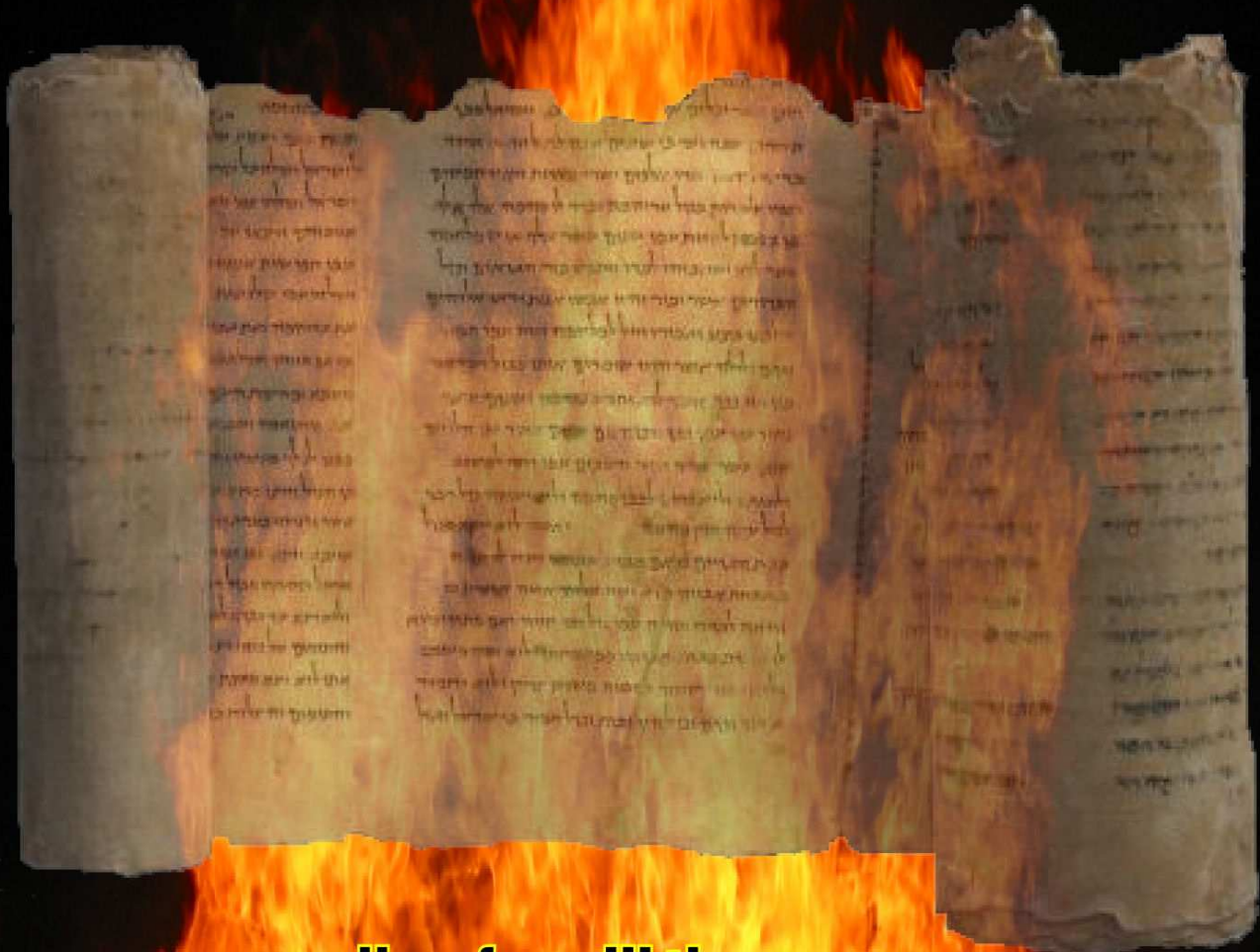


Dead Reckoning

By J. Ryan Fenzel



**How far will they go
to claim a piece of ancient history?**

Dead Reckoning

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I tracked Gene Goldberg to a coffee house downtown. It was an artsy place, the kind with fifty flavors and scones under glass. Mr. Goldberg sat in the corner reading the Free Press and sipping a latte. If he saw my face he'd remember me. I think a first arrest is a lot like a first kiss. You never forget who you were with. And five years ago Gene had been with me, Detective Nelson Brady.

I ordered a coffee from the woman behind the register. She dropped my change on the counter. Some heads turned, but Gene didn't flinch. He kept his eyes on the paper. Funny, he didn't seem anxious. He should be.

Heading over, I grabbed a lightweight, metal-frame chair that looked like it wouldn't hold my weight, much less Gene's two-hundred plus pounds, and set it down at his table. I sat, he looked up, and the deer was in the headlights. Yeah, you never forget that first kiss. I said, "Morning, Gene. Been keeping yourself busy?"

He clenched his little teeth, and the mole on the side of his round face shook. "Here to harass me, Brady?"

I set down my coffee. "It's only harassment if you haven't done anything wrong."

"I haven't, so leave me alone." He tried to look collected and went back to his paper.

"Someone torched the Van Andel Museum Center. What do you say about that?"

He didn't look up. "Too bad for the Grand Rapids art community."

Dead Reckoning

“You were a busy little firebug five years ago. Guess you’re still jazzin’ for the match.” He didn’t reply, but his fair skin turned red.

“The fourth floor of that museum housed the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit.” I let him ponder that a little while. “You’ve riled three major world religions.”

Crumpling the newspaper in his fists, Gene glared at me. “I’m filing a complaint.”

He moved to stand but I grabbed hold of his jacket and held his girth down. My coffee cup wobbled beneath my elbow. “Surveillance camera caught you on museum grounds, and we lifted your print from a gas can found in the debris.”

He froze. That deer again. Two uniformed officers I had waiting on the sidewalk came through the front door and grabbed hold of Mr. Goldberg, slapping on cuffs and reciting Miranda. Coffee house patrons were getting a show this morning. I looked Gene in the eye. “Why did you do it?”

He seemed ready to tell me a thing or two but held his tongue. Exercising his rights I guess. The officers led him to their cruiser for a trip to the station. I fished a dollar from my pocket and tossed it on the table, then left the intrigued customers to their cappuccinos and croissants.

Back at the precinct I plopped down in the chair behind my cluttered desk. I stared at two NHL playoff tickets stuck with a thumbtack to my poster of the 2002 Red Wings team being awarded the Stanley Cup. The tickets had been for the 2003 playoffs, round one, game five, Detroit vs. Anaheim. Problem was the Wings were swept in four games by the Mighty Ducks. The Mighty Ducks? Sometimes I think there’s no justice in the world.

“Brady.”

Det. Bill Flannery rested his arms on my cubicle wall. “You got a call parked on line three. Guy’s name is Ariel Hauser, an official with the Israel Antiquities Authority.”

“The Israel Antiq—Why does he want to talk to me?”

“He said he’s a minder for the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit that’s touring the States. You know.” Bill pantomimed a fiery explosion with his fingers.

“What do you mean he’s a minder?”

Bill gestured to my Red Wings poster. “See the guy in white gloves handing the Stanley Cup to Scotty Bowman? He chaperones that trophy around the country throughout the year, keeping an eye on it at public displays and such. I think a minder is the same idea but with the Dead Sea Scrolls.”

Great. I punched line three and picked up. “Detective Brady.”

“Detective, this is Ariel Hauser.” The voice was deep through the phone. “Is it true?”

“If you’re referring to the fire, yes, it’s true. The entire Dead Sea exhibit was lost. I’m sorry, sir.” Not a very good minder if he didn’t know that already. “I take it you are not in Grand Rapids.”

“No,” Hauser said. “I’ve been in Israel for a week on family matters. I’m on my way back and am stuck in New York. Bad weather has closed the airport. I saw the report of the fire in the newspaper here. After a dozen calls I found out you were handling the investigation.”

“I am, Mr. Hauser, and just this morning we arrested the man I believe set the fire.”

“This is a sad historical loss. Has he told you why he did it?”

“He hasn’t said much of anything. He’s waiting for his attorney.”

“When I get to Grand Rapids I would very much like to talk to this man. Can you arrange that, Detective Brady?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Dead Reckoning

“Good. I will come to your precinct station.” Hauser thanked me and hung up.

I thought about his request and wondered if he suspected Gene’s motive for torching the museum went beyond love of fire. The file I’d built for the museum case lay on my desk and I pulled it toward me. I thumbed through the papers, giving them one last look before tossing them into my file cabinet. Something caught my eye. The museum’s alarm system was tripped seven minutes before the first call to the fire department had been made. I’d seen this before but assumed the arsonist had just gone in to spread accelerant. Now, after Hauser’s call, I looked at the information through different lenses. Maybe Gene went inside intent on taking something out.

I collected some guys and we went over to Gene Goldberg’s two-room apartment. After ten minutes of searching I came to a small bookcase in the meticulously clean bedroom. A collection of books regarding Jewish religion sat on the shelf, including a copy of the Torah. The edge of a Ziploc bag stuck up from the pages of the tome. I grabbed the Torah and opened it to the Ziploc. Inside the bag there was a ragged, discolored piece of paper covered in what looked to be writing of some kind. I had a feeling it was ancient Hebrew.

We spent over an hour rifling the apartment, looking for more articles from the museum, but left with only the scroll piece. After a late lunch I went back to the station and requested Gene be moved from the holding cell to an interrogation room. “He hasn’t been able to contact his lawyer,” Flannery told me. “So don’t expect much cooperation.”

I walked into the interrogation room with the Ziploc in a manila folder.

Sitting at the bare table in the drab room, big Gene Goldberg looked at me and frowned.

I approached him. “Gene, Gene, loves kerosene.”

He didn’t much appreciate that.

“I’m sorry, Gene, I want to apologize.”

He lifted his eyes. “I accept,” he said. “Now let me go.”

The portly firebug was good for a laugh now and then. “No, I apologize for thinking that you were a simple arsonist.” I dropped the folder on the table. “You’ve branched out to grand theft.”

He opened the folder, saw the scroll piece, and exhaled the first sign of resignation I’d seen in him. I slid a chair over and sat at the table. He averted my gaze. “I’d say we’ve got conclusive evidence that places you in the museum, Mr. Goldberg.”

He crossed his arms and studied the dirty beige linoleum.

“Do you have any more articles from the museum in your possession?”

He looked at me. “Not another word without my lawyer.”

I tried a while longer but the big lug had clamed up tight. I grabbed the parchment in the baggie and left him to think through his predicament. Bill Flannery caught me at the door. “You’ve got a visitor in your cubicle.”

“Ex wife?”

Bill said it wasn’t, and I can usually trust him on things like that, so I walked back to my office. Near my desk, gazing at my Red Wings paraphernalia stood a man I didn’t know. He looked to be around fifty, had receding silver hair, bronze skin, a strong nose, and wore a nice looking gray suit. Hearing my approach, the man turned and addressed me. “Detective Brady, I’m with the Israel Antiquities Authority.”

I extended my hand. “Ariel Hauser?”

He smiled. “Yes.”

We shook. “How was your flight?”

Dead Reckoning

“Turbulent, but the scrolls occupied my thoughts.”

I showed him the Ziploc. “This may be all that’s left of the Dead Sea exhibit.”

Hauser turned sad eyes to the bag. “Our history, our religion, is preserved on those scrolls. Thank God only a portion of the Dead Sea find is in the traveling exhibit.” He thought a moment. “You said this may be all that is left. Is there a chance to recover more?”

I jabbed a thumb down the hall toward the interrogation room. “I’m interviewing the suspect now. We found this piece of scroll in his apartment, but he’s not revealing any more.”

“May I accompany you in to see him?”

I balked at this, but then remembered that the scrolls were his country’s property, so I relented. We marched down to the interrogation room and walked in together. Gene looked up, studied Hauser.

I said, “This is Mr. Hauser with the Israel Antiquities Authority. He’s extremely unhappy with what you’ve done.”

Gene stared at me, eyes widening.

I shook my head. “You’ve created an international incident.” I gestured to him. “Mr. Hauser, this is Mr. Gene Goldberg, suspected arsonist and antiquities thief.”

Hauser considered him a short while. “Your name rings with ethnicity, Mr. Goldberg. Are you Jewish?”

Gene nodded slightly.

Hauser looked down on him like a reprimanding father. “Burning our history, stealing sacred documents, you are a disgrace to our people.”

Gene huffed and rattled his chair. “You’re wrong. I took that piece of scroll so it all wouldn’t be destroyed.”

My eyebrow hit the ceiling. Five seconds in and Hauser had extracted a confession. I lifted the Ziploc. “If you didn’t want the scrolls destroyed why did you torch the museum?”

Hauser eyed the scroll piece and gently took it from my hand.

Gene pressed his lips together as if trying to stop words from spilling out.

“Come on, Gene, you’re not making sense. Why the hell did you torch something you didn’t want torched?”

He slapped the tabletop and rolled his head back. “Twenty-thousand dollars.”

I processed that. “You were contracted?”

Peering around the Ziploc, Hauser glared him.

“Yes, somebody paid me to set fire to that section of the museum.”

“Who hired you?”

Gene looked me in the eye. “I don’t know. He dropped twenty-five percent in the park before the job, and the rest after I did it. When I found out the scrolls were in there I didn’t want to do it, but I needed the money.” He gave me a nasty look. “Good jobs are hard to come by for ex-convicts.”

“How did he contact you?” I asked. “How did he arrange the deal?”

“E-mail at first. Then we met in public places, but not directly. We communicated through drops, notes, discrete things. I don’t know what he looks like or what his name is.”

“You still have those e-mails?”

“No, I got rid of them. But they were so vague even I wasn’t sure what this guy wanted from me at first.”

I looked over at Hauser. “Who would pay twenty grand to destroy the Dead Sea

Dead Reckoning

Scrolls?”

Ariel Hauser tossed the Ziploc onto the table as if it were a pair of useless Red Wings playoff tickets. “The question is this. Where are the real scrolls?”

I glanced at the bag, as did Gene, and then back to Hauser. “What do you mean?”

“That piece is a forgery.”

Gene’s jaw dropped. “A fake? I wouldn’t have grabbed it if I knew it was crap.”

I picked up the baggie. “You sure, Mr. Hauser?”

“The Dead Sea Scrolls have been my responsibility for ten years. I know them when I see them.”

I shot a look at Goldberg. “Where are the real ones?”

Gene shook his head. “How should I know? I just torched the place.”

Holding the scroll piece up to the light, I strained to see the signs of fraud. I’m obviously unqualified for that kind of thing. I’m a little better at police work. “Somebody wants us to think the Dead Sea Scrolls are ash. Only one reason for that.”

“Yes.” Hauser said. “They’ve already stolen the originals.” He made a fist and shook it. “I don’t understand when this could have happened. Four days ago I verified the scrolls in the exhibit were authentic.”

I mulled over the facts and the curve ball that just screamed our way. “We need to go back to ground zero, Mr. Hauser, and talk to the man who had the exhibit under his wing, so to speak. We need to talk with the director of operations at the museum.”

Hauser agreed. I returned Gene to the loving care of uniformed officers then spent an hour on the phone setting up a meeting with Public Museum of Grand Rapids Director Edward Flax. My new Israeli partner and I headed to the museum at dusk.

“You have any idea who might have stolen the scrolls?” I asked while backing out of the parking spot.

“As a matter of fact I do,” Hauser said. “The DSS.”

“Is that like the KGB or the CIA or something?”

“No, it’s the Dead Sea Sect.” He noted the blank look on my face. “Do you know the history of the Dead Sea Scrolls?”

“Just that they were found in the desert east of Jerusalem in the late forties.”

“Yes, in the caves around the ruins of the Qumran settlement. Over two-thousand years ago the Essenes settled in Qumran after breaking away from the mainline Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. They uprooted themselves from their homes and disappeared into the desert, taking with them all their sacred writings.”

“Why did they break from their religious leaders?”

“The Essenes, or as they had come to be known, the Dead Sea Sect, believed in a very strict, hard-line form of Judaism. The Pharisees and Sadducees of the time, however, had gotten caught up in placating the Romans. The Dead Sea Sect felt their leaders had fallen away from the teachings of God.”

I chuckled. “You really think this Dead Sea Sect is still around and after their scrolls?”

Hauser didn’t smile. “They were a very determined group. When the Romans came to lay siege to Jerusalem, the Sect felt the apocalyptic day of God had arrived. They took their writings and hid in the caves and waited for the End Times. They never came out.” He added, “Human remains were found with the scrolls.”

I pulled into the museum’s parking lot. Half of the Van Andel Center had been gutted by the fire. Yellow crime scene tape encircled half-collapsed and charred brick walls, skeletal sections of burned steel truss, and mounds of ash and debris. Little wisps of smoke

Dead Reckoning

still rose from the grounds. Hauser sat transfixed by the image. I parked near the main entrance and we got out. Hauser looked across the car roof at me. “While you are talking to Mr. Flax I’d like to examine the debris more closely. Will that be okay?”

“I don’t see why not.” We parted company, Hauser for the charred section of building, I for the section still standing. Inside the museum it smelled of smoke from the fire. Edward Flax greeted me at the entrance. His cologne didn’t mix well with the burnt aroma. He looked about forty and sported a precisely trimmed black beard. His unbuttoned blue blazer exposed a white mock turtleneck. I think they’re called dickeys, the shirt not the guy. Edward gave me a business smile and we shook, and then we headed back to his office.

We sat in leather chairs facing one another inside pastel-colored walls. A handful of paintings surrounded us, mostly abstracts by artists I’ve never taken the time to appreciate. Edward drew a breath, paused for thought. “Detective Brady, I’m happy to meet with you but I don’t know what I can add to the discussion we had immediately after the fire.”

“New information has come to light, Mr. Flax, and I have new questions.”

He creased his brow with concern. “Okay, I’ll help however I can.”

“This morning we arrested who I think is the arsonist.”

“Good work, Detective.”

“Thank you, Mr. Flax. You know he told me something very interesting.”

“Oh, what is that?”

“He said that—Excuse me, but is that painting right there a Picasso?”

Flax appraised the canvass for a split second. “I’m afraid not.” He paused out of politeness. “But you can see Picasso’s influence on the artist. Now you were saying...”

“Guess what I found in the suspects home?” I waited for Mr. Flax to guess, but he just shook his head. “I found a piece of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls.”

“Good Lord, the man came here to steal, not just destroy?”

“That’s what I thought. But guess what I discovered next.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

I could tell he was already getting tired of me. I said, “It’s a forgery.”

Audible gasp. Flax leaned back in his chair. “Impossible.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you, but Mr. Hauser from the IAA is convinced.”

Flax pondered. “If Ariel Hauser says so, I guess it must be true.”

“How could anybody have exchanged the original scrolls for fakes right under your nose?”

That tweaked him. “I don’t know. Are you sure this person is telling the truth? Maybe he didn’t get that scroll piece from here.”

“He swears he did, and he does so very convincingly.”

“But he’s a criminal,” Flax protested. “Lying is a second language to that type. How can you be sure he got the forgery from the museum, or that he was paid?”

I considered Mr. Flax for a long while. “Maybe you’re right. Perhaps I should have another talk with our suspect.” I stood. “Thank you for your time.”

Calming down, Edward Flax showed me to the front door. I walked to the car and Hauser met me there. He carried what looked like a broken clay jar covered in soot. I studied it a second. “What have you got there?”

Hauser nodded to the relic. “I believe this is one of the vessels that contained the scrolls. It is a very sad truth. God protected and preserved the scrolls for two thousand years. We’ve had them in our possession for only sixty years and they’re falling apart, decaying...being destroyed.” He looked up from the jar. “Did your discussion go well with

Dead Reckoning

Mr. Flax?”

“Yeah,” I said scanning the fire damage. “He’s the one behind the whole thing.”

Hauser looked at me like he wasn’t sure I was telling the truth. I get that a lot.

“He knew Gene was paid for setting the fire before I told him. I’m going to check out a few more things, but I’m pretty sure I’m right on this.”

“What about the scrolls? Do you know where they are?”

“Not yet, but I will.”

I went through proper procedure, paperwork, flaming hoops, and found out that Edward Flax had withdrawn the sum of twenty-thousand dollars from several private accounts a week before the flames. With arrest warrant in hand I took some friends from work and paid another visit to the Van Andel Museum Center the next morning. We apprehended Edward Flax. The original Dead Sea Scrolls were stored safely away in a basement vault, awaiting sale on the Black Market. Mr. Flax may have majored in Liberal Arts, but he knew how to turn a buck too.

Ariel Hauser wasted no time. He confiscated the sacred scrolls, packed them into a special case, and made for the airport and a flight to Tel-Aviv. “I’m taking them back to the Israel Museum,” he said, “where they will be better protected.”

After seeing my creds the TSA guys at the airport let me accompany Hauser to the gate, although I had to check my sidearm with them. A fond farewell later I watched the man from the Israel Antiquities Authority disappear into the jet way.

The case of the missing Dead Sea Scrolls was over. But it didn’t feel over. I turned to leave and caught a glimpse of a café television tuned to CNN. The attractive anchoress on screen was explaining how JFK airport had finally resumed flights, five hours ago.

Five hours?

I palmed my cell and checked for messages. None. I called the precinct and checked for voice mail there. Zilch. I punched in Flannery’s extension. “Bill, have I had any visitors since I left this morning?”

“Impeccable timing, Brady, hold on.” Muffled noise on the line. Bill was handing the phone to somebody.

“Detective Brady,” a deep voice said. “This is Ariel Hauser.”

Strange. His voice had gathered timber since he sauntered down the jet way. I suddenly got that falling-off-a-cliff, Wyle E. Coyote feeling in my stomach. “Why aren’t you on board a flight bound for Tel-Aviv right now?”

Silence. “I don’t understand. I just arrived here two hours ago.”

The voice on the line was indeed the one I had spoken to yesterday, but not the one I’d been conversing with over the last twenty hours.

I bolted for the jet way door, flashing my badge at an attendant who was moving to close it. TSA agents came out of nowhere, guns drawn, shouting for me to stop. I turned and lifted my shield. “Detective Brady, Grand Rapids Police. There’s a suspected Al-Qaida guy on board this flight.”

Not quite accurate, but I knew it’d get their attention. We rushed down the jet way and I spotted the bogus Mr. Hauser in First Class. When he saw me he got that look on his face that Gene had when I arrested him at the coffee house.

“I never saw your credentials,” I said. “Rookie mistake number one. And then you said you authenticated the scrolls four days ago, but the Ariel Hauser on the phone yesterday said he’d been gone for a week. Too many inconsistencies.”

Pseudo-Hauser tried to pull it together. “What are you talking about?”

Dead Reckoning

“Flax would’ve known you were an imposter. That’s why you didn’t go in with me.”

I cued the TSA guys and they seized him from the seat.

He threw an icy glare at me.

“You told me about the Dead Sea Sect,” I said, “and how you thought they were still around and after the scrolls. You’re with them, aren’t you?”

He smiled, more from frustration than joy I supposed.

“The scrolls have been out of our hands for thirty generations. It’s time we get them back. They belong to the Sect. We will have them.”

Talk about persistence.

We held the imposter Mr. Hauser in Grand Rapids until the real Mr. Hauser could arrange extradition and take custody. Apparently the Sect had planned to steal the scrolls a long time ago and had lured Hauser out of the country to make their move. Too bad they didn’t know about Flax’s greed, or they could have struck a deal. I thought on the whole cabal today: Gene, Flax, pseudo-Hauser, the IAA. It amazed me how two-thousand-year-old writing could cause such a commotion. Like with the paintings in Flax’s office, I’d never taken the time to appreciate what those brittle parchment scrolls have preserved.

They’re reopening the Dead Sea Exhibit at a Grand Rapids art gallery next week. Think I’ll head down and get educated on a bit of ancient Mid-East history. It has to be more enriching than watching the Mighty Ducks advance toward the Stanley Cup again on Sports Net.

Hey, I think my cultural side is starting to ferment.