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Grey morning light seeped weakly through the grimy, narrow-arched windows of the church. Bunting's mind was a whirlpool as he struggled to comprehend the revelations of the last few hours. The wooden box, now closed, gave no outward sign of the great secret within.

How was it possible that these Holy Words had survived over 1500 years? Yet, who was he to doubt this miracle? For years he had been preaching to his impoverished congregation to have faith – could he do any less?

The long and stressful journey could now be clearly seen on the Pope and Duke's faces. Their grey pallor and exhaustion, previously hidden in the shadows of the night, were now revealed by the rising rays of dawn.

It was on reading the first few lines that Bunting had understood the Pope's terrible predicament: *Heed my words. Blessed is the Lord my Father. Faith is my gift to you. It is faith alone which will justify you and fulfil my laws.*

These original handwritten Holy Words of the Lord Jesus were almost the exact words preached by the Reverend Father Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant Reform movement, and a total contradiction of the Catholic Church's position that justification occurs only by an intrinsic, infused righteousness by faith and works, and was not simply a gift, to be bestowed.

It had only been fifty years since Luther had questioned 1500 years of papal authority over Christians, finally leading to a massive schism in the Church. His refusal to retract his writings, at

the demand of Pope Leo X in 1520 and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1521, resulted in his excommunication from the Catholic Church by the Pope and condemnation as an outlaw by the Emperor.

'All men are born in sin. Repent for your sins today and for all your life. No man can remit guilt. This judgement alone belongs to The Father, the most holy, blessed be He.'

These words could have been written by Luther himself! Now it made sense why the Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church, would feel twisted. He and all previous Popes had been teaching the wrong message. There had been cataclysmic consequences due to the rise of the new Protestant movement. Luther had strongly disputed the claim that freedom from God's punishment of sin could be purchased with money. The peasants, who had watched priests grow fat on the sale of these indulgences, while they lived in penury, joined the new movement *en masse*.

Thousands of clergy, dissatisfied with the Mother Church, had also joined, supported by many of Europe's princes and aristocrats, tired of paying enormous taxes to Rome. The resulting power struggle had immersed Europe in forty years of massacres and atrocities, unmatched in the continent's long and bloody history.

Bunting, in awe, his heart pounding, had read and reread all the fragments of the holy manuscript. 'The Words' of Lord Jesus were unambiguous and there was only one conclusion possible: the Church of Rome had been preaching a false message for over fifteen hundred years.

The Pope spoke first, his voice now stronger. 'Herr Bunting, the effect of this revelation completely overwhelmed me. I blindly stumbled out of the study, staggered along the hall, only stopping to vomit violently, before collapsing onto the bed, my heart palpitating and my body bathed in sweat. So many thoughts pounded through my brain, it was as if my head would split with the pressure pulsating through it. I passed out. When I awoke, it was dark. Whether one of my attendants had tried to wake me, I knew not. However, the lamps were lit and I reasoned that they had thought me exhausted from my ascent to the Papacy, and let me be.'

‘I can understand now what you mean by twisted,’ said Bunting with compassion.

The Pope gave a small shrug. ‘What was I to do? Why, I wondered, hadn’t even one of the previous incumbents of this high office done *something*? How could they have attested to the writings of our Lord and then ignored the message? I tried to put myself in the heads of some of the greatest Popes over the preceding centuries. Slowly it dawned on me. They would rightly have reasoned that to reveal the information would have split the unity of our Church. Many would have called for the Pope and all the hierarchy of the Church to be dismantled, branded as charlatans and the deliverers of false messages.

‘Yet, on the other hand, others would have supported us for our godly intentions and still recognised us as the intermediaries between man and God. I then understood that the saving of lives had been those former Popes’ priority; it was for the greater good to keep “The Words” from the light of day. To reveal this terrible truth would only lead to bloodshed. It would be *our* cross to bear, to take this sin on ourselves, for the sake of the many.’

‘And, no doubt, silence was far more politically expedient as well,’ said Bunting. ‘They, the Popes, were also protecting their positions of power. Correct me if I am wrong but was it not you who said: “It is a man’s immortal soul in eternity which is important”?’

The Pope stared intensely at the young priest for many seconds, unable to hide his surprise at being spoken back to. Slowly, however, Bunting saw this anger melt to mere resignation. ‘Yes, that is also true, Herr Bunting,’ the Pope sighed. ‘It must be. But I do believe, and I have thought of little else over the last twelve months, that with few exceptions, all the Popes were godly and men of reason. I believe they came to the correct conclusion.

‘As I took up my new duties, I exuded confidence on the outside and applied myself with gusto. However, on the inside, I was still deeply troubled. It did not rest easily with me, being the guardian of the greatest secret ever known. Was I, then, somehow less than these previous men? Those who *had* taken the secret to their graves? Why could I not be like them? I lived a half-life those

first few months in office. The weight of the knowledge was heavy on my soul and my prayers for direction were never answered.

‘However, the Lord had always heard my cry. It was me who was still, just as I was as a youth, too vain and egotistical to hear or see it. So, it was on the day of the Feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, four months after my ascendancy, that I let my eyes wander over a pile of correspondence and books sitting on the occasional table in my antechamber. There, always in full view but overlooked and unread due to my troubled disposition, were many volumes. One attracted my attention – *your* book, *Omnium Temporum et Annorum Series ex Sacris Bibliis.*’

Bunting gasped as the Pope mentioned the name of the very treatise that had caused his humiliation.

‘Yes, Herr Bunting, yes. The Lord, from the very first day, had answered my call but I did not know it. I picked up the treatise amongst thirty others on that table and began to read your writings. This is why I am here: because of you. Your words were clearly out of step with your leaders, yet they bore little resemblance to the Mother Church either. I have read everything that Luther and Calvin – may they burn in Hell – have written, and they would also have condemned you. For instance, your views on that accursed race, the killers of our Lord, are almost beyond reason.’

He reached down into the folds of his cassock and produced a copy of a small tattered pamphlet, which Bunting knew only too well.

‘You say ...’ The Pope urgently leafed through the pages.

‘Christian oppression has deformed the Jew. He lives in the shadows of Christian society and God’s grace, fated to live a life of penury and wretchedness. He is unwilling and unable to step out of his culture. It is for us the oppressor to examine the way we have treated him. A Christian without access to education, a trade or profession or to own land or property would soon be indistinguishable from the Jew. Were we to reach out and lift him from his worthless life, to surrender his oriental language and practices, to prepare him to receive Christ, then ultimately he would surely join the Christian fellowship of man.

‘And later on you say: *Does the God of Creation, the God of Abraham and Moses, the God of Jesus, of Mohammed despise any of his children?* These statements would not be tolerated in our Church, Herr Bunting. My inquisitorial tribunal would have demanded retraction and contrition.’

As did mine, thought Bunting, remembering his humiliation at the hands of the Committee for Orthodox Instruction chaired by Archbishop Wilhelm. Instead he said, ‘Yes, my treatise was not ... well received ... in the County of Lemgo.’

‘Nor Hanover. Nor Lower Saxony. Nor Greater Germany,’ added the Pope sharply, brandishing the pamphlet in the air. ‘My people in Saxony reported that your writings have put you at odds with your superiors and you were unceremoniously dismissed from your duties in Lemgo. Furthermore, you were given an ultimatum with your posting in Magdeburg not to publish and not to stray from Lutheran orthodoxy.’

Bunting winced at the memory of his humiliation. ‘How do you know this?’ he stammered.

‘I am the Pope! Do you think I would travel thirteen days in a carriage across Europe to this Godforsaken country without knowing *everything* about you?’

‘What you say is true,’ said Bunting, lowering his head.

The Pope raised his voice and stared at the young priest. ‘And then, like a lamp suddenly being lit at night, all was illuminated. God *had* answered my prayers and showed me the way. It was a revelation! An incredible one! The answer was *you!* An obscure, discredited Lutheran heretic whose destiny it is to hide “The Words”.’ The Pope struggled from his chair, refusing the outstretched arm of the Duke, and stood over the young priest. Bunting was taken aback by the sudden vigour and passion in the old man, whose eyes were now ablaze and locked on his. He grasped the young priest’s shoulder and held it tightly as he spoke. ‘I charge you, Herr Bunting, with the responsibility to hide these “Words” where no Christian man can discover them! This is your quest.’

‘No!’ railed Bunting. ‘Why should it be *my* quest? And why should I *care* if your Church should be shown the errors of its ways?’

'You *will* do it! You have been *chosen!*' The old man went on as if Bunting had not spoken.

But Bunting wasn't finished. 'Why remove and hide these "Words" now anyway? After 1500 years? It makes no sense!'

The old man sighed and loosened his grip. 'Because,' he said gravely, 'because I cannot trust one of my own.'

'Our Church is under attack from within by those who would accommodate the reformers; that "The Words" of Lord Jesus should align themselves with the heretics is almost incomprehensible. They must never be discovered, not by the reformers, for they would use the Lord's words to malign and eventually destroy our Church and its institutions.'

'And these "Words", these Holy Words, must not be *destroyed* either, as those of my Church would surely do, for this would be a sin greater than all ... You now understand that if they were ever to become public, the horrors that would ensue would engulf Christendom forever. The massacres of the previous forty years would pale into insignificance compared to the upheavals that would surely result from these revelations. There is only crisis and catastrophe from outside. All Christendom is under attack from the barbarian Turks. The Sultan's armies camp on the outskirts of Vienna and, be assured, they will make another attempt to conquer Malta in the next few years. It was a miracle that Sicily and the mainland were not invaded. The Holy City could be lost to these heathens at any time, as was Constantinople in 1453, with the resulting massacres, burnings and looting.'

The Pope took a deep breath, sat back down and gathered his thoughts. At last he continued. 'I have considered the gravity of this situation for many months. When I read your treatise, I knew that you were the right person for this quest. Who would suspect an unknown German Protestant, a reformer and heretic, of holding the greatest secret ever?'

'You are, are you not, first and foremost a Christian? You believe in the sanctity of life, the frailty of human beings? You *will* accept the quest, Herr Bunting, because you know there is no other option.'



Hours later Bunting stared at the box again. Next to it was a bag of coins and some documents of passage that the Duke had presented him. In his palm he could feel the hardness of the papal ring that the Pope had pressed on him on his departure.

‘This ring,’ the old man had said, ‘will guarantee you safe passage when you most need it. Do not compromise on the final resting place of the Holy Words. It must remain a secret for as long as time itself if need be. Christendom is not ready for them and I fear they never will be. I will do what I can from my high office to protect you and our secret for now and forever.’

Then the Pope said simply, ‘Goodbye, Herr Bunting. We will never meet again. God be with you on your quest.’

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Nick was savouring the last bite of his fried egg on toast while reading *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall* by John Julius Norwich, when he was interrupted by the familiar tone of his mobile phone. He quickly glanced at the screen. Bronte? What could she want at this time?

‘Nick! Sorry to bother you so early but you’d better get down here. Some asshole’s been in here. We’ve had a break-in.’

‘You’re joking!’ gasped Nick. ‘I’ll be there in ten. Don’t touch anything. I’ll phone the police.’

‘Yeah, Nick, I’ve already put my fingerprints over everything,’ responded the Australian sarcastically.

Nick tried to gather his thoughts as he shoved the dishes into the sink and grabbed his jacket. Robbed? He’d rarely had a problem with theft over fifteen years. A couple of times he had experienced shoplifting, but never a break-in. Anyway, who would bother stealing old maps? They’d be hard to sell if you wanted quick money. You’d be far better off stealing computers or sports clothes: things everybody wanted.

As usual, Nick had difficulty finding his car keys. Ever since Natasha had moved out he’d hardly used his old late-edition Triumph Stag. She had hated public transport, so they’d mostly used the car when she was here. Since she’d gone, Nick had reverted to the type of travel he preferred: buses and trains. In fact, when he thought about it, Natasha hated most things that he liked. No wonder it had become another disaster of a relationship.

Fumbling around in his jacket for the keys, he came across

Inspector Jaeger's card from the day before. He'll do, decided Nick, and dialled the mobile number on the card.

A few minutes later Nick was driving out of Clapham and along the Wandsworth Bridge Road. Jaeger had been annoyingly unperturbed by Nick's call and had agreed to meet at the gallery in half an hour.

It was Jaeger who greeted him with another limp handshake at the gallery doorstep. Nick could see Bronte directing a hard-faced, thin-lipped, wiry man around the interior. He seemed to be brandishing a small make-up brush and a bottle.

'Fingerprints, Mister Lawrance,' Jaeger explained. 'It would be preferable if you closed your gallery while the sergeant is here.'

Ignoring the inspector, Nick called out across the gallery: 'What's been taken, Bronts? Any damage?'

'Hard to tell. The maps have been chucked everywhere but so far it seems all the important ones are here. Can't find Bunting's World Map though.'

'The Bunting maps?' interrupted the inspector. 'Are you sure?'

'No we are not *sure*, Inspector,' Nick said impatiently. 'It'll take at least an hour to do a full ...' Just then he noticed the fingerprinting sergeant at his computer. 'Hey, what do you think you're doing?'

The sergeant looked at Nick, then addressed the inspector. 'I'll be having to check his computer, Conrad,' he said in a brogue Nick immediately recognised as Northern Irish. 'I can get clearance at the Yard if need be.'

'That won't be necessary,' responded Nick, resigned to the situation. 'Just take care not to damage anything. I have years of contacts in there and it would be a disaster to lose the database.'

It was almost midday before Bronte and Nick had completed the stocktake. Sure enough, every map could be accounted for except Bunting's World.

'Is it possible the priest came back in the middle of the night to steal *this* map?' said Nick shaking his head in disbelief. 'There are far more important and valuable maps here. It doesn't make any sense.'

However, the inspector had no time for Nick's conjectures.

With persistence bordering on rudeness, he made Nick repeat the previous night's argument with Monsignor Montano, over and over again. It was a painstaking process for Nick as the inspector insisted on complete and full descriptions of both the Monsignor and his assistant.

'Now, are you certain he was wearing black robes, Mister Lawrance?' asked Jaeger for the umpteenth time, his odd accent irritating Nick. 'Anything else? Did he say anything about being from the Benedictine Order for example?'

'Yes, he was wearing black. Not green, yellow or bloody rainbow colours, how often do I have to tell you?' responded Nick angrily. 'And, no, he didn't bother to discuss with me his religious affiliations ... surprising, don't you think?'

Jaeger pressed on, apparently oblivious to Nick's sarcastic outburst. 'And this priest took three of the maps with him and said he would return on Tuesday to collect the World Map?' queried the inspector once again, while examining a copy of the invoice and Amex receipt Nick had written out at the opening. The inspector and the sergeant then spent some more time peering at Nick's customer database, making notes.

'That was what he *said* he would do. Certainly he was a bit angry that he couldn't buy the map last night. In fact, he offered me triple its value. But that doesn't mean he broke into the gallery last night to *steal* it. Honestly, Inspector, as I explained to you yesterday, it's simply not that important a map. Certainly not to commit such a crime for, that's for sure.'

'Perhaps. But it was obviously important to *him*, maybe even enough to take the risk,' responded the inspector, the scars on his face twitching with tension. 'We should not forget the people who stole the maps from the Garner Collection *also* went to a lot of trouble for little reward – at least according to you. In any event, can you think of anything else at all that could be helpful?'

'No, sorry, Inspector.' Nick was anxious to get the gallery open for the day. 'If I do, I will give you a call,' he said as an afterthought.

Nick and Bronte rehung the maps. 'We've been lucky in a way, Nick,' whispered Bronte, trying not to attract the attention of the two policemen. 'I mean, only the Bunting map is missing,

right? Imagine if they had also stolen others like the Blaeu or the Ortelius. It would have cost us a fortune.'

'I know, Bronts,' Nick also whispered, 'but it doesn't make sense! *Why* steal Bunting's map of the world from here or Sotheby's in Amsterdam? They're not that difficult to find. I could pick up another one this afternoon for three hundred quid if I wanted to! Something *else* is going on. Trouble is, I haven't a bloody clue what it could be.'

The inspector and his sergeant were making their way to the door. 'Mister Lawrance,' Jaeger said in parting. 'You will immediately phone me if, and when, this Monsignor Montano contacts you?'

'Of course, don't you worry. We'll catch this evil black monk one way or another!'

Unimpressed with Nick's constant sarcasm, the inspector said gravely, 'This may be a joke for you, Mister Lawrance. However, for *us* it is a very serious matter. You should not take it or *us* too lightly.'

'Speaking of "us", responded Nick, 'I didn't catch your name, Sergeant.'

Nick could see that the hard-faced Irishman was in two minds whether to respond or not. In the end, he did. 'It's Robertson,' he said gruffly. 'Sergeant William Robertson. Good afternoon, Mister Lawrance and Ms Gibson.'