



the talpiot find

John Evan Garvey

The Talpiot Fiʿd

Also by John Evan Garvey

Secreta Corporis
(Prequel to this novel)

Tinselfish:
The scripts from season one
Books 1 & 2
(As John Garvey)

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All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. All events described in this book are fictitious; the story, however, is based on the events described in the Bible, Second Book of the Kings, chapter 22, verses 8-13.

Cover design and typesetting by the author. The background text in the cover photo is a portion of the Ten Commandments written in Paleo-Hebrew, also known as Hebrew Canaanite.

To D.H., always there.

כְּמִגְדַל דָּוִד צִנְאֲרָךְ, בְּנוֹי לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת; אֶלֶף
הַמָּגֹן תָּלְוִי עָלָיו, כָּל שְׁלֵטֵי הַגְּבָרִים.

Thy neck is as the tower of David, which is built
l'talpiot: a thousand bucklers hang upon it, all the
armour of valiant men.

Song of Solomon 4:4
(Douay-Rheims)

I

Tel Aviv, Israel, present day

As the jet banks on its approach to Ben Gurion International Airport, Marc scans the distant hills to the southeast for the spark of the Dome of the Rock, but the jet continues its wide turn, changing the angle of view out his window, and he looks down to the modern city scrolling below him. It vaguely reminds him of the Valley on approach to the airport in Burbank. He sees little turquoise swimming pools in backyards, tiny satellite dishes on roofs. Even here.

Marc is a grad student in archaeology at Encino University in Los Angeles where the focus of his research is on the Levant at the time of the Crusades. One of his professors set up a dig in Jerusalem the previous year, and Marc will be doing his required fieldwork there. He is looking forward to the work, to examining the volatile, electrolytic interaction between East and West during the Middle Ages. In certain ways, both sides benefitted from the contact. Europe acquired knowledge of science, mathematics, ancient literature and hygiene, and the presence of the intruders galvanized the Muslim world into a broader, stronger entity than it would have become otherwise.

Hearing the thump of the landing gear on the runway, Marc realizes he'd dozed off. His body is trying to tell him it's only 5:00 a.m. Los Angeles time, but his watch and the view outside the window tell him 3:00 p.m. Tel Aviv time. He rests his head back and closes his eyes again as the plane slows.

After the last passenger has stepped up into the airport shuttle, the driver pulls the passenger door closed and walks around the front of the van. Marc looks out the windows as the driver settles in behind the wheel and the radio offers intermittent verbal exchanges. The parking lots and passenger pickup area outside the van could easily be located at Bob Hope Airport in Burbank. Toyotas, Fords, BMWs roll past the van.

Even here. Where Phoenicians roamed. Where Philistines and Canaanites played. The only things disrupting the illusion are signs displaying Hebrew and Arabic calligraphy. Where seldom is heard an encouraging word. And the rockets are all Russian-made.

Jerusalem

At a high-tech industrial park the shuttle driver exits the Menachem Begin Expressway and follows the curving avenue into dense neighborhoods and drops off a passenger in Arzei HaBira. Although Marc feels a strong need for sleep, he is fascinated by the variegated neighborhoods connected by tangles of streets as they scroll by outside the windows of the van. So many broad-brimmed black hats. Many more than he's ever seen in Beverly Hills. The driver turns south onto a broad boulevard, Sderot Hayim Barlev, and approaches the wall of the Old City. Marc takes in the Damascus Gate, its neat palms and lawns and its tourists with cameras making it look like the theme-park version of the real thing. The van rounds the corner at the New Gate and moves with the traffic toward the Jaffa Gate and the Tower of David. Past the Old City, the van heads east into the neighborhood of Abu Tor and drops passengers off. The driver heads the van west and drops another passenger off in the German Colony, an anachronism of gabled houses. The van heads south into the Talpiot outlet-shopping and nightlife district, where the dig Marc will be involved in is located in a parking lot. The driver turns into an adjacent residential zone and locates the address Marc gave him.

Closing the door of the small studio on the second floor of the rooming house, Marc looks around and finds a neat, simple room with a bed, two arm chairs and in a corner a kitchenette with a small set of table and chairs. Afternoon light angles in from the window overlooking the street and adds a sense of life and a patina of hominess to the plain room. Marc sets his rolling carry-on upright out of the way and slips his backpack off his shoulders

and onto the bed. Pulling out a phone, he sits on the edge of the bed and touches the screen a few times.

After a ringtone, the professor answers. "How are you, Marc?"

"Hey, Jess. Not too bad. I was able to sleep pretty well on the plane."

"Good. Where are you?"

"I just arrived at the room."

"Everything okay with it?"

"Seems to be. I just walked in, but I don't see anything wrong with it at first glance."

"Good. Hope it won't be too painful for you to be at the meeting tomorrow morning at six?"

"Nah. I've always found pizza to be good for jetlag."

Jess jhfs.¹ "Great. Glad you got here safely."

"Yes, thanks, I am too."

"*Now* we can get started."

Marc chuckles at this, the idea that he's an essential cog in the machine, that the whole dig team would have been held up if his flight had been delayed. Right. "Let the dig begin." He's just one of several students on the team, from universities in Israel, Syria, the Netherlands, the U.S., and a few other countries. "Is there a torch you need me to light to get things going? I didn't think to bring my barbecue lighter."

"No, *you* are the torch, Marc, destined to illuminate the mysteries of the ancients."

"Uhhh... Okay." That was kind of odd. Did he hear something strange in Jess' voice? Maybe he's stoned. "But I won't have to spend a lot of time sitting in a big bowl at the top of a column, will I? I came here to dig."

Jess is humored. "And dig you shall, sir, into the very heart of the mystery."

That was odd too. Like some paranormal program on the History Channel. What is he thinking? "Good. That's why I'm here. You're making it sound like we should cue the Indiana Jones theme. *Tah ta-da taahh...*"

"Good idea. I'll download it now so we'll have it when we need it."

That sounded more normal. “Excellent.”

“So we’ll see you in the morning, Dr. Jones.”

“Right. ’Bye.”

He sets down the phone, trying to picture Jess stoned. It’s not something that had even crossed his mind about Jess while at school. A torch, illuminating mysteries. What was *that*? It was just the cannabinoids talking, but even so, why did they say that? It came from somewhere in Jess’ brain. Illuminating mysteries. What mysteries? They’re excavating a twelfth-century Saracen structure. He thinks he probably shouldn’t read too much into Jess’ comments. Although they did come out of nowhere. Whatever. He’ll think about it later. He takes off his shoes, stretches out on the bed and is quickly asleep.

The archaeological site in the Talpiot parking lot attracts little attention from people in the district because one sees archaeological digs so frequently in the Holy Land that they simply blend into the environment. This dig has been going well under the guidance of co-directors Jess Feldman, Professor of the Archaeology of Israel at Encino University, and Kaliyah Assaf, Professor of Mid-East Archaeology at Harrow University in London. They had found the foundation of a twelfth-century Saracen building as they had expected to after studying the core samples taken from the area. They had also located a well and, while excavating it, realized that the well penetrated an ancient trash pit dating from possibly the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. Up the hill from the site is the kibbutz Ramat Rachel, where excavations have been taking place intermittently since the 1950s and where remnants have been found of a palace believed to be that of the kings of Judah dating from the seventh century BCE. Because the trash pit at the Talpiot site is a possible extension of the Ramat Rachel site, there was some discussion at the end of the digging season the previous year that the Talpiot site might be taken over by the directors of the Ramat Rachel site. During the intervening months, Jess, a student-favorite type of professor in his 30s with dark hair in

natural curls, kept Marc and the other students apprised of the discussions and posturing going on between Tel Aviv University, Encino University, Harrow University, the Israel Antiquities Authority and the private group funding the Talpiot site. The decision was finally made to leave the site in the hands of Jess and Kaliyah and their respective universities when the funding group, which includes individuals who are somehow involved with British Petroleum, intimated that the funding for the Ramat Rachel site and several programs at Tel Aviv University could possibly dry up if they persisted in trying to annex the Talpiot site. The group did agree to let the Ramat Rachel people have access to information gathered at the Talpiot site, and vice versa, since the bi-directional flow of information would benefit both sites. They did not, however, agree to unlimited access to the Talpiot site for the Ramat Rachel people.

Marc and the other students had learned long before this incident that there is a sort of Mafia operating unseen in the world of high-priced artifacts. But up to this point, Marc had thought it was just some high-rollers, bored with Baccarat, finding a new game to play with others in their exclusive, velvet-rope class. But the funding group, which has no name, seems to be made up of people who take themselves very seriously. Jess had told his students that, as far as he knows, no one has met anyone from the group in person. Their communications are always by phone, email or snailmail. When Jess had mentioned to a class Marc was in that the name of the man who initially contacted him was Sinclair, a classmate gave an exaggerated gasp and said “Ohmygod! The Priory of Sion!” The class had a good laugh. Jess then said that the man’s name was Sinclair Grzyb and he had been a professor of French medieval history at a university in Sicily before retiring some years before. He had sent Jess a copy of the plat of the Talpiot property, which included data from ground-penetrating radar indicating where core samples might be the most informative. Jess asked him how he knew to look in that location and Sinclair said that a research project the group had worked on over the years led them there. When asked

what they would be looking for, Sinclair said they didn't know, but they would know when they uncovered it.

Now, as Marc sits uncomfortably in the well and gently scrapes soil with his trowel to expose pieces of broken pottery and animal bones to the light of his headlamp, he wonders what they will find as they continue downward. The group wants them to uncover some elusive treasure that will fulfill their fantasies of wealth and influence. But the odds are greatly against their finding anything but more of the same quality of artifacts—not at all insignificant but certainly not treasure. He wonders if what they're looking for is related in some way to the Jesus Tomb that was found in 1980 about a mile and a half to the east. Documentaries made in 1996 and 2007 stirred people up briefly with speculation that the ossuary with the Hebrew inscription “Yeshua bar Yehoseph” might contain the bones of Jesus. But the topic faded from public discourse soon afterward in both instances and people resumed believing what they were accustomed to believing. Marc now considers the remote possibility that the Sangreal may finally be found, here on this dig site. He may even be the one to find it. Is he pure enough? Like Bors, Galahad and Perceval? The quest for the Grail has brought him here? To the shaft of a Saracen well surrounded by ancient Israelite rubbish? He didn't even know he was on a Grail quest. But if the Grail is only a couple of feet down from where he's working, wouldn't he be able to faintly sense its radiance through the soil? He senses no radiance. On the other hand, if it's the Ark of the Covenant that is only a couple of feet down, he should proceed with extreme caution, if at all.

11:29:30 GMT, ☉ 0° ☾ 0', ☽ 29° ♌ 35' (113°), ♃_{MC} 21° ♀ 29', ♀ 8° ♎ 17', ♂ 7° ♎_{AC} 37', ♃ 1° ♀ 47', ♁_{AC} 28° ♎_{AC} 14'. ♁ 0° ♀ 31', ♀_R 28° ♁ 35', ♃_R 4° ♁ 13', ♁ 29° ♁ 18', ♃_R 0° ♁ 51'. [♃ ♂ ♁] ☐ ☉, [♃ ♂ ♁] ♂ ♁_{AC}, ☉ ♂ ♃_R.

Jess, Kaliyah and Marc, returning from lunch at a cafe in the Talpiot, walk toward the dig site where some of the students and volunteers are already back to work below canvas canopies that

cast an island of shade onto the fenced-off area of the parking lot. Kaliyah, who is slim, about Jess' age, and has olive skin and straight dark hair, is conspicuously not wearing a Muslim hijab, but she is modestly dressed in a big shirt with rolled-up sleeves and baggy work pants. As the three near the site, they hear Reuben, a chubby grad student from NYU, sitting on the ground and looking at his uBerry, say "It's the solstice!"

Jess jufhs. "You're synchronized with the atomic clock?"

Reuben's facial expression says *What a dumb question*. "Of course. I've adjusted for our longitude of thirty-five degrees, twelve minutes, fifty-one seconds east." He holds up his phone as if Jess would be able to read it from where he is.

"Thanks for the info, Rube. Happy summer." He and Kaliyah head toward their work tables and Marc heads toward the temporary fence that encloses the well.

Reuben looks like *You just don't get it do you?* "It's not just the beginning of summer." He arcs his arms up toward the sky and out to the side as he asks "Don't you feel it?"

Jess gives Reuben his own you-just-don't-get-it-do-you look and says "No."

"The Grand Square. Jupiter conjuncts Uranus, squares sun, opposes *Saturn*. Sun opposes *Pluto in Capricorn*. The last time Pluto was in Capricorn was the time of *the American Revolution*. And the sun entering Cancer at the solstice transforms the T-square into a Grand Square with *Pluto* squaring *both* Jupiter and *Uranus*." He spreads his arms again. "We've just entered a whole new *world*."

Marc watches Jess look out to the parking lot and the surrounding buildings, which don't look significantly different, and say dully "Cool."

Kaliyah adds "Dazzling. I never knew." Her pronunciation indicates a British education.

Marc begins descending the ladder into the well, and Reuben's voice fades. "The last time there was a Grand Square, the Third Reich came to power." Marc reaches the bottom of the ladder and carefully steps around the partially uncovered skeleton they had discovered a few days ago. He cautiously sits

inches. To mark the extent of his probing, he lightly draws short lines in the dirt with the trowel. He clears two more square-inch areas, locating them near opposite edges, and sees that the text extends as far as those points. The object lies almost parallel to the ground surface, sloping slightly down toward the skeleton, and about an inch from the ribcage. As Marc carefully stands, he wonders about the significance of this much text dating possibly from before the sixth century BCE. He knows that this find isn't as significant as the discovery of the Amarna tablets in Egypt dating from the fourteenth century BCE. But this text should provide an important window into the Kingdom of Judah. As he begins climbing the ladder, he realizes he still has his brush in his hand and then notices that the headlamp is still on his head.

At orientation, Jess had instructed everyone that, when they believed they had uncovered something important, they should avoid doing anything out of the ordinary and especially avoid shouting out what they thought they had found. Because the site was so out in the open, and because of the sensitive nature of the excavation, and because the region was so politically volatile, it was important that the public not inadvertently be given misinformation that could, realistically, spread around the world within minutes. He'd said he didn't even want to think about what would happen if someone shouted that they had found the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail. Now, as Marc reaches the top of the ladder and sees Jess and Kaliyah notice the lamp still on his head and the brush still in his hand, he sees that they both recognize that he's found something and it's probably important. An observer in the parking lot, however, would not be able to detect that from the calm way they pick up their equipment bags and start walking toward Marc from their tables. Marc removes the lamp from his head and turns it off as he walks toward them. When they meet, he says "No it's not *that*." They smile and Marc calmly says as they move toward the well "Some text on a flat ceramic object six by nine inches. Maybe Paleo-Hebrew."

Jess nods, digesting this. He swings around and descends the ladder into the well. Marc and Kaliyah watch from above as Jess reaches the bottom, puts on the headlamp he pulls from his bag

and aims the light down at the object. He kneels and studies for a moment what Marc has uncovered and then pulls out a small brush and sweeps one of the cleared areas to enlarge it. He picks up Marc's small trowel and removes soil in a horizontal swath. With the brush, he carefully uncovers the full length of a few lines of the text and studies them. After a moment, he translates in a voice just loud enough to reach Kaliyah and Marc "—and reaches her hand to take him by the secrets, then you shall cut off her hand. Your eye shall have no pity." He looks up to them. "If it's not the earliest fragment of Deuteronomy, it's *one* of the earliest."

Kaliyah says "Ce n'est pas le Sangreal, but it'll do." Marc jufhs at this. Kaliyah continues "Odd that it's in a trash pit. Fortunate for us, but odd."

Marc says "Next to a corpse."

Jess says as he stands "An Assyrian or Babylonian wouldn't have had any trouble tossing a page of Israelite law into the trash, after he killed the priest carrying it. I just wonder how the tablet got this far from the Temple. Who was taking it where?"

Kaliyah shrugs. "A scribe was taking it to the palace? The king wanted to consult a book of the law on some issue?"

Jess shrugs. "Sure. I hope we can piece together the circumstances. I'd love to find out if the corpse is related to the tablet, or just happened to fall next to it."

Kaliyah nods. "I think it's likely since it's a page from a *book* of law—"

Nodding, Jess finishes the sentence "—that there are others with it." He kneels again and begins gently removing soil from a small area beside the tablet with the small trowel. About an inch down from the surface of the tablet, the trowel produces a faint click and Jess says "Aha." Marc watches Jess search for the edge of the object below the tablet and when he finds it he continues digging downward. Another inch or so down, there is another faint click. Jess repeats the process downward until he hears another faint click. He stops digging and sits back on his heels and looks up to them. "In *theory*, the complete text of Deuteronomy could be buried here. But the objects under the

tablet could turn out to be anything: invoices, student exercises, *rocks*, so we should be patient and see what we find.” Marc nods. Jess retrieves a scale ruler from his bag and places it near the tablet and then fills out a tag for the artifact and sets it next to the tablet. He retrieves a camera and flash and takes some close-up pictures while still kneeling and then stands and takes several wider-angle shots. He returns his equipment to his bag and climbs up the ladder. Kaliyah takes a few pictures from ground level looking down into the well. Jess says to Marc “Clear maybe five more lines of text, just so we can see a little more of what we’re dealing with. Then dig loosely around the edges so that we can remove the tablet. But come and get me when it’s ready. If removing the tablet damages it or the object under it, I want it to be me who causes the damage. I don’t want you to be blamed for it.”

Marc nods. “Thanks.” As he turns around to step down onto the ladder, he notices that Reuben is talking on his cell phone while continuing to clear soil away from the artifacts in his assigned area, gesturing with his brush as he talks. Marc returns to the bottom of the well and settles into the same place on the ground as before and begins carefully widening the horizontal swath. When he uncovers a couple of lines preceding those already cleared, he notices that several words on one line were incompletely smoothed over as if to erase them. When he uncovers the two lines above those lines of text, he sees what looks like another correction. It looks as if the scribe smoothed the clay, relatively carelessly, over part of the line and wrote new text, a little too large, over the erasure. Marc supposes it wasn’t unusual for a scribe to make a correction to some text incised into clay, but the apparent carelessness of these corrections seems out of character with the importance of the text being preserved on the tablet. He supposes the scribe could have come from another nation and was only performing a task he was being forced, or paid, to do. Or any number of scenarios. Marc admits he is looking at it from a twenty-first-century point of view and imposing his own priorities on an object created twenty-six centuries earlier.

Beth Lehem Road, Kingdom of Judah, 622 BCE

♁_{IC} 0° Crayfish, ☾ 27° Agrarian Worker, ♀ 26° Crayfish, ♁ 2° Lion, ♂ 18° Great Twins, ♃ 8° Great Twins, ♋ 16° Steer of Heaven.

In the dim light of the moon, Hazael and Gershon, Hebrew men of the working class, stand beside an ox cart at the edge of a trash pit located at the foot of the slope leading up to the King's palace. The moon, waning gibbous, only weakly illuminates the mounds of smoldering rubbish glowing orange and red in the pit. Sparks sporadically rise from quietly crackling embers and float upward and fade among the stars. At this time of night, by happenstance the shortest night of the year, no one is on the road to Beth Lehem, which passes between the palace hill and the pit.

Gershon, who has been forced into slavery by debt, has just completed unloading the contents of the cart into the pit with Hazael, and he wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Hazael, a freeman employed by the Temple as a foreman to manage slaves, steps closer to him and abruptly, in a single motion, pulls out his knife, thrusts it into Gershon's abdomen, withdraws it. Gershon doubles over in pain, gasping, his hands at his abdomen. He looks up to Hazael and snarls "Why? I did everything you gave me to do!" He gasps, grimacing as the pain increases and he drops to his knees.

Hazael says "You know too much." He takes hold of Gershon's bowed head and slices his throat. Gershon falls to the ground. Hazael bends down and wipes his knife clean on Gershon's tunic and replaces it in its sheath at his waist. He rolls Gershon's body to the edge of the pit and pushes him over. As he straightens up he watches Gershon's body drop out of sight into a deep mound of smoldering kitchen refuse.

He looks instinctively toward the road to see if anyone observed him. He sees no one. He notices a shooting star gliding silently from directly above him down to where it falls out of sight beyond the King's palace on the hill. A good omen.

Notes

1. juhf - (intr. verb) to chuckle without animation; (noun) a subdued chuckle.
2. nad - (intr. verb) to shake the head as a negative response; (noun) a shake of the head.
3. ʔ - interrobang, indicating an exclaimed question.
4. º - irony mark, indicating that the sentence should be read as irony or sarcasm.
5. “The status quo is good.”
6. “Thus indeed.”
7. “It’s self-evident.”
8. “Don’t disturb settled things.”
9. “Never tickle a sleeping dragon.”