

CHAPTER 1

1967—IN THE AIR OVER GALILEE

MORDECHAI GUR SAT ON THE FLOOR of a Douglas DC-3 aircraft, his back braced against the forward bulkhead. Originally built to carry passengers, the plane had been reconfigured for cargo service. Stripped of anything that hinted at civilian accommodation, its frame exposed to the outer skin, it had a steel floor with cleats for securing freight and oversized doors in the back, one of which had been removed.

With Gur that evening was a platoon of young, freshly trained paratroopers about to make their first nighttime jump. They were seated down both sides of the fuselage, backs against the wall, knees against their chest, and their eyes focused on the floor. No one spoke. No one smiled. No one looked around.

Born in Jerusalem, Gur had lived in Israel all his life. At the age of sixteen, he volunteered for service with Haganah, an early pre-independence defense militia. Later, in 1948, he served with the newly formed Israel Defense Forces in the War of Independence. When fighting came to an end he found he enjoyed military life and decided to make it his career. He trained as a paratrooper, worked in counterintelligence, and rose steadily through the ranks, becoming adjutant to the brigade commander. From there he went to Paris where he studied military tactics and the history of warfare. When he returned to Israel, he was promoted to the rank of colonel and placed in charge of the Fifty-Fifth Paratrooper Brigade, a position that gave him battlefield command and one in which he flourished.

As brigade commander, Gur didn't have to be there for the jump that night. He could have remained home with his wife, enjoying dinner and a relaxing moment with her. But trouble was brewing between Israel and its neighbors. War wasn't far off. No one said so explicitly—there'd been no meetings or memos on the topic—but Gur knew it. He sensed it. He felt it. And if war was coming, he wanted his men to be ready at a moment's notice for any eventuality. So he sat with them that evening, full pack on his back, a parachute strapped to his chest, the drone of the plane's engines in his ears, waiting for the signal to jump from the safety of the plane into the cool night air.

Twenty minutes into the flight, the jumpmaster, a tall, rangy soldier from Haifa, rose from his place on the floor near the rear of the plane, attached a tether from a harness at his waist to a hook on the aircraft's frame near the open doorway, and turned to face the men. Above him was a panel of red, yellow, and green lights. As he moved into position, the yellow light came on. "Okay!" he shouted above the noise of the engines. "We're getting close. Everybody up." He gestured with his hands. "Check your gear." The men pushed themselves up from the floor and stood to their feet as he continued, "Remember the drill. Stand up. Hook up. Shuffle to the door. Jump and count to four."

Gur stood with them, watching as the men gathered in a line at the center of the plane. They dutifully attached the rip cord tether from their parachute packs to an overhead line that ran the length of the plane, then turned to face the rear. As they waited, they adjusted their gear, tightened the straps from their packs, and shifted the parachute harness to a comfortable position. *It's the same with every drop, Gur thought. Fidgeting. Lots of fidgeting.*

The platoon leader, a lieutenant from Tel Aviv, worked his way past them, checking each one to make certain everything was in place. When he reached the door, he hooked his tether to the overhead line and turned to face the men. "Remember what we talked about in class. Count to four, look up, and straighten your lines. Don't cut away from your main too early, but don't wait too long, either. This is a nighttime jump. It's not much different from a daytime jump except it's dark, which means

everything looks different. So pay attention. Drop zone is an open field. You've seen pictures. You all have maps. Find it early, guide yourself toward it. Don't get lost."

While the lieutenant continued to talk, Gur noticed a kid near him fumbling with the shoulder straps of his backpack. His hands trembled and his fingers seemed useless as he tried to untwist a shoulder pad. Gur reached over and straightened it for him, then gave the straps of his parachute harness a tug. "This is the part that matters," he shouted. "Keep it tight." The kid turned toward him with a nod and Gur noticed the name on his shirt. "Strauss? That's your name?"

"Yes, sir," Strauss replied.

"All right, Strauss," Gur pointed. "That parachute harness is the most important part. If it's not tight, it'll pinch you in the wrong place when the chute inflates," he grinned. Strauss nodded nervously and turned to face the rear of the plane with the others.

Seconds later, the green light came on. "This is it," the lieutenant shouted. "See you on the ground." He nodded to the jumpmaster, then turned aside and in two quick steps dove out the door with the practiced ease of one who'd done it many times.

"Here we go!" the jumpmaster shouted. "Remember the drill. Stand up. Hook up. Shuffle to the door. Jump and count to four."

The first man shuffled forward with halting steps, made an awkward turn to the left, and lunged through the doorway into the night. The tether from his rip cord pulled tight against his weight, then jerked free as it snatched the pin from the parachute. Instantly, fabric streamed from the pack, then billowed into the sky as it filled with air.

When he was gone, the jumpmaster pulled the dangling tether inside the plane and held it as others followed, shuffling forward while the next man jumped. They moved with their eyes fixed on the back of the man in front, no one looking up, the tether lines jiggling against their chests as each jump bounced the static line overhead.

Then it was Strauss's turn. He was the last man in the unit and he shuffled forward, made the turn, and froze. "Let's go!" the jumpmaster shouted. When Strauss gave no response, he moved closer, placing his

lips near Strauss's ear. "You gotta jump, soldier!" But Strauss didn't move. "Are you listening to me?" the jumpmaster shouted. "Your platoon is waiting for you. You have to—"

Gur waved him off and put a hand on Strauss's shoulder. "First step is the hardest. So never stop at the door to think about it. Just come up here. Acknowledge the jumpmaster and step out. If you stop to think about it, nobody in their right mind would do this. So don't stop."

Strauss nodded his head but remained at the door, unable to take the final step. Gur leaned close once more and said, "I'll make it easy for you, son. Crouch." Gur tapped him on the back of the knee and Strauss bent his legs into a crouching stance. "Are you ready?" Gur asked. Strauss nodded his head. "Count to four. Look up. Make sure your lines are straight." Gur paused a moment longer, then shouted, "Go!" Strauss jumped forward, helped along by a hearty shove from Gur.

When Strauss was safely away, Gur looked over at the jumpmaster. "Reminds me of my first jump."

"Mine too."

Gur gave him a nod. "See you back at the base." Then with two steps he went out the door.

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As Gur plunged toward the ground, he did as all the others and counted to four, then looked up and saw his parachute was open but the lines were twisted. He pumped his legs as if riding a bicycle, creating a gentle up-and-down motion against the lines. Moments later, they came untangled and Gur settled in his harness for the ride.

Off to the north, most of the men from the platoon should already be on the ground, with the last of the jumpers making their final approach. Having jumped much later, Gur was too far south to reach them. Instead of trying, he turned his attention to finding a suitable alternative place to land. That's when he noticed Strauss, drifting aimlessly, apparently unable to steer at all.

Minutes later, Gur dropped to the ground, wrestled the lines under control, and rolled his parachute into a manageable bundle. He stuffed it

into his backpack. Strauss was about a hundred meters away, struggling to contain his parachute, which was slowly dragging him across the field. Gur started toward him.

“Didn’t they teach you how to do that?”

The sound of Gur’s voice startled him and he glanced around, his eyes wide. “Yes,” Strauss replied. “But it was daytime.”

“You don’t like the dark?”

“Not much.”

“Well, I’ll see that they give you plenty of practice at it.” Gur moved past him and took hold of the lines, then walked forward hand over hand and drew them to himself. When they had the parachute under control, Strauss folded it and stowed it inside his pack.

Gur glanced around to get his bearings. “We’d better find the others,” he suggested, “or else we’ll be hiking back to base.”

Strauss looked concerned. “They won’t come find us?”

“They should, but you can’t always count on it.” Gur turned away. “Come on. There’s a road over here, I think.”

They started across the field toward a tree line about sixty meters away. Gur led the way. Strauss walked to his right, just a few steps behind. They’d gone a short distance when Strauss said, “I was really scared up there.”

“Son,” Gur replied, “we’re all scared.”

“You were scared?”

“Jumping out of a perfectly good airplane is an unnatural act. Anybody tells you he isn’t scared when he goes out the door, you know one thing for certain.”

“What’s that?”

“He’s lying. Come on.” Gur pointed. “I see the road over here.”

When they were a few meters from the trees, Gur caught the odor of a cigarette. He raised his hand for Strauss to stop and gestured for silence, then dropped to one knee. Strauss did the same.

Against the shadows beneath the foliage of the trees, the glow of a cigarette was clearly visible and with it the outline of a man’s head. Gur watched for a moment, then moved forward on his hands and knees.

Strauss followed. When they were closer, just a few meters away, Gur raised up for a better look. This time he saw the man, clearly visible. He was seated near a clump of bushes on the far side of the tree line, between the trees and road.

As they watched, the headlights of a truck appeared in the distance. It came down the road toward them, then slowed to a stop opposite the bushes where the man sat. Gur listened as the driver leaned out the window and spoke in Arabic. “Has he come by yet?”

“No,” the man by the bush replied. “Not yet.”

“You are ready?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Then the truck started forward once more. When it was gone, Gur turned away and gestured for Strauss to follow. When they were a few meters up the tree line Strauss whispered, “Who was that?”

“Arabs.”

“The guy in the truck was asking whether someone had been by yet—I couldn’t quite catch the name. Who was he talking about?”

Gur glanced over at him. “You speak Arabic?”

“Yes, sir. Shouldn’t we do something about this?”

“I think we just did all we could do.”

As they moved north up the tree line, Gur thought about what they’d just seen. A man hiding by the road. Other men roaming the countryside in a truck. Questions about someone’s coming and going. This wasn’t good. Something was up and he was certain it wasn’t good. He was also certain that he and Strauss were in a vulnerable position—too vulnerable to do anything except watch and listen. The parachute jump that evening was a training exercise. Neither he nor anyone from the plane was armed. Listening, observing, and watching was all they could do. Better to move in the opposite direction and live to report what they’d seen and heard than attempt to intervene and get themselves captured. Or worse, killed.

With Strauss at his side, Gur picked up the pace and continued in the general direction of the original drop zone, following a course that

kept them close enough to the tree line to be protected by its shadow but far enough from the road to avoid being seen. Near the northern edge of the field, they came to a fence. Gur helped Strauss across, then waited while Strauss returned the favor. As they cleared it, headlights from a car appeared in the distance, coming down the road toward them. Gur watched and as it drew near a sense of dread swept over him. "This isn't good," he mumbled.

"This is the person those men were asking about?"

"I think so," Gur said slowly.

The car passed opposite their position without incident but when it reached the place where they'd seen the man hiding in the bushes, a violent explosion erupted. Flames shot into the sky, and the car careened from the road into an irrigation ditch. Seconds later came a burst of automatic gunfire and in the glow of the flames they saw two men standing near the car.

Strauss had a look of anger and he shrugged off his backpack. "We have to do something."

"No," Gur took hold of his arm to stop him. "We know what happened."

"What do you mean? Those men we saw earlier attacked that car!"

"Yes, and there is nothing we can do about it."

"Nothing we can do? We are soldiers. We're supposed to do something. We should have done something before."

"We saw one man."

"I know but—"

"And as we watched just now we saw that there were actually two."

"Yes. So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying, if we'd gone in there before, thinking there was only one person, we would have confronted two."

"But we should see about them."

Just then, the gasoline tank on the car exploded. Both men watched as a bright orange fireball rolled into the sky, then Gur said tersely, "Get your pack and come on. We have to get out of here."

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When Gur returned to the base at Ramat David, he filed a report with the watch commander, giving details of what he saw and heard. The next morning, General Broder, the base commander, called Gur to his office to discuss the matter. When Gur arrived, Broder was seated at his desk. Gur saluted and took a seat across from him as they reviewed the incident.

“Do you have any idea who was in that car?” Gur asked.

“Isaac Tikvah,” Broder sighed.

“The guy who runs one of the farming settlements?”

“Yes,” Broder nodded. “Very influential in the region. Vocally opposed to Arab terrorism and actively engaged with us. Helped with intelligence gathering, response coordination.”

“He was part of that action we took against those men from a few weeks ago. The ones in that house outside Karmiel, supposed to be from FATAH.”

“Yes.”

“So, the people we saw by the road really were Arabs.”

“They’ve been looking for a chance to hit Tikvah.” Broder leaned back in his chair. Gur looked away, suddenly uncomfortable with his decision not to intervene the night before. “But tell me something,” Broder continued. “How is it that you were in the area? I checked the map. That’s a long way from where you were supposed to drop.”

Gur had anticipated the question—the location where he’d landed was too far off-course to go unnoticed, but he felt an instinctive need to protect Strauss. “I got separated from the others in the unit. The wind blew me off course.”

“There wasn’t any wind,” Broder countered.

“Then I don’t know,” Gur shrugged. “Must have been a strange gust. Anyway, sir, there are Arabs out there and judging from what we saw I’d say they have a network in place that’s at least as extensive as anything Isaac Tikvah told us about. This isn’t groups crossing the border from

Syria or Lebanon, like we were thinking. These are people who live here. Indigenous Arabs.”

“I know,” Broder nodded. “One of our patrols responded. They got to the scene within a few minutes. Did you see them?”

“No. We didn’t stick around.”

“Why not?”

“This was a training exercise. Most of the men in that unit were on their first nighttime jump. We weren’t armed. We got out of there as quietly as possible.”

“We?” Broder asked with a grin.

“One of the men landed near me.”

“You both got blown off-course,” Broder chuckled, no longer able to contain his humor at Gur’s unease.

“He’s a trainee, sir.” Gur glanced away. “I took care of it.”

“Who was it?”

“I took care of it,” Gur repeated. “And we need to take care of this situation. We need to put more troops in the field. Form a net across Galilee. A major military operation.”

“Don’t you think that would just drive the Arabs to another location?”

“Perhaps. But what’s the alternative, sir? Wait for them to attack again so we can pick up the dead bodies? If our presence deters them from acting here or anywhere, isn’t that enough?”

“I suppose,” Broder nodded. “Put your ideas on paper.” He scooted closer to his desk. “Write it up. I’ll see what they think about it in Tel Aviv.”