EMERALDS
NEVER FADE**

ALSO BY STEPHEN MAITLAND-LEWIS

Hero on Three Continents

EMERALDS NEVER FADE

STEPHEN MAITLAND-LEWIS



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IN MEMORIAM

My Father – Philip
(1909–1978)

My Mother – Esther
(1909–1994)

My Brother – Martin
(1936–1974)

My Uncle – Benny
(1908–1980)

My Hero – Louis Armstrong
(1901–1971)

My Mentor – Harold Robbins
(1916–1997)

My Friend – Arthur Marx
(1921–2011)

*Once the game is over, the king and the pawn
go back in the same box.*

Italian Proverb

No man is rich enough to buy back his past.

Oscar Wilde

PROLOGUE

“**A**VRAM, IT’S ME, URI.”

Uri Nusbaum spoke firmly, but he was badly shaken. “I’m at the Dorchester. Leo has had a heart attack. He’s been taken to the Middlesex Hospital. Danny is with him. I’m coming straight back to the embassy now, and I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Though officially a senior international banker with the Israeli Bank Leumi, Uri was actually a Mossad operative, and he had known Leo since the two arrived as frightened teenagers in Palestine in 1939. Seeing his friend taken away in an ambulance, lights flashing and sirens wailing, was as if his own heart had stopped beating.

Out of the hotel and onto Park Lane, Uri approached a line of black taxis waiting at the hotel’s entrance. Uri told the driver his destination, Palace Gardens Terrace, and sat back. His restless fingers folded and unfolded his wallet until his American Express card fell onto the floor. He realized what he was doing and reached to retrieve it.

How could this be happening? Uri had met Leo in the hotel lobby that evening to join four hundred or more other guests, mostly bankers and financial journalists, at one of the receptions that was taking place during the week of the World Bank’s London conference. Leo was still in the midst of a distinguished banking career. Uri knew of no medical problems, at least none that Leo had shared with him. Leo’s mood, in spite of everything looking up in his life, had been bleak. Now Uri wondered if that was a sign of the impending attack.

Uri tucked his wallet into a pocket and crossed his legs. Why was he going back to the embassy? Duty? Habit? Certainly, it would have been inappropriate to stay at the cocktail party. But he just as easily could have gone home. Maybe he should have gone with Leo to the hospital instead of his colleague, Danny. No. He had learned during his training as an operative that it was crucial to divert all unnecessary attention. If Danny hadn't been there, of course he would have accompanied Leo. Maybe he should have gone to the hospital anyway.

The cab pulled up outside the embassy, and in a few minutes, Uri sat with the ambassador in his study. The ambassador showed the same anxiety and confusion as Uri felt. Leo was a critical member of their team, a major contributor to their mission. Now what?

"This is bad news, Uri," the ambassador said. "Leo is a good man. Let's hope he'll be okay. As soon as we hear from the hospital, I'll call Geneva and speak with his wife."

Uri nodded. He had been perspiring for some time and his hands were sticky. He wiped them on his trousers.

"You've known Leo for a long time, haven't you?" the ambassador asked.

"Yes." Uri closed his eyes and sighed. "We first met on the way to Palestine in 1939. Nearly thirty-five years ago."

"Given the life he's led," the ambassador said, "I wonder when Leo would say his life really began. With us or earlier."

Uri looked at the man, seeing Leo's dark disposition and questioning eyes superimposed over the ambassador's narrow face and dark beard. Leo had once told Uri of a parting, years before in Nice, France, when he was fourteen. Leo said that he could never erase the memory of that painful farewell on a railroad platform in Nice, when his parents returned to Augsburg, Germany. Within a few short years, Leo had been left an orphan, a man of the world, and a man of his own making.

When Leo had told the story, he kept a palm to his heart, over the very spot where his mother's embrace pressed the family's treasured heirloom against his chest, followed by his father's hand on his shoulder, shaking him. Both of his parents had been uneasy, exhibiting a tension beyond the sadness of separation.

Ulrike, Leo's mother, had been fond of wearing the large emerald pendant on the thick gold chain within the folds of her blouse. She wasn't a woman

proud of her riches. Instead, at moments, she was still the beautiful and excited bride who had received the pendant on her wedding day from the matriarch of her husband's family. Leo's eighty-five-year-old grandmother had traveled by train from Hamburg with a widowed sister, and after the wedding, she unhooked the pendant that had for decades bounced upon her formidable chest, waddled across the room, and placed it around Ulrike's neck. The act was a blessing, an acceptance, a dictum to go forward and raise new generations of Bergners.

Each time his mother hugged him tightly, Leo felt the imprint of that pendant, and at the train station, her embrace had been more deliberate than any other in Leo's memory. Then his parents boarded a train back to their family home in Germany, a Germany that would betray them.

All through his life, Leo had often placed his open palm to his chest, many times for Uri and others to see, each time bringing the past into the present. Uri had grown to understand the gesture. Leo's hand to his chest, where his mother's pendant pressed against it, signified his undying love of his family.

1

LEAVING LEO IN THE SAFETY OF NICE WITH THEIR COUSINS, Jacques and Karin Kaplan, seemed a wise parental decision in view of the fast-deteriorating situation in Germany. The fear of impending war, and the ever-increasing indignities the Jewish community had to endure, was not an atmosphere in which to raise a child. Leo's parents had planned to reunite the family in Augsburg once the great German nation had finally come to its senses. In the meantime, fourteen-year-old Leopold Bergner would continue his studies in relative safety.

A talented pianist, Leo set about establishing himself in Nice as a professional musician, available for private parties. He averaged three every week—two most weekends and one on a weeknight. He had business cards printed and distributed them at the lycée and among all the caterers in town. With his earnings, he bought himself a smart tuxedo and had a head-shot photograph taken by a professional. He sent two copies of the picture back to Augsburg: one to Professor Hailer and one to his parents with assurances that he was getting on fine and not to worry. And he was doing well.

The best place to play was at the Levys' house. They had an elegant music room, and an ebony concert grand piano imported from Berlin after the Great War. Its polish was so fine it glowed, and Madame Levy made sure the precious instrument was in tune so Leo could play Chopin for her friends. She had a melancholic streak that her friends quietly mocked. Still, they came to her parties and tipped Leo well, especially when he looked tired.

"On time, as usual," Madame Levy said when he arrived.

This particular Sunday evening, the night was clear and breezy. Leo was sorry to step inside the warm house. Still, he had written to Professor Hailer, asking him what to play, and the old man sent him Sonata No. 2. Leo had spent hours practicing to make sure that he would not be a disappointment. Now, when he played a piece he knew well, the music and warmth and background din put him in a trance that felt like the beginning of sleep.

“There’s water in the kitchen for your hands,” Madame Levy said. “Help yourself to the wine before the guests arrive.”

“No thank you, Madame,” he said in his German-accented French. “Perhaps after I play.”

He soaked his hands and sat down to warm up for a few minutes. He still used the old Czerny exercises Bruno had taught him, long before Professor Hailer took over his instruction. A few of the five-note finger patterns reminded him of a phrase from Schumann, and he played for a while, imagining an orchestra filling out the rest of the score.

While he played, the room filled with guests and he realized he should be playing his Chopin. Once in a while, he answered a question about his studies or nodded in thanks if a few francs found their way into his pocket. As he played, his thoughts remained on the music and his body, a kind of instrument secondary to the piano. He wished he had made time for a nap that afternoon. But his fingers followed a physical pattern of sound in his mind, and if he lost track of the room and people, he doubted he would miss a note.

The guests were usually deep in their conversations about fashion and politics, or in gossip that was just as dull and vicious as what Leo had heard in the streets back home. They never paid him attention for long. Yet through his fatigue and concentration, he noticed the repeated gaze of one of Monsieur Levy’s friends.

The man was in his fifties, with a knobby face that was somehow appealing. He also seemed to have spent too much time in the sun. Above his white-as-white collar, his ears were scorched red and looked painful. After the first few guests said their goodnights and how-lovelys, the man appeared at the upper keys. Up close, he was familiar.

“I’m Rabbi Aaron.” His smile creased his sunburn. “I shouldn’t shake your hand now, should I?”

Leo grinned. The joke was common, and the Rabbi’s tip would be higher if Leo acted amused.

“My cousin has mentioned you,” Leo answered.

“You’re Leo Bergner. Your cousin Jacques is a good man. A bulldog when he is pursuing something he knows is right. In fact, he has reminded me several times to look in on you one of these evenings, and to invite you to my office for coffee.”

Jacques wanted Leo to be more religious, but they had avoided discussing the issue at length. To be confronted like this, here, almost caused Leo to miss a note in an easy bass chord.

“It would just be a friendly talk, my boy,” the Rabbi said. “I know you’re far from home. I’ll leave my card here. You may call on me someday after school, if you wish.”

“Thank you, sir. Take care of your sunburn.”

“And you take care of your studies.” The Rabbi slipped his card and a few francs into Leo’s jacket pocket, which hung on a chair by the piano. “It’s late for a school night.”



The next morning, Leo counted his tips from the party and came upon Rabbi Aaron’s card. He studied the address and the embossed logo of the Rue De Gustave Deloye Synagogue. It wasn’t far from school, but he had no intention of going. He marked his place in his math book with the card and hurried to get dressed for the lycée.

The lycée was hard work. After the informality of sitting around Herr Roitsch’s dining room table every afternoon for a couple of hours, it was difficult for him to go back into a structured environment. Leo had to acclimatize himself to the routine of a formal school again, to be in a large institution with hundreds of other pupils spread across many buildings. But he made the adjustment.

His French, good as it was before, was already fluent. He made a few friends, both boys and girls, and through their families, broadened his network of potential clients for his musical soirees. These parties, however, were not the parties of his earlier childhood. He suspected that those days were gone for good with the way the world was changing.

All week long, each time Leo reached in his pocket, he found Rabbi Aaron’s card. A few times, Leo thought about throwing it out, but each time he pulled it from his pocket and gazed at the odd logo, he was reminded of

his cousin Jacques insisting that he should learn more about his family's Jewish heritage.

On his way home from school, Leo found himself in front of an imposing pair of wooden doors, standing beneath an archway marked with Hebrew letters. He couldn't read them. Inside, the door to Rabbi Aaron's office was propped open with a bronze bust.

"I always thought it was ugly. Some family thing." The way the Rabbi rolled his eyes reminded Leo of his father, particularly his father's attitude toward in-laws. "Please, Leo, sit down. I'm so glad you've come."

The rabbi shook Leo's hand warmly. Leo grudgingly liked him. Over tea, Rabbi Aaron said that he had been living in Nice since 1918.

"How about yourself, Leo? You must come from a musical family."

"Well, sir, it's a rather long story."

"I have time. More tea?"

Rabbi Aaron tilted the pot over the porcelain cup. Leo allowed his thoughts to turn toward home for the first time in months. To his surprise, he spoke about them aloud.



Leopold Bergner was born on April 20, 1922 and started life with a number of disadvantages. First, he was Jewish. He shared the same birthday with Hitler, and he was born in a hospital on Schleissheimerstrasse, not far from the Führer's first home in Munich. Leo was destined to be an only child and couldn't claim kinship with the well-known and wealthy Bergners, the influential and powerful banking family. So he was a Jew without connections in difficult times.

Leo settled into school quickly and was a good student. He outgrew his young friends and became more solitary. He didn't love or despise any particular subject, receiving good marks in all of them. And the classroom taught him apathy.

Then one day his parents, Sigmund and Ulrike, took him to an open-air opera at the Rotes Tor. Each member of the audience came with their own colored cushion to place on the hard seats and listened as the sun went down and the sky sparkled with stars. Leo's eyes glowed with a light his parents had never seen in them before, and he begged to see more concerts.

On Leo's eighth birthday, his parents called him into the kitchen. He threw down his satchel on the bench in the hall and wound his way to the family center.

"Happy birthday!" many voices shouted.

Candles on a cake were ablaze. He looked around the room. His mother beamed, looking very pretty with Grandmama's emerald pendant shining against her white blouse. Papa looked smart in a new suit that he had bought in Munich the week before. Other familiar faces smiled at him—Frau Brindl who came every Tuesday and Friday to clean the house; Hans and Fritz, two of his friends from school; Herr Schultz, the next door neighbor who had retired from the bank the year before and who played chess every Sunday with Papa; and another boy, older than Leo, whom he didn't recognize.

"Leo, come and meet Bruno," Papa said.

Leo walked over to the older boy and they shook hands. The boy was tall, almost as tall as Papa, and had blond hair, a round face and a friendly smile.

"Happy birthday, Leo," he said. "It's good to meet you."

"Leo, Bruno is a pupil at my school," Papa explained. "He's a very good student but needs some extra coaching in algebra and geometry. He is to come here every Tuesday and Thursday at four o'clock, and I will teach him for an hour beginning at five o'clock." His father's hand went to his pocket watch in his vest, but he didn't pull it out. "Well, aren't you going to ask me why he is coming at four, if the lessons aren't due to begin until five o'clock?"

Leo smiled, not knowing what to say. Finally, he shook his head.

"Come with me," Papa said. "Let's go into the living room."

Bruno headed out of the kitchen toward the living room and everyone followed. Leo noticed that Bruno's left shoe didn't match the right one and that he walked with a limp.

"Close your eyes," Papa said quietly.

Leo walked slowly into the room, covering his eyes with both hands.

"Now, open them."

A piano of highly polished walnut filled the large bay window. A grand Bechstein. Ulrike had already put some family photographs on it, and it was magnificent.

"Happy birthday, Leo," they all said.

“Now, Bruno is a first-class pianist.” Sigmund took Leo by the hand. “He’s going to give you lessons every Tuesday and Thursday. Before long, you’ll be playing at the best concert halls in Bavaria.”

“Please,” Ulrike said, “play something for us, Bruno.”

Bruno smiled, walked across the room and sat on the piano stool. He looked down at the keys. His fingers slid across the keyboard.

“This is a lovely piano,” Bruno said. “It’s been a long time since I played on such a beautiful instrument.”

Then he sat up straight and played a Chopin piece. Leo stared, mesmerized. Ulrike beckoned everyone to sit.

“Bravo,” they all shouted when Bruno finished, Papa the loudest of all.

“This time next year, Leo, I want you to play that too,” he said firmly.

And so the routine began. Every Tuesday and Thursday, Bruno arrived at four o’clock to give Leo his piano lessons. For fifteen minutes, Leo would recite what he had practiced since the last lesson. Then for another fifteen minutes, he would perform scales and short drills. The final half hour was devoted to sight-reading and an evaluation of technique. They played Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and later Rachmaninoff. Every winter, Bruno added German Christmas carols. There was a dull but pleasant rightness to this hour, a kind of eternity trapped in his mother’s living room, in which music notes fluttered at the windows like moths.

Besides the piano lessons, Leo developed a keen interest in military history. He nagged his mother to bring home books from the library on the Napoleonic Wars, the Franco Prussian War of 1870, and the Great War. He badgered his father to talk about life in the trenches. His birthday set so much in motion for him. Leo imagined that his life beyond the living room windows would be an interesting epic full of adventure, and yet in his heart he wanted nothing to change. He thought he was lucky to be born into his family.

After several lessons, Leo and Bruno became more relaxed in each other’s company, and one day Leo plucked up enough courage to ask Bruno what was wrong with his foot. Bruno became agitated and was curt for the remainder of the lesson. Leo never approached the subject again.