



It's Yom Kippur Eve in 1973, and twelve-year-old Beni thinks his biggest problem is settling in at his new school in the Golan, where his family moved at the end of the Six-Day War. But on Yom Kippur, shocking news comes over the radio: a stunning strike on Israel has begun, led by a coalition of Arab states. In the blink of an eye, Beni's older brother Motti is off to war, leaving Beni behind with his mother and father. As bombs drop around Beni and his family, they flee to safety, every day hoping for news of Motti and the developments of the war. Beni must find a way to aid the war effort in his own way, proving that he too can be a hero, even as he learns along the way that there is dignity in every person, including the people he considers the enemy.



Chapter One

Yoni and Ori are sitting across the aisle from me on the bus. Their heads are close together as they whisper loudly and laugh. I feel that spot between my shoulder blades tingle as they keep glancing at me. We're on the bus for an hour going from school to our moshav. I feel their stares the whole time.

Finally, the bus stops outside our farming community. I hurry off.

Yoni and Ori trot after me. The bus pulls away in a belch of gray fumes. It's just the three of us on the side of the road.

"Hey, loser," Yoni says. "Where do you think you're going?"

Yoni is one of those kids who's twelve but

looks fifteen. He's thickset and half a head taller than me. He's got a shadow of a mustache on his upper lip.

I don't. I'm short and I'm thin and I know that this is going to hurt.

"You're such a little brown-nose," Ori says. Ori is even taller than Yoni, but thin and awkward. His ears stick out, and his nose is small and squished in the middle of his face. He has the longest eyelashes I've ever seen. He reminds me of a giraffe. But a mean one. There's an excited glint in his expression that doesn't bode well for me.

"What do you want?" I ask. I feel my heart-beat shudder in my chest. My palms are sweaty. What a stupid thing for me to say. I know exactly what they want.

"*What do you want?*" Yoni mocks in a high voice. I hope I don't sound that scared. A sharp cramp in my stomach nearly doubles me over.

"I didn't tattle on you," I say. A bloom of sweat prickles across my face. "Why are you acting like this?"

It's exactly the wrong thing to say. A dark red flush spreads over Yoni's cheeks. His hands

curl into fists. Ori glances at Yoni and then follows suit, hands clenching at his sides. They both step closer to me.

It takes everything I've got not to back away.

"It's Yom Kippur Eve, and I have to tell my dad that I'm in trouble at school," Yoni hisses. A bit of spit lands on my face. "Everyone hates you. You're the reason the whole class is in trouble."

"You're the one who started it!" I yell.

I don't even see the first blow coming.

His fist catches me right across the face. Pain explodes behind my eyes, and I stagger back, warm blood gushing from my nose and running into my mouth. I gag and spit red.

Ori hesitates—but only for a second. He steps forward and punches me in the gut. My breath whooshes out. For one horrible moment, I can't breathe. I'm bent over, my mouth flapping open and closed like a fish on land. A steady drip of bright red blood from my nose rains down on the black dirt at my feet. Ridiculously, I think of my father crumbling the dirt, calling it good. I'm watering it with my blood.

Just when I think I might never breathe

again, I suddenly manage to suck in a great gulp of warm, dusty air.

I straighten up, trying to stagger away from them, but Ori steps close, shoving me with all his strength. I'm already off balance, so I go flying back. I land on the ground, scraping the heels of my hands and bruising my elbow. Pain shoots up both arms. I scramble back to my feet and lunge at Ori, trying to shove him back. But he skitters away, and I flail at empty air, almost falling again. As soon as I catch my balance, Yoni cocks a fist. I cover my face with my arms, braced for the pain.

But there's nothing. I hear scuffling. I lower my arms, expecting a trick. The first thing I see is Ori's stupid giraffe face slack with surprise.

I shift my gaze to Yoni. For a moment, the sun blinds me. But now I see my brother Motti in his army uniform, his curly hair shining gold in the sunlight like a lion's mane.

He's got Yoni by the back of his shirt, shaking him like he's a naughty puppy. Motti isn't much taller than Yoni, but there's no question who's stronger.

"Two against one, eh?" he says through gritted teeth. "How about we even the odds?"

"You don't understand," gasps Yoni.

"Sure I do," Motti says. He drops Yoni and kicks him on the butt. His black military boot leaves a dusty mark on the back of Yoni's blue shorts.

Ori shakes off his stunned paralysis. He scrambles away. My brother glares at his retreating back. He turns back to Yoni.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. Beating up the new kid. You'll have plenty to talk about with God tonight."

Yoni's face turns splotchy red. His ears are so hot, they're nearly purple. He shoots me a murderous look before he turns and runs to catch up with Ori. But when Ori tries to say something, Yoni shoves him away. They go off in separate directions.

I slowly sit down. I'm sore and banged up, but it could have been worse. My nose has almost stopped bleeding. I wipe away a wet trickle of blood that oozes down.

Motti comes close and squats next to me.

“Beni . . .” I hear the question and the worry in Motti’s voice.

I give a half-shrug. Now that they’re gone, I start to shake. Hot tears rise up—shame, fear, and relief all mixing together.

“I hate this place,” I say, my voice wavering.

“I know.” Motti helps me to my feet. Once I’m standing, he takes my face between his hands and looks closely. “Your nose doesn’t look broken.” He touches the bridge lightly, and I wince. It’s tender.

“I know,” I say, pulling my face away from his probing hands.

“You’ll probably have a black eye. There’s no way you can hide this from Ima and Abba.”

“I don’t care.” My voice cracks. “I want to move back.”

I see sympathy in Motti’s eyes. “It’s not going to happen, Beni. They sold the apartment. They’re never going back.”

His words are like sharp tacks, sending piercing pain in my stomach. I rub it, trying to push away the ache. I miss the white, sun-washed Jerusalem stones, the twisting alleys, my dad’s

carpentry shop, the smells of baking bread and rosemary, my school, my friends. I miss them all so badly. I even miss grouchy Mrs. Friedburg, who always scolded me for playing too loudly in the courtyard.

“You have to learn to defend yourself,” Motti goes on, oblivious to my wandering thoughts. “I won’t always be around to protect you.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” I say. “That’s not what this was about. I was fine in Jerusalem.”

“Beni,” Motti huffs impatiently, “there are jerks and bullies everywhere, even Jerusalem. Remember Dovid? I had to kick his butt after school *twice* before he left you alone.”

“That was in fourth grade,” I say hotly. “I’m twelve now.” My nose throbs in pain. I don’t like where this conversation is going.

“Right, that’s my point. You have to create your own reputation here; you can’t rely on mine.”

“You know what, Motti,” I say, feeling my temper rise, “just shut up, okay?”

“Beni”—he puts a hand on my shoulder—“you’re just too nice. People take advantage of that.”

I shake his hand off. “You don’t know anything about this place. That is not what this was about.”

“Okay, so tell me. What happened?”

I try to think of where to start. Motti’s been away, first for his basic training, then tanker school. Other than a few weekends, he’s not spent any time here at all. He’s only home for the holiday. After Yom Kippur, he’ll rush back to his tank battalion. He has only the vaguest idea of what I’ve been going through lately.

The moshav where we live is new. A moshav is like a kibbutz, a little farming town where people work the land, sharing the labor and profits. But unlike a kibbutz, where everyone owns everything together and nothing is owned privately, in a moshav everyone has their own house and plot of land.

My parents love that we live in a house now, not an apartment like we did in Jerusalem. They like the green space, the farm animals in the nearby barns, the orchard with the baby apple trees that will bear fruit in a few years.

I hate those trees. They look like little sticks

with a few sad leaves that shiver in the breeze. The branches and the trunk look too fragile to ever hold up dozens of apples. But my dad loves to go look at them. He often puts his hands in his back pockets and rocks back on his heels, his eyes dreamy.

He’ll say, “There’s good dirt here.” He’ll grab a black clod of dirt and crumble it between his wide hands. Then he’ll sniff his fingers and smile like he’s been smelling fresh-baked bread.

“It’s just dirt, Abba,” I always say.

“It’s a place to put down roots, Beni,” he says. And I know he’s thinking of my oldest brother, Gideon, who died six years ago.

Our moshav is so small that there aren’t enough kids for us to have our own school. Which is why I ride a bus for an hour to get to school at Kibbutz Lavi. There are twenty kids living here, but most are toddlers and babies. I’m one of the oldest.

I hate it.

I had friends in Jerusalem. I had my soccer friends, my chess friends, and even the loud class clowns. My teachers were strict but smart. Now?

There are only two other boys my age in the moshav: Ori and Yoni.

My teacher at my new school is so stupid it hurts. She's clueless. The kids play tricks on her all the time, and she doesn't even realize it. She's an immigrant from France, and her Hebrew is terrible. Which is how this whole mess got started.

Yesterday, Yoni was throwing spitballs into Sara's hair.

I cannot stand Yoni. He always picks on Sara, who lives at another new moshav not far from ours. She wears thick glasses and has a big gap between her teeth. I don't see the big deal about glasses or gap teeth, but she's clearly embarrassed about them. The more she's embarrassed about them, the more kids make fun of her.

"Leave her alone," I said. No one else was going to say it. Not even Sara.

"Why do you care?" Yoni smirked at me. "Is she your girlfriend?"

Sara turned bright red. It made me so mad the way Yoni went on, making everyone's day worse and worse.

I glared at Yoni. "You're such an idiot."

He sneered back at me and said, "*Ata tahat shel hamor!*" Which means *You're a donkey's ass*. A couple of kids near me snickered, and that finally caught our teacher's attention.

She was at her desk at the front of the room, oblivious as always. She always makes a face whenever we call her Morah Yvette. In France, she told us, students called her Madame Monteux. But in Israel, students call teachers by their first name.

"What did you say?" Morah Yvette trilled in her panicky way. She always acts as if she's about to lose control of the class and only screaming at us will help. Something about the way she perched at the edge of her seat, her dumb face looking at Yoni and the rest of the class, got under my skin. Why hadn't she done anything before now?

"He said I'm cool," I said with a straight face. I heard someone swallow a shocked giggle. The rest of the class froze, waiting to see if Yvette would call my bluff. Our teacher knew enough not to believe everything we said. I could see her deciding whether she could trust me or not. I don't know why I lied.

One upside was that I had trapped Yoni neatly. He either had to agree that he'd called me cool or confess that he'd called me a donkey's ass, in which case he would get in trouble.

"It's slang," Yoni said, backing me up. "Everyone's saying it." The teacher looked at the rest of us and, God help us, everyone nodded.

"It's true," Ori said. You could always count on Ori to back up Yoni. "*Tahat shel hamor!* My sister's in the army and they're all saying it."

Yvette's face cleared, and the class continued. Except now everyone kept saying "*Tahat shel hamor!*" in an excited way like it really did mean something awesome. It was actually hilarious to hear all these kids cursing and the teacher just smiling about it.

A few minutes later, Ori passed me a folded note from Yoni.

Nice one.

I looked over at Yoni. He grinned like we were best friends. I felt sick. I didn't want Yoni as my friend. I should never have lied to keep him out of trouble. I didn't smile back. His grin

faded. His eyes narrowed. I rolled my eyes and looked away.

The bus ride back to the moshav that day was long and stuffy. We rolled over the green heights of the Golan. I noticed a soaring bird, gliding on air currents. It drifted over the bus and was lost from view.

I imagined Yvette feeling cool with her new slang. I squirmed uncomfortably on the hard plastic seat. I wasn't much better than Yoni picking on Sara.

Then this morning, the principal, Noam, was waiting for us with Yvette.

Apparently, our brilliant teacher went to a staff meeting yesterday. She was excited to try out the cool new slang she'd learned. When Noam brought in a cake that his wife had made for the staff, Yvette spoke up and said she thought he was "*tahat shel hamor.*" She meant it as a glowing compliment. The staff room fell into an uproar. It took a while to sort it all out, but bottom line, our principal figured out we pulled a practical joke on our teacher.

So this morning he yelled at us. "How dare

you mock a hardworking immigrant! How dare you lie to your teacher!”

It went on for a while. And then Sara, trying to help, said it was all Yoni’s fault. She must have had to pull all her courage to do that. She’d never spoken out loud in class before. But it didn’t help. I really think Noam was planning to make us write an apology letter or something. But once he had someone’s name, his mood got even uglier. Yoni is the son of our moshav co-founder, which means he couldn’t bear the brunt of all the trouble alone.

Not to worry! Yoni wasn’t going down without a fight.

“It’s Beni’s fault!” he shouted.

And his dumb, obnoxious pet, Ori, hurried to agree. “That’s right! He’s the one who said it first!”

Everybody was yelling accusations. Sara burst out crying. Noam and Yvette looked a little stunned.

Once they got the class settled, Noam decided the fair thing to do was to punish the whole class, since not a single student had spoken up and told

the truth before Yvette embarrassed herself. This made the rest of the class furious at me, since they had almost nothing to do with it. As soon as Yom Kippur is over and we’re back in school, all forty of us will be staying late every day for a week washing the blackboards, emptying the trash, scrubbing the toilets, and mopping the floor.

Everyone blames me, the new kid.

And this afternoon, Yoni and Ori kicked my *tahat shel hamor*.

Motti listens to my tale of woe.

“I hate this place,” I tell him again, and I’ve never meant anything more.

I hate everything about it. I hate the smell of cow manure that drifts into our house whenever there’s a south-blowing wind. I hate the rooster that crows at four in the morning. I hate the houses that all look exactly the same. I hate the baby apple trees that look so fragile. Too fragile to live. Too weak to put down roots. They will only break my father’s heart.

I want to shout, *We shouldn’t have come here! We had roots in Jerusalem!* But I choke it back. We’d gone over it before.

My parents refused to listen.

“This all happened because I stuck up for a stupid girl and now everyone hates me and I hate it here!”

“Beni, Beni,” my brother says. “You did good.”

“What?” I want to shake him. These two days have been a series of mistakes and bad decisions. My face throbs as if to chime in with agreement.

“Yeah. I’m proud of you.”

“Then you’re out of your mind. I’m an idiot.” I touch my nose gingerly. My fingers come away dry. At least the bleeding has stopped.

“Naw, you did the right thing.”

I shoot him a “give-me-a-break” look. Just because my nose isn’t bleeding anymore doesn’t mean I call what happened a good thing.

“I’m serious.” He puts a warm hand on the nape of my neck and draws me in close. “Always stick up for people who can’t stick up for themselves.” His face is close to mine; his pale eyes seem to gleam as they drill into me. “That’s what being a man is about. That’s what being a decent person is about. And it inspires people to

do the same thing. Look what it did for that girl. You made her stronger. That’s why she tried to stick up for you. You helped her be brave.”

I blink in surprise. I never thought of it that way.

“Maybe it didn’t work out exactly like either one of you hoped, but standing up for someone is never a mistake.”

I give a half shrug, though I feel a warm glow of pride at his words. “But then I shouldn’t have covered for Yoni! Why did I do that?” That’s the part that gets me. I hate that guy. Why did I do anything to help him?

“Oh, don’t beat yourself up,” Motti says, his lips twitching as he tries to hold back a smile. “You couldn’t help it. You’re so clever. Your mouth was running ahead of your brain. *And* you made him admit you were cool. In front of the whole class! Come on, admit it, that was brilliant and really funny.” He grins, and I just burst out laughing. I feel the weight of confusion and anger at myself evaporate.

He ruffles my hair and pulls me in for a hug. He smells like machine oil, soap, and sweat.

I wrap my arms around him, feeling his solid strength. I wonder if he's ever afraid.

We stay like that for a few moments, the sun warming my back. A car passing by slows down and stops. The driver rolls down the window.

"Everything okay?" he asks. I could have used him fifteen minutes ago.

"This is my brother; I missed him," Motti says. I'm thinking the same thing.

"*Nu*, so go home to your mom. What are you waiting for?" says the man and drives off. Everyone in Israel is a former soldier, and everyone knows how much parents worry over their kids in the army. Before the car disappears around the bend, the driver toots his horn and waves to us.

I don't know if it's aftershocks from the fight or from laughing so hard with Motti, but I can't help laughing again. Everything is better now that Motti is here.

"Come on," Motti says, smiling back. "Let's get you cleaned up before Kol Nidre."

We walk to our new house together. I should be thinking up a plausible story to tell my mom

about how I got banged and bruised, but instead, I just keep thinking of Motti. My brother is the bravest person I know. He's tough. He's smart.

And I'm the kid who gets a stomachache at the thought of fighting. Fierce as a baby lamb.

All my shame comes flooding back. Motti is defending our country against the people who want to hurt us. I can't even defend myself.