

CHAPTER ONE: ESCAPE

On the sixth or seventh day, in a wadhi somewhere, where she rested for a while, waiting for the road ahead to become safe, for a truck that might take her on, she sat in the shade of a pistachio tree and watched as a kestrel hovered above a small rock outcrop, head-down, intent on some invisible lizard or vole or hamster that busied itself amidst the crevices. Long minutes it hung there, a star of brown against the blue, wings fluttering, tail bending to the wind, and all was silence. Then, with no warning, the bird fell like a stone, down, straight towards the Earth, as if all levitation had suddenly been lost and gravity had reclaimed it. In the silence, she thought that she could hear its body, as it carved the air aside.

Then a wing's width above the ground, it twisted, banked, and with a careless slash of a curled claw, swept up its prey. And shrieked its victory.

In that same moment, she saw, or sensed, for the movement was too fast, another trajectory. A dark arrow-flash. An eagle owl or buzzard, perhaps. It came from upwards and right, from some other stratum in the sky too high for human vision. It swooped, not in a tangent-line, but following a perfect curve, asymptotic with the land, an ogive arc, or the sweep of a swan's neck, and even before the kestrel had completed its cry, smashed into it. Feathers scattered, gobbets of blood spattered on the ground. The bird wheeled away, dangling the lifeless kestrel in its talons. And all was silent again.

Only a single feather remained, floating, this way then that, in a parody of flight. Then it, too, yielded, and sank to the sand.

It seemed apocalyptic, though if so she could not read the message. But whatever its real purpose, it gave her hope. It was the first glimmer of hope that she'd had.

Where she was at that moment, she did not know. She'd travelled without a plan, without a map. The land she'd walked through had been alien and uninformative. No signs, no names; few people, and those she did see shied away from her when she approached. She must have been here before, she thought. In her childhood, she'd journeyed the length and breadth of Syria with her father as he pursued his interests – chasing suppliers or creditors or potential customers for the products of his woollen mill – or when they went to visit relations, scattered around the country from Al Hasakah to Kobane, as far south as Hama and Homs, for the roots of the Barzani family spread far and deep. Since her marriage, she'd travelled in more style, with Mahmet, to dinners and meetings with dignitaries or politicians, businessmen, imams, leaders of this faction or that. Though in those more recent years, she was invariably consigned to the back seat as befitted a married woman; and in the luxurious cocoon of the air-conditioned car, behind tinted windows, the world outside had seemed remote and uninteresting.

But that day, as she'd walked, as she'd sat there alone in the grey desert, she'd cursed her inattention. Her failure, too, to pick up a map.

Whether one existed at home, she did not know. What use had they of maps? They had drivers who took care of such things as how to get from here to there, which road to take. And time, opportunity had been against her. She'd left on the spur of the moment, when the chance arose. Other than her shoes, she'd had no

time to change, had left in what she was wearing. All she'd managed to snatch was the money from her drawer, a bag that she'd hastily filled with food from the kitchen – water, bread, dried fish, fruit; a comb (why that?), a shawl. Outside, she'd crept through the garden. Mercifully it had been empty, for it was just after noon, hot, siesta time, and no-one would be looking for her yet. Even so, she kept to the shadows beneath the bourgainvilleas and vines, moved silently; at the servants' door in the back wall, had looked around to check that she was unobserved before slipping out. In the street, she'd glanced about her again, still nervous, then hastened away. She kept her head down, cloak drawn around her, fearing every moment that she would hear her name or heavy feet running behind her, feel a hand on her shoulder, a restraining grip. Each second that she remained unmolested seemed like a gift, and she muttered her thanks for it.

She'd headed north, out of Ad-Deir, not because she had any plan or that seemed the right way to go, but because it was the way the road took her. But then she'd had a fright: a black car, moving slowly, its interior impenetrably dark, oozed past. She imagined the faces inside, observing her, expected it to stop, the doors to be flung open, Mahmet, or Rohat or his men, to leap out. She wanted to turn away, yet dare not in case they caught her unawares. Perhaps her hijab saved her. Perhaps the men inside were paying less attention than they should. Perhaps it was not them. For whatever reason, the car moved on. Afterwards, though, she took the first turning that she could, into the back-streets and alleyways, the narrow lanes. They felt no more welcoming. Women watched her from the doorways, the few men around regarded her with hostile eyes. She did not belong there. Her clothes, the way she walked, even her height were evidence of her difference. Too rich, too

proud. In far too much of a hurry. But there were no cars here, and the alleys were a maze. For the moment, she felt safe.

Soon, though, she was lost. In the shadowless lanes, beneath the midday sun, she had no idea which way was which; every street looked the same. Repeatedly, she found herself in blind alleys, had to turn back. She became convinced that she was walking in circles, making no progress at all. Her feet were already sore. Her bag felt heavy on her shoulder, her body ached. Her mind was ragged from lack of sleep, the torment of what had happened; her fear. She could not think, had no point of reference, jumped and jibbed at every sound.

But slowly the buildings began to change. White-painted stucco was replaced by bare breeze-block, rough red brick. The streets became narrower, the houses crowded in. She pushed between lines of grey washing, strung from wall to wall, tripped on rocks, slipped on the water that leaked from a broken tap. She had to shoo away begging children, inquisitive dogs. At the corners, black refuse bags were piled up, ready to be torn open by the cats and rats. Sewage washed down the gutters, gathered in green algal pools. The air was thick with the stench of ordure and wood-smoke and rot.

And then she was out of it all. She stood in a landscape of thorn-scrub and fields, rocky ridges, terraces, tumble-down walls, hills that shimmered in the sun.

For some moments, she'd remained there, feeling released, and surprised by the fact. She'd not believed that it would happen. They would find her, she knew. They would take her back. What had happened would happen again, and would go on happening, for ever now, for as long as she lived.

Just there, in the brightness of the afternoon, a donkey watching her from a field, its mane trembling against the mob of flies, its ears alert, such fears had

seemed suddenly unreal. That world, that life, might have been nothing but a dream.

Yet in the instant of thinking it, the notion was banished. From away to her left, there was the roar of a vehicle, then others in its wake. Diesel fumes made a dark smudge against the land. Out of a cutting came a convoy of trucks, army vehicles, camouflaged, a government flag – red, white and black, with two green stars – fluttering on each one. Though it was nothing unusual, nothing to do with her, she felt a wave of panic, wanted to hide. As soon as they had gone, she hurried away, into the scrub.

In that moment, too, a plan of sorts took shape in her mind. Less a plan, perhaps, than a simple goal. Something, somewhere to aim for. The north. The border with Turkey. Another country. A place she might be safe. For she was not safe here, and never would be now. Honour has no clock. Family honour, especially.

So, for the days that followed, she'd travelled north. She avoided the roads, kept to the farm tracks and donkey trails. Roads felt dangerous; she might be seen; even now they were probably looking for her. She feared the police and the army, too, for since the civil unrest had started, since the rumours of civil war had taken hold, anyone alone, behaving strangely, looking out of place, would attract attention, might be arrested, questioned. And women like her did not walk alone. So she clung to the hills and the edge of farmland, skirted villages when she could, moved out of sight when she heard vehicles or people approaching.

The going was harder than she dared believe. The tracks were rough. Here, beyond the margins of the Euphrates, the land was raw and cruel. The farms were small. They huddled in the valleys, or around an oasis, near any water they could find. The sky was unforgiving: a lid of pale blue in which the sun blared white,

searing anything that moved. The wind came from the desert, dry and laden with grit. She turned half into it, away from the main highway and the towns where she'd be seen, where Rohat might find her. Into the blistering heat, the biting sand, her cloak pulled to her mouth for protection. She walked through days of thirst and hunger, fear. Sun and dust. Dust and sun. Days that died into nights of coldness and despair; nights in which she huddled in search of her own scant warmth, and measured the slow passage of time by the circling blizzard of stars, and Feresu'l-a'zam, the winged horse, as it crept across the horizon.

Yet amidst it all, she found small kindnesses. By contrast with the world around her, they came to her like acts of huge moment and generosity. In a scatter of houses somewhere, a woman came to her door, offered her milk from a bowl. A young girl, five years old at most, walked with her for a while, holding her hand. An old man, working in a rough, walled field, which might once have been an orchard, called to her. When she hesitated he beckoned urgently: come, come. As she reached him, still uncertain, he pointed at the tree beside him, half-withered now, its broad leaves ragged and pale. "When the plant knows it is dying," he said. "It makes fruit for the next generation. See." On the stems, in what shade was left from the leaves, were clusters of figs. "Take some," he said. "Take them with you. For what it doesn't know is that there is no future anymore."

On other days there was nothing. She would walk for hours without seeing anyone. The houses were silent, doors and shutters closed. The fields were untended. Out on the hills there was no sign of cattle or sheep or goats. The sky was empty. Her only company would be the carrion crows that mocked her from the bare trees, and the vultures that gathered around her whenever she stopped. On days like that she yearned for some sound, some sign of life, for she seemed to

be journeying through a world that was abandoned and dead. She might be the only one left, the only one living. It was a state that bore down on her, frightened her, more even than death.

In the daylight, as she walked, what had happened felt remote, as though it had happened to some other woman in some other world, some other version of herself. But at night, the pictures and the pain and the fear returned. The hatred, less of them than of herself, for what they had made her. The curse she would carry for evermore. In her dreams, as she fought against them, she heard herself scream and, knowing it was a dream, struggled to wake for fear that she would attract attention, bring them back to her. But she could not wake, she could not find the exit from her suffering, from what was happening, so it went on happening, all over again. Only when the sun came did her dreams retreat and the men slink away, like demons afraid of the light. Yet as they went, they taunted her with their promises. We will return.

On another night, after a day in which the whole world seemed to be shifting, reshaping itself, sifting in the wind, she found shelter in the lee of what once must have been a farm truck, and tried to sleep. The fizz of the sand, the gathering cold, taunted her. She dipped into and out of dreams, each one another torment against which she had to fight. She stared at the endless sky, made fuzzy by the dust, and tried to pick out the constellations, as if seeking old friends. She dozed, her hands crossed in front of her, then woke with a start, feeling a sudden strangeness, as though despite everything she was no longer alone. Allah was with her, she thought. Or Shaytan, or some other god. Whoever it was, they were welcome, for they made the night seem worth surviving, gave the day ahead a promise of some sort.

How many days she walked, she could not have said. A dozen, fifteen, maybe more. The only change she noticed was that towards the end, she was no longer the only one walking across the dry and dusty land. She'd see others: families, small groups of men, women like herself, now and then a group of children. She'd see them walking towards her, obliquely across the bleak plateau, moving slowly as if at the end of their strength; or parallel, half a kilometre away, until they dropped into a wadhi, disappeared from sight; or picking their way through the rocks and scree from the cliff-line above. Sometimes, when she stopped at night, she could hear their murmuring voices from the darkness or a child crying, or caught the slow tramp of feet moving past on the rough road.

At first, she assumed that these people were an indication that she had entered a more populous area of the country, and she tried to avoid them, imagining that amongst them might be people who knew her, or agents of her husband's or his brother, sent to find her and bring her back. But gradually, she realised that they were, in some way, people like her, fleeing from something that she did not know. Poverty perhaps, or drought. Or the revolution and the war that would inevitably follow. So she came to accept their presence, and learned to follow them, for they seemed to share the same vague notion of where they were bound.

And so it was that one morning, on a day she could not name – all sense of time gone – she found herself in what seemed to be a gathering place for people just like her, each one a piece of flotsam discarded by the world.

After all the time alone, the sudden presence of others so close around her came not as a relief but an assault, like a wave breaking over her, too strong to hold. She felt she would drown. They brought with them the realisation of how close she still was to the world she'd tried to flee and to the brutality it contained. So as she stood

amidst the crowds, trying to make sense of the noise – the shrieks of children, the keening cries of babies and mothers, the shouts of men in uniform, women in white coats – she felt afraid, wondering: would they be here, Rohat and his men, waiting, watching, knowing that she would come.

As if in answer, someone grabbed her arm. She gave a cry.

“This way,” she was told. “Come with me.”

Dazed, she let herself be steered between the press of people, too tired to resist.

“There,” the man said. “Stay in line.”

Where she was, why she was there, she had no idea, and did not ask. The world had a purpose of its own, and it was not hers to know. So she did as she was told, and stood in the queue, shuffling forward one step at a time as the women ahead of her moved and the sun dawdled on its trek across the sky and blazed its hot stare at them. At some point, a man appeared beside her, dressed neatly, as if he were an official of some sort. He demanded to see her wrist. She held it out, and he steadied it with his own hand, holding it firmly, then branded it with a small stamp, inked from a pad. When she looked at the mark, she saw that it was a number. ‘17-04-11’. Is that what she was, now, she wondered: just a number? But then she thought: perhaps that is the date.

And later, two young men walked down the queue handing out water. And later again, as the sun sank, they were told to lie down, get what rest they could.

For long hours, she lay there, awake, listening to the murmuring voices around her, the occasional cry of children, the slow pad of soldiers walking by. And slowly, in those hours, another realisation dawned. She’d reached the border. Somewhere in those endless plains and hills, or in a waterless valley where the fields were

crusted and bare and no-one any longer lived, she must have crossed it. She was in Turkey. She'd found safety of a sort.

The next day, just before noon, she received the confirmation she sought. She found herself standing in front of a fold-up desk, while a bored official worked through his list of questions, ticking boxes as he went, never looking at her, hardly waiting for her replies.

"Hawillya?"

She handed him her identity card.

"Is this information correct?"

"Yes."

"Zarrin Sinjari?"

She tensed. Did he recognise the name? "Yes."

"From Damascus?"

"Yes."

"You're Syrian?"

"I was born there, yes – but my family was Iraqi."

"Kurdish?"

"Yes."

"What other family do you have?"

"I don't know. My mother and father are dead. I had a brother, but he has disappeared."

"Your age?"

"Twenty-two."

That much, she thought, was truth at least. Yet the man regarded her dully and distrustfully all the same.

“Married?”

“I was. My husband died.” Her first lie.

“You’ll need to be examined – you know that.”

“Yes.”

When he’d finished, he gave her a form, directed her to a tent, then, as she turned to go, said in a dull, mechanical tone: “Welcome to Turkey.”

In the tent, a nurse examined her. She did so perfunctorily, looking into her mouth, at her ears, eyes, hair; running her hands across her body, breasts, fingers for a moments exploring inside her.

“You’re not pregnant? No?”

“No.”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes.” Though after what had happened, how could she know?

She was waved through, directed to another queue. And after that passed through a high, barb-wired gate into a fenced compound. There, the process was repeated, one more interrogation, this time in the only common language they could find, English. The same questions. Where was she from, was she married, was she pregnant, was she sure?

Then another examination, gentler, but more intrusive. The nurse frowned at her: “Did something happen?”

She nodded, said nothing.

“Do you want to tell me?”

She shook her head.

“Soldiers?” the nurse asked.

Again she nodded. It was the easiest thing to do. It was not really her story, but safer that way: let someone else decide.

“I’m sorry.”

Another nod.

“They’ll look after you in the camp.”

“Thank you.”

The nurse wrote on a form, then looked up. “You are from a good family, aren’t you?”

She shrugged.

“I can tell. You’re in good health. You have good skin. Your English is good. Do you have money?”

“I am poor,” Zarrin told her.

The nurse smiled. “I do not want anything. But if you have money, it will help. It will be your only way out of here. But it is dangerous. People will try and steal it. Do you want to leave it with me?”

“I am poor,” Zarrin said again.

The nurse regarded her for a moment, nodded. “I understand. Take care.”

The camp was large, crowded, frightening – though most things frightened her now. She was put in the women’s section. It had its own fences, was patrolled by armed guards day and night. Whether it was as protection against the outside world or the men in the adjacent compound, Zarrin was not sure, but she found comfort in the fences and gates and guards.

She shared a tent. Her partner was an old woman, bent and shuffling, gap-toothed. Her breath rasped, and she had a cough that rattled in her throat. At night she muttered to herself in her sleep, words that Zarrin could never quite catch, yet

which seemed to fit together, almost to rhyme – a prayer, perhaps, or a poem or song in some strange dialect. After a month or so, she died, and Zarrin was alone.

Though not quite alone, for in her sleep, that feeling returned – that sense of another, of a unity that she could not quite grasp. As though someone, or something, accompanied her now, guiding her life.

Then sickness came. After two or three days, she asked to see a medic, found herself in front of the same nurse who had examined her when she arrived.

This time she introduced herself. “I’m Dr Schreiber,” she said. “We met before. Remember? I’m glad to see you looking so well.” Then, later, after she had examined her: “You’re pregnant. Didn’t you know?”

Zarrin shook her head, dumbfounded.

Dr Schreiber smiled. “I had my suspicions before. When was it do you think?”

“I –” She remembered the growing sensation she’d had, of someone else with her. No god, no devil, then. Just a child. She counted back. “Two months ago,” she said. “A bit more.”

“You seem sure now.”

“I am.”

Dr Schreiber nodded. “I understand.

Did she, Zarrin wondered? Did she understand at all? Could anyone?

“We will look after you. Don’t worry.”

Zarrin did worry. She did not want the child, knew its origins, how it had been conceived. What it would mean. She wanted to rid herself of it, of the memories it held. She wanted to flee the camp, escape, be on her own again. But she stayed, for there seemed to be no choice. She was still weak from her journey, from the change in her body; the child, so she imagined, gnawing at her from inside. She knew that

out there, beyond the fence, she would not survive, that the child would kill her. Here, at least, there was some small chance. Perhaps the child would die within her, or at birth. Or if it were born, would be taken from her, disposed of in some way.

So she stayed, through the summer, into the winter, and then for two months more.

Life was not easy. In the summer, the sun was unrelenting, and there were no trees, no shade in which to hide. The wind was from the desert, and carried just heat and dust. The winter when it came was cool, wet. At night, the air felt tautly stretched, and in the morning the skin of the land was white. For days at a time it rained, grey clouds rolling in from the west. Water dripped through the seams of her tent, gathered in pools by the doorway; dampness crept into her clothes as if seeking a home. The ground outside churned to brown mud.

And yet she found she could bear it, and was content to wait. She was anonymous here, safe. Or as safe as was possible anymore. The dangers that existed – disease, an assault by someone who believed that she had money or jewellery worth stealing, the unwanted attentions of a guard – might happen to anyone, were not hers alone. And there was food of a sort, shelter, people around to help. It gave her time to recover, for the wounds to heal. A hard scab to form over the memories.

Time, too, for the child inside her to grow.