

EXCERPT from *SERENADE: A MEMOIR OF MUSIC AND LOVE*

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After Introduction and Prologue

From CHAPTER ONE

A CAFÉ AND MORE

Vienna, Austria

3 September 1927

On the audiotapes that my father left me, he told me about the first time he met my mother. He couldn't quite remember the name of the café, but he told me where it was and described it to me. When I went to Vienna in 1998, I was sure that I had found it.

Franz Jung (*pronounced "Yung"*) stumbled up the stairs nervously as he reached the entryway to the renowned Wiener Kursalon. He had never been inside before, but had walked by often on his way to his ballroom dancing classes, which took place in a building just across the street on the Ringstrasse -- the long Viennese boulevard that encircled the inner part of the city. This was Franz's first five o'clock tea, and he'd put on a suit for the occasion. Today was his chance to show off the fancy footwork he'd perfected by waltzing with some old friends from the dance school, and hopefully with someone new, who might be entranced not only by his locomotor skills but by his charms as well. Little did he know that this innocent non-alcoholic cocktail-hour-type social for young people would serve to give structure to his actions for the rest of his life.

As he advanced into what was clearly a café, he couldn't help but think that no other café in Vienna resembled the one in the Kursalon. It wasn't simply lined up among many others on a particular street, but dwelled within the Kursalon building, which stood majestically independent on a corner adjoining the Stadtpark. Home to a few small concert halls as well, the Kursalon

was much more than a coffeehouse. Its gold-colored Italian Renaissance style only served to enhance its reputation as the historical sight where the great composer Johann Strauss once conducted his immortal melodies.

Glancing into the café, Franz saw numerous small tables which seated three or four people each, but these people had not come to dance; they were eating pastries like *Apfelstrudel* and *Sachertorte*, and were sipping *Kaffee*.

“I think you’re in the wrong place,” he heard a soft voice say. “You’re here for the Saturday social, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Franz answered, noticing an attractive blond waitress dressed in a uniform-type long black skirt and white satin blouse.

“You took the wrong entrance. Just walk into that corridor;” she pointed to the right, “and you’ll see where to go.”

Franz thanked her and proceeded into a beautifully decorated passageway with regal-looking red-and-gold carpeting. One of the doorways in the back was open, and he could hear the sounds of laughter and music from within. He cautiously approached, not knowing what to expect. The room was filled with people. It was unquestionably different from the café. Here both small and large tables adorned with tablecloths and floral centerpieces were positioned unevenly in a U-shape around an unpretentious dance floor. And standing on top of a one-step platform-like stage were animated musicians who were dressed in the red-and-white imperial court ball uniforms of fifty years before. Their backdrop: tall arched windows cloaked almost to the ceiling with elaborate, lavish red velvet draperies cascading down into graceful folds. Franz was thoroughly impressed.

As he scrutinized the room, he spotted his friend Fritz Sachsel fox-trotting with a short, fat girl whose plunging décolleté and swinging ripe breasts had the young compatriot’s full attention. Then there was Sigi Levin. He was dancing with the amateur prostitute he told Franz he’d planned to escort.

She’s not bad looking, Franz thought. *You could never tell.*

“Well, I guess it’s time to make an entrance,” he whispered under his breath. “Here we go. . . .”

First he handed the hostess his ticket. Then he walked all around the room with an approachable smile on his face, but he couldn't find a place to sit. None of the girls seemed to interest him either. Then, suddenly, his glances ceased. He couldn't move. *That's her*, he thought. *She's beautiful.*

His eyes were glued to the center of the dance floor. The music had just stopped and a nice-looking fellow was escorting her to a small round table on the left side of the stage. They said their adieus, and then Franz wondered: *How am I going to approach her? She's seated with another girl and they have a chaperone. Why should she be interested in me? I'm not tall. I'm nice-looking, but I don't think I'm exactly handsome. And at the age of seventeen, I don't even know what I want to do with my life. She could probably have anyone she wanted. She's gorgeous!*

Franz began to float toward his destination. With each new step, he became more enamoured with the girl who truly had a face fit to serve as the subject of many a fine painter. She had ravishing thick, long black hair which perfectly profiled her exquisite almost sculptured features. Her makeup was applied sparingly to a flawless olive complexion and served only to maximize the alluring quality of her unusual and stunning onyx-colored almond-shaped eyes. As dictated by the times, her eyebrows were penciled thin; her lips were painted red and full. Her nose, although not overly small, was slender and straight, and added a classicality to her face, which to Franz epitomized Cleopatra.

Her dress was also an illustration of style, he thought. He could appreciate that her skirt was short, just to the knee; yet the dress had buttons all the way up the front, from the hemline to the collar. The blue silk material was attractive, and the thin matching belt which tied just a fraction below the waistline revealed to Franz that this petite young lady not only had a bewitching face, but was endowed with a lovely figure as well.

He'd reached her table now. He was standing in front of her. She was even more beautiful up close than he had anticipated. He was speechless.

As her eyes met his questioningly, he felt as if time had stopped. He cleared his throat a little embarrassed and disconcerted, remembering what he had come to say.

“May I have the pleasure of this dance?” he tried to ask graciously.

Amused by the humor of the situation, the chaperone, a handsome-looking woman of about forty, couldn’t help but laugh. She was wondering how her daughter would respond. The other girl just looked on vacantly.

“It would be my extreme pleasure to dance with you,” Franz’s damsel answered coquettishly, standing and offering him her hand. As they made their way onto the dance floor, Franz could feel his heart thumping inside his chest as if it were a gargantuan time bomb waiting to explode. Oh, no, his hands were starting to feel clammy; what if she noticed.

The musicians were beginning to play “An der schönen blauen Donau” (“On the Beautiful Blue Danube”). *I could waltz to this melody in my sleep*, Franz thought somewhat relieved. He then stood erect, faced his newly found partner, started to raise his arms into the dance position, and waited anxiously for her to reciprocate. As she gracefully placed her right hand in his left and her left around his right shoulder, he slipped his right arm around her back, looked deeply into her onyx-colored eyes, and drew her closer. They were ready to embark on their journey around the dance floor, and he felt as if he were going to faint.

They began dancing to his left. One, two, three; one, two, three . . .

The music seemed to carry them around the room. It felt to Franz as if they were flying. She was as graceful as a gazelle. But it was time to change directions. *Will she be able to follow my lead?* he wondered. *Will I step on her toes?*

As they stopped circling, he applied more pressure to her back, led her into a few repetitive steps in place, and guided her to begin dancing to his right. One, two, three; one, two, three. . . . The maneuver had been a success, and both were grinning. They continued to whirl from side to side until they heard the final beat of the music. . . .

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