

THE
GILGAMESH
PROJECT

BOOK I THE
CODEX

JOHN FRANCIS KINSELLA

BOOK I



THE CODEX

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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BOOKS BY AUTHOR

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For

*Tilla, Selma, Eléonore, Noé, Xaver, Elyas, Adèle,
Camille and Antoine*

The Dream Play

*What night-rule now about this haunted grove?
The spirits have dispersed, the woods
faded to grey from midnight blue
leaving a powdery residue,
night music fainter, frivolous gods
withdrawing, cries of yin and yang,
discords of the bionic young;
cobweb and insects, hares and deer,
wild strawberries and eglantine,
dawn silence of the biosphere,
amid the branches a torn wing
— what is this enchanted place?
Not the strict groves of academe
but an old thicket of lost time
too cool for school, recovered space
where the brain yields to nose and ear,
folk remedy and herbal cure,
old narratives of heart and hand,
and a dazed donkey, starry eyed,
with pearls and honeysuckle crowned,
beside her naked nibs is laid.
Wild viruses, Elysian fields —
our own planet lit by the fire
of molten substance, constant flux,
hot ice and acrobatic sex,
the electric moth-touch of desire
and a new vision, a new regime
where the white blaze of physics yields
to yellow moonlight, dance and dream
induced by what mind-altering drug
or rough-cast magic realism;
till morning bright with ant and bug
shines in a mist of glistening gism,
shifting identities, mutant forms,
angels evolved from snails and worms.*

Derek Mahon

CHAPTER 1

'There are no indecipherable writings, any writing system produced by man can be read by man.' Yuri Knozorov

BARRY SIMMONDS WAS UNEASY AS HE disembarked from the Iberia flight at Madrid-Barajas airport. Firmly grasping his briefcase and carry-ons he looked around anxiously as he emerged from the gangway and joined the thin crowd of arrivals hurrying along the seemingly endless one-way corridor, following the panels marked 'Llegadas-Arrivals'.

Once in the almost empty immigration hall he tagged onto one of the unusually short lines and after a few minutes fumbled his passport across the counter at the control booth, squinting anxiously at the tight faced official through his thick glasses, wishing he could light up a cigarette.

It was Wednesday morning, June 24, a few days since Spain's frontiers had been relaxed following a draconian Covid 19 lockdown, but it wasn't the virus that worried him, nor was it the fact that the UK had officially quit the EU and his British passport would soon, he feared, have the same value as that of a banana republic or some other third world country.

He needn't have worried, the attention of the Spanish police was fully focused on the health of the arriving travellers, a mere trickle compared to the pre-pandemic flow, more fearful of incoming infection than on the watch for the usual drug

mules arriving from Central America on early flights, scrutinizing businessmen and tourists, arriving like him on the half empty flight from Geneva and other hubs for fever and signs of the disease.

Simmo, as his friends called him, was a longtime resident of Belize, a former British colony, a small country overlooking the Caribbean, wedged between Guatemala and Mexico, where he was the surviving partner of a small local law firm—Young & Simmonds Partners.

His business was legal services related to setting up offshore companies and bank accounts, the firm's clientele consisted mostly of those who wanted hide their money from the taxman, many of them were 'honest' tax dodgers, businessmen and the like, others were much less so, crooked politicians, officials and their mafiya friends laundering ill gotten gains derived from corruption, embezzlement, extortion and plain theft.

His rather worn, but handsome leather briefcase, contained what had been discovered at the end of a complex paper chase left by a recently deceased client of his, one George Wallace.

Wallace, a Londoner, had been a good client of Simmo's, for whom he had set up a good number of offshore shell companies over the previous decade or so, both in Belize and other Caribbean tax havens, for which he managed certain and often complex legal transactions.

Belize was barely ever mentioned in mediatised investigations into tax havens, it was too poor, less glamorous compared to the Bahamas or the Cayman Islands. In the book

The Panama Papers, described as ‘the biggest leak in the history of data journalism’ by the American whistleblower, Edward Snowden, Belize was cited just twice, very briefly, and in the Laundromat it was cited just once in passing.

Wallace had kept a low profile, very discreet, maintaining nothing more than polite contact with his close neighbours, though he often entertained business friends, who included Russians, Cubans and Venezuelans, at his spacious villa that lay on the edge of the forest, between the Rio Bravo Conservation Area and the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, about an hour’s drive to the north-west of Belize and its airport.

Wallace used Simmond’s services to create the kind of legal fronts needed to manage his clients’ business in safe havens, the safer the better. His business consisted of laundering their dirty money with the ultimate goal being investment in upstanding prime property in London and other European capitals, the trouble was some of his clients’ dollars were simply too dirty, and even London, though it wasn’t too regarding, had its limits.

Simmo had maintained a serious business-like relationship with Wallace. As a lawyer he provided legal services according to the legislation enacted in Belize, which gave him a lot of latitude since it boasted one of the most secure jurisdictions with regards to confidentiality and discretion for offshore companies.

The Belize International Business Company Register, through the Belize IBC Act, promised to protect offshore businesses and bank accounts within the jurisdiction of Belize.

Stiff penalties punished any divulgence of sensitive and private information such as banking records or financial information about residents and non-residents, and all fiscal documentation was protected and guaranteed confidential within Belize.

In addition, Belize IBCs were not required to officially report annual accounting information or to file account audits. All information filed during the registration process remained with the licensed register agent. Therefore, all pertinent information about a company, that is to say the identities of its shareholders, directors, and owners, were expunged from public record.

The only documents that an offshore company in Belize were required to have on public record were the Articles of Association and the Memorandum. Both of these records existed to officially prove the incorporation of an IBC in Belize.

Unfortunately Wallace had been found dead by his house keeper, floating in the pool at his villa. An accidental drowning according to the medical report. Simmonds was the legal executor of defunct's estate, a task he had not anticipated given Wallace was barely 50 years old and in good physical form.

Single and without children Wallace always been a bit of a mystery with no heirs apart from a few distant and apparently hard up relatives living in London who asked Simmo's law firm to liquidate the estate, which mainly consisted of the villa.

Surprisingly, the balance in Wallace's account at his local bank account was of little interest, but it came with a safe deposit box, which Simmo had initially overlooked. When the manager at the Heritage Bank called about the closure, he

recalled the charges due for the box were overdue. Simmo perked up, perhaps it contained something of interest and he informed the manager he would drop by the following morning at the bank's main branch on Princess Margaret Drive, situated in the downtown area of Belize City, a ten minute walk from his office

He was not disappointed, besides a few not very interesting documents—deeds, insurance documents and the like, it contained a hundred or so thousand dollars in negotiable share certificates, treasury bonds, cash, gold coins and small bars, more than enough to cover his fees.

Amongst the papers was an envelope containing a key and the address of a bank in Panama City, which though it intrigued him he put it to one side whilst he finalised the inventory and concentrated his mind on the disposal of the deceased's estate.

He put the villa on the market at a price that ensured a quick sale and his firm a good commission, sold the shares and gold, and wired the proceeds to a law firm in London that would take care of the formalities for to whom it was due.

A month later on one of his occasional visits to Panama City, where he was to meet with one of his UK clients—in transit to his vacation home on one of the islands of Bocas del Toro, he dropped in at the PKB Banca Privada, part of the New York based Warburg Pincus private equity bank. There he presented himself to the account manager and was led to the safe deposit box vault.

Simmo was familiar with the procedure and with a minimum of formality he was led to the basement vault where with his password and key, and the bank's guard key, the box was opened. He withdrew the metal drawer and was pointed towards a private booth where he was left to inspect the contents.

Placing the drawer on the table he lifted the lid. It contained a substantial sum of money in different currencies, and a hard covered address book, about the size of the kind of pocket book that could be found on the shelves of any stationary store. It contained about 100 pages with A-Z index tabs, filled with what appeared to be coded addresses and numbers.

He had hoped to find something more valuable, but he contented himself with the cash which he slipped into his briefcase and the notebook into his pocket. He then signalled his departure to the bank employee who had been discretely waiting a few paces from the booth.

Back in his hotel room he counted the cash, mostly US dollars and Swiss francs, in large bills, almost two hundred thousand dollars. He then inspected the note book. It contained entries of what appeared to be account numbers, codes and abbreviations. He picked up his Samsung smartphone and connected to his Google Drive and opened a coded file, it contained a list of bank accounts he had opened for his clients over the years. He ran down the list and stopped at Wallace and compared the numbers. He quickly found one that matched and then several others. The abbreviations corresponded to the

names of the banks, plus what he recognised as postcodes. The other numbers were the accounts and access codes.

Wallace's system was simple and by extrapolation Simmo quickly identified most of the accounts. One, however, puzzled him, it was a Swiss postcode, for Geneva. A quick check showed it to be an address near the city's international airport.

He Googled the map of Switzerland and zoomed into Geneva and the airport which lay to the north of the city. He switched to the satellite map, it showed nothing but car parks and warehouses. He checked for banks, but found none. He searched south, towards the city centre, then the surrounding suburbs, not exactly a banking districts. He continued along Voie Centrale and Route des Jeunes towards the border with France.

There was nothing that resembled the kind of place to stash money. Suddenly he spotted Credit Agricole, a French bank—not reputed for offshore banking. Next to it was KPMG, the international financial management firm. He was getting warmer. Then a large building caught his eye, it wasn't a bank, something much more intriguing, he recognised the name, one linked to a fine objets d'art scandal that had made headlines in the press—Ports Francs et Entrepôts de Genève S.A.

He checked out the address—Route du Grand-Lancy 6a, 1211 Genève, Suisse. The postal code 1211 corresponded to that in the address book.

Another search told him the Freeport was one of the world's most secretive sites. Its vaults held more than one million fine

art objects worth an estimated 100 billion dollars, compared to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, one of the world's greatest art collections with some 200,000 works, which dwarfed London's National Gallery with its 2,300 paintings.

His pulse accelerated, he had that gut feeling he was on to something, something that must have been worth hiding, though art to his knowledge had not been one of Wallace's usual business interests.

Cross-checking the bank account that corresponded with the Geneva reference, Simmo noted it was linked to a company that he had set-up a couple of years back—Atlantic Fine Arts. He looked it up in his file and saw that he was managing director, there was nothing unusual in that, he was the MD of numerous companies, a simple ploy that hid the identity of the real owners.

He looked at his watch, then impulsively checked the flights to Geneva. There was one leaving early that evening for Madrid with a connection to Geneva early the next morning, he called Iberia and booked a business class seat on the flight, at the least he could deposit the cash in a Swiss bank, a much needed contribution to his seriously compromised retirement fund, he figured Wallace would no longer need it.

He then carefully worded a mail to the Freeport informing them he would be arriving the next day to access his storage space. He signed it as managing director of Atlantic Fine Art and clicked send.

CHAPTER 2

SIMMO HAD CHECKED OUT THE EXACT location on Google maps and driving a rented car he found the Ports Francs et Entrepôts de Genève complex without difficulty. It was much larger than he had expected, consisting of four large buildings on the corner of Route des Jeunes and Route de Grand Lancy. The main building was a modern office style structure five stories high on Grand Lancy, behind was nondescript windowless building that looked more like a multiplex cinema than a warehouse. To the right of the main office was a long low two storey building behind which was another larger off-white warehouse that extended nearly half-a-kilometre down Route des Jeunes. The site was situated by a railway sidings about four kilometres southwest of downtown Geneva.

The Freeport was principally owned by the Swiss government with a minority holding held by a group of art dealers, collectors, freight forwarders and mysterious offshore companies.

There was not much about the buildings that said they contained the world's greatest private collection of art treasures. A chain link fencing topped by razor wire separated the site from the outside road, not as forbidding as Simmo had been expecting, with the kind of access gates and security

checkpoints that could be found at any international airport or government building.

Once inside, he, like the Freeport's other clients, discovered 24-hour protected areas, CCTV cameras, biometric sensors, secure lifts, heavy metal doors, and in addition a sophisticated air-conditioning system that controlled the building's temperatures and humidity so as to conserve the stored treasures in perfect condition.

The vast warehouses were composed of endless identical corridors with locked store rooms on either side. Behind the heavy doors were metal racks on which were carefully stacked wooden cases of all shapes and sizes. They contained paintings, statues, furniture, books and other treasures deposited for safe keeping by rich collectors and investors living in New York, London, Paris or Tokyo, far from the eyes of fiscal authorities and other parties interested in their wealth. Some said they also hid works of art seized by the Nazis from Jewish families, treasures looted from archaeological sites, valuable cultural objects stolen from war torn Middle Eastern countries, and pre-Columbian artefacts smuggled out of Mesoamerica.

It was like a vast bank vault where wealth was deposited for safe keeping—commodities to be traded for a profit at a propitious moment, to protect the owners from the vagaries of currencies and the volatility of stock markets. Art had become a safe haven asset which in addition could be safely hidden from tax authorities, covetous families and ex-wives.

The rich could store anything from gold bars to rare wines, collector's cars and art treasures in the Freeport. In addition

they could hire the services of experts and take advantage of specialised showrooms designed to display works for sale or organise small private events in congenial surroundings far from the prying eyes of the media.

In all more than a million valuable objects, besides countless bottles of rare wines, were stored in one of the most secure places on Earth, the most precious behind massive steel doors that had nothing to envy of the vaults of the Bank of England in the City of London.

At the reception Simmo presented himself to the hostess and five minutes later was met by a customer relations assistant, Jean-Louis Favre, who asked for his passport, account references and inventory numbers. Simmo obliged and announced he would like to inspect the objects stored on behalf of his company. A mere formality as the objects stored in the Freeport's warehouses were the property of its customers whose only obligation was to declare the nature of the stored items, but not their value.

Simmo was led to a steel door where entry was controlled by an access code and a key. Favre punched in the code and unlocked the door, inside, the storage area was lined with metal racks on which were stacked wooden cases of various sizes. He was pointed to a narrow space not more than about 60 centimetres wide and one metre deep on which lay one small lonely packing case marked 'Fragile'.

'I'll have a storeman take it to a viewing room.'

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