

*SEEKING SINAI*

ALSO BY BARRY POLLACK

**FORTY-EIGHT X: The Lemuria Project**

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A N O V E L

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This is a work of fiction that has taken the liberty of melding historical fact with historical conjecture and current events. While some characters have a true place in history, the main characters, places and events of this story are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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**IN MEMORY OF**

my father, WILLIAM POLLACK  
and my mother, LENORE POLLACK.

We don't choose our parents.  
They choose us and make us  
whole and worthy from nothing.

Religious faith does not require historical or scientific proof. You either have it or you don't. While I may treat the faithful with some cynicism in my writing, I do believe that faith, when not used to demean or harm others, is a most wonderful gift.

Historical relics have often been used to strengthen the conviction of the faithful - the remains of Buddha enshrined in a stupa, a reliquary holding a piece of the cross, or a hair from Mohammed. Could a contrary relic shake one's faith? That was the seed thought that began my writing of *SEEKING SINAI*.

## **Acknowledgements**

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I dedicate this book to my readers, without them, words are just black on white and not ideas or entertainment; and to Margaret, my wife, for without her, this writer would wallow in self-deprecation.

Barry Pollack  
Westlake Village, California  
2012

*BARRY POLLACK*

# PROLOGUE

*5<sup>th</sup> Century BC*

It was dusk. The air was still, ghostly translucent and sweltering. No soothing breeze came off the Nile. Lying on a chaise under the meager shade of a date palm, Herodotus waved his hand urging his servant to increase the pace of cooling him with a giant woven reed fan. Lying beside him was a young woman wearing a white cotton sarong; a single breast, moist with sweat, stood bare.

“Dance for me, Cornelia,” Herodotus said, half pleading, half commanding.

She rose and did not cover her nakedness. Cornelia, with pouty lips, wide exotically painted eyes, and the inherited beauty of a Nefertiti, was a woman barely sixteen who had been taught since a young child how to entertain and entice men. She danced, moving to the steady rhythm of the whooshing fan, raising her skirt revealing her long legs almost to the mound that gave men pleasure. Her master was a graying, curly bearded man in his forties, a scholar and historian who had gained fame in the great city state of Athens by meticulously recording the events of his time and the legends of notable civilizations that preceded him.

“You resemble a god,” Cornelia had praised him when they first met. “Zeus without his lightning bolt.” That was also part of her allure. She knew how to massage both the lusts and ego of a man.

Herodotus had recently arrived in Egypt intent upon expanding his renown by recording the history of another great civilization, that of the pharaohs. He had settled in the port city of Naukratis on the west bank of the Nile because it was a Greek city and, although Egypt was now ruled by the pharaohs of the

dynasty of Xerxes, it was a free city protected by the Persian monarch in order to promote trade. The Greek historian had another talent that was greatly valued in his new home. He could write pleadings to statesmen in Athens and never hesitated to refer to his friendship with its greatest general and ruler, Pericles. Although he accepted money for his eloquence, at times he accepted other gifts. One such payment was Cornelia, the child of an Athenian merchant and an Egyptian of once royal blood. She was the distant heir of pharaohs who could entertain with dance or with royal gossip back to the dynasties of the Middle Kingdom, to the Rameses, Tutankhamen and Thutmose. She was given to Herodotus as a mistress with the traditional hope that if he favored her, she would be more to him later.

Herodotus enjoyed Cornelia's dance and forgot the heat of the day as the heat rose in his loins. Then, abruptly, she halted her erotic dance and the servant stopped fanning.

“Don't stop!” Herodotus ordered. But Cornelia stood still, staring beyond him toward the garden entry. Herodotus turned. A Persian foot soldier stood stolidly before him. He wore a shimmering cuirass, a polished bronze breastplate shaped like a muscled torso. Bronze greaves were strapped to his legs and a Chalcidian helmet with a thick red-dyed horsehair crest was atop his head. His hand rested on an 18-inch double-edged sword, an *akinakes*, suspended from his belt. Herodotus stood. Cornelia covered her nakedness. The servant retreated.

“Sir,” the Greek scholar asked obeisantly, “how may I welcome you to my home?”

The foot soldier stepped forward and handed the Athenian a note. And then, as abruptly as he had entered, he departed. He said not a word.

Herodotus called after him. “Wait.” But the soldier did not

halt. He had performed his duty. He had been ordered to deliver a message, not await a reply.

*You will present yourself to the Temple of Hera upon the coming dawn*, the message read. It came from Artapanus, a general of Artaxerxes, the son of Xerxes the Great, the new pharaoh of Egypt and King of Persia, Assyria, and Babylon. Herodotus understood. Even though he was a free Greek, life in this land depended upon the favor of the pharaoh.



At the cusp of dawn, as commanded, Herodotus arrived at the Temple of Hera. Only a few of its great Doric columns remained standing. Most rested on the ground, a jigsaw-puzzle of rubble. The Temple of Hera was the one temple of Naukratis that had not been rebuilt, still lying in ruins since the wars between Greece and Persia. Herodotus was an expert at interpreting meanings and this choice of meeting place was a message. A Greek temple in ruins was a testament to the general's power. Then he heard the footsteps, the rhythmic march of soldiers. Herodotus trembled, unsure if it was from the morning cold or fear. What did this Persian want of him? He saw no one until Artapanus himself stepped out from the shadows. He was a man of about thirty, his body chiseled to perfection; his skin the color of red clay with a myriad of paler scars upon his face and arms that attested to his violent life. Herodotus looked beyond him, catching site of his retinue, thirty hoplites - foot soldiers. The general was dressed comfortably, wearing only a crimson tunic and short skirt. His soldiers were armored with shield, helmet, greaves and cuirass, and two weapons, sword and spear.

*Be calm*, he told himself, and he bowed deeply when the

general approached. He was surprised when Artapanus bowed too and then came close, kissing him on the mouth. It was the custom of the Persians with friends.

“Your name,” the general began, “is known by my king. I trust you will speak well of him.”

*Ah, Herodotus thought, suddenly feeling empowered, inhaling deeply, letting the color back into his cheeks, this man comes to assure that I edit history in their favor. Perhaps there are rewards to be had.* But that well-being quickly faded when Artapanus continued.

“What I seek I could simply take. With your head, if need be. But I have measured my life and the gods tell me that I need not disturb the heavens to achieve my desire.”

Herodotus knees buckled a bit. “And what is it you wish of me?” he asked, head bowed, promptly and properly subservient.

“I have seen too many men cling too long to swords and old habits until the final breath of life leaks from their lungs. And then they are buried and forgotten. Who will remember that my feet have touched this ground and praise my glories? You may name me with your pen, Herodotus, but even the grandeur of the pharaohs written in stone is worn away by the winds of time. As a young man, I have enjoyed the searing pleasures of love but have forgone the comfortable hearth of a wife and mother.”

Artapanus held his hands palms up, as if beseeching the gods - and the scholar.

“There is a woman,” he continued, “who I once enjoyed, who I let slip. Her name is Cornelia, daughter of Maneus. I am sure you know how she tells tales of the greatest of her clan. I wish her for my wife, to bear my children.”

The old Greek smiled and felt magnanimous. He would miss the pleasures of Cornelia but at this moment he was relieved

to feel his head more secure upon his shoulders.

“Then she shall be my gift to you, General.”

The general grasped the scholar’s bearded face in his coarse hands and beamed.

“I do not accept your gift, Athenian. But I will pay you for her with the kind of currency you will appreciate.”

Artapanus waved for one of his soldiers to approach. A bundle in a tattered oiled cloth was handed to the general who set it carefully upon the flat base of a fallen column and unwrapped it. Inside were old papyri, brownish yellow with faded writing. Herodotus took one and, despite holding it gently, its frayed edges turned to dust. He set it down again, gently. The writing was in hieroglyphics, a language Herodotus had tediously translated in the past but one that had not been used for more than a hundred years, since the days of the Saite pharaohs, the last native dynasty to rule Egypt.

“These are perhaps hundreds of years old,” the story-teller said, thinking aloud.

“No, a thousand,” Artapanus corrected. “They are from the Valley of the Kings, from the tomb of the sons of Rameses the Great. I have already had my scholars read them.”

“And what do they say?”

“The sons of Rameses tell a story of their father and a battle he fought.”

“Much has already been written of Rameses already,” Herodotus remarked. “And the pharaohs fought many wars.”

“But this is a story I have never heard before.”

“And why do you think it has been overlooked?”

“Because it is a story of a civil war,” the general replied, “and a kingdom's treasures lost. Kings do not write of their foibles. But the sons of pharaoh thought this history needed to be

remembered.”

“History is not only what is remembered but what is believed. Is it a story you believe, General?”

“I found it as compelling as your telling of Croesus and his treasures.”

Artapanus gathered the frail papyri, wrapped them again in the oiled cloth and gently placed them in the Greek’s hands.

“With the next full moon, I shall come for my bride. Tell me then what your muses say, if this is a history you wish the world to remember.”

With no further farewell, the general departed, his troops trailing behind him like the train of a great robe.



Herodotus read the story written by the sons of Ramses and, as he did, the papyri, buried alongside the princes of Egypt for a thousand years, turned to dust. He hurried to preserve history by recording the hieroglyphic tale with his own pen, in his own words. And, seeking further favor from Artapanus, he prepared a unique wedding gift. He hired a smith to make a bronze neck protector - a hinged metal cylinder that wrapped like a collar about the neck and attached by leather straps to a large crescent-like shield to further cover-up the front of the neck and upper chest. He had seen this kind of armor, called a *gorget*, worn by Athenian hoplites. They were a battlefield innovation of his time. But he had never seen a Persian soldier wearing such armor. He hoped the gorget would be particularly appreciated by a warrior like Artapanus - a thoughtful gift for a soldier general and a new friend who had the ear of the pharaoh. Once the armor was completed, Herodotus sought out an artisan to inscribe a

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decoration upon it, the words he had read on the ancient papyri and re-written.

Artapanus, however, never returned for his bride. There was sedition in the kingdom and he was slain. The gift of the gorget was never given and Herodotus, feeling himself in jeopardy, fled Egypt, leaving the gorget behind. Other missives of his new history of Egypt written upon parchment were sent on to Athens but were lost at sea. The gorget, while mislaid, survived; and the story inscribed upon it, chronicling a pharaoh's battle for his throne and a kingdom's stolen treasures, remained lost to mankind for two thousand years more.

*Whoever destroys a single life is as guilty as though he had destroyed the entire world; and whoever rescues a single life earns as much merit as though he had rescued the entire world.*

**The Talmud**

# CHAPTER ONE

Day 1

Near the midnight hour of a moonlit, warm Southern California Saturday night, Nathan Lachsman, an orthodox rabbi, crouched behind some water heaters in the garage of a mansion, like a rodent avoiding a trap. Hours had passed since he had first decided to hide there. He sat still, silent, and morose, his vacant gaze a mirror to his embattled soul, as he prepared himself to become a thief.

Six hours earlier he had been at home finishing dinner with his wife and eight children. Had he offended God then? Perhaps the *malachai ha sharif*, God's angels that bless or curse each Jew depending upon whether they honor or dishonor the Sabbath, had seen him glancing at his watch impatient for *Shabbos* to end? He

was impatient because he had an appointment to keep and a speech to give. *Shabbos* would end at 6:13 p.m. He was fortunate sundown came so early this time of year. Any later and he would have been unable to get to his meeting on time. He had nearly an hour to drive to an event being held in a private home in Lake Sherwood, an estates area populated by the rich and famous about ten miles inland from Malibu. He had been invited to be a principal speaker at a gathering of a group called The Messiah Society, made up of both Christians and Jews who anxiously awaited the “Coming,” as did he. They weren’t end-of-the-world faddists. Although most were religious folk, clergy and lay people, they all believed that the messiah would come - but only when the world was ready for him. Rabbi Lachsman did not feel out of place among this group of mostly Christians. He had learned that when it came to discussing the messiah, there was not much difference in their beliefs. He believed that the messiah was yet to come. They believed the messiah was to come again.

Many in his community, both lay friends and other rabbis, had outspokenly disapproved of his attending events such as this with *goyim*, non-Jews.

“You should not put yourself in a position to be tempted by wrong thinking,” they had admonished him.

But Rabbi Lachsman did not believe it was possible he could be *led astray*. His faith was too strong. And, he always wore his personal armor, a *tallit katan*, an undergarment with knotted strings called *tsi-tsit* at each corner. Wearing it fulfilled a biblical commandment: “*And the Lord spoke to Moses saying: ‘... They shall make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments ... You shall see them, and you will remember all the Lord's commandments ... and you will not be led astray.’*”

Lachsman was in his mid-fifties, a gaunt man with thin slit-

like eyes that looked like they were always straining to see - or to learn. He had spent most of his life indoors pouring over the pages of religious books. He had a pallid complexion and was garbed in his customary black suit with a black wool English's driver's cap covering his *yarmulke*. The only color on him was his simple gold wedding band. The rabbi, *Nabi*, as his students fondly called him, was a teacher at the *Aish Ha Torah* Yeshiva, a school for orthodox boys in West Los Angeles. *Nabi* was a Hebrew word that meant "to bubble forth, as from a fountain." It generally referred to someone who bubbled forth with wisdom; a word often used in referring to a prophet. But it was only a nickname and the rabbi made no pretense to being a prophet. He was, however, a scholar who had studied the *Torah* and its commentaries his entire life, a man who debated the subtleties of God's word and the practical meaning it had for how men should live. He was especially renowned as an expert on the *moshiach*, the messiah. He could quote from memory Talmudic passages describing the where, when, how, and why of the messiah's coming.

When the rabbi arrived at the gates of Lake Sherwood, the security guard asked his name and passed him through. The guard had seen a collection of strange folk that night, all going to a party at the McGraw house. This was a community where starlets, sports heroes, and captains of industry in Lamborghinis and limos were the more customary guests. Tonight the gate guard had passed through a priest and two nuns in a dented 1996 Buick Skylark, a 12-passenger Chevy van carrying a group of lay people from a church in Altadena, and now a bearded rabbi in an old Ford Escort.

The McGraw estate, a ten thousand square-foot Tuscan Mediterranean villa, stood on a hilltop overlooking the back nine

holes of the Lake Sherwood golf course. The rabbi's host there was actually the owner's housekeeper, Felicia Consuelo Vigil. Felicia had begun working as a part-time maid for Arthur McGraw nearly ten years earlier when McGraw was a computer engineering student at Stanford and lived in a rented apartment in Palo Alto. McGraw's business success led him to purchase up, from a one-bedroom townhouse to a three bedroom home, and finally from one mansion to another. With each move, Felicia followed. That long term relationship and the fact that McGraw was no longer living in the Lake Sherwood house made it easy for her to ask her boss for the favor of allowing this gathering at his estate. The house was for sale. Arthur McGraw had already moved to another more bachelor suitable abode overlooking the beach in Malibu.

Felicia Consuelo was a member of the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic church in Moorpark, just ten miles up the 23 freeway from Lake Sherwood. With her pastor active in the Messiah Society, she had become active as well. Although she may have been only a maid, she was the hostess of this event and had used all her skills and contacts to cater it. A fortyish woman, somewhat pudgy but with a flawless complexion and long straight coal-black hair, she wore her finest Sunday dress as she greeted her guests in the grand foyer, speaking with men she considered holy, scholarly, and close to God. She glowed with contentment, as if she were the matron of this multi-million dollar domain rather than its maid. It was the proudest moment of her life.

Nabi was one of the principal speakers at the event. When it came his turn, he began hesitantly but, as with his students, the thrill of teaching soon overtook his shyness. He spoke with a magnetic cadence, his body bobbing back and forth at the lectern,

almost as if he was praying.

“The Jewish diaspora,” Nabi explained, “began in the sixth century BC with the destruction of the Temple. Ironically, this tragedy may have been instrumental in preserving our people while many other ancient cultures disappeared from the face of the earth. Exile forced us to preserve our identity by creating a community centered about the synagogue and Torah. The role of the rabbis was to preserve and teach the holy words of the Bible, to give the Jewish people hope, and set the stage for the coming of the *moshiach*, the messiah. Nowhere in our Talmud is it written that the messiah will be a superman, performing miracles. It is only written that his coming will herald *Olam Ha-Ba*, the World to Come. And what is this World to Come? It is one where we will all know peace and freedom, but more importantly we will know God, both physically and spiritually. And when will the *moshiach* come? Some sages say we should pray for the return of all Jews to Israel, for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, and once that is accomplished, he will come. Some say he will come only in a generation that is either altogether righteous or altogether wicked. Or, when all have given up hope or all have hope. I know you will ask me what I believe. Maimonides, the great 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish rabbi and philosopher, summed up the principles of Judaism in thirteen articles of faith. Those principles affirm our belief in the oneness of God, the divine origin of the Torah, an afterlife, and the messiah. His twelfth article of faith was often among the last words spoken by Jews being marched into Nazi gas chambers. ‘I believe,’ they recited, ‘in the coming of the Messiah. And, even though he tarries, and doesn’t appear in any hurry to come, I still patiently await him.’ I myself pray these words every day,” Nabi concluded, “and I believe in them.”

After all the speeches had ended, guests meandered about the mansion, gawking at its opulence and nibbling on an assortment of appetizers that Felicia Consuelo had bought and prepared from the local big box store. The rabbi kept apart, sipping from a bottle of water. Surely, nothing here was kosher.

Nabi, too, was fascinated by this rich man's home. He studied the art on the walls. Modernists like Hockney and Rauschenberg. A Picasso, something he thought he had seen in a museum once. And there was McGraw's presidential collection, hanging on the walls or set on shelves. Arthur McGraw collected objects and documents written by, signed, or owned by presidents. He owned something from every one. There was Lafayette's officer's commission signed by George Washington; a note of praise from Lincoln to General Grant; many autographed presidential photos, several recent ones with McGraw posing alongside Clinton, the Bushes, and Obama; and interestingly something with words in Greek. Inside an acrylic display box with a blue velvet backing was mounted a large crescent-shaped, shallow, plate-like, pitted bronze object with faint inscriptions on it written in Greek. Set in the display box, next to the bronze, was a time-weathered note written in elegant script. It read:

*Honorable President Jefferson,  
I proffer this relic of ancient Egypt to enhance your  
joy of history and in gratitude of your trust.  
Your humble servant,  
James Monroe*

The brass plaque on the outside of the display box read:

*A gift from James Monroe, plenipotentiary  
representative to the Republic of France,  
to Thomas Jefferson,  
President of the United States, 1803.*

Rabbi Lachsman fogged his glasses with a huff and cleaned them with a handkerchief from his pocket. He put them back on and leaned in a little closer to read the words that had been engraved on the ancient bronze plate - “a relic of ancient Egypt,” and “a gift” from one president to another. Nabi had spent nearly four decades studying the *Tanach*, the Jewish bible and its commentaries. Most were written in Hebrew but many had been written in Greek. By the second century BC, most of the western world was either controlled by the Greeks or influenced by them. In those times, although Hebrew remained the language of rabbis, many Jews could no longer read Hebrew. The most literate of them had adopted Greek. So Jewish scholars, intent on keeping the Torah alive, translated the Five Books of Moses into Greek and wrote many of their commentaries in Greek as well. Nabi, as part of his lifelong learning, had learned Greek and studied Greek culture. He alone among the guests of this house could read beyond the English inscriptions. As he read, his pupils widened, sweat beaded his brow, and his hands trembled. He had a stricken look, as if he'd received a vision of what life had in store for him.

*Am I translating correctly*, he thought? Although he was familiar with Greek, the language was Athenian Greek known as *Koine*, written only in uppercase letters with scarce punctuation, which made it more difficult to translate. Despite the noise of the party and guests milling about him, he focused his attention on

the bronze. He stared at it for almost an hour before noticing that most of the guests had left. He needed more time and quiet to study the words, to truly understand their meaning - to be sure. He thought of asking the owner if he could borrow the artifact. But the mansion was owned by Arthur McGraw and the young dot com billionaire wasn't there, only his housekeeper, who surely couldn't provide permission. It might take weeks or months to gain approval from such a busy entrepreneur and even then the rabbi would have to explain his motives and his fears. And so, almost as if someone else had overtaken his will, he found his way to the empty garage where he thought and planned - and hid.

It was nearly one a.m. when the rabbi stepped quietly from behind the water heaters. He glanced at his watch, its iridescent dial illuminated in the dark. It was time for him to act. The words that Nabi had read had sowed doubts in his faith for the first time in his life. How could he, a rabbi, tell anyone that just a few words had shaken his faith, a faith in *Ribbono Shel Olam*, the Master of the Universe. This ancient artifact was something he had to obtain, knowledge he had to know - right now - to smother those doubts. He had to learn more and could no more postpone that urge than a farmer could postpone his harvest or a soldier postpone the battle.

The words were also attributed to a renowned author, Herodotus himself. Nabi recalled what he had learned about the ancient Greeks. Herodotus, who had been given the soubriquet *The Father of History*, was the first writer to report history by separating fact from myth. He identified his sources and noted their reliability or lack of it. His great work, *The Histories*, was considered a reliable version of real events, particularly the Persian Wars and the famous battles of Marathon and

Thermopylae. And on this bronze plate were inscribed more of his words. But did they describe true events? Were they history or imagination? Fact or fiction? *How did President James Monroe come upon this artifact*, Nabi wondered? And what was it? *A religious item? A kitchen utensil? A piece of armor?*

Nabi trembled, not from cold or a fear of being found, but from that internal torment that wells up inside and erupts in moments of despair. If what he had read was true, perhaps his whole life, the life of all the Children of Abraham - Jews, Christians, and Muslims - was in jeopardy. The bronze was dark, oxidized, and occasional words were unreadable. But still the context was obvious. If only he could polish it to make the words clearer, to be sure his translation was correct. This was something he did not wish to misinterpret.

Nabi decided he would wait until the quiet hours of early morning and stealthily re-enter the house, taking the acrylic box - as carefully as possible - from its place on the wall and returning here, to this garage, to study it more carefully. He would "borrow" it for just an hour or two. And then he would return it back to its place. It would cause harm to no one. Nevertheless, the rabbi could not keep his mind from busily debating right and wrong.

*I am not stealing*, he said to himself. *I am borrowing something for a few moments - simply to learn - and then I shall return it.* Nabi reinforced his decision by quietly mumbling the words of the Talmud. "*He who adds not to his learning diminishes it.*"

But, after a lifetime of study, the words of the *rebbe*s who had spoken and written the law for a millennium drowned his thoughts in a torrential flood of ethical give and take.

To borrow something and make no payment, well, that,

according to *Halacha*, Jewish law, was stealing. He could borrow the item if he was sure the owner would permit it. But would he? And proper payment would be necessary. But what price would the owner demand? Surely nothing he could afford. Another Talmudic concept said that one was not obligated to make payment if he enjoyed something and no loss was caused to its owner. But still, any loss would have to be determined by the owner.

In his teaching, Nabi often quoted *Rambam*, Maimonides. Rambam had said that the ultimate role of all *mitzvoth*, of all God's commandments, was to teach us to love and get along with one another. *It is a mitzvah*, Nabi thought, *a blessing, to lend to a poor person - a poor person like myself. By borrowing this object, I am allowing this rich man the opportunity to perform a mitzvah.*

Nabi smiled for just a moment and then shook his head clear of such absurd thoughts. He would have laughed if one of his students had made such ridiculous arguments. He was rationalizing stealing and there was no hidden interpretation of the holy texts that would make it any different.

The sounds of the gathering in the home and the clean-up afterwards had subsided. It was time. Everyone would be gone. He had been told that the house was vacant, ready to go on sale. The rabbi put all righteous thoughts out of his head. He took off his shoes and quietly made his way back into the house. His eyes were already well adjusted to the dark. He quickly found the bronze, set in its clear plastic box. Unfortunately, it was well mounted on the wall. He would need something to pry it loose. He went into the kitchen and began opening drawers looking for a knife or screw driver, something. Then the kitchen light came on. The rabbi squinted a moment to adjust his vision and found

himself looking eye to eye at Felicia Consuelo, the housekeeper he had met earlier in the evening.

“*Qué estás haciendo aquí todavía?* What are you still doing here?” she growled, glaring menacingly at him.

“Nothing. I was ... I was just leaving.”

“*Ladron!*”

The rabbi knew a bit of Spanish. *Ladron* was a thief. She thought he was a thief.

“No. No. I wanted to study something.”

“*No te mueves!* You stay right there. I’m going to call the police.”

“Call the police! What are you talking about?”

The rabbi moved toward Felicia to dissuade her.

“Let me explain,” he said, pleading.

As she reached for the phone, the rabbi reached for her hand to take it away, to give him a moment more to explain. He would try to piece that moment together later, for it was just a moment. Like a car flying off a mountain cliff. You could see the calamity coming and do nothing about it.

Felicia was not a fragile woman. She had the strength of a woman who had known hard work all her life. She swung at the rabbi, clipping his chin. Just in reflex, he held out his arm to keep her from hitting him again. But he accidentally struck her. She lost her balance and fell backward onto the sharp corner of a marble countertop. She hit at that crease at the back of her head, that spot where head and neck meet. The rabbi could hear it, the loud crack of bones breaking in her neck, although he didn’t know the nature of the injury. Felicia Consuelo fell, her voice a crackling groan for just a second, and then she lay limp and contorted on the floor.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” the rabbi said. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

The fall broke her neck but it didn't kill her. Had the rabbi let her lie still and called paramedics, they would likely have immobilized her neck and after a few months of healing, she would have been fine. But the rabbi had to help. He had a natural compassion for people and in this moment he felt sorrow and regret that he had contributed to someone else's pain. He ran into the living room and retrieved a pillow from the couch, returning hurriedly with it to make the injured housekeeper more comfortable. Nabi flexed Felicia's neck forward and set the pillow under her head. Then, seeing that she seemed to be breathing poorly, he set it more under her shoulders, hyper-extending her neck back. The cervical vertebrae fractured further and in a split second, she was a quadriplegic. The rabbi watched her eyes blink as if she was awakening, but that was the only movement she had left.

"Forgive me. Please. I only wanted to look at that plate on the wall."

The events of the night had so confounded him that he didn't think to call 911. His nature was to comfort and so he sat beside her, taking hold of her hand, caressing her cheek, and praying.

Felicia did not breathe but her heart continued to beat, first rapidly, then irregularly, then not at all. The rabbi wept and mumbled the *Mi Sheberakh*, the Jewish prayer for the ill or injured.

"*HaKadosh Barukh Hu,*" Nabi began. "May the Holy Blessed One overflow with compassion upon her, to restore her, to heal her, to strengthen her, to enliven her."

That was all he knew how to do as he watched her die.

*Never exposure yourself unnecessarily to danger; a miracle may not save you ... and if it does, it will be deducted from your share of luck or merit.*

*The Talmud*

# CHAPTER TWO

Day 2

It was Sunday, a day off for Elmo Bernize, one of veterans in LAPD's RHD, Robbery Homicide Division. Sun, surf, and the anticipation of sex - it would have been a perfect day for him except for the fact that he was on his way to a murder. Only he didn't know it yet.

Natalie Adler, his thirty-something girlfriend and lately his real-estate mentor as well, had called him an hour earlier, at eight a.m. He had been on duty the night before and had planned to sleep in; so, when she woke him with her call, his first words were gruff.

“Yeah! What?”

“Bernie?” She, like most of his friends, called him Bernie. Elmo seemed too Muppetish.

“Natalie,” he sweetened his tone. “Morning.”

“I'll be at your house in ten minutes. I need you.”

Her voice was thick, crackling with sexuality. Bernize put his hand on his morning erection in anticipation. "I'll be here."

"Get dressed. I'll honk when I get there."

"You're not coming in?"

"No. I need to be at Lake Sherwood in an hour."

"Why the hurry?"

"Bernie, I have a broker's open house scheduled for a new listing this morning. You need to come. You'll meet people. And you'll learn something."

Bernize eased himself out of bed and slipped on some perfectly faded jeans and a tight cashmere sweater that accented his muscled pecs and taut stomach. But he skipped his usual morning shower. His skin still felt soggy from the night before. Bernize had gotten a call just when he was about to go off duty at 7 p.m. But there was no passing on a multiple homicide.

A twenty-year-old male had walked into his home and shot and killed both his parents and two siblings. A teenage sister was the only family member who had gotten out alive. Wounded and bleeding, she had run to a neighbor's home, who then called nine-one-one. Fifteen minutes later, Elmo Bernize and half a dozen squad cars were parked on the streets and lawns surrounding a Sherman Oaks mini-mansion. A police helicopter disturbed the usual calm of the affluent neighborhood with the earsplitting *woof-woof-woof* of its rotors, hovering overhead spotlighting the grounds, looking for anyone lurking in bushes or running. But Bernize knew from experience that a killer in a domestic homicide often stayed put, lingering to enjoy the quiet of his victims, or contemplating his own demise. He had gotten a quick background from the surviving sister.

"My brother," she said, "he's bipolar. But when he takes his meds he's fine."

“What do you think set him off?” Bernize asked.

“The water,” she answered. “They wouldn't let him have enough water.”

“He shot everyone because he was thirsty?”

“No,” the sister answered. “It was the showers. He came in yelling, 'I can't take a decent shower. A couple fuckin' minutes is too long?!' And then he shot us all.” She began a wavering howl. Bernize put his arms around her and pressed her head to his chest. He knew this was a time for his compassionate side.

“He liked to take long hot showers,” she sobbed, “but with the price of water, Dad said we had to conserve and take shorter showers.”

Bernize had his killer kid pegged - bipolar and OCD.

A few minutes later, Bernize was huddled behind a tree on the front lawn, a few feet from the front door. He had made several loudspeaker announcements asking the boy to come out. They would wait awhile, but not long, and then they would go in. Bernize wondered whether this was going to be the first of LA's “water homicides.” Los Angeles had a semi-arid landscape dependent on water funneled along hundreds of miles of aqueducts from mountain sources in the northern part of the state. In the last few years, with the drum beaters blaming the perpetual drought on global warming, the price of water in L.A. had skyrocketed. It used to be folks griped about the cost of gasoline. Now the cost of water was the bugaboo.

A couple of minutes before they were timed to burst into the house, the lawn sprinklers went on. Bernize kept his position, getting bitch slapped every six seconds as a rainbird made its cycle. It was an ironic soaking. Had this dad watered his kid more than his lawn, he might be alive now. After two Flash-Bang grenades, SWAT was in the house. They called it clear in less

than a minute and Bernize found the killer, the son, lying naked, crumpled on the floor of a still running shower. He had shot himself in the chest and, as the shower ran, a kaleidoscope of blood circled the drain. *Well, he thought, the kid is finally getting his long shower.*



Bernize was waiting at the curb when Natalie pulled up to his Woodland Hills home. He eased into the front passenger seat of her top-down ruby red Mercedes SLK convertible and they took off. *It's going to be another perfect California day*, Bernize thought - blue skies, temperature in the low eighties, warm enough to sooth skin and soul, not hot enough to sweat, and a beautiful woman by his side. When he related his experiences of the night before, Natalie had only one comment.

“In the hills, south of the boulevard in Sherman Oaks, it's better to describe a house as Beverly Hills adjacent. Keep it on your radar. A dead family, there's a potential listing there although you'll have to disclose the circumstances. Could be a tough sell.”

That was Natalie. She was hot. She could be cold. But she definitely knew her business.

Bernize lived in a modest hilltop 1950's three-bedroom bungalow in the Hollywood Hills with great views of the city. It wasn't a grand residence.

“It's a fixer-upper,” Natalie had tactlessly remarked when she first saw it. “It needs a major remodel.”

It was in her character to imagine the potential and she was already fantasizing about what Bernie could do with the place -

new windows with dramatic casings, French doors, and some stonework instead of the faded mauve stucco that reminded her of the cheap tract house it was. Like most solo male residences, the décor in Bernize's home was a mix of adolescent and hired decorator kitsch. But it was a perfect bachelor pad. The bedroom had a king size bed, a wall-mounted 50-inch flat screen TV, a mini-bar, and a sliding glass door that led to an outdoor Jacuzzi and pool. At night, she thought, there were few views as grand or as romantic as his, with the moon shimmering off a backyard infinity pool and a myriad of lights carpeting the city below. It was a place designed to seduce and she had been well satisfied with the seduction. Elmo Bernize was not only Natalie's lover; he was also her protégé, at least when it came to the real estate business.

"It's not brain surgery," she had told him in the sweaty afterglow of sex. "In six weeks you can get your license. And with your contacts, you can probably make an extra ten, twenty, maybe even a hundred grand a year just listing houses from your friends."

Elmo listened. He needed a cigarette but had quit six years ago. Smoking was sexy - in the movies, in photographs - but no longer in real life. Talking business after sex, he supposed, was the 21<sup>st</sup> century's version of a having a cigarette. For the "A" types, there was no more time for a satisfied sigh or a deep filtered inhale. One always had to keep their eye on the money. He listened to her talk of escrow and title, commissions and buyers, liars and time vampires, and soaked in her world while twirling his finger about her pubic hair.

Natalie was right. The real estate course was quick, the test easy. Bernize now had his real estate license and a superb, experienced and, as an added perk, sexy mentor. Two weeks after

passing the test, he even got his first listing. Tom Hmong, a young Vietnamese cop who worked sex crimes, wanted Bernize to sell his immigrant parents' home and find them a condo.

Natalie was ecstatic when he told her. "Your first deal! A buyer and seller in one deal. Bernie, if you close both sides, you'll easily pocket twenty grand. Are you excited?"

"Sure," he smiled back. *But I'm not going to get an orgasm over selling a house, he thought, like you do.*

Natalie was a very successful high-end Southern California realtor. Her working car was a Lexus SUV, which she used to shuttle around clients. The red convertible roadster was her toy. As they headed north on Pacific Coast Highway, Bernize soaked in the pleasures of his day off, gazing absently at a sparkling blue-green sea. Surfers were gracefully zigzagging through the waves and a small armada of sailboats behind them wove their way slowly between the coast and Catalina. The surf grumbled sweetly as it lapped the shore and a fragrant salt sea breeze massaged his face. Natalie disturbed his reverie as she laid out her plans for the day.

"I got a new listing last week in Lake Sherwood," she began. "I have it coming out at nineteen point seven million."

Bernize let out a silent whistle. The only people he knew that talked those kinds of numbers were the folks investigating organized crime - and realtors. And now he walked in both their worlds. Lake Sherwood was a gated community of multi-million dollar luxury homes built around the Sherwood Country Club and its Jack Nicklaus signature golf course.

"I set my brokers open at the last minute for this morning," Natalie went on. "I tell you, I'm exhausted. I had to meet with the caterers at seven a.m. Thank god they know me. Nobody

else could put on this kind of show this quick. If I get a good turnout, seventy, maybe a hundred realtors will show up.”

Bernize imagined the scene. He had only been a “licensed” realtor for one month but he had already been to a few “brokers opens.” Realtors, he quickly learned, were a gossipy and carnivorous lot and a free lunch always brought them around. A few dozen of them would go through salads and a couple hundred turkey and roast beef sandwiches like sharks in bloody water all the while trampling through a client’s estate and jealously or maliciously ruminating over the owner’s life style - and what their competition, the realtor who had the listing, had to do to get it. *It’s a divorce sale*, they would muse. Or, *the guy’s going bankrupt. Doesn’t sell in a month and it’ll be a bank sale*. Or the sleaziest assumption, *who did Natalie fuck to get this one?*

“It’s gonna be a slam dunk sale. It’s priced right and it’s immaculate,” Natalie said, driving with one hand and reaching into the back seat with her other, fiddling in her purse to retrieve the color brochure she had designed. She handed it to Elmo. There were several glossy photos of the multi-million dollar Tuscan estate. *The ultimate living experience*, the copy read. *A grand life-style for only a select few*.

“Well, it may be a bit overpriced,” she confided, “but it’ll at least go in the teens. And,” she added, with dollar signs twinkling in her eyes, “I’m on the prowl for something in Malibu beachfront for the owner. He’s renting there now.”

Bernize was calculating. That would make her commission for just this sale about half a million dollars, twice that if she brought the buyer. Even more if she sold him another house.

Natalie Adler had been selling real estate since she was nineteen years old. She had suffered through two years of poor performance at Santa Monica City College and given up without

a degree or the MRS so many of her girlfriends were striving to achieve. And then, the fates intervened. As a college drop-out, she interviewed for jobs as restaurant hostess, a secretary at a software company, and finally accepted, as her first real job, employment as a receptionist in a real estate firm. She took some brief courses, got her real estate license, and it wasn't long before she discovered her niche. She had a talent for making people feel comfortable and confident while making one of the most difficult, stressful and expensive decisions in life - buying or selling a house. After only a dozen years of real estate experience, she earned far more than lots of old acquaintances with prestigious college degrees who were doctors and lawyers. As one of the top realtors for the largest real estate company in the nation, she traveled in lofty circles. While she couldn't claim they were friends, she was well acquainted with California's rich and famous, from corporate titans to movie stars.

"I met the Smiths at a cocktail party last month. I think he's going to get an Oscar this year. Anyway, I sold them a house a few years ago in Encino and he turned me on to Arthur McGraw. That's who owns the Sherwood listing."

"The McGraw who's in the gossip columns all the time?" Bernize asked but knew.

"Yeah. That one."

Arthur McGraw was an entrepreneur who had made millions before he was twenty, starting up a never-profitable dot com and getting out before the 2008 bust.

Natalie turned north on Kanan into the Santa Monica Mountains and then onto Potrero Road where the scenery abruptly changed from suburban residential to Kentucky bluegrass. It seemed a lot like being "teleported," that's how rapidly the setting changed from the snarled traffic of LA's

sound-walled freeways to a country road with open fields set at the base of lush green hills where thoroughbreds and show horses grazed on great horse properties and ornate gates guarded the entry to the homes of movie stars and billionaires. The wind-blown convertible ride did not faze Natalie's hairdo. Her hair was cropped in a wedge cut and slicked down with plenty of product. She wore a tight, black and white checkered skirt by Donna Karen and a short St. John's knit white jacket. As she drove, her skirt rode up. She didn't bother yanking it down. She knew Bernize couldn't help eyeing her creamy white thighs and if he leaned forward a bit she was sure he could see her lacy pink La Perla underwear. Arousing him aroused her.

Natalie flashed her Board of Realty ID card, handed her business card to the Lake Sherwood guard and they quickly passed through the estate community's grand iron gates. Her listing was up a long driveway on a hilltop knoll with a 360 degree view. Unlocking the door to the estate, Natalie hurried first to the kitchen and sighed with relief. The caterers had set out everything perfectly. All was ready for the coming rush.

Bernize strolled the downstairs admiring the lavishly decorated home with lots of expensive art.

"Looks great, doesn't it? But it's all staged," Natalie said matter-of-factly. "Arthur may be rich but he still has *pobre* boy tastes. We moved most of his stuff to his new house. I had a great decorator do this. The furniture's rented. The art are copies with great frames. The only thing Arthur left behind is his presidential collection. He's still a little boy at heart. Instead of collecting baseball cards, he collects presidential memorabilia. But they don't fit. I'm moving them out next week."

Natalie glanced at her watch. "We've only got a few minutes," she said. "Where do you want to fuck?"

## SEEKING SINAI

This was one of the perks of being a realtor, Bernize had learned. There was something very erotic about screwing in other peoples' homes. They had done it straddling a saddle on horse property in Hidden Hills, on the floor of some kid's room filled with a wall-to-wall Barbie collection, and on a white fur faux polar bear skin in the living room of a famous actor conservationist's estate.

Realtors would be showing up in a few minutes. They would have to be quick. This would be pants down, dress up sex. They found the perfect spot to enjoy themselves in the home's theatre, a dimly lit room where they could watch a couple fornicating on a hundred-inch flat screen TV. The image they were watching was their own reflection. Then, they heard the front door open and the chatter of realtors arriving. Just a few more moments Natalie thought as she straddled Elmo riding him faster to reach her climax. But then came the screams. Bernize lifted her off him, afraid they had been caught in *flagrante*. But the screams had come from a distance, down the hall. Bernize had heard such screams before. They weren't staccato screams, like from a rat running by. They were terrified screams. Something more permanent, more macabre had set them off. Something dead.

*Thy friend has a friend, and thy friend's friend  
has a friend; be discreet.*

**The Talmud**

## **CHAPTER THREE**

Four realtors from the Malibu Coldwell-Banker office had shown up first and were grazing through the house together opening doors to bedrooms, cupboards, and closets when they found the body. It had been stuffed into the maid's room closet. The victim was a forty year-old Hispanic woman wearing a cotton flower print nightgown. Bernize knew she was dead when he saw her. There was no blood but her head was hanging akimbo, so he knew her neck was broken. But he felt for a pulse anyway. Natalie had followed Bernize toward the screams and the body. Looking back at her, Bernie saw she was looking pale and one of the other realtors looked like he was about to heave. Bernize didn't need Natalie or anyone else fainting or otherwise mucking up his crime scene, so he flashed his chrome shield, moving it around for all to see.

"I'm a police officer. LAPD," he announced professionally. "I need everyone to step outside and stay there."

Everyone complied unquestioningly. It probably also

helped that they watched him unclip the ankle gun he always carried and place it in a more accessible position on his belt. It was a slim easily concealable three-inch barrel Browning with a clip count of sixteen, plus one in the chamber. He put Natalie in charge.

“Keep them all together on the driveway,” he ordered. “Nobody leaves. And anybody that drives up to see the house, have them turn around.” And then his cop’s wisdom kicked in. “And jot down all their names and license plates.” It was not unusual for “perps” or people that knew them to return to the scene of the crime.

Bernize then made a quick call to the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office. They were the local jurisdiction. He expected they would have a team on the scene in a few minutes. Next, he called his bosses at Parker Center to let them know he was “on the job.” Then he moved quickly but cautiously through the house, gun drawn. There could be other victims or the killer could still be inside, though he doubted it. The body was in early rigor. So the murder had to have taken place in early morning, eight to ten hours earlier. The house was clean. “Immaculate,” as Natalie had described it earlier. There were no more bodies. No telltale signs of a break-in, a scuffle, or a theft. CSI would of course search more thoroughly for signs of struggle, theft, and trace evidence perhaps left behind by the murderer or murderers. But Bernize had a trained eye and it only took a moment for him to assess the situation. He already had a few scenarios imagined and a list of suspects. While a thief would be high on any cop’s list, they usually went for easy targets, and a gate guarded community with private security was not an easy target. A broken neck probably meant some violent altercation, something personal. So the victim was likely familiar with her killer -

a husband or a boyfriend, or maybe the owner, this guy McGraw. That collection of folks made his list of top suspects.

Bernize left the house to await the local cops and see how Natalie and the rest of the realtors were faring. Natalie, voice cracking, told Bernize what little she knew of the victim.

“That was Felicia,” she said, “Mr. McGraw’s house-keeper.”

Bernize gave her a quick overview of his suspicions. In this realm, after all, he was the expert.

“She was a live-in,” Natalie told him. “I don’t think she had a husband. And boyfriends? I wouldn’t know anything about that. But you’re thinking Arthur McGraw could have done this? That’s ridiculous.”

Natalie still felt shaken. She had never seen a dead body before. Even at funerals, she had assiduously avoided looking inside the coffin. And worse, terrible, inappropriate thoughts crossed her mind. Somebody had just died and she felt guilty thinking them but she couldn’t help herself. *Goddammit, she imagined the horrors, this house is now going to be a tough sell. I’m gonna have to disclose it as a murder site. And what if McGraw is the killer? Shit, I could have been killed. And if he did it, this sale’s gonna be held up in court for years. I’m fucked.*

“It’s gonna be all right,” Bernize said, hugging her comfortingly, not knowing the variety of real and realtor fears that were going through her mind.

Two uniformed officers in a squad car showed up first. Bernize held his hands up and his badge out for them to see. They had been called to a murder scene and he didn’t want some nervous new academy grad drawing on him. But another unmarked car pulled up right behind them and Bennie Midthun got out, quickly taking charge of the scene. Midthun worked for

the Ventura County Sheriff's Department, Major Crimes Division. He and Bernize had met several times at statewide training sessions. Midthun was a good cop who knew his trade. Bernize quickly laid out what he knew about the situation.

"The victim is in a downstairs' bedroom. I've been told she was the housekeeper. Neck appears broken. Early rigor. The house is being sold and a bunch of realtors who showed up for an open house stumbled on the body."

"You make any of them out as suspects?"

"Doubt it. They just got here. I did a quick look through and found no other victims. No break-in evident and nothing obvious appears stolen. But it's a big house and you'll have to do your own due diligence." About all Bernize left out of what he knew was his sexual escapade.

"And how did you end up here?" Midthun asked.

Bernize reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and handed Midthun one of his brand new realtor business cards.

"My new part time gig," Bernie said.

Midthun looked at the card and just smiled.

"How's the market?" the Ventura cop asked sarcastically.

"Dead," Bernize answered. And, done with his duty, he walked off, heading over to comfort Natalie, who still looked shaken.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I've never seen a dead body."

"That's all right. We'll be able to go soon."

"Do you see a lot of dead bodies?"

"Enough," Bernize shrugged.

"How do you do it?"

"It's my job."

And then a light went on in Natalie's head. "Oh my god!

I have to call Arthur.” And she took out her cell phone.

As she started to dial, Bernize took the phone from her. “No, we don’t want to call him.”

“He’s my client. He’s the owner.”

“He’s a suspect,” Bernize replied. “The police need to talk to him first.”

“Bernie, this is a nineteen million dollar listing. I have ten thousand dollars already invested and people working on ads and brochures. I have to know where I stand on this.”

“It’s a police matter, sweets. It’s a murder investigation.”

“Well, you’re police and murders are what you do.”

Natalie pouted and gently massaged the brass on the badge hanging from his waistband the same way she massaged the knob of his dick.

“Okay,” he said submissively. “I’ll ask about jurisdiction. Maybe they want some help.”

Midthun listened to Elmo’s story about his girlfriend the realtor, her big listing, and the millionaire homeowner, Arthur McGraw, who was renting somewhere in Malibu.

“Look, Bennie. This McGraw guy is not a good fit for this but he might have some information. I can interview the guy and keep you directly in the loop if I come on to anything. Hey, you’ve got all these people to talk to.” Bernize nodded toward the realtors. “You’ve got the Sherwood gatekeepers, the security service, and maybe a husband or a boyfriend or two to talk to. And, you’ve gotta comb the house. Bennie, it puts me in good with my girlfriend and lets me help you out too. What’s the harm?”

Bernize had summed up the situation pretty well. Midthun looked about at his officers busy putting up yellow crime scene tape around the house. It would take awhile. He might need

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more crime tape. It was a very big house. He looked back at Bernize who was straining to put on his most deferential smile. Bennie Midthun nodded his okay.