

CHAPTER 1

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER?

SOUTH LEBANON, TUESDAY, MARCH 1, 1983

There's an old saying in Lebanese Arabic. "Happy is he who has a goat shelter on Mount Lebanon." You might think it a bit odd. But it certainly speaks to me. Even though it's based in the north and center of Lebanon and I'm far away down in the south. It's telling us that there is nothing better in life than being in the great outdoors. And preferably tending to your flock. I agree. That's how I am growing up in Lebanon, a simple goat herder, tending to my father's massive herd. At one time, we had no less than 1500 head of cattle. Actually, you might well say that I'm already grown up. I am, after all, 19 years of age and married with a wife who is about to give birth to our first child. Still, I feel more of a child goat herder than a fully grown man.

My name is Ibrahim Yassin. Lebanese, Muslim, Shiite. My life is out in the fields, shepherd's crook in hand, tending to my grazing goats.



I'm driving an unmarked and battered Mercedes. Really enjoying the countryside of southern Lebanon, where deep gorges and reddish mountains merge seamlessly into one another. The air is filled with the scent of vivid pink blossoms, their fragrance an early indicator of spring approaching. Lebanon might well be a troubled land, but it didn't acquire its reputation as "the pearl of the Middle East" for no reason. I'm Tzachi Barkat and leading a two-vehicle convoy from Beirut towards the Ras Al Naqoura Crossing, the international border between Naqoura in south Lebanon and Rosh HaNikra, one of the most northerly points in Israel.

I'm a captain in the Israeli army, veteran of the Six-Day War and many other conflicts. But you wouldn't know any of that from looking at me – I'm operating undercover and dressed so as not to stand out from the crowd – jeans, trainers, sweatshirts. My dark green bruised Mercedes, its roof rack laden with crates of freshly picked olives and oranges from Beirut's bustling main souk – all packed somewhat chaotically on its rusty old roof rack – seems to be very familiar with Lebanon's poorly-maintained network of roads. I like to think that I sound like a local too – my Arabic as fluent and flowing as the next man. Well almost.

I cross the Litani River, which coils its way like a serpent through the fertile Beqaa Valley and cautiously approach the village of Delfafe. This place is pretty much run by local armed Shia militias – and as such not the friendliest of environments for an Israeli intelligence officer. As I climb towards the village I see some people desperately trying to flag me down, apparently in great distress. There are men standing on rooftops, some waving brightly colored handkerchiefs. The adrenaline kicks in. A real emergency or an ambush? I can't be sure. I halt the convoy. There are 8 men under my command. A couple of minutes pass. Nothing. Surveying the surrounding landscape, I am relieved to spot no potential aggressors but instead trusted allies a few hundred meters away – around a dozen military

vehicles belonging to the Israel Defense Forces – the IDF. So, the danger has passed? Time to let down my guard? Certainly not.

The presence of the IDF in south Lebanon, and occasionally beyond, is part and parcel of what we Israelis call “Operation Peace for Galilee” but which some locals refer to as “the invasion.” If these guys are going to shoot, I think, then surely they are going to be aiming their fire at the army, not us. After all, they don’t know who we are. In theory, at least. I hope and pray that I am making the right call. I have a wife and kids to get back to.

“Listen up!” I tell my team. “Guns ready, two teams of four, on foot – we’re going to make our way to the house where all the noise is coming from. Make sure you can’t be seen. As best you can. *Yalla* – go.”

I’m not proud of my decision. I know it runs counter to a number of army rules and regulations. The teams set off quietly. There is no shooting. We remain on high alert, providing cover for one another as we advance slowly towards the source of the commotion – the door of a dirt-poor concrete home. Its apparent that a chaotic scene is taking place behind that door.

A young woman, fearful and in great pain, is deep in labor and clearly close to giving birth. There are no other women around to help. A Muslim woman is meant to be supported by other women – ideally her mother or grandmother – but all I see are men.

“Her name is Diba,” a bearded local elder informs me.

Diba is in her own space, her own world, kneeling on a straw mattress on the concrete floor. A solitary light bulb in the center of the ceiling casts shadows on a haphazard system of unfinished electrical wiring.

“You are a doctor? You can help?” she asks between contractions. Desperation and fear are written over her olive-skinned face.

“Everybody out,” I bellow. “Get me a blanket – and water.” I tell the last man to depart.

Despite the bravado and machismo of the IDF and my own background as a Navy Seal, I’m actually rather shy. I would never be so bold as to claim that I’m the right man at the right time – just the

only person present who might be able to help out in an emergency. For although I'm now a career soldier in the Intelligence Unit of the IDF, I grew up on Kibbutz Dan – a collective farm situated in the Hula Valley at the foot of Mount Hermon. Millions of migrating birds pass through every year, not so very far from where I'm standing right now. You could say the fact that the kibbutz was founded some four decades earlier by Jewish farmers from Transylvania was good news for Diba and myself. Because it meant that I spent much of my childhood working with the cows in the kibbutz's rather odorous cowsheds. It's where I first helped to deliver and then delivered alone more calves than I care to remember. Of course, the birth of a calf and a baby are not the same thing – but I'd always been told that they're not a million miles removed.

“It's okay, Diba,” I say, “we are going to get through this together.” It's clear from my demeanor and slightly accented Arabic that I'm not a local, but she is not in the least concerned. She has other matters on her mind. She takes a sip of water.

I do my best to speak calmly. Even though I can feel my own heart rate going through the roof.

“Relax. Breathe deeply. Trust me. Everything is going to work out fine.”

It seems as if I am her best shot at help. Make that her only shot. Not that I have any medical equipment on me at all, not even surgical gloves. Just a Leatherman, similar to a Swiss army knife – that, my knowledge from the kibbutz's cowsheds, and my bare hands. As her labor intensifies, she begins to scream.

“*Yamma, yamma, yamma,*” she yells – “oh, mother.”

Another contraction. Then another.

“The baby is coming Diba. Take a deep breath. Listen to me now. Take a deep breath. And push now, push,” I say.

I catch a glimpse of jet-black hair on the baby's head, and barely a few seconds later, I see the shoulders emerging. More contractions. Suddenly, the baby is out.

“*Ya elahе, ya elahе* – oh my god,” the newest mother in the world exclaims, “*ya elahе* – my baby.”

She seems unable to distinguish between the sweat from her brow and the tears from her eyes. They merge to find a single salty pathway into the corners of her mouth. She is exhausted, elated, and relieved that her ordeal is over. So am I. I clean up the baby as best I can, wrapping him securely in a shabby old blanket and placing the newborn on his mother’s tummy.

But now I’m running into difficulty myself. A baby calf has an umbilical cord. Which breaks away naturally during delivery – here mother and baby are still attached. I don’t know what to do – how or when to cut the cord.

I instruct my men to fetch a transmitter from the army convoy nearby. I know there is always a doctor on call at the IDF’s main base in the town of Marjayoun. Marjayoun – “Meadow of Springs” – a poetic description masking both its violent past and present. A Dr. Hanan picks up. I tell him what has happened and that I am in the village of Dellafe.

“What about the umbilical cord?” The medic talks me through the cutting.

“You’ve done well. But now do nothing,” he says. “Just swaddle the baby and leave him on the mother. I’m getting in the chopper and will be with you in four to five minutes. Hang on in there – I’m on my way.”

Dr. Hanan arrives and examines Diba. He makes a decision right away: she is to be evacuated by the same helicopter to the obstetric department of the Rambam Hospital in Haifa, the foremost center of medical excellence in the north of Israel. I would never claim to be a great thinker. But I cannot help but reflect that the medieval Sephardic philosopher Moses ben Maimon or Maimonides – Rambam is the acronym – would have given a resounding thumbs up to Dr. Hanan’s decision. To assist a Lebanese Muslim woman in distress and helicopter her off to a hospital in modern-day Israel. And with that, I know that my caring for Diba is done. I let her know what is going to happen and say goodbye.

“*Shukran, shukran,*” she says repeatedly, holding her baby boy protectively. “Thank you. I hope that one day our paths will cross again.”

“Me too.”

I like to think that my training in intelligence and language is thorough. But nothing prepared me for that. I return with my team to the parked Mercedes, and we continue on our way to Rosh HaNikra.

“Not what you were expecting when we were first flagged down,” Uri, one of my youngest conscripts ventures.

I exhale heavily. “A day to remember, for sure.”



I still go along with what the village elders have always said –that the fresh air of the countryside is good for your heart, good for your health and good for your soul. Lebanese or otherwise. Goat-herding might sound like a leisure activity, but it’s not. For most of the day I’m alone and at the mercy of the elements, my eyes and ears constantly scanning the terrain. The goats are all safe? Any sign of danger?

I’m heading home after a tough day in the countryside when a middle-aged man from our village approaches. What does he want? One of my father’s goats perhaps?

“There’s been much excitement in Dellafe today,” he informs me, “a helicopter suddenly appeared from nowhere and landed nearby.”

Ya salam, I think, goodness, the Israeli army must be after a particular person – a terrorist perhaps. If that’s the case, then I’m all in favor. Because ever since the Palestinians set foot on Lebanese soil some years ago there’s been nothing but murder and mayhem, the tranquility of our lives turned upside down.

As I enter the village, people are waving at me as if I have won a prize of some kind. “*Mabrouk – mabrouk, Ibrahim. Congratulations.*”

“What for? What’s going on?”

“You have a son!”

“What? What are you telling me? The baby’s come?” I can’t believe my ears. I’m beside myself with joy. “I must see them right away. My Diba, my son.”

And I speed up my pace towards home.

“*Aala mahlaq* – hang on, Ibrahim, hang on. They’re not here.”

“Not in Dellafe? What do you mean? Where are they? I need to see my wife and son.”

“They’ve been flown off by helicopter, an Israeli helicopter, and are at some hospital in Hayfa.”

“What are you telling me?” I raise my hands to my head in disbelief.

Just as well, then, that my older brother Ali is enlisted in the South Lebanese Army – and based in Marjayoun. The SLA is Israel’s primary ally in Lebanon and is active in fighting against various groups including the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Amal Movement, and the emerging Hezbollah. Not that I’m interested in Lebanese politics. All I know is that in practical terms it means Ali will be able to drive south and pick up my wife and baby. It’s only an hour or so away.

Two days later, they are home. Both are fine, *alhamdulillah*, thank God.

It takes me just a few seconds to choose a fitting name for my son. Mohammed. After his miraculous entry into the world, I feel the need to show gratitude to the founder of Islam himself. It’s the least I can do.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16, 1983

The Israeli army is well aware that I am fluent in Arabic. With this in mind, they approached me three years or so ago to see if I might be interested in intelligence. We soldiers who grew up on Israel’s *kibbutzim* typically excel in the army – becoming commandos, parachutists, pilots – and are disproportionately represented in

just about every elite unit. My theory is it's because a *kibbutznik's* education is far removed from city life – we live as a community, learning to work together and help one another. I am happy to be in intelligence – it's different from the work of a commando. That more physical training is no doubt helpful. But working in intelligence is to inhabit another world. There are courses in psychological warfare. You have to know how to speak to people. You want to bring people on to your side, to recruit spies and agents. So, now, in southern Lebanon, I am spending a lot of time in the field, studying people. I'm constantly on the lookout for someone who might be willing to help. Not just anyone. Not just someone for the sake of it. I am looking for a person who is deeply familiar with the local landscape. Someone sharp. Alert. Courageous and quick-thinking. Such individuals are few and far between.

It's a blustery day. I am driving around the southern Lebanese countryside. My attention is drawn toward an athletic young man herding a huge flock of goats. Pulling over to one side, I get out my binoculars and observe how the man conducts himself, how he chooses a route to reach the herd, how he gathers them by throwing rocks, each landing exactly where he wants it to, the goats reacting precisely as he wishes. I see that he's totally in charge. Might this man have the agility and precision that I am looking for? He clearly knows the landscape, every twist and turn of the countryside. A phrase in Arabic springs to mind – *ibn el balad* – a natural-born local. I honk the horn of my old Merc. But the young man cannot hear because of the wind.

I leave the vehicle and approach him. “*Al salam alaykum* – how are you doing?”

“*Wa alaykum al salam*,” the young goat herder replies, startled at my unexpected appearance.

“If it's a goat you are after, you'll have to speak to my father.”

“No, it's not that. Tell me – what's your name?”

I offer a cigarette, which is gratefully accepted.

“I'm Ibrahim. Ibrahim Yassin. My job is to look after these goats. I'm from Dellafe.”

“Huh,” I reply. “I was in Dellafe recently myself. You are married?”

“I am,” Ibrahim affirms proudly. “And my wife gave birth to our first-born, a son, a couple of weeks ago. His name is Mohammed.”

“Really? *Mabrouk* – congratulations. Tell me – it was a hospital birth?”

“All I know is that there was an emergency and the Israeli army helped out. A helicopter came and landed nearby.”

“And you know the name of the person who brought your baby into the world?”

“No. I wish I did.”

“Well, I do.”

“Really? How come?”

“Because it was me. I delivered your son.”

At which point you could be forgiven for thinking that the joyous religious festivals of Sukkot and Eid al-Fitr had miraculously combined. With a fast and furious round of *shukrans*, Ibrahim showers me with hugs and kisses.

“Please, please, come to my home. You must meet the whole family. We want to thank you properly.”

By which time, I am beginning to think, “You know what, Tzachi – you might just have found your man.”