

House Divided

A Novel

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ISBN-13: 9780985036645**

New York City: Thursday, March 15

“You did what?” Leonard Robbins asked his daughter, not sure he heard right due to the din in the Manhattan restaurant where he and his wife were celebrating Courtney’s twentieth birthday.

“I said I joined Students for Palestinian Justice.”

Leonard threw his hands into the air. “Why?”

“You’re the one who taught me to root for the underdog.”

“The Palestinians like to pretend they’re the underdog, but don’t ask them what they’re doing with all the money they get from us, the United Nations, Qatar, and even from Israel.”

“But, Dad, the Palestinians are not occupying Israeli territory.”

“Courtney, you should know the history of that region better before—”

“Len, not now,” Alison Robbins said, placing her hand on her husband's arm. “It's neither the time nor the place.”

Leonard frowned, but deferred to his wife. “You’re right. Sorry.”

The silence that followed was not broken until three members of the restaurant wait-staff arrived, one with a candle in a large cupcake. Leonard detected a look of annoyance from his daughter, as if she thought this was another example of their treating her like a child. Yet, she couldn’t help but smile when the waiter lit the candle and led a rendition of the happy birthday song.

Courtney puffed up her cheeks and blew out the candle to applause from diners at nearby tables.

Alison Robbins removed a small gift-wrapped package from her pocketbook and handed it across the table. "Happy twentieth."

Courtney slid the ribbon off the package and tore the wrapping paper off the box. It was a dark blue velvet jewelry store box. She extracted a set of four silver bracelets.

"Mom, you shouldn't have."

"Those were the ones you wanted, right?" Alison asked.

Courtney nodded. She put them on and raised her arm to show them off.

Leonard waited a few seconds before he pulled an envelope out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her. "Just don't donate any of this to the Palestinians."

Courtney opened the envelope. "Thanks, Dad. In other words, they can have my body, but not my money?"

"When you put it that way, I'm not sure which is worse," Leonard said.

"Enough, you two," Alison said. She waved down the waiter. "We should be getting back to the hotel. I'm sure your father wants to go over his talk one more time."

"I do," Leonard said.

"You're not nervous, are you, Dad?"

He chuckled. "Hardly. Besides, you probably have some school work to do."

"Not on my birthday! Sue Philips is waiting for me. We're going out."

"Then we won't detain you any longer," Leonard said.

"Should I hail a cab?" Courtney asked.

"No need, dear," her mother replied. "We drove over in our van, but you can help

your father maneuver his wheelchair out the front door while I pay the bill.”

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“How’d it go with your dad?”

Courtney Robbins turned around. It was Doreen Rupert, a tall brunette from her International Politics class. “Join us,” she said, motioning for Doreen to pull up a chair.

“Doreen, this is my roommate Sue Philips. Sue, Doreen.”

That morning Courtney had mentioned to Doreen that that her parents were coming to town to take her out to dinner.

“Lucky you,” Doreen had ventured.

“I’m not so sure,” Courtney replied.

“What do you mean?”

“My dad can be a little overbearing. He’s always asking questions about every thing I do.”

“Dads can get that way,” Doreen said.

“Yours, too?”

“I wish mine came with a remote.”

Courtney chuckled remembering Doreen’s comment. She’d have to remember that one.

Courtney showed off her new bracelets when Doreen returned to their table. “I got these from my mom.”

Doreen took a close look. “Nice.”

“And a check from my dad.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Doreen said.

“Now I can stay in the city for the summer.”

“Dads are good for something,” Sue said. “Mine is always ragging on me for my clothes and hair, but he pays the tuition on time.”

Doreen saluted her with her drink. “There you go.”

“On the other hand, my dad isn’t happy about my joining the campus SPJ group,” Courtney said.

“Your family’s not Jewish, are they?” Doreen asked.

“It’s not that. I guess he doesn’t buy the idea that Israel is in the wrong.”

“Did you explain?”

“My mom stopped the conversation.”

Doreen raised her glass. “You survived!”

“No doubt he’ll bring it up the next time we talk.”

Doreen nodded. “Show him some of the pictures on SPJ website and ask him to read some of the stories about families forced to abandon houses they’d lived in for decades.”

“Good suggestion. He can be so stubborn, but that’s not going to stop me!”

“Good for you, Courtney. You’re how old—twenty-one?”

“Just twenty.”

Doreen shrugged her shoulders. “Still, you’re your own person. You get to decide what you believe.”

“Here, here,” the roommate echoed.

Courtney downed the last of her margarita. “I still wish he trusted me more.”

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Two days later, Alison Robbins handed Leonard her cell phone. They were waiting

for their van in the lobby of the Regency Hotel. Alison had called her daughter to let her know that they were driving back upstate.

“How did your talk go, Dad?”

“Fine. I told them what they didn’t want to hear and they told me all the reasons I’m wrong.”

“You always say people don’t like to face the truth.”

Leonard laughed. “Speaking of which we need to talk about the BDS movement. When are you coming up to Albany?”

“Never, since you put it that way.”

“I fell into that one, didn’t I?”

Alison reached for the phone. “Len. Please don’t lecture her.”

Leonard shrugged. “Okay, Court dear. Just promise me that you’ll use that brain of yours to test out whatever bunk they try to sell you.”

“Only if you do the same, Dad,” Courtney replied.

Leonard was quiet on the three-hour ride back to Albany. He told himself not to worry about Courtney’s having joined Students for Palestinian Justice. At some point she was bound to see through the group’s moral failings, but he wondered if she had chosen that group because she knew he’d disapprove.

Is this just a growing up game she’s playing? The problem is people get hurt when not everyone is playing by the same set of rules.