

A HOUSE DIVIDED

A novel by

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In memory of my brother Joshua

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Prologue

Thursday, July 16, 1993

The ancient cedar, a stubborn vanguard of the vast forests of the Lebanon, clung to the undulating rock like a cork riding a mighty wave. Lieutenant Danny Geller peered up through outstretched boughs at the dark sky.

Hell, he thought, what were they doing here?

The six-man unit huddled in tense silence behind an outcrop, watching and waiting, thankful that the day's July heat had finally been swept away by a stiff westerly breeze. Twenty meters away, a patrol road snaked along the frontier: a steel mesh fence topped with barbed wire that flashed like knives in the moonlight. Between the broken asphalt and the fence lay a five-meter-wide strip of chalky, clay-rich sand.

Land mines and electronic sensors aside, Danny knew this innocent track of dirt formed the real barrier. It recorded in minute detail every imprint of the creatures it encountered: birds, snakes, small animals, and, on rare occasions, the boot scuffs of human hostiles. Bedouin scouts, who accompanied the patrols routinely, scrutinized every centimeter of the impressionable surface, marking each find with secret signs until it could be plowed smooth again – as it was twice daily.

Danny shifted in a vain effort to alleviate the growing knot in his stomach. Soon, he and his unit would pass through a small perimeter gate and descend into sloping darkness.

Lunacy!

Three months ago he had commanded a small literacy seminar in Haifa for the Education Corps, counting down the waning days of his commission. The news of his reassignment had arrived out of the blue, in a nondescript manila envelope. He remembered sitting dumbfounded in his office, the tersely worded document slipping from his fingers onto his desk. The army, in its infinite wisdom, had finally decided to make a “fighter” out of him. He could look forward to twenty years of reserve duty as an artillery officer.

Two weeks later he was eating dust at Haleva, the main artillery training facility deep in Israel's southern desert, with dozens of other hapless men.

A gust of wind now howled through the overhanging branches, causing them to sway, leaves quivering. The team stirred, as if awakening from a collective trance.

“Twelve weeks of artillery dogshit,” Dudi Haverfeld grumbled. “Trudging around the damn countryside, playing soldier.”

Haverfeld, Danny’s rotund bunkmate, had worked a desk job in the Kirya, Israel’s Pentagon, in downtown Tel Aviv. His world seemed to center around drinking beer, telling outrageous lies about his conquests of the opposite sex, and complaining about the obvious discomforts they all shared – bad food, hard work, no sleep, and no leaves.

Danny nodded, only half listening. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out his military ID. There, next to his own photo, was a second snapshot.

He ran his fingers over the laminated surface, unable to see much of the image in the dim light. Unlike Dudi, he had a real love in his life – a woman he never spoke of to the others, and whom he had not seen in over a month and a half. He imagined her cheek against his, her long silky red hair falling about her freckled face, her wise emerald eyes looking up at him.

Only three and a half weeks to go, he told himself, then I’m out. I can do anything for three and a half weeks.

An engine chugged in the distance. A combat patrol was ascending the hill from the west. A disheveled infantry sergeant and his tracker, both on foot, were first to emerge from the shadows.

“About time.” Uri, the senior officer in Danny’s unit, got to his feet. The captain had once been a logistics wizard at a major air base, but apparently fallen from grace after causing some monumental foul-up. He fumbled his M16 rifle over his shoulder and stomped out to greet the patrol.

“You’re late,” he barked at the sergeant. “We should have been underway an hour ago.”

The infantryman shrugged. Waiting long enough to make a point, he turned and motioned for the patrol vehicle. It materialized out of the night, bristling with antennae, its 50 caliber machine gun manned and ready.

Uri glowered at the sergeant as though considering some caustic remark, then thought better of it. “Open the damn gate.”

The sergeant produced a key from a chain about his neck. He sauntered across the clay track to the fence, where he fiddled with the lock. At last, the rusty portal swung noisily inward.

Uri went first, motioning to the rest to follow. One by one, in single file, they crossed the track and passed through the small gate, Danny taking his usual place at the rear.

“Give us a heads up on the radio when you want back in.” the sergeant called after them. “Wouldn’t want anyone to get shot by mistake.”

They followed the hedge as it dipped below the summit. Danny clutched his rifle in his hands.

Welcome to Southern Lebanon.

A few seconds later, the gate clanged shut behind them. The patrol vehicle roared to life. Heavy chains rattled as the plow it towed obliterated all traces of their passage from the clay.

Chapter 1

Friday, July 17, 1993

His marker danced across the whiteboard, another line of mathematical notation emerging behind it.

Assistant Professor Jonathan Geller paused to glimpse at the bright, shiny faces in the packed amphitheatre-like auditorium. He noted with satisfaction that most of the undergrads were writing furiously, appearing to struggle with the theoretical basis of the quick-sort algorithm. The humility of not understanding was the main lesson he wanted to impart. Science was a hard mistress. She could reward you in unimaginable ways, or plunge you into the deepest pit of despair.

He strode back to the other end of the board, his disembodied voice echoing from the speakers in the ceiling as he produced another line for them to consume.

A loud sound buzzed through the hall. He made a final note and set down the marker. Christina, his senior TA, scrawled the new assignment in red on a side board, then stood by as reams of due homework piled up beside the base of the wooden lectern.

He shook his head. Wasn’t summer quarter supposed to be light?

Geller slipped out a side door and ascended the spiral staircase of the Computer Science building. Built in the 1960s, the drab, utilitarian structure stood out like a sore thumb among the manicured lawns and walkways of the University of Washington’s Seattle campus. From the landing, he watched

Drumheller Fountain sparkle seductively in the clear July light. His gaze was drawn to the shimmering blue waters of Lake Washington and the snow-crested dominance of Mount Rainier beyond.

Moments later he was back in the quiet of his office, reclining in the old metal swivel chair. He took out his notebook and pored over the last few pages of the proof he was working on – his own personal torment.

Almost done. Yet, still not quite there. Six months of work teetered on the brink.

A few weeks ago he had found an infuriating flaw in his reasoning. This error had provided insight into an aspect of the problem he'd never considered to be central. Now, it occupied his every waking moment.

He took out a fresh hard-covered notebook, opened its tightly bound pages, inhaling the aroma of new paper. He made a small mark at the top of the first page, indicating it was fifteenth in the sequence. Then he began to write.

The assistant professor's posture remained the same for the next five hours, his left hand clasped to his chest, thumb tapping against his sternum. Only when the sunlight streaming through his office windows began to fade did he stir, staring down at his watch. It was nine p.m.

Geller jogged across the little pedestrian bridge over Montlake Boulevard, descended the spiral staircase, and headed south. The student parking lot was nearly deserted, only a few isolated vehicles dotting the acres of asphalt.

He settled into the seat of his old Honda. The engine sputtered as he pulled into the light evening traffic. Picking up speed, the car slipped past Husky Stadium, where towering bleachers reached like massive wings into the summer sky. The Accord's wheels hummed on the metal grates of the Montlake Drawbridge, as he banked left past the 520 on-ramp, then right into the University Arboretum. The road meandered beneath majestic old trees, whose leaves and branches deepened in amber shadow as the sky erupted in streaks of red and violet.

Breathing easier, he watched the Japanese Gardens slip by, secret paths and fish ponds hidden behind an impenetrable wall. A final bend, and he emerged from the enchantment of the woods, coming to a halt at the stoplight on Madison. Five

minutes later he was racing through Leschi, past thickets of tall masts that swayed in the twilight along the waterfront marinas. Patrons were arriving at the Lake Cafe for dinner or drinks, and joggers were everywhere.

He hung a left on McClellan and eyed the yuppified shops on his way up the boulevard. Whizzing by kept and not-so-kept yards, he acknowledged the few remaining old-timers: the sculptor, her tidy gray house and garden covered with her work; the opera singer, whose voice carried for blocks through his open windows during the hot summer months.

The Geller family home was a fixer-upper his parents had purchased in 1965. His dad had got it as part of the divorce settlement, and left it to his son when he'd passed away two years ago.

Jonathan Geller made his way through the overgrown front yard, fished the mail from the rusty mailbox, and let himself in. A familiar wood scent greeted him, a stale musk one would expect to find in the home of a doting grandparent. He stepped through the dog-mauled French doors and dropped his bag on the oak dining room table.

He noted the solitary framed picture on the wall. Danny gazed stoically from the glossy five by seven, an olive-green beret perched jauntily on his nearly shaven head.

Geller sorted through letters and flyers: the weekend *Jerusalem Post*, bills, and the ever present inquiries from realtors. At the bottom of the pile, a postcard showed palm trees on a white sand beach.

"Eating shit, getting short," the card read in his brother's flowing Hebrew script. "Four weeks. D."

It bore the triangular sign of the IDF postmaster.

Geller smiled, turning the card over in his hands. He opened a drawer in the buffet, and slipped it into a shoebox brimming with a decade of like correspondences. One hundred and nineteen in all, about ten words per card.

"Eating shit..."

He replaced the shoebox in its drawer and pushed his way through a hinged door into the kitchen. Discarded TV dinner cartons littered the orange countertops. The sink was lost beneath a mountain of dirty dishes and empty soda cans. The Geller family breakfast table, the one they had gathered around more than twenty years ago, now listed on its three good legs.

Brushing aside the morning's cereal bowl, he set the *Post* on the table and studied its dense pages. More ink on the

secret Oslo meetings. Earlier in the year, a group of academics and left-wing Israeli politicians had begun a dialog in Norway with leading figures from the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The existence of the peace talks had only recently been divulged to the public.

Geller ignored the loud headlines, the predictable commentary, and turned his attention to the inner pages. "Boom in the software industry," the financial headlines declared. Intel was building another facility near Haifa.

He dove in. The piece was well written, informative, and reflected a deep understanding of how the economic wheels turned. His eyes strayed to the byline.

"T. Goren," it read in bold letters.

You've come a long way, Talia.

He set the *Post* down, trying in vain to recall her warmth, scent, and touch. Over the long years, his memory of her had faded like newsprint in the sunlight, but then so had the pain.

He trudged up the squeaky stairs, tossed his bag into a corner near the landing, and collapsed onto the unmade king-sized mattress in the center of his bedroom floor. Clicking on the TV to dispel the quiet, he surfed through several dozen cable stations before slipping into an uneasy slumber.

The duty operations sergeant sat by the communications array, listening to scratchy late-night blues on his transistor radio. Drawing his heavy jacket about him, he took another sip of poisonous coffee.

"You going out, Geller?" he asked with a yawn.

The young corporal snapped up, checked his watch. Oh-three-hundred hours. He dragged himself to his feet, grabbed the five-liter Thermos, and hefted his M16 rifle over his shoulder. The metal door swung open.

He stepped out into the cold night, his breath billowing about him. A curling fog had settled upon the rocky hilltop, drowning the perimeter fence lights in a thick soup. The closer compound lights shone dimly through, surrounded by great multi-hued halos. In the distance, the large diesel generator faltered, sinking the installation into an eerie moment of darkness before it coughed and caught again.

Corporal Geller shoved his free hand deep into his overcoat pocket, while he scrambled between large rocks to the badly paved road that connected the headquarters building

to the main gate. Cypress trees lined the rough asphalt and echoed the clapping of his boots as he trotted down the hill.

The gate sentry sprang from his seat, weapon at the ready. "Who goes there?"

"Relax. Want some coffee?"

The sentry shivered, holding up a soiled blue plastic cup. "It's pretty bad out tonight, isn't it?"

The corporal smiled to himself. Fresh meat. Every three months another cycle of green recruits were deposited at the training compound, leaving the staff only twelve weeks to mold them into something the military could pass off as soldiers.

"Stay sharp," he said. "If the civilians from the settlement catch you sleeping, they'll go directly to the base commander and we'll all be in deep shit."

The sentry nodded.

Geller followed the fence along the path from the gate, noting that the foot patrols were where they should be. A mile in circumference, the perimeter was guarded by three observation towers and three mobile patrols. It took an unhurried twenty-five minutes to complete the circuit.

He paused by the officers' quarters, a single-story gray prefab illuminated by a ring of yellow lamps on tall wooden pylons. The rooms were dark, as were the rooms in the adjacent women's barracks. Good, he thought, setting out for the base commander's quarters a hundred meters up the hill.

He encountered one of the patrols on his way up. "Coffee?"

"No thank you, sir. We still have some left in our canteens."

"You need to wake the cooks at five, or we'll all go without breakfast."

Both soldiers nodded.

He left them to it. Last stop. The path cut through a small greenbelt near the summit. Tall bushes separated a portable structure from the rest of the compound. A network of black cables ran across tarred pylons and linked to the communications and power grids.

A meager light filtered through the shuttered windows. As he crept closer, he heard faint moaning and the squeaking of springs. He peered through a window and made out the foot of a single military cot. Clothes were strewn about the floor. A dark tunic bearing red and gold major's pips was entangled with a female's light khaki slacks. Shifting for a better view,

Geller saw the base commander's large frame moving rhythmically on top of a woman's writhing body.

Trouble. Definitely trouble.

Corporal Geller shook his head and eased back. Even as he retreated, the cries grow louder, building, merging with the howl of the biting wind. Then a gunshot pierced the night.

He was running, rending the white mist that blew about him like apparitions, his feet battling the rising ground with each step. The southern tower materialized, an ominous shadow ringed in light. Panting, he grabbed the ladder and tried to climb. Despite the night cold, the rungs were warm and slippery, covering his hands with a thick, oily substance. He rubbed them on his pants and looked up.

Dark liquid cascaded through the cracks in the boards three meters above his head. It formed steaming puddles on the ground below, as though the tower itself was bleeding.

He reached the head of the ladder and gasped. He was staring down the muzzle of an M16 assault rifle.

Geller batted at it, sent it skittering across the slippery floor. The body of the soldier was still in the chair, slumped back against a roof post. The mouth was open and black, unseeing eyes staring directly at him. He felt a salty drop on his cheek and looked up. The roof was caked with gore.

Suddenly, the body shifted forward and fell into him. He began to scream. Alarm bells chimed in the distance, ringing louder and louder in his ears, the sound tearing at his brain.

Jonathan sat up, chest heaving, body bathed in sweat. Above him, the pallid light of the boulevard streetlamps cast long shadows across the bedroom ceiling.

Home. Thank God, he was home. The dream, it had never been so vivid, so detailed – the sights, the sounds, the smells. In eleven years, it had never felt so real.

The phone erupted again.

Cursing, he groped for the receiver in the darkness. "Hello," he barked, glaring at the bedside clock. The luminous dial read 4:15 a.m.

"Yonatan, ze ata?" a deep voice asked in Hebrew.

"Yes," he replied awkwardly in the same language.

"This is Shaul, your mother's husband. There's been an accident. You need to come home immediately.

Chapter 2

Monday, July 20, 1993

Dawn's pale light intruded upon the azure hues of the waning night. Bidding farewell to the last of the stars, the large aircraft breached a dark bank of low-lying clouds, and slipped into a thick brown haze that all but obstructed the Tel Aviv skyline.

Someone touched his shoulder. "Excuse me, sir."

Blinking, Geller stared up the flight attendant.

"Please bring your seat back up," she said, the Hebrew slowly taking form in his mind. She clucked, shook her head, and switched to heavily accented English. "Your seat. You must put it up."

He fastened the buckle, tightening the harness.

Several thousand feet below, high rise apartments jutted from the haze. Ghea Highway stretched northward in a succession of cloverleaf intersections that faded into the gray-brown pall. The aircraft's shadow flitted over tilled agricultural fields, reaching out like a phantom to overtake them as it descended. Banking from port to starboard, the jet shuddered on touchdown. Geller's restraint tugged at his midriff as engines roared and the plane braked sharply.

"Please wait for the aircraft to come to a complete stop," the flight director's voice crackled, barely audible above the clicking of seatbelt buckles. At the bulkhead, an exasperated attendant sprang up, shooin' recalcitrant passengers, who had begun to remove belongings from the overhead bins, back into their seats.

"Why sit?" a heavyset Russian woman protested, already halfway down the aisle. "Look. We stop now."

A throng followed her, jostling forward. Leather bag in hand, Geller joined the procession as passengers wormed toward the front of the aircraft. He hesitated at the doorway before stepping out into a blast of hot, dust-laden air. A hamsin, a great summer sandstorm that blew north from the Arabian Peninsula, suffocated the land.

Twenty feet below, under the vigilant gaze of armed security, travelers piled onto large shuttle buses.

"Move along." A flight attendant waved, directing the flow of people across the blazing tarmac. "Please remember to move all the way to the rear of the shuttle."

Nodding with fatigue, Geller was carried by the steady press of humanity onto one of the air-conditioned vehicles. He settled into a spot between two adjacent benches.

You're back, he told himself.

He studied the airport terminal building through the vehicle's glazed windows. Could he accept what his senses were telling him? A persistent little voice whispered in his ear that none of this was true.

A sharp jab in the flank jarred him from his doubts. This bus was too crowded. Grumbling, he rubbed his side, then took out a well creased newspaper and read the story for the fiftieth time.

The last of the five victims of the Haleva training accident will be brought to rest today at Kiryat Shaul . . . What is being called the worst training disaster at the base in three decades is now the subject of a Defense Ministry board of inquiry . . . All other mechanized training activities have been suspended until further notice.

What the hell had happened? Questions filled Geller's aching head.

He stepped off the bus into the terminal's antechamber and was immersed in the discordance of a thousand conversations – Hasidic Jews with earlocks and long beards, in dated wool attire and black hats; tall, blond Scandinavians in shorts and backpacks; a group of tourists from Japan; business people in suits and ties; dark-skinned Ethiopian Israelis in jeans and sandals; children squealing as they chased each other about their parents' legs.

He tucked the paper under his arm and shuffled forward with the line, lost in thought.

"Darkon!" Passport.

A border agent glared down at him over the rim of her thick glasses. This booth and twenty others spanned the hall like a great dike, barely containing the awaiting chaos.

"Rak . . . shniya," Geller muttered, his Hebrew thick and unnatural in his ears. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he scavenged the folds and pockets of his briefcase. There. With a sigh of relief he produced a dark blue, leather-bound passport.

"And the other papers?" the agent demanded.

Geller swallowed.

"You are an Israeli citizen, no?" She held up his passport. "Where are your military documents?" Annoyed, she gazed past him at the restless travelers crowding the edge of her booth.

In a flood of comprehension, he retrieved a yellowing slip of paper from an inner pocket of his bag. The woman