

1

Helter Skelter

1968

I watched him die, twice. I stuck a tiki torch inside his skull. Mother blew him up with a fucking missile. And yet there's more of him, always more of him.

Just another daybreak on Mallorca. Bluish light. Air thick as water. I cut through the morning mist to catch the first batch of *ensaimadas* out of the oven. I got there early; so said the red *cerrado* sign on the door. I walked the hilltop, watched the dark sea vent its anger before the sun calmed it down and painted it blue. I took in the town's quaintness before hordes of strangers defaced its narrow cobbled streets.

He looked right at me.

The baker unlocked her door, scolded the dog when she barged out. She waved at me through the window—I'm a part of her routine as much as she's a part of mine. I petted Blanca for a minute, wiped the hair off my hands, and followed her back in. Soothing heat, more smells than I could distinguish. "*Dos ensaimadas para llevar!*" she said. "*Cuatro, por favor.*" I was starving. I paid, rolled the paper bag, and smiled my goodbyes.

I ran into the Tracker just outside the door. Literally. Our bodies collided, like two old friends chest-bumping after a game. But he didn't step back, or move, or budge. It was like I'd hit a concrete wall. I looked up from chest to face, and there the devil was staring me down.

Slick warmth running down my legs. Mother's death flashing

before my eyes. I dropped the paper bag. The smell of fat and sugar mixed in with the stench of piss.

He raised his hand to my shoulder and nudged me to the side.

—*Disculpe.*

He didn't fucking know me. We killed him twice, Mother and I, but he's never seen us. Not this one. I watched him step into the bakery. I stood there, deer in headlights. I remember thinking about his accent. British, with a hint of something else. Eastern Europe, somewhere. I was stuck in some kind of trance until I heard the sound of children running up the street.

Running.

Run.

I grabbed the paper bag from the ground and dashed home. I made it in four minutes flat; we were out of there in ten. Lola didn't ask why. She grabbed her best seashell and waited for me by the door. Lots of memories in that house. All of Lola's. Crawling on the kitchen floor. First steps, first words. I looked around, tried to remember as much as I could before I poured gasoline all over it. Lola spoke only four words as she watched her world burn in the rearview mirror: "Don't leave a trace."

But I didn't. I fucking didn't. I was a ghost. Different name, different life. No loose ends. Lola and I laid low. We didn't stand out; I made sure of that. Stick bugs on a branch. Plain. Ordinary. Vanilla. I've made mistakes before, but not this time. I couldn't have found us.

Lola and I ate cold *ensaimadas* on the boat to Valencia. Lola didn't cry—or speak, for that matter. She just looked at me from time to time to gauge how scared she should be—she can read me like a picture book. My daughter is unyielding, stubborn as hell, but she's smart enough to realize her best option now is blind, unqualified trust. We hitchhiked from the port down to

Alicante. One more boat to catch. I screamed at them to wait for us as they unmoored the ferry to Algiers.

Here we are now, casting off into the unknown. The light from Spain is getting dimmer and dimmer. What life we had is fading with it. Thirteen hours until we hit shore and begin a new one. This is . . . limbo, the in-between. We're still high on adrenaline. None of this has sunk in yet. We were . . . a family. Now we're fugitives, refugees, castaways. The wind is strong on the main deck, but we'll spend the night up here. I keep staring at the sea, waiting for him to spring out like a shark. Stupid, I know. Regardless, confined spaces just aren't on the menu right now.

—Mom, can we look at the stars?

—Yes, honey. Let's get ourselves something to drink.

Every night, Lola and I watch the sky together, sharing a Coca-Cola. Tonight will be no different, not if I can help it. I brought her into the world. I made her prey. The least I can do is let her have these moments. Sorting through loose change. The tumble of the bottle in the coin machine. Pop. Fizz. This is our time. Our five minutes before I put the weight of a hundred lives on her tiny shoulders.

—Show me Venus.

—Venus is . . . over there, Lola. And that smaller dot above it is Jupiter.

She's six years old and living on borrowed time. It's horrible, but that's not what I find tragic. I think, somehow, she knows.

—Show me . . . Saturn.

—I can't. It's on the other side of the sun.

She knows how this story ends, how they all end. I die. She dies. If we're lucky, her child is born first and the Hundred and Two goes through the motions all over again. We're the hare at a greyhound race. We can't win; the best we can do is not lose.

It's not much, but it's all I have to give. That and a Coca-Cola from the vending machine.

—When can we see all the planets, Mom?

Funny. This is what she wants. Eight dots in the night sky. How I wish I could give her that. She just watched her whole world burn. All her drawings, Roger the stuffed bear. Captain Action. She owns one set of clothes and a fucking seashell, but she wants to see the planets. Yet another thing I have to take away from her.

—I don't know, honey. Probably never.

2

Can't Find My Way Home

1969

What are we? The eternal question.

We're . . . the same. My daughter will look exactly like me when she's my age. Same sun, different day. I am what my mother was. We're . . . copies, I guess. There's no word for it. We're like that fish from some river in Texas. All females. They pass on all of their genes to their daughters, every time. We're like a plant cutting that turns into an identical plant. A twig.

Philoponus of Alexandria wrote about it in the sixth century. "If someone cuts a twig from a walnut tree in Athens and plants it in Patras, two or three years later it will bear nuts that are the same in every aspect, in size and taste and color and every other character, with the ones from the walnut tree in Athens." *Klon*, in ancient Greek. Good walnut wisdom, but it doesn't answer the important question. Is it the same tree? I wish I could spend a day in my daughter's mind and see if we're more than each other. Am I . . . me?

We are different. From everyone else, that is. We're stronger, better than most when it comes to math and science. We're . . . fierce—that's a diplomatic way to put it—predatory at times. We can be brutal. I have. I've killed people. Some deserved it more than others. There's no erasing the past. All we are is a reminder of what once was. All I can do is make amends. Dilute the bad with a little more good.

We're prey. The Tracker hunts us, relentlessly. He's done it for

three thousand years. He is many, like us. I killed one of them. Mother took another one with her when she ended her life to save mine. But evil is like the mail. It keeps coming and coming. The one I killed said we both come from a dying world. That *I*, my ancestors, hid something from them, a device of some sort. If they had it, he said, they could call home and save “our” people by bringing them here. Lies, perhaps. The devil is full of deceit and trickery. As always, we don’t know.

We don’t know where we’re from. We don’t know why we do what we do, only that we chose to do so a hundred generations ago. Some version of us, of me, chose to. Would I make the same choice now? I don’t know. *We* don’t know—I guess we would as we keep on *making* that choice.

Take them to the stars, before evil comes and kills them all. That’s what I was born for. That’s what my daughter has to look forward to. If we’re to believe the Tracker, that evil is “our” people—talk about irony. Then again it might be giant squids, little green men, Bible salesmen. We. Don’t. Know.

My ancestors started with nothing, before science, before anything. They didn’t know what a star was, let alone how to get to one. It took us three thousand years, but we have made progress. We found people to help. I did. I got Wernher von Braun out of Germany after the war. The US wanted him bad. They turned a Nazi officer into the poster boy for space exploration. From SS *Sturmbannführer* to hosting Disney specials. That’s some major-league redemption. Von Braun will return the favor and take them to the moon. Even steven. I helped the other side, too. Sergei Korolev and I built the R-7 rocket in Russia. I did more than help. I married the man. But the Tracker found me and I had to disappear. Korolev is a widower now, but he did send the first satellite into orbit, the first man into space. All in all, I think I did my part.

We *do* know a few things, six to be precise. We live by a handful of rules we set for ourselves when we knew who we were.

Fear the Tracker. Always run, never fight.

Preserve the knowledge.

Survive at all costs.

Don't draw attention to yourself.

Don't leave a trace.

Last, and certainly not least: there can never be three for too long.

I bent a few of those rules in my youth, just a little, and we all paid the price. I lost my unborn child. I nearly died. My mother did, spectacularly. After that, I followed the rules like God handed them to me himself. It worked for a while. I had a life. I don't know if it was mine to have, but I took it. Lola and I had a home. We had . . . a beach we called ours, *our* café, *our* used bookstore. I had . . . a friend. Let's call her a good friend. Don't get too attached. It's not one of the rules, but it might as well be. I learned that one the hard way.

It's gone now, all of it. Because we are the same, and different, predator and prey. No matter how hard we try, there is only one thing we truly know, one inescapable truth.

We are the Kibsu.

3

Gimme Shelter

1969

We came here to hide. They came to flaunt their resistance, daring to be seen. Outside, the streets are filled with students, poets, dancers. Inside, a hundred revolutions are brewing. Agitators, rebels, insurgents. Subversives. The Pan-African Cultural Festival is in full swing and, for a few days, Algiers is the Mecca of revolutionaries.

They've fought their oppressor for over a century, but things are different now. They started winning. Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, the Mau Mau movement in Kenya, and, of course, the Algerian war. Their fight was the longest, the bloodiest, but no one counts bodies on the winning side. They prevailed, and they inspired a whole fucking continent.

Down with imperialism! Down with colonialism! Intellectuals cerebrate the -isms in smoky hotel rooms while musicians and fire-breathers take to the streets. Everything here is a weapon: guns, words, rhythms. Seditious minds and pulse-pounding drumbeats. This city's electric. And hot. Fucking hot. Everything here smells of sweat and defiance.

Our apartment is mostly sweat. Beige, bare, with a view of the same. We have plenty of money, but money draws attention. Our place most definitely doesn't. Remember the rules.

Lola's a lot braver than I am. I'm still scared shitless, like I was in Germany. I see the same shadows, hear the same footsteps. We stay inside most of the time, away from the unknown, the

dark alleys. But not tonight. Tonight is different. I found us a shitty bar with a good breeze to watch the moon landing. A small show of defiance, taking my seven-year-old child to a bar at three in the morning.

This is our moment. This is why I risked my life to save von Braun, so he could build the biggest rocket ever and put a man or two on another world. I was still breastfeeding when Kennedy made his moon speech. “We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people.” He used the right word: “knowledge.” I’ve had dreams about tonight ever since. I should be ecstatic, jubilant. This is what we all died for. I *should* be . . .

Our bar filled up about an hour ago. Some Tuaregs, SWAPO guerrillas from Namibia, Angola. Tough. Not your average tough, the kind you rarely see in public spaces. These people have seen shit that can’t be unseen. I feel a great swirl of pity for the poor soul who comes into this bar looking for trouble. Half a dozen Americans walked through the door moments later. Black Panthers, as it turns out. I think everyone here came straight from a Nina Simone concert.

This is a weird night.

My daughter is playing darts with Angolan freedom fighters. I asked if she was bothering them and they told me to leave. Just me. Lola feels right at home in all this. Another day, another dollar. That’s her allowance. Me, I’m neck-deep into all kinds of strange. Right now I’m having a drink with Eldridge Cleaver. Let’s just say he’s not really into the moon thing.

—I don’t see what benefit mankind will have from two astronauts landing on the moon while people are being murdered in Vietnam and suffering from hunger even in the United States.

I don’t think he and I will be best friends, but he’s right about one thing. We’re not doing anything. Well, *I’m* not. Lola’s seven;

she gets a pass. The point is I'm not helping anyone and I sure as hell am nowhere close to saving this world. Take them to the stars. Ha! We've gone from Earth to . . . the area around the Earth. The closest star is a hundred million times farther. A hundred million. "Baby steps" doesn't begin to cover it. We don't even know what's in our solar system. Americans just walked on the moon, but it's the Russians doing most of the exploring. They crashed a probe on Venus three years ago and they've been gunning for Mars for almost a decade. Years of development. Hundreds of millions spent on a few minutes of data. Those are the easy ones. Then come the outer planets. Jupiter is first, then . . . Then I don't know if we can reach that far with the engines we have. There's still so much to do and every second I spend with these people is a reminder that I'm not doing it.

I'm on the sidelines, watching. Everyone else is playing the game, whether they're leaving footprints on the moon or planning a revolution. Everyone in this room came to Algiers with purpose. Their ultimate goals vary slightly, their methods vary wildly, but they all—Mother was particularly fond of that Roosevelt speech—they all strive to do the deeds. They spend themselves in a worthy cause, and if they fail, they will fail while daring greatly. I'm afraid my place is now with the cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

I thought I was protecting my daughter. Maybe it's me I was hiding from on that island. Whatever fear I've spared ourselves, one of us will have to pay for it down the road. Every step I don't take is one I add on my daughter's journey. If not her then her daughter, or the Hundred and Three. I may never meet my grandchild, but I've wasted seven years of her life already.

No more.

The moon was a small step, but we will take another, and another, and a hundred million more. Like the students chanting on the street, the fire-breathers and the freedom fighters, we

will not cower. We will have *our* revolution. Ours will be around the Earth, the sun, the galaxy. Like my mother, I will die fighting for it, but others will follow. We'll win because we're many. We'll win because we have to.

4

Space Oddity

If you ask the universe how to get from point A to point B, it will inevitably answer: “What’s wrong with point A?” The universe wants us to stay put. Every subatomic particle of it does. The Earth is an overbearing mother. It wants us close by and it is remarkably good at keeping things down. We can pull, throw a tantrum, but even if she lets go of our hand, the sun steps in and says: “Where do you think *you’re* going?” That tug-of-war will never stop, and the farther we go, the more energy we have to spend. That means more fuel. That fuel is heavy and so we need more fuel to help carry *that* fuel, and fuel for that fuel, and so on until our head explodes. Rocket science is fighting planets and stars and none of them fight fair.

Von Braun had to build a rocket taller than the Statue of Liberty to get to a rock in our own orbit. I tried to imagine a rocket big enough to reach the outer planets, or to leave the confines of the solar system. I couldn’t, so I did the math. The math said it was impossible with the technology we have. I’d hit a brick wall, so I followed the advice of my grandmother. She said there’s only one sensible thing to do when you find a problem you can’t solve. Eat something.

I went to the place across the street. The food was barely edible, but I hated walking in the heat and they served a half-decent milk shake. For some reason, the owner liked to trade barbs with me. He asked what was wrong with my hair; I told

him I'd just slept with his wife. I ordered the usual. I think better with a milk shake. I really do. I finished it in one sip, and that's when it happened. No apple falling on my head, just Nassim the waiter walking by with platter in hand. The place was crowded and I couldn't reach the counter from where I was, so I put my empty glass on Nassim's platter without him looking. I was standing still, but now my empty milk shake was moving at full Nassim speed towards the kitchen.

We don't need the fuel to go all the way to Neptune or Pluto. We only need to reach Jupiter. That's it. She'll give us the speed to make it the rest of the way. I should have figured it out sooner; the Soviets showed us how a decade ago when Luna 3 photographed the far side of the moon. Everything moves, the moon around the Earth, the Earth around the sun. If you fly close enough to anything, it veers you in and alters your course. A tiny bit if it's small, a lot more for something like a planet. If you come in ahead of it and escape gravity in the opposite direction the planet is moving, it resists and slows you down. If you come from behind and leave in the *same* direction, it drags you along and speeds you up. Like a cowboy hopping on a running horse, or a dirty milk-shake glass dropped on Nassim's platter. It's a trade in energy. Tit for tat. For something as big as Jupiter—the king of the gods is massive—the momentum we'd take from it wouldn't mean anything, but for a tiny probe . . . Jupiter flies around the sun at forty thousand miles an hour. If we can steal even a fraction of that speed, we'll come out fast and furious towards our next stop.

That's the pickle. The planets kind of need to be where we want them to be. We're flying hell for leather because we just picked Jupiter's pockets for speed. If we want to visit Saturn next, Saturn has to be on the same side of the sun, and ahead of Jupiter because that's the direction we're in. We can pick up speed again when we get there and visit Uranus, but then *it, too*,

has to be on the same side of the sun, ahead of Saturn. Then Neptune, Pluto. What are the odds they'll all just line up for a photograph?

—When can we see *all* the planets, Mom?

—I don't know, honey. Probably never.

Lola's question stuck with me like an earworm. It doesn't matter whether we can see them or not, but are the outer planets *ever* in the right position for us to jump from one to the next? It's not that complicated when I think about it. It's a school problem. A horse, a cat, a turtle, and a snail are going around a racetrack. How often do they line up?

Our world takes one year to go around the sun. We're the horse. The outer planets march to a completely different beat. Jupiter takes nearly twelve years to make one loop. Saturn about thirty. That means these two can wave at each other every twenty years or so. Uranus is a long-distance runner. It takes eighty-four years to go around the sun, which is still only half the time it takes Neptune to run its marathon. If my math is correct, these four planets should align in just the right way . . .

. . . every 175 years.

Once every seven generations. It's not never, but it might as well be. I'll tell Lola her great-great-grandchildren can go on a grand tour of the outer realms.

5

Everyday People

—Mom, that was the best ice cream, EVER. Right? Right?

Butterscotch with chocolate and nuts. Mom even let me put cherry syrup on top. She never says yes to the red one, not before we have our Coca-Cola. She says too much sugar makes me talk too much. I don't think that's true. It's just I don't know anyone in Algiers, so I talk to Mom a lot. If I had ten people to talk to, I'd talk ten times less to each of them.

—Mom?

—What?

—The ice cream. It was amazing, right?

—I don't know, Lola. I had a milk shake.

—You do know. There's ice cream in a milk shake. You should have had butterscotch like me. Why do you always get vanilla?

— . . .

—Mom?

[Bonsoir, mesdames. Par ici. J'insiste.]

Three strangers just walked up to us. I think they want us to go into the alley with them. Mom just squeezed my hand. I don't know what's going on, but she doesn't like it.

—Stay close, Lola. . . . Guys, my daughter's with me. How about you just let us through?

They're forcing us in. I don't want to go there. It's dark. And it smells . . . bad. It's the garbage containers. We keep stepping on

things. Broken wood, broken glass. Mom is squeezing my hand harder. I think she's afraid. Me too.

—What's happening, Mom?

—Not now, Lola. . . . Guys, I have . . . eighty dinars, that's all. Here. Take it.

[It's a nice necklace your daughter has there. Approches, ma petite. Laissez-moi le voir.]

Oh no. Not my necklace. He can't have that. Mom lets me wear it sometimes, but it's not mine. Grandma wore it before Mom did. She said it belonged to the first one of us. It's her most precious thing in the whole world. I can't let that man take it. OUCH! The bad man grabbed my arm. It hurts!

—DON'T TOUCH HER! . . . LET. US . . . GO!

No. No. No. He pulled a knife from his pocket. The other two men are holding my mom. I'm *really* scared now. I don't know what to do. I'm . . . hot. I'm really hot. And dizzy.

—Mom . . . I'm not feeling well.

—Don't be afraid, Lola. Just do as he says.

I can feel the sweat running down my dress. My head hurts. It's burning. I don't know what's happening to me. My whole skin is on fire. . . .

—Mom, make it stop!

—What you're feeling is perfectly normal, Lola. Give him the necklace. Just give it to him.

I'm burning. I think I'm dreaming. I'm in my room. Something is holding me, something big. A giant claw. I think it's a dragon. I can feel its scorching breath on my back. I try to move, but I make it angry. The whole room fills with flames. My bed is on fire; my stuffed animals are screaming. I'm burning alive. There's a knife. I have a knife. I'm . . . I want to stab the dragon, but my arm burns and turns to ash. I hear more screams, horrible screams. I think they are mine. The dragon flaps its wings and the walls disappear. We're flying. I watch our home burn

from above. We fly higher. Higher. Higher, until our home looks like a dollhouse. I stab at the dragon and it opens its claws. I start falling into the fire below. I'm burning up, like a rocket in reentry. I keep falling and falling and burning.

—SOMEONE MAKE IT STOP!

—Just breathe, Lola.

[What is wrong with you, little girl?]

Breathe. Breathe. The dream's over. I can see. . . . It's so clear, colorful . . . like Alice when she gets to Wonderland. The bad man is still in front of me. He's a lot stronger than I am. Too strong. I need to make him . . . *less* strong, and I think I know how. *Human Anatomy*, volume 1. It's next to the dictionary in our living room.

There's an old wood nail on the ground. He won't notice if I kneel down and pick it up.

—Please, sir. Please don't hurt my mom.

One prick to the chest. Hard.

—LOLA! What are you doing?

I see a tiny red dot on his shirt. It's growing now, like a small flower.

—It's okay, Mom. I'm okay. "The solar plexus is a bundle of nerves." The nerves in his diaphragm overloaded. He can't breathe right now.

Mom kicked one of the men in the knee. His leg bent sideways before he let go of her. Gross. I can crawl between the bad man's legs and get behind him.

—Run, Lola! Let's get out of here!

The two men who were holding Mom ran away. It's just us and the bad man now.

—If I put the nail below his third vertebra . . .

—LOLA, DON'T! Let's go!

It will sever the cervical nerves. Loss of motor function. His lungs won't work on their own anymore. . . .

—Mom?

—Come here, honey! It's over now. It's all over. Just breathe.

—Can we go home now?

—Yes, Lola. We're going home.

—I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't want to give it to him.

—Don't be sorry. You did nothing wrong.

—I'm sorry.

—You did what you had to do. I'm proud of you, Lola. Mama's proud of you.

— . . . Mom, I—

—What is it? Are you hurt?

—I'm okay. I just—

—Come here. One big hug. Now let's go home and have our Coca-Cola.

6

Across the Universe

I'm going to miss Algiers. I don't know why—we barely leave our apartment—but I will. I'm going to miss . . . people. No one in particular, just all of them combined.

—Yes, baby. We have to move again. We're going to California. You'll like it there, I promise.

—Is it because of what I did?

She thinks she did a bad thing hurting that man. I'm just glad she didn't kill him. She stayed in control, somehow. I don't know how, but she did. She might be stronger than I am.

—Of course not. We're moving because of the ancient gods. According to my charts, Uranus is catching up to Neptune now. We're just waiting on Saturn; then Jupiter will follow. It's happening, Lola. That really rare planetary alignment I told you about, it's happening *eight years* from now. Can you believe it?

—We can see all the planets?

—We can visit them! The Greek and Roman gods are all coming together as in some prophecy.

—Like that book series we're reading.

The Chronicles of Narnia. I read her a chapter every night before bed. "Tarva, the Lord of Victory, salutes Alambil, the Lady of Peace. They are just coming to their nearest." I like how optimistic she is. My first thought was the return of Cthulhu.

—Better than the books, Lola. We can send a probe and see