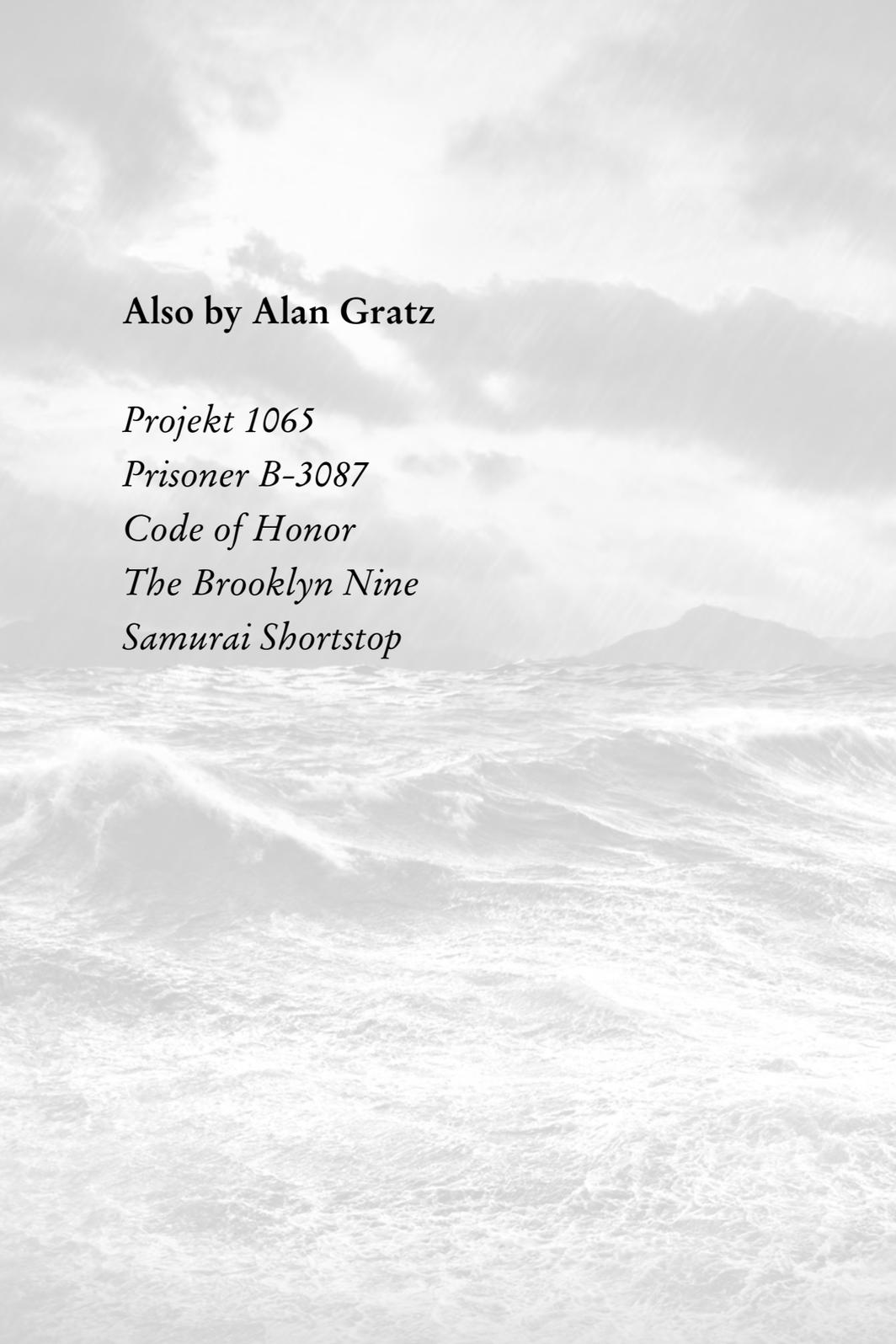




# REFUGEE



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ALAN GRATZ

# REFUGEE



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**For John Gratz**







# REFUGEE



# JOSEF

BERLIN, GERMANY—1938

*CRACK! BANG!*

Josef Landau shot straight up in bed, his heart racing. That sound—it was like someone had kicked the front door in. Or had he dreamed it?

Josef listened, straining his ears in the dark. He wasn't used to the sounds of this new flat, the smaller one he and his family had been forced to move into. They couldn't afford their old place, not since the Nazis told Josef's father he wasn't allowed to practice law anymore because he was Jewish.

Across the room, Josef's little sister, Ruth, was still asleep. Josef tried to relax. Maybe he'd just been having a nightmare.

Something in the darkness outside his room moved with a grunt and a scuffle.

*Someone was in the house!*

Josef scrambled backward on his bed, his eyes wide. There was a shattering sound in the next room—*crisssh!* Ruth woke up and screamed. Screamed in sheer blind terror. She was only six years old.

“Mama!” Josef cried. “Papa!”

Towering shadows burst into the room. The air seemed to crackle around them like static from a radio. Josef tried to hide in the corner of his bed, but shadowy hands snatched at him. Grabbed for him. He screamed even louder than his little sister, drowning her out. He kicked and flailed in a panic, but one of the shadows caught his ankle and dragged him face-first across his bed. Josef clawed at his sheets, but the hands were too strong. Josef was so scared he wet himself, the warm liquid spreading through his nightclothes.

“No!” Josef screamed. “*No!*”

The shadows threw him to the floor. Another shadow picked up Ruth by the hair and slapped her.

“Be quiet!” the shadow yelled, and it tossed Ruth down on the floor beside Josef. The shock shut Ruth up, but only for a moment. Then she wailed even harder and louder.

“*Hush, Ruthie. Hush,*” Josef begged her. He took her in his arms and wrapped her in a protective hug. “Hush now.”

They cowered together on the floor as the shadows picked up Ruth’s bed and threw it against the wall. *Crash!* The bed broke into pieces. The shadows tore down pictures, pulled drawers from their bureaus, and flung clothing everywhere. They broke lamps and lightbulbs. Josef and Ruth clung to each other, terrified and wet-faced with tears.

The shadows grabbed them again and dragged them into the living room. They threw Josef and Ruth on the floor once more and flicked on the overhead light. As Josef's eyes adjusted, he saw the seven strangers who had invaded his home. Some of them wore regular clothes: white shirts with the sleeves rolled up, gray slacks, brown wool caps, leather work boots. More of them wore the brown shirts and red swastika armbands of the *Sturmabteilung*, Adolf Hitler's "storm troopers."

Josef's mother and father were there too, lying on the floor at the feet of the Brownshirts.

"Josef! Ruth!" Mama cried when she saw them. She lunged for her children, but one of the Nazis grabbed her nightgown and pulled her back.

"Aaron Landau," one of the Brownshirts said to Josef's father, "you have continued to practice law despite the fact that Jews are forbidden to do so under the Civil Service Restoration Act of 1933. For this crime against the German people, you will be taken into protective custody."

Josef looked at his father, panicked.

"This is all a misunderstanding," Papa said. "If you'd just give me a chance to explain—"

The Brownshirt ignored Papa and nodded at the other men. Two of the Nazis yanked Josef's father to his feet and dragged him toward the door.

“No!” Josef cried. He had to do something. He leaped to his feet, grabbed the arm of one of the men carrying his father, and tried to pull him off. Two more of the men jerked Josef away and held him as he fought against them.

The Brownshirt in charge laughed. “Look at this one!” he said, pointing to the wet spot on Josef’s nightclothes. “The boy’s pissed himself!”

The Nazis laughed, and Josef’s face burned hot with shame. He struggled in the men’s arms, trying to break free. “I’ll be a man soon enough,” Josef told them. “I’ll be a man in six months and eleven days.”

The Nazis laughed again. “Six months and eleven days!” the Brownshirt said. “Not that he’s counting.” The Brownshirt suddenly turned serious. “Perhaps you’re close enough that we should take you to a concentration camp too, like your father.”

“No!” Mama cried. “No, my son is just twelve. He’s just a boy. Please—don’t.”

Ruth wrapped herself around Josef’s leg and wailed. “Don’t take him! Don’t take him!”

The Brownshirt scowled at the noise and gave the men carrying Aaron Landau a dismissive wave. Josef watched as they dragged Papa away to the sounds of Mama’s sobs and Ruth’s wails.

“Don’t be so quick to grow up, boy,” the Brownshirt told Josef. “We’ll come for you soon enough.”

The Nazis trashed the rest of Josef's house, breaking furniture and smashing plates and tearing curtains. They left as suddenly as they had come, and Josef and his sister and mother huddled together on their knees in the middle of the room. At last, when they had cried all the tears they could cry, Rachel Landau led her children to her room, put her bed back together, and hugged Josef and Ruth close until morning.

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In the days to come, Josef learned that his family wasn't the only one the Nazis had attacked that night. Other Jewish homes and businesses and synagogues were destroyed all over Germany, and tens of thousands of Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. They called it *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass.

The Nazis hadn't said it with words, but the message was clear: Josef and his family weren't wanted in Germany anymore. But Josef and his mother and sister weren't going anywhere. Not yet. Not without Josef's father.

Mama spent weeks going from one government office to another, trying to find out where her husband was and how to get him back. Nobody would tell her anything, and Josef began to despair that he would never see his father again.

And then, six months after he'd been taken away, they got a telegram. A telegram from Papa! He'd been released from a concentration camp called Dachau, but only on condition that he leave the country within fourteen days.

Josef didn't want to leave. Germany was his home. Where would they go? How would they live? But the Nazis had told them to get out of Germany twice now, and the Landau family wasn't going to wait around to see what the Nazis would do next.

# ISABEL

JUST OUTSIDE HAVANA, CUBA—1994

IT TOOK ONLY TWO TRIES TO GET THE SCRAWNY calico kitten to come out from under the pink cinder-block house and eat from Isabel Fernandez's hand. The cat was hungry, just like everyone else in Cuba, and its belly quickly won out over its fear.

The cat was so tiny it could only nibble at the beans. Its tummy purred like an outboard motor, and it butted its head against Isabel's hand in between bites.

"You're not much to look at, are you, kitty?" Isabel said. Its fur was scraggly and dull, and Isabel could feel the cat's bones through its skin. The kitten wasn't too different from her, Isabel realized: thin, hungry, and in need of a bath. Isabel was eleven years old, and all lanky arms and legs. Her brown face was splotchy with freckles, and her thick black hair was cut short for summer and pulled back behind her ears. She was barefoot like always, and wore a tank top and shorts.

The kitten gobbled up the last of the beans and mewed pitifully. Isabel wished she had something else to give it, but this food was already more than she could spare. Her lunch hadn't been much bigger than the cat's—just a few

beans and a small pile of white rice. There had been rationing and food coupon books back when Isabel was little. But a few years ago, in 1989, the Soviet Union had fallen, and Cuba had hit rock bottom. Cuba was a communist country, like Russia had been, and for decades the Soviets had been buying Cuba's sugar for eleven times the price and sending the little island food and gasoline and medicine for free.

But when the Soviet Union went away, so did all their support. Most of the farms in Cuba grew only sugarcane. With no one to overpay for it, the cane fields dried up, the sugar refineries closed, and people lost their jobs. Without Russia's gas, they couldn't run the tractors to change the fields over to food, and without the extra food, the Cuban people began to starve. All the cows and pigs and sheep had been slaughtered and eaten. People had even broken into the Havana Zoo and eaten the animals, and cats like this little kitten had ended up on dinner tables.

But nobody was going to eat *this* cat. "You'll just be our little secret," Isabel whispered.

"Hey, Isabel!" Iván said, making her jump. The cat skittered away underneath the house.

Iván was a year older than Isabel and lived next door. He and Isabel had been friends as long as she could remember. Iván was lighter skinned than Isabel, with curly dark hair. He wore sandals, shorts, a short-sleeved, button-down shirt, and a cap with a fancy letter *I* on

it—the logo of the Havana baseball team the *Industriales*. He wanted to be a professional baseball player when he grew up, and he was good enough that it wasn't a crazy dream.

Iván plopped to the dusty ground beside Isabel. “Look! I found a bit of dead fish on the beach for the cat.”

Isabel recoiled at the smell, but the kitten came running back, eating greedily from Iván's hand.

“She needs a name,” Iván said. Iván gave names to everything—the stray dogs who wandered the town, his bicycle, even his baseball glove. “How about Jorge? Or Javier? Or Lázaro?”

“Those are all boy names!” Isabel said.

“Yes, but they are all players for the Lions, and she's a little lion!” The Lions was the nickname of the *Industriales*.

“Iván!” his father called from next door. “I need your help in the shed.”

Iván climbed to his feet. “I have to go. We're building . . . a doghouse,” he said, before sprinting away.

Isabel shook her head. Iván thought he was being sneaky, but Isabel knew exactly what he and his father were building in their shed, and it wasn't a doghouse. It was a boat. A boat to sail to the United States.

Isabel was worried the Castillos were going to get caught. Fidel Castro, the man who ruled Cuba as president and prime minister, wouldn't allow anyone to leave

the country—especially not to go to the United States—*el norte*, as Cubans called it. *The north*. If you were caught trying to leave for *el norte* by boat, Castro would throw you in jail.

Isabel knew that, because her own father had tried and had been thrown in jail for a year.

Isabel noticed her father and grandfather heading down the road toward the city to stand in line for food. She put the little kitten back under her house and ran inside for her trumpet. Isabel loved tagging along on trips into Havana to stand on a street corner and play her trumpet for pesos. She never did make much. Not because she wasn't good. As her mother liked to say, Isabel could play the storm clouds from the sky. People often stopped to listen to her and clap and tap their feet. But the only people who could afford to give her pesos were the tourists—visitors from Canada or Europe or Mexico. Ever since the Soviet Union had collapsed, the only currency most Cubans had were the booklets you got stamped when you went to pick up your food rations from the store. And food ration booklets were pretty worthless anyway—there wasn't enough food to go around, whether you had a booklet or not.

Isabel caught up with her father and grandfather, then parted ways with them on the Malecón, the broad road that curved along the seawall on Havana Harbor. On one side of the road were blocks of green and yellow and pink and baby blue homes and shops. The paint was

peeling, and the buildings were old and weathered, but they still looked grand to Isabel. She stood on the wide promenade, where it seemed all of Havana was on display. Mothers carried babies in slings. Couples kissed under palm trees. Buskers played rumbas on guitars and drums. Boys took turns diving into the sea. Tourists took pictures. It was Isabel's favorite place in the whole city.

Isabel tossed an old ball cap on the ground, on the off chance that one of the tourists actually had a peso to spare. She lifted the trumpet to her lips. As she blew, her fingers tapped out the notes she knew by heart. It was a salsa tune she liked to play, but this time she listened past the music. Past the noise of the cars and trucks on the Malecón, past the people talking as they walked by, past the crash of the waves against the seawall behind her.

Isabel was listening for the *clave* underneath the music, the mysterious hidden beat inside Cuban music that everybody seemed to hear except her. An irregular rhythm that lay over the top of the regular beat, like a heartbeat beneath the skin. Try as she might, she had never heard it, never felt it. She listened now, intently, trying to hear the heartbeat of Cuba in her own music.

What she heard instead was the sound of breaking glass.

# MAHMOUD

ALEPPO, SYRIA—2015

MAHMOUD BISHARA WAS INVISIBLE, AND that's exactly how he wanted it. Being invisible was how he survived.

He wasn't literally invisible. If you really looked at Mahmoud, got a glimpse under the hoodie he kept pulled down over his face, you would see a twelve-year-old boy with a long, strong nose, thick black eyebrows, and short-cropped black hair. He was stocky, his shoulders wide and muscular despite the food shortages. But Mahmoud did everything he could to hide his size and his face, to stay under the radar. Random death from a fighter jet's missile or a soldier's rocket launcher might come at any moment, when you least expected it. To walk around getting noticed by the Syrian army or the rebels fighting them was just inviting trouble.

Mahmoud sat in the middle row of desks in his classroom, where the teacher wouldn't call on him. The desks were wide enough for three students at each, and Mahmoud sat between two other boys named Ahmed and Nedhal.

Ahmed and Nedhal weren't his friends. Mahmoud didn't have any friends.

It was easier to stay invisible that way.

One of the teachers walked up and down the hall ringing a handbell, and Mahmoud collected his backpack and went to find his little brother, Waleed.

Waleed was ten years old and two grades below Mahmoud in school. He too wore his black hair cropped short, but he looked more like their mother, with narrower shoulders, thinner eyebrows, a flatter nose, and bigger ears. His teeth looked too big for his head, and when he smiled he looked like a cartoon squirrel. Not that Waleed smiled much anymore. Mahmoud couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his brother laugh, or cry, or show any emotion whatsoever.

The war had made Mahmoud nervous. Twitchy. Paranoid. It had made his little brother a robot.

Even though their apartment wasn't far away, Mahmoud led Waleed on a different route home every day. Sometimes it was the back alleys; there could be fighters in the streets, who were always targets for the opposition. Bombed-out buildings were good too. Mahmoud and Waleed could disappear among the heaps of twisted metal and broken cement, and there were no walls to fall on them if an artillery shell went whizzing overhead. If a plane dropped a barrel bomb, though, you needed walls. Barrel bombs were filled with nails and scrap metal, and if you didn't have a wall to duck behind you'd be shredded to pieces.

It hadn't always been this way. Just four years ago, their home city of Aleppo had been the biggest, brightest, most modern city in Syria. A crown jewel of the Middle East. Mahmoud remembered neon malls, glittering skyscrapers, soccer stadiums, movie theaters, museums. Aleppo had history too—a long history. The Old City, at the heart of Aleppo, was built in the 12th century, and people had lived in the area as early as 8,000 years ago. Aleppo had been an amazing city to grow up in.

Until 2011, when the Arab Spring came to Syria.

They didn't call it that then. Nobody knew a wave of revolutions would sweep through the Middle East, toppling governments and overthrowing dictators and starting civil wars. All they knew from images on TV and posts on Facebook and Twitter was that people in Tunisia and Libya and Yemen were rioting in the streets, and as each country stood up and said "Enough!" so did the next one, and the next one, until at last the Arab Spring came to Syria.

But Syrians knew protesting in the streets was dangerous. Syria was ruled by Bashar al-Assad, who had twice been "elected" president when no one was allowed to run against him. Assad made people who didn't like him disappear. Forever. Everyone was afraid of what he would do if the Arab Spring swept through Syria. There was an old Arabic proverb that said, "Close the door that brings the wind and relax," and that's exactly what they did;

while the rest of the Middle East was rioting, Syrians stayed inside and locked their doors and waited to see what would happen.

But they hadn't closed the door tight enough. A man in Damascus, the capital of Syria, was imprisoned for speaking out against Assad. Some kids in Daraa, a city in southern Syria, were arrested and abused by the police for writing anti-Assad slogans on walls. And then the whole country seemed to go crazy all at once. Tens of thousands of people poured into the streets, demanding the release of political prisoners and more freedom for everyone. Within a month, Assad had turned his tanks and soldiers and bombers on the protestors—on his own *people*—and ever since then, all Mahmoud and Waleed and anyone else in Syria had known was war.

Mahmoud and Waleed turned down a different rubble-strewn alley than the day before and stopped dead. Just ahead of them, two boys had another boy up against what was left of a wall, about to take the bag of bread he carried.

Mahmoud pulled Waleed behind a burned-out car, his heart racing. Incidents like this were common in Aleppo lately. It was getting harder and harder to get food in the city. But for Mahmoud, the scene brought back memories of another time, just after the war had begun.

Mahmoud had been going to meet his best friend, Khalid. Down a side street just like this one, Mahmoud

found Khalid getting beaten up by two older boys. Khalid was a Shia Muslim in a country of mostly Sunni Muslims. Khalid was clever. Smart. Always quick to raise his hand in class, and always with the right answer. He and Mahmoud had known each other for years, and even though Mahmoud was Sunni and Khalid was Shia, that had never mattered to them. They liked to spend their afternoons and weekends reading comic books and watching superhero movies and playing video games.

But right then, Khalid had been curled into a ball on the ground, his hands around his head while the older boys kicked him.

“Not so smart now, are you, pig?” one of them had said.

“Shia should know their place! This is Syria, not Iran!”

Mahmoud had bristled. The differences between Sunnis and Shiites was an excuse. These boys had just wanted to beat someone up.

With a battle cry that would have made Wolverine proud, Mahmoud had launched himself at Khalid’s attackers.

And he had been beaten up as badly as Khalid.

From that day forward, Mahmoud and Khalid were marked. The two older boys became Mahmoud’s and Khalid’s own personal bullies, delivering repeated beat-downs between classes and after school.

That’s when Mahmoud and Khalid had learned

how valuable it was to be invisible. Mahmoud stayed in the classroom all day, never going to the bathroom or the playground. Khalid never answered another question in class, not even when the teacher called on him directly. If the bullies didn't notice you, they didn't hit you. That's when Mahmoud had realized that together, he and Khalid were bigger targets; alone, it was easier to be invisible. It was nothing they ever said to each other, just something they each came to understand, and within a year they had drifted apart, not even speaking to each other as they passed in the hall.

A year after that, Khalid had died in an airstrike anyway.

It was better not to have friends in Syria in 2015.

Mahmoud watched as these two boys attacked the boy with the bread, a boy he didn't even know. He felt the stirrings of indignation, of anger, of sympathy. His breath came quick and deep, and his hands clenched into fists. "I should do something," he whispered. But he knew better.

Head down, hoodie up, eyes on the ground. The trick was to be invisible. Blend in. Disappear.

Mahmoud took his younger brother by the hand, turned around, and found a different way home.