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The Antiquities Dealer
(A David Greenberg Mystery)
Sample Chapter
by Ed Protzel

I. Opening Game

Believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a more perfect creature than he is now—

— Charles Darwin

In three days you shall live, I, Gabriel, command you.

“Gabriel’s Revelation” stone tablet, circa 1st Century BCE, anticipates a suffering Jewish Messiah who will be raised from the dead.

— Ada Yardeni and Binyamin Elitzur

Cathedra Quarterly [Israel]

Chapter One

Aphrodite Unclaimed

Someone said Jesus Christ is alive.

Then I received a phone call that buckled my knees.

I closed my gallery, David Greenberg Antiquities, early that evening to play one of my rare but deadly chess matches against my diminutive gambler friend, Larry Finkel, a loser of epic proportions. In his daily desperation to support his local bookies, Finkel is a scavenger in the antiquities black market, preying upon unsuspecting collectors whom he can convince that vast windfalls await them at little risk. I only associate with him because, while Finkel may be a slimeball, his dragon variation of the Sicilian defense makes for breathtaking chess.

Outside in the falling dusk, the cold, hard rain dragged its feet, but I sensed a balmy April poised to elbow it aside. Muted umbrellas and raincoats rushed by my shop's window, doomed to be relegated to closets by morning. Life in the Midwest would soon emerge from its winter dormancy renewed, stretching its emerald luster toward blue skies and sunshine.

The little English shoppe bell above the door tinkled as the five-foot-five scam artist scurried into my upscale gallery, his back-alley soiled shoes leaving *schmutz* on the Kashan Persian rug.

"Hey, Genius, ready for a bloody knife fight?" Finkel flattered me with my old gambling crowd nickname, although his tone was more sarcastic insult than grudging compliment.

"Bring it on, Finkel!" I replied playfully.

I was surprised to see Finkel looking like a middle-aged accountant: black hair slicked back, wearing a tan sports coat over pressed khakis and a plaid shirt. The big annual Baptist convention was in town, and I had expected him to be sporting his black preacher suit with the phony white “Father Finkel” collar, like a predatory wolf in sheep disguise. With a grimace on his skeletal face, he leaned away to block my view of his illuminated cell, rapidly fingering the miniature screen. *Nothing*. He checked his watch with a bitter frown, then angrily shoved the cell into his pocket. Finkel is tightly wound.

It was an hour before post time at Fairmount Racetrack. I figured, if he wasn’t at the track, he intended to snooker me, but how? I locked the door, then, returning to my desk, poured two cabernets and pulled my hand-carved ivory chess set from the drawer. The set is nothing special, 20th Century Hong Kong, but I like the way the pieces make a solid *thunk* when brought down hard on the board. To make room, I cleared my desk, closed the safe, and—honored guest in mind—gave the tumbler an extra spin. I also shut down my computer so he couldn’t thumb-drive my customer base when I left the room. There’s no trusting Finkel.

During our second game, Finkel said pointedly, “Hey, somebody tells me there’s a rumor going around that Jesus—the Jesus—is living somewhere in Israel. Now there’s a chance for someone to make a buck.”

I sneered, figuring either he was trying to break my concentration or he had a bizarre hustle lined up to snag me. Finkel knows I’m a relatively honest player in the antiquities game—in spite of my reputation in some circles—and it’s difficult to cheat an even somewhat-honest man. Yet greed does spring eternal in the coldhearted, lowlife breast.

“Sure, Finkel,” I laughed. “I’ll leave the door unlocked for Him.”

His eyes narrowing, he pulled out his cell phone and tapped the screen, listened for a single ring, then cut off the call. Turning to me, he sported a smug, superior grin. I didn't know what to make of his sudden change of demeanor.

I soon found out. Within moments, Finkel's cell rang out the Kentucky Derby "Call to the Gate." He noted the caller and handed it to me. "It's for you."

"David Greenberg," I growled.

"Hi David, it's Miriam," the familiar voice of a woman I hadn't heard in twenty years said cheerily. Instantly, I felt faint, unnerved—and at the same time, joyously aroused. It was, indeed, Miriam. My hand began to shake, and I went white blind, the ocean roaring in my ears. When I recovered from the shock, I stammered, "Miriam. Why—why are you calling me?"

"I can't tell you over the phone, David," she said urgently. "But we need to talk; it's important. How about lunch tomorrow?" I quickly agreed, fool that I was.

Shaken, I returned to a won position in mid-game: a bishop ahead with the clear prospect of a passed pawn. But I couldn't concentrate. After I made a few desultory moves, Finkel locked a knight fork onto my rooks. Shortly thereafter, the black bishop had my queen skewered!

"Death to the bitch!" Finkel cried, undoubtedly alluding to his late-grandmother whose antiquities fortune he'd inherited and summarily blew at the track and in card games at the Eastside stockyards. But he was winners now. Faster than my king could fall on his sword, Finkel snapped up two crisp C-notes and shoved them into his coat. "Thanks, Greenberg. Got to get to the track. Lazy-Eye Lebowitz gave me a tip on the sixth race." Then he rushed so hurriedly out the door, the tiny shoppe bell rang like a violated canary.

Little did I suspect then, but Finkel and his card-shark buddy, Fat Daddy Markowitz, an old family friend of mine, would become adjunctive to my higher, or my *lower*, purposes.

At last, the stupid chess game was out of the way. *Screw the money.* Twenty years of yearning for Miriam, twenty years! I tried a sip of wine but had difficulty swallowing. Mortified, I turned out the lights and sat in the dark, a serrated longing plunging and ripping into my chest, remembering...

There, on her parents' darkened porch, our enduring first kiss, soft and long and tender, releasing luminous visions of a life together.

There, under the star-splashed sky by the park's Jewel Box fountain, we embraced, our bodies melting together, her breasts against me, our every sense bursting into life.

There, in my student apartment, I awoke on a sunny Sunday morning, Miriam's long black hair wild on my chest, her lips sensuously brushing my navel...

I drifted into consciousness, numb and despondent, absently gazing at my gallery's locked display cases, their tarnished relics of epochs past now seemingly useless, meaningless, as I suddenly believed my life to have been. *Perhaps the gods cheat us at chess,* I mused.

Indeed, the mischievous Fates were playing a far deeper game than I could have imagined, about to spring a trap upon me they'd set twenty years before...or, perhaps, twenty *centuries* before.

The noon sun poured through the picture window of Blueberry Hill like aged scotch, spreading a warm, golden glow. I waited for Miriam in a scarred oak booth at the nostalgia bar named for the Fats Domino song. Then, as if she had planned it, Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne" — a song about a woman you want to spend the night beside because she's "half-crazy" — so fitting the old Miriam, spoke to me from the luminescent Wurlitzer jukebox. Entranced, my thoughts drifted to

the Miriam I had known so long ago, never imagining the singular historical destiny into which she had been cast.

Ironical to meet her at our favorite old haunt. Blueberry Hill touches the depths of its patrons' youthful memories, and I surmised that's probably why Miriam picked it. The long bar at the front of this museum of decades past is crowned by a semi-religious effigy of Elvis atop the cash register. Around me, the wall-to-wall icon collections—the Beatles and Chuck Berry displays, the Howdy Doody-themed phone booth and Whistle Orange Soda clock—all proclaimed that the thrill on Blueberry Hill augurs another time, another world, something primal that I had lost.

Then she was there, looking the same—yet so changed, emanating an inner glow I'd never seen. Ghostly white Jewish kewpie doll with long, black, exceedingly thick curls only slightly touched with gray. Compact, wispy, pale body, like a wood nymph, as if there wasn't material to waste when they put flesh on her bones.

Her dominant feature, large, expressive, black doe eyes, gave one the sense she was soulful. But now she was no longer the rebellious girl I'd known, wearing Salvation Army *schmattes*. Her dress, an off-the-rack Israeli brand I knew well, was simple, unadorned, of material too light for this latitude.

Thoughts of Israel always put a lump in my throat. Two decades before, Miriam had inexplicably emigrated there with my best friend, Solly—Professor Joseph Solomon—leaving no word of explanation. For two wonderful years prior to their disappearance, Miriam spent every weekend with me at the apartment Solly and I shared as I drifted through graduate school, more dabbling-in than dedicated-to history and archeology. Solly was merely our Mr. Spock fixture around the place—already obsessing on his second Ph.D. in the sciences, while engaging in his

unsanctioned “personal” experiments. And then one day, Miriam was gone from my life...with Solly, dammit, a scientific whiz with a female-scoring quotient within degrees Celsius of absolute zero. And I never knew why.

To recover from my loss, I told myself Miriam never deserved my affections—that my youthful lustiness blew her better qualities out of proportion. But isn’t there always one who continues to haunt you?

For the last decade, I’ve taken regular buying trips to Israel. Inevitably, though, whether drifting along a Tel Aviv beach awash in sun-drenched bikinis or strolling a sweltering Arab street market in Jerusalem, the first thing my eyes seek out is Miriam. Invariably in vain. Perhaps I could have found her and Solly, but I couldn’t force myself to try.

“The years have put the rest of you in the right places, David,” she said with a sly smile, sliding across from me.

“How is Solly? Still testing the barriers of modern science?” I ventured.

“I hate to tell you, David...” She paused, thinking of how to frame the bad news. “Joseph died,” she recited, revealing nothing.

I sighed deeply, shaken. My best friend from college...dead.

Solly could have won the Nobel Prize. He was that brilliant. At least, if his grad school experiments hadn’t become drug-related, with himself as his own guinea pig. In his sophomore year in high school, before the drugs, he’d won a grant to explore original experiments at Pfizer. After school, he’d ride his bike to the corporation’s laboratories to work on his concoctions, which he devised while daydreaming in right field during gym class—leaps of imagination that made the adult scientists’ jaws drop. No telling how many discoveries Solly could have made.

“I’m sorry, Miriam. How did he—?”

“Suicide,” she said, her voice flat as if she was ordering a Coke and wasn’t thirsty.

“A great mind wasted is a great mind wasted,” I said despondently. “What happened? Was it drugs?”

“Joseph never touched drugs after we were recruited to Israel, David. Neither of us did. But the saving grace is that his work might live on long after we’re all gone.”

Bravado? Conviction? I’d have to find out for myself.

“Were you still married, when he—?”

“Yes. Although he’d been living in his lab for the last two years.”

So Solly had reverted to his natural state, living in a laboratory without the real world to distract him from his research. Of course, if we’re lucky, don’t we all wind up where we belong? Was running a high-end gallery and chiseling the chiselers where I had intended to land? Lately, I hadn’t been so sure. There was no special woman in my life, no future companion or wife on the horizon, and the proverbial missing leg stung.

“Was it recently when he...?”

She nodded ‘yes,’ with no intention of elaborating. I wanted to press her, but couldn’t. I knew nothing of their last two decades, of their lives, their pursuits, if they had children. Let alone what took them to Israel. Most importantly, why Solly had slain himself.

“Why call me now?” I asked.

“I promised Joseph. He told me to visit you, on a mission of sorts,” she answered.

Solly sent her! She had me by the tender warriors, and I couldn’t resist. Had my friend wanted to atone for breaking us apart? Or was it because he knew I could be trusted?

“Where have you been living in Israel? I travel there frequently on business.” There was a long silence.

“Outside of Netanya, near the Mediterranean coast,” she whispered with some reluctance.

“I’ve been there. Why Netanya?”

“It’s all connected to a Society we belong to.” She was clearly unwilling to go further, and I let up on the interrogation. “So I understand you’re in antiquities,” she said.

“Right, I own a gallery on Euclid.” *Which she already knew, so why ask?*

She flashed her warm, toothy smile. “You were always so smart,” she said, her rare compliments, as always, melting my resistance.

“Why?” I countered, suspicious.

“Chick Markowitz tells me you also play the dark side of the antiquities market from time to time, sort of off the books. But he says you’re honest. Are you?”

“If you’re honest with me. Otherwise, all bets are off.”

Chick is Daddy Markowitz’s younger brother. Chick was a promising young artist Miriam and I had known who one day returned from a trip to San Francisco blathering about dead bodies and ghosts. His parents were forced to plant him in an institution. He was also, for a time, one-third of a spinning love triangle: I wanted to bed Miriam, she wanted to bed Chick, and he wanted to bed me. Frustrating to all concerned.

“So Chick is out of the mental ward?”

“He’s living in Israel. That’s all I know about him.” She cut to the chase. “David, there’s something Joseph instructed me to...to recover, and I need your help.”

“All right.” *Depending.* “Shoot.”

She grew solemn. “Listen, this may seem a bit strange, but I’m perfectly serious. Now I’m not talking about a piece of the cross from a railroad tie, not even the shroud of Turin. David, there were only three nails on the cross.”

“Nails? On *the* cross?”

“Yes, exactly. The only one that’s still in existence is the one from the *feet*. You must have heard rumors—”

“Well, Miriam, you hear stories all the time in my line of business, but the whole thing seems so *farfetched*. A nail from the crucifixion? It sounds like some Indiana Jones fantasy.” My mood dropped; I wasn’t going on any wild goose chase over an apocryphal legend. “I mean, assuming everything you’d need to—which is a stretch—after two thousand turbulent years, how do you document that a particular nail is the exact one? Carbon dating? Listen, the Romans crucified more Hebrews...”

Her cheeks flushed, and she blurted, “You don’t think one of his followers or, heck, just some adoring fan wouldn’t have held on to those nails as a keepsake? With the business you’re in? David, come on.”

“Okay,” I said, exasperated. “Let’s assume you’re right. I mean, why would Solly, an atheist, even want such a thing? And no hocus-pocus or biblical exegesis clap-trap.”

Seeing I was headed down the wrong trail, she laughed, shaking her head, her black crown of hair swirling. “I’m not authorized to discuss this yet, David, but it’s nothing mystical, I assure you. You know Joseph and I never believed in that *bubbe-meise*. You’ll know soon enough, I promise. The point is that the nail exists, and I need you to find it.” Her eyes darted about, what poker players call a tell.

“Okay,” I said. “You’re holding something back. Out with it.”

She merely stared at me with those dark eyes. I could see I was going to have to pry it from her.

I wondered what kind of Jews were so involved with historical Christianity that they'd invest their communal aspirations into the quest for a relic. Mainstream Jews *wouldn't* do that. This sounded more like a cult. Both Solly and Miriam were from typical middle-class Jewish families. But the young Miriam had been far too blatantly hedonistic to ever join a Jesus cult, and Solly's only religion, if any, was science.

From my own understanding, Jesus never claimed to be anything but a Jew. He preached in the countryside around Nazareth, avoiding the town, until his fatal trip to Jerusalem. At that time, like today, there were those Jews who kept the daily rituals, and those who didn't. Being a scholar, it is believed Jesus followed Jewish practices. Many believe the Last Supper was a Passover *seder*. Interesting speculation, but who knows for sure?

"So, what's involved?" I asked, my interest piqued. "An artifact like that, if such a thing exists, would cost millions."

"I can get you millions," she said matter-of-factly, meaning it.

"You? Millions?" I examined her department store clothing. "From whom, Miriam, this Society?"

At that moment, the tattooed waiter with a spiked Mohawk fluttered up to take our orders and refill our iced teas, then flitted away.

"Can you help us, David? It's for the ultimate cause, for humankind. I came to you because you have ethics...and because you loved Joseph."

Ethics aside, the twinkle in her eye indicated she much preferred that people on the seamy side of antiquities trusted me, which could be helpful to her. I nodded reluctantly.

Miriam reached into her worn shoulder bag and, without guile or fanfare, pulled out a large, thick envelop, Israeli-make. I could see my name written in the precise, left-leaning style of my late-friend. Then she reached casually for the sweetener, allowing me a glimpse of the pink sunrise on her left breast. Was this revelation on purpose? My thinking wasn't clear.

I absently turned my attention to the envelope. Inside, there was a letter written in Solly's hand—to me—and a thick stack of fresh American banknotes. Shocked at the sight of so much cash coming from Miriam's delicate hand, I quickly pulled the package under the table and extracted the letter.

I skipped to the end to see Solly's familiar, precise signature, matching that on the envelope. Considering the entire package was new, with crisp stationery and banknotes, Solly would most likely have written the letter shortly before he died. Recently. I wondered what had driven him to send this plea to me, then to do himself in. I was anxious to read the missive but preferred to savor it alone, so I folded it into my shirt pocket, where it burned my chest. Then, returning to Earth, I absently counted part way into the stack of greenbacks, but stopped abruptly, suddenly fearful.

Trying to act nonchalant, I scanned the room. Among the lunch crowd nursing their Becks and Heinekens, a ghostly pale-faced man at the bar, thin as death, ignored an untouched Coke. When he saw me examining him, he dropped a ten on the bar and slipped off. Suspicious, but I wasn't going to let myself get hung up in paranoia.

"There must be fifty thousand dollars in here," I whispered.

"I took a few cabs, meal expenses," she replied absently. *And she probably distributed a few tastes around town, seeking information or the cooperation of people like Finkel. Or worse.*

"I'm not taking this money from you," I said, tapping Miriam's knee with the envelope. She got the hint and dumped the money back into her purse.

"So tell me about this Society. What's its name?" I asked.

"Am Ha-b'rit," she whispered confidentially. "It means 'People of the Covenant.' You can't repeat that name to anyone. *Anyone.*"

"I won't. Is this Am Ha-b'rit like a *kibbutz*?"

"Kind of," she replied, clearly not meaning it. "They're all great people, David, doing important work. That's what attracted Joseph, why he gave up drugs for them." She paused to measure her words. "David, we're the original group that Jesus joined over two thousand years ago."

Not that "joined Jesus," but that "Jesus joined." Quite a claim.

"A group of Jews? You mean, a philosophical movement like...the *Essenes* or one of those offshoots?" I asked.

"Yes, sure. Kind of. But I'm not the best person to tell you," she said, avoiding the subject.

"Please try," I pressed.

She hesitated, then went on. "Am Ha-b'rit has always been an intellectual order: everyone seeking wisdom, during some eras—not so much today—living in common, working together, sharing material possessions. I mean, we live in modern communities now, with credit cards and single-family homes, but the basic idea still applies."

"Okay, I get the picture. And this group survived beyond the crucifixion?"

“Survived in varying degrees the Romans slaughtering the Jews, survived the Diaspora, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust as best we could. But with Israel reborn in 1948, we have taken root and prospered.”

“Miriam, that’s saying a lot,” I said skeptically, but decided to drop it. She was right about one thing. They had certainly prospered if they were tossing around millions for a wild-goose-chase artifact. “But go on. How does your Society, this Am Ha-b’rit, support itself?”

“Well, Am Ha-b’rit’s always been about philosophy, religion, sure, but the Society is also into the physical sciences. You know? Recruiting Joseph was part of that. We’ve made real advances, David, in biotechnology, medical science, and computer technologies.”

“I see. There are a few bucks in those lines of work,” I chuckled.

“We’re cashing in, that’s for sure. Not that anyone’s trying to get rich,” she cautioned, “but our successes enable us to do so much good. We all have different interests, but some members are pretty brilliant, like Joseph.”

I was dumbfounded. “I get it. And so—?”

“So the movement’s thinking has evolved over the past two thousand years.”

“Evolved?” I interjected. “That’s a strange word for something that began as a religious order.”

“Who doesn’t believe in evolution in this day and age? I mean, not everyone in the Society is traditionally religious. And even if you do believe in God, evolution might be *His* method. Anyway, Am Ha-b’rit blends religion, philosophy, and science together, see? Science is on the ascendancy, but they’re all just ways of understanding the world. Right?”

“I guess so,” I agreed, still not fully grasping the idea.

Detecting the doubt on my face, she said, “You still don’t believe me?”

“I want to, but, really, Miriam—”

“David, we have preserved writings spanning the last two thousand years—even books about Jesus, contemporaneous to His time, that weren’t written by Paul or John, which contain *other* things He said. Not that the originals have survived, but they’ve been copied and translated over time. Maybe they’re real, maybe not. But whether Jesus was divine or a historically significant genius, whether the writings are real or forgeries, what does it matter if the books themselves give us wisdom?”

“True, it doesn’t matter.” Fascinating. My bags were already half-packed for a Mediterranean climate. Maybe I’d find some unique acquisitions for my collection. If nothing else, I wanted to read the writings. “How long have you been in town?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Almost two weeks, visiting my family mostly.”

Then I asked the big question and held my breath for the answer: “Are you going back?”

“I’ve got to, David,” she said with startling urgency, the glint of a tear in her eye. A tear! From Miriam! Venus had me hooked through mouth and gills like a pool-hall patsy.