



A U T H O R   O F   *E X O D U S*

**LEON**

**URBIS**

**MITLA PASS**



# MITLA PASS

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LEON URIS



This book is dedicated

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to my beloved sister

ESSIE

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**PART ONE**  
**GERONIMO!**

# TEL AVIV

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*October 20, 1956*

## D DAY MINUS NINE

THE PRIME MINISTER'S COTTAGE, a remnant of the former German colony, sat unobtrusively in the middle of the outsized defense complex on the northern end of Tel Aviv. Midnight had come and gone. The stream of callers faded to a trickle, then halted.

For the moment David Ben-Gurion sat alone, his first opportunity all day for solitary contemplation. He was behind a desk that looked down a long conference table which was covered with green felt. Dead cigarette butts spilled over their ashtrays. The fruit baskets held spoiling apples and pear cores, grape seeds, banana skins, and peach pits, their fruit devoured. Half-empty soda bottles had lost their fizz and others, tipped over in disarray, appeared like a platoon of soldiers caught in cross fire.

The cleanup crew of soldiers, two young men and two young women wearing top-security clearance badges, tiptoed in and attacked the mess.

“Can I get you anything—some tea?” one of the girls asked.

Ben-Gurion shook his head. It was a great head that seemed even greater perched on his short, dumpling body. It was bald on top with an angry white mane flaring out in every which direction. The cherub face remained deceptively peaceful.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Morocco,” one of the girls said.

“Romania. I live at Moshav Mikhmoret.”

“South Africa. My family is in Haifa,” the second girl said.

“I am a sabra, Kibbutz Ginnosar.”

“Yigal Allon's kibbutz,” Ben-Gurion said.

“Yes,” the soldier boy answered proudly.

Ben-Gurion's head tilted and his eyes blinked. He was a past master at grabbing forty winks, a skill honed at a hundred Zionist conferences. When the crew departed it was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

The Old Man's eyes fluttered open and became fixed on a single paged document awaiting his signature, the approval of a plan, Operation Kadesh, that would commit his young nation to war. Only eight years earlier he had signed another document, a proud document that declared statehood. Would there even be a ninth birthday, or would it all end in horror like a biblical siege with a final ghastly

scene of a national massacre?

The past three weeks had been nightmarish in the speed and intensity of events: the secret meetings in Paris with the French and later the British and the clandestine agreement to go to war together ... the return of Israeli officers who had been training in military academies and army specialty schools around the world ... the call-up of reserves ... the near-disastrous raid on Kalkilia ... make the world believe that Jordan, not Egypt, was the enemy of record ... French equipment arriving without spare parts ... pressure from Eisenhower and the Americans mounting daily ... dire threats from the Russians ...

Operation Kadesh. How esoteric, Ben-Gurion thought. The biblical site in the Sinai where the Jews dwelled for a time during their wanderings with Moses.

Operation Kadesh needed a series of miracles to succeed. Every assessment was frightfully the same: *Israel must win the war in the first four days. A prolonged conflict in which every Arab nation would join would be disastrous.*

No small country goes to war without the support of a major power, yet David Ben-Gurion felt, in the depths of his being, that Israel's partners, England and France, would falter, leaving her alone, outmanned and outgunned.

*Israel must win the war in the first four days!*

All sorts of things were going wrong as D day approached. The ordinance reports all but crushed the spirit: no spare steel matting to roll vehicles over the sucking sands of the desert ... aged tanks being cannibalized, further reducing their already inferior armored force ... rifles from Belgium not up to spec ... no filters for the tracked vehicles to keep them from choking in the desert ... a shortage of tank tracks, chains, pulleys, winches, flatbeds, four-wheel-drive trucks, repair stations, batteries, belts ... an obsolete air force of World War II piston planes to face double the number of the latest MiG owned by the Egyptians ... no aircraft batteries to defend the cities against Egyptian bombers flown by "volunteers" from Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The orders to the brigade commanders were desperately simple. They said, in effect, "You have one objective. You must reach the Suez Canal in three days despite the resistance. You will not ask for reinforcements or further supplies for there are none available."

Worse was the constant gnawing conviction that the British and French would quit. This would allow the release of fresh Egyptian troops to reinforce the Sinai. If France and England failed to bomb and destroy the Egyptian airfields, Nasser could put his Russian-made bombers to work on Israel's cities.

*We must win the war in four days!*

Two of the brigades must traverse over a hundred miles of semi-charted wilderness ... and the 7th Battalion, the Lion's Battalion, must be dropped deep into the Sinai behind enemy lines, exposed to a disaster, a sacrificial force. The Old Man had argued for hours with the Defense Chief of Staff, Moshe Dayan, to try to dissuade him from parachuting the Lion's Battalion near Mit

Pass. Dayan was adamant. It was the linchpin of the entire operation, a maneuver to initially confuse the enemy, then stop Egyptian reinforcements. When the brigade linked up with the battalion, the combined force would wheel south to free the blockaded passage to the Red Sea. Yes, there was great risk—but try to engage in a war without risk.

Jacob Herzog, B.G.'s confidant and closest adviser on the campaign, entered the room with Natasha Solomon. Herzog was pale, in a scholarly way; an Irish Jew, the son of the chief Ashkenazi rabbi, with a magnificent religious and legal mind. He put all the late communications and a day's summary before the Old Man.

Natasha Solomon set a batch of papers on the desk, translations of messages from the French. Even at this hour Natasha was a warming sight. She was one of those women who gained an extra dimension of beauty through weariness, a certain sensuality in the black rings of fatigue forming beneath her eyes, as if from exhaustion at the end of a day of lovemaking. She was softness itself, different from many of the roughhewn sabra and kibbutz women, groomed in a Middle European way that made the silk of her blouse float over her terrain and shout "female!" even at two in the morning. An all but forgotten memory flitted through the Old Man's mind ... a girl, long ago. Such a thing I can't remember at a time like this.

Ben-Gurion picked up the summary but his eyes were fatigued. He handed the papers to Natasha and waved her into a seat, then took up a pad and pen to jot notes as she read.

The British were being very cautious, very cagey, deepening B.G.'s distrust. Herzog tried to tie up the day's events, but new events were already overtaking them.

Both the Soviet Union and America were bogged down in their own problems. An American presidential election was to take place in a few days, and traditionally it was a good time to catch Washington off guard.

Revolts against the Russians were brewing in Poland and Hungary. The students in Budapest had rioted and the unrest was growing. Israeli intelligence estimated a Russian tank force would enter Budapest in a matter of days.

Herzog reckoned these events could give Israel a slight advantage. Russia and America might be slow to react to the Israeli attack on Egypt. If Israel could stall diplomatically for three days, her forces might reach the Canal and Israel's part of the war would be over.

But America was certain to be outraged that her two closest allies, England and France, would initiate military action without advising them. As for the Soviets, they had to put on a barking show for their Egyptian clients.

"Is there anything at all we haven't covered, Yakov? Anything ... anything ..."

Herzog pointed to the document setting Operation Kadesh into motion.

"Your signature," he said.

Ben-Gurion would not quit, gleaning for the stray, minute detail that might have been

overlooked. It all boiled down to the same thing. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian president, was on a heady binge. He had seized the Suez Canal and evicted the British and French. He had closed the Strait of Tiran, at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula, to Israeli shipping. He had turned the Gaza Strip into one enormous terrorist base which violated the Israeli border hourly. He had massed a huge army in the Sinai armed with a larder filled with Russian weapons. The bottom line was that Israel had no choice other than military action—with or without the British and French.

He scribbled his name on the paper. His nation was at war!

“Anything else?” he asked.

Herzog put before him a memo requiring initialing.

“What is this?”

“A small piece of business. Permission for Gideon Zadok to go into the Sinai with a forward unit. He has had a standing request that if there was ever to be a major action, to be allowed to join it as an observer. Research for his book.”

“Am I mistaken, or didn’t he go on the Kalkilia raid?”

“He did,” Herzog answered. “Both Zechariah and Ben Asher told me he conducted himself very well under fire.”

“How is his intelligence clearance?” B.G. asked.

“Early during his trip here, we realized he was in a position to gain very valuable information and pass it to the Americans. Both Beham and Pearlman fed him false intelligence on the Ramon Rocket and the atomic project at the Haifa North Plant. The kind of data we gave him would be easy to trace if he had turned it over to the Americans. Our boys have no qualms about him as a security risk and I personally give him my vote, but I believe Natasha is in the best position to judge.”

“Natasha?”

“Gideon Zadok is family,” she said. “He’s been on five or six border and desert patrols with units of the Lion’s Battalion. They swear by him, as well.”

“So, why not,” Ben-Gurion said. “He’s a good boy. I like him. He has funny ideas about not settling in Israel. I’ll change his mind about that. But ... who knows, he might write us an important book.” The Old Man scribbled his initials on the memo. “Who are you assigning him to?”

“I believe,” Natasha said, “if Gideon knew about the plans, he’d choose to be dropped with the Lions at Mitla Pass.”

“That’s one part of this I don’t like,” Herzog interjected. “He is an American, after all. If we send him back to Eisenhower in a wooden box it could create an ugly incident.”

B.G. pondered. “We are entitled to a poor man’s Hemingway. Send him with the Lions. He’s a writer. He should be in the action. God knows he doesn’t write like Hemingway, but I hear he drinks as well.”

“I can vouch for that,” Natasha said.

“Don’t get yourself broken up with this boy,” the Old Man said.

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“I already have,” she answered.

# GIDEON

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HERZLIA, ISRAEL

*October 29, 1956*

D DAY, H HOUR MINUS NINE

I COULD NOT MOVE. My feet felt as though they were encased in cement. My brain was whirling with a mishmash of bloated, horrifying images. Weird-shaped airplanes fell out of the sky ... distorted, terrorized faces of my daughters screamed for help ... Valerie was humping some faceless bastard and screeching venomously and laughing at me ... a band of headless musicians played a military march. Shit, what was all this about? Baby waves breaking on a beach ... hush ... hush ... hush ...

I blinked my eyes open.

Hush ... hush ... hush ...

Where the hell am I? My mouth was filled with sand. I strained to move. Trapped! Dammit! I can't move!

I jerked hard and inched up on my elbows. The beach was empty. My face dropped to the sand again. Get it together, Gideon. Think, man. All right, I know. I ... I ... left the hotel and ... uh ... I left the hotel and took a walk on the beach to clear my head. Let me think, now. I must have stopped at the water's edge and ... I guess I passed out from exhaustion. Where is the hotel? Dammit, I can't see to well ... sand.

Think. The tide has washed over me. My legs and feet are sunk in the wet sand. I worked my feet and legs loose and wobbled upright, then staggered to the water and plunged my face into an oncoming little wave. Shit! Sand washed out of my face, ears, mouth, nostrils, hair. My eyes stung from the salt water. I plunged in, took a mouthful, rinsed it, spit it out. Phew!

I looked about. Not a soul, not even a bird. Nothing more empty than an empty beach.

Oh, Jesus! The past twenty-four hours flooded in. The evacuation and watching Valerie and the girls fly off. How'd I get here? I remember now. I went home but couldn't stay there alone, so I went to the hotel. It was deserted.

Our dog, Grover! Come on, Gideon, get a handle on it. I went home, decided to go to my office at the hotel. Grover had a fever. I took him with me and had to carry him up four flights to my room. The hotel was dark and empty, scary.

Where was Grover? Yeah, okay, that's it. I put him into the car to wait for me. I was going to take him into Tel Aviv to the vet. Then I took a walk on the beach to try to clear my head. I sat down for

rest and must have dropped off. Lucky I didn't drown myself.

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Oh, dear Lord, where were Val and the girls now? What a mess I've made! I began once more to replay the evacuation scene. Blow the trumpets. Gideon has just made a triumphal entry into shit city.

"Gideon!" a voice called from the distance. "Gideon!"

Now I'm hearing things.

"Gideon!" it repeated.

If that voice isn't real, I'm in big trouble.

"Gideon!"

I squinted, tried to clear the sting from my eyes, and brought into focus the figure of a woman standing on the bluff near the hotel, shouting and waving.

"Natasha!"

I sprinted down the beach along the waterline, where the sand was hard, stopped and caught my breath, then cut over the soft sand toward the hotel. A path led up to the bluff. I grunted and growled as sharp little pebbles and shells nipped hard at the soles of my feet, and then I stood before her nearly doubled up.

Natasha clawed so hard at my back I felt and heard my shirt rip. She bit at my shoulders, weeping crazily. She pulled at my wet, salty, sandy hair and I came back at her squeezing the breath from her lungs with my embrace.

After a time we stood holding each other up like a pair of fighters who have punched themselves out and are clinched and staggering. Our bodies became still, only wavering a bit as we fought to control our breathing. A puff of wind blew her hair into her face where it joined her tears. I pushed her free and hobbled off the path to where the sand was soft in a patch surrounded by high spiky tufts of dune grass.

"They're gone," I managed to blurt.

"I was with B.G. all day," she rasped. "I heard about the evacuation, but didn't dare try to get the telephone out. Everything goes through the switchboard. I was crazy out of my mind. I thought— I thought you had left with them."

I flopped my arms.

"You wanted to go with them, didn't you?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"But you wanted to go."

Her eyes mirrored her hurt.

"I'm here."

"Why?"

"I guess I was more scared of evacuating than I was of staying. I wanted to stick around for the raid, or the battle, or the war ... whatever the hell is coming."

She turned acid. Unmistakable, vintage Natasha.

“You stayed because you weren’t going to show yourself to be a coward in front of the whole country. After all, everyone knows what a tough Marine you are. Your blessed novel is the bible of the army of Israel. Prophets don’t flee.”

“Come on, get off it. I’m here.” I reached out and touched that fine silky red hair of hers and brought her against me, this time softly. “Maybe I stayed for you.”

“For me? Why? I’m poison. You’ve told me I’m poison a dozen times.” She turned sharply out of my grasp and walked away, off the little path and into a wave of small dunes that formed part of the bluff. She relented for a moment as I put my arm around her shoulder and we stared at the unearthly emptiness below.

“So quiet around here now,” I said. “You okay?”

She sighed and leaned against me. “My head is spinning like crazy. It’s been chaos. Everything’s crazy. Ben-Gurion fell sick last night. He got up out of his chair and just collapsed. Jackie Herzog set up a hospital room for him right in the cottage. It’s got twenty guards around it.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“I don’t know. He’s running a high fever. Two hundred people are trying to get to see him. He’s—he’s—throwing up. He’s sick like a dog. We’re spreading the story that he’s out of the country on a secret meeting. I’ve only got a few hours. I’ve got to get back.”

She suddenly shivered and walked away from me. Natasha could play deadpan for everyone but me. The color left her face and she bit nervously at her lip.

“Are we at war?” I asked.

Her lack of a reply was answer enough.

“When?”

“Tonight,” she managed shakily. “You can still leave. There’s an American destroyer heading for Haifa.”

I had known it was coming. Everyone had known it was coming. Yet it jolted me. That flash of fear that sends tingles throughout the body. You can’t divide fear up into halves and quarters, but I knew I was more afraid for Israel than for myself ... or Val ... or the girls. I was very afraid for Natasha.

“I want to go out with the troops,” I said.

“It’s been arranged,” she managed. “The Old Man himself gave approval.”

“Who am I going with?”

“The Lions. Your lucky outfit.”

“Where?”

“I shouldn’t say any more.”

“Okay, I’ll find out when I find out.” My mind checked out a number of possibilities over the

Jordanian border. Maybe it was going to be a push to capture the West Bank and straighten out the borders along the Jordan River. Maybe Israel would try to capture East Jerusalem. That would be a dream.

“You’re going to make a drop in the Sinai,” she said abruptly.

“The Sinai! Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Mother of God, are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s the Sinai. All this rumbling and the threats against Jordan have been a decoy. Egypt has been the real target all along.”

“French and British involved in this?”

“Draw your own conclusions.”

The ramifications were staggering. These audacious Israelis were going to take the Sinai Peninsula while the Anglo-French snatched the Canal back. This was the whole ball of wax ... major major.

“Where are we going to be dropped?”

“A place called Mitla Pass.”

I sat in the sand and with my finger drew a map. The Sinai was fairly clear in my mind. “Mitla Mitla ...” It was somewhere quite close to the Canal and, I think, near the Gulf of Suez as well. Something else occurred to me.

“Shit! I’ve never jumped out of an airplane.”

Her white teeth showed. “That’s very funny,” she said. “No matter. A lot of people here are convinced that nothing is too tough for you.”

“I jumped from a practice tower once. Scared the hell out of me.”

“Oh, I don’t worry about you, *chéri*. You’ll bounce right up like a ball. Shlomo says it’s easy, like pie. He’ll be right in back of you to push you out of the plane.”

“Jesus,” I said and dropped my head onto my knees. “It isn’t funny.” Natasha stood over me—back to bitch again, the master of Hungarian mood swings.

“You wouldn’t back out, Gideon,” she said sarcastically. “After all, war is where little boys go to prove they are big boys. You wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

She was right. She generally was. I realized my posturing had convinced the Israelis that I was rattlesnake-mean. I’d sold them a real sackful of B.S. Out of an airplane, huh? Well, I hoped I wouldn’t make an ass of myself. I didn’t make an ass of myself that one time, long ago... I almost did ... I almost broke with fear, but I held on—barely.

*We were coming into the beach at Tarawa. My boat was in the first wave and I was up front, right next to the ramp. We were hitting one of the smaller islands on the atoll and not expecting much opposition. We’d been circling around for hours and most of us were pretty nauseated as the line of*

*landing craft straightened out and moved for the beach. Just then, Japanese machine-gun fire opened up and raked us. The bullets hit the armor plating on the ramp and their impact nearly shook us out of the water like a wounded sailfish. In a matter of a few seconds the ramp would be lowered and I'd be the first out, into the water. All I could think about clearly was that I couldn't disgrace myself because I was a Jew. I almost fainted with fright. I managed to dare a peek back into the boat. Almost half of the guys, including the major, were puking out of sheer fear. Pedro, the toughest guy I ever knew, was on his knees praying to Jesus, Mary, and an assortment of Mexican saints. And just like that, a miracle happened. I was no longer afraid. The ramp lowered and bashed the water and I leaped in without hesitation. We were pretty near chest high and being fired at as, grunting, we waded forward. Funny part of it is how other things take over. I had a lot of work to do when we hit the beach—set up a radio and contact our command ship. Then my mind went to Sergeant Bleaker in back of me. He was the tallest guy in the company so we all gave him our cigarettes to keep dry inside his helmet. ...*

So, them were the apples. I was going to jump out of an airplane and I couldn't dream or wish away. Thirteen years had passed since Tarawa, with a lot of fat living in between. I put my face in my hands and sighed away my trepidations.

Natasha stood over me, her hands on her hips and her legs apart provocatively. Natasha did not assume that stance accidentally.

"What are you thinking about?" she said.

"It's been a real shit night," I said.

"The first destination of your family was to be Athens. They cleared our airspace without any problems. Your wife is probably enjoying an ouzo ..."

So, finish your fucking sentence ... with some nice, handsome, young officer from the embassy

...

Hungarian bitch!

"You love me now or you hate me now?" she persisted.

"Bitch!"

I lifted my head, the same instant her skirt fell to the ground and she stepped out of it. Her blouse and bra followed.

"Come on, Natasha, only a rat could make love at a time like this."

"That's right," she answered, "we're rats, both of us, so let's do a little rat fucking."

She hurled herself atop me, grabbed two handfuls of sand, and ran them up and down my back hard.

"I make it raw. I want to see blood from you. I want it to hurt so bad that when you jump out of the airplane your shirt will stick to you from blood and you'll be thinking of Natasha!"

Natasha did have a nice way of getting your mind off your troubles.

If you considered things from Natasha's point of view, she'd been waiting for a long time to

make tartare out of my back. For the better part of six months I'd been chastising her.

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"For Christ sake, stop wearing perfume!"

"Look what you've done. I've got a bite mark on me."

"Easy with the fingernails."

Those times we soared, and they were often, restraint was not one of Natasha's commendable qualities. From time to time she'd deliberately leave a calling card in the form of a high-visibility mark, a bite bruise, scratches, which obviously didn't come from wrestling with the family dog. ("The platoon was scaling some rocks and I slipped and tore the hell out of my back.")

Valerie's response was always double-edged. ("Poor baby. These Israeli rocks *do* have teeth them.")

Now the family was gone, and Natasha jumped me in the sand dunes. She had me as she used to have me, before Val came to Israel. Natasha went ape. She was the only woman who could make love while cursing you in seven languages.

An hour or so later we went to my hotel room to survey the damage. Natasha was filled with remorse. Scrubbing very gingerly, it took over a half an hour to get the sand cleaned out of a lot of unlikely places. As she examined my back, she chastised herself but reckoned I could get by without stitches.

In the shower, she started up again. Natasha adored making love in the shower ... or out of the shower ... or in bed ... or locked in a public rest room ... or on the desk in the Prime Minister's office after he had gone for the day.

"Oh, poor baby, look at what I've done. Natasha, you are an animal," she said of herself.

There was a Swedish mouthwash in my cabinet that could peel the paint off a battleship or make a leper aseptic. The tenderness with which she dabbed it on my wounds was the flip side to her character.

From the rape in the sand dunes, one would hardly get the notion that Natasha Solomon was also the most gentle, patient woman and lover I had ever known. She could play with my eyelashes for an hour with her whisper touch and lips and make every moment of it new.

She cried as she patched me up. All I could manage was to hang on to the bedposts, clench my teeth, and fight off the tears.

The alarm clock woke us up a bit later. She went out onto the balcony as I dressed and she read my new pages. I couldn't help myself, but it felt good—damned good, wonderful—as I laced up my old Marine boots and strapped a .45 pistol on my belt. I wondered why it should be feeling good in my khaki shirt and trousers ... fatigue jacket with an IDF logo ...

I came out to the balcony. Her white knuckles gave her away as she gripped the railing like a vise. I put my arm about her shoulder as she slowly calmed, and we watched the sea as we had always watched it from there in fifty stolen rendezvous.

“You’re writing beautifully,” she said.

“I wonder how it sounds in Hungarian.”

“Don’t worry about the dog,” she said. “I’ll take him to Dr. Klement. Grover will keep my company. Put him in my car. I parked right next to you.”

“Natasha ... ”

She broke. Seeing someone off always terrified her ... since she had seen her mother sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz ... God almighty!

“See you around,” I said.

SLOW TRANSPORTS ALWAYS “lumber.” Our formation of twenty Dakotas lumbered over the Negev Desert toward the Sinai Peninsula. The twilight was fading fast. This military version of the DC-3, the famed Gooney Bird, was built for neither speed nor comfort. Twenty-five of us were crammed into miserable bucket seats along either bulkhead.

First time I flew in a Gooney Bird was to cross the States returning from furlough. The trip from Philly to L.A. took almost twenty hours. I had to transfer to four different airlines. From L.A. it was a train to San Diego, because there was no air service.

On the other hand, there was something comforting about the Gooney Bird. I used to read a bedtime storybook to the girls called *The Little Engine That Could*. This little engine was a small-tin train and found itself in a rough situation. It had to huff and puff its tiny heart out to make it over a mountain, in order to take candy and toys and food to the kids on the other side. I acted out the story with nail-biting suspense a hundred and one times, but in the end the little engine always made it. So did the Gooney Bird. Sometimes it landed with one engine out, or half the tail assembly shot off. But the Gooney Bird was the mainstay of the lift over the Hump, the Himalayas, and it carried the Berlin Airlift.

During the briefing earlier today, we had been told that at the same moment, a pair of World War II F-51 fighter planes were crisscrossing over the Sinai Peninsula, cutting the telephone lines with their propellers. For that dandy little maneuver, the pilots had to fly ten feet off the ground. Amen!

We had been sequestered in a hangar on the military side of Lydda Airport. Colonel Zechariah, the founder and commander of the Paratroop Brigade, briefed us. Zechariah was a comforting sight, a sort of Hebrew-speaking Marine-type commander, working diligently on becoming a living legend.

The plan was simple enough. The Lion’s Battalion—four hundred paratroopers under the command of Major Ben Asher—had been given the “honor” of dropping deep into the Sinai Peninsula to open Operation Kadesh.

The actual site was called the Parker Monument, a marker in honor of a former British military governor. From the Parker Monument to Egypt proper, on the other side of the Suez Canal, was a distance of thirty miles. Sixteen or seventeen of those miles was Mitla Pass—a treacherous, narrow

defile of mountain, rock, and cliff. An Egyptian force of unknown size was inside the Pass in fortified positions. Fortunately, we would not have to go in and try to take the Pass itself.

The Lions were to seal the eastern end of Mitla to stop reinforcements from getting through the Sinai. Meanwhile, the balance of the Para Brigade under Zechariah would cross a hundred and fifty miles of desert track, capture three fortified positions, and link up with us sometime around D day plus two.

There were a thousand *What ifs* in my mind. I'm certain Dayan and the Old Man and Jack Herzog and the rest of them had already *What if*'d themselves to death.

Israel wasn't going to initiate a war unless she was forced. She was undermanned and underarmed against Egypt alone. *What if* we were jumped by Jordan, Syria, and Iraq as well?

And *What if* the Egyptian Air Force caught us in the open ...

And *What if* Zechariah didn't link up with us ...

And *What if*—forget it, Gideon.

The nonchalance, the downright boredom of the Lions had to be partly playacting. We did it like the Marines before battle. In fact, my dog Grover was probably the best in the world at fake macho.

The Lions were sprawled about, seemingly oblivious of the bouncing and rolling. The sergeant major checked his Uzi gun as though it were a sweetheart he never got tired of caressing.

Shlomo Bar Adon, my assistant, who had been lent to me by the Foreign Ministry, was dead asleep, his bearded angry-looking head bobbing on my shoulder, unresponsive to my elbow which I drove into his ribs. I don't know whether I could have gone through a parachute jump without Shlomo. I loved him like a brother most of the time and some of the time hated him twice as much.

I didn't want to think about Val and the girls right at that moment. If a writer can't block his family out of his thoughts, he can't go to war. During years of long research trips I had mastered the art of not thinking about them. I'd get maudlin ... I'd cry at bars ... I'd never get my work done if I couldn't get my family out of my mind. Or so I made myself believe. Val says writers are the total masters at suffering. She says everyone suffers just as much, but writers can say it better.

For a time I thought my decision to bring my family to Israel was going to work. I'd been there for four months when they arrived, and was already heavily involved with Natasha. All three of my girls had adapted and seemed happy. We lived in a lovely neighborhood near the sea and I had an extra hot room a few miles away to work in. Our neighbors were mostly affluent South Africans who were bedrock Zionists and had come to settle.

Life wasn't easy in Israel in 1956, but what was lacking in comforts was more than made up for by an explosion of spirit and a lust for life and a purpose for living and a feeling of brotherly love that I never would have believed could exist in an entire people. For me, being here was reaching nirvana.

The government had shown a lot of confidence in me, and the armed forces loved my early novel about the Marines. I had finished most of the research on my new book. Writing was going extremely

well. To be the first Jew in centuries to write about Jews as warriors was more than an obsession, was life itself.

Even the madness of my affair with Natasha was controllable. Or so I led myself to believe. She was by far the cleverest person I'd ever met. Far too clever to cross that final bit of no-man's-land and force me into a decision between her and my family.

So I'd go to my room at the Accadia Hotel every day and write and make believe that Natasha really wasn't going to be a problem. And I had reckoned that by the time I finished the novel and was ready to return to the States, Natasha and I would have burned the affair out—past history. Everything would resolve itself like magic ... yeah, sure, man. Gideon, you are one stupid Jew.

An abrupt downdraft got me in the pit of the stomach. A few of the Lions were annoyed enough to shift positions, grunt, and continue to snore.

So, Gideon, the best-laid plans of mice and men ... I was an idiot to think I could tightrope between two warring females.

I did manage to hold everything together and move the book along well and keep our heads above water financially. Then came the border raids, the sudden, swift escalation, and the inevitable conflict. Things started to really become unhinged with the Kalkilia raid. Good Lord, it was only seventeen days ago.

Major Ben Asher opened the door from the cockpit. This woke everyone up in a hurry.

“One hour to drop,” he bellowed over the engines. “We'll be going down to five hundred feet to get under their radar.”

... The Kalkilia raid ... only nineteen days ago ...

## **HERZLIA, ISRAEL**

**October 9, 1956**

IT WAS COMING UP to six o'clock, time for the English-language news. Gideon never missed the news, he should be back. The whole country stopped every hour, on the hour. Good news was scarce these days.

The sun played out its daily ritual, drifting downward toward a sea that was mirror-smooth tonight. From the kitchen window Valerie could just about make them out coming up from the beach. She shaded her eyes and squinted toward the path, then wiped her hands at the sink and stepped out onto the rear veranda and waved.

Penelope enjoyed her royal seat on Daddy's shoulders, while Roxanne walked ahead of them swinging a bucket.

Val never failed to react every time she caught sight of him. Gideon was on the slight side, but most people thought of him as being larger. It was his bearing, a determined manner of stride

hunched forward, pondering. Val loved his looks. Feisty little bastard. Gideon had overpowering eyes that could express a full range of emotions with a glance, and when his look was for you and filled with lust, it always brought on shivers.

The first time she ever saw him was on a USO dance floor. He was in Marine uniform and she was a student at Mills College, a few miles away from the Oak Knoll Naval Hospital. Gideon just moved right in—cut in and whisked her away from her partner. He was pure driving male.

And cocky! “You’d better put in your dibs for me now, Val, because I’m going to be a great writer.” Hell, he was only nineteen years old when he told her that, two nights after they met.

“Here’s a pair of tickets for a play at the hospital next week.” Gideon was a patient. He was also the playwright, director, producer, and star of the show.

It was frightening meeting someone so strong that early in life, but Lord, he was magic.

Grover Vandover, their golden retriever, a lollipop of a family dog, flopped up the path alongside them. Roxanne broke away, running toward the house, and opened the back gate onto a lawn of coarse grass.

“Mommy! Look! Coins!” She opened her palm revealing three bits of irregularly shaped metal blackened by time, with the image and lettering no longer visible.

“Daddy says they may be Roman, even Israelite.”

What Roxy didn’t know was that when Professor Ben Zohar had been over the night before, he had slipped the coins to Gideon who had planted them at the tel earlier in the day. The Professor was their self-appointed Hebrew teacher and he kept an eye on their school progress. The only English language school was run by Franciscan Brothers in Jaffa, too far for them to travel. It fell on Val to see to the girls’ studies.

Gideon lowered Penelope from his shoulders and she ran to embrace her mother. She still had a slight limp from the accident three years earlier. It had happened in the blink of an eye. Val had turned her back for only a few seconds when Penelope ran into the street as a bus came roaring through the intersection and sideswiped her ... fractured skull ... broken ribs ... wrecked knee.

It took over two years for Penny to heal. Val, with great compassion and support from Gideon, learned to manage her guilt but would take some of it with her to her grave.

They looked at her and smiled and said silent “thank Gods.” They always did.

Val ordered the girls to strip and they squealed under the outdoor shower. She rubbed them dry with big towels, dressed them in muumuus, and sent them to their room to do their lessons.

In the kitchen, Gideon reached under Val’s muumuu and caressed her backside. Most of the Jewish men she had met since Gideon often as not had their hands on their women. A lovely horrible breed.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Surprise. We’ve got prime rib.”

Gideon peeked into the oven. “Chicken,” he grumbled. Gideon hungered for a thick, juicy slab of prime rib. His visions of food, which grew daily, always ended up at Lawry’s Restaurant. He’d get on the plane at L.A. International and all the customs officers would have been alerted to pass him through without formalities. A helicopter would be waiting to fly him directly to the Lawry parking lot. The big silver cart would be rolled up to his table, the lid would be opened, and there would be one entire steer. He wouldn’t get up from the table until he was so bloated that a pair of waiters would have to pack him out on a hand-cart. ... Well, anyhow, the fruits and vegetables were outstanding in Israel.

Gideon seated himself at the kitchen table and snapped on the radio. His hand snaked over to the fruit bowl as he checked the mail.

Oh, thank God, a letter from F. Todd Wallace, his literary agent! Gideon had bombarded Wallace with letters pleading with him to find some writing assignments—a magazine article, a guest column, anything to augment the foundering bank account.

Val watched Gideon’s anxiety turn to deflation and then to anger. “Incompetent, lazy son of a bitch. All that mother knows how to do is collect commissions like a hungry landlord. The whole God-damned Middle East is about to blow up, he’s got a writer in place, and he can’t get me a nickel’s worth of work!”

“Why don’t you just replace him?”

“He’s got me tied up on this book and there’s no way he’s going to give it up. You remember how it was? We were in a real mess with J. III and Reaves Brothers Publishers and in comes Wallace with his Princeton charm in Brooks Brothers’ uniform. We thought we were lucky to have him at the time.”

“Honey, don’t get yourself all churned up.”

“Depend on that literary pimp to pull you through and you’re dead, man, dead. You’ve got to land a winner in that sucker’s lap. Give him any God-damned task requiring creative selling and you might as well be represented by the seals at Sea World.”

“Listen, we can only eat two chickens a day. We’ll get through.”

Gideon was pacing, throwing his middle finger up. “F. Todd Wallace and his God-damned club Harvard and Yale blimps with rigor mortis, in their overstuffed chairs, sneering down on Fifth Avenue. That crowd is drunk by noon. Can you believe it? God, I hate that crowd. Hey, Wallace, how’d they let me in? Do they know I’m a Jew?”

“Calm down, Junior, *gor nisht helfen*,” Val said, once again butchering an attempt at Yiddish.

Gideon jammed his hands into his pockets and continued his monologue. “If worse comes to worst I can always do a doctoring job on a screenplay. That’ll set the novel back three months. I’d better write and see what’s doing at the studios. There’s always a script in trouble.”

He flopped back down. Val had taken one of the letters and put it in her apron pocket. A letter from Nathan, Gideon’s father.

“Might as well let me have it,” he said.

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“Maybe you ought to save it till after dinner.”

He took the envelope from her pocket and held it as one would handle a box with an unexploded bomb inside, sighed, and tore it open. “Want me to read it?” she asked. “Yeah.”

My Dear Son,

I am still trying to get used to being deprived of your weekly letter, which I came to depend on when you were home in California. Now I come home to the usually empty mailbox. Am I to blame for having the blues?

Val sighed. “Honey, you really don’t need this,” she said.

“Go on, finish it.”

“As you wish. Let’s see ... ‘blame for having the blues?’”

Son! I am getting nasty letters from the relatives in Israel that you are boycotting their homes. I am having terrible difficulty to convince them that Gideon is not a snob. Son, I beg of you. It wouldn’t hurt a thing to drop in for a meal once in a while. You still like gefilte fish! Even though Valerie doesn’t know how to make such dishes and seems reluctant to learn.

However, that is not the point. Especially you should every so often see my brother, Mordechai, who suffered so brutally at the hands of the Nazis. He pleads with me for you to read his essays, which are world-famous in some circles, a highly respected scholar. You could easily, with a letter or two to your famous friends, get him published in America. It would do miracles for his health (ruined by the Nazis) if you could accomplish this small favor. Or maybe I’m asking too much.

Also, to visit my sister (your aunt) Rifka, who sits in a dark room all day grieving for my beloved mother (your grandmother), who was murdered at Treblinka. She is not a well person, mentally speaking, and it is my firm belief and honest opinion that a visit from you would make her well. Thank you, son, for not ignoring the relatives.

How are Valerie and my beautiful *eynikles*? *Ah laben auf dier kups*. I love them all! I embrace them. I kiss them. Perhaps you could convince Valerie to drop the old man a few sentences, a post card. It would be nice to get from her regular mail IF IT’S NOT TOO PAINFUL FOR HER. Also, is there a reason that Roxanne and Penny should be ashamed of their *zayde*? I have for each of them a little Channukah *gelt* in exchange for a letter. Please, so they shouldn’t forget, have them write regularly. It would also alleviate my loneliness.

Now, let me address you on a very serious matter. I am not no literary expert, although I have read all the classics in a number of languages. I am only a humble worker, but you must listen to what I have to tell you. Menachem Begin and his crowd are nothing but fascists. Don’t

let them convince you they are Hollywood heroes. The Jewish people will never forgive you if you glorify, in your book, these thugs and hoodlums. God forbid I should tell you what to write. I am only offering a suggestion that should be carefully followed, FOR YOUR SAKE.

I miss you. I long to see you. I embrace you. I plead with you, don't take chances and also MOST IMPORTANTLY to write. Lena sends love.

Your loving,

Dad

P.S. We are okay for old folks. Nothing happens new in Philly except to wait to die.

The letter sent Gideon directly to the liquor cupboard over the sink.

"He gets better with age," Val said.

"Shit!" They had finished up the Scotch last night. Gideon took down a bottle of Israeli brandy and glared at it as though it were an adversary. A few ice cubes, without integrity, were scraped from the tray. He poured a brandy and diluted it with soda water. The ice cubes vanished on contact. The first swallow was the worst.

Kol Israel radio beeped out its signal. Gideon turned up the sound. Syria and Jordan were meeting with Egypt to form a joint military command. Val watched her husband tense up. His back and neck would be as hard as a billiard table tonight.

More news. A fedayeen raid from Jordan. The marauders caught a girl from the kibbutz, raped her, and stabbed her to death. The Arab Legion fired into West Jerusalem from the walls of the Old City.

Well, at least the sunset was reliable. Gideon repaired to a tiny porch on a flat part of the cottage roof that afforded almost a full-circle panorama.

Between their cottage and the sea was a smattering of cottages and small villas, randomly scattered in the dunes and anchored by a pair of hotels, the Accadia and the Sharon, on the beach about a mile apart.

Before Val and the girls arrived, Gideon had lived at the Accadia.

Now they gave him a room to write in and the family was able to use the hotel switchboard for phone messages.

In the opposite direction lay the Plain of Sharon, now glistening from the sprays of overhead sprinklers. Jordan was only ten miles away. Gideon was certain there would have to be a major reprisal against the Jordanians. Something big, a real *klop* to sober up Hussein and stop him from joining up with Nasser and the Egyptians.

His thoughts were interrupted as Val brought up a second drink. If you survived the first one, the second one was almost palatable.

They were invaded by squadrons of fighter-plane gnats followed by squadrons of bomb

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