

Chapter Five, Part Three “Habemus Problem”

Thursday, January 28, 2038
Third Day of Papal Conclave
12:45 P.M.

“Your ex seriously ended a relationship because you wouldn’t drop a story?” Vinya unspooled the tortilla on her vegan tofu wrap and began carefully picking out the carrot shreds. “And I thought I’d dated jerks. If I’m ever in Wisconsin, remind me to maul his car with a golf club – I’m good at that”

Nina tore the cellophane off her turkey sandwich, squeezed on a liberal dollop of mustard out of a packet, and took a seat on the concrete floor of the hotel roof terrace. “Yup. He says I dumped him but it’s one of those chicken-or-egg debates – depends on where you count from. Also, you’re really going to have to explain the carrots thing.”

Vinya re-wrapped the tortilla. “Jains can’t eat death,” she said, taking a large bite.

Nina took a nibble off her very meaty sandwich and swallowed a bit guiltily. “Okay, so you’re vegetarian – but what about the carrots?”

Vinya pointed at the pile of orange shreds she’d placed on a napkin. “Digging up a root kills a plant,” Vinya said. “No bueno.”

Nina let out a low whistle. “So, like, you can’t -”

“No beets, no potatoes, no onions, no ginger, and – my favorite – no garlic.”

Nina shook her head. “Wow. I think garlic probably paid my college tuition.”

Vinya almost snorted. “Trust me, it smells way more tempting to me than to you.” She took another bite of her lunch. “My first two years of college I decided I was *not* a good Jain girl and ate my weight in garlic bread. Granted I was also doxxed on tequila and ecstasy for most of that, so maybe it wasn’t as good as I thought it was.”

Nina raised an eyebrow and decided it was a good time to change the subject. “So, threatening to golf-club my ex’s car is pretty specific, and I’m a reporter, so I have to ask if that’s from experience”

Vinya shifted nervously and smirked.

“Seriously?” Nina pounced. “Um...details?”

“It was during that college phase,” Vinya said, clearly trying to hold in a giggle. “I was a different person then, and it was a *very* bad breakup.”

Nina burst out laughing. “You actually did that?”

“Oh, I was a grade-A hot mess before journalism,” Vinya said. “This job is my outlet.”

“Wow,” Nina said, “Do I want to know the make and model.”

Vinya smiled slyly. “It’s a Titleist 7-Iron. My dad made me keep it after he paid the boy off not to file charges.”

“Not the club!”

“Oh, you mean the car,” Vinya said innocently. “If memory serves, it was a Jaguar coupe. New. Yellow. Very sporty. The leather seats were great for...let’s just say I didn’t like other girls sharing them.”

Nina’s jaw dropped. “You beat up a brand new Jag? Heck, don’t waste your talent on Isaiah’s Camry. I hated that thing.”

“Hey,” came a voice from behind them. Nina turned to see Aiden at the door to the stairwell. “Vinya, would you mind if I borrow my reporter? Lunch ended ten minutes ago.”

“Well, at least he remembered my name,” Vinya snarked, “That’s a first for this crowd.”

Nina got to her feet and dusted herself off. “He doesn’t miss details – at all.”

“Be right there!” she shouted back to Aiden, “No nun will be left unturned!”

“Funny,” Aiden said dryly, “Meet me downstairs in five.”

Vinya gave Nina a side-eye. “I didn’t think you two were getting along.”

Nina shrugged. “He’s not bad once you get used to him.”

2:45 P.M.

Madison had been hitting the coffee hard all day. Thankfully, nobody asked what she had done with that bottle of Ardbeg last night, or why she referred to it as “pulling a Brazil”, or why a 37-year-old national news correspondent had any business “pulling a Brazil.” Lucky for her, the job for today consisted of standing off to the side of St. Peter’s Square, reporting on occasional puffs of chimney-smoke, and listening to Priscilla attempt to tolerate the musings of Father Finian O’Reilly. The papal biographer had flown in last night and spent the entire morning talking about how the “Holy Spirit was working in the hearts of the cardinals to identify the new Holy Father.”

Apparently, he’d been recommended by author and talking-head S. Flannery MacClennan – who hated Prissy with a blazing passion.

Madison could have warned Prissy that any recommendation from Flannery was a trap, but it was too entertaining listening to Priscilla’s barely concealed rage. Madison had put a note in her phone to send Flannery flowers or chocolates or something.

Then it happened. She was halfway through a long gulp of coffee when a puff of stark white smoke issued from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel.

Madison almost choked on her drink and shot out of her folding chair. “We got a pope! Get the cameras running! Aiden, take Nina out into the crowd and find some happy nuns to interview – make sure they’re nuns. Prissy hates nuns!”

Priscilla’s voice blared out of Madison’s earpiece. “Looks like they picked who gets to wear the white dress. You ready to go live in two minutes?”

“Yup!” Madison shouted back.

The next forty-five minutes were pure chaos. Madison talked about the mood of breathless anticipation, Nina was practically trampled on camera as throngs of pilgrims rushed into the square, and Priscilla gritted her teeth as Father Finian talked about how wonderful this all was. Then two priests emerged to open the doors to the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica, closing a red curtain across the door.

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT
WWN SPECIAL REPORT
1/28/2038

PRISCILLA DAVIS: There's something going on. Father Finian, refresh us on what happens next.

FR. FINIAN O'REILLY, S.J.: Well, we should see the Cardinal Protodeacon, that's Cardinal Parker of the United States, come out from behind that curtain and announce the famous '*Habemus Papam*', meaning 'we have a pope'. Then he will recite a Latin formula giving the name of the new pope and the new papal name that he has chosen.

DAVIS: I never cease to be fascinated by how arcane these things are. Here he comes, let's watch.

(BRIAN CARDINAL PARKER emerges on the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica. An aide holds a microphone)

BRIAN CARDINAL PARKER: *Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum. Habemus papam! Eminentissimum ac reverendissimum dominum,*

O'REILLY: And here’s the name.

CARDINAL PARKER: *Dominum, Fletcherum-*”

O'RIELLY: Holy (expletive bleeped)!

DAVIS: That was live, Father!

CARDINAL PARKER: *Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Cardinalem Adams.*

O'REILLY: The new pope is Cardinal Fletcher Adams of New Zealand! I'm going to be honest with you, he's not someone I know well at all. Out of left field is an understatement.

DAVIS: And the name, Father?

O'REILLY: In a second.

CARDINAL PARKER: *Qui sibi nomen imposuit Eutychiani Secundi.*

DAVIS: Father?

O'REILLY: I...sorry. I couldn't recognize it other than 'the second.' I think he may have taken one of the Greek papal names from deep, deep in antiquity. Very, very strange.

(Screen displays footage of **CARDINAL FLETCHER ADAMS** taking his conclave oath earlier in the week)

DAVIS: I suppose we'll wait for reports on the name. I'm not a historian but I think I can say confidently that Cardinal Adams is the first Kiwi to lead the Catholic Church. My tablet is telling me he's 62 years old, Archbishop of Wellington, and has taken a vow of extreme poverty.

O'REILLY: Correct, he's the first cardinal – and first bishop - ever to come from from the Missionaries of Charity Fathers, that's the small priestly branch of Mother Teresa's order. So, his vows are to serve the poorest of the poor.

DAVIS: It says he's also known for building schools for low-income Māori children, and he's the tallest cardinal at seven-foot-one. That ought to be interesting to see.

(SILENCE for ten seconds – on the screen, **CARDINAL PARKER** waves and retreats behind the balcony curtain.)

DAVIS: Okay, the name is coming over the wire from the Vatican press release. Cardinal Adams has indeed taken the name of an obscure pope from the third century. He will be

known as - and I want to make sure I pronounce this correctly - Pope Eutychian the Second. Father?

O'REILLY: Honestly, I'm a bit gobsmacked. I'm sorry to say I've never heard of Pope Eutychian – well, Eutychian the First now. A lot of very old monuments will need to be updated with that numeral.

DAVIS: Give me a second...Yes, our producers are saying that Pope St. Eutychian reigned from the year 275 to the year 283, and that almost nothing is known about him in the historical record. Also, this this is, by far, the longest gap between two popes of the same name in history. Father, do you have any thoughts on what could possess someone to reach that far back into obscurity?

O'REILLY: Not at all – only that the choice itself shows an attention to detail and a willingness to honor a pope who, as you said, has been almost entirely forgotten. There's a purposefulness there that I want to hear more about when the new Holy Father emerges.

DAVIS: And when do we expect that?

O'REILLY: If history is any guide, we should expect to see him in five to ten minutes.

3:37 P.M.

You have got to be kidding me, Aiden thought to himself. He thought he'd seen everything, but this was a new one.

"When we get home," he muttered, "I am going to kill this woman myself." After a few moments of struggling, he was finally able to free one arm from under Nina's unconscious body and tap his earpiece to radio in.

"Hey NaQuan!" He yelled, trying to compete with the roar of the crowd around him. "It's Aiden. Nina fainted."

"She *what?*"

“Fainted! Blacked out. Caught the train to dreamland.”

The line went silent. NaQuan the unflappable had been stumped - which for some reason gave Aiden an odd sense of accomplishment.

Finally NaQuan radioed back, “She still out?”

“Yup!”

“She hurt?”

“No. I caught her on the way down.”

“How close to the studio?”

“Five minutes’ walk normally - but we have a lot of crowds down here!”

That was an understatement. People were streaming into the square, and those that were already here were starting to process the news and chanting “Eu-thy-chian-o! Eu-thy-chian-o!”

“Look,” NaQuan’s voice refocused him. “Try to get her awake and back here. If not...just get her out of the square before she gets trampled.”

“Right,” he said under his breath, firmly patting Nina on the cheek. “Come on, Nina! Let’s go.”

The radio conversation kept going in his ear.

“NaQuan to Priscilla. Constantinos fainted.”

“Wait, what?” Priscilla shouted.

“You heard me. Look, it’s an emergency, so unless you have any objections I’m throwing makeup-girl from lifestyle out with Aiden, we need someone out there.”

“Are you freaking kidding me?!” Priscilla shot back.

Aiden tapped his earpiece. “No! Definitely not a good idea!”

“Look,” came NaQuan. “She’s professional on-camera talent, and she’s nothing if not made up.”

There was silence for a second, and Aiden finally saw Nina’s eyelashes start to flutter.

“Nina’s coming around,” he radioed back.

“I don’t care,” NaQuan said, “She’s coming back here for some fluids. Last thing I need is her pulling a fainting goat on national TV.”

Nina gasped for breath and bolted to her feet.

“Whoa, whoa!” she screamed over the crowd. “What happened?”

“You fainted,” Aiden shouted back, “and you’re going back to the studio to sit down.”

“But I have to do interviews!” She grabbed her microphone off the ground, despite being obviously dizzy.

“Fat chance! We’re going in.”

Meanwhile, the conversation in his earpiece was continuing fast and furious, with Priscilla doing most of the yelling,

“Hey, lifestyle girl! What’s your name again?...Vinya?...Okay Vinya, grab your blazer, you just joined the news division.”

3:46 P.M.

Nina stumbled out of the elevator into the studio. Her head was starting to spin again, and the crowd noise was echoing through her skull.

NaQuan was waiting with an oversized bottle of red Gatorade and a very nervous-looking Vinya. The bottle was shoved in Nina’s face.

“Here,” NaQuan said. “Grab a seat in the control room and we’ll see what we can do to get you back out there.”

He turned to Aiden, who was standing behind her. “Healy?”

“Yeah?” Aiden answered.

“Don’t even bother getting out of the elevator. Get Jain out there and set up as quick as you can.”

He pushed Vinya into the elevator.

“Oh, so I get the last-name-only treatment now?” Vinya snarked. “I still have to go on record as thinking that this is a really, really bad id-”

The doors closed before she could finish her sentence.

NaQuan raised his eyebrows shook his head at the now-closed doors, then turned back to Nina. “Seriously, sit down. Now.”

Nina took a swig of the Gatorade and felt her feet get firmer under her. The room was still whirling round her, but not quite as fast. She blinked a few times to clear her head, then finally got out what she’d been meaning to say the whole time.

“Where’s Dan? I need to talk to him.”

NaQuan put a hand on her shoulder and started forcibly steering her to the control room. “He’s on air. And when I said you needed to sit down, it wasn’t a request.”

The ground was starting to feel firmer, but all Nina could think about was rushing downstairs and opening the stupid safe.

“I seriously need to talk to Dan.” she prodded NaQuan.

“Cool your jets,” he said, “The pope’s about to come out. Sit back and watch the excitement. We got it on 13 screens.”

“The curtains are moving!” shouted one of his assistants.

NaQuan ran back to his console and threw on his headphones. “Okay boys, how does the quality of this pool feed sound back in DC?...I know it’s garbage. What flavor of garbage and can you fix it?”

“Curtains are open!” the assistant bellowed.

“Okay, just cut to it. We go to war with the sound we have.”

Nina focused on the middle screen, displaying WWN’s broadcast feed with a chyron reading “POPE EUTYCHIAN II TO GIVE FIRST BLESSING.”

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT
WWN SPECIAL REPORT
1/28/2038

PRICILLA DAVIS: So here he comes.

(Curtains open, a priest carrying a cross emerges, followed by **POPE EUTYCHIAN II**)

FR. FINIAN O’REILLY, S.J.: Led by cross, the new pope will address the crowd and give his first blessing *Urbi et...*wait, what the hell?

DAVIS: Father!

O’REILLY: He’s come out in shirt-sleeves! Actually that’s the habit of the Missionaries of Charity Fathers - they’re a very modernist order that way. Khakis and powder-blue dress shirts with priestly collars. So, he’s decided to strip away all the papal finery, not even wearing the white cassock. This is going to be interesting.

DAVIS: He’s coming to the mic. Let’s listen.

HIS HOLINESS POPE EUTYCHIAN II (*Simultaneous translation from Italian*): Brothers and sisters, they say the Holy Spirit can choose from anywhere, but this is a bit ridiculous.

(CROWD NOISE – much laughter)

POPE EUTYCHIAN II (*Simultaneous translation from Italian*): In the future, I will do my best to speak to you better in your beautiful language, but right now I feel I must speak from the heart.

(*In English – no simultaneous translation*) I don't think anyone expected this, least of all me. A great pope would have something profound to say, but I'm a simple priest, and I don't see the point in trying to be anything else. My brother cardinals know that they are not getting a great pope or a saint in me, because I spent the last three days trying to tell them that - as bluntly as I humanly could.

But many of my brothers - and this I believe is the word of the Holy Spirit - have told me that this is not a time for the greatness of popes, but for the glory of the Lord. There have been a few of us in the conclave who found ourselves confused and unable to feel God's will in this process. We resolved, and for this I will credit my friend Cardinal Clementi of the Vatican Archives, to offer prayers to the sainted early popes that time has mostly forgotten. If you will, we were seeking guidance from Holy Fathers who may not have been directly consulted in some centuries.

I personally found myself offering prayers to Pope St. Eutychian, who left no record for history other than that he served. I had never heard his name before this week, but I connected with the idea that he led in a time of peace, recorded no misdeeds, and left nothing behind to glorify himself. I hope that you will join me in remembering him, and I only hope that something similar will one day be said of me.

4:15 P.M.

Nina was pacing in front of the concierge counter, alternating glances between the headlines scrolling on her watch and the Italian language pope-coverage on the TV. She didn't understand a word of it, but she didn't need to. Her back-alley contact had just become the spiritual guide to somewhere north of a billion people, and just thinking about it made her terrified and excited and jittery.

She wanted to jump up and down – but she also wanted to throw up.

Finally, Dan appeared out of the elevators, wearing his crazy just-off-air eyes and (as always) struggling to free himself from his suit jacket.

“What’s the idea, rookie?” he huffed. “Couldn’t you have told me whatever it is upstairs?”

“No.” Nina said, turning to the concierge, “Mario, we’re both here, get the envelope out of the safe.”

Mario looked at Dan for a second approval, receiving a skeptical but decisive nod.

“I will have it shortly,” the concierge said as he rushed to the back room. He returned a few seconds later with Vinya’s red envelope.

Nina grabbed it out of his hand and shoved it emphatically at Dan.

“Open it.”

He took the envelope and gingerly ripped open the with his index finger. “I know this is important to you, but this better be...”

He stopped cold as he read what Nina had written on the index card. He slid it back into the envelope, and Nina swore she saw *his* hands trembling.

“Rookie,” he said slowly, “I need you to know there’s a fifty-percent chance – minimum – that this man will never answer your call, given where we are now.”

Nina felt her shoulders sag and all the wind go out of her. She hadn’t considered that angle. Getting through to the Pope, even on a private cell number, was not going to be easy – and there was every reason to think he might have to welch on his promise with the demands of the new office. The room was starting to spin again.

She tried to steady herself and nodded. “I understand that.”

“Good,” Dan said, “because you also need to understand that you may have just scored the single biggest scoop in the history of this network.”