

**THE
GENESIS
RESOLUTION**

A Thomas Constantine
Mystery

T.D. FREIBERG

ALSO BY T.D. FREIBERG

The Russian Legacy

The Codex

THE GENESIS RESOLUTION

By T.D. Freiberg

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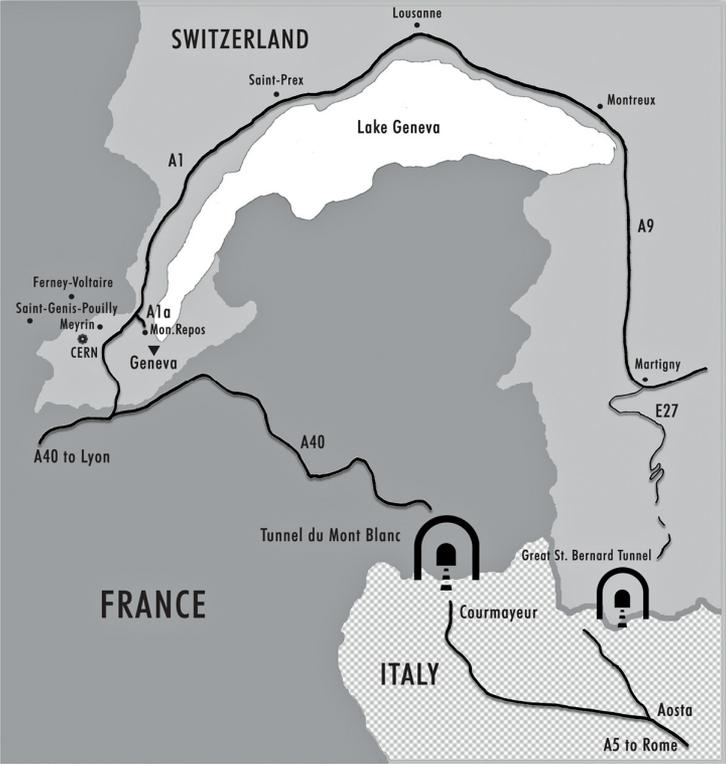
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Cover Designer: Kästle Olson

Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1491206348

*To my wife, Jan.
As we embark on a new chapter in our life,
there is no one I would rather share the journey with.*



Where God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel.

—Martin Luther



Northwestern Italy
Sunday, November 19th

THE CREATURE APPEARED out of nowhere. Its black eyeless sockets were caked with dried blood and bone fragments. Flesh peeled away from a broad gash carved across its forehead. The exposed bone, dull with age, was peppered with patches of dark brown and black decay. Shredded, charred flesh hung off the right side of a face frozen in horror. Fragments of an ear dangled around a void that should have been a skull. The mouth gaped open in a soundless scream under pieces of red cartilage that had been a nose.

Only its head and shoulders were visible above the car's hood. Two hands clawed at the paint, trying to pull itself toward the driver. Fractured bone protruded through the tips of its fingers. There were no fingernails on the yellowing skin. Flesh and muscle ended in shreds on the left hand where a thumb had been ripped away.

The car had become bone-chillingly cold. Father Thomas Constantine could not feel his fingers on the steering wheel of the aging Fiat. He stomped on the brakes. The car careened to a stop on the Alpine road's narrow shoulder—but it was too late. The apparition disappeared under the car. Slipping two shaking fingers under his white clerical collar, Constantine composed himself by repeatedly inhaling and exhaling deeply.

Fearful of the creature reaching out from under the car, he lowered his window and listened. The wind carried the howl of a wolf. At least he hoped it was a wolf and not something unearthly. The trees lining the road rustled. Cold sweat dripped

from Constantine's brow and ran down his cheek. He wiped his perspiring forehead with the back of his hand and cracked open the car's door. The mountain air, with its pungent scent of pine and decaying vegetation, was thin but not as frigid as the air inside his car. Constantine peered into the darkness and listened for movement.

The wind stilled. The coppery, metallic stench of napalm mixed with the charcoal-like, sulfurous odor of burning flesh filled the car. It was the disgusting, repulsive smell of death. Battlefield death. He put a handkerchief over his nose and mouth to keep from vomiting.

Constantine shivered. The hairs on the back of his neck lifted. He would never forget that smell. Once you encounter it, it never leaves you. Never. No matter how long you live.

The reek of burning human tissue conjured up images that he had spent decades trying to forget. Horrific memories from Vietnam flooded his consciousness. He was eighteen and fresh out of Union High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The war was making insatiable demands for young men. Rather than wait for the draft, Constantine enlisted in the army. Shipped to Saigon eight weeks later, he was assigned to the 1st Battalion of the 28th Infantry, part of The Big Red One. Scrawny—but determined to prove his bravery—Private Constantine volunteered to be a tunnel rat.

The Viet Cong had dug 150 miles of tunnels under the dense jungle floor, some as deep as 32 feet. Wearing what looked like black pajamas, they would spring out at night through concealed openings, attack, and then disappear underground. When a tunnel was discovered, a tunnel rat would be lowered into the black abyss to kill any remaining insurgents and plant explosives to destroy the tunnel.

Thirty-six years later, he still did not know if the apparition he first encountered in those awful tunnels was real or a fabrication of his mind. He did know the demon always preceded a companion: Death.

Heartbeat racing, he stepped out of the car. His feet turned to ice as he stood. Trembling, Constantine lowered his eyes. He expected to see mutilated hands gripping his ankles but slush

had smothered his loafers. Another burst of wind ripped through the mountain's pass, smacking his face like an invisible fist. The vile smell disappeared. He fought his way to the front of the car. There was no damage to his car's grille or its rust-spotted bumper. The dirty film on the hood was undisturbed. Shaken by the appearance of the wraith—and the memories it evoked from his service in Vietnam—Constantine was about to get back into his car when a vehicle pulled up and parked behind him. Adding to the glare of the car's headlights, a powerful blue-white light blinded him.

"*Ha bisogno di aiuto?*" a woman called out in Italian. "*Est ce que vous avez besoin de l'aide?*" she asked, this time in French.

He raised his left hand to shade his eyes. The gesture forced his jacket open, displaying his black clergy shirt and white clerical collar.

"*Mi scusi Padre,*" the woman responded, reverting to Italian. The blinding beam lowered off his eyes, but his hands and torso remained illuminated.

Constantine recognized the intense beam as a military or law enforcement grade halogen light and was still seeing spots when he located the source of the voice. The woman was standing behind her driver's side door. She held a flashlight far to her left, away from her body. Constantine knew the procedure. It was by-the-book tactical training. Her right hand was hidden from view. He guessed that she would be holding a weapon.

"I saw you skid off the road in front of me. Are you okay, Father?"

"Do you smell anything?" Constantine asked, removing his hand from his nose and mouth. His resonant voice carried over the churning wind.

"Like what? Are you having car problems?" the woman asked.

"No, I am okay—I think. I thought I hit an animal, and then I smelled something burning. I cannot find anything."

"Are you well enough to continue?"

"I am a little tired. I left Rome this morning—I have been

driving nonstop.”

“I travel this motorway all the time,” the woman said. “Lynx, red deer, even wolves find their way to the highway. I am staying up the road in Courmayeur. If you need a place to rest, I know the hotel has rooms available.”

Her voice did not display any anxiety, but she stayed behind her car’s door. “Thank you. I planned to drive all the way to Geneva, but I am too fatigued to continue. If it is not an inconvenience, I will follow you to the hotel you mentioned.”

“Not at all,” the woman said, turning the flashlight off.

Settling back behind the wheel, Constantine eased the Fiat onto the road and slipped behind the woman’s black Volkswagen. He glanced at his rearview mirror just long enough to see the car’s taillights illuminate a hideous, bloodied torso. He pushed harder on the accelerator. The abomination faded into the blackness of the night.

“Why have you come back after all these years?” he asked aloud.

He heard no reply.

Snaking another eight hundred feet higher in elevation, both vehicles pulled into the parking lot of the Hotel Courmayeur. Constantine was exhausted. Courmayeur was the last exit before the Mont Blanc Tunnel that connects Italy with France. The four thousand foot elevation and November winds had changed the light drizzle to a howling icy-snow. He was too tired to drive in such hazardous conditions. He trudged toward the VW Golf with his hands in front of his eyes. Crystals of ice assaulted his unprotected face. He held the driver’s door of the VW open, allowing the woman to exit.

“I am Thomas Constantine,” he said, extending his hand. A blast of icy air blew his silver-gray hair into an Einsteinesque caricature. “May I repay your kindness by helping you with your luggage?”

“Nadia Kanatova,” the woman said, offering her hand. “Nice to meet you, Father Constantine.”

Surprised by the firm grip of such a petite woman, he guessed her to be in her mid-thirties, about five feet three, and maybe a hundred fifteen pounds. She looked well dressed in

the pale lighting of the parking lot—brown knee-high boots over fashionably tight pants, a short leather jacket with a fur collar, and a matching fur hat. The fur did not appear to be mink, but it was not imitation either. A designer handbag hung on her shoulder.

“Thank you, but I can manage,” she replied. “I travel light.”

Constantine detected a Russian accent when she introduced herself, but her Italian was flawless. Had she given him an Italian surname, he would have missed the accent entirely. He blocked the wind with his body while she opened the car’s hatchback and extracted a small overnight bag that matched her handbag.

At the hotel’s entrance, Constantine opened the door. The pleasant aroma of a wood-burning fireplace welcomed them. He could not help but watch her stride to the registration desk. Her hips mimicked the sway of a catwalk model, but her posture was military-erect with shoulders back and eyes straight ahead. A wisp of blonde hair worked itself loose and fell in front of her eyes. She pushed it back behind her ear.

The glint of a gold wedding band caught Constantine’s eye. He stepped back a discrete distance, allowing her to fill out the hotel’s registration form. Something about her persona told him not to get too close.

Turning away from the counter, the woman stopped and extended her hand. “Goodnight, Father Constantine. I hope your journey is successful.”

“Goodnight, *Signora* Kanatova. Thank you for stopping and offering your help.”

Constantine stood for a moment, mesmerized by her countenance. The cold had put a pink blush on her cheeks. She was trim but not skinny, more of a runner’s body. Her facial features were not as etched as the Italians nor as rounded as the French but would turn heads anywhere. A winsome, up-turned nose did not quite match her deep, almost black, eyes. She was not wearing lipstick. She did not need it.

Constantine realized that he had been examining her all the way to the elevator and flushed with embarrassment.

“*Che bella ragazza,*” the young night attendant whispered.

He pushed a registration pad over the counter.

Yes, very beautiful. Constantine signed his name to the register. His hand trembled ever so slightly. *My other demon.* He placed the pen on the counter and turned toward the elevator. A smile creased his tired face as he remembered the bottle of Jack Daniels in his suitcase.



Medieval Palace, Vatican City
Monday, November 20th

A BITTER, WET, cold front was sweeping through Italy. A thin layer of frost coated the bricks in St. Peter's Square. The ancient fountains, normally surrounded by tourists, spewed ice-cold water in silence.

Cardinal Secretary of State Benedetto Capponi was in his office on the second floor of the Medieval Palace. Smaller than the Pope's private library and lacking the centuries-old frescoes, the office held a lifetime collection of old books and manuscripts. Nearly a thousand volumes adorned the shelves. Cardinal Capponi had absorbed all of them.

Looking at the thesis on his desk, the veins in his neck pulsed with every heartbeat. *This ends—now!* For the second time in eighteen months, a Father Thomas Constantine, at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, had been brought to his attention. He did not like the American priest. He did not like the way Constantine questioned everything and especially did not like the way he challenged Church dogma in his classroom.

Dripping wet, the man entering Cardinal Capponi's outer office put his overcoat and umbrella on a rack near the door. His shoes slogged on the terrazzo floor as he passed two rows of large, overstuffed leather chairs to face a young man behind a century-old, carved-walnut desk. "Daniel Vaughn. I have an appointment with Cardinal Capponi."

"Your Eminence," the Cardinal's assistant spoke into an

archaic intercom, “Grand Chancellor Vaughn is—”

“Send him in,” the speaker growled. The assistant stood, opened a carved mahogany door, and stepped aside.

Vaughn entered the inner office and approached two antique chairs that faced the Cardinal’s desk. He stopped and bowed, “Your Eminence.”

The Cardinal knew that the Chancellor was waiting for an invitation to sit. Technically, the Pontifical Biblical Institute did not report to the Secretary of State’s office, but it was dependent on the Vatican for nearly all of its funding. *It always comes down to controlling the money.* He left Vaughn standing. This was the second time that the two men had faced each other.

Last year, Father Constantine had postulated in his classroom that the story of creation...as told in Genesis...was poetry that carried a divine message. Written for simpler people in simpler times, Constantine had argued that the story could not be supported in a universe known to be thirteen billion years old and should no longer be accepted as a literal truth. He concluded that it was time for the Church to reject intelligent design and accept evolution as a scientific truth. That encounter had ended with both Chancellor Vaughn and Father Constantine being issued stern letters of reprimand.

“I thought we had an understanding on this matter,” Cardinal Capponi said, raising his voice to a near shout. “You told me you could control Constantine. Now this...” The Cardinal threw an inch-thick treatise to the edge of his desk. It landed with a solid thump, shaking a miniature urn filled with antique writing instruments. “This goes beyond heresy. This is public blasphemy. I will see Constantine defrocked over this.”

The Cardinal sat back in his chair while Vaughn thumbed through the document.

“Your Eminence,” Vaughn said, returning the Cardinal’s icy stare without blinking, “I arranged the loan of the Chaldean Flood Tablets from the British Museum and appointed Father Constantine to translate and interpret them. I attended Father Constantine’s lecture on these tablets. His research, translation, and interpretation are beyond reproach.”

“Blasphemy! This is blasphemy. The Church will not tolerate this.” Cardinal Capponi’s nostrils flared.

Vaughn stood his ground. “Carbon dating has confirmed that these tablets pre-date the Christian era by twenty centuries. They—”

“I do not give a damn how old they are,” the Cardinal raged. “The story chiseled in the tablets supports the biblical account of a God who punishes mankind with a worldwide flood.”

“But—”

“There are no buts.”

“With respect, Your Eminence,” Vaughn said in an unwavering voice, “Father Constantine traced the origins of this story to a much older period, 10,000 years before the Christian era.”

“Blasphemy.”

“Father Constantine’s research documents, beyond any reason-able doubt, how this story was passed down from generation to generation as oral folklore. It became fully accepted by the early Christians and ultimately found its way into Scripture. The account of the flood given in Genesis was rooted in an ancient Babylonian myth. While the story has spiritual significance, the actual event NEVER HAPPENED!”

Cardinal Capponi raised his hand, ending the discussion. “This paper is to be withdrawn immediately. Any conclusions published by your Institute *will* be consistent with the Sacred Scripture. Are we clear on this matter?”

“Yes, Your Eminence,” Chancellor Vaughn said through clenched teeth.

“I want Constantine terminated. Send him back to America. I do not want him teaching in Rome. You are dismissed.”

Vaughn bowed and closed the door on his way out with just a little extra force than was necessary.

Cardinal Capponi unlocked the top right-hand drawer of his desk and withdrew the newest model Nokia Mini Smartphone—a special phone equipped with the latest encryption technology, as was its mate. He pressed the *C* key, engaging the encryption software, then the memory 1 button. A number was displayed with a Vienna, Austria city code but no

name.

It took a fraction of a second for the call to be forwarded to a number in central Rome. A male voice answered. “*Buongiorno, Your Eminence.*”

“What is the status of your current assignment?” A smile creased the Cardinal’s lips as he listened to the man’s report. “Excellent—I look forward to the conclusion of this matter.”

Capponi pressed the phone’s END button, stood up, and looked into a full-length gilded mirror set between floor-to-ceiling mahogany bookcases. He breathed in the aroma of the old books and manuscripts. They were survivors, like him. At seventy-six years of age, his furrowed brow and facial wrinkles gave an impression of fatigue that belied the fire in his soul.

His destiny had been determined before the beginning of time. He closed his eyes and whispered to the image in the mirrors, “God is my strength and power, and he maketh my way.



Hotel Courmayeur, Courmayeur, Italy
Monday, November 20th

SNUGGLED UNDER A down comforter, Constantine lingered in that state between sleeping and waking. Unsettled and regretting the second drink he had before going to bed, he squinted at the clock on the nightstand. The red numerals displayed 5:37 a.m. His mouth tasted of whiskey. Constantine rolled out of bed, shaved, showered, and rubbed his hands on his stomach. His paunch was getting bigger. Decades of teaching were taking a toll on his body. He walked five minutes every morning to the train station where he caught a bus to the institute and always lectured standing up, but it was not enough. *Too much pasta. Too much wine. Too much Jack Daniels.*

He dressed and made his way to the hotel's lobby for the complimentary continental breakfast. The smell of freshly baked brioche, pastries, and cinnamon rolls filled the small alcove off the main reception lobby. As tempting as the pastries appeared, he remembered his expanding girth and selected a fruit cup and an apple. He poured himself a cup of coffee from a pot labeled *caffè Americano* and sat at one of the small tables.

Conversations of business deals, the weather, and skiing filled the air as he sipped a coffee that was still too strong for his liking. Guests came and went but the woman he encountered the previous night never appeared. Constantine sloshed around the last of his coffee and downed it in a final gulp. The caffeine cleared the fog in his mind.

The sun was still behind the eastern mountain peaks as he pulled his worn fabric suitcase through the fresh snow of the parking lot. The wind coming off the mountains carried the scent of various woods and frozen earth. He used his bare hands to brush the snow off his car's windows, making a mental note to buy a snowbrush or at least a pair of gloves.

The little Fiat sputtered to life on the second attempt. Just an hour and a half from CERN, the world's largest center for scientific research in fundamental physics, Constantine's thoughts turned to his old university roommate, Bae Lee, the reason for this journey.

He had met Bae Lee during his sophomore year at the University of Michigan. He was answering a newspaper ad for a roommate to share a two bedroom flat. He had driven to the apartment's address but almost did not get out of the car. It was in a suburb that he knew he could not afford. The ad did not mention a price.

With nothing to lose, he marched to the front door and rang the bell. "I'm here about the apartment..." An Asian man with brown eyes and black hair opened the door. Flashing back to Vietnam's tunnels, Constantine's right hand instinctively went to his side, but he had no weapon. He felt embarrassed. That would have been 1971. The war was not going well. American casualties were escalating. The man behind the door had probably endured years of prejudice and abuse because of his race.

"You were a soldier." The young man bowed to him. "My name is Bae Lee. I would be honored to have you as a roommate. Let me show you to your room. Please." The rail-thin man made a sweeping gesture with his arm.

Constantine followed the man through a spotlessly clean living area with leather furniture to a large bedroom with a king-sized bed, two night tables, and a massive armoire.

"This will be your room. My room is across the hall."

Constantine noticed that the other bedroom was much smaller. "I cannot possibly afford—"

"Then I will accept whatever you offer. I am Korean. You saved my country and my family many years ago. It is I who

am indebted to you.”

“I...I did not...” Constantine fumbled for words.

“I am a mathematics major and hope to find a career in nuclear physics. I cannot tolerate alcohol and I do not do drugs. I am shy and do not mix well with other people. I think this was meant to be. Perhaps we can help each other overcome our...issues.”

That was the beginning of a three-year friendship. Constantine helped Bae become more confident in social situations and Bae educated him on various Asian cultures. By the time they graduated, thanks mostly to Bae, Constantine had pretty much stopped drinking. He had last seen Bae on graduation day at the University of Michigan. Bae had received a Bachelor’s degree in Nuclear Engineering and had been accepted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Constantine was not surprised that he ended up at CERN.

They had exchanged a few letters over the years but eventually lost contact. The prospect of seeing Bae after all this time was exciting, but Bae’s frantic phone call Friday—and the appearance of the apparition last night—darkened his mood.

Bae had literally begged Constantine to meet him at CERN.

“I have made a discovery, Thomas. A big discovery—a Nobel Prize discovery—and someone wants to keep it a secret. I am afraid that I will be killed over this.”

Constantine had asked what Bae discovered.

“Not on the phone.” Bae said. “I need you to come here...to CERN, in Geneva. I will explain everything when you get here. Please!”

Constantine had four days before his next class. He had agreed to meet Bae at CERN, got his car serviced that Saturday, and set out for Geneva yesterday morning. Last night, the wraith that had haunted him during his entire tour of duty in Vietnam reappeared after thirty-six years. He had no idea why it was back, but it scared the hell out of him.

The morning sun glistened off the fresh snow as Constantine eased onto the motorway. He lowered the windshield visor to keep from squinting. The thin crust of ice blanketing the motorway crackled under the Fiat’s worn tires.

Constantine followed signs to the Tunnel du Mont-Blanc and Geneva. Behind him, puffy clouds obscured the mountain's peaks.

An hour and a half after exiting the Tunnel du Mont Blanc, fumes coming from the car's dash vents caused Constantine to turn the heater off and roll down the windows. Cold, fresh air flooded into the car as it crossed over the Pont du Mont-Blanc, the first of eight bridges spanning the Rhône. He was now in Geneva. Compared to Rome's musty, old book smell, Geneva had a lighter, woodsy feeling with scents of pine and evergreen. It was fresh...enticing...seductive. The city smelled of prosperity.

Constantine was immune to the call of the elegant shops and lively markets that he passed. He had renounced worldly possessions decades ago. Ten minutes later, he arrived at the main gate of CERN.

A security guard at the gate motioned him to stop.

"I have an appointment with one of your scientists," Constantine said. "I was told to pick up a pass at Reception Building Thirty-Three."

The guard gave the Fiat a more-than-casual once-over. Constantine knew that his car was the type of disposable vehicle a terrorist would use, but it was also the kind of car a priest could afford. Constantine watched the guard examine the undercarriage with a mirror on the end of a long pole. After a final glance into the backseat and cargo area, the guard motioned him through.

"Follow the signs to the Visitors Parking Lot, opposite the Globe," the guard said, pointing to a large spherical building. "Reception Building Thirty-Three is across the street from the parking lot."

Inside the reception building, a three-dimensional map of the world highlighted contributing countries. A middle-aged and very professional-looking woman, wearing a chocolate-brown business suit and wireless headset, greeted him.

"I have an appointment with Dr. Lee. My name is Thomas Constantine."

The receptionist gave him an awkward smile and handed

him a clip-on badge printed with the word: VISITOR. “Please keep this visible while you are in the complex.” She motioned to a security officer stationed near the reception desk. “Please show Father Constantine to Conference Room Four.”

Constantine followed the guard to a double glass door. A lock buzzed and both doors parted.

The conference room was hospital clean and flooded with natural light. An oval table sat in the middle of the room with three modern office chairs on each side. A white projection screen had been pulled down in the middle of a wall-to-wall whiteboard. Constantine had just settled into a chair when two men entered the room.

The first was shorter and olive-skinned with dark, wavy hair going gray at the temples. A bushy, black moustache under thick horn-rimmed glasses drew attention away from a chubby Middle-Eastern face and a frame carrying an extra twenty-five pounds. The second man was older, over six feet tall, wiry, and muscular. His cheap-looking suit was past the point of just needing pressing and reeked of tobacco. The man’s fish-like face was engraved with a permanent frown. Olive skin spoke first.

“Father Constantine, I am Karim Alami, the director general of CERN. Dr. Lee worked under me on the ATLAS Project.”

As Constantine rose to shake hands with the man, the words registered. “Worked?” he said, emphasizing the past tense.

Karim removed his glasses and looked into Constantine’s eyes. “I am very sorry to be the one to tell you, but Dr. Lee was found dead in his apartment on Saturday afternoon. A housekeeper found his body.”

Constantine collapsed on his chair. “I assume that his death was not accidental.