

A HOUSE DIVIDED

A novel by

Noah S. Friedland

In memory of my brother Joshua

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 steel 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.

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“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

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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, shooing 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

examined it, then dropped it onto a pile already hundreds deep. He stared at the heap of papers.

So many returning soldiers, he mused. So many.

The woman was speaking again, her voice rising.

“Yes?” he said.

“This passport has expired. Three years ago!”

Geller's mouth went dry.

“You can't be out of the country with an expired passport. You will have to see someone.” She picked up a telephone.

“Please,” he interjected, his brain fighting to work. “My brother was one of the Haleva victims.”

The agent hesitated, her eyes shifting from him to the multitude in the antechamber and back again. Her expression softened. “OK. But you won't be able to leave with this passport. You'll need to get it renewed as soon as possible.” She stamped it with a heavy thud and pushed it across the counter. “Next!”

“Move on. Yes, you sir, move on,” a customs official chided, waving along Jonathan Geller and his old, olive duffel bag.

Baggage claim had been a madhouse – a frontal assault on overfilled carousels. Huge bags were carried away amidst shouts and the rumble of conveyer belts. People filled two and three carts apiece just to make off with what was undoubtedly a year's worth of shopping and gifts.

Geller made his way along the iron railing that separated arriving passengers from those amassed to greet them. He noted many subtle changes: the narrow terminal road had been expanded and repaved; a new parking garage had been erected on what had once been an empty lot; the taxis gathered along the curb were larger, sleeker, their diesel engines idling above the clamor of greetings. Eddies of dust swirled about the plaza, and the musk of the dirt mingled with whiffs of pungent jet fuel beneath a bleak, white sky.

A young soldier strutted through the crowd, his brown Golani beret perched at an angle on his head. Every crease and fold in his tunic, the way his pants tucked into his worn boots, every pin and medallion spoke of his power and lineage. He looked invincible.

Danny?

For a brief moment Geller saw the image of his brother in uniform. He, too, had this carefully assembled regalia. Then a heavy blow from behind sent Geller reeling.

“Zooz,” someone growled at him.

“Watch where you push that thing,” he snapped, glowering at the offending cart pusher. His left leg throbbed in pain.

“Yonatan?” he felt a light tap on his shoulder. A fragile young man in a pressed Dacron dress uniform smiled at him. Thick black hair, coifed and oiled, glistened with a shine that rivaled the man’s polished military shoes. “I am Ehud, Colonel Ben-Natan’s driver. I was nervous I wouldn’t recognize you from the photo I was given, but you are nearly identical to your . . . well, to Danny.” Leaving no time for protest, the soldier hefted the ratty kitbag onto his shoulder. “The car is around the corner.”

The white military Peugeot 205 was backed halfway onto the curb between two parked cabs. Geller contorted his tall frame into the sizzling interior, which reeked of stale tobacco and baked vinyl. The tiny vehicle groaned in protest beneath his weight. It dipped again as Ehud took the driver’s seat, keys jangling in his hand. The small engine roared to life, immediately drowned out by the wail of Arabic music.

At the airport exit, they sped past paramilitary policemen languishing in boots and heavy combat vests at the checkpoint. Tires squealing, the little car roared northward, running a gauntlet of giant eucalyptus trees that cast intermittent shadows across the roadway in a dizzying sequence of light and shade.

A large Ford sedan zoomed past, cutting into the opposing lane in an act of blind daring. It disappeared around the wall of foliage, leaving Geller with an uneasy vision of mangled, burning wreckage and twitching bodies strewn across the asphalt. He contemplated this as another wailing ballad filled the cabin, the nasal screech adding an edge to his fatigue.

“Can you tell me anything more about the accident?” he shouted over the din.

Ehud shrugged. “Only what I read in the papers, which isn’t much.”

The car banked left at Tsomet Hatayasim, Pilots’ Intersection. They barreled westward past a green “Yehud City Limits” sign. Geller watched the familiar southern outskirts of the old frontier town’s industrial area whiz by – a few lesser

Israel Aircraft satellite plants, a half dozen auto shops, a handful of family owned restaurants.

They were braking. Ehud swore as traffic slowed to a crawl. "Must be an accident up ahead."

"Get off here." Geller pointed toward the shoulder.

Veering onto gravel, the Peugeot added another cloud of dust to the existing pall, engulfing dozens of unhappy motorists in its wake. A hundred meters further, they turned right onto a rough road and picked up speed as the traffic thinned.

Blue-collar Yehud unfolded in a string of unremarkable low-rise apartment buildings: four squat stories on pylons, sixteen two- and three-bedroom flats, the original white stucco dulled by years of soot and punishing sun. Knee-high stone walls cordoned off patchy yellow lawns from the uneven, sand-swept sidewalks. Flies buzzed, and alley cats lay panting in the shade of overflowing dumpsters. A few forlorn townsfolk huddled in the shade of a bus stop canopy, awaiting the next Dan line coach.

Jonathan frowned, his frustration growing. Five dead! He'd trained as an artillery crew commander, served years in the corps, yet never heard of an accident so deadly.

"Where to?" Ehud asked, as they neared an intersection.

Grunting, Geller pointed up a narrow lane. Whitewashed block walls supported sloped roofs of faded, orange clay shingles, where tall briars and wild raspberry bushes overran small yards. The roadway banked to the left, past a giant oak on the corner. Three steel posts rose from the pavement, barring vehicular traffic from the fragrant orchards of Ganei Yehuda. The lime-colored walls of his alma mater, Yahud Comprehensive High School, loomed over the cottages.

Nearly fifteen years ago . . .

Voices reverberating across time, the aroma of stencils and ink, and his scoured, chalk coated desk pressing against the eastern wall at the back of the room.

Geller looked back ruefully as the old campus shrank and then disappeared in the rear window. How quickly that last year of high school had gone. By mid-July he was in the army, at boot camp, humping the hills.

Slowing for another sharp curve, they left behind the last of the sleepy cottages. Ehud gunned the vehicle up a smooth straightaway, the world about them transitioning abruptly into West L.A. opulence. Welcome to Savyon. Four- and five-bedroom stucco-finished homes lined the freshly paved

blacktop. Quarter acre lots brimmed with climbing vines and ivy, great cedars and statuesque cypresses.

The road wound through several roundabouts before topping out at a strip mall: a mini-mart, a post office, a bank, and a dozen or so other smaller shops harbored beneath a brown thatch roof.

Geller's gaze followed a street that led away from the main drag. He took a deep breath. The faint scent of chlorine was in the air. The country club would be just behind that large hedge. Too poor to be a member, he'd gotten in sometimes as a classmate's guest, though most times by cutting through a friend's yard and scaling one of the many weak spots in the perimeter fence.

A left turn took them down another tree-lined boulevard. Half a mile later, they rolled to a stop at a red traffic light on Levi Eshkol Street, beneath crackling, high tension wires. This was the working-class town of Kiron, where he had grown up.

One, two, three . . . He counted the passing relay towers. Gun-metal gray prefab buildings were stacked four stories high on pylons, like blocks in a child's construction set, green blinds drawn against the heat. A tight communal setting so different from his Seattle home – neighbors you could hear through walls and ceilings and floors, who were there anytime you opened a window. He was surprised by the size of the trees. It made things seem wrong. The balconies, which should have been visible, were mostly obscured.

Jonathan Geller tried to visualize the tiny three-bedroom flat: a galley kitchen, a dining nook, and a diminutive living area appointed with a brown sofa and matching love seat. A teak wall unit and a thread-bare carpet ran the length of the room.

He looked back over his shoulder and whispered, "This is where I lost you, little brother."

Geller had gone away to the army and Danny had moved to the new house, a place Jonathan swore never to set foot in. From then on it was the occasional movie, a rushed hello or good-bye. Life went on.

Now that was all gone. No more postcards.

Chapter 3

He was uncertain when he had nodded off, but one moment they were crawling along Ghea Highway, motion and color

blending with the pulse of Arabic music – a harsh, alien sound – and the next the vehicle was idling beneath him, the purr of the engine more like a roar in the palpable stillness.

They came to a stop in an unpaved delta crowned by a three-meter-high stone wall. Topped by thick ivy, it spanned more than a football field in length and had but two visible portals: a wooden service entrance and an ornate, black iron gate.

Kiryat Shaul Military Cemetery. End of the line.

“We’re here.” Ehud sighed, getting out of the car.

Geller swallowed. He released his latch with an unsteady hand. The young soldier was talking, though to him it sounded like disconnected syllables.

He flashed back to the day he had buried his father. It had been cold, the first week in January. A rare winter’s snow had blanketed Seattle. He’d arrived early, watching a backhoe crew toil almost an hour to excavate the frozen earth.

He tried to recall the old man’s voice, his smell, the deep sadness ingrained in the creases of his face. Instead, he could remember only the glazed, unfocused eyes, and the scent of alcohol on his breath.

Geller followed Corporal Ehud through the small black gate. Orange, yellow, and violet flowers bloomed in well-tended beds at the foot of a green thicket that lined the imposing wall’s interior. They stopped by a stone ceremonial basin at the center of the enclosure. Stooping, the soldier drank straight from the spigot. Geller drew a draught as well, the cool water flowing onto his trembling hands. He splashed most of it on his face, then took a tentative sip. It was sweet, almost fruity. He took a longer draw from the faucet, gulping the liquid.

“Better?” Ehud wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Geller nodded, forcing himself to walk on.

Ehud picked up a couple of black cardboard skullcaps from a wicker basket, setting one on his head and waiting for Geller to do the same. “There are shady places to sit a little further inside. You can wait there until it is time.” The soldier slipped his Wayfarers on, hiding his eyes behind the opaque lenses.

Beyond the fountain, Geller stepped into a small courtyard, surrounded by a silence the likes of which he had never experienced. The singing of birds, buzzing of insects, and rustling of leaves, all gave way to the raspy sound of his

own breathing. The stone path led to a plain white gate that cut through a blossoming hedge.

Ehud veered off the trail, crossed a manicured lawn, and entered a small recess of the inner gate.

Geller followed him into the alcove, discovering a rattan gazebo adorned by a sheath of delicate, leafy vines. Two limestone benches invited him into the shade, their pedestals stained by moss and time. He sat, tracing his fingers over deep cracks in the stone.

“So, they tell me you’ve been gone awhile,” Ehud said, taking a seat on the opposite bench.

Jonathan nodded.

The corporal took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. “I had a big brother about your age – a career officer in the paratroopers, the pride of the family. He was killed in Beirut in 1982. He’s buried here.”

“I’m sorry.” Geller shook his head.

Ehud got up, the sun glinting off the frames of his sunglasses. “I should go now. I’ll see to it that your bags are delivered to the house.” He gave a sad smile. “Sorry again about your brother. I liked him very much.”

Geller watched the young man stroll through the interior gate, the sound of his footsteps fading as he crossed into the ossuary beyond.

Voices. The little garden was filling with people.

As Geller left the solitude of the bower, an awkward hush fell. A hundred subdued conversations ceased as all eyes turned his way. He spotted a familiar face, a few older couples, friends whom he had not seen since the divorce, but most were strangers. Many of them younger people. Were these Danny’s friends?

He took a breath, waiting for the tension to subside. Instead, it mounted as the seconds ticked away.

“Shooter,” he heard someone whisper. The word spread through the crowd like wildfire.

Geller wished the earth would swallow him.

“Yonatan Geller!” A booming baritone rang out over the square, and a huge bald man with a long, unkempt, gray beard barreled through the crowd. “Excuse me!” The giant charged up the stone walkway, seized Jonathan, and kissed him on both cheeks before wrapping him up in an iron embrace.

Geller looked up into the round Slavic face of his family's oldest friend and former neighbor. "Lova, how have you been?"

"Baruch Hashem!" the Russian said with a tinge of sadness, light glittering off gold-capped teeth. "We were very sad to hear about your father, a good man and a good friend, and now this..." The big man shook his head.

"How is your wife?" Geller asked.

"She is well, thank God. You know we became involved with Lubavitch, the Hasidic sect, about ten years ago. Finding a new Jewish meaning that led us out of the hedonistic, secular Tel Aviv cesspool." Lova wore a wry smile. "We live in Ma'aleh Edumim, just east of Jerusalem." He proudly adjusted the large multi-hued knit skullcap on his head.

"Send her my regards."

"I will." Lova ran a huge hand through his beard. "I've already told Linda that I will organize a proper minyan, a prayer group, during the week of mourning." His massive forearm gave Geller a nudge. "I think I see your mother now."

Linda Ben-Natan, striking even from afar, stood beyond the wash station, towering over a group of women he did not recognize. One was speaking to her with some urgency.

Donning his RayBans, Geller wove through the scrutiny of mourners who now filled the enclosure, with hundreds more still arriving through the main gate.

He stopped and cleared his throat. What would he and his mother have to say to each other after so much time?

Linda turned, cutting short the discussion with her companion. At first, she seemed untouched by time. Still slight in build, her nose and cheeks were soft and rounded. She had none of the strong angular features shared by her sons and their father, Ray. A web of tiny wrinkles was just visible around her large sunglasses. Her hair, mostly tucked into an oversized brown beret, was no longer jet black.

She reached for his arm. He shivered, his eyes clouding. He took a moment to collect himself.

An imposing man stood a discreet distance away. Colonel Ben-Natan was in his early fifties, his dark, neatly shorn hair now laced with silver. He wore a crisply pressed olive uniform, three bronze pips glistening on each shoulder. He was one of the few assembled not wearing sunglasses.

Sensing Geller's gaze, the officer's hard eyes narrowed. He nodded in stiff acknowledgment. Jonathan nodded back with equal correctness, feeling the warmth ebb from his body.

A bearded soldier stepped forward. "Mrs. Ben-Natan, we should get started."

Arm in arm, mother and son moved through the inner gate, the cobbled path branching into a garden of raised, meticulous flowerbeds. The squared sections were populated by dozens of planters, each blanketed in blooming cacti and wild flowers, their petals open like tiny trumpets whose tones had fallen mute in this hallowed stillness.

Drawing near, Geller realized the six-by-three-foot planters were graves, adorned with uniform stone markers. He noticed an engraved headstone in the first row. Small pebbles had been placed upon it in deliberate disarray.

Chaim Katz

Fell during the siege of Jerusalem

July 17, 1947

Moving deeper into the graveyard, other engraved words caught his eye.

Killed in the Sinai Campaign

Fell in the Six Day War

Died on the Golan Heights, October 1973

Killed in Lebanon, July 1982

The plantings showed less maturity as death progressed into the nineties. The newest section lay raw and incomplete, its symmetry ruined by empty gaps, the stone paths rough and undone. What was it like twenty or thirty years ago, when the other sections lay exposed and half finished? Could those families who had buried their young men and women imagine the horrible toll that was to follow?

Then it struck Geller. By very design, this place assumed no end. Even faced with the end of life, the end of hope seemed sadder still.

The chaplain came to a stop before a great wound in the earth, cordoned off by white rope, like a macabre museum exhibit. He produced a pair of scissors and made a jagged cut in Jonathan Geller's shirt collar.

"A sign of mourning," he explained, moving to do the same for Linda.

Geller waited as onlookers continued pouring in, amassing behind the semicircle of ropes facing east, all looking, as was he, down into the inevitable. At last, the final stragglers took their places. Only when a somber silence lay heavily in the air did the rabbi stir.

The wooden service gate swung open. An honor guard emerged, led by a white-haired sergeant major with a magnificent flowing mustache – the White Horse.

Geller gave him a slight nod of recognition.

Behind the guard, six captains bore a coffin draped in a blue and white Israeli flag. As they approached, the cantor began to sing, his voice rising, as though guiding the words as they ascended to the heavens.

Mother and son followed the pallbearers' every step and the pine casket cradled between them.

As they passed before Geller, he noticed a group of young women in uniform. A striking redhead stood in their midst, her shoulders shaking. Then, as if touched by his glance, she, too, looked over the top of her glasses. For an instant their eyes met, a flash of emerald across the open chasm.

The cantor fell silent. The guard stopped and removed the flag as the bearers eased the pine box into the ground.

"Esh!" A sonorous voice called.

The honor guard fired. The concussion of the reports tore through Jonathan. He felt them reverberate through his mother's body, too. With an effort, he straightened and she stiffened alongside him.

"Kaddish," the rabbi said, when the echoes of the final volley had faded. He handed Geller a prayer book, pointing out a paragraph. "Please read from here."

"Yitgadal veyitkadash shme raba," Geller began, the unnatural Aramaic leaving his lips in halting bursts. The syllables formed an incomprehensible chant, interrupted by occasional choruses of "Amen!" from the thousands gathered in respect. The rabbi quietly corrected any misspoken words until, after what seemed an eternity, a final "Amen!" signaled it was over.

Steadying herself, Linda Ben-Natan bent and gathered the first handful of soil. She opened her outstretched hand. A hollow thud rang out as earth impacted on wood.

Jonathan was next. He felt the rich brown dirt between his fingers. As he turned to join his mother, he saw that the ropes had been removed and hundreds were lining up to follow suit.

Chapter 4

The great room in the Ben-Natan home had been cleared of most furnishings, exposing the tile floors and unadorned, white-washed walls. Three recessed skylights notched the cathedral-like ceiling. Several dozen folding chairs formed concentric arcs about a plain mattress on the floor by the north wall.

From his seat on the firm foam, Jonathan Geller examined the faces of those he presumed were his mother's closest intimates in the first row, then those of lesser friends and relations in the second and third rows. All sat stoically, whispering over the hum of the fans, which pivoted on either side of the mattress.

Mourners shuffled by, each kneeling to convey condolences. "We are with you," they murmured, a parade of names and faces that soon melted together. "Our prayers are with you. Sympathy for your terrible loss."

Swelled by new arrivals, the procession filled the room, extending around the dining nook, and through the open wall panels onto the backyard patio. Awed by this display of solidarity, Geller realized there must be hundreds in attendance.

Shoshana Amiram, Colonel Ben-Natan's younger sister, slipped through with drink and refreshments. Short, slightly overweight, she used a touch of henna and judiciously applied makeup to blur early signs of middle age.

"Some more coffee, Linda?" Shoshana's dress settled about her, as she knelt and placed the Chinese lacquer tray on the marble tiles. "You should try some of these fresh pastries that Leah brought. The glazed ones have an apple filling."

Linda set one on a little plate but did not eat.

"How about you, Yonatan?" Shoshana said. "Would you like one, too? Or would you prefer herbal tea? We also have an excellent honey cake."

Geller blinked up at her, an incoherent train of thought interrupted. You are the one from the cemetery, he realized, the one who spoke so urgently to my mother.

"No, thank you," he muttered.

He was still unable to accept that he was in the colonel's home – a place he had sworn never to set foot in. Struggling to breathe, he turned his gaze toward the ceiling. The dust storm had subsided. Clearing skies projected brilliant prism patterns

through the skylights, igniting amber veins in the marble at his feet until it shimmered like molten flame.

It was so beautiful, he thought, reclining against the cool plaster of the block wall. Linda stirred as well, accepting a steaming mug with a weak smile.

“May I get you food, Yonantan?” Shoshana wore a hopeful expression. She rose to her feet, tray lifted high. “Why don't you give it some more thought while I take a better inventory.”

Lingering guests formed an aisle for her, a narrow corridor almost as miraculous as the parting of the Red Sea. Through that opening, Geller caught a glimpse of two photos on the massive teak wall unit, silver frames both draped in black.

The first was a current picture of Danny in uniform, smiling with his easy-going confidence, tanned skin contrasting with his cropped flaxen hair. The second depicted a plump baby on the sands of Tel Aviv.

Geller looked at those long, tangled tresses, and recalled their family's arrival in Israel. The Jewish Agency had put them up for a week or two in a small inn on the Mediterranean coastline. Every morning they would wake to a continental breakfast, then walk to the beach, a strip of white sand hemmed between ocean breakers and an endless skyline of towering hotels. Some days the sea would swell, rumbling as it pounded the giant stones, cascading sheets of spray over the fishermen who basked there with their buckets and long rods.

He remembered racing into the warm surf. Little Danny would follow, wearing nothing but a cloth diaper, which loaded up with water and wiggled behind him as he toddled about. He would splash for a moment or two, the wind tangling his wavy blond hair, then dash away, shrieking, as waves chased him up the shore. Safely out of reach, he'd stand in the sand and point as the froth receded. Finally, Linda would get up, chasing him until he toppled into the sand, scooping him up and brushing him off. Pink and lightheaded from the sun, Jonathan would lead the way over the emptying dunes to sidewalks lined with small foreign cars. His parents would follow leisurely, smiling and holding hands, carrying the sleeping baby between them.

On the eve of their last day at the inn, they were visited by an older couple – long lost friends of his grandparents who had once lived in Europe. Geller didn't remember the woman,

but the old man was white-haired, his skin leathery from the sun. He pinched the baby and chucked him under the chin.

“Wonderful strong boys,” he said in heavily accented English. “Yes, you’ll make fine soldiers.”

Chapter 5

“Professor, are you asleep?”

Geller sniffed. The familiar scent of cheap cologne hung in the air. He opened his eyes to find Lova kneeling over him, wide belly overflowing the waist of his slacks. He sat up and looked around. The activity in the room had diminished with the dying sun. The fans were off, the rows of chairs vacant.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner,” the big Russian said. “An unforeseen problem.” He tucked an errant earlock back behind his ear. “Where is your mother?”

Geller realized he was alone on the mat. He sighed. “Have you ever had one of those dreams that you can’t wake up from, no matter how hard you try?”

Lova nodded. “When I had the misfortune to be a guest of the Soviet Union. For years I’d rise in my cell and not remember where I was. For that brief moment, I was still free.”

Geller swallowed.

“Forgive my ramblings. It is all in the past. It is you and your mother I am worried about. Loss of someone so close turns your world upside down, and it requires effort to regain balance in life.” Lova lowered himself onto the mattress. “But you should already know this. Didn’t you sit for your father?”

“I...” Geller stammered, stung by the unexpected question.

“Ray was a good man, a good friend, and, for a time, a good father too. He loved all of you very much. He just had a very hard time coping with his own life.” The Russian took off his glasses and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “So much tragedy,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

Footsteps sounded on the landing. Linda descended the stairwell slowly, with Shoshana an attentive shadow that matched her step for step. Jonathan watched his mother cross the room, her usually statuesque figure bent and unsteady.

She stopped and took his hand, then turned to Lova. “Dobry vyecher,” she said, managing a smile.

“I'm happy to see you still remember the language.” Lova beamed, his gold caps glistening. “Yonatan, not only is your mother beautiful, she is also a woman of many hidden talents.”

“Being a Russian Minor in college didn't hurt,” she said, some of the gray leaving her face.

“It has been too long.” The old bear leaned to kiss her on both cheeks.

With Shoshana's help, Linda settled into her place on the floor. “Please,” she said, motioning to the many empty chairs, “tell me, how is Eda?”

“We get by from day to day, with God's help. The weather is a little harder for her up in the mountains. The winters are colder with an occasional snow, but we are managing.”

“And how are you? How is business?”

“Baruch Hashem. With all the construction going on in Ma'ale Edumim and other new neighborhoods around Jerusalem, we have more than enough work.”

Linda shook her head. “Jonathan, do you remember the pilgrimages to Lova's old apartment?” For years, people had dropped by for audiences with the head of the Riga Seruvniks. They called him the Lion of Riga. “This man could have easily become a national leader, but instead he's out at building sites with a hard hat.”

Lova smiled. “Building our country is a wonderful calling, and I am happy I can do it in my own small way, which is good, seeing as I lack much talent for anything else.” The wall clock chimed, and at the end of the seventh and final stroke he got to his feet. “And now, with your permission, I'd like to lead the evening services.”

Water rumbled in the dark confines of the tiny wash room. Through the open slats of a glazed window, stars emerged in the deepening cobalt of the new night sky.

Sighing, Geller immersed his head in the sink, trying to wash away the dull ache that began behind his eyes and extended to the base of his skull. Droplets clung to the scratchy growth on his normally clean-shaven face. He looked up, expecting to see a reflection of himself – worn and scruffy – but the mirror had been covered with coarse, brown wrapping paper.

A discreet knock brought him back. “Yes?”

“Yonatan,” Shoshana whispered. “I didn’t want to disturb you, but there is someone here to see you.”

His stomach constricted. Could it be *her*?

Again, a light tapping. “Yonatan?”

He waited until her footsteps faded before twisting the key in the lock. Lamps glowed throughout the house, the light searing his sensitive eyes. An evening breeze blew through the open wall panels, banishing the stagnant heat from the crowded great room.

“Oh, there you are. Please,” Shosh said nervously, “your guest is waiting outside.”

Lined with lawn chairs and bordered with flowerbeds in tended planters, the cobbled patio formed a half crescent that reached into the private backyard. Chains clanked in the shadows as Chief, Colonel Ben-Natan’s boxer, stretched and yawned along the base of the ivy-covered wall.

Geller’s eyes adjusted to the gloom. The hamsin had finally broken. A strong sea breeze was blowing inland, perfumed with the aroma of orange groves that bordered the subdivision to the north and west. He noted a silhouette reclining in one of the lounge chairs.

The figure stood up. “Don’t you love the scent of the orchards?” Tall and slender, the man wore a dark, expensive suit, and a white shirt with no tie, buttons opened at the neck. The dim garden light glistened off his forehead. He stepped out of the shadows, extending his hand. “Long time, old friend.”

“Gad Weinberg!” For an instant, Geller felt the burden lift, the ache in his chest lessen ever so slightly. The two men embraced. “How the hell have you been?”

“Busy.” Weinberg grinned, running a hand up over his shiny pate. “I was in Europe when I got news of the accident. I can’t tell you how terribly sorry I am. First your old man, then this – it’s just horrible.” He shook his head. “I caught the first flight home, but still missed the funeral.”

Jonathan looked at his old friend, imagining him as he was when they first met, a skinny kid from Cleveland with thick glasses and tight, tangled curls. “How’s your dad doing?”

“Great. The practice is bigger than ever. They moved into a larger building a few years ago and he’s taken on a couple of new associates.”

Geller stared into the garden, half listening as Gad made small talk. The sweet citrus fragrance unleashed a barrage of memories . . .

Summertime. He and Talia were walking through the vast groves that lay to the north of the apartment complex in Kiron. They were kissing, entwined. The taste of fruit was fresh on her lips, her back pressed against a hoary tree trunk, its leafy limbs shading them from the hot sun.

Gad paused, studying him. "How is your mom?"

He shrugged. He felt a knot form in his throat.

"It's OK, Jono." Gad touched his arm, "So, what have you been doing with yourself?"

He took a deep breath, slowly exhaled. "I live in Seattle. I teach Computer Science at the University of Washington."

"Wow, an academic. That is surprising. I always imagined you as more of an artistic person, maybe a sculptor or architect."

"I always loved computers – a mixture of applied math and black magic." Geller sighed. The last few days had driven work completely from his mind, and dangerous thoughts were filling that void. He struggled to bring himself back to the here and now. "Nothing quite as exciting as what you've been doing. I've been following your meteoric rise in the papers. Gad Weinberg, member of Knesset!"

Weinberg smiled. "First rule of politics: never trust the media. They are all liars, regardless of how well intentioned they think they're being."

Geller shook his head. Looking back, it made perfect sense. "Your dad must have been overjoyed."

"Ecstatic. He's been a passionate peacenik since we left the States during Vietnam. Remember his lectures? 'Use your heads, not your fists?'"

"I couldn't stand by and let my best friend repeatedly get his butt kicked. Remember that time the Salem gang went after you with their belts?"

"My left eye was swollen shut for a week."

"They got you good, too. I see the scar is still there." Weinberg motioned at the discolored patch above Jonathan's left eye. "I'd never seen so much blood."

They both sat back, lost in childhood recollections. An aircraft flew overhead, its red lights winking. The sliding door nudged open and Shoshana stepped onto the patio.

"Goodness, are you still awake?" she said. "I'm just checking to see if the mosquito trap is working. Linda can't

eat breakfast out here in the morning unless it's going all night. The bugs just eat her alive." The purple-lit contraption flickered on beneath the eaves.

"My mother's sister-in-law," Geller explained, after she left.

Gad got up. "She's right, you must be exhausted."

They embraced again.

"Let me know if there is anything you need." Gad produced a business card. "My contact info. I have to be in Jerusalem tomorrow to attend parliament, but I'll definitely come back and see you again before you get up from Shiva."

"I'd like that."

"I'll leave you with a bit of good news." Weinberg's eyes shone with excitement. "I told you I had been out of the country. I was in Oslo. We've been negotiating the framework of a comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians, and we're just about done. There will be an announcement very soon and a possible trip to the White House. It won't bring Danny back, but it should give us all hope for a better future."

Shoshana was the only one up and about, collecting paper cups and plates, and putting leftover food into the side-by-side kitchen fridge. The wall clock read ten minutes to midnight.

"Is there anything left to drink?" Geller asked.

"There may be some orange juice. I can make you a fresh batch if you like." She brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "Has Mr. Weinberg left?"

He nodded, pouring himself a tall glass.

"It was very nice of him to visit. Is he a close friend?"

"We grew up together. Can I help you load the dishwasher?"

She shook her head. "Gad has become quite a television personality." She added, in a measured tone, "He's been calling for Palestinian statehood for some time."

Jonathan grinned. Weinberg had always been the world's conscience, ever since he was a kid – a major pain in the ass.

"It was fortunate Shaul was out for the evening," she said, stacking in the last dish.

"Oh?"

“Many people don’t like this new initiative. I just don’t think it would’ve been a good thing if they had crossed paths. Next time, you should meet your friend elsewhere.”

Chapter 6

Tuesday, July 21, 1993

He woke before dawn, disoriented in the unfamiliar pink-trimmed room. Sliding the window’s heavy outer slats into recesses in the concrete walls, he watched the rising sun reach to embrace the heavily laden citrus trees. The cool air was alive with the calls of birds.

As promised, Lova arrived around seven with his entourage. Halfway through the morning service, Geller watched Shosh guide his mother down the stairs, across the great room, and into the kitchen. After the Russian and his crew departed, Geller joined the two women for a light breakfast.

Linda looked pale and unfocused, and touched almost nothing on her plate. Finally, she pushed away from the table and with some assistance got to her feet. “I think I’ll lie down again for a little while.”

“Do you feel OK, Mother? Should we send for a doctor?”

“I’m fine. I just need a little rest.”

“I’ll make sure she’s alright, Yoni.” Shosh followed Linda up the stairs.

Geller moved food around his plate, his appetite gone, and felt the walls close in about him.

He had to get out of here.

He was clearing the table when the colonel’s sister returned. “What do you think you are doing?” she scolded, taking the last plate from his hands.

“How is my mother? It’s the second day she hasn’t eaten.”

“Just a little stomach bug. It should sort itself out.”

He studied Shosh’s round face, and she met his gaze without wavering. This woman, he thought in frustration, was impossible to read. “I have to go into town to renew my passport.”

She frowned. “You needn’t bother yourself with that. I’ll have someone take care of it for you.”

“It’s not a problem, really. I’ll be back before Mother gets up from her nap.”

“At least let me drop you off.”

“I would rather someone be here in case she needs anything. Besides, I could use the exercise.”

“Try and be back for lunch. I’m making an eggplant quiche. Linda told me it is one of your favorites.”

Geller bolted out the front door. He waved to her through the kitchen window, and reflected on the colonel’s stern demeanor. How could two siblings be such polar opposites? For a moment, the leaves seemed to whisper a reply as anemic puffs of hot, sticky air rustled through them.

He shut the iron gate and set out, keeping to the shade as much as possible. The upscale cul-de-sac soon drew to an end, the last home hidden behind a wall of tangled, green vines dotted with clumps of red and violet berries.

The other side of the block was more familiar to him: low-rise apartments, with original white stucco now gray from sooty residue, their shutters closed to ward off the morning heat. A staple of post-’67 construction, the same design was replicated in cities and neighborhoods around the country. Boxy, utilitarian, and inexpensive to construct, the apartments did not seem so out of place along the tree-lined Kfar Saba backstreets.

“Kick it here,” a child cried amidst the clop-clop of sandaled feet on asphalt.

A pack of young boys ran past, brown and slender, dribbling a scuffed black and white soccer ball, the humid air ringing with their high-pitched voices.

Geller watched them surge ahead, weaving among the trees, on and off the sidewalk, skirting into the street, only to retreat from speeding automobiles, which slowed, brakes squealing, in a blaze of red panic. He gasped at a near-collision, recalling himself at that age, a street urchin romping about the old neighborhood in Kiron. He hadn’t begun his growth to mature height until the middle of tenth grade, though his fiery temper more than made up for the lack of stature.

Never refuse a challenge.

Never back down from a fight.

His fists and body still bore the scars to prove it.

You and Gad, he told himself, as he strolled along the shaded avenue –always so close, yet such opposites.

Geller was the serious athlete, first on the swim team and later the varsity basketball squad. Gad preferred cerebral challenges, pursuing chess and achieving master status. Where Jonathan was impulsive and mercurial, Gad was moderate, deliberate, forward thinking, and incredibly stubborn. As boys they were inseparable, spending hours lolling beneath the stilted apartment buildings on one of the many air raid shelter exits. Boyhood had given way to adolescence. Grade school, junior high, and high school – life flowed inevitably toward their eighteenth birthdays, matriculation, and induction into the army.

Geller muttered to himself, remembering the shock of transition into military life. Where he struggled to fit in, Gad went out of his way to antagonize the system. He refused orders he felt were immoral or illegal, and bought himself numerous visits to the stockade. Geller spent many Friday afternoons at Gad’s various lockups, often bearing care packages of fresh underwear, books, and cookies for his best friend. Their half-hour visits would always begin with Jonathan’s “Just do what you're told, and stop being a goddamn Don Quixote!” speech.

“I’m not a Don Quixote,” Gad would retort, arms folded.

“It’s not as though you’re being asked to kill children. See, the army is real simple, with a code of conduct. You go where you’re told and do what you’re told. You never stand out, you never volunteer, and above all you never rat out your buddies. It’s easy. Gad, you’re a goddamn medic, you take people’s temperatures when they’re sick and put bandages on them when they fall down. It’s really not all that complicated.”

“I won’t serve in Gaza, the West Bank, or anywhere beyond the Green Line. I will not participate in the subjugation of another human being!”

“What subjugation? What the hell are you talking about? These people always had shitty lives. Believe me, things were far worse for them under Jordanian rule.”

“That doesn’t justify our bad behavior!”

The two friends usually ended up making enough noise to warrant a rebuke from one of the Neanderthal guards.

Apartments gave way to commercial buildings, their ground floors adorned with shops, boutiques, open air cafés, and restaurants. The blare of horns and acrid diesel fumes greeted

Geller as Weitzmann Street drew near. Named after Israel's first president, the congested artery ran east to west and served as Kfar Saba's main roadway.

On his right, wedged between an access alley and upscale bistro, he spotted a small storefront.

"Alef Beit Makolet," proclaimed the wooden sign above it.

He stopped, sniffing the pungent mixture of spices, fresh rolls, and curdled milk. Like Abutbul's in the old neighborhood, this establishment had probably once provided the community's staples, from perishable and canned foods to soap, all crammed into two or three aisles. It was the kind of place where owners knew customers by name and kept a monthly tab scratched in pencil in a little black book.

Drawn by an echo from the past, he stepped across the threshold. Arabic music wailed from a boom box perched on the cluttered counter. Beside it, a newspaper fluttered as a large wall fan whirred to and fro in a lazy arch.

"Hello?" he called.

The interior was dark. The rank smell grew stronger toward the rear. Beside a glass-sided, stainless steel, dairy larder, fresh crates of leben – a watery, low-fat, sour yogurt – were piled three high on the discolored tile floor.

Further back, flies buzzed as he lifted the spring door on a mesh-screened bread box. A deformed loaf lay dejected in the cornmeal. He pulled the lever on the lower door of the fridge, found a plastic milk bag hemorrhaging in a Tnuva Dairy crate.

"Lo nishar harbe." The proprietor, a tiny, threadbare, Sephardic woman in her mid-sixties, pushed by him and shut the refrigerator door. "Meuchar!" she scolded, shaking her head. "You should have come earlier."

"Lo nora," Jonathan said, trying to hide his disappointment. He browsed for a while in the simmering heat and then brightened. "Yesh arktikim?" Do you have popsicles?

"Bachutz." Outside.

Geller stepped toward the relative brilliance of the overcast, ten o'clock sky. Blinded, he nearly ran into a patron scurrying through the entryway. "Slicha," he uttered, sidestepping.

For a fraction of a second, his heart fluttered. A shard of an image passed before him, a face, a familiar essence – strong, like the scent of cheap detergent. Blinking to adjust his

vision, he found he was standing alone in the store's cave-like interior. Whoever had been there had vanished.

How odd.

He was touching the old scar above his eye, when he heard a door slam, and the ancient proprietor reemerged from the back.

“Matsata mashehu?”

He shook his head. “I have to go,” he mumbled.

His unease did not dissipate as he lost himself among the window shoppers and quicker pedestrians on Weitzmann.

From some distance away, he heard voices shouting over a PA system. In the midst of the confusion, a red and white Egged bus pulled up in a huff of black fumes, depositing people onto the already packed sidewalk. He waited for a break in the wall of humanity, then worked his way westward, skirting rows of shops for a few blocks, the walkway growing more congested as the amplified shouting grew louder.

The city center plaza, a collection of community buildings about a dry water fountain, was packed with hundreds, if not thousands, of protesters. Entire families – men, women and small children – seemed to be clustered around a makeshift stage, behind which a large sign read, “No to Oslo.”

Many of the male protestors wore beards and knit skullcaps, and held up colorful banners, while the women wore modest dresses and had their hair covered in loose bandanas. Dozens of tense policemen, some on horseback, were arrayed around the assembly.

A new speaker emerged at the podium, greeted with a chorus of “Am Isroel Chai.”

“Friends!” he said, raising his hands.

The singing died down.

“Appeasing murderers only brings more murder!” He retrieved a bloodstained shirt from a bag and held it above his head. “This week alone we have seen three of our leaders gunned down. And what has been the prime minister's response? He says the army cannot be expected to protect people who choose to live in unusual places.” The speaker paused until the booning subsided. “Friends, the land of Israel is not an unusual place.” Cheers. “It is the cradle of our nation, and let no man tear it asunder!”

Damn, it was hot.

Geller watched cars stream by on Weitzmann. This small kiosk was set back from the walkway, though most of its tables encroached on the stream of pedestrians. He raised his glass, downing most of the carbonated liquid in a single gulp. As he lifted it a second time, he caught the reflection of a man in sunglasses who seemed to be staring at the back of his head.

Slowly, Jonathan turned.

“Terrible weather,” the stranger said, folding a sheet of paper into a manila envelope and licking the flaps. He poured himself liquid from a large bottle. “Good orange juice has become rare these days. May I offer you some?”

“I’m fine.” Geller held up his own drink.

“Very wise to stay hydrated, very wise.” The man scribbled something on the sealed envelope. “Summer can be so trying – the congestion, the humidity. People have no patience for each other.” He pocketed the pen, then pushed the packet to the center of his table. “Heat has an effect on people’s ability to make sound judgments. Often you have to consider things carefully, take your time, and try not to make rash decisions.”

Geller shrugged, glancing at the crawling traffic. Another bus groaned to a halt, its doors parting in a hiss of air. Commuters disembarked in a mad rush. “Been away for a while,” he said. “I’ve forgotten how it is, but it’s coming back...”

He left the last word hanging. The stranger was gone, his drink untouched. Feeling foolish, Geller stood and looked around. The demonstration in the pavilion continued – voices greeted by a long round of applause.

This was all so odd.

He was about to leave when he noticed the manila envelope, untouched upon the table. He bent over to examine it.

“Jonathan Geller,” the bold script read.

Chapter 7

He watched the orange orb of the sun fall from a crimson-streaked sky, then returned his attention to the sheet of paper.

What did this mean? he asked himself, scanning it for what felt like the hundredth time. It appeared to have been torn from a journal or bound notebook, and bore traces of

grease, possibly even fingerprints. Dated the day of the accident, it appeared to have been written in haste – and in his brother’s unmistakable flowing script:

July 16th. Message to be delivered to Michal, 04-683-22. Hitting the road in a few minutes. Will try and call you in transit. – Danny.

Who was Michal? Danny had never mentioned her in any of his correspondences. Where had Danny been going?

Geller shut his eyes and tried to visualize the kiosk man’s face, complexion, clothes, but could not. Nothing stood out. The stranger had sat at the periphery of his vision. The encounter had taken less than a minute, and then the man had vanished.

Geller stopped by a payphone, but each time he tried to dial the 04 Haifa number, it rang unanswered.

Frustrated, he made his way back to the colonel’s house, and slipped through the front door with the latest group of mourners. Noting that the mat in the great room was empty, he ducked into the bustling kitchen. Shoshana and a small group of women were sorting numerous platters of food, more arriving with each visitor.

“Where have you been?” Shoshana looked concerned. “I was expecting you for lunch. Did you get your paperwork done?”

Damn! Geller shook his head. “I . . . got caught up in the demonstration.”

“Oh, dear, I completely forgot about the rally. Were there any problems? We’ve had riots and tear gas on several occasions.”

“Where is my mother?”

“Upstairs with the doctor.”

“Is she OK?” Geller’s heart thundered in his chest.

Shoshana gave a reassuring smile. “She’ll be fine.”

Minutes later, the doctor walked in carrying a black bag, his khaki Air Force uniform neatly pressed. “Shalom, Shoshi,” he said, with the familiarity of a friend.

“Shalom, Doctor. This is Linda’s son, Yonatan Geller. Yonatan, this is Dr. Ashkenazi.”

They shook hands.

“How is she, Doctor?”

“Everyone should avoid making her more upset than she already is. I’ve given her another sedative, which should tide her over through this evening.” He stressed the last word as

though it carried special significance. He turned to Shoshana. "Tell Shauli that I'll call him later to see how things went."

Geller raised an eyebrow, after the doctor had departed. "What's going on?"

Shoshana took his hand and fixed him with an intent look. "I know you don't care much for my brother." He tried to interrupt, but she put a finger to his lips. "It is very clear to me. Sometimes he can be abrasive, even cruel, but you must never question the love he has for your mother."

Their eyes met. Geller took a deep breath.

"Shauli called earlier," she continued, "and said the army would be stopping by this evening for a condolence visit."

A cold shiver ran down his spine as the air in his lungs seemed to contract.

The next hour crept by, the hum of conversations intensifying. He noticed the crowd was more familiar, a more intimate circle.

I know you, he thought. I've seen you before.

He studied each of their faces. Most eyes were filled with kindness, though a few seemed more guarded.

Linda sat beside him on the floor, like a wax facsimile in a museum. She neither moved nor spoke. Her plate of pastries lay untouched, her coffee mug full and growing cold.

As the large wall clock rang out the bottom of the hour, he felt an almost electric buzz in the air. Hushed voices carried in from the verandah. A moment later, the casualty officer, a military social worker with whom Geller had had some limited interaction over the course of the Shiva, stepped into the great room. This one was very attractive. A captain in her late twenties, she wore army olive with much grace, her black beret tucked into her left epaulet above her unit insignia: a pair of crossed cannons on a black and red background.

From his cushion, he followed her movements. Shoshana materialized by her side, and the women exchanged quiet words.

The colonel's sister then turned her attention to the entire room. "I will now ask everyone who is not a member of the immediate family to please take their leave." She allowed a few minutes to usher visitors toward the front door.

Only when the last stragglers had departed did the social worker step back into the kitchen, and mutter, "Muchanim."

Here it comes . . .

Geller's stomach tightened even further. He flashed back twelve years to the bedlam of the Guetta home – women shrieking; small children bawling; men unshaven, their clothes torn in mourning, some wailing. He remembered bloodshot eyes looking up as he and his fellow instructors made their way into the hot confines of the Shiva room in a coordinated maneuver, forming a wall of living green in their dress uniforms.

Hold the line!

The beating of helicopter rotors filled the air above the Ben-Natan home. A green Bell Ranger swooped in, running lights blinking as it flared and lowered from sight among the orchards.

The backyard gate swung open, and a brigadier general entered through the open patio, followed by junior officers. He was a fit man, well under six feet tall. Dark skin, pocked and leathery from too much sun, contrasted with the intensity of bright, green eyes. A man of the field, he seemed ill at ease in his dress uniform.

Shoshana greeted the newcomers, directing them to the front row chairs that now stood empty.

“Jonathan, Linda,” she said, “this is General Ziv. He and his people have asked to come pay their respects, and to try to explain what happened to Danny and his crew.” She glanced to her brother, who stood quietly at the back of the room.

Geller saw the colonel nod. What was that about?

Shoshana was now offering refreshments to the general. He declined warmly and moved the centermost chair a few inches closer before taking a seat.

Jonathan felt his mother's hand close over his.

“Mrs. Ben-Natan, Dr. Geller,” the officer began in a soft, soothing voice, “thank you for allowing us to come at this most difficult time. My name is Zachariah Ziv, and I am the KATMAR, the Commander of the Artillery Corps.” He paused to study them both. “I have spent over twenty-five years safeguarding our country. It has not been, for me, an easy task. I have lost close friends, a brother, and an uncle. We all hope that a day will soon come when it will no longer be necessary to rely on military vigilance for our survival here, but that time is not yet at hand. We still need to be ready, and the price we pay for that readiness is sometimes very high.” He cleared his throat. “There is nothing I can say this evening that will lessen your loss. The world is not the same place it was a week ago. I

cannot change this. What I can do is offer any help that is in my power to give.”

He turned to his people. “Tami, could you please come here?” The captain rose and stepped forward. “I know you’ve met Tami. She, unfortunately, has had a lot of experience assisting families through hard times. She is always on call, day or night.”

“We have all the numbers,” Shoshana said.

The general waved over another staffer. The soldier produced several documents from his briefcase. The general cleared his throat again, holding mother and son in his gaze. “I am here in my official capacity as Commander of the Artillery Corps to offer condolences to you upon the death of your son and brother, Captain Daniel Geller, killed in the line of duty.” In a more formal tone, he added, “As is customary, Daniel Geller has been promoted posthumously to the rank of captain. It is my honor to offer you this in commemoration.”

Tami accepted the framed document from him, and kneeled before Linda. “We are truly sorry for your loss.”

Geller saw his mother’s eyes gazing straight ahead, her lower lip quivering.

“I have brought the Haleva base commander with me so that he can brief you on what we believe happened,” the general continued. “This is Ze’ev Milo, the CO of the Haleva Training Facility.”

Milo, a heavysset officer, gave a stiff nod and coughed – the gravelly rasp of a lifelong smoker. A shade over six feet, his blunt features resembled those of a pit bull, his cropped black hair thinning on top. He shifted his bulk forward on the small folding chair, and it creaked and groaned in the tomblike silence.

Geller braced himself, felt his mother shrinking at his side.

“First, let me also convey my condolences.” Milo’s voice and mannerisms were metered and precise, as though he were giving a staff briefing. He produced a gray military notepad, opened it with a flourish, and read. “Captain Geller was undergoing a routine Artillery conversion. The twelve-week course, administered at Haleva, is designed to promote familiarity with equipment and operational procedures, with intent to rapidly convert non-corps personnel to functional reserve artillery officers. The facility has, until this time, graduated hundreds of trainees without incident. In week nine,” he said, turning the page, “Captain Geller and his team

participated in a week-long, regimental, live-fire drill. At or about nineteen-hundred hours on Thursday, during the last drill, a misfire occurred in their American-made, M109A1, self-propelled howitzer cannon.”

“It’s like a tank with a big gun on it,” the KATMAR explained. “A misfire happens when a shell is loaded into the cannon, but the mechanism fails to fire it off. Like a round jamming in a rifle.”

“Exactly. Thank you, sir.” Milo nodded to his superior officer, and resumed reading. “A chain of events ensued that resulted in the catastrophic destruction of the vehicle and the loss of all five members of her crew . . .”

Geller blinked, as though a flash of lethal flame had passed through him. The hairs on his arms stood on end as he imagined living tissue evaporating in a rain of molten fragments.

But how? How could this be?

He’d served a year or so himself at Haleva, and encountered a variety of accidents – aircraft crashes, soldiers accidentally shooting a comrade while cleaning their weapons, deaths in automobile accidents. Nothing like this, though.

“. . . Our investigation has concluded that equipment failure and human error combined to result in this catastrophic outcome.” Milo sat back and fell silent.

Geller’s mother was shaking. He wanted to put his arm around her, pull her to him, but he couldn’t move.

The general rose to his feet. “Tami will stay for a few minutes and answer any additional questions you may have.” His eyes swept over Colonel Ben-Natan in the back, and his entourage was halfway out of their chairs when Jonathan heard his voice fill the great room.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I don’t understand.”

General Ziv stopped in his tracks.

Jonathan Geller’s focus moved to the two portraits across the room – the little baby frolicking on the beach, and the vibrant young soldier. He peered at his mother, her face frozen, her eyes staring through the line of officers before them. “You say there was human error involved. What exactly does that mean?”

The entourage fidgeted. The general sank back into his seat, while Colonel Ben-Natan’s eyes flashed. The CO of Haleva eyed him darkly, then exchanged a glance with his boss.

“It’s technical,” Milo said at last.

Geller snapped, stung by the condescension in the man's voice. "I am completely familiar with the M109A1, and I –"

"We are well aware of *your* background."

General Ziv placed a restraining hand on his subordinate's shoulder, and looked back at Geller. His patient tone betrayed none of the tension in his green eyes. "You need three things to produce a firing sequence in one of these cannons. The first element is a shell or round, which contains the explosive payload. The second is the propellant, which is made up of bags of varying-sized grains of gunpowder. And the third is the initializer, a small charge that sets the propellant off. A misfire happens when a loaded cannon fails to fire."

"According to procedure," the general continued, "the team would have attempted to remove the initializer, which resembles a rifle round without a shell, and to determine whether it had been properly struck and discharged. Apparently it had been fired. This means the propellant was either damp, defective, or inverted in the breach."

Nothing was likely to happen with an inverted propellant, since the gunpowder pellets got progressively larger in their bags and required more energy to combust. Such errors, Geller knew, were not uncommon, especially after a week of a war exercise with little or no sleep.

"They were under pressure to fire," General Ziv explained. "We suspect that an ill-timed attempt was made to examine the propellant, and it flared up just as the breach was being opened by the crew. Flames engulfed the compartment, setting off other bags of unused propellant that had been left about the floor."

Linda was now openly sobbing.

Jonathan ran through what he had heard. All eyes in the room were riveted on him. A cold sweat formed on his palms as he glared back at the wall of green arrayed before him. He watched them exchange looks and literally close ranks, gathering strength from their unity.

Why, he wondered, was the breach opened while the whole crew was still inside? And why were unused bags of propellant just lying around the vehicle? Shouldn't they have been disposed of? Shouldn't the main crew door have been open at the time, so that some of them might have been blown clear?

"Dr. Geller," the general said, "I have been through this with the base commander many, many times. All we can

conclude, upon examining the evidence, is that Captain Geller's team . . ." He paused and sighed. "There is strong likelihood that human error was involved. We are all very, very sorry."

With that, the group of officers turned and exited quickly. Colonel Ben-Natan went with them.

Emptiness gnawed at Geller's insides, and tears streamed down his mother's cheeks as she clutched the framed document in her hands.

"My baby," she moaned, curling up into a ball.

Looking on helplessly, he felt a light touch.

Shoshana knelt beside him, her eyes red. "I'll take her, Yoni. Dr. Ashkenazi has been sent for." She coaxed Linda to her feet, helping her out of the room.

He made his way out onto the patio, where he was plunged into welcome darkness. How could his brother's crew have screwed up so badly? The corps took misfires very seriously, and the story contained at least five major protocol infractions.

"You bastard!"

He turned to find a red-faced Ben-Natan shaking with rage.

"You fucking bastard!" the colonel said, pointing at him. "How could you have done that to her? How?!"

Surprised by how little the older man's anger moved him, he said, "Doesn't any of this sound the least bit strange to you?"

The colonel shook his head in disgust. "Don't you get it? They screwed up. Did you want them to spell it out? In front of your mother?! A decent human being would have understood and left it at that. But not you – no, you had to go digging into the wound!"

Chapter 8

Wednesday, July 22, 1993

Colonel Ben-Natan's parting words still echoed in Geller's mind as he emerged from a near-narcotic slumber into an otherworldly quiet, like the aftermath of a great storm. No muted conversations, no doors opening, or water running.

He shuffled across the hallway, hesitated, and tapped on his mother's door.

"Mother?"

He rapped again. Finally, he twisted the handle, and the door swung inward to reveal a sparsely furnished master suite. In the center stood a full-sized bed in an antique, four-posted frame, its bedding covered with a taut, embroidered throw. The matching chest of drawers and vanity were draped with similar pearl-colored, tightly crocheted circulars that rustled in the sudden cross-breeze from the open balcony.

Stepping inside, he examined several yellowing oval photographs in polished silver frames, men and women attired in heavy European garb, their stoic faces captured against a floral studio backdrop. A lone ceramic vase on the vanity bore an arrangement of dried flowers. The space was otherwise void of articles of clothing, makeup, or magazines. The tiny adjoining washroom, with its sink, gleaming commode, and glass-enclosed shower, was equally bare – not a book, bottle of perfume, poster, or even a toothbrush in a cup.

Who lived here? The space was so utterly sterile. Not one current snapshot.

Then it occurred to him that the only photos recognizable to him in the entire house were the two of Danny in the great room.

What about his mother's cherished possessions? Where was the porcelain china doll in a silk red and black kimono that she had inherited from her grandmother, as well as the prized black-lacquered jewelry box with a plush ermine interior? She had always kept them by her bed stand in the apartment.

Stepping onto the small balcony, he peered down into the backyard garden, where the lawn furniture was moist with dew. Cultivated citrus trees obscured most of the stone wall, while beyond, the untended grove stretched as far as he could see – save a small clearing used as a helipad, its orange weather vane limp in the still air.

Geller made his way downstairs. The great room lay in darkness, the shuttered wall panels blocking all but the thinnest lines of rising sun. The drab foam mattress stood, as he had found it each morning, propped on end against its wall, the array of folding chairs piled with precision into a dining room corner.

“Mother?” he called, walking across the marble floor – cool, polished smoothness, wafting the clean aroma of lemons.

He found the breakfast nook also vacant, oak chairs tucked beneath their matching table, the empty coffee pot gleaming in its cradle. In the hall, he turned the deadbolts on

the heavy steel front door, then moved out onto the Jerusalem stone walkway, warmed by the morning rays.

Swinging open the portal, he found a large sign in bold, block, Hebrew letters:

Regrettably, the Ben-Natan family has been forced to suspend the Shiva services for Danny Geller due to Linda Ben-Natan's poor health. We appreciate your support.

Jonathan swore, kicking the gate shut with such force that it reverberated on its hinges. He gritted his teeth. So this was how it is going to be.

He thought of his friend, Gad, sitting bruised and emaciated – all those years ago – in the yard of the Tsriffin Stockade . . . *“They set the rules. You decide whether you want to play their game.”* He reflected on his brother and the other dead soldiers.

There was no conceivable way that crew had blown themselves up. No way!

He shut his eyes. He could still see the sweat rolling down Milo's brow. He took the creased envelope from his pocket and reexamined it, feeling his resolve harden. He stomped back into the house and threw his clothes into the old kitbag.

Summer, 1981

With Corporal Jonathan Geller nearby, Platoon Sergeant Moshe Aptick stood muttering as his men raced back in a valiant effort to fulfill one of his impossible tasks. Their boots pounded the rocky terrain, the sound echoing through the darkness of the surrounding hills. The hapless Chanich Toran – a recruit temporarily assigned to implement the staff's will – stood by, calling out time in a high, hysterical voice.

“Bitch, fucking bitch,” Aptick repeated over and over.

If Geller was to believe the base grapevine, and there was no reason not to, he knew Aptick and the base commander were double-dipping in the same honey-pot.

Soon, the first few soldiers crashed through the underbrush. A second wave followed, many doubled up from exertion while new sweat stains formed on their already filthy uniforms.

“Two minutes!” the Chanich Toran brayed.

Time was running out and most of the men had yet to arrive.

“Go back and help those stragglers,” Geller ordered, surveying the gasping platoon. Most averted their eyes. Some peered back, paralyzed. “Well! Do you want to be doing this all night?”

“No, sir!” A tall towhead stepped up. “Let’s go!” He dashed off into the darkness with four of his friends - a likable, close-knit clique, stronger and more capable than the rest.

“Chanich Toran, how much time is left?” Aptick growled.

“Ninety seconds, sir!”

“They’d better not be late.”

“No, sir!”

The eighteen-year-old turned, and, with what was left of his voice, shrieked at the others to hurry. The main body started to arrive. Heaving, they unslung their weapons, some toppling over, unable to support the weight of their backpacks.

“Oh, we can’t have this!” Aptick kicked one of the prostrate soldiers. “Get up!”

“Thirty seconds!” the Chanich Toran called out.

The towhead’s crew was returning, carrying a pair of weaker soldiers between them.

“Time?” Aptick bellowed.

“Ten seconds, sir! Nine, eight . . . Prepare to stand at attention. Attention!”

Most of Alef Platoon complied. Corporal Geller heard sporadic footfalls as the last few tried to slip into the ranks from behind. Aptick ran to catch them, skewering them with his 12-volt Maglite, and then pulled someone into the midst of the U-formation. It was the towhead, breathing heavily, carting another soldier over his shoulder.

“So what do we have here?”

“He’s twisted his ankle on a rock, sir,” the towhead said.

“Silence!” Aptick hit him on the back of his head. “Why, it looks like you’ve caught the runt of the litter. Shalom, Guetta!”

The sergeant grabbed Guetta by the back straps of his combat vest and tossed him from the towhead’s shoulder to the ground. Guetta landed with a thud, a thin cry escaping his lips. He was slight of build, his olive-colored skin nearly black on this starless, overcast night.

“Taking a break, are we?” Aptick laughed, prodding him with the tip of his boot. “Get him to his feet.”

The towhead lifted Guetta, who nursed his left ankle and tried to keep the tall soldier between him and the sergeant.

"Now get your ass back to the ranks!"

The towhead stood his ground, looking over to Geller.

"Move!" Aptick shouted, then shot deadly eyes at Geller.

Only after a slight nod from Corporal Geller did the tall soldier back away and take his place among his friends. A murmur swept through the ranks.

"Silence!" the sergeant howled. "Chanich Toran, it seems like we still have plenty of energy, so I want them to do it again. Five minutes up the hill and back."

The platoon groaned. No one moved.

"Please, people," the Chanich Toran croaked. "Four minutes and fifty seconds!"

A few turned and loped off. Reluctantly, the rest moved to obey, with even Guetta limping toward the hillside.

Aptick stepped in front of him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Th-the h-hill, sir." Guetta's eyes were wide with terror.

"I don't think so. Come along, Private. You and I and the very popular Corporal Geller here are going to have a nice chat." Aptick sounded almost affable as he put an arm around the man's shoulders. He waved over one of the other drill instructors.

"Sir?"

"Keep running them up and down that hill until they drop. Follow them halfway up to be sure they all make the top, or I'll roast you too."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Tell them this evening is a gift, a present from my good pal, Guetta." Aptick gave Guetta a hug. "Can I count on you to do that?"

The instructor nodded and left.

The three of them walked through the campsite, Guetta hopping along as best he could. The broken voice of the Chanich Toran could still be heard, urging the troops to go faster.

Geller followed the sergeant with growing apprehension.

What was Aptick up to?

They reached the unpaved track that led back toward the base. A large military truck idled in the darkness.

"Is Aptick around?" the driver yelled over the engine noise. "Oh, hi, Sarge. We've come to pack you up for return to base."

“You can start immediately with the staff tents and beds and the generator. We’ll carry the rest with us. Have the south gate manned and ready around two-hundred hours. We should be getting in by then.”

“Two-hundred hours? But Beit Platoon is expecting you back to do perimeter watch.”

“Change of plans. Tell them we owe them one.”

“They’re going to love that.” The driver shrugged and kicked the truck into gear. It crept away.

“Idiots,” Aptick muttered.

He led them deeper into a neighboring gully. The full moon, hidden for most of the evening behind a cloudbank, climbed to its apex and filled the ravine with a translucent silver light that made every stone and bush glow.

“Is it much farther?” Guetta complained, before Geller could stop him, “My ankle really hurts.”

“Not much further, good buddy.” Aptick chortled. “As a matter of fact, why don’t you stand right here.” The sergeant cocked his M16, pumping a round into the chamber.

“What are you doing?” Geller whispered.

Ignoring him, Aptick pulled out a fresh pack of cigarettes and offered one to Guetta. “Smoke?”

Guetta wiped his brow with a sleeve that was too long.

“Very smart. These things are terrible for your health.” Aptick lit up. “And I know better than to offer one to you, St. Yonatan.” He took a deep drag and blew it in Geller’s face.

Blood boiling, Jonathan unclenched his fists and counted slowly to ten.

Aptick’s lips twisted into an amused smile, then he turned his attention back to Guetta. “Anything else I can get you? Coffee? Tea? A blindfold?” In one swift motion, he brought up his rifle.

In horror, Corporal Geller heard the click of the safety being released, followed by two bursts of gunfire. Shattered debris sprayed up as the projectiles traveled a thousand meters per second, impacting rock at the private’s feet. Guetta gasped and fell forward, a stain spreading in the crotch of his pants.

Aghast, Geller ripped the assault rifle away from the gloating sergeant, and slammed the butt into his face. Aptick toppled backwards.

“Are you hurt?” Jonathan cried, rushing to the fallen private, who stared up with blank eyes. He ripped open the man’s tunic and checked for wounds.

“He’s not hit, you schmuck.” Aptick tottered up behind them, trying to staunch the blood from his nose with his hand. Guetta sat up, blinking like an owl but saying nothing, and Aptick cackled. “See? The son of a bitch just wet his pants.”

“Are you fucking insane?!” Geller was still in disbelief.

“No. You’re the one who’s insane. I’m going to have your ass thrown in jail for this!”

“Tell it to the board of inquiry.”

Aptick laughed. “Board of inquiry? You went insane and were shooting at this poor soldier. When I tried to intercede, you attacked me, too. Isn’t that what happened, Guetta?”

Guetta nodded, then crawled into a fetal position, rocking back and forth, his arms braced around his knees.

Chapter 9

“Ahuza, Haifa! Ahuza! All passengers for Ahuza please disembark.”

Geller bolted up in his padded seat. Through the tinted windows of the inter-city liner, he could make out the tip of the University of Haifa’s Eshkol Tower over the rise behind them. Ahuza was the southernmost of neighborhoods perched on a line of hilltops belonging to the Carmel Mountain Range. It boasted breathtaking views of the lower city and of the harbor to the northeast, while the southwestern side overlooked the sandy Mediterranean coastline for miles in each direction.

Haifa, with its hills and ocean vistas, had always seemed alien to him. Dubbed “The Red City,” the country’s high-tech center still maintained its character as the consummate blue-collar town. Government-subsidized industries abounded – the port, the iron works and oil refineries, smokestacks spewing pollutants into the atmosphere.

After struggling to his feet, he followed a handful of riders to the rear door, dragging his heavy bag – thump, thump, thump – down the steps behind him.

Geller filled his nostrils with a salty sea tang. The faint pulse of music wafted down from a balcony hewn into marble and glass walls that towered above the intersection.

He grimaced at the sight of his own reflection – wrinkled shirt, disheveled hair, and bloodshot, puffy eyes staring back at him. Oh, what he would give for a shower, shave, and ten minutes with his electric toothbrush.

From his pocket, he removed the well-creased slip of paper. He found a nearby pay phone, dropped a token into the slot, and punched in six numbers. It rang and rang and rang, until he slammed the earpiece onto its cradle.

A second bus pulled away with a hiss, the last of its riders dispersing from the curbside.

“Excuse me. Does anyone know where Seminar Thirteen is?”

One man shook his head, beating a quick retreat.

“I know a little bistro a couple of blocks up the street,” an older woman said. “Local folk, not like this lot.” She waved her hand toward the mall. “Ask there.”

Shouldering his heavy kitbag, Geller trudged the main Ahuza artery as it ascended the hill’s broad shoulders. The neighborhood unfolded around him. Small shops and storefronts hugged the narrow roadway. Behind these, in the midst of great hoary trees, rows of low-rise apartments lurked, probably pre-’67 construction. Glimpses of the port and lower downtown industrial area flitted in and out through gaps in the leafy bowers.

He located the street café on the eighth block, tucked into the right hand corner of a single-story commercial building that adjoined a small bank branch. The café’s front window featured a cork board crammed with ads: apartment for rent, seeking roommate, looking for a fourth commuter, puppies for sale, etc.

Two apron-clad waiters bustled about the busy sidewalk tables. “We’re full,” one of them said without stopping. “Come back in half an hour.”

“I’m looking for the Ahuza Military Literacy Seminar.”

The shorter man stopped and rubbed his chin. Paunchy and balding, he had earrings hanging in a half crescent around his right earlobe.

“The Military Literacy Seminar,” Geller repeated.

“I know that place,” the other waiter said. He had a large Buddha tattoo on his shoulder, and a tight braid ran down to the small of his back. “They’re on break now.”

Geller frowned. “Do you know where it is?”

“I think so. It’s a few blocks up, on the western slope. A bit hard to see through all those trees and bushes, but it shouldn’t be too much of a problem if you’re on foot.”

Ten minutes of steady climbing led him to a quaint roundabout adorned with a fountain that held several heavily oxidized bronze lions at its center. He stood, watching the water trickle down the creatures' green manes.

An old cab sputtered by, its diesel engine spewing soot. The driver slowed, looking his way. Sorry. Jonathan waved him on. Frowning, the driver peeled away in disgust.

Back at you bud, Geller thought irritably.

Taking the left fork, he descended a side street. He drew in the woody scent of trees encroaching upon rows of modest two- and three-story apartments, as though the Carmel Forest hoped to wrest back the hills from man's dominion. Crickets and other creatures struck up an impromptu chorus, their calls intensifying as he moved into deepening shade. Soon, even the outlines of buildings were obscured by the woods, and the pavement dissolved into shadows.

Groping along for a hundred meters or so, he almost stumbled headfirst into a metal gate left open across the sidewalk. A weak yellow bulb hummed to life, illuminating a sign that hung precariously above the gateway.

“Seminar 13,” it read, the block letters braced between the emblems of the IDF and the Education Corps.

Well, well, he thought, peering with satisfaction past the bars, making out the silhouette of a wooden guard booth.

“Is anyone there?”

He pulled open the gate and passed unchallenged beneath the sign. Well, of all the peacetime, Mickey Mouse soldiering. The booth contained an old desk, a chair, and a dead field telephone. At least the ambiance was familiar – the whole area reeked of stale urine.

Geller stopped in his tracks and listened. The wind blowing down from the summit behind him had shifted. He heard nearby voices. He followed the access road until the hazy twilight pierced the gloom. A wooded clearing opened onto an asphalt-covered parade ground flanked by two prefabricated structures. An unmarked commercial van was pulled up to the building on the right, which featured inline offices, whose doors all opened onto a common walkway. Three men in street clothes were carting away boxes and file cabinets from one of the offices.

“Is that the last of it?” someone called from the van.

“Just about.” The men reemerged carrying a bed frame, mattress, and a personnel locker, which they tossed into the

back of the vehicle. “Go!” one of them shouted, climbing aboard.

Wheels squealed, and the white van shot forward. Quickly it was on top of Geller, forcing him to jump clear as it roared past.

“Maniacs!” He shook his fists at the settling dust.

Probably petty thieves doing a smash and grab on the poorly guarded base. Grumbling, he shouldered his bag again and crossed the courtyard.

A shout filled the air. A door in the other structure opened, and a fatigue-clad figure stumbled out. “Vanya, you are right,” he said. “Those bastards have left.” He then gagged and vomited onto the platform.

Laughter erupted from the room behind him.

Another man staggered out, holding a bucket in one hand and a bottle in the other. He was short and wiry, with a receding hairline. “Some lookout you are! Can’t take your medicine, blad.” His Hebrew, also, was thick with a Russian accent. “Next time we should get them to take you away.” He took a swig from the bottle and offered it to his fallen companion.

“Nyet, nyet,” the man groaned, pushing himself into a sitting position.

“Horosho.” The wiry man cackled, putting down the bottle. “Maybe you want another kind of drink, my friend.” Grasping the bucket with two hands, he cast a sheet of water into the face of his comrade, drenching his fatigues, and washing most of the mess onto the ground.

Another fit of laughter exploded from the room, as the wiry man discarded the bucket, retrieved his drink, and lifted the bottle in a toast. At that moment, his eyes rose and met Geller’s. He turned pale and nearly choked, the bottle slipping from his hand, shattering on the wooden platform.

“Boss,” he cried in a hoarse voice.

“Vanya, what is it?” Heads appeared in the doorway. Several others emerged and stood gaping.

“Boss,” the man exclaimed again, face contorted with fear.

Geller shook his head.

The man blinked, still unable to comprehend. “You are brother, yes? I thought I saw a ghost,” he said, regaining his composure. “Please excuse. Too much drink.” He turned and snapped something in Russian, sending the others scurrying. “I am Vanya.” He bowed slightly. “Everyone very sad to learn

horrible news. Your brother, a good, good man. I am – how you say? – groundskeeper, yes? I student here last year, part of group – Russians, Ethiopians, Moroccans – all need help reading, writing, yes? After finished, went to army – six months and out. After, no get work. Look for many months. One day I come visit, and your brother, God bless, offer job.”

Geller suppressed a caustic remark, glancing about the place. “Your Hebrew is very good for such a short time,” he said diplomatically.

“I pick up here and there in Moscow, before I leave Russia. No work there, either.” He shrugged.

“Who were those men with the van?”

“Military police.” Vanya spat onto the parade ground. “Kurva! They come every day, ask questions. Today they ask where commander room is.” He waved across the courtyard toward the smaller building. “They want know if boss ever drunk, ever drink vodka with Vanya or Vanya friends. Then they asking about drugs.”

Geller’s eyes narrowed. In days, the whole damn army would be circulating this story.

“No worry,” the groundskeeper said. “I say, ‘Never! Boss never drink, never, never!’ He smash bottles. Good stuff, cost me fifteen U.S. dollars!”

Grunting, Jonathan tried to read those dark, bloodshot eyes. He wished Lova was here – then they’d get at the truth. “Show me his room,” he snapped, motioning at the other structure.

They crossed the small quad, with the white shores of the Mediterranean peeking through dense trees to the west.

“Here.”

Vanya stepped onto the rough porch, wood groaning underfoot. They stopped before the rightmost door, battered and scarred, its chipped green paint standing out against the sand-colored exterior of the office unit.

This was the one, Geller thought, the room the MPs had worked on. “Open it.”

The groundskeeper nudged the door inward. With wide eyes, he looked back at Jonathan. The room had a faded tile floor, dirty whitewashed walls, and a single bulb dangling from a black wire. It was entirely barren.

“They take everything!” Vanya exclaimed. “Boss leave stuff: posters, pictures, book. Now all gone, even bed!”

Geller dropped his duffel on the floor. Danny’s room, he told himself, and a cold shudder ran through him. That

distinctive army smell – part sweat, part gun oil, part dust – permeated everything. He placed a hand on the wall and shut his eyes. He imagined his brother on his cot, hands tucked behind his head, gazing up at the ceiling.

Geller's anger rekindled.

Why the questions about booze and drugs? Why take all of Danny's things? What the fuck was going on?

He focused on a stain on the ceiling and began a breathing pattern learned in a meditation class taken after his father's death. Minutes elapsed before his calm returned.

"Tell me, Vanya, do you know Michal?"

"Michal? Yes. She boss' secretary and friend. They very good friends," the man added with a lecherous grin. "Very beautiful, Michal. Red hair, green eye . . ."

The girl from the cemetery!

Geller fought back an impulse to smack him. "Is she around?" he demanded.

"No. Nobody here now, all home. Come back Sunday, except Michal, done with army, yes? Two years, no more. Go home, yes?"

"Do you know how she can be reached?"

Vanya shrugged. "Sorry, no. I not sure where. All girls live close, come every day on bus."

"Do you know her last name?"

Vanya shook his head.

Damn! Geller kicked at the floor, and then a thought occurred to him. "Do you have keys to all these offices?"

The Russian groundskeeper gave him a quizzical look, before a knowing smile spread across his face.

Chapter 10

Thank goodness for military bureaucracy.

With Vanya's help, Geller discovered that Michal Kiryati had been born in Afula, a town in the Izrael Valley, in 1973, had no siblings, and her address of record was in Nesher – one of the city's northern neighborhoods that bordered on refineries and a large quarry.

He rummaged through other files, hoping to find something on his brother, but this was less successful.

Bidding farewell and good riddance to the Russian groundskeeper, he rode three crowded city buses, the last of

which deposited him at the bottom of a hovering slope. The signpost told him this was Havatselet Street.

Shielding his eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun, he began to climb, the duffel growing heavier with each step. To his left, refinery towers rose from the valley. Noxious clouds of blue smoke spouted into the heavy pall that hung over the townships between Haifa's northern reaches and the ancient port city of Acre. Further north, barely visible in the smog, the resort town of Nahariya sparkled like a jewel along the great scythe of the fading shoreline. On clearer days one could see as far as the white cliffs of Rosh Hanikra, on the Lebanese border.

Sweating, Geller watched the bay disappear as new apartment buildings rose around him. Pausing to catch his breath, he peered over the sidewalk railing, a three-story plunge from this street level to the base of the lower rampart. A swatch of greenery and immature plantings separated the stone retaining wall and the buildings' ground level pillars. The flats, their slotted exterior blinds drawn against the heat, appeared small and inexpensive. On tiptoes, he inspected the antennae and solar panels that glistened above tar coatings on the rooftops.

As he turned to move on, a small car roared up the street and came to an abrupt stop beside him. A tan young woman emerged, dressed in a bathing suit and beach wrap, her bare feet and legs still flecked with sand.

She eyed him with open curiosity. "Efshar la'azor lecha?"

"Number thirteen?"

"Third building after this one." She pointed up the hill. "I'll show you where the stairs are."

Geller followed. Occasionally, she glanced back at him. Wiping sweat from his eyes, he struggled for nearly fifty paces until they reached a stone stairway that wound into the garden below.

"All the way to the bottom. The one on the left." The woman smiled. "I live in eleven, apartment fifteen. Give me a buzz if you need anything."

He thanked her, then made the long descent into welcome shade. A tiled pathway forked at the foot of the steps. Going left, he came upon the building entrance, where a round lamp showed this to be Thirteen Havatselet.

"Kiryati," he muttered, examining the names on neat rows of mailboxes embedded into the concrete facade.

A strip of sticky tape read, “Kiryati, Unit 16,” in bold letters. Fourth floor. He stepped into the stairwell, groping for a small plastic panel. An anemic light illuminated the faux marble stairs, a mixture of sea pebbles in a smooth white matrix. The bare cement walls bore wood grain markings, like the fossilized remains of an ancient forest.

While Geller was negotiating the narrow landing on the second floor, the lights flickered and drowned him again in blackness. Dust particles swirled along a thin line of sunlight that filtered from above. He reached the last landing, heard shuffling inside one of the two topmost units. The lights came back on, and he knew someone was watching through the peephole.

“Mi sham?” a raspy voice called from within.

“I’m looking for Michal Kiryati,” he said.

“Go away. Don't you people ever stop?”

What people? he wondered. “My name is Jonathan. I am Danny Geller's brother.”

“One moment!” A key turned and the deadbolt sprang open, revealing a bent, graying man in the doorway. He peered at his guest over ill-fitting silver spectacles, then looked nervously about the landing. “Come in, come in. Quickly.”

Geller stepped inside, heard the door lock behind him.

The man, walking with great difficulty, ushered him into a small living room. “I am Nachum, Michal’s father,” he said. He moved a pile of books from the sofa to a matching coffee table. “Leave your things by the door . . . Yes, this way. Please, have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Please.”

Geller shed his bag and sat down, watching the sun set on the northern valley. Pollutants roiled from acres of chimneys, like froth from a thousand cauldrons.

He turned his attention back to the modest flat, where a stained dinette covered most of the opposite wall. There, amid mostly faded portraits, the image of a young woman showed a red mane, full and flowing, and piercing green eyes that sparkled intelligently above pale, freckled skin.

Those eyes. Geller felt caught by them.

Nachum hobbled back from the kitchen carrying a tray of refreshments. “Our daughter is quite striking, isn’t she?” He picked up the photo, ran his fingers over the frame. “My wife, Ahuva, and I came to Israel as part of the Youth Aliyah in the late thirties . . .”

Only fourteen and twelve years old respectively, they had left their lives and families in Europe, never to see them again. They settled in separate kibbutzim in the Beit She'an Valley, and met a few years later during the War of Independence. They married in '49. For almost twenty-five years, they tried to have a child but we were never able to conceive.

Then, at the age of forty-two, they had their miracle.

“Ahuva laughed at the news, just like Sarah, Abraham's wife, laughed.” Nachum removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “The hospital in Afula insisted she abort the pregnancy, but she refused. Six months before the Yom Kippur War, we had a healthy baby girl.” The old man sighed, setting the picture back in its place. “Forgive me for going on. The last few days have been very, very trying.” He handed Geller a glass. “Did you get up from Shiva this morning? What is it today, Wednesday? You couldn't have been sitting for more than a couple of days.”

“My mother's health . . .”

“I understand. From what Michali told us, your brother was a good boy. He will be deeply missed.”

Geller nodded, drawn again to the photo. “Is she home?”

Nachum's expression darkened. “Not since the funeral.”

Geller studied him for a moment. “You seemed anxious about opening the door. Has anyone else been by looking for your daughter?”

The old man shuddered. “Investigators, or at least that's what they called themselves. They weren't wearing uniforms. They flashed IDs in our faces. Came in with dogs and took her room apart. I haven't seen or heard from them or Michali since.”

Jonathan realized he had been grinding his teeth. Could these be the same people who raided the Seminar? What were they looking for? What did the girl know?

“It is very important that I find her,” he said. “You must have some idea where she might be.”

Nachum Kiryati shrugged. “We assumed she was staying with a friend from the base. But when the girls dropped by the other day, asking about her, we realized she was not. My wife may know more. She should be home for dinner soon.” He got up heavily. “You will stay, won't you?”

“I couldn't . . .” Geller tried to object.

“Nonsense. I insist. Why don't you put your things in Michali's room. I'll call you when we are ready to eat.”