

Chapter 1

A MOTHER'S BETRAYAL

LOS ANGELES HAS PRETERNATURALLY beautiful weather that hides many of its sins.

This Saturday morning the sun shone like an early 1960s picture postcard, the sky a powder blue.

My father—Moshe—stood next to me on the stoop of a small bungalow on 12th Street. He was dressed well—slacks, button-down shirt, very much a man of 1963, before Kennedy was killed later that year. His eyes always made him look a little lost, like someone had just hurt his feelings and words failed him.

My Uncle Issa once said of him, “He’s just a broken man trying to recover from the Holocaust.” He said it sympathetically, but my dad never lost that expression of fear, the look that his words had failed him when he needed them most. It wasn’t a lack of courage. He was just a man who could never get on top of his mountain of pain.

Aunt Sally made sure I was dressed nicely that day. In Yiddish she would be described as something of a *balabusta*. Literally translated, it’s a term of endearment that means she was a good homemaker, but it also means that she was in charge of the home. She wore the pants, so to speak. And though Issa was something of a dapper dresser, the truth was that Sally made sure that neither he nor I left the house looking less than what

she thought was best. To Issa's credit, he was color blind—he also had no sense of smell—so Sally was his sartorial guide.

That Sally was the boss in the house never seemed to upset Issa. He was possessed of a great equanimity that presented itself in his gentle, soft-spoken—almost aloof—demeanor. Only on rare occasions did I see Issa do more than lift his eyebrows at something that bothered him. Once I referred to a man who walked into one of the liquor stores that Issa owned as *dude*. His head turned sharply toward me. “No! Don't ever talk like that again.” Loud noises could also rile his anger. If the car radio came on too loud, he'd yell, “Turn that down!” Then he'd return to the placid version of Issa. It was like sloth to roadrunner back to sloth.

The funny thing about the radio is that for fifty years he slept next to a clock radio turned to the news. This started during the 1967 Six-Day Arab-Israeli War, when the very existence of Israel was threatened. Issa and Sally listened intently to WKNX news for any updates, with Issa going so far as to place his clock radio on his pillow like a teddy bear with the volume on low. He did this for the rest of his life.



It was a Saturday the day Dad picked me up. I wore a nice pair of clean and ironed shorts, button-down short-sleeved shirt, scuffed leather shoes, and my hair—a bit longer than the early '60s crewcut stereotype—was combed to one side. In one hand I held a little suitcase filled with my clothes and a keepsake or two that Aunt Sally had packed. In my other hand was a paper sack of candies my father gave me when he picked me up from Issa and Sally's house to take me to live with Mother.

I have no memory of my life before this, of how exactly I came to live with Sally and Issa. But by age four, I was living with them instead of my parents. Like Issa said, my father was just a man trying to recover from the Holocaust, and that was about as much as he could manage in any one moment. Even when my mother abandoned me at an orphanage and the mercies of the Southern California foster care system, my father let this ride. They were divorced, and his thinking was, *What could I do?*

My mother, on the other hand, was a prizefighter when it came to manipulation, quarreling, and hitting. Dad was the thing a prizefighter beats on for practice.

Issa and Sally had come to visit me in the orphanage after Dad told them where I was. I don't remember this either, but Sally—Dad's sister—told me about their visit. She said they sat with me and watched me play. Though she said it was a pitiful display of three-year-old playfulness, or lack thereof.

Like Dad, they thought, *What could we do?*

But as they left, Sally—a woman the word *zaftig* was created for—turned for one last look. She saw me sitting in a tiny child's chair, my spine bowed, and my eyes broken by loneliness and fear.

"Issa," she said in her Polish-inflected English, "we *have* to do something. Look at him. He's so sad."

Issa is and always will be my messiah. Sally—an emotionally hard, well-dressed, plumpish woman—will always be the person who saved me. Without her broken heart, I'd not know love; I'd not know my humanity.

Issa agreed. They became my second set of parents, and their home—barren of children—became my home.

Standing on the stoop that Saturday, Dad bent down, fixed the collar of my shirt, then stood back up.