

THE SECRETS OF TIME

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Gary Sturm

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To my wife, Etsuko

CHAPTER 1

*I will utter things which have been kept secret
from the foundation of the world.*

Matthew 13:35

Twenty-four-year-old Moishe Aronson, an archaeology student from Haifa, carefully guided his old Mercedes taxi around engine blocks and rusting automobiles. His legs trembled as he made his way toward a dilapidated trailer house that squatted in the middle of a large salvage yard. A rare night of rain had turned Bet She'an's soil into a clayey slush that sucked at the car's tires as it slithered across the yard. The clay kept water from draining as it did in Bet She'an's sandy outer areas. It was in the clay that a Palestinian laborer had found the precious artifact that Aronson was about to sell for a splendid price. Bet She'an was an unlikely place for such a find. There were no caves or outcroppings to allow for the secreting of treasure. The land was flat and monotonous and there were few landmarks beyond the town's sterile sandstone buildings. Nothing significant had ever before been found there, save the anomalous "scroll," which was not a scroll at all. The most curious fact of the discovery concerned the soil from where it had come: a stratum of argillite four meters deep. Soil at that depth was once mud, mud that in 8000 B.C. flowed over the now-arid plain like frosting over a cake.

Aronson's car slammed over a deep pothole and a worn front tire blew with a muffled pop. The student muscled the crippled

taxi another twenty meters, then slid to a stop beside a purple Cadillac Seville. The aging, carelessly parked auto clearly had suffered much abuse. Aronson climbed four steps to the worn deck of a dilapidated trailer house and wondered if the Russians would lend him a jack. The door was opened by a malevolent-looking, red-haired man of about thirty-five.

"*Shalom!*" he boomed in accented Hebrew.

"Hello," Aronson answered in English. It was English, their only common tongue, in which they would negotiate. He walked into the musty interior of the old trailer to see two other men staring at him. One had the coarse hair and bushy eyebrows of a Taliban. The other man looked slick and western like a Latin playboy. Neither was an improvement on Red Hair. Two of the men looked athletic, yet vaguely undisciplined. Their eyes were hard, the eyes of men who could negotiate anything from an assassination to the sale of an atom bomb. The "Taliban," on the other hand, wore the rumpled clothing and bright eyes of a scientist.

Red Hair waved a huge hand toward his unsmiling comrades.

"Gennady and Vanya, my associates. And I am Nicky."

Aronson nodded. "A pleasure, I'm sure."

"Nicky" motioned toward a chair. "Please to have a seat, my friend."

"I really have very little time. Why don't we get down to business?"

Aronson's voice was just a little too high. The "associates" glowered while Nicky laughed and threw a huge arm around the student's bony shoulders.

"Come! There is always time for courtesy in business. This is civilized way. First, we have drink and then business, *da?*" The big Russian steered a reluctant Aronson toward two tattered easy chairs and bade him sit. He sat across from the student while Vanya poured vodka into four glasses then passed them around. The vodka smelled like rubbing alcohol to the light-drinking young man.

"*Nazdorovie,*" Nicky chirped.

"*L'chaim,*" Aronson answered.

The Russians bolted their drinks, then chuckled as Aronson, with poorly concealed displeasure, choked down his vodka. Red Hair pulled his chair closer so that their knees were nearly touching. The associates came nearer. The student drew small comfort from the feel of the 9mm Beretta he wore at the small of his back; he knew he could never draw it now. He could only pray that he wouldn't need it.

Red Hair pulled a piece of folded paper from his shirt pocket, looked at it thoughtfully, then leaned close to Aronson.

"I have question."

"I . . . I'll try to answer it."

"Chest was found at four meters, *da?*"

"That is approximately correct."

"Chest is copper, is this not so?"

"Yes, copper."

The Russian searched his face for duplicity. "Why was found so deep in ground?"

"I do not understand the question."

Red Hair nodded toward his comrade.

"This is Vanya's specialty. He tells me such an age would be before," he said, snapping his fingers, "before? . . ."

"Neolithic," said Vanya.

"Yes, before Neolithic age."

"I believe that is correct."

"This is not strange? *Copper* chest. *Writing?* These are not developed by 8000 B.C."

"Yes . . . strange," Aronson agreed.

"Also page. Page like modern book. No books in old days."

"Yes, it is a puzzle. That is what gives the document its value."

Red hair stared soberly into the young man's eyes as though waiting for a confession. Aronson returned the stare until his eyes began to water. Finally, the Russian smiled broadly.

"Is in your car?"

Aronson took another sip of vodka to mask his relief. There was no point in lying.

"Yes. And the money?"

The Russian waved his hand and Gennady pulled a small briefcase from a nearby desk. Red hair took the valise and placed it on his lap. Aronson started to rise.

“I’ll get the—”

“Gennady will get. Where is it? In trunk?”

Aronson’s heart began to bounce in his chest. Things were not going as planned. He had intended to simply step through the door, exchange the scroll for a quick three hundred thousand and leave, but it was not to be.

“It is very fragile.”

“Yes, of course. The key, if you please.”

Red Hair’s smile did nothing to assuage the menace that tinged his voice. As the student reached into his back pocket for the keys to the car, he brushed his pistol for reassurance. The Russian took the keys without taking his eyes from the student.

“Thank you.”

Red Hair handed the keys to Gennady and said something to Vanya in rapid Russian. Vanya immediately poured more vodka into each glass. Aronson already felt the effects of his first drink.

To the student’s horror, Red Hair leaned forward to look behind his back.

“Do you always carry pistol?”

Aronson blanched. “What do you mean?”

“They told me you are student. Is not strange for such person to be armed?”

“Not in Israel.”

The Russian smiled. “Maybe you do not trust us.”

The young man felt the need for control. “I would like to see the money now.”

“Of course.”

Red Hair clinked Aronson’s glass then swallowed his own drink in a single gulp. He grinned as he opened the case. Within were neat bundles of hundred-dollar bills. “You can count, go ahead.”

It was all there. After a moment, Gennady returned; he held the pitch-and-soil-crusted chest as though it were a bomb. Vanya brought from the other room a leather case from which he extracted

several small bottles of chemicals, a microscope and other instruments.

“Just few moments while Vanya checks authenticity,” said Red Hair.

“Yes, of course, but it was already checked by—“

“A second opinion. Do you mind?”

“No . . . of course not.”

The Russian looked the student squarely in the face.

“Are you sure there are not more?”

“More?”

“Pages, more pages.”

“I’m positive.”

“How did you find?”

“A fellow student . . . part-time construction worker found it. They were digging the foundation for a large building. When he . . . found the chest, he called me. The hole was eventually dug very wide and very deep. There was nothing else.”

“Why he called you?”

“I told you, I am . . . was his friend. I . . . I’m a graduate student in archaeology.”

Vanya carefully removed an aged sheaf of vellum and a small, gold cylinder from the corroded box and examined the items closely. He paid particular attention to a small, cartoonlike image inscribed on the parchment. It was a thing never before seen on an ancient manuscript—the likeness of a man.

“I wouldn’t handle the document in this environment.”

Vanya smiled. “Don’t worry.” He held the gold cylinder up to the light and studied it carefully. “What is this?”

“I don’t know but it’s pure gold. I had it checked.”

Vanya nodded wisely. Red Hair leaned closer to the student.

“Hard to believe only one page.” He put his heavy hand on the young man’s knee. “Let’s be honest. We can trust each other.” He gave Aronson a conspiratorial wink. “What really happened to rest of manuscript?”

“I told you that is all there was.”

“Page comes from book. Somewhere must be book, da?”

"If there is, I know nothing about it."

"Maybe you have other customers."

"I tell you there was nothing more." Aronson started to rise.
"Well, I'm afraid I must be going."

Gennady gently restrained him.

"And who else is connected to this discovery?" Red Hair asked.

"Just the man who found it."

Another smile. "And how much did you pay this fellow?"

"That is my business but you needn't worry about him."

"Why so?"

"He was killed two weeks ago."

"Your work?" the now-grinning Red Hair asked.

"Certainly not! He was a Palestinian. There was a . . . commotion in Gaza and he was . . . shot by a policeman."

Aronson saw Vanya rise from his microscope with a satisfied look on his face. He nodded toward Red Hair. Gannady was out of sight.

"Well, my friend, it seems Vanya is pleased."

"As I expected. Perhaps now, we can—"

Aronson was suddenly buried under muscles and body odor. A loop of wire closed around his neck and not another word would ever leave his lips. The world turned red and then dark. The last thing Aronson saw was Red Hair's clinical stare.

Dr. Rosenberg was poor at directions and had forgotten the map he picked up at the Auto Club. Gas station attendants, more familiar with Peshawar than Santa Barbara, had not been helpful. It was chance, more than design, that finally brought Dr. Rosenberg to the right road, where he saw a hand-lettered sign that marked the way to *Pacific Research*. An arrow pointed up a cobbled road that snaked into a grove of trees on a distant hill. The pastor drove the road slowly, uncertainly, until at last he arrived before two huge iron gates, behind which was a large parking lot. Rosenberg drove his rented Dodge past the open gates, parked, then walked past rows of cars toward what looked like the grounds of an asylum. Amid a stand of eucalyptus trees was a large building flanked by two smaller structures. Although the edifice wore the look of time, the sign before it was new and temporary, like those seen at construction sites. The structure was made of aged, mud-colored brick and looked vaguely Moroccan. Beyond the main building could be seen a tall chimney like that of a brick works or a crematorium. The grounds were thick with ancient eucalyptus trees, their sloughing skins clumped in the shadows. Only the eternal California sun, bathing the grounds in brilliant light, kept the clergyman's spirits from sinking into gloom.

He was sorry he had come. He regretted having traveled two thousand miles on nothing more than speculation. He was about to address an organization of which he had never heard and could find no reference. All he had was the oddly worded, gilt invitation that he carried in his breast pocket. It had seemed not a request but a thinly veiled order, a draft notice from a government agency with a name as arcane as that of the conference: *Interfaith Symposium*. Although Rosenberg could certainly have refused, he was made to feel that his presence was crucial to the success of the conference. He was flattered when he received a follow up from someone on the White House staff, a person who said the president "appreciated" his participation. There was also the matter of a rather generous honorarium and expense money that had aroused his curiosity. What could the government, with its enshrined separation of church and state, want to hear from a Lutheran minister? Assuming he

would be asked to address the group, he had polished his standard “*Beauty of God’s Promise*” speech. He was thinking of it at the moment a marine, in blue uniform and white gloves, smartly waved him toward the flagstone path to the main building. He was surprised to see the military directing traffic at a religious meeting. Dr. Rosenberg had many questions in mind as he followed others up the curving path.

Another marine carefully checked his invitation then waved him past massive, carved oaken doors that predated the pastor’s seventy-two years by a century. The cleric took a moment to marvel at the high vaulted ceiling with its huge dark timbers arching overhead like a forest.

“Gus?”

Rosenburg turned to see a heavy-set man, who wore a sorrow-carved face and a yarmulke atop his silver hair.

“Oskar Schneider! You here? Haven’t seen you since the Mannheim conference.”

“Yes, it has been a long while. How are you, my friend?”

“Puzzled, I must admit. I’m not sure why I’m here or what I’m to do.”

Schneider let out a long breath.

“Everyone is in the dark.”

“How many are we exactly?”

“I reckon about twenty in all.”

“All clergy?”

Schneider shrugged. “We shouldn’t worry about earthquakes.”

The clerics turned to see a smiling man in an expensive jogging suit approach with palms extended in greeting.

“Gentlemen, welcome aboard. The meeting should be starting at any time.”

Rosenburg eyed the man warily. “Can you tell us anything about it?”

“Is there a program of some sort?” asked Schneider.

“Gentlemen, all your questions will be answered at the meeting.” The greeter pulled from a fanny pack a handful of photo

identification cards; he examined each man's face before handing him a card bearing his likeness.

"Please clip these on your shirts. It's important that you wear them at all times during your stay here."

The amiable man patted the clerics on their shoulders and gently guided them toward the open doors of the conference room.

As Rosenberg walked apprehensively into the meeting chamber, he wondered where the marines had gotten his photo.

In contrast to the impressive antechamber, the symposium room was starkly functional. A false ceiling of white fiber tiles was suspended twelve feet above the commercial linoleum of a well-polished floor. Large windows ran around the walls and, despite their white privacy screens, brought light from the morning sun. In the room's center was a very long and heavy wooden table upon which were name cards, notebooks and ballpoint pens for each participant. Bottles of mineral water, drinking glasses, and small microphones ringed the table. The room was filled almost exclusively with men who chatted and milled about like conventioners. A few wore clerical garb but most were dressed casually—tennis shoes and sweatshirts being most in evidence. Rosenberg looked down at his dark suit and unconsciously loosened his tie.

"Ladies and gentlemen," boomed an amplified voice. The crowd grew still. "If you will please find your names at the table and be seated, we will begin."

The pastor spotted his place and was sorry to find himself seated far from Rabbi Schneider. His friend smiled and shrugged resignedly. Rosenberg was surprised to see a world famous evangelist—a friend of presidents and kings—near the head of the table. An attractive woman in beige slacks and brown satin blouse stepped up to the head of the table. She was about thirty-five, well conditioned and just a little nervous. She tapped her microphone and motioned to the gathering.

"Please be seated and make yourselves comfortable."

The woman smiled with tight lips and glanced at her notes as she waited for an end to the clearing of throats and shuffling of chairs. When the room grew quiet she looked up, took a deep breath and began:

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.”

There were a few mumbled responses.

“My name is Leda Swann. Please call me Lee. I am a . . . specialist on assignment to the White House Office of Science and Technology.” Ms. Swann offered no explanation as to her specialty. “I would like, first of all, to welcome you and express our thanks to you for taking the time to join us. Some of you have traveled a long way to be here and I know you are pretty perplexed about now, but we’re going to answer all your questions, I promise. We’re going to . . . end our sessions by three each afternoon so you will have some time for sightseeing. There are a lot of things to do in Santa Barbara, and we hope you will find time to enjoy yourselves over the next three days.” She paused to look out at the expectant, dubious faces before her. “Wh-why are we here? I know you are all anxious to find the answer to that question. Basically it is this: we have a problem and we need your help.”

There was scattered mumbling, an ironic laugh or two. Swann continued.

“I know this may come as a surprise, but you will soon understand why.” Swann took a long breath. “You see, we may be at the beginning of a new era in civilization and new times call for new modes of thinking. Every new age calls for reinterpretation, fresh analyses. That’s why you are here. Each of you is a respected cleric. What’s more, some of you are experts in ancient languages, paleography, archeology, and other disciplines involved in the study of history and religion.”

Rosenburg wondered why he had been chosen. His standing in the fields mentioned would mark him as little more than an amateur. His specialty was in writing about the discoveries of others. His talent was in his ability to explain to laymen the works of the specialists. The conferees began to settle down and Swann spoke with more confidence.

“Today we will discuss matters that will be of great interest to all of you, I’m quite sure. However, what we are going to examine here must remain confidential. We ask your cooperation in not discussing the substance of our meetings with anyone. In that connection, let me introduce to you Mr. Dennis Ikor, our chief of security.”

Puzzled glances were exchanged as Dennis Ikor, seated next to Ms. Swann, rose to his feet. He was fortyish, trim and crew cut in the military style. His manner was relaxed and he spoke with a slight southern drawl.

“Thanks, Lee. By the way, folks, we’re on a first-name basis here. We hope you all get to know each other and become friends while you’re at the conference. As you know, Uncle Sam is footin’ the bill for this shindig and as Lee said, the meetin’ is to be kept confidential. In fact, the official classification is *secret*.”

There were snorts and laughter.

“That may seem strange but, by the end of the day, I’m sure you will understand the reasons.”

Swann handed to each person a document stapled to stiff blue backing.

“Lee is gonna give you each a confidentiality agreement. You will be asked to sign one before the meetin’ officially begins.”

Chuckling and laughter. Schneider raised his hand. Ikor gave him a nod.

“Question, Dr. Schneider?”

“Excuse me, but are you sure I’m in the right meeting? I’m just a poor rabbi.”

Ikor joined in the general laughter that followed.

“Rabbi, you’re too modest. I read your resume.”

Lee Swann placed a copy of the confidentiality agreement before Dr. Rosenburg. He caught her hand before she could withdraw.

“Miss . . . Swann, is this really necessary?”

“I’m afraid so, sir.”

Swann smiled, withdrew her hand and continued her rounds. It took a good thirty minutes to assemble the signed documents and bring the meeting to order. The chamber was filled with a palpable air of anticipation.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if I might have your attention!”

A half-dozen conversations died away. All eyes were drawn to Swann and to a long-haired man who adjusted a large video screen.

“What you are about to see is probably familiar. We’re going to show you a photograph taken from space on a Viking mission to Mars, back in 1976.”

Swann nodded to the technician who illuminated the screen. An enigmatic image popped into view. A murmur ran through the room.

“Most people call it the ‘Face.’ When the pictures were first received at Jet Propulsion Labs, no one was sure what it was. The program people assumed it was an incredible coincidence of nature. The consensus said it was formed eons ago by a combination of seismic and meteorological conditions. As I’m sure you know, this picture has inspired countless books and documentary films and a lot of theories. The controversy only increased after Global Explorer and the later missions.”

Rosenburg had seen the picture before. The Face was an all too familiar one.

“Although Congress has pretty much gutted the space budget, we were lucky to have the last two landers in the pipeline. Thanks to those missions, we have some new, provocative data to work with.” Swann looked around the table. “Before we go any further, we’re going to ask each of you to take a minute to write down your impressions of this image.”

A man with short, gray hair raised his hand and was recognized.

“Yes, Reverend Kim?”

“What do you mean by our ‘impressions?’”

“Tell us what it is, what it means to you.”

“It’s a mountain,” said a heavyset cleric at the rear of the table.

“Fine, then just write that down as you see it.”

There was a spate of conversation and not a little chuckling as each member of the forum took pen in hand. Rosenburg’s hand was trembling.

* * *

The security people were nervous. Hundreds of spectators had gathered at the top of the dunes to watch three famous men walk along Tottori Beach. The high ground was too convenient for a makeshift mortar attack, and none of the leaders who walked beside the slate gray Sea of Japan was very popular in his respective country. President Garvey was easily the least liked of all. Spray from a strong surf and a biting wind made the going troublesome but privacy of conversation was assured. Prime Minister Doi had chosen the location, not only as a safe place to talk, but to show his fellow conspirators some of the beauty of Japan. Unfortunately it was O-bon Matsuri, the festival of spirits, and the place was jammed with the living.

Prime Minister Doi turned to Randall Garvey. "I assume our silent partner has things in hand."

The president flipped his twenty-dollar Partagas cigar into the surf.

"Too damned windy to smoke. I tell you, Hiro, no one has a better grip on Congress than Senator Santello. Don't worry about him."

"And his recent concerns—"

"We did a dog-and-pony-show demonstration out in California at China Lake. The plasma motor burned beautifully. Everything looked super. Believe me, he's satisfied."

"My great worry," said Russian President Boyarsky, "is the news media. Especially," he nodded to President Garvey, "in America, I am sorry to say."

Garvey smiled. "It's a problem, Greg, but we can keep a secret when we have to. The SR-71 and stealth fighters were under wraps for years."

"It is a problem for each of us," added Prime Minister Doi. "But I agree. We must be discreet as long as possible."

President Garvey stooped to pick up a small piece of driftwood. "How does the site look, Greg?"

“We are ready for business.”

Garvey flung the wood into the surf. “That’s good. Shipments will start moving within sixty days. Any problems at your end, Hiro?”

Doi looked with apprehension at the crop of news cameras sprouting from the dune, then drew a breath between his teeth. “The situation is very difficult. Naturally, the process will require careful steps.”

Boyarsky frowned. “But there will be no problems?”

“Problems will be inevitable, my friend, but the funds will be available.”

They watched a Japan Self Defense Force Sea Knight chopper chase away an NHK news plane. Garvey placed a hand on each man’s shoulder.

“I’m glad we’re together on this. Whatever happens, I’m honored to count you as friends. We might end up unemployed, but I know you will agree the stakes are worth it.”

Grigori Boyarsky slapped him on the back. “We are pioneers! Nothing venture, nothing gain.”

“Knowledge,” added Prime Minister Doi, “does not come easily. I can only hope the results will justify our foolhardiness.”

Garvey grinned. “Well, I tell you, Hiro, if we fail and my people disown me, I’m going to come and live in this beautiful country of yours.”

“As my friend you might not be welcome.”

Boyarsky laughed. “Don’t worry, boys. We can get a nice dacha on *Novaya Zemlya!*”

Garvey laughed appreciatively. “Wonderful, Greg. You bring the bearskin coats and Hiro and I will bring the snowshoes.”

Whistlers in the dark, the three risk takers continued their walk along the sand. They were followed by a retinue of security people who were themselves trailed by a small army of reporters.

“What of the legend?” Boyarsky asked. “This will be important.”

Doi stopped to pour sand from one of his shoes. “There have been so many recent failures in the space programs, one more should seem quite normal.”

Garvey sighed. "This one is going to be hard to explain. But I think we have the answer to the problem."

The others looked at him expectantly.

"I would like to hear this answer," Boyarsky said.

Garvey smiled. "Essentially it's this: there will be only *half* a failure."

Several media aircraft orbited just outside the security zone. The JSDF pilots had their hands full. Their craft could be seen bouncing in the heavy winds that blew in from the sea. The cold and wind soon forced the three leaders and their followers to retreat from the shore. They left angry waves to crash unheard on a deserted beach.

Dinner was to be taken at a popular sushi restaurant, closed to accommodate its illustrious guests. Slogan-covered, martial-gray busses of the *uyoku dantai* were parked at either end of the narrow street that led to the restaurant. A khaki-clad rightist grunted a coarse diatribe over a powerfully amplified speaker system. Translated, the extremist's speech was not unlike those heard in the U.S. from both the right and left of the political spectrum.

End government secrecy!

Stop the waste of resources on foolhardy ventures!

Power-hungry leaders should resign!

Local police and security agents managed to clear the street before the arrival of the official limousines. However, the hostile crowd and thrusting signs were easily seen from the passing motorcade.

Although both Doi and Boyarsky spoke excellent English, translators were on hand to retrieve any nuance that might flee the conversation. Other than the translators, only security staffs were allowed in the large *shokudo* where the party sat on *zabutons* and prepared to eat plate after plate of first-rate sushi. Video cameras would be allowed inside just long enough to record the event for the news organs. The most critical points of the mini-summit had been discussed on the beach or in secure rooms. Dinner

conversation was the bland repartee common to meetings between leaders of governments. References to the *project* were oblique and very limited.

With their main business out of the way, the three heads of state allowed themselves to enjoy the evening. However, Prime Minister Doi was unable to relax completely. He had recently finished reading a new biography of one of his country's heroes. It was the story of a man who had brought his nation to the most tragic adventure in its history. Passages from the book kept floating through Doi's mind. He could not stop reflecting on the life of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto.

"You're home! I thought you were coming back tomorrow."

Rosenburg gave his wife a perfunctory kiss then carried his suitcase toward the bedroom.

"Caught the red eye out of LAX."

"Did you have dinner in Westlake with Karl?"

"I was dead tired so I didn't go."

"That's a shame. You don't get to see your brother that often. I hope you called him."

"I called him."

"Gus, what is it? What happened?"

"We had a meeting."

Loretta Rosenburg took a last look at the large canvas before her then thrust her brush into a jar of turpentine. She wiped her hands on a paint-stained smock then followed her husband into the bedroom.

"Are you going to tell me about the meeting or is it to be a secret?"

Rosenburg sat wearily on the edge of the bed and rubbed his eyes.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"It is a damned secret."

"Gus, what are you talking about?"

"The meeting was classified. We're not to discuss it with anyone."

"Well what on . . ." She brushed a lock of hair from her forehead. "You are going to tell *me*, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"You look ill, Gus."

"I'm all right."

"Well, you don't look it, my dear. Oh, before I forget, Pastor Swenson called."

"What did he say?"

"He can't do the second service on Sunday. He has to fly to Seattle. Seems his father is ill."

Rosenburg was unsettled by the news. He rose from the bed and walked toward the den, followed by his wife.

“They will have to find someone else.”

“What on earth for? You’re here now.”

“I’ll never be able to get through it.”

Loretta gripped his shoulders.

“Gus, I want to know just what happened at that meeting.”

“Give me a few moments to unwind. Is there any brandy?”

“Brandy? Yes, I think so. I’ll get it.”

She gave her husband a concerned look then left for the kitchen. Rosenberg walked over to his ceiling-high bookcase and searched for a very special book. He found what he wanted, shuffled to his favorite chair and then plopped heavily onto its battered cushions. The book fell open to a page that had been summoned many times before. The pastor gazed at the page wearily until his wife returned with a glass of blackberry brandy. She shot a quick glance at the book and her face filled with alarm.

“Why?”

Rosenburg handed the open book to his wife. Her eyes were weighted with sadness as she peered at the page.

“So it’s back. I thought that was behind us.”

Rosenburg took a sip of his blackberry brandy and smiled ironically.

“So did I, my dear, so did I.”

Mrs. Rosenberg clapped the book shut.

“Well, so what? We’ve been all through it before.”

“It is different this time.”

“Different? How? What happened in Santa Barbara?”

“They say it is an artifact.”

“They? You mean the government?” She considered his silent answer, shook her head slowly, then sat beside her husband. “Who? Who do they say made this thing?”

“They don’t know.”

“Then how—”

“Satellites . . . new photos, other ‘data.’”

Mrs. Rosenberg pulled her sweater close to her neck. She wondered if she had remembered to lock the front door.

“Gus . . . whatever it is, whatever they find, we must remember it’s God’s universe. Nothing will be changed by this . . . this ‘data,’ as you call it.”

Rosenburg sipped his brandy in silence.

The guard at the gate quickly recognized Gerry Fiedler but he still had to ask him for identification. Fiedler was annoyed.

The young airman smiled. "Thank you, sir. And who might these people be?"

"They *might* be my camera crew."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I only have *your* name. These folks will have to wait out here."

"Look—Corporal, I am a news person, get it? You know, *Gerry Fiedler*? Television? A newsman needs his camera crew. We're a team, *capiche*?"

"Sorry, sir, I have my orders."

Fiedler chuckled grimly.

"Look, soldier boy, I am here as a guest of General William Smart. Sound familiar? You know, as in *Base Commander Smart*? Ring any bells?"

Although annoyed, the guard remained professional.

"I'll be glad to pass you through to General Smart, sir, but these two stay here. There's a coffee shop down the road. They can wait there if they want."

Fiedler laughed in disgust. He was a man not used to such resistance from those he thought of as "standard people." He became coldly controlled.

"Would it be too much to ask you to get General Smart on the phone and explain the situation to him? Hmmm? Suppose you could bring that off?"

The young man glared at Fiedler. The celebrity was lucky the encounter was not taking place on a Friday night at the Lompoc Cowboy Bar.

"I'll see what I can do, sir."

He stepped into the guard shack and made his call. He emerged wearing a slight smile. It had been a very short conversation.

"General says you'll have to go in alone, sir." The airman reached into Fiedler's car to place a plastic pass on the dashboard.

Fiedler's eyes were hard with controlled rage as he turned to his technicians.

"You people wait here. I won't be long."

Shaking their heads, the camera and sound technicians stepped from Fiedler's Mercedes.

"Be sure to stay on the road with the green line, sir. The general's office is in that glassed-in building at the end of the street. His aide will meet you," said the now-grinning airman.

Fiedler was calmer by the time he was ushered into General Smart's office but he was not a happy angler. The general, a tall, trim fellow in his fifties, rose to greet the famous man.

"Mr. Fiedler, nice to make your acquaintance."

Fiedler didn't smile.

"Likewise, I'm sure. Look, General, I thought I made it clear we expected to shoot a piece for *News Hunters*. For this I need a camera person and a camera."

The general frowned and motioned toward a chair where Fiedler sat reluctantly.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that, Gerry. See, we came under a security alert this morning. Supposed to last a couple of weeks. Bad timing, I guess. Anyway, I'm sure we can make your visit worthwhile. What would you like to know about our outfit?"

Fiedler glanced with distaste at the many photos and awards on the wall behind the general's desk. Twenty years before, he had washed out of basic training as "unsuitable for military service." Since then, he had hated anything connected to the military. Although two decades had passed, he wondered if General Smart knew anything about it.

"First of all, what kind of alert are we talking here?"

"Oh, strictly routine. We go through these things all the time. Preparedness exercises, you get the idea."

"Isn't two weeks kind of long for an alert?"

"Depends on the situation."

"I thought readiness alerts were supposed to be a surprise. How come you know it's going to last two weeks?"

General Smart's smile faded. "You said you wanted to get an angle on women in the military. Sorry I won't be able to spend more time with you but the alert is going to keep me hopping. I'm

sure you understand. I've arranged for Major Judy Bender to show you around. Her office is just down the hall and she's expecting you. Why don't I escort you there?"

"So I'm not gonna be able to get a camera in here?"

"Not at this time, I'm afraid."

A martyr, Fiedler rose from his chair.

"Then give my regrets to Major Bender but I won't be staying. If I can't shoot, I got nothing to show my audience."

"Well, I'm sorry, Gerry. Why don't we try again another time?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks for your time, General."

Fiedler walked quickly from the office. The same staff sergeant who had greeted him earlier met him at the door.

"Don't trouble yourself, Sergeant. I can find my way back to the gate. Green line, right?"

He took the blue line. Something unusual was happening and Gerry Fiedler was just the man to uncover it. He was able to drive unmolested for twenty minutes before he found what he wanted. Partially obscured by a patch of late morning fog, a huge jet "Super Guppy" sat with nose agape. The plane's cavernous cargo compartment was being loaded with what appeared to be a large rocket section. Despite the distance, Fiedler could see another plane: a giant C5 Galaxy squatted on the tarmac. An increase in activity at Vandenberg, including movements of large, covered equipment in the dark of night had led to Fiedler's subterfuge on "women in the military." Now he was on the trail of a *real* story. Deprived of equipment and crew, he was left with only a small still-camera. Fortunately, it had a superb zoom lens and was certainly better than nothing. He reached into his glove compartment and extracted the Nikon he kept for just such an occasion.

He was able to take three excellent shots before being summarily jerked from his car.

"Line one, general. The NCOIC."

General Smart absently pressed a button on his phone and continued reading the report he held before him.

“Yes, Sergeant?”

“Sir, we picked up a civilian with a camera taking shots of area twelve.”

General Smart dropped his report.

“That so?”

“Yes, sir. Says he’s a friend of yours.”