



As fascinating as any best-selling thriller, the rediscovery of Leonardo's *Salvator Mundi*, one of fewer than 20 surviving paintings accepted as from the artist's own hand, has caused a worldwide media sensation.

FINGERS CROSSED

Adam Lakatos knows for sure, there is a smell to the sale of a supposedly unique painting at a standardized auction house in New York. Or rather, it stinks on all sides!

As an art critic, Adam is a much respected journalist with the added value of his expertise on everything to do with Leonardo da Vinci. All seventeen paintings, which have been determined to be original canvases by the Italian master, he has seen in real life more than once.

A few months earlier, rumors circulate that a unique painting is coming on the market. Adam is the first to know through his network, in this case the

eccentric Vicky Shields who owns an Art Gallery in Chelsea, that the work would be Russian.

Tarek al Sharif is in charge of "security" for Mohammed Bin Salman al-Saoud, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia.

Seated in the passenger seat of a Rolls Royce Phantom, he hears Mohammed bin Salman also known as MBS, in the back talking on the phone with one of his financial advisers. Amounts pass by that he can't estimate exactly how many figures are involved. But that does not so much have his attention; it is only when names like Al-Thani, the royal family of Qatar and the Al-Maktoum clan of the United Arab Emirates are mentioned, as well as those of Rupert Murdoch and even Elon Musk, that he is alert and Tarek knows something special is about to happen.

Meanwhile in New York, rumor has it that this is a canvas by Kazimir Malevich that would be auctioned at Christie's. But soon there is confusion. It is not a Russian painter, but a Russian owner who wants to get rid of a capital artwork to the highest bidder.

It is an open secret that this oligarch owns a Leonardo da Vinci.

Adam Lakatos eventually manages to get in touch with Dimitry Rybolovlef the alleged owner of the now much talked about painting under the pretext of wanting to interview him about AS Monaco the soccer club he owns. The Russian invites him to his estate in Hawaii in the hope that the journalist will drop out, but Adam is not easily swayed and is on a plane a day later.

The conversation lasts less than ten minutes when, out of the blue, Adam asks his host: What do you think the Salvator Mundi painting will fetch at Christies?

The Russian looks at him with disdain, shakes his head, gets up, shakes his hand and disappears into

another room. Two security guards make sure Adam is escorted out as quickly as possible.

During a Camel Race in Taif, about an hour's drive from Mecca, Mohammed bin Salman sits in the royal box next to his counterpart; Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates. This is the first time, with the crown prince's approval, that female jockeys will compete.

Tarek al-Sharif sits diagonally behind his boss and, through the "favorable" wind, hears snippets of the conversation Mohammed bin Salman is having with his UAE guest.

'Under no circumstances must the work fall into their hands and so disappear to Qatar forever, even if it costs more than my yacht this opportunity must not be passed by us.'

The man beside him looks at the crown prince and says:

'You can count on us ... as long as you don't forget our new museum in Abu Dhabi!'

Things change for Adam Lakatos when he is invited by a certain Piontek Haßler to Hastings-on-Hudson just outside New York. There, in a café, he meets a man who just might be Vladimir Putin's younger brother. Soon his host gets to the point. He asks if Adam is interested in a well-paid assignment. It has to do with a painting that will soon be up for auction at Christie's, he informs the art critic. There are a few conditions. Such as absolute secrecy of and about his work. Furthermore, the results of the research may never be made public. Also, he is not told exactly what his assignment entails until later.

Adam hesitates and does not want to risk his reputation as a renowned journalist. Before reaching an agreement, he at least wants to know who his client is. Piontek smiles and says, When you have completed your assignment I am sure you will receive an invitation for a closer acquaintance.

He then hands Adam his business card. He reads; Morrison Barret & Haßler Lawyers. New York-London-Zurich-Singapore.

He is momentarily confused but soon realizes that he is being offered something that does not cross his path every day.

After talking back and forth for another fifteen minutes, they shake hands and Adam receives an envelope containing an advance of twenty-five thousand dollars. There is no turning back for the journalist.

Even before the official opening of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Salman receives a private tour from Mohammed bin Zayed and the museum's curator. With his earpiece in, Tarek al-Sharif walks behind them at an appropriate distance. As he gives instructions to his team of security guards, he hears MBS say, This is unique! Macron will feast his eyes tomorrow Mohammed bin Zayed smiles affably and replies, And do you have everything and everyone on standby in New York? MBS puts his arm around his host and whispers something in his ear.

On the day that Christie's releases a press release announcing that a canvas by Leonardo da Vinci will be auctioned, Adam receives a phone call from Piontek Haßler who informs him about the painting by the Italian master just before the news is made public. He also now learns in detail what his task is, namely what is the origin of this work of art, titled; Salvator Mundi. Also called The Redeemer. But more importantly, whether the painting is indeed by Leonardo da Vinci. For now, Piontek leaves out the word "forgery."

Even for Adam Lakatos, getting another seat in the packed auditorium of Christie's at Rockefeller Center on that Wednesday evening of Nov. 15, 2017, was not so easy.

Soon Lot 9 B was announced by the auctioneer. It took less than twenty minutes when the iconic canvas was hammered down for a sloppy four hundred million.

Mohammed bin Salman is never easily exuberant but on this early morning he can hardly control his emotions. On a big screen, from his chateau under the

smoke of Paris, he watches a live stream connection to Christie's in New York where the auctioneer thanks the bidders and the public.

The crown prince cheers and sings a victory song.

Tarek al Sharif walks down the hallway and looks with some surprise at the closed doors of his boss' departure where a party is seemingly being celebrated.

For Adam Lakatos, after that never-before-seen auction at Christie's, a search begins for the truth of the Savior. Not so much about his existence, because with a price of nearly half a billion, that is rock-solid proof. But what is the origin of the canvas, where did the painting come from? And the key question: is it even a real Leonardo da Vinci? **Fingers Crossed!**