

Alexandria, Egypt

A.D. 391

THE SHOUTS WERE GETTING CLOSER. THE SCREAMS. THE PLEAS for mercy.

Unnerved by the violence in the adjoining chamber, Zelek ben Judah waded elbow-deep in a mountain of scrolls, frantic to find the misplaced manuscript. He cursed the incompetence of his subordinates. How many times had he lectured them? A disorganized library was worse than no library at all. To misplace a scroll was to destroy it, for who could read words that could not be found?

Sweat ran down his temples and into his eyes, blinding him. He dared not lift a hand to wipe it away. Sifting through a stack of scrolls was like digging in sand—if he pulled out now, the scrolls would tumble in on themselves and he'd have to start over. With an angry grunt, he shrugged at the sweat with his shoulder.

Just then, an ungodly shriek from the central chamber echoed down the hallway, the dying wail of a man put to the sword. Zelek closed his eyes as sadness draped over him like a shroud. He recognized the voice. Orosius. Only this morning the two of them

had argued over the writings of the sophist Polemon of Laodikeia while eating figs.

How had it come to this? Barbarians, marauders, zealots ransacking the great library, this hallowed sanctuary of thought and oratory, of learning, and his home since he was a boy. Here, a man's weapons of choice were a cutting wit and a sharp pen. This was no place for vulgar battle swords and bludgeons. Who could have foreseen that in such a short time the rising tide of mass ignorance and superstition would flood the city and threaten its greatest jewel?

The debate would go on for centuries, no doubt, but Zelek was a scholar, with a scholar's body—aged, paunchy, and weak—and his only chance of surviving this barbarian onslaught was to find the scroll. His search took on a greater intensity.

A tall clay container rested at his feet. It held two scrolls, with room for a third.

“Ah!” Zelek cried.

In triumph he hoisted the missing manuscript. Unrolling it to make certain he had the correct one, he scowled as he read. It was indeed the scroll he'd been instructed to include. But why this one? The two in the jar, yes. But this spurious account?

There were worthier scrolls and codices and sacred texts for such an hour. Works by Plato and Socrates. Euclid's *Elements*. Eratosthenes' calculations of the size of the earth. Archimedes' invention of the screw-shaped water pump. The Septuagint. Irreplaceable originals. Rare copies. Works that might be lost forever. To place this well-circulated scroll in the jar with the other two manuscripts was beyond folly, it was criminal.

Zelek checked the door. His escort had not yet arrived.

Did he dare?

Laying aside the third scroll, he chose a more suitable work and placed it in the jar instead. He capped the jar with a lid and

stood, satisfied—no, beyond satisfied, justified by the exchange. For good measure, he sealed the jar with wax to prevent them from discovering his deception.

He donned his cap. Using both hands, he hoisted the clay jar and clutched it to his chest. He was ready.

He tried not to hear the nightmarish shouts and screams, the sickening sounds of shelves and marble statues and busts being smashed. But how could he not? His entire world was dying, and he would die with it if his escort didn't arrive soon.

Where are they? They said they'd be here!

Then, Zelek sniffed a new horror.

Fire!

Smoke crawled across the ceiling like a legion of demons. Fire was a librarian's greatest fear.

He checked the doorway again. Where was the escort he'd been promised?

The room filled with smoke, choking him. Clutching the jar tightly against his chest, Zelek's feet danced nervously as he began to cough. He was finding it difficult to breathe.

He glanced at the jar. The third scroll. They knew. Somehow they knew.

Dropping to his knees, he pulled a small knife from his waistband and, with trembling fingers, cut the wax seal. Prying the lid from the jar, he removed the substitute scroll and replaced it with the designated third scroll.

No sooner had he done this than two men with swords appeared in the doorway, tall men with broad shoulders and strong jaws. They stood serene in spotless white robes. No one could mistake them for marauders.

"I'm ready," Zelek wheezed.

His armed escorts silently turned toward the central chamber.

With fumbling hands, Zelek fitted the lid on the jar. Grabbing

a leather pouch, he slung its strap over his head and hurried to catch up with his escorts.

The room before him was a familiar one, the domed palatial expanse of the central library chamber. Hallways led to lecture halls, study rooms, dining areas, gardens, and an astronomical observatory. For centuries the great library of Alexandria had been a repository of human knowledge, with thousands of documents and records collected from every corner of the known world, the sum of mankind's learning preserved on papyrus, vellum, and clay tablets. Now it was a battlefield, papyrus scrolls on fire, shelves broken and splintered, floors littered with the dead and the dying, their quivering lips praying for death.

Zelek pressed close behind his escorts and kept his head down. Their path through the carnage was arrow-straight, forcing him to step over bodies. Midstep he recognized Orosius. His friend's chest had been slashed, his glazed-over eyes stared in disbelief, reflecting the terror of his final moments. The mouth that had earlier tasted figs gaped open in death.

Zelek swallowed hard, forcing back an eruption of bile.

On the fringes of the chamber, marauders trolled the room, torching shelves and searching for fresh victims. Zelek's escorts showed no sign of alarm. Their swords drawn, they strode almost casually through the vaulted chamber.

A pair of ragged marauders spied them, signaled to their cohorts, two on one side, two on the other. Six filthy, sweating, wild-eyed men with swords and clubs stopped what they were doing and moved to intercept them.

His escorts did not break stride.

Even though Zelek knew something about his escorts the marauders didn't know, a man didn't watch six armed attackers with a taste for blood charge at him without experiencing fear. A scream erupted from his throat.

The marauders closed.

Zelek's escorts raised their weapons. The swords shimmered with an ebony radiance, then suddenly burst into flame with a pulse of light that swept the room, knocking the marauders off their feet and sending them flying backward. So bright was the light, its reflection on the dome was as great as the sun at midday. And then, as suddenly as it appeared, it vanished, plunging the chamber into darkness despite row after row of shelves on fire.

Zelek's scream turned to giddy laughter. His feet tapped with joy. Borrowing from Scripture, he sang lustily, "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions!"

Outside was no safer. In the midday light, they crossed the library grounds, stately statues now toppled and lying among the dead, lush gardens trampled and uprooted, pristine pools muddied with blood. Looters and brigands scurried here and there, accosting the defenseless and unarmed. More than once, rapacious eyes glared at Zelek and his jar, but the intimidating presence of his armed escorts was sufficient to douse their greed and go after far weaker prey.

With the black pillar of smoke at their back, Zelek followed his escorts into the city. They traversed the slums of Alexandria without incident—most of its residents were out looting—and upon reaching the Mound of Shards, his angelic escorts disappeared.

"What?" he shouted at the sky. "You would leave me now?"

Standing at the base of a weathered stone stairway that ascended to a limestone portico, he gazed at the imposing structure. He had his orders, but that didn't mean he had to like them. The Mound of Shards was one of Alexandria's greatest works of architecture, rivaling the legendary lighthouse in the bay. What made it remarkable was that the entire structure, with its vast, intricately decorated rooms and seemingly endless labyrinth of tunnels, had been chiseled out of solid rock.

Despite its popularity and unrivaled beauty, the structure terrified Zelek. He got cold sweats every time he entered it. To him, there was something unnatural and unnerving about building a three-level city for the dead.

With the city's attention on looting and mayhem, Zelek had the catacombs to himself. It went without saying that tomorrow business would be brisk.

Clutching the clay jar to his chest and taking a deep, ragged breath, he ascended the steps. A mound of broken pottery—discarded terra-cotta containers—lay to the left of the stairs. It was the size of the mound, the quantity of refuse, that gave the catacombs their name. Having fulfilled their purpose of carrying food and wine from nearly every corner of the world, the containers were tossed onto the pile and discarded.

Having reached the top of the steps, Zelek passed between two pillars, the entrance to the underground city. A feeling of dread fell upon him as he stepped out of the light and into the dim, stone-cold vestibule.

The first level boasted a large banquet hall, complete with rotunda and extensive mosaic flooring. Rectangular limestone slabs served as tables, flanked by stone couches. It disgusted Zelek to think that dining clubs regularly used this facility for entertainment. What sort of people held banquets in the catacombs?

He crossed to a spiral staircase with a central shaft six meters in diameter. The shaft not only provided light for the stairway, but was also used to lower bodies to the second and third levels.

At the top of the stairway, he hesitated. The first step down was a small one. The builders had designed it so the height of the steps decreased near the top to make it easier for people as they approached the surface. There were ninety-nine steps in all. Perspiring heavily, Zelek took a deep breath and started down.

At the second level, he ran out of natural light. Torches were

available for visitors. He took one and lit it. As he turned, his heart seized and he nearly dropped the clay jar. Inches from his face was a writhing serpent, carved in stone and flanking the doorway. The flickering of the torch had brought it to life.

Unlike those in Rome's catacombs, the images on these walls were Egyptian, not Christian.

Having caught his breath, Zelek continued downward to the third level, where a central hallway intersected with a series of connecting corridors. The dense humidity at this depth made it seem darker than the second level, and Zelek fought a strong urge to turn back. He tried not to think what lay beyond the reach of his torchlight.

Following his instructions, Zelek counted the connecting corridors as he passed them. At the ninth corridor he turned right and proceeded to the end, where he encountered solid rock. This was where his instructions ran out.

His torch flickering, the walls dripping, his heart pounding, Zelek waited for whatever was to happen next. Initially, when he was told of the plan to rescue the scrolls, the description of the massacre in the library had so frightened him that waiting alone in the catacombs seemed a minor thing. It didn't seem so minor now. He stood alone in the dark, deep underground, his only escape a hallway filled with row after row of rotting corpses.

"I'm here," he said with a shaky voice.

His eyes strained at the corridor entrance, alternately wanting someone to appear and fearing someone would appear.

Then the rock wall behind him shuddered.

He jumped away from it.

It shuddered again, as did the stone floor.

Zelek's eyes bulged with fear.

He turned to run, but as he did the rock floor tilted, throwing

him against a slick wall. He managed to spin just in time so that his shoulder, and not the clay jar, took the brunt of the force.

The rock underfoot rippled like waves. To keep from falling over, Zelek sank to the floor, his back against the wall. He watched in fearful wonder as a fissure opened at the closed end of the corridor, large enough for a man to walk through.

The quaking stopped. Everything was still again. Still and silent as rock was meant to be.

A light appeared through the fissure, soft at first, then increasing to blinding brilliance.

Inching himself up the side of the wall, Zelek managed to get to his feet. He approached the fissure, clay jar in hand. He left the torch behind, for it was no longer needed.

Shielding his eyes, Zelek stepped through the fissure. An exquisite radiance awaited him.

“Gabriel!” Zelek fell to his knees and offered the jar. “I have done everything you have asked of me.”

The angel stared down at him. “Seal the jar.”

The angel’s voice resonated within Zelek’s chest like the music of a thousand instruments in perfect harmony. The feeling was pleasant to the point of distraction.

“I . . . I . . . brought the wax,” Zelek managed to say.

He shrugged the strap of the pouch over his head and retrieved the tools he needed to seal the jar. Under heaven’s gaze, Zelek ben Judah took pains to make certain the container was properly sealed. Then he placed it with several other jars that had already been deposited in the cave.

The angel nodded his approval.

Zelek sighed with relief. He had done it. He’d faced his greatest fear and preserved a pair of invaluable scrolls. Now all he had to do was climb out of this wretched hole of death.

Beaming, he said, “God willing, in better times I will tell

all who will listen of the day an angel sent from heaven's throne enlisted me to perform this sacred task."

"You would tell a lie?" the angel asked.

The smile on Zelek's face quivered. "A lie? I don't understand."

"Heaven's throne had nothing to do with this."

The third scroll! It made sense now.

"You are Satan's man!" Zelek murmured, backing away.

The light emanated from within the being standing before him, rays shooting out like arrows, growing ever stronger in intensity, swirling around him, lifting him into the air. And when he spoke, his voice resounded off the walls of the small subterranean cave like a chorus of a thousand voices.

"I am Semyaza. Tremble before me."

Terror animated the paunchy librarian. He lunged for the fissure, but it had already begun to close. Desperate to get out, he stretched a hand to the other side. But who was there to rescue him? There were only corpses there. And soon he would be added to their number.

The fissure continued to close and Zelek had no choice but to retract his arm to keep it from being crushed. His back against the rock, he turned toward the radiant evil.

Zelek's gaze fell on the clay jar.

He picked up a sizable rock and lifted it over his head. "Let me out or I'll destroy it."

Semyaza's expression remained unchanged.

Zelek protested, "You promised—"

"—to keep you safe from the marauders. I have kept that promise."

His arms trembling with exertion, blinking back the sweat that stung his eyes, Zelek said, "You deceived me."

"Would you expect any less from Lucifer's lieutenant?"

Zelek had but one move left, to do the work of a marauder and

destroy that which he had spent his life preserving. He lifted the rock to smash the jar.

His arms froze in place, held back by an unseen force. Crying out in frustration, he strained against it with all his might, to no avail.

The ground beneath him trembled. The cave shuddered. Rocks from the domed ceiling pelted him like meteors. He collapsed onto the floor. Semyaza, untouched by the rocks and appearing as beautiful as ever, looked down on him without pity.

A second fissure opened. This one on the opposite side of the cave. The sea rushed in, crashing against the rocks and Zelek.

The cave filled quickly. Zelek ben Judah remained alive long enough to know he'd been entombed in seawater, and long enough to watch the clay jars settle gently against the ocean floor.

The last thing he saw before he died was the glory of Semyaza shining against the black dome of the cave ceiling while a thousand flecks of sand glistened like stars in the sky.

CHAPTER

1

A HEAVENLY GLORY BLAZED DIRECTLY IN MY PATH. SHIELDING my eyes, I fought to keep them open. I hated driving east at this time of morning.

As if Southern California freeways weren't dangerous enough, the sun hovered at just the right incline to make seeing nearly impossible. Through the thinnest of eye slits I saw braking red taillights as the cars ahead of me began to stack up at the Second Street off-ramp. I slowed as I maneuvered into the queue, stopping over the blackened starburst on the roadway where Myles Shepherd had staged his fiery death.

It wasn't something I wanted to remember. For the last six months, I'd done my best to reestablish my life as a writer and historian, to live a normal life in a normal world without angels and demons and heavenly wars and satanic plots. All right, so I'd met Lucifer face-to-face. It wasn't exactly the kind of thing you brought up in everyday conversation. Sports. Investments. Music. Theater. What you did for a living. That was what normal people talked about—what I wanted to talk about. People looked at you

weird when you told them you had angel DNA mixed into your human genomes.

The fact that I had a chance to live a normal life again only because I was marked by a seal from God—my own personal force field against Satan’s minions—was beside the point. If other people could shove their personal embarrassments in the basement next to a footlocker with Uncle Abner’s dresses, why couldn’t I do the same with my angel heritage?

My first step to forging a normal life was to get out of DC, away from that maelstrom of ambition, pretense, and politics. You couldn’t live there and not get caught up in it. You’d have a better chance holding a tea party on the Florida coast during a category 5 hurricane than you would distancing yourself from capital intrigue while living in DC.

So I moved back home to San Diego, hoping that an entire continent would be sufficient distance. The fact that my apartment was a short drive from El Cajon and Sue Ling was—

Who was I kidding? I moved back to be close to Sue Ling, even though I didn’t have a chance with her.

Traffic began moving again, and I made my way to Madison Avenue and turned left. Two miles and I was passing Singing Hills High and the classroom where six months earlier I had been initiated into the realm of angels and demons and the unsettling notion that human life had been invaded by the supernatural and that we were not, and never had been, alone in this world. I still had nightmares and flashbacks about the events atop the Emerald Plaza, surrounded by two dozen angry angels and a hoard of ravenous demons.

It was hard to believe that six months had passed since President Douglas was assassinated. I hadn’t seen an angel since. At least, not that I was aware. I mean, when they take human form,

who can tell? I lived with one for four years and never had a clue he wasn't human.

But the ache in my gut feared my hiatus from the supernatural might be coming to an end. Professor Forsythe had had that Paul Revere tone in his voice when he'd called.

The angels are coming! The angels are coming!

He hadn't actually said it, but he didn't have to. Believe me, it took a lot to drag me away from my cheese Danish and coffee in the morning.

A mile further down the road and I arrived at Heritage College. It was no surprise that the parking lot was full. Likewise, the area streets were lined with cars. If the universe was expanding like scientists said, why was it I could never find a parking place?

I ended up a quarter of a mile from the college. I must have looked like one of those Olympic walkers as I hurried toward the campus.

My cell phone rang. It was my publisher. I considered letting it go to voicemail. I wasn't sure I was ready to talk to him yet.

I tapped the green Answer icon.

"Grant? Higgins. Have you read the contract?"

"My agent emailed it to me this morning," I told him. "I haven't had time to go over it yet."

"Whatever problems you have with it, I'm sure we can work them out," he said. "I don't mind telling you that I'm getting a lot of pressure from above on this one."

I grinned. Pressure from above. Little did he know.

"I told you, I haven't had time to look at it yet."

"Can I at least tell them you're interested?"

Of course I was interested. I needed the money.

The publisher came to me on this one. They wanted a tell-all book documenting how the Douglas administration had systematically deceived me while I was researching President Douglas'

biography. It would begin with an eyewitness account of the assassination and then detail subsequent events that uncovered the web of lies that concealed the truth from the American public.

My agent said the publisher was anxious to save face after printing the president's biography. And frankly, my career could use some damage control, since I was the expert researcher who had been duped.

"We want you to show that things aren't always as they seem," Higgins pressed. "After reading this book, John Q. Public will never take a White House statement at face value again. They'll always wonder what's really going on behind the scenes."

"This isn't the world you think it is," I mused.

"Exactly! So you're in? Grant, I want you to know that I went to the mat for you on the advance money."

It was an impressive amount. Nearly double what they'd offered me for the biography. My agent told me not to let the amount give me a swelled head, that it reflected the publisher's desperation more than their assessment of me as an author. Agents could be brutal sometimes.

"Shouldn't you be talking to my agent?"

Higgins mumbled something about desperate times and desperate measures. We both knew his end-run around my agent was unethical.

"How much leeway will I be given on the project?" I asked. "If I do it, I want to do it my way."

"That's what we want," Higgins insisted. "Your frustration. Your outrage. How you felt when you first realized you were being led down a garden path."

That wasn't what I meant. I wanted to write about what I saw in the sky the day of the assassination. I wanted to reveal to the world the supernatural forces behind the plot. But I knew that if I started talking about angels and the war in heaven now,

my publisher would pull the contract off the table in a human heartbeat.

I'd reached the stairs that led from the parking lot to the campus.

"Listen, Higgins, I'll need to get back to you."

"You sound winded."

"I'm late for a meeting."

"A meeting? Grant, you're not meeting with another publisher, are you? Let me get back to my boss. I can get you more money."

"I'll have to call you back."

"When? Grant, the pressure on me is incredible. Don't leave me hanging."

"Soon. I'll get back to you soon."

"How soon?"

I'd reached the top of the steps. My breathing was labored. "I'll call you as soon as I have an answer." I ended the call. For good measure, I turned off the ringer.

The first thing I noticed about the campus was that there were more students milling about than usual. Someone or something had poked the hive. The place was abuzz with conversation.

The professor had told me he'd be in the library. It was our usual meeting place. As I wove my way in that direction, some of the students recognized me from recent events. They fell silent and stared as I passed them.

I had opened the library door and stepped aside for some coeds who were trailing behind me when Sue Ling grabbed me.

"You're late," she said by way of greeting. She pulled me away from the door.

"I couldn't find a parking place."

"This way."

Her pace was urgent. Her expression serious. Something was wrong.

“The professor, is he—”

She plowed ahead. “He’s waiting for you.”

Small, with dark hair and dark eyes that shimmered with intelligence, always dressed professionally with a splash of color, Sue Ling was the most devoted person I knew. As the professor’s personal assistant, she served him with passionate loyalty, emphasis on passionate. Just once I’d like to know what it felt like to have a woman look at me the way she looked at the professor.

Tall and lanky, I stood head and shoulders above her and, as usual, I was self-conscious about the outward thrust of my ears. But I dressed well—a by-product of DC, where dressing for success was a way of life. The creases on my slacks were always sharp, my shoes always polished, my long-sleeved shirt always fresh, my tie always stylish, and my suit coat always hung well on me. In DC, I fit in. Here on the West Coast, where formal attire meant wearing socks, people often mistook me for a fashion store mannequin.

Walking next to Sue Ling, my heart was hammering and it had nothing to do with the climb up the stairs. Being close to her had that effect on me. That was how I thought of her—not Sue, but Sue Ling. I loved the rhythm of her name. Like a heartbeat. *Bu-bump, bu-bump, bu-bump . . . sue-ling, sue-ling, sue-ling.*

“Talk to me, Sue. Tell me what’s going on.”

“You’ll learn soon enough.”

I put on the brakes. Sue’s momentum carried her several steps before she realized she was walking alone.

“Grant!” she protested. “We don’t have time—”

Fifty feet ahead of us, the door to the administration offices swung open. Seated in his wheelchair, dressed in a gray suit with his white hair waving in the breeze, the professor held the door open with one arm.

HEAVENLY MORTAL

“Miss Ling, I told you to bring him the moment he arrived!” the professor barked, clearly exasperated.

From the expression on her face, it was evident his words stung. Sue Ling prided herself on her efficiency.

I stepped between them. “Professor, it’s not her fault. I—”

But the professor wasn’t listening. His arm looked like a windmill in a gale as he motioned toward me. “Come, come—”

I half-ran toward him. Sue Ling didn’t follow. When I looked over my shoulder, she had turned and was walking away.

“Were you able to contact Miss Torres?” the professor asked, pulling me inside.

CHAPTER 2

“CLOSE THE DOOR.”

Jana Torres did as she was instructed. Always poised, confident, with high cheekbones, flowing brown hair, and a smile that could boost the ratings of a televised hamster derby, she took a seat opposite the producer of the KTSD news, who sat hunched behind a desk that served as the bedrock for a mountain of papers.

Matt Gabra was a short, sinewy man with more energy than any man Jana had ever known. During the station’s annual blood drive, the joke around the office was that the San Diego Blood Bank sold the producer’s contribution as a substitute for an energy drink.

“New York called,” Gabra said. “The network is offering you a contract. You impressed their high-priced socks off with your report from the bridge the day the President was assassinated.”

The thrill that shot through Jana was so strong it nearly lifted her off her chair. This was what every television news reporter dreamed of. And for someone as young as she was to be offered a position with the network . . . she could hardly contain herself.

Gabra didn’t share her excitement, and for good reason. The networks were always raiding the best talent from the local

stations. It was the bane of local producers. The moment local personalities boosted ratings, the networks snatched them away.

“Look, Jana”—the producer came from behind his desk and stood in front of her—“I can’t match the kind of money they’ll throw at you. Just tell me what it’ll take to get you to stay.”

The timing couldn’t have been better. Jana’s contract was up for renewal and, before her assassination coverage, Gabra had been bemoaning the fact that while he liked her work, the budget being the way it was, she might have to take a reduction in her salary package if she wanted to stay.

“You have what it takes,” Gabra continued. “No surprise there. And it was inevitable you’d catch the eye of the network. But consider this—now might not be the best time for you to make the move. Let me tell you what’ll happen. You’ll go to New York, thinking that within a year or two you’ll be anchoring the six o’clock news. But reality is, you’ll be the low man on the totem pole. You’ll be the reporter standing in an Idaho field in January reporting on the plight of freezing bovine, or hanging on to a lamppost in Florida to keep from being blown away by hurricane winds. Stay here, and you’ll have your choice of assignments. All the big stories. The network will always be there for you, and with a little more seasoning and a track record of impressive ratings, you’ll be able to write your own ticket.”

Jana stood. “I’m sorry, Matt.”

She didn’t fault him for trying to talk her into staying. It was his job. But this was the network. The big time. This was her chance.

Her cell phone vibrated against her hip. Jana checked the display.

Grant Austin again.

His timing was a few minutes off. She wanted to snatch up the phone and scream, “Grant, guess what? I’m going to New York!”

But celebrating a job offer in front of the producer she was leaving would be in bad taste.

“Sleep on it,” Gabra said, not giving up. “Let me make some phone calls and see what I can do to sweeten the pot.”

Two raps on the door and it flew open.

Jay Ostermann barged into the room. A throwback to an earlier generation, Ostermann always wore a bow tie. Middle-aged, he’d worked all of his professional career at KTSD, mostly doing research. Occasionally he made it on the air when there was a science or academic story that nobody else wanted to do. He clutched a printout in his hand.

“This just came in. It’s big, Matt. Really big.” He thrust the page at the producer.

Apparently there had been similar barging incidents in the past, because Gabra wasn’t quick to take the page. Science reporters and producers don’t often get excited over the same stories.

“Ostermann, we’re in the middle of something,” Gabra said.

The bow tie wasn’t about to be put off. “Sir, this is something you’re going to want to see. The networks are going to be all over this, and we have a local connection.”

Jana craned her neck to see what was on the sheet. Ostermann frowned and angled it away from her.

Gabra took the page. His eyebrows raised.

“They’re having a press conference at Heritage College in half an hour,” Ostermann said.

Gabra was nodding now. The more he read, the larger his nod. By the time he finished, he was saying, “Yes . . . yes . . .”

“Didn’t I tell you it was big?”

“Bigger than *The Da Vinci Code*,” the producer said.

Ostermann corrected him. “*The Da Vinci Code* was fiction.”

“Tell that to all the tourists who are flocking to Saint Sulpice and Rosslyn Chapel.”

“Which reminds me,” Ostermann said as an aside, “did you get the brochure?”

Gabra nodded. “Sherri booked us reservations for July.” He handed the printout back to Ostermann. “Let’s run with this. Get it to—”

“Let me do the story,” Ostermann begged. “Please. I’ll never ask you for anything else.”

The producer mulled for a moment. “All right. Get a camera crew.”

Ostermann thanked him profusely and bolted out the door.

No sooner had he gone when Gabra turned his attention back to Jana. “Where were we?”

“Give it to me,” Jana said.

Gabra’s face broke into a wide grin. The man recognized a bargaining chip when he saw one. “What do you know about this? It’s big, isn’t it? It would have to be the story of a lifetime for you to pass up a chance at the network.”

Jana glanced at her cell phone. Three missed calls from Grant Austin. “It has something to do with Professor John Forsythe, doesn’t it?”

“How did you know that?” Gabra was equally surprised and impressed.

“Here’s the deal,” Jana said. “I get my choice of stories and an unlimited expense account.”

Gabra laughed. “In your dreams. Double your current expense account.”

“Deal.”

Having turned my back on the others in the president’s office, I pocketed my cell phone after leaving a somewhat disjointed

message on Jana's voicemail. The focus of my thoughts returned to the images on a computer screen.

"Incredible," I muttered.

I was staring at the JPEG of a manuscript no man had seen for centuries.

"Is she coming?" the professor asked.

He and the president of Heritage College, an elderly man with thinning gray hair, sat facing each other in front of the president's laptop.

From the moment I entered the office, the president had looked at me as if I were a refugee from a carnival freak show. Either I'd grown a second head since shaving this morning or the professor had told him of my angel parentage. When the president shook my hand, he squeezed it repeatedly as though he expected something other than flesh.

It was the professor who had suggested we keep my angel heritage a secret. I readily agreed. Apparently, he felt it necessary to tell the president.

"I left a message on Jana's voicemail," I said.

"Did you try the station number?" The professor's tone had an edge to it. Understandable, considering what was at stake.

Turning aside, I did a quick search to find the station's number. I spoke to the station operator. The conversation was brief.

"She's in a meeting," I reported. "I left a—"

"Did you tell them it was urgent? Did you tell them we're offering them an exclusive interview?"

"They said they'd get word to her."

The professor pursed his lips. "Not good enough. Keep trying. Right now we need friends in the media."

With the press conference fifteen minutes away, as a final row of chairs was set up in the gym, I tried Jana's cell phone again. This time she answered.

"I've been trying to reach you," I said.

"I know."

"Are you still in your meeting?"

"No."

"Can you talk?"

"Sure."

That didn't sound like Jana. Normally she was two snowflakes away from being an avalanche of chatter. However, since time was short, I launched into the purpose of my call.

"Here's the deal. There's a press conference I think you'd be interested in."

"The archeological find in Alexandria."

I blinked. She was one step ahead of me. "Um, yeah. Anyway, it's at—"

"Heritage College and it starts at ten o'clock."

I didn't know why I was surprised. This was news. Jana was a newswoman. "Okay, you know about it. Is your station going to send someone to cover it? And if they are, is there any way you could do the story?"

She didn't reply.

"I know what I'm asking. But if the station manager has already given it to someone else, is there any possibility that you could switch assignments or something? You have an edge. You know some of the key players. The professor, for one. He specifically asked me to call you."

The other end of the phone was silent.

"Look, I hope I'm not putting you in a difficult position. But tell your manager that the professor is willing to give you an exclusive interview."

Still no answer.

“Jana?” I looked at the display. We were still connected. “Jana? Can you hear me?”

I felt a poke in my back. It was Jana.

“Of course I can hear you,” she said, amused at having startled me.

“You’re here,” I said, still talking into the phone.

Her cameraman and another reporter began setting up their equipment. I recognized the reporter. He always wore a bow tie. While I couldn’t remember his name, I remembered watching him report a story from in front of the Reuben H. Fleet Science Museum. I think it was on an eclipse.

“I have news,” Jana said.

Jana Torres was one of those women who could light up a room with her smile. When she was really excited—as she was now—her smile could melt the human male heart.

“I’ve been offered a promotion.” She paused for effect. “By the network.”

“The network? That’s the big leagues!”

Just then Sue Ling approached us. “What’s this about the big leagues?”

Jana repeated her news, and Sue, who was the epitome of decorum, hugged her former college roommate.

“I’m so happy for you,” she said, “though I can’t say I’m surprised. You’re the best reporter on the West Coast.”

Watching the two friends celebrate, I remembered a quotation, something to the effect that the hardest thing for a friend to do was to be happy for another friend’s success. Whoever said that didn’t have friends like Sue and Jana.

“When do you leave?” I asked. “I assume you’ll be going to New York.”

Jana took a deep breath. “I turned them down.”

“What?” Sue and I said in unison.

Before Jana had a chance to explain, the press conference began. School personnel filed onto a platform behind the podium. The professor was among them, wheeling himself up a ramp.

“That man! He was supposed to wait for me.” Sue touched Jana’s arm. “Don’t leave until you explain yourself.” Then she ran to assist the professor the rest of the way up the ramp.

Once they were onstage, Sue took a seat next to the rest of the faculty members.

“What’s she doing up there?” Jana asked.

“Assisting the professor.”

“Assisting him with what? She has no books, no papers. Normally, she stands in the wings.”

Leaving the question hanging in the air, Jana joined her team. I took a seat in the back row.

Whoever had arranged for the press conference had anticipated a much larger media response. There were chairs for at least a hundred people. At best, there were twenty people in the gym, not including the personalities on the platform. Many, like me, were associated with the school in some capacity.

I had to chuckle. Typical academics, assuming the rest of the world would be as excited about their findings as they were. I once had an English professor who claimed to have discovered proof that Shakespeare’s plays had been written by Christopher Marlowe—that Marlowe had refashioned himself as Shakespeare after staging his death in order to escape debtors. The professor claimed to possess a confession by Lord Burghley, who had assisted in the ruse by delivering the body of one John Penry, a nonconformist Puritan preacher executed a few days before, to the queen’s coroner, claiming it was Marlowe’s body. To announce his evidence, he’d held a press conference on the steps of the library in anticipation of a great crowd. Three representatives of the press

showed up, one of whom was a freshman writing his first article for the school paper.

It turned out to be just as well, though. Lord Burghley's confession was a fake. My English professor had been set up by the other professors in his department because nobody liked him.

I wondered if the people who had organized this press conference really expected it to be the lead story on *Entertainment Tonight*.

The president of Heritage College made his way to the podium. He gripped the sides with familiarity, like a preacher about to deliver a sermon.

"Good morning and thank you for coming," he said in a deep speaking voice. "My name is Dr. Marvin Whitson, and I am the President of Heritage College."

Cameras recorded the introduction while reporters scratched the information on pads of paper.

"For seven summers, Heritage College has teamed with Texas A&M University to explore archaeological sites of biblical significance. Each year, two or three select students participate in the program as partial fulfillment of their academic degree. This summer one of our students had the unique privilege of working in association with the Institute of Nautical Archaeology on a site in Northern Africa, specifically Alexandria, Egypt. To say that she was a participant in a finding of historic proportions is an understatement. Her discovery of two scrolls in an undersea cave rivals that of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls."

A buzz swept through the crowd, small as it was.

"Mr. Dutton, if you please."

Whitson motioned to a student seated at a table laden with projection equipment. The boy pecked at a laptop keyboard, and moments later images of ancient manuscripts illuminated the two screens flanking the platform.

Dr. Whitson turned to the screen on his left. “What you see here is a manuscript unseen by human eyes for over sixteen hundred years, since the day it was placed in the underground cave. The manuscript itself—though its dating has yet to be confirmed—is believed to be older than any of the Dead Sea Scrolls. At present, we estimate it to be approximately 2,230 years old.”

Dr. Whitson turned toward the front and spoke to the cameras directly.

“But it’s not the age of the manuscript that fascinates us. What makes both of these manuscripts worthy of a press conference is that they are copies of books that have been lost to us for centuries, books that are mentioned by name in the Bible.” He pointed to the projections. First one, then the other. “Ladies and gentlemen, on my left you are looking at the Book of Jasher, and on my right, the Book of the Wars of the Lord.”

A chill went down my spine, even though I’d already seen the images in the president’s office. Dr. Whitson himself was likewise caught up in the emotion of the moment. I turned to see if the reporters shared our feelings. They didn’t. But neither were they uninterested. They took notes dutifully.

Dr. Whitson went on to describe each of the books. “The Book of Jasher is a sacred songbook, the national anthology of the ancient Israelites. A collection of verse, it describes great events in the history of Israel and is mentioned in the Book of Joshua. It includes the Song of the Bow, David’s lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan.

“The Book of the Wars of the Lord is a collection of odes dating back to the time of Moses himself. It is a celebration of the glorious acts of the Lord among the Israelites.

“As you might imagine, Heritage College is humbled to be part of an archaeological find of this magnitude. Now, allow me to

introduce you to the student who made the actual discovery, our very own Tiffany Sproul.”

There was a smattering of applause from the assembled representatives of the college. Not from the media.

An unassuming young lady moved to the lectern. She wore a simple print dress. Straight brown hair fell to her shoulders. At first impression, she appeared unsophisticated, but that was misleading. Her eyes flashed intelligence and her speech was articulate. But there was no enthusiasm in her voice. She'd been thrust into the national spotlight, and spoke as though she didn't want to be there.

She didn't. Having been briefed ahead of time, I knew that for a fact. I also knew why she'd agreed to make an appearance, and I admired her for her courage.

“Louder! We can't hear you!” one of the reporters shouted.

Miss Sproul leaned closer to the microphone and began again. “One of the requirements to be selected to the team was the ability to scuba dive. I have been a certified diver for five years. Because I was a summer intern, my assignment was to gather pottery shards on the periphery of the site, an area that had already been explored and mapped.”

A map of the Northern African coastline appeared on the left screen with a red crusader's cross marking the location of the city of Alexandria.

The same reporter who had complained she wasn't speaking loudly enough interrupted her a second time. “Are we going to be given a copy of that map?”

Miss Sproul stepped aside so that Dr. Whitson could field the question.

“Press packets have been compiled for you with everything that you see here this morning. They will be made available to

you at the end of the press conference. Please hold all questions until the end.”

“Why can’t we have them now?” the reporter complained. “We always get press packets before the start of a conference.”

Exhibiting the patience of a host, Dr. Whitson said politely but firmly, “Today you will be getting them at the conclusion of the press conference. Now if you’ll—”

“Is there a reason you’re keeping them from us?” the reporter persisted.

“Please,” Dr. Whitson said, his patience growing thin, “hold all questions and comments to the end.” He motioned for Miss Sproul to continue.

She took a deep breath and once again approached the microphone. She began softly, glanced at the pesky reporter, and spoke louder. “My pouch—a net I used to collect the shards—was getting full, and I was about to swim to the surface when I noticed some plants waving, which isn’t unusual given the swirling currents in the area. But these were at the base of a rock formation and were waving steadily in a direction different from all the other plants.”

Her eyes had a distant look to them. She was reliving the experience.

“When I swam down to investigate, I could feel an underground stream coming from a fissure in the rocks. When I explored further—”

She hesitated. Her eyes darted side to side. She was envisioning the rock formation.

“It was like Aladdin’s cave, you know? All I did was touch it and it crumbled open, as if it were magic.”

As she relived the moment, excitement crept into her face and voice. Then she caught herself and stifled the emotion.

“My instructions were that if I were to find anything of

significance, I was to notify my supervisor immediately.” She shrugged innocently. “But how was I to know if the finding was significant? I had to look inside, didn’t I?”

Her playfulness made me grin.

“When the water cleared, I found a cave roughly ten meters in diameter. Shards from what we have since concluded were the remains of at least five jars littered the floor. One jar remained intact—the jar containing the manuscripts.”

A color photo of the vessel appeared on the screen. It was cylindrical, about two meters tall with a lid. On the second screen there appeared a picture of the interior of the cave. Miss Sproul pointed to where she had found the unbroken jar.

She continued, “Of course, at the time I didn’t know what was in the jar. By their size and shape, I suspected manuscripts, but that could be anything—a government census, a grain inventory, a text of medical procedures. I alerted my supervisor and the experts took over from there.”

Miss Sproul glanced at Dr. Whitson to signal she was finished. The president thanked her and she left the platform. She’d agreed to give a statement only after the president promised her she wouldn’t have to field any questions.

To cover her departure, Whitson expounded on the historical and theological significance of the lost manuscripts. The preacher in him surfaced, and when he concluded I almost expected him to give an invitation to those who had experienced a conversion experience. Instead, he called for questions.

The obnoxious reporter was the first to speak. “What was in the other five vessels?”

“We’ll never know, will we?” Dr. Whitson replied. “Once their seal was broken, the contents were exposed to the sea. They disintegrated centuries ago.”

“Other than the jars,” the reporter asked by way of follow-up, “were there any other artifacts in the cave? Any human remains?”

“No, and again, understandably so. While we wouldn’t expect to find human remains in the cave, had there been any, they wouldn’t have lasted long.”

Jana raised her hand to ask a question.

“Yes, Miss Torres,” Dr. Whitson said, obviously pleased to call on a friendly representative of the press.

“Wasn’t there a third manuscript in the jar?” she asked.

To a person, the expressions onstage soured.

Whitson glanced at the professor before answering. “Yes, well—” He took a moment to formulate his reply. “As with the other two manuscripts, it is being examined with the utmost care. However, it is not worth commenting on at this time. Are there any other questions?”

Without waiting to be called on, Jana followed up. “Dr. Whitson, I’m afraid the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt disagrees with you.”

Standing beside her, Ostermann handed her a sheet of paper for reference.

“According to Dr. Zahin Pasha, general director of the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo, Egypt, ‘Of the three manuscripts, while the two have great historical significance, the third manuscript is most intriguing and may prove to be the most significant.’ Would you care to comment now?”

Whitson’s eyes narrowed defensively. The professor was frowning. Sue Ling silently implored Jana to back off with subtle but urgent shakes of her head.

“I assure you, Miss Torres,” Dr. Whitson said, adopting a fatherly tone, “the third manuscript is undergoing intense scrutiny, but it poses certain technical and academic questions which

will take longer to investigate. That is why we have chosen not to feature it at this press conference. Are there any other questions?"

Jana took a couple steps closer to the platform. "Dr. Whitson," she pressed, "obviously the person who placed the third manuscript in the jar thought it comparable in value with the other two."

"Miss Torres," Whitson countered, "while I cannot speak for the man who placed the scrolls in the jar, I can tell you with the utmost assurance that, after thorough academic scrutiny, the third manuscript will be addressed."

"Is it true that the third manuscript is a palimpsest?"

"What's a palimpsest?" one of the other reporters asked.

Jana motioned to Ostermann to field the question.

"In antiquity," Ostermann replied, "when the supply of parchment was limited, it was common practice to scrape the ink from an old manuscript and reuse it. These recycled parchments are called palimpsests. The cool thing about them is that they leave ghost images of the original text which, thanks to modern multispectral imaging, we can now recover." His voice rose to an excited pitch. He was obviously enjoying the spotlight. "For example, in the 13th century, some monks scraped an old manuscript to record a rather mundane liturgical text. Beneath the liturgy, we have found the only known copy of the great mathematician Archimedes's theorems and observations on floating bodies."

He started to relate another finding. Jana placed a hand on his arm, reining him in.

The reporter who asked the question followed up. "So if this third manuscript is a palimpsest, what's on top? And what is it covering up?"

The question was aimed at Ostermann. Jana redirected it. "Dr. Whitson?"

Whitson scowled at the reporters like a lion surrounded by

hunters. He glanced at the professor who gave him a noncommittal shrug.

“At this time, we are not prepared to comment on the third manuscript,” Whitson parried. “Once we have had time to study it, we will—”

“Tells us what you know to this point,” Jana pressed.

His face red, his knuckles white from gripping the sides of the podium, Whitson took a moment to calm himself. He stepped back, adjusted his tie.

“Very well,” he said in a calm voice. “Actually, the surface text is quite remarkable. While carbon dating has yet to validate our suspicions, we believe it to be the earliest known manuscript of a New Testament book, specifically, Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians.”

“You say earliest,” the inquisitive reporter jumped in. “How early?”

“First century.”

“And when was the epistle written?”

Whitson allowed himself a small smile. “First century.”

“So,” the reporter pressed, “this may be the original manuscript?”

“It’s too early to say.” Whitson pressed his advantage. “That’s why we did not wish to include it in this press conference. Now, if you will . . . there are press packets at the door.”

“What is written beneath it?” Jana said. “It’s a palimpsest, which means that the writing beneath the epistle is even older.”

“We do not care to comment further on the manuscript at this time,” Whitson insisted. He turned to walk away.

“According to my sources,” Jana said, “the underlying text is the Gospel of Jesus, an account of his life and teaching in his own words. And because it was written before the overlying Ephesian text, that would place the writing within Jesus’ lifetime. Do you care to comment now?”

Whitson wheeled around and glared with all the righteous wrath he could muster. “This press conference is over,” he said.

But Jana wasn’t finished. “Exactly what is it about the third manuscript that frightens you?”

“That’s enough!”

This time it was the professor. He wheeled to the edge of the platform. His outburst startled everyone in the room, including Dr. Whitson.

“I said, this press conference is over!” Whitson repeated.

But Jana would have none of it. Even as the assembled representatives of the college began filing off stage, she fired another question.

“Can you tell me why *he* is here?” She pointed at me with her pen. “Why would you invite to the press conference a—”

When she looked at me, she stopped midsentence. She knew my secret. And she knew I wanted it kept secret.

“A what?” the inquisitive reporter prompted.

“A Pulitzer Prize–winning biographer,” I answered for her.

Jana let it go at that, and the press conference was over. Sue Ling wheeled the professor down the ramp with Dr. Whitson on her heels, pelted in the back by more questions from the press.

Students cradling armloads of press packets waited patiently at the doorways.