

RAVE REVIEWS FOR GREGG LOOMIS!

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“This book is a jewel—riveting, dynamic and action-packed. The twists and turns make this an absolute page-turner to the very last. I highly recommend *Gates of Hades*.”

—Fresh Fiction

“*Gates of Hades* is a suspense-filled novel.”

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—New Mystery Reader

“I’ll take that, Mr. Reilly.”

Lang turned slowly. Leather Jacket and another man stood just inside the door. Each held a automatic obscured by a silencer.

The two men were a good five feet apart. No chance Lang could draw the SIG Sauer from his holster and fire before at least one of the intruders could shoot.

Lang slowly raised his hands, his fingers manipulating the envelopes so that one was square behind the other. “What can I do for you, gentlemen?”

Leather Jacket motioned with his weapon. “The envelope you have in your hand, Mr. Reilly, put it on the counter and slide it towards me.”

The question was whether these two intended to take what they had come for and leave or make sure Lang did not trouble them further. The silencers on each gun did not suggest a happy ending. It was unlikely a man would risk carrying something that bulky if he had no intention of using it.

If Lang was going to do something, now seemed about the right time.

But what?

Other *Leisure* books by Gregg Loomis:

GATES OF HADES

THE JULIAN SECRET

THE PEGASUS SECRET

GREGG
LOOMIS

THE SINAI SECRET



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THE SINAI SECRET

PROLOGUE

Mount Horeb
Sinai Peninsula
March 1904

Sir W. M. Flinders Petrie was astonished but certainly not pleased by his discovery.

His expedition had been funded by the Egypt Exploration Fund for the purpose of revisiting and mapping the area of mining activity by the ancient Egyptians between the gulfs of Suez and Aqaba. Like so many explorers before him, he had found something quite different from the object of his search.

Although this was supposedly Mount Sinai, the mountain from which Moses had brought down the Ten Commandments, Petrie had no particular expectations. The place was in the area he was surveying, so the expedition had struggled up the sharp outcrop to its summit. Instead of more craggy red sandstone boulders, scrubby brush, and a surplus of scorpions, they were viewing something totally unexpected.

Jutting out from what was clearly a man-made cave were remnants of walls of ancient handmade brick. The southern side of the walls had long ago been abraded by sand blown by millennia of wind, the consistent gritty, hot breeze Petrie had come to think of as the breath of the desert. The northern side still displayed a patina of the painted plaster that had once covered the crude bricks. In the plaster were inscriptions, hieroglyphics that Petrie recognized as possibly dating back to the Twelfth Pharaonic Dynasty of about 2600 B.C.

Long before Moses.

This presented a problem.

The articles of association of the sponsoring Egypt Exploration Fund were quite clear: One of its objectives was excavation and exploration for the purpose of confirming or elucidating the Old Testament. This was the mountain where Moses had spoken with God in the form of a burning bush from which he had brought down not one, but two sets of commandments; and at the base of which Moses had burned the idolatrous golden calf.

Petrie's discovery was tantamount to betraying his friends and sponsors, something no English gentleman could countenance.

Making the find public would certainly lose future financing from the fund. It could well lead to disgrace, even his loss of privileges at the Explorers' Club in Mayfair.

He wished he had never seen this wretched mountain.

Still, he and his exploration team were here, and not even investigating the site would be wasteful indeed.

By sunset the shifting sands had yielded an impressive collection of tablets, statues, and tools typical of a temple. Petrie was confident the next day would reveal an altar and other evidence of the worship of the oft-depicted Hathor, the goddess of love, tombs, gold, and song, and from whose milk the pharaohs gained immortality. There was no doubt about the god pictured: No other deity had cow horns and a solar disk on its head.

By the time dinner was over and the native porters had erected tents for him and the three other Englishmen, Petrie had decided to simply submit his findings and let the Fund decide what use to make of them.

A bother, that. He had planned to publish an account of this exploration himself.

By the next afternoon loose sand had been removed from a number of halls and chambers. Reliefs of various pharaohs and their favorite wives, sons, and chamberlains were uncovered, but not the missing altar.

What had been discovered was a series of rectangular and round holes carved into the sandstone, each hole larger than a bathtub. Petrie had never seen anything quite like them, and their possible function eluded him. The discovery of a metallurgist's crucible and perhaps several pounds of an unidentified white powder beneath a stone floor was equally puzzling. Perhaps it was the strange object frequently mentioned in the inscriptions on the walls and surrounding stelae. He certainly had no other idea what the word referred to. He had never seen it before. Even more mysterious was why a crucible would be in a temple in the first place.

It was referred to again in a portrayal of Anubis, the jackal-god who led the deceased into the afterlife. The animal was lying on an ark while the pharaoh Amenhotep presented a conical object. The inscription stated something about giving gold and rejoicing mouths.

Another search revealed no gold, only the enigmatic white powder.

Like any competent archaeologist, Petrie recorded his findings, completed his excavation (without locating the missing altar), and continued the survey he had been sent to complete.

Having apparently reached some sort of peace with the Fund, he published a short book on his exploration, *Ancient Egypt and Ancient Israel*, in 1910. His discoveries might have caused reactions in the academic world had the real discovery not been overshadowed by the storm clouds of two world wars.

Again, like many explorers, he had set in motion forces he could not have imagined. No one in early twentieth-century Europe could have.

Stift Melk an der Donau (on the Danube)

Austria

The present

Joseph Steinburg, Ph.D., stood at the two-story entrance facing the afternoon sun. In front of him, the hill on which the first part of the monastery had been built in the tenth century dropped precipitously into the rushing gray waters of the Danube. Behind him was the library. Fifty-foot-high book-lined walls ran the three-hundred-foot length of the huge room.

From the chapel below came the vesper chants of the thirty or so monks who still occupied that part of the baroque abbey not presently used as a parochial school. He paid no attention, if, in fact, he even heard.

Were it not for the boat pushing barges upstream and the cars humming along the highway across the river, Steinburg could have been anywhere in time within the last millennium.

He wasn't thinking about that, either.

He could only ponder the strange discovery that had occupied him for the last two days.

A year ago the abbey had begun the awesome task of creating a computer index of the library including the two thousand-plus volumes that dated back to the ninth through the fifteenth centuries. Last week one of the graduate students had discovered a number of bound parchments in ancient Hebrew, perhaps misplaced in the panic to hide all things of value that ensued when, in 1683, Kara Mustafa and his two hundred thousand Turks laid siege to Vienna, just fifty miles to the east. Although the Turks were forced to withdraw only three months later, these documents had, most likely, not been returned to their proper place, remaining with what were at the time current religious writings. The Church had asked Steinburg, part-time archeologist and full-time professor of ancient Hebrew history, to translate and date the documents.

From the heavy parchment and ink, Steinburg guessed the physical pages themselves could be as old as Melk. But the events they described were older, much older. The unusual syntax, phrases borrowed from pharaonic Egyptian, indicated that someone had painstakingly translated a chronicle from, say, 1500 to 1200 B.C. Or, to be politically correct, B.C.E., before the Common Era. In any event, before Hebrew itself was recognizable as a written language.

A cautious man, Steinburg turned around and walked back inside to one of the rolling ladders on the rails, climbed to the top tier, and examined the exact area where the material had been found. Sure enough, the neighboring volumes all dated from the mid- to late-seventeenth century.

Once back on the parquet floor, he returned to the table where the parchments were unrolled. He pulled on the surgical gloves that protected the documents from any acid that might be contained in the moisture of his skin, then turned to the laptop on which he was composing a draft of his translation. He was aware of the irony of the anachronism, using electronic transcription in a place where manuscripts had been hand-copied for centuries.

But how did these documents come to be here in Austria in the first place?

If Steinburg had to guess, a pursuit he loathed as a professor but had to embrace as a

archaeologist, he would say the ancient parchment had found its way to Europe as a trophy of the Crusades, most likely the third, when Duke Leopold V had held the English king, Richard the Lionheart, for ransom at his castle at Durnstein, just a few kilometers down the Danube, where ruins of its towers could still be seen. Possibly these pages had been brought to Melk from the centuries-old castle of some former crusader for safekeeping before the Turks breached the castle walls. A number of families in this area dated their ancestry back that far.

Steinburg sighed his relief at having at least theoretically solved the mystery of the papers' origin.

How the Church—or, for that matter, the world—was going to solve the consequences of his discovery was another issue.

Two hours later, he stood and glanced around the room.

Ancient or not, the facts narrated in the documents could have very contemporary implications.

Serious implications.

Implications far beyond the halls of abstract academia or the dusty pages of history.

He could simply return the documents to oblivion in their place among the top row of books and leave Melk, hoping his translation of both Hebrew and old German would likewise be lost in obscurity. But somehow that didn't seem a satisfactory option. Part of his compensation for his work was right to publish his findings in his choice of scholarly journals. The information had value for some people if published, perhaps even more if not.

At any rate, he had no intent of shunning the acclaim his work would earn. The purpose of academia was to disseminate knowledge, like a breeze laden with the parachutes of dandelion seeds. How it was used was not his to question.

He had not noticed that a frail glow from electric sconces now illuminated the cavernous room, the sun having long set. He wondered if the abbey's lightbulbs were intentionally dim to simulate the candles that had burned here for centuries.

He stood, nodding as though reaching an agreement with himself. Reaching into his computer traveling case, he produced a disk and copied the notes he had spent the last two days inputting. Then he e-mailed the draft of his translation to his home computer. Better backup than a disk. Tomorrow he would print out both his translations along with his notes, and send it to the abbey.

But for now . . .

Well, he could look forward to at least a modicum of academic recognition, perhaps even more than his cousin, the scientist.

Then he had an idea.

Documents in hand, he walked out of the library, down several halls, and across a courtyard where by day a gift shop sold souvenirs, books, and religious medals. Behind the shop was a small office, one to which Steinburg had been given a key yesterday when he needed to send a fax. The door to the outside was closed and bolted for the day but yielded easily to his key. If he remembered correctly . . .

Yes, the fax machine was also a photocopier. Closing his mind to the potential damage that might be done to the documents, he carefully placed them one by one on the glass plate.

His cousin in Amsterdam had mentioned a project that might make these old writings interesting. But if he sent these, Benjamin would have them for months, perhaps a year before Steinburg could publish. Not a problem. His cousin Benjamin was also a professor, but of some sort of exotic science. Analytical chemistry, theoretical physics—Steinburg wasn't sure.

He opened the desk and extracted a bulky envelope and a roll of stamps. He quickly jotted a note

requesting the copies either be destroyed or hidden until he published. He estimated the stamp required, addressed the envelope, and dropped it in the sack of mail to be picked up the next day.

He smiled. That ought to get him back for the unintelligible formula his cousin had published last year, a theoretical equation that had caused a mild stirring in scientific journals. These Hebrew scrolls were going to be bigger, much bigger than Benjamin's theory.

The two had been friendly rivals since childhood, and now Steinburg would be one up.

A glance at his watch told him he would be late getting home to Vienna. Locking the office, he returned to the library, exited away from the river, crossed a courtyard, and found his ancient but immaculate Volkswagen Beetle in a gravel parking lot now deserted by the daily tour buses. He drove out the gate, away from the abbey's manicured grounds, and onto the road leading to the bridge. In his rearview mirror, Melk's twin towers and dome were fading in the growing dusk.

By the time he reached the narrow bridge high above the Danube, Steinburg had an idea which publications would be given the opportunity to see his work.

His thoughts were interrupted by a pair of lights behind him. From their height above the road he had to be a truck.

Strange. Trucks were expressly forbidden on this bridge.

And the damn thing was speeding, too.

Steinburg realized what was going to happen only an instant before the crunch of metal against metal sent the Volkswagen crashing into the side railing of the bridge.

He felt a jolt of fear. No way was that rampart going to hold, to keep his car from smashing through into the void below.

He was quite right.

*The White House
Washington, D.C.
0423 EST*

The ringing of the telephone beside the bed brought Phillip Hansler, the president of the United States, to groggy awareness. He groaned softly as his eyes took in the time on the digital clock next to the phone. As he fumbled the receiver to his ear, he thought the obvious: He was through with sleep for the night. Only his chief of staff had access to this line, and no one called at this hour with good news.

Rather than wake his wife beside him, he sat up without turning on a light. “Yeah?”

“Good morning, Mr. President. The Iranian situation has gotten out of hand. The Joint Chiefs are on their way, should be in the situation room within the next ten minutes.”

The president hung up without reply before he slipped from beneath the covers, feet groping for the slippers he had left beside the bed.

“Shall I order up some coffee?” The question came from the mound in the covers beside where he had been.

There was at least a skeleton crew manning the White House kitchen twenty-four hours a day.

The president was shuffling toward the bathroom. “No need. There’ll be plenty where I’m headed.”

The very mention of the place gave him chills. Far below the White House, the situation room was actually a series of rooms, including bath and kitchen facilities, that had been constructed as an emergency bunker during the Cold War in case an imminent nuclear attack did not allow enough time for the president to evacuate Washington. Equipped with the most advanced communications, it still served as a command post in times of national emergency.

Minutes later the president stood in front of the elevator just outside his private living quarters. He could already hear a cacophony of sirens growing louder. He checked his watch. The military cavalcade and its escorts would be right on time.

As the president entered the conference room, the three commanding generals and one admiral snapped to attention. The president imagined he could hear the jangle of medals. How did these guys get all that brass and ribbon on so quick, anyway? They must have multiple sets, each already pinned to fresh uniforms.

The president gave a cursory nod. “Be seated, gentlemen, please.”

Four sets of pressed and starched rear ends plopped into chairs. A white-jacketed orderly appeared with a carafe of coffee and a stack of cups just as the White House chief of staff, the secretaries of state and defense, and the director of intelligence slid into their places.

“Shall we wait until we can find the vice president?” the chief of staff asked.

Not unless you intend to search every single woman’s apartment in Washington, the president thought. A widower of two years, the vice president had become difficult to reach on short notice at night and on weekends, behavior that would have to be modified if the man’s obvious ambitions were to be realized.

The president shook his head. “Have someone continue to try to reach him. In the meantime let

not keep everyone waiting.”

The president gave a grateful nod to the coffee server and took a steaming cup from the tray. “Okay, I know you didn’t get me up at this hour for the pleasure of my company.” He nodded to Jack Allen, a black navy admiral in his late fifties, the first member of his race to reach that rank and on the second to serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“What’s up, Jack?”

The admiral pointed to a huge flat-screen monitor displaying the Near East from the Mediterranean to the Hindu Kush. A red dot was moving east to west.

The admiral spoke in a bass so deep the president had remarked that it sounded like it came from somewhere beneath his feet, the voice of an Old Testament prophet. “The picture, Mr. President, is a real-time satellite relay, and represents six K-twelve or SUMA missiles, each capable of carrying ten or more separate warheads, possibly nukes. They were launched from three different sites in the Iranian desert, sites our satellites never picked up. Probably underground.”

“Target?”

“Israel. There’s nobody else within the K-twelve’s range that has a beef with Iran.”

The chief of staff leaned forward to look down the table at his boss. “Mr. President, you’ll recall last week the Israelis threatened a preemptive strike if Tehran didn’t begin destroying its nuclear-capable missiles. Looks like the Iranians have launched first.”

“Mr. President?”

A tall, rangy woman of indeterminate age was leaning forward to be seen. With her prominent nose and long, masculine walk, Susan Faulk, secretary of state, often reminded the president of a stoic striding through the marsh in pursuit of a juicy frog. Avian or not, the woman was both brilliant and intuitive in recognizing the national interests of both her country and others’. She had predicted that Iran’s recent war games had not been an empty show but were fully intended to prepare for offensive action against its enemy, Israel.

The president admired her clarity of thought. “Yes, Susan?”

“We can be certain Prime Minister Konic of Israel is watching, too, already preparing Israel’s reply, probably a strike not only at Iran’s military installations but oil fields as well. With Russia and China as Iran’s biggest customers, we can expect them to jump into this if their supply of fuel is threatened.”

“Both Russia and China know we stand firmly behind Israel. They know they act at their peril,” the president said. With the millions of Jewish voters and hundreds of millions of their political contributions, no president could do otherwise. He turned back to the military. “How long until those things hit?”

A silver-haired man in air-force blue answered, “Seventeen minutes, ten seconds, Mr. President.”

“Anything we can do to shoot ’em down?”

The air force man shook his head. “Not enough time. We’ll have to rely on the Israelis for that. We sold them the hardware. Still, I’d anticipate about fifty percent of the intruders will get through.”

The president didn’t want to even think about the damage thirty nuclear devices could do to the United States, let alone a country as small as Israel.

“Let me make sure I have your consensus here,” he said. “We’ve got an attack, likely nuclear, against Israel. There’s little doubt of retaliation, which will likely bring in China and Russia. Suggestions?”

The secretary of state raised her hand. “Only one choice, Mr. President. You have to contact Prime

Minister Konic immediately.”

“I’d guess he’s sort of busy right now.”

“Nonetheless, you have to speak to him, convince him not to strike back, at least not until we can speak to the Russians and Chinese.”

It would be easier to convince the hotheaded Israeli to convert to Islam. But, as president, Hansler had to try.

Why the hell had he wanted this job in the first place?

As though someone had read his mind, a warrant officer appeared at the president’s side. “Telephone, sir. It’s Prime Minister Konic.”

A pin dropping would have sounded like an explosion.

“Did you say Prime Minister Konic?”

“Yes, sir.”

Skeptically, the president picked up the receiver. “Moshe?”

“Phil!” boomed a voice that sounded like it came from the same room rather than from halfway around the world.

Since becoming president, Hansler had become fast friends with the head of the Israeli nation. The two had enjoyed fly-fishing for trout on the president’s Montana ranch as much as socializing at international gatherings. It had been difficult not to lose sight of the fact that all Israeli leaders made a business of getting as close to their American counterparts as possible. Israel’s survival depended on it.

“How’s Nancy? Your boy about through college this year? Send him over here for a graduation trip!”

The president glanced around the room, aware that Konic’s voice was spilling out of the receiver. “Er, Moshe, I take it this isn’t a social call?”

“Right you are,” blared over the connection. “I expected to hear from you—a little matter of those pesky Iranians.”

The president would have used another adjective, but he said, “We have the missiles on satellite. Hope the defenses we sent you work.”

“Oh, never mind the antimissiles.” The man’s voice was downright jovial, as though he were telling a favorite story. “We’ll be just fine. The reason I called you was to tell you just that—that we’ll be okay. No need to go to alert status.”

“You mean you don’t intend to retaliate, to bomb Iran into the Stone Age?”

“Far as we’re concerned, Iran’s been in the Stone Age for decades. You checked out their politics. No, no retaliation will be necessary. Go back to sleep.”

The president removed the receiver from his ear long enough to glance at it as though he might assay the sanity of the speaker. “No retaliation?”

“For what?”

“For . . .”

The four-star marine general on his left tugged gently at the president’s cuff. “Mr. President . . .”

The president gave him an annoyed look until he followed where the man was pointing.

There was no longer a dot on the screen.

“See what I mean?” the Israeli statesman asked with a triumphant cackle. “Hang in there!”

“Moshe! What . . . How did . . . ?”

“Jehovah’s will, Phil. Your Bible says faith can move mountains. All we did was make a few missiles go away.”

The line went dead.

The air force general was speaking earnestly into a cell phone.

“What the hell happened?” the president asked.

“What did not happen, Mr. President, was a malfunction of the visual equipment. The missile really disappeared.”

“You mean the defensive system functioned better than predicted.”

“No, Mr. President. The satellite showed no launch of countermissiles. The Iranian hardware just evaporated.”

The president slumped deeply back into his chair. “And just how the hell did they do that?”

Silence was his only answer.

“Okay, okay,” the president said. “I want to know exactly what took place, why those missiles disappeared, vanished, or whatever. And in the meantime I want a total lid on this. I hear so much as whisper about tonight, somebody’s gonna finish their career counting caribou in Alaska.”

THREE

Blind Donkey Alley
Bruges, Belgium
2200 European Time

Even though Bruges's canal network was now scenic rather than utilitarian, the trees along the bank in front of redbrick, narrow-windowed medieval houses reminded Benjamin Yadish of his native Amsterdam.

The town was amazingly preserved from its days as a trading center for textiles, fine lace, and intricate gold jewelry some six hundred years past. The silting up of the River Zwin had largely ended its mercantile days, but it had also discouraged replacing tall town houses with more contemporary and far less charming structures, as had happened in so many European cities.

There had been the coldly charmless semidetached in Cambridge, the fourth-story garret in the Sorbonne District of Paris, the wretched and noisy rooms over a Bierstube just outside the university area of Munich, the only quarters worse than the converted barn near Bologna that still leaked hours after a rainfall. Before accepting a post as head of the University of Amsterdam's physics department, he had spent time at half a dozen institutions.

A wandering Jew, he liked to joke.

He rounded a corner, thankful to exit an alley so narrow he could have touched opposing polished doorknobs by stretching out his arms. He breathed deeply in relief.

Relief from what?

He was unsure. He was aware only of an anxiety that had no rational basis. Hardly an emotion which any scientist would admit.

He crossed the Burg, a pleasant cobbled square consisting of several small restaurants, all closed this hour. Now he could see the Markt, a thirteenth-century market square lined by tall, stair-stepped gabled houses, many with brightly painted facades. For reasons he also could not have explained, he was thankful to reach the most brightly lit place in town. Only now did he realize how claustrophobic he had felt in the confines of twisting streets and alleys too narrow for vehicular traffic.

Nonsense, he told himself. He had never feared confined spaces any more than he had standing on the roof edge of tall buildings.

The glances over his shoulder were totally unnecessary.

There was, though, something sinister about this whole trip. The unexpected phone call demanding he bring the CDs containing the protocol of his most recent experiments, a meeting at night in this strange city. Had the call come from anyone else, he would have thought he was speaking to a lunatic.

He settled at a table in one of the few bistros on the square still serving at this hour. A waitress silently materialized, and Benjamin ordered a Brugse Tripel beer. He would have preferred coffee, but

caffeine at this hour would keep him awake all night.

Night.

Well after 2200.

The waiter set the beer bottle next to a glass. As was customary for such places, he also left a slip of paper on a small tray, the bill, which Benjamin could pay anytime before leaving. The waiter scurried back to the lights inside. Benjamin poured slowly, intent on the building head of bubbles.

“If you tilt the glass, you will get less of a head.”

A man sat down across from him, speaking accented English. He was positioned so that his face was dark while limned by street lamps.

Benjamin squinted, unable to make out more than a featureless dark blur. “I don’t recognize your voice. You’re not . . .”

The head shook. “No. I am to take you to him. You have what he requested?”

Benjamin patted his inside jacket pocket as he lifted his glass. “Of course. As soon as I finish. You?”

“No, thanks.”

Benjamin emptied the glass and held the tab up to the light from the street. Guessing rather than seeing, he left two euros on the table and stood. “I’ve spoken with him often, but we met only once. At the beginning. Why now? Why here instead of in Amsterdam, where he can personally inspect what I’m doing?”

The other man either did not hear or, more likely, ignored the questions. He was already hurrying west down Steenstraat. Benjamin caught up, curious as to the need to rush. Perhaps all would be explained shortly. A left turn down Mariastraat past the Welcome Church of Our Lady, its spire, the tallest in Belgium, stabbing the night as it glowed in beams cast by lights at its base. Right turn along the east–west canal. The steep-gabled, tall town houses had given way to modest two-story brick buildings whose steep eaves had sloughed off snow for over five hundred winters.

The man stopped and pointed to a bench under a tree with roots running down to the canal. Across the narrow street was a house with a depiction of a swan on it. A small hotel. That made sense. It was the type of accommodation the man Benjamin had come to see might choose: both luxurious and inconspicuous.

“Wait here.”

Benjamin started to protest, then thought better of it and sat facing water so still that the warm light from the hotel’s windows swam on the surface. On a spring night like this, sitting outside was comfortable. Perhaps the man feared some sort of listening devices might be in the walls of the hotel. Benjamin could fully understand why the man would want whatever he had to say not to be overheard. The project was best kept quiet until completed. There would be those who would very much like to see that it never was.

Benjamin heard footsteps and started to rise.

He felt something cold and hard against the base of his skull, cold and hard like steel.

Like a gun’s barrel.

But why?

He heard a puff, a mere whisper, and brilliant lights exploded from somewhere behind his eyes. He felt no pain, only the firmness of the earth beneath him.

And someone’s hand groping his inside jacket pocket.

Then all went black and he felt nothing.

FOUR

*Manuel's Tavern
Highland Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia
8:30 p.m. EST
The Same Night*

The original part of Manuel's Tavern dated back to the early 1950s. It consisted of stools along a bar and wooden booths, now time-worn and inscribed with graffiti from generations of students. Then, now, it was a rendezvous for local Democratic politicians, university intelligentsia, and those who would like to become any of the above. Manuel had chosen wisely, locating his establishment across the street from the border of the Southern Methodist/Baptist-controlled county in which Emory University was located. The bar had been an oasis of beer and free thought on the edge of a Sahara of proclaimed abstinence and intolerance. Never mind that the greatest amount of liquor tax collected in the state at that time came from those purveyors of the devil's elixir just across that same line, stores that supplied unmarked grocery bags and boxes to conceal the potables their customers hauled back into forbidden territory.

As racial and economic diversity blurred old and perhaps outdated values, even when alcohol became legal across the street Manuel's remained quirky. While gracious lots with lovely homes were subdivided into new look-alike neighborhoods of "affordable housing," the bar remained a bit risky with a reputation subsequent owners had done little to alter. As the years passed, it had morphed into a watering hole for not only the left-of-center but also the social contrarian and the downright funky.

A black man wearing a clerical collar and a white man in lawyer camouflage of dark suit and powdered tie drew no special attention. They were steady customers, always taking the same booth, continually arguing and complaining, frequently in Latin, about the poor quality of food for which Manuel's was famous.

"*Corruptio optimi pessima*," the priest said, reaching for a half-empty pitcher of lukewarm beer.

"No doubt corruption of the best is worst, Francis," the white man agreed, signaling to the waiter as he emptied the pitcher. "But the mayor is entitled to a defense just like anyone else. *Cor illi in genere decideret.*"

"You can bet it was fear that brought him to his knees. It certainly wasn't prayer." Francis snorted.

Francis Narumba, formerly of one of West Africa's more corrupt, poverty-stricken, and disease-infested republics, had attended Oxford on scholarship, then had been sent to seminary in the United States. Either by his wish or that of a higher power, he had been assigned to minister not to the hellhole of his origins but to Atlanta's growing number of African immigrants.

As his dinner partner, Langford Reilly, described it, they were both victims of a liberal arts education and therefore unfit to do anything requiring any real skill.

Like, maybe, become a plumber.

Trapped in their own schooling, Francis had pursued a career in the church, and Lang law school. Lang's sister had been one of Francis's few white parishioners. Although tragic, her murder had

brought priest and lawyer together. Before long they had become fast friends. Lang's lack of faith and in his view, Francis's overabundance thereof provided an endless source of amicable debate.

In private, each would admit that the other, no matter how misguided, was probably the brightest mind he had known.

Lang watched their entrées' approach with interest. Regardless of what had been ordered, surprises were frequent at Manuel's. "Fortunately, the former mayor disagrees with Ovid. *Estque pati poenitentiam quam meruisse minus.*"

Lang could see the curiosity on his companion's face replaced by suspicion as he looked at the plate set before him. The "medium-rare" filet had a very burned look to it. He sighed as the waiter shoved Lang's hamburger and fries onto the table and retreated hastily. "Fortunately?"

Lang tried to suppress a smile as Francis surveyed the cremated remains of his steak. "Fortunately for me. If he believed it better to suffer punishment than deserve it, he wouldn't pay me an outrageous fee to defend him."

Francis shook his head, reaching for a bottle of steak sauce. "I'm surprised he doesn't . . . What is the crime shows say?"

"Plead guilty?"

"*Hoc sustinete maius ne veniat malum.* Cop a plea."

"He says he's innocent."

Francis snorted again. "His chief administrative assistant, the head of the city contract board, five others—"

"Six others."

"—have either pled guilty or rolled over on each other for corruption, bribery, racketeering, tax evasion, et cetera. What else could they charge him with?"

"Parking overtime?"

Francis sampled the first bite of his steak, chewing thoughtfully. "I'm surprised you'd take the case. For sure you don't need the money."

Lang shrugged, a tacit admission that Francis was right. "Managing a huge charitable foundation isn't my idea of fun. Trying white-collar criminal cases is."

Francis was adding more steak sauce in a losing battle to cover up the flavor of burned meat. It had become a point of honor for neither man to admit during the meal just how bad Manuel's food could be and often was. "I still don't see why you'd want your name tied to a crook like that."

Lang wiped his face. The blood of his nearly raw hamburger—ordered medium—was running down his chin. "I seem to remember someone who spent his days with a prostitute and died between two thieves. Something to do with who should throw the first stone, as I recall it."

"You know far too much scripture for a heretic," Francis growled good-naturedly before changing the subject abruptly. "Hear anything from Gurt?"

Lang put his burger down to let it soak in its own juices, mostly blood and grease. "Not a word."

Francis started to say something, thought better of it, and renewed his assault on the steak.

"Don't expect to hear. It's been over a year now since she left, went back to Europe to work with the government."

A euphemism Francis understood to mean the Agency. Although the priest had not pressed for details, the gap between Lang's college education and his law degree indicated he had spent several years in some sort of employment. His long-standing acquaintance with Gurt Fuchs gave a clue as

where. Gurt had been the first woman in whom Lang had shown any romantic interest since the death of his wife from cancer several years before the priest and the lawyer had gotten to know each other.

“*Capistrum maritalis*,” Francis said with a smile, trying to make light of the matter.

“Fine for you to bewail the woes of matrimony. Not like that’s a problem you’ll ever have.”

Francis reached across the table to lay a hand on his friend’s arm. “I’m sorry she left, Lang. I really am. You know how much I liked that woman.”

“You and Grumps. I feel for both of you.”

Lang was referring to the dog he had inherited when his sister and nephew died. He had not been able to part with what was arguably the world’s ugliest mutt. The animal was the only part of his family left.

The waiter was removing the remnants of dinner. He must have been a recent hire or he would have known better than to ask, “All done? How was it?”

Francis simply gave him a blank stare.

“As always,” Lang said. “Overcooked steak, raw hamburger. And I just love those limp, extra-greasy fries.”

“Glad you enjoyed it.” With the hand not holding the plates, he deposited the check on the table. “I’ll take that when you’re ready.”

Lang picked it up. “I suppose we may as well follow the ritual.”

The two men routinely flipped a coin to determine who would pay the tab. Lang could not remember ever winning. What were the odds of that?

Maybe Francis was right: There was a greater power.

Instead Francis reached for it. “Let me get this one.”

“No, no. We’ll toss for it. Always *post prandium*.”

Lang lost.

Francis grinned. “*Manus e, nubibus*. A lucky break.”

“I think the literal translation better describes it: ‘A hand from the clouds.’ The consistency with which you win is enough to convert most heathens.”

“Including you?”

Lang handed the bill along with a credit card to the waiter. “I have faith, just not one that’s centered on a pope.”

“Or anything else, far as I can see.”

“I believe in a higher power, right now the highest: Judge Adamson of the Atlanta division of the northern district of Georgia. Believe me, there *is* no power on earth mightier than a U.S. district court judge. If you don’t believe me, ask Dick Nixon.”

“He’s dead.”

“Okay, so you might have to wait awhile to ask.”

The credit card receipt arrived and Lang signed it, adding an undeserved tip to ensure the same booth would be available next time.

“The mayor is being tried in federal court?”

Lang pushed back from the table and stood. “Unluckily for him, yes. The feds indicted him while the Fulton County DA was still thinking about the political ramifications.”

The Fulton County district attorney’s office was famous for mishandling its workload. Statutes o

limitation expired while county lawyers searched for misplaced files or evidence. Felons walked free after exasperated judges waited for prosecutors to show up for trial.

Both men headed toward the rear door that opened onto the parking lot.

“Too bad,” Francis observed. “You’ll have an opponent instead of a victim.”

Lang beeped the security device that unlocked a silver-gray Porsche Cabriolet. “You’re right there. Trying a case with the local guy has gotten too easy anyway. Poor bastard couldn’t have convicted John Wilkes Booth for discharging a firearm in public.”

The priest folded himself into the car’s passenger seat. “One of these days you’ll get a grown-up car.”

Lang turned the key and was rewarded by a muscular rumble from the rear-mounted engine. “I did. Remember the Mercedes convertible, the malfunction mobile—had everything from the burglar alarm to the power top not working?”

“At least it wasn’t a toy. Seems to me a multijillion-dollar charitable foundation would want its president to have something a little more dignified to drive around in.”

Lang was looking over his shoulder as he backed out of the parking spot. “You forget, my dear Francis, I *am* the foundation.”

That was true. A few years previously Lang had demanded annual payment of millions of dollars from Pegasus, an international organization, as compensation for the murder of his sister and nephew. The money funded a charitable trust in their names. Although the trust had the directors and officers mandated by tax law, Lang made the decisions that mattered. The board did, however, serve two very important functions other than satisfying the IRS: It screened the needy from the greedy, and it kept secret who really made what choices. If Lang’s solitary power became known, he would drown in a sea of mendicants.

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