

## Chapter Fifteen, Part Three “Heaven, Hell, and Nirvana”

**Wednesday, March 31, 2038**  
**Thirty Minutes Until Interview**

**Vatican City**  
**12:30 A.M.**

Everyone, up to and including Prissy, had said the same thing to Nina before she headed out for Rome. “Everything is going to be fine.”

Nina was not fine.

She was sitting alone in a cavernous, Renaissance-era waiting room – in the Apostolic Palace – in the middle of the night. She was playing dress up in a Vera Wang dress she couldn’t afford, wearing heels that cost a month’s salary, and she was taking deep breaths into a stolen airplane barf bag.

In no universe was that “fine.”

Nothing had gone according to plan since they touched down in Rome yesterday. The ‘plan’ had been to do the papal interview earlier in the day, edit it so that it looked shiny, then air it during the evening back in the States. Somehow, no one in entire Vatican had relayed this to the pope.

Apparently, he wanted something “raw and unfiltered” – which was code for “live.”

Priscilla had planned a three-hour special, dependent on the interview airing at exactly 7:00 P.M. Eastern, and she had made that point loudly to the Vatican press office earlier today. That led their Vatican contacts to kick the issue up the chain, which led their supervisors to kick it *all the way* up the chain, which led to the result nobody expected.

An hour later, a clearly agitated Vatican press official had delivered the news. “The Holy Father would be happy to work within your existing schedule. He will sit for the interview at one A.M., and our full staff will be available to assist.”

In addition, the Holy Father had also scrapped the plan to stage the interview in the lavish Papal Apartments, a plan which Priscilla had personally negotiated with the Vatican Press Office and which Aiden's team had been setting up for. That team had now been spirited off to scout some top-secret location, which left Nina alone in a giant room that echoed whenever she moved her feet.

Hence the whole breathing-into-a-bag thing.

Aiden arrived back, along with several men in suits. He looked more put-together than she'd ever seen him, having traded his jeans for a blue WWN polo and slacks.

He blanched at the sight of the barf bag and whispered something to the head of the suit-brigade - who quickly made his followers disappear.

Aiden made his way to Nina's side and put a hand on her shoulder. "You okay there? Trust me you're going to be—"

"Fine." Nina finished the platitude, looking up at him. "Tell me that in a few hours. My stomach is doing cartwheels."

Aiden squeezed her shoulder a bit harder. "I know, mine too, but at least nobody's shooting at you. Trust me, that makes it worse."

"You're not helping."

"Right." Aiden stared at his feet. "I suck at pep talks. How's this instead?"

He put a hand to her cheek and kissed her softly.

The stomach stopped turning, at least for a second. "Any better?" he asked as he let go.

"A little," Nina said, "I don't think I got the full effect, though." Nina grabbed him by the hair and pulled him in for another go, this time a good bit longer.

That was when an Italian-accented voice clanged through the room. "Am I interrupting?"

Aiden let go of Nina and wheeled around. “What the h-”

Then he covered his mouth when he saw who it was.

A portly, balding priest was staring at them, wearing a wry smirk. He chuckled, looked over his shoulder pointed at a painting depicting humanity’s final judgment.

“That the Hell,” he said in thick New Zealand accent, pointing at one side of the painting. Then he moved his finger to the other side of the canvas. “That the Heaven.” He took a step forward and offered a handshake. “Good to finally meet you, Miss Constantinos. I’m Father Ngata, Personal Assistant to His Holiness. Are you ready to head over?”

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## **The Hiram Fong**

**6:58 P.M. Eastern Time**

“Come on, it’s starting!” Sinéad shouted from the living room.

Emma was doing battle with the microwave. “Be right there. Waiting for the popcorn.”

The machine let out a loud beep. “Your popcorn is ready,” intoned a computerized voice, “Please allow the bag to cool, as the contents may be—”

“Shut your mouth, Evangeline.” Emma yanked open the microwave door, “I eat what I want.” She did not need to deal with judgmental robots when her nerves were already fried.

“It’s gonna be fine,” she mouthed to herself. “Just be cool.”

She grabbed the steaming bag of Wasabi-Mango Pop Secret and slammed the microwave shut.

In the living room, she found Sinéad glued to the ongoing pope coverage on one of the iWindows. The other two had been re-purposed as computer screens, displaying WWN’s proprietary “WorldWorm” social media tracker. Two steadily increasing line graphs

marked the twitter handles for Nina and the Pope - “@Pontifex” and “@NinaC\_WWN,” respectively.

Sinéad smiled at Emma, “Like my pope-per-view command center?”

Emma sighed. Why did the girl have to be so smiley?

What would normal Emma do right now?

She faked an eye-roll. “You are such a nerd. Can we at least get one real window?”

Sinéad stuck out a pouty lip. “Okay, but I don’t want to smell the swamp. Screen one, display current view, Vatican City – include weather effects”

The lights faded and a dry Mediterranean breeze wafted into the room. One window shifted from Sinéad’s charts to display a night scene overlooking a deserted St. Peter’s Square.

Emma chuckled. “Well, that’s one way to set the mood.” Maybe this wasn’t going to be as hard as she thought.

Sinéad shushed her and shoved her hand into the popcorn bag. “Quiet, it’s almost seven!”

“That’s all for tonight’s special edition of *WWN Evening News*.” Priscilla said from inside the window. “Thanks to special contributors Dan Dragovich and Father Finian O’Reilly. We’ll be back with more after the interview, but right now, we go live to the Vatican.”

As Pricilla’s image faded, WWN’s theme music played. The screen was enveloped by a graphic showing Nina and the Pope’s faces, along with the words, “POPE EUTYCHIAN SPEAKS.”

“And now,” said a deep voiced announcer, “Live from the Vatican, WWN Correspondent Nina Constantinos.”

Emma let out a breath through her nose. She was getting really sick of hearing that name.

Nina's image appeared, standing not in a grand Vatican palace, but in an office hallway next to a water cooler.

"What in heck?" Emma blurted.

Nina gave one of her smarmy Wisconsin smiles, bright enough to make Emma sick.

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**OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT  
WWN SPECIAL REPORT  
NINA CONSTANTINOS INTERVIEWS POPE EUTYCHIAN II  
MARCH 31, 2038**

**NINA CONSTANTINOS:** It's one A.M. in Rome, and I have no clue where I am. Just under a half-hour ago, I was put in a van with tinted windows and taken here - an ordinary-looking office building somewhere inside the Vatican. The location is a closely guarded secret, because three weeks ago, this hallway became the nerve center of the Catholic Church. There is a new pope, Eutychian II, and a new way of doing things here. Laid-back, no-frills, and distinctly Kiwi. Task one, I'm told, was to move the pope's private offices from the palatial Apostolic Palace to a more normal work environment, complete with papal water cooler.

That said, the new pope is also known for being introverted, soft-spoken, and intensely private. Who is this unassuming man, and how will he shepherd his billion-strong flock? The first clue might be that he insisted on showing us this, his most private space.

**(CONSTANTINOS opens a door, revealing an office. Inside is POPE EUTYCHIAN II)**

**HIS HOLINESS POPE EUTYCHIAN II:** Good to see you, Nina. What do you think of the new digs?

**CONSTANTINOS:** I like it. It has a bit of a startup feel.

**EUTYCHIAN:** (\*Laughs\*) Well, we've only been in business two thousand years, so we're still finding our footing.

**CONSTANTINOS:** So, I have to ask what the motivation is with this place. You didn't even take the corner office.

**EUTYCHIAN:** Your cameraman probably wishes I took the corner. I underestimated how many people would be in here at any given time. But seriously, I don't like symbols of authority, and I've never had a fancy office. I'm an old schoolmaster, and before that I was working in a very poor neighborhood in Mexico. I had an office as Archbishop, and honestly it always looked empty. My things were huddled in a little corner around my desk. This is much better.

**CONSTANTINOS:** Well, at least you don't have a lot to unpack.

**EUTYCHIAN:** Well, I can't have a lot, actually. I mean – people probably already know this because of all the media coverage - but as a Missionary of Charity Father I'm under an extra vow of poverty compared to most priests. You know, I horrified the papal tailor when he found out that I'm only allowed to own three sets of clothing. People forget that I was the first MCF ever to become a bishop – and I frustrated the daylights out of the order's Superior General trying to figure out how I could do bishop things without breaking my vows. One time, I had to call him up and tell him that the diocese was demanding I carry an iPad. That got a straight-up 'no.' I don't know what the poor bloke's going to do now.

**CONSTANTINOS:** That brings me back to the biggest question I had coming in. What makes someone join an order like that? It's pretty severe, if you don't mind my saying."

**EUTYCHIAN:** Well, that's just a matter of perspective. About a billion people live on less than two U.S. dollars a day. By that standard, my vows are a piece of cake. If they can do it, I can manage.

**CONSTANTINOS:** With respect, Your Holiness, you didn't answer my question. Why? Your dad was a stockbroker, your mother was a lawyer - neither of them Catholic. You went to college in the U.S. - played Division I college basketball for Gonzaga. I even read you had a shot at the NBA. How does that kid decide to give it all up, take a vow of extreme poverty, and go work in the slums of Tijuana?

(TEN SECONDS OF SILENCE)

**EUTYCHIAN:** You know, I've never really had it put to me that way. I used to tell a lot of street kids that money isn't what makes you rich. There are lots of people with money who are spiritually poor. The me that thought he wanted to play in the NBA, he didn't feel rich. He felt empty. That's why I was always cranked up to eleven with whatever I did - basketball, whatever. I didn't meet anyone who didn't have that hole until a few MCFs came through to give a speech at Gonzaga - Jesuit school and all. Those guys seemed like they got it, and they were like taking the priesthood and really running with it. That appealed to me - I used to say that if you're going to do something, do it all the way. And they did.

**CONSTANTINOS:** So, that's when you got the bug? Just like that?

**EUTYCHIAN:** Oh no, not then. Although, that was when I decided that not all priests were full of...well I used different language then.

**CONTANTINOS:** Yeah, we try not to put that on TV

**EUTYCHIAN:** (\*Laughing\*) I'd hate to get the first papal bleep. Anyway, I had my own religion then, in a way. I mean, I always said I was an atheist, but you know where Gonzaga is right? Spokane, Washington - and I was there in the early '90s. If you were a college student in 1994, especially in the Northwest of America, there was one god - and he wasn't the one I serve now, if you get my drift.

**CONSTANTINOS:** I don't follow.

**EUTYCHIAN:** You weren't even born yet, were you?

**CONTANTINOS:** (\*Shakes head\*) Not even close.

**EUTYCHIAN:** That makes me feel older than being pope. Anyway, that was the Grunge era, and we were the eye of the cyclone. Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, Soundgarden - all those bands were from Seattle. It was everywhere when I got over to the States, and right at the top, the big one, was Kurt Cobain. He was an idol for me. The man could do whatever he wanted, however he wanted, and still be the biggest rock star in the world. He had something to say and he just let it all out - no filter. I saw myself in that. I wanted to be that. I'll be honest, when those priests came, I thought they might have had a point -

but I'd found my path. I was going to ride the basketball thing as far as I could and be the Kurt Cobain of the NBA. Grungy long hair and all.

**CONTANTINOS:** So, what happened?

**EUTYCHIAN:** Don't seriously tell me you don't know what happened to Kurt Cobain.

**CONTANTINOS:** I know he died, but what does that mean for you?

(FIVE SECONDS OF SILENCE)

**EUTYCHIAN:** I...

(**EUTYCHIAN** wipes away a tear.)

**EUTYCHIAN:** I'm sorry. Nobody's ever actually asked me that. I feel like I know the answer, but I haven't tried to put it in words before. He...he got everything I wanted, and it wasn't enough. He ended it, at 27. I think – that was sort of my Ecclesiastes realization. “Meaningless, Meaningless, everything is meaningless.” When you get all the way down there, you realize that a lot of things don't mean as much as you thought they did – and that you need to find something real.

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“Night, Emma.” Sinéad said, closing the door to her room.

“Night, nerd!” Emma laughed back as the door clicked shut.

Sinéad sank onto her bed and let out a long breath. The interview had been perfect. Amazing. A masterpiece of modern journalism. Textbooks were going to have entire pages devoted to that event. It was thrilling, compelling, everything TV was supposed to be.

And Priscilla was going to be livid tomorrow.



The script was off, the message was off. Nothing about it was on-message, and Nina hadn't asked a single question off the pre-submitted list.

Sinéad thought it was awesome, but the office was going to *suck* in the morning.

"Screw it," she mouthed to herself, "deal with the stress later." Right now she needed sleep. She rolled over, with half a mind to conk out in her clothes, but that's when she heard it. A soft, quick huffing, punctuated by small puffs of orange light.

Dragon breath.

Something about the rhythm of Dumby's breathing was off. Way off. She snapped her eyes open and rolled toward her iWindow. The castle scene was dark, as usual, but what wasn't usual was Dumby's glowing eyes staring back at her. He was wide awake and panting.

She sprang up and turned on the lights. "Oh no, boy! What's wrong. Did Mommy not give you your sheepy snack before bed?"

She could have sworn she'd set him up for an automatic feeding this morning, and play time. Had she forgotten? "Oh no, Mommy's sorry. Let's get you a nice tasty cow. Or we could sacrifice a virgin from the village, would you like that?"

Dumby cocked his head and fixed her with a quizzical stare. No virgins then.

Sinéad pulled up his health stats, just to see how badly she'd screwed up and...no, that didn't make sense. He was full and exercised. All the scheduled programming had worked. So why wasn't he sleeping like a ginormous fire-breathing baby?

She dug deeper. No events. No diseases. That made no sense. If his numbers were good, the only reason he'd be acting agitated would be a lot of noise in the room. He did get easily startled, but Sinéad hadn't been in this room since breakfast.

Sinéad looked back at Dumby, feeling her pulse start to speed back up. She punched few buttons and three knights appeared on the parapet of the castle with a giant rake attached to a stick. "Shhh," she tried to calm the dragon, "it's okay, mommy's here now."

The knights reached down gingerly. The scratcher only worked if the dragon was agitated by stimuli from outside the game. Otherwise, the knights were about to get torched. The back-scratcher hit the dorsal spines on the back of Dumby's neck, and he wagged his rump in contented bliss. He'd be asleep in no time.

Sinéad, on the other hand, felt her hands start twitching. Someone other than her had been in here, and they'd made enough noise to freak out her dragon.

She looked around the room. Everything seemed clean and organized, minus the dirty-clothes hamper – which was its usual overflowing self.

She took another scan, looking at all the Disney knick-knacks.

Her eyes settled on the *Frozen* figurines on the dresser. Elsa was supposed to be on the left, not the right.

Sinéad got out of bed and flipped on the lights. All the other figures were in place. The pictures were unmoved. She looked around again, and there it was. A depression in the carpet peeking out from under the leg of the dresser.

Whoever was in here had taken great care to put the dresser back exactly, but they'd missed by about a half-inch. Why would anyone do that?

Sinéad bent down and pulled the dresser about a foot away from the wall, noticing a very soft red glow as she did so. A tiny circular device stuck to the wall, shining one dim-but-steady red diode. Whatever it was, it was on.

Sinéad reached back and pulled the black bulb off the wall. It came unstuck with almost no effort. It didn't look like anything, except maybe a small bomb from a spy movie – but her arm was still attached, so that probably wasn't it.

Then the tiny light started blinking.

Sinéad turned it around in her hand one more time, and then she saw the letters stamped into the back.

*SHURE*

That rang a bell. She'd seen it. On equipment.

No. Not just equipment. Microphones. Shure manufactured microphones.

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## **UNITED STATES TWITTER TRENDING TOPICS**

**MARCH 31, 2038**

#RockerPope

#NinaConstantinos

#RIPCobain

#MarchMadness

#CalculatingStarsMovie

#Constantinos

#GirlCrush

#MarryMeNina