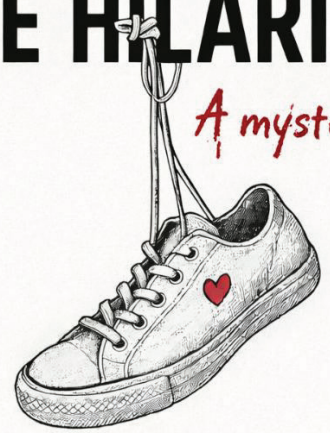


POPE HILARIUS II

A mystery novel



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Robert Falco

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Pope Hilarius II
A mystery novel by Robert Falco

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This is a work of fiction. While certain real people, institutions, places, and historical events are mentioned, the characters, events, dialogue, and situations portrayed are fictionalized or imagined, including those set in the future. Any opinions expressed by fictional characters are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the author. No insult or offence is intended towards any person, institution, or belief.

In loving memory
of my sister,
Maureen (1973—1999).

Prologue

Although entirely fictional, this much is true: once there was a Pope Hilarius.
He reigned briefly and is mostly forgotten. His successor, Pope Simplicius, suffered much the same fate, remembered today as little more than a footnote in the annals of Church history, or perhaps the answer to a particularly tricky question on a Catholic quiz show.

But our story is of Hilarius II — perhaps the most remarkable Pope the world has ever seen, whose reign will not be so easily forgotten.

Our story takes place in the not-so-distant future (2035–2060 AD).

Chapter One

Sneakers on Marble

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"*In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.*"
— 1 Samuel 3:1

"*A mysterious man has come to Vatican City.*"

— Anonymous Vatican source

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The old world shuffled forward, red-robed and ill at ease.

A procession of cardinals, their robes like crimson shadows, moved in near-choreographed silence.
The sound of their footsteps echoed across the marble floors of the Apostolic Palace—measured, deliberate.
Cardinal after cardinal moved silently, solemnly, in ceremonial dress.
The red of their robes fluttered softly with each step, catching golden candlelight in their folds.
Somewhere nearby, incense curled through the air from a gently swinging thurible, its soft chime keeping time with the near-liturgical rhythm of their procession.

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And then—a faint squeak. Not the sound of leather or polished soles, but something else. Rubber on marble. Ordinary. Out of place.
Several cardinals slowed almost imperceptibly, glancing sideways.
"That sound again," murmured Cardinal Estevez of Buenos Aires, pausing mid-step.
"It's his shoes," whispered Cardinal McKenna of New York. "Sneakers."

“Sneakers?” hissed Cardinal Pignatelli, scandalised. “*Ma dai*… You’re certain?”
McKenna gave a slow nod. “They squeaked in the chapel too.”
They continued walking.
A silence followed—dense, troubled.

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Then the murmuring began. Like Korah and his kin once murmured against Moses in some mist-veiled wilderness of old.
“I still don’t know if we’ve done the right thing,” said Cardinal de Lemos of Lisbon.
“We had no choice,” replied Cardinal Okafor of Lagos. “He had to be consecrated before the announcement. There was no other way. He wasn’t even a bishop. Not a priest. Not even a deacon—until an hour ago.”
Cardinal Petrovsky exhaled audibly. “The procedure was… unorthodox.”
“Highly irregular,” intoned Cardinal Barzagli of Florence, for the third time that morning.
“Emergency consecration during conclave is rare, not forbidden,” countered Okafor.
“But his age. He is not thirty-five,” said Estevez.
“That’s not canonically relevant,” murmured Cardinal Duarte. “According to the law, he need only be a baptized male. That’s it.”
“Besides,” said Cardinal Schönborn dryly, “even secular courts have deemed that age limit discriminatory. That debate is long settled.”
Another cardinal’s voice floated through the corridor. “He’s insisting on appearing in lay clothes. No vestments. No ring.”
Pignatelli shook his head. “He wants to appear ‘as himself.’ Whatever that means.”
“Well,” drawled Cardinal Roux, half-laughing, “it could have been worse, I suppose.”
“Oh?” said Pignatelli, raising an eyebrow.
“Imagine if it had been a woman.”
There was a stifled burst of laughter. Even Barzagli’s solemn facade cracked momentarily. Yet, some of the cardinals exchanged uneasy glances, clearly unsettled by the remark.
Cardinal Mendonça laughed so hard he nearly lost his footing.
“Careful!” McKenna said, steadying him. “Slippery floors.”

“Honestly,” wheezed the laughing cardinal, dabbing his eyes, “sneakers on marble might be the only sensible thing about this day. Better grip than those blasted velvet slippery slippers.”
“Highly irregular,” Barzagli muttered again, though there was a twitch at the corner of his mouth.

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“Well,” sighed Roux with mock-theatrical drama, “at least the conclave is over. Four months, gentlemen. Four months! We could have rewritten Leviticus twice. Even a bad pope is better than no pope at all.”
“I wouldn’t say that too loudly,” grunted Cardinal Bamba of Dakar.
“Unless you’re hoping for a resurrection of Alexander VI, whose papal values included a rather generous attitude towards murder and involved a suspicious series of accidents.”
“Or Benedict IX – who sold the papacy like it was a second-hand mule”, suggested McKenna.
A cynical and outspoken cardinal chimed in, somewhat unfortunately, referring to a far more recent pope: “his papacy was also troublesome, although he had the good sense of resigning.”
A murmur of disapproval circled the room.
They turned a corner.

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The silhouette of the chosen – and freshly anointed – figure could just be glimpsed ahead, standing near the great bronze doors. Young. Still. Tall. Still dwarfed by the immensity of the space around him.
A heavy silence.
“I only hope he’s chosen a weighty name,” murmured de Lemos. “Something strong. Authoritative. He’ll need it.”
“I was thinking,” said McKenna, “if I had been elected, I would have chosen Leo. Or maybe Gregory.”
“Pius,” added Estevez. “A name that carries tradition. Dignity.”
“Celestine,” said Petrovsky. “The reluctant pope.[1] Out of humility.”
Pignatelli snorted. “And dead in a cell. That didn’t end well.”
“Highly irregular,” mumbled Barzagli, as if on cue.
One of the attending acolytes passed quietly between them, holding a small vial of chrism—left from the rushed episcopal ordination in the

[1] Celestine V.

Pauline Chapel, less than an hour ago. The air still carried a trace of it: warm, earthy, sacred. Its scent mingled with the frankincense, forming a floating fingerprint of the holy.
“He still seems in shock,” whispered someone.
“Wouldn’t you be? Standing all alone before the world, holy anointed but wholly unprepared.”

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Another glance forward. The young man’s silhouette remained motionless, except for the slight shifting of his feet. That faint squeak again—barely audible now, yet oddly symbolic.
Sneakers on marble. Modern friction against ancient tradition.
And behind them, the centuries-old marble held its breath.
The procession halted. They had reached their dreaded destiny: the balcony.
As they approached the balcony, a solemn silence fell over the procession. The only sounds were the faint rubbery squeak of shoes on marble — and something else.
A low, growling noise. Guttural. Rhythmic.
One of the Swiss Guards glanced sideways with mild alarm. “Sorry,” he whispered to his colleague. “I haven’t eaten all day.”
The other Guard smirked. “Nice. History in the making, and your stomach steals the scene.”

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Chapter Two

A 'Papa di Sorpresa' like no other

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"*The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*"

— 1 Samuel 16:7

"*In the midst of dusk, a pope appeared who no one had expected—and least of all, himself*."

— Claudia Moretti

+++

St. Peter's Square buzzed with electric tension—the kind that only arises when centuries of tradition brace for the unexpected.
A cool, swirling mist had settled over Rome, muffling the lamps and softening the contours of saints and stone.
The Vatican dome, usually a beacon, loomed ghostlike in the haze.
Then, through that haze, something began to rise—smoke. White, possibly. Or was it pale grey? It was hard to tell.
Veteran journalist **Claudia Moretti** stood in the press zone near the obelisk, wrapped in a scarf and curiosity. She narrowed her eyes. "Is that—white? I… I think it is. Yes—white smoke. *Fumata bianca*. *Habemus Papam*. A new pope has been chosen. November second, 2060 — a historic day: remember the date, kids."
The announcement came not with certainty, but with the instinct of a journalist who had seen too much not to trust her own doubt.
Camera shutters fluttered like restless moths, catching mysterious silhouettes in the fog.
Around her, murmurs rippled through the crowd as people leaned in, squinting through the mist. A cheer rose—tentative, then building.

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The bells of St. Peter's began to toll. Their deep tones rolled through the fog like thunder beneath water.
Claudia pressed her microphone to her lips.
"As far as we can tell, It's official. White smoke has appeared above the Sistine Chapel. After nearly four months of deadlock — 120 days — a new pope has finally been chosen.
For context—this conclave lasted 120 days. Longer than any in the past century, though far shorter than the infamous Viterbo conclave which dragged on for nearly three years until the townspeople literally locked the cardinals in and removed the roof to force a decision.
Thankfully, this conclave ended with fewer hammers and more Holy Spirit—though some might question how much of each was involved. At least this time no one had to tear the roof off the Sistine Chapel—yet."
She half-smiled, then refocused. "Still, after four months of silence, what we are about to witness could reshape everything."
She paused, then added, "There were no clear front-runners in this conclave. No dominant theological camp. No charismatic frontrunner to unite the cardinals. What there was, was division—profound and global. Between continents. Between generations. Between radically different visions of the Church's future."
She took a breath. "And now… it seems we're about to meet what Italians call a '*Papa di sorpresa*'— a pope of surprise. Of course, there was no shortage of speculation about who that pope might be. The usual suspects—*i papabili*—have been on everyone's list these past months.
Cardinal McKenna of New York, the eloquent bridge-builder with a flair for media.
Cardinal Roux of Paris, ever the quiet strategist, elegant in *cassock* and thought.
Cardinal Barzagli from Florence—fiercely traditional, with a spine made of granite and a Bible to match. Even the Colombian firebrand Suárez had his admirers, especially among younger Latin clergy. And of course several cardinals from Africa and Asia are…"

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Just then, the great red curtains above the balcony fluttered ever so slightly. A ripple of cheers and selfies — wholesome whistles, whoops,

woohoos, and expectant applause — rolled through the crowd like wind over a field of wheat.
Above them, still out of the public eye and wrapped in the hush of the Apostolic Palace, a young man stood flanked by a small cluster of cardinals clothed in their magnificent robes.
He looked impossibly young — twenty-five or so… at most.
He wore no papal vestments. *No mozzetta*. No *stola*. No *zucchetto*. No papal ring. No papal robes, not even a *cassock* or collar. No *regalia* whatsoever.
Just a rumpled white T-shirt and faded jeans that had clearly seen better days.

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For the moment, the crowd below was completely unaware of his appearance.
He looked both serene and bewildered—if such a contradiction can exist.
He looked as if plucked straight from sleep—dreamy and dazed under the weight of waking. Yet above all, nervousness clung to him, unsure what to do with his hands, or indeed with himself.
The cardinal beside him—Lévy from Belgium— sensed it and gave him a brief, fatherly nod.
"You don't have to be ready," he whispered. "You just have to be willing."
The young man whispered back: "I still don't understand how…"
"Neither did Peter," the cardinal murmured. "But I'm still somewhat concerned about your chosen name. Are you really sure about it? It's not too late to change it, you know."
The young man nodded, barely perceptible.

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And then another cardinal gestured to the papal master of ceremonies.
The heavy, red velvet curtains opened.
The crowd held its breath, and a few pigeons did too, because suspense knows no species.
A senior cardinal stepped forward and, with practiced solemnity, spoke the formulaic Latin words that have echoed across centuries and were now cutting through the Vatican mist:
"*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: habemus Papam*!

Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Papam electum… qui sibi nomen imposuit: ***Hilarius Secundus***."

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A stunned silence fell over the square.
At this announcement, a collective gasp came from the cardinals.
Cardinal Bamba's jaw dropped visibly; Estevez blinked again, as if hoping the fog had misled his ears.
"Not quite the authoritative name I was hoping for", mumbled a perplexed de Lemos.
And Cardinal Mendonça—who earlier had nearly stumbled from laughter at the mere mention of a female pope (Pope Joan was, after all, just a legend)—this time actually tripped and fell backwards. In the tense silence of the moment, no one even noticed his fall. He picked himself up unhurt, dusted off his robes, and muttered, "I'm fine. Absolutely fine." God punishes swiftly.
Even Cardinal Barzagli surprised everyone with an uncharacteristic "*Madonna mia… è pazzesco!*", momentarily forsaking his usual litany of 'highly irregular'—his well-worn rosary of indignation.
"The last time a name caused this much eyebrow-raising," murmured Cardinal Mancini to his neighbour, "we ended up with two popes and a council to fix the mess."
"Which one?"
"John the twenty-third. Not the good one."
They both fell silent, watching the boy in sneakers wave.

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The crowd hesitated.
Claudia frowned, blinking. "Hilarius? Are they serious? They must be joking. What the hell…" she whispered – then froze. Her mic was still on.
People all around her had the same question.
Hilarius? Was that real? A prank? A hoax?

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A murmur became applause, applause became cheering—until voices rang out, bold and rhythmic: "Hi-la-rius! Hi-la-rius! Hi-la-rius!" At that

moment, none in the crowd knew who Hilarius was—nor had anyone seen him before in their entire life.

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And then—he stepped out of the shadow. And into the light.
Wearing nothing but his simple, white T-shirt and those faded blue jeans.
The many thousands below looked up — and for a moment, forgot how to think.
It took them a few heartbeats to realize that this twentysomething man — boy, almost — with his open smile and those unruly curls that no mitre known to man or Church could have tamed, was the newly elected pope.
The mist, thick as reverence, began to glow. Sunlight broke through the clouds in golden ribbons, warm and heartening, sharpening the silhouette on the balcony until he looked too perfect to be entirely real.

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Then his face appeared on the big screens. Clear, porcelain skin. Brown curls that fell just right. Eyes so blue they seemed almost unreal. But it was his smile — warm, open, effortlessly genuine — that stole the moment. An unexpectedly warm, boyish smile, both shy and disarming, as if it had wandered onto the wrong face in the wrong century—and yet somehow belonged exactly where it was.
He looked part movie star, part young statesman, part old friend. Not quite *Jude Law*, but close enough to cause a stir.

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Naturally, the crowd below was still trying to decide whether to cheer, pray, or run.
Amy, Laurien, and Suzan were still wearing their coordinated pink dresses from a bachelorette party that had, quite unintentionally, turned into a papal coronation.
“Oh my God,” said Laurien, swaying slightly in her white bachelorette sash. “He’s hot. I’m a fan.” Suzan, giggled. “I’m Protestant, but he may take my confession any day.” “Forget Protestant,” said Amy. “I’m ready to become a nun — as long as he’s the abbot.” They started laughing.

Amy smiled and added: "Actually I'm Protestant too, but I swear—if he's staying, I'm converting right here, right now."
"He looks like my nephew," said one pilgrim.
But what was heard most often was certainly, "*Ma chi è questo?*" — "Who is he?"

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Claudia blinked again. "That…that…that can't be him," she whispered to her cameraman. "That's not a cardinal. That's a… stagehand. A theology student who wandered into the wrong hallway. That's not a pope."
But no one corrected the announcement.
No cardinal stepped in to explain.
Not a single Swiss Guard moved.
No other pope was put forward.

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And the young man – boy even - at the center of the balcony stepped towards the microphones, looked out over the sea of pilgrims, priests, press and pigeons.
He leaned in. The microphones caught a breath—not quite a sigh—and then he spoke with his warm voice :
"*Goeienavond, Vlaanderen, waar men de Heer nog kan loven.*
Bonsoir, la Belgique! Goeienavond Vaticaanstad!
Belgium says 'hi'!
Buona sera, Roma.
Bonsoir à tous les croyants.
Guten Abend, liebe Menschen.
مساء الخير، يا أهل النية الطيبة. (Masā' al-khayr, yā ahl al-niyya al-ṭayyiba),
晚上好，善意的人们 (Wǎnshàng hǎo, shànyì de rénmen),
Hello, world. Good evening, people of good will. Thank you for coming."

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For a moment, the crowd stood stunned.
Then, from deep within the crowd, a woman cried out in Arabic.
A group of tourists from Shanghai laughed with joy as they heard Mandarin spoken from the balcony.
Never before had a pope dared to greet the world in these tongues—not from this balcony, not like this.
Applause broke out, spontaneous, sincere.

From somewhere near the central fountain, a voice rang out—not in Latin or Italian, but in clear, off-key French.

"*Moi j'ai quinze ans et je te dis*
Whoa whoa... j'aime la vie."

It was unmistakable, heartfelt, and loud enough to reach the balcony.
Several Belgian teenagers had apparently taken it upon themselves to start singing *J'aime la vie*—Sandra Kim's 1986 Eurovision winner — half-joking, half-jubilant.
Others joined in. A Belgian flag waved. A few sobbed from surprise.
The young pope smiled and winked in recognition.

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Claudia stared. She turned back to the camera, not quite sure whether to speak.
"What we are witnessing," she said slowly, "is something I have never seen in my entire career. If this is *not* a mistake… then this is a *papa di sorpresa* like no other."
For a moment, Claudia felt as if she had slipped into an alternate universe — one where the impossible suddenly seemed possible, like a plot twist in a brainless novel. *Or perhaps,* she thought wryly, *this is the story itself reminding me that sometimes reality is stranger than fiction.*
She lowered her mic, eyes fixed on the boy still speaking on the balcony.
She added: "At dusk, a pope had stepped forward—unexpected by all, and least of all by himself."

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This was no ordinary papacy.
This… was the beginning of something else entirely. But no one knew exactly what. Or at least not yet.
Meanwhile, up on the balcony a boyish voice and some old scuffed sneakers were ever so slightly squeaking: the first heard by millions, the second only heard by a small cluster of cardinals, some of whom were already having second thoughts and were seriously wondering if they had made a holy mistake…

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As the murmurs of the crowd swelled beneath the balcony, two cardinals exchanged whispered remarks not far from the newly installed pope.
Cardinal O'Malley of Ireland leaned in, whispering earnestly, "Well, at least his languages are flawless. He's Belgian, after all."
From the corner, Cardinal Schönborn of Germany arched an eyebrow and smirked, "No shit, Sherlock. Next you'll tell me he likes waffles."

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First official photo of Pope Hilarius II, as released by the Vatican. (Whether the jeans should be visible in this picture was hotly debated for 3 days, 7 hours, 3 minutes and 11 seconds. They decided against it — but accidentally released the wrong photo.)

Chapter Three

Intermezzo (with chocolates)

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"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels… or assassins.*"*

— Hebrews 13:2 (Revised Edition)

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No one knew then, not even the man in the well-worn, funny shoes, that by the end of the week, five cardinals would have resigned, two Swiss Guards would have fainted, and one very old dog would refuse to stop barking at the Apostolic Palace.

But that was still to come. For now, the eyes of the world were fixed on the balcony — unaware that the fainting of the two Guards was already underway.

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No one in the crowd noticed, nor did the cameras pick up, the moment when two young Swiss Guards quietly slipped away from their post near the bronze doors.

Their names were Andreas and Matteo, and they had stood through one hundred and thirty-two rounds of voting, one hundred and forty-four hymns, and one panicked evacuation drill caused by a malfunctioning smoke machine.

As the new pope — still unknown, still unknowable — greeted the city and the world, they wandered into the antechamber just behind the Apostolic Library.

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Unnoticed by most, the real drama was quietly unfolding behind the scenes — as the two Swiss Guards' stomachs began to stage their own uprising, stealing the spotlight once more.

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On a silver tray rested forty Belgian pralines, neatly arranged in the shape of a cross, the note beside them simple and elegant: *'For His Holiness. With blessings from Brussels.'*
Andreas (chuckling lightly): "*Belgian* chocolates… Should we even risk it? You know what the *Swiss* Guard code says about foreign chocolates."
Matteo (grinning): "For the Pope? Maybe the rules bend a little."
Andreas, the taller and always the more curious of the two, reached first. "Do you think he'll mind?"
Matteo shrugged. "If he's Belgian, he'd want us to taste them first."
"Safety protocol."
"Exactly."
"Besides, I haven't eaten all day," replied Matteo.
"Well, that didn't go unnoticed. You said it loud and clear."

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Andreas grimaced. "Not the taste I expected from Belgian chocolates."
Matteo laughed weakly. "Swiss chocolates still win, no contest."

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Moments later, both men were found collapsed in the corridor, clutching their stomachs and muttering fragments of the Nicene Creed. It was unclear at first whether their sudden illness was caused by the sheer quantity they had eaten, the unfamiliar Belgian taste clashing with their Swiss preferences, or something far more sinister.
Later, a discreet report arrived from the *Istituto Superiore di Sanità* laboratory in Rome. It confirmed the presence of a fast-acting toxin in the only praline the Swiss Guards had left uneaten. Something far more sinister, it was.

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But back on the balcony, the young pope smiled and waved, blissfully unaware. He had just said, "Peace be with you," and meant it with all his heart.
And in that precise moment, a double rainbow appeared over St. Peter's Square — a silent reminder of the covenant made long ago with Noah, a promise of hope and new beginnings.

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Chapter Four

The Balcony Speech

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"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances."

— 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

"The soul of religion is joy — the rest is mostly meetings."

— Cardinal Schönborn

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The sea of pilgrims, priests, press and pigeons stood frozen in a silence far heavier than mist.
And then he spoke—with the disarming ease of someone who hadn't read the script.
"*Buonasera, cari fratelli e sorelle di Roma, del Belgio e di tutto il mondo*."
He smiled, and the words rang clear across the square. A breeze tugged at his curls.
A wave of applause rose from the crowd.

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"I know. It's a bit... unusual," he said, now switching to English. "So allow me to speak mostly in the language of my generation—the language of text messages, memes, and misunderstandings: English. With a little Roman hospitality thrown in."
Laughter rippled across the square.
Cardinal Bellini whispered: "Well, he's not the worst pope ever, I'll grant him that."
Cardinal Okonkwo replied: "No? He's on all the lists—youngest, strangest, most unqualified, and certainly the most underdressed."

Cardinal Ippolito added: “And possibly the only one to quote memes before Scripture. You know, cardinal Roux said a bad pope is better than no pope. But this one…”
“…might just be both” concluded cardinal Bellini.

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The young pope looked upward, briefly, towards the deepening sky above St. Peter’s.
He raised his hand in benediction, and said it—softly, sincerely: “Peace be with you.”
And precisely then—like a celestial exclamation mark—a double rainbow appeared above St. Peter’s Square, arching gracefully over the colonnades as if drawn by the hand of a gentle child.
A collective gasp rose from the crowd. Phones lifted. Tears welled.
As if not to be outdone, the Italian evening sun finally decided to break through the remaining veil of clouds. It poured down like a blessing, bathing the square in golden light. It kissed the curls on the young man’s head and lent his smile a radiant glow. Even the doves seemed to pause in flight.
The mist had vanished, but a gentle drizzle remained—just enough to catch the light.

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In the shadowed *loggia* just behind him, the cardinals were watching. Cardinal de Lemos adjusted his glasses.
They couldn’t see the rainbow from where they were — some seated, some standing behind the young pope — but the sudden wave of applause made it clear that something very Instagrammable had just happened.
A little slower than the general public, they too began to notice the celestial signs.

“Well,” Cardinal McKenna muttered to no one in particular, “this Flemish pope apparently has a direct line to heaven.”
Cardinal Roux exhaled with half a laugh. “He’s either the worst decision we’ve ever made, or the best. And it may take a century to know.”

Cardinal Okafor of Lagos raised an eyebrow. “Or until the next tweet,” he said, with the dry solemnity of a man unaware he had just uttered a prophecy.
Cardinal Schönborn of Germany, ever the rationalist, mumbled under his breath: “Rainbows and lifting mist — big deal. Hardly a miracle.”

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He continued:
“I stand here with trembling knees and a full heart. Obviously I never expected this. Not today. Not ever. I am—how do you say in Latin? *Nemo ex nihilo.* A nobody from nowhere. Or as we Belgians would say: “*Je ne suis rien qu'une poussière dans cet univers*.” Here the young pope winked again.
The Belgian teens by the fountain saw their cue—and sang: *“J’aime, j’aime la vie, même si c’est une folie; bravo pour le défi*!”
“Did he just quote a pop song?” said Cardinal Barzagli out loud. He stood up and walked off, scandalised.
A pause.

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Then, almost in a whisper, he said in his mother tongue:
“Ik ben maar een weeskind uit een boerendorpje uit Vlaanderen, waar meer koeien dan mensen wonen.”
He paused to steady his voice, and quickly wiped away a single tear.
From behind the curtain, a concerned cardinal whispered: *“Sta piangendo…”* (“He’s crying…”), and another whispered back: *“Lascia che pianga. È buono.”* (“Let him cry. It’s good.”)

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He smiled gently and continued in English:
“But it’s not where you come from that matters—it’s whether you dare to say, ‘Here I am.’
A beat.
It reminds me of the first chapter of the book of Jeremiah, where it reads: “Don’t say, ‘I’m only a boy,’ because wherever I send you, you’ll go. Don’t be afraid—I’m with you.”
Youth is no limitation in the eyes of God.

He does not measure by years, but by the heart."
At this, some cardinals—especially the older ones—raised skeptical eyebrows.
Cardinal Roux smiled wryly. "He speaks boldly for one so untested. Let's see how long the fire lasts."
Cardinal Tanaka from Japan, half-smiling and half-serious, whispered, "He speaks like David before Goliath. Let's just hope he remembers the sling."
Cardinal Schönborn, of course, did not disappoint: "Let the boy-pope enjoy his day in the sun—storms come for us all."

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"Uhm, o yes… I chose the name Hilarius.
Yes, there was once a pope by that name, centuries ago. But also—because I wanted to stress the importance of living joyfully. The soul of religion is joy — otherwise we are just very serious people with candles. Joy is not the same as ease. Joy is the courage to hope, to laugh, to forgive—even when the world feels heavy."
He turned his gaze towards the edge of the crowd where young faces clustered beneath phone screens and banners.
"And yes... I know what you're all thinking. I look very young. Maybe I am. But Jesus and his apostles? They were about my age – some of them younger. They were not marble statues with long white beards. They were young men … and young women with dust on their feet and fire in their eyes.
Besides, if being young is a fault, I trust time will fix that soon enough."
In the front rows, a few cardinals shifted in their seats, robes rustling. The mention of young *female* apostles had clearly struck a nerve.

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He paused again, and then leaned slightly towards the mic, with a spark in his voice:
"And I *know* that right now, some of you are asking your personal AI assistant: *Is he the youngest pope in history?*"
Amy froze with her phone halfway to her face. Busted. "Oh my God, he's reading my mind," she whispered to Laurien.
A grin.

"Well—let me save you the trouble. I'm *twice* the age of the youngest pope ever elected—depending on which historian you ask. You do the math."
Laughter broke out—broad, genuine.
Somewhere, a bedsheet with the word 'Hilarius' scrawled in rainbow paint waved madly in the breeze—clearly the work of someone with quick hands and a bursting heart.
From the back: *"Finalmente un papa con senso dell'umorismo."*
("At last, a pope with a sense of humour.")

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He smiled broadly, then glanced down at his outfit, as if only just registering it.
"Oh, yes…I almost forgot. These jeans. This T-shirt. This is what I normally wear. And I wanted, with all my heart, to greet you today not as a statue or a symbol, but as a human being. As your little bro. Before all the vestments and titles. As equals."
He ran a hand through his hair, slightly embarrassed.
"Besides, my rebellious curls don't really agree with the mitre. It kept sliding off backstage. I may have to finally consider a haircut…"
Laughter burst from the crowd.
A cardinal coughed and muttered: *"Santo cielo…"*

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Then, unexpectedly, someone shouted:
"*Viva Papa Hilarius!*"
A second voice echoed:
"*Viva il Papa giovane!*"
And then dozens more. The square erupted in cheers and clapping. The names and phrases are chanted in waves—*Hilarius, giovane, fratello, papa nostro*. Flags wave. Strangers embrace. Phones are lifted to capture this moment they'll one day tell their grandchildren about.
A roaring, thunderous applause followed—no longer surprised or tentative, but full-hearted, unanimous, joyful.

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Our young pope – *il Papa giovane* - stood there for a long moment, overwhelmed. His eyes grew wet, but he didn't look away.