

The truth was hidden for two thousand years

THE PETRINE PROMISE

A Vatican Conspiracy Thriller



DR. R. CELESTINE

The Petrine Promise

a Vatican conspiracy thriller

by

Dr. R. Celestine



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To my loving husband

RUDOLPH CELESTINE

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PROLOGUE: Jerusalem, 33AD

THE COMMISSION

The evening air hung heavy in the upper room. Jesus looked at each of His disciples in turn, His gaze lingering longest on those He had chosen to record His teachings.

“I have told you many times”, He said quietly, “you must bear witness because you have been with me from the beginning”.

John, the youngest, leaned forward. “Master, how will we know our writings have been true to Your teachings?”

“The Father Himself will give you the words”, Jesus answered. “Just as He gave words to Moses, He will guide your testimonies”. His expression grew serious. “But take heed- there will be those who try to change what you write, who will add their own teachings to yours. Beware- know that not all who shout ‘Lord, Lord’ will be pure of heart. Not all who prophesy on My behalf or cast out devils on My behalf or even do wonderful things on My behalf- are truly

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with Me. I have warned you before- you must remain as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves”.

Matthew, the former tax collector, had already begun taking notes, as was his custom. “Then how will future generations know which writings are true?”

“By their fruits, they shall know them”. Jesus stood, moving to the window that overlooked Jerusalem. In the distance, the lights from oil lamps flickered in the high priest's palace. “There are those, even now, who fear the message of justice and accountability that I have taught you. They will not rest until they have created their own version of My teachings”.

“Then we must protect the truth”, Peter declared.

“Yes”. Jesus turned back to them. “What you write will be preserved, though many will try to destroy it or bury it beneath other teachings. But in the last days, when the world most needs My message, what *you* have written will be rediscovered”.

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He touched the scrolls where Matthew had been writing his notes. “Your testimonies and those of your fellow Apostles who share in this task will be enough. Let no one add to them or take away from them”.

In the streets below, torches appeared, moving towards the garden where Jesus would soon pray. The time was drawing near.

“Remember”, He repeated, “you are not just writing for your time but for all times. When humanity faces its greatest challenge, they will need to rediscover My pure message- which you will record”.

The disciples nodded solemnly. They were unaware that even as they sat there, Caiaphas- the high priest of Jerusalem- was already planning how to suppress the truths that Jesus had been teaching.

CHAPTER 1: Saturday Evening

Evening light slanted through the stained-glass windows of The Church of Our Lady of the Assumption and the English Martyrs in Cambridge. It painted jewelled patterns across worn wooden pews. The scent of beeswax candles and ancient stone hung in the air, a fragrance Father Thomas had known for thirty years of ministry. But tonight, that familiar comfort felt hollow as he gazed out at the empty spaces in his congregation.

Twenty-three people. He'd counted them three times, though he wished he hadn't. Twenty-three, where once there had been hundreds. Their absence was as palpable as the silence between hymns. Each empty pew seemed to mock the hopes he'd once held for this parish.

At sixty-eight, Father Thomas carried his years in the smile lines around his eyes rather than in his bearing. Of medium height and slightly stooped from decades bent over manuscripts, he maintained the lean

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physique of someone who'd spent more time chasing ancient mysteries than indulging in earthly comforts. Wire-rimmed glasses and silver hair gave him a scholarly air but there was an intensity in his blue eyes that spoke of someone who'd found answers he'd never expected to find.

His hands, weathered by decades of turning scripture pages, holding communion chalices and indulging in his passion for archaeological digs, trembled slightly as he gripped the edges of the pulpit. Not from age- although now, he felt every year as it went by- but from the weight of what he'd discovered in his research.

“For our final reading this evening”, he said, adjusting his glasses, “we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter Twenty-five, verses Thirty-one through Forty-six:

“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one

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**from another, as a shepherd divideth his
sheep from the goats:**

**And he shall set the sheep on his right
hand, but the goats on the left.**

**Then shall the King say unto them on his
right hand, Come, ye blessed of my
Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for
you from the foundation of the world:**

**For I was an hungred, and ye gave me
meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink:
I was a stranger, and ye took me in:**

**Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and
ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye
came unto me.**

**Then shall the righteous answer him,
saying, Lord, when saw we thee an
hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and
gave thee drink?**

**When saw we thee a stranger, and took
thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?**

**Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison,
and came unto thee?**

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And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

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And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.'“

The words of judgment echoed through the vast space, Christ's message of accountability and social justice ringing as true now as it had two thousand years ago. *If only they understood what had been lost*, he thought. *What had been deliberately hidden.*

While he was reading, Father Thomas had occasionally stopped to glance at his small congregation. Most of them were elderly, fixtures of the parish for decades. But there in the back, a young mother with two children listened intently. Hunger for something real was visible in her eyes. They were all searching, he knew, even if they didn't fully understand what they were missing.

His voice echoed in the air. The evening light through the stained-glass windows continued to fall on the empty spaces, dust motes dancing in the coloured beams.

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“Thank you for coming”, he said softly to the congregation. “Go in peace. Love one another. Serve the LORD”.

As the small congregation filed out, Michael Barnes, one of his lay readers, approached the pulpit. The younger man's face showed the same concern Father Thomas felt.

“Another drop from last week”, Michael said quietly. “Remember when we had to add extra chairs for evening Mass?”

Father Thomas nodded, gathering his notes. “And it's not just us. Every church I know is facing the same decline. People want the hope that only a promise of justice can deliver- and they're not getting it in our teachings anymore”.

“Yes, Father Thomas, I agree with you. Something is missing, isn't it? Something important”.

“Though perhaps, not for much longer”, Father Thomas replied, thinking of the research waiting in his office. It was more evidence that everything they had been taught had been deliberately altered.

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Michael gave him a curious look but didn't press further. As the younger man walked away, Father Thomas remained at the pulpit, lost in thought. This latest evidence he'd discovered could change everything- but it could also destroy what little faith in Christianity remained. Was the world ready for what they'd found?

His phone buzzed in his pocket- another message from his contacts in Egypt. Something new had been discovered in the monastery archives, something that confirmed his worst fears. He needed to make some calls, especially to that brilliant young researcher at the British Museum, Dr. Chen. She had been his former student during her time at Cambridge University and they had stayed connected over the years. If his suspicions were correct, they would need her expertise in ancient languages.

His fingers lingered over Dr. Sarah Chen's number on his phone. Last week's conversation with his former student still echoed in his mind.

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“I was thinking about our last conversation, Father Thomas”, she'd said over coffee in the British Museum's café. “You remember we had been discussing Grigory Kessel's discovery of a hidden portion of a chapter of the Gospel of Matthew? I was wondering- could there be another reason for its existence other than the current scientific explanations? I noticed an interesting omission and I'm not sure if it is significant”.

“Keep looking, Sarah”, he'd told her, remembering his own discoveries. “Sometimes the most important truths hide in the smallest discrepancies”.

Now, with what he'd found in his research, her expertise in ancient languages might be more crucial than either of them had ever realised. But first, he needed to confirm his suspicions about certain documents that shouldn't exist- documents that might explain why Christianity had changed so dramatically from its earliest years.

He'd contact her soon. For now, he needed to be certain of what he'd found. The

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consequences of being wrong- or worse of being right- were too grave to risk hasty action.

In the gathering darkness of Hyde Park, James Bradford's running shoes pounded against the path in rhythm with the bass line pulsing through his headphones. At forty, he carried himself with the easy confidence of someone who'd seen real danger and survived despite it. His dark hair was just beginning to grey at the temples, adding a distinguished touch to his rugged good looks, while his well-groomed beard enhanced rather than softened his sharp features. His six-foot athletic frame moved with the fluid grace of his Royal Marines training.

Freddie Mercury's voice soared as he rounded the Serpentine, his mind shifting between the ancient texts he'd been studying and the growing evidence of something hidden in Christianity's earliest days.

“Another one bites the dust...”. The lyrics seemed oddly appropriate, given what the

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Guardians had discovered about early church history. James allowed himself a grim smile as he maintained his pace. Eight kilometres down, four to go. Running helped him think, helped him process the weight of the secrets he carried.

Other runners nodded as they passed, never guessing that the man in the faded Queen t-shirt and shorts was one of Britain's foremost religious historians. Or that he belonged to an organisation that had spent centuries protecting a truth that could change everything.

His dark eyes, holding both scholarly intelligence and something harder- the watchfulness of a man who knew too many secrets- scanned the path ahead. His phone buzzed with a message from his Guardian contacts. Unusual activity had been noted in the Vatican's archival division. James slowed to read it, then quickened his pace. Something was happening. Something they'd been waiting for.

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Deep within the Vatican, Cardinal Romano sat at the head of an ancient oak table, its surface reflecting centuries of similar meetings. At sixty-three, he cut an imposing figure- tall and distinguished, with the bearing of someone who could have run a global business corporation instead of serving the Church. His meticulously maintained physique belied his age. His silver hair and aristocratic features gave him a statesman's presence- while his deep, resonant voice commanded attention without effort. The seven other Cardinals watched him in silence, their red robes appearing almost black in the chamber's dim light. A single hanging lamp cast a pool of illumination around him, leaving the room's corners in shadow.

Every Cardinal in the room had accepted a lifetime appointment for this particular task.

Cardinal Romano's grey eyes, capable of shifting from warmth to steel in an instant, surveyed the men before him. "Brothers", he said. His voice carried the weight of generations, "As we speak, another artefact is making its way to London, to the British

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Museum, for evaluation”. His fingers tensed as they traced the gold lettering on the worn brown leather notebook before him. The leather-bound notebook was in excellent condition, in spite of the fact that it was decades old. “We will have to do *everything* in our power to address the complications that will, most certainly, arise. It is our duty. Are you in agreement?”

The others nodded, their murmured responses echoing off stone walls that had heard countless secrets. “Whatever it takes”.

“Yes”. Cardinal Romano’s eyes glinted in the lamplight. “Whatever it takes”.

He closed the notebook with deliberate care, the sound echoing in the hushed chamber. “Now, duty calls”, he said, rising from the table. The shadows seemed to move with him as he reached for his phone. “I must contact Luca immediately”.

Alone in his office afterward, he paused before an ancient crucifix on the wall. His fingers touched the leather-bound Bible on his desk. It was different from his notebook, older. Much older. “Are we doing the right

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thing?” he whispered to himself in the empty room. He shook his head slightly, then straightened his shoulders and continued with his duties. There was no room for doubt. Not now.

In a cosy flat in Chelsea, Sarah Chen was curled up in her favourite reading chair. A glass of merlot was on the side table beside her. At thirty-five, she combined brilliant academic credentials with striking beauty—her Asian heritage giving her high cheekbones and elegant features that needed no enhancement. Long dark hair was pulled back in a practical style that suited both laboratory work and her natural grace. Her living room walls were lined with books—academic works on ancient languages, religious histories and archaeological texts. The room still smelled of the jasmine tea she had been drinking earlier. The scent of jasmine was mingled with the ever-present musty smell of old manuscripts that Sarah collected as a hobby.

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Sarah picked up her glass to take another sip of wine and studied her notes. Since her last conversation with Father Thomas, she still hadn't solved the mystery.

She returned to the article in the journal she was reading. The journal was published by the Cambridge University Press and enjoyed a stellar academic reputation. Sarah checked the notes she had jotted down in her notebook:

#1- In 2023, Grigory Kessel was doing research in the Digital Vatican Library and discovered a portion of text- belonging to the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 11:30 to 12:26. It was hidden as an underlayer of text in a 1,750-year-old Greek Bible manuscript.

#2- The Kessel text is written in the Old Syriac Aramaic language and has been determined to be at least one hundred years *older* than any other known Greek New Testament manuscripts, including the Codex Sinaiticus manuscript.

#3- The Kessel text is the lowest layer of writing (*scriptio ima*) on the page, with the

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text of the 1,750-year-old Greek Bible manuscript written over it.

#4- The Kessel text is not visible to the naked eye.

Sarah took another sip of wine and continued to read her notes:

#5- The Kessel translation is the fourth instance of independent manuscript evidence of Old Syriac Bibles that *pre-date* any Greek Bible manuscripts.

Sarah stopped reading and glanced at the framed photo on her bookshelf- herself at eight years old. She was sitting on her grandfather's lap in Hong Kong as he showed her characters in an ancient text. He'd sparked her love of languages, taught her that every symbol held meaning and every text told a story. What would he think of the puzzle she was trying to unravel now? Something about Kessel's discovery in the ancient manuscripts wouldn't let her rest.

Sarah headed to her bedroom, although she wasn't sleepy. *Okay- tomorrow, time for laundry*, Sarah reminded herself. On

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Monday, she'd be back at her job in the religious documents lab at the British Museum.

None of them slept well that night.

Father Thomas sat in his study until dawn, surrounded by his research. James- having run until his legs ached, had only managed to get a few hours' sleep. Even Cardinal Romano, normally an excellent sleeper, tossed and turned all night. Sarah- eventually fell asleep and dreamt of ancient documents with their secrets waiting to be uncovered.

That night, little did any of them realise how big the storm was that was waiting for them, a storm they were each about to enter.

Sunday morning dawned grey and cool, typical English weather for March that matched the sombre mood in Father Thomas's office as he made one final call. In Hyde Park, James checked his encrypted messages while stretching out his running-weary muscles. More running was needed.

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And in her flat, Sarah gathered her notes together for work on Monday, unaware that her quiet academic life was about to change forever.

None of them knew it yet, but their paths were about to converge around a truth that had been hidden for two thousand years. A truth that some might kill to keep secret, while others would be willing to die for in their fight to expose it.

The chase was about to begin.

CHAPTER 2: The Fragment

Sarah arrived early at the British Museum, her footsteps echoing through marble corridors still hushed with pre-opening quiet. She loved this time of day, before the visitors filled the galleries- when she could almost hear the whispers of history in the air.

The grand edifice in Bloomsbury had stood as London's temple of knowledge since 1759, when Sir Hans Sloane's vast collection of curiosities first opened to the public. Now, nearly three centuries later, it remains one of the world's pre-eminent museums, drawing over six million visitors annually through its iconic colonnade entrance. The building itself, with its Greek Revival architecture and vast glass-ceilinged Great Court, housed a staggering eight million artefacts under the care of more than a thousand specialists, curators and support staff.

Sarah often reflected on how the museum's very existence spoke to humanity's need to

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preserve its past. While the Louvre might claim more visitors and the Metropolitan Museum of Art more American donors, the British Museum held something unique: the world's most comprehensive record of human civilisation, from the Rosetta Stone to the Parthenon sculptures. As she made her way past the sleeping galleries, their display cases holding treasures from every corner of the globe, she felt what she always felt—privilege mingled with responsibility. Here, in this hushed morning hour, she was part of an unbroken chain of scholars stretching back through centuries, all dedicated to preserving humanity's cultural heritage.

Her security card beeped her through a series of doors leading to the conservation labs, each threshold taking her further and further from the public spaces into the hidden world where the real work happened.

In his Vatican office, Cardinal Romano made two calls. The first was to Dr. Harrison.

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“Nigel”. The Cardinal's deep voice carried both warmth and warning. “I understand you have an interesting artefact being delivered today. I trust you have received my message about my requirements?”

“Yes, Your Eminence”. Harrison's voice held the careful deference of someone who knew precisely where his funding came from. Although, he couldn't help wondering- *how had the Cardinal heard about this new fragment so quickly?* “The fragment will be in Dr. Chen's lab within the hour”.

“Excellent. And you remember our arrangement?”

“Of course. I'll ensure you receive immediate word of anything she discovers”. A pause. “Though perhaps if I knew what we were looking for...”

“You'll know it when you see it, Nigel. Just as you've known other things over the years”. The Cardinal's tone made it clear the conversation was ending. “I expect to hear from you soon”.

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His second call was to a number he rarely used but knew by heart. It was unlisted in any public phone directory.

“Luca”. No warmth this time, only authority. “You need to be at the British Museum. Immediately”.

“Yes, Your Eminence?” A voice as sharp as steel responded.

“An artefact. It will be in Dr. Chen's lab or on her person later today. It must be retrieved at all costs”. As he spoke, the Cardinal's fingers traced the gold lettering on his notebook. “Though hopefully without any loss of life”.

“Understood”.

“Make sure you do. The artefact cannot, I repeat, cannot be allowed to get into the wrong hands. I, myself, will be travelling to the Museum this evening. I will expect your full report and to collect the artefact from you when I arrive”.

“It will be done, Your Eminence”.

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The Cardinal ended the call, his grey eyes fixed on the ancient buildings visible through his window. Everything was in motion now. He could only pray they would have no unexpected loss of life.

As the morning sun filtered through the lab's high windows, Sarah settled at her workstation. The smell of preservation chemicals mixed with the musty scent of ancient parchment produced a fragrance more intoxicating to her than the finest French perfume. She was halfway through her morning tea when Dr. Harrison appeared.

“Dr. Chen”. The head of Biblical Artefacts looked more dishevelled than usual, his bow tie slightly askew. “Glad I caught you early. We've had a priority acquisition come in- a new Dead Sea Scroll fragment that needs immediate examination and preservation. Apparently, it was discovered during the renovations of an ancient storage area beneath St. Catherine's Monastery”.

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Sarah's pulse quickened. In her ten years at the museum, she'd handled countless precious manuscripts but the Dead Sea Scrolls were her special favourite.
“Authentication confirmed?”

“Preliminary tests look promising”. He placed a sealed conservation case on her desk. “Carbon dating and material analysis support first-century origin. But there's something unusual about this one. The Vatican's Archaeological Commission has expressed particular interest. They've requested immediate updates on anything you find”.

Sarah frowned. The Vatican rarely showed such interest in individual fragments. “Any idea why this one's so important?”

“None”. Harrison wouldn't quite meet her eyes. “Just... handle this one carefully, Sarah. More carefully than usual”.

He left her with the case and a growing sense that something wasn't quite right. Pushing the feeling aside, she began her standard protocols. The lab's fluorescent lights hummed overhead as she prepared her

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workspace, laying out tools with surgical precision. Her grandfather's voice echoed in her memory: *'Respect the text, little one. Every ancient word is a treasure waiting to be found'*.

The fragment itself was smaller than her palm. The parchment was dark with age but remarkably well-preserved. Sarah adjusted her microscope and began the painstaking process of documentation. She moved with the deliberate precision of someone used to handling priceless artefacts. Hours went by as her camera clicked rhythmically. She had to photograph every millimetre of the artefact, to build a digital record before attempting any preservation work.

That's when she saw it.

“This can't be right”, she muttered, adjusting the microscope's focus. There, in the corner of the scroll's backing, barely visible to the naked eye, was something that shouldn't exist: a single tiny letter in ancient Aramaic. Its presence pointed to what appeared to be a hidden pocket in the scroll's binding.

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Her hands trembled slightly as she reached for finer tools. Aramaic- the language Jesus actually spoke, not the Greek of later translations. She was one of only a handful of scholars worldwide qualified to read the oldest forms of this ancient language. The British Museum had hired her specifically for this expertise but in her ten years, she'd never seen anything quite like this.

Working with painstaking care, she loosened the delicate fibres of the binding. A small piece of papyrus slipped free, covered in precise Aramaic handwriting that looked remarkably well-preserved for its age. The script was elegant, clearly the work of a trained scribe.

Her heart raced as she started typing the translation of the first line:

‘To those who seek truth: What you have been taught is not what was written...’

Sarah's hand froze above her keyboard. The implications of those words... She forced herself to continue typing, her fingers flying across the keys as the ancient text revealed its secrets:

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‘I, Ed-Tzdeik bar Yair, former scribe of the Temple, write this testimony knowing my life is forfeit. Caiaphas fears the spread of the Apostles' writings. Their message of social justice threatens those in power. But worse, in his view, is their insistence on personal accountability before God...’

The letter's next section made her inhale sharply:

‘I witnessed the meeting where Caiaphas recruited Saul of Tarsus. “Become one of them. Create new writings”, he commanded. “Shift their focus from the Father to the Son. Write to confuse. Write in a manner such that many will struggle to understand—especially the unlearned and the easily led. Add new doctrines to obscure the Apostles' simple message. And make salvation a matter of faith alone, not works, so they stop questioning our authority and our actions.”’

She sat back, her mind reeling. *If this letter was authentic, it was exposing a deliberate conspiracy to alter Christianity from its very beginnings. Had they systematically changed Christ's message? Was Yair an*

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actual eyewitness? Did he have any evidence of this conspiracy?

As these questions swirled in her head, Sarah reached for her phone to text Dr. Harrison but stopped mid-motion. Something about this felt different. Important. Dangerous, even. She'd read enough Gary McAvoy novels and David Leadbeater novels and she'd seen enough Indiana Jones movies to know there was a grey area between reality and fiction. All ancient conspiracies had a basis in facts...

Her phone buzzed- a text from James Bradford. Even seeing his name made her pulse jump, though she'd never admit it. Three years of arguing over coffee in the museum café had taught her that the brilliant historian was both infuriating and infuriatingly attractive.

'Still working late?', his message read.
'Thought I saw your light on. Coffee?'

Sarah ignored the message and turned back to the translation. The ancient scribe's words pulled her deeper:

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‘But there were those who knew. Those who preserved the true testimonies. We hid copies in places they would never think to search, using the ancient symbols of our fathers. But most crucial are the records we kept of their plan. Each step, each change, each deliberate alteration of Christ's message. From the first letters Saul wrote, to the final manipulation that would come at...’

The text ended abruptly at a tear in the papyrus. Sarah swore softly. Crucial information about the details of the final manipulation was lost.

Her phone buzzed again. Another text message. This time it was from Dr. Harrison: ‘Vatican delegation arriving in 20 minutes. Cardinal Romano leading them’.

Sarah's fingers flew faster across the keys, desperate to document everything before they arrived. Then, footsteps echoed in the museum's marble hallway- determined footsteps. Too soon.

She quickly slipped the papyrus into her tablet case just as Dr. James Bradford

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appeared in her doorway. Perfect timing, as always.

“Dr. Chen”. He leaned against the doorframe, his dark eyes taking in the organised chaos of her workspace. “Still working on the new scroll fragment?”

Sarah fought the urge to smooth her hair. James Bradford was everything she usually avoided in a man- arrogant, sceptical and annoyingly handsome in that rugged way. He actually reminded her of another *James-Bond*. *James Bond*, she thought to herself and smiled. Although James Bradford did not exude a ‘tuxedo and shaken martinis’ aura- unlike his namesake. Sarah had noticed that there was still something quite dangerous about him.

Dr. Bradford specialised in disproving the authenticity of religious artefacts, which made him both the last person she wanted to talk to about her discovery and possibly the only one who could help verify it.

“Just finishing up”, she said, trying to sound casual. “And please, after three years of

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arguing over coffee in the museum café, you can call me Sarah”.

He smiled that infuriating half-smile that always made her stomach flutter. “Ok. Sarah, then”. He stepped into the lab. “Speaking of coffee, I was wondering if---”

The lights went out.

In the sudden darkness, Sarah heard the faint sound of heavy footsteps coming down the hallway. They were too heavy for the museum's night guards.

James was already moving. “Back door”, he whispered, reaching for her hand. “Now”.

As they slipped out the lab's rear entrance, Sarah realised two things: she was still holding James's hand and her quiet academic life had just become extremely complicated.

The emergency lights cast an eerie red glow in the service corridor as they hurried toward the staff exit. Sarah's heart pounded, though whether from fear or his hand still gripping hers, she wasn't quite sure.

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“Wait”, James whispered, pulling her into a supply closet. The space was tight, forcing them close together. Sarah could smell his cologne- something expensive and distinctly masculine. He pressed a finger to his lips as heavy footsteps passed their hiding place.

“Friends of yours?” he murmured, his breath warm against her ear.

“I was about to ask you the same thing”. Sarah tried to ignore how his body felt pressed against hers. “The Vatican's Archaeological Commission has been surprisingly interested in this scroll fragment”.

“The Vatican?” His eyebrows rose. “Sarah, what exactly did you find?”

Before she could answer, her phone started vibrating. A text from Father Thomas, her old professor from Cambridge: ‘URGENT. Need to speak with you. Don't trust anyone’.

The footsteps were returning.

“Do you trust me?” James asked suddenly, his dark eyes intense in the dim light.

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“That’s a loaded question for someone I’ve only argued with over coffee”.

“Yet here we are, hiding in a closet”. His lips twitched into that infuriating half-smile. “I know a place we can go. A safe house of sorts. But we need to move now”.

The footsteps were getting closer. Sarah thought of the papyrus in her tablet case, with its mysterious message about truth and deception. She thought of Father Thomas’s warning.

“Lead the way, Dr. Bradford”.

His smile widened. “James”, he corrected and then he was pulling her toward the emergency exit, into the rainy London night and straight into what would become either the greatest discovery in Christian history- or their death sentence.

The rain had soaked both of them by the time James led her to his Jaguar F-Type parked two blocks from the museum. The sleek black car purred to life as Sarah checked her tablet case- the papyrus was safe and dry.

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“Nice car for a historian”, she commented as they pulled into London traffic.

“Nice observation for someone who's not telling me what we're running from”. He navigated smoothly through the wet streets, checking the rearview mirror frequently. “Though I'm guessing it has something to do with that papyrus you're clutching like it's the Holy Grail”.

Sarah hesitated. In the warm interior of the car, with rain streaming down the windows, the events in the lab felt almost surreal.

“How did you know it was a papyrus? Would you believe me if I said it might be more important than the Holy Grail?”

“To your first question- I have my sources”. He turned onto a less travelled street. “To your second- coming from anyone else, no. But you're the most rigorous researcher I know. You don't jump at shadows or chase religious fairy tales”.

“Is that why you've been arguing with my findings for three years?”

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“I've been trying to get your attention for three years”, he corrected, as he turned to look deeply into her eyes. “The arguments were just a bonus”.

Before Sarah could process that revelation, headlights blazed behind them- a black SUV was gaining speed.

James swore softly. “Hold on”.

The Jaguar surged forward, engine growling as they wove through traffic. Sarah gripped her seat as James demonstrated driving skills that were definitely not learned in academia.

“MI6?” she asked, only half-jokingly.

“Former Royal Marines. Before I decided ancient history was more interesting than modern conflicts”. He took a sharp turn down an alley. “Your turn. What's in the papyrus?”

The SUV was still behind them. As Sarah held her tablet case, her hands shook slightly. “It's a letter, first century, hidden in the scroll fragment's binding. According to this, Caiaphas and Paul deliberately added books to the New Testament- books that

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weren't written by Christ's actual Apostles. By doing this, they systematically changed the original message.

“The letter also claims Caiaphas and Paul deliberately...” She stopped as another SUV appeared ahead of them, blocking the street.

James's face was grim as he checked his mirrors. “We're about to have company, Sarah. Whatever's in that letter, someone obviously doesn't want it found”. He reached across her to open the glove compartment, revealing a handgun. “Last chance to tell me you're secretly an international spy”.

“Sorry to disappoint. Just a boring academic who may have stumbled onto the biggest cover-up in Christian history”. She tried to smile but her heart was racing.

“Nothing boring about you, Dr. Chen”. James's eyes met hers again for a moment, intense and searching, before returning to the approaching vehicles. “Now, about that safe house I mentioned...”

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The SUVs were closing in from both directions. Sarah clutched her tablet case and nodded. “Drive”.

The Jaguar fishtailed around a corner, spraying water across the pavement. Sarah's phone buzzed again- another text from Father Thomas: 'GET OUT NOW.'

“Problem?” James asked, smoothly manoeuvring between two buses.

“It’s Father Thomas”, showing him the text. “He never sends messages like this”.

“Then your discovery is even more significant than you realise”. James pressed the accelerator harder. “Trust me, we need to keep moving”.

“Ok. I trust you but they're right behind us!” Sarah gasped as they flew around another corner.

“That’s strange”, James said moments later. “They've had at least three clear shots at us since the museum. Vatican security forces don't typically hesitate”.

“What are you saying?”

“I'm saying they might not be trying to eliminate us. Maybe just contain us. Or...” his brow furrowed, “direct us”.

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“To what end?” Sarah asked.

James shook his head. “I don’t know and that is what’s worrying me”.

The SUVs were falling behind but Sarah had a feeling this was just the beginning. She studied James's profile as he drove, noting how his scholarly demeanour had shifted to something more dangerous, more compelling. What other secrets was Dr. Bradford hiding?

A flash of movement caught her eye.
“Motorcycle, coming up fast”.

James checked his mirrors and swore softly. “Time for plan B”. He continued driving for another minute and then made a sharp turn into what appeared to be a solid brick wall- but the holographic projection dissolved around them, revealing a hidden entrance to an underground parking facility.

“MI6 might have been an understatement”, Sarah managed as the wall re-materialised behind them.

James parked and turned to her, his expression serious. “There are organisations

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within organisations, Sarah. Some want the truth found. Others...”. He glanced at her tablet case.

“According to the letter, after adding additional books to the New Testament, Caiaphas went on to set in motion a final manipulation. James- what do you think it was?”

“That’s what we have to find out, Sarah”, James answered, as they both climbed out of the car.

The hunt for truth had begun. And somewhere in the rainy London night, ancient secrets were waiting to be found.