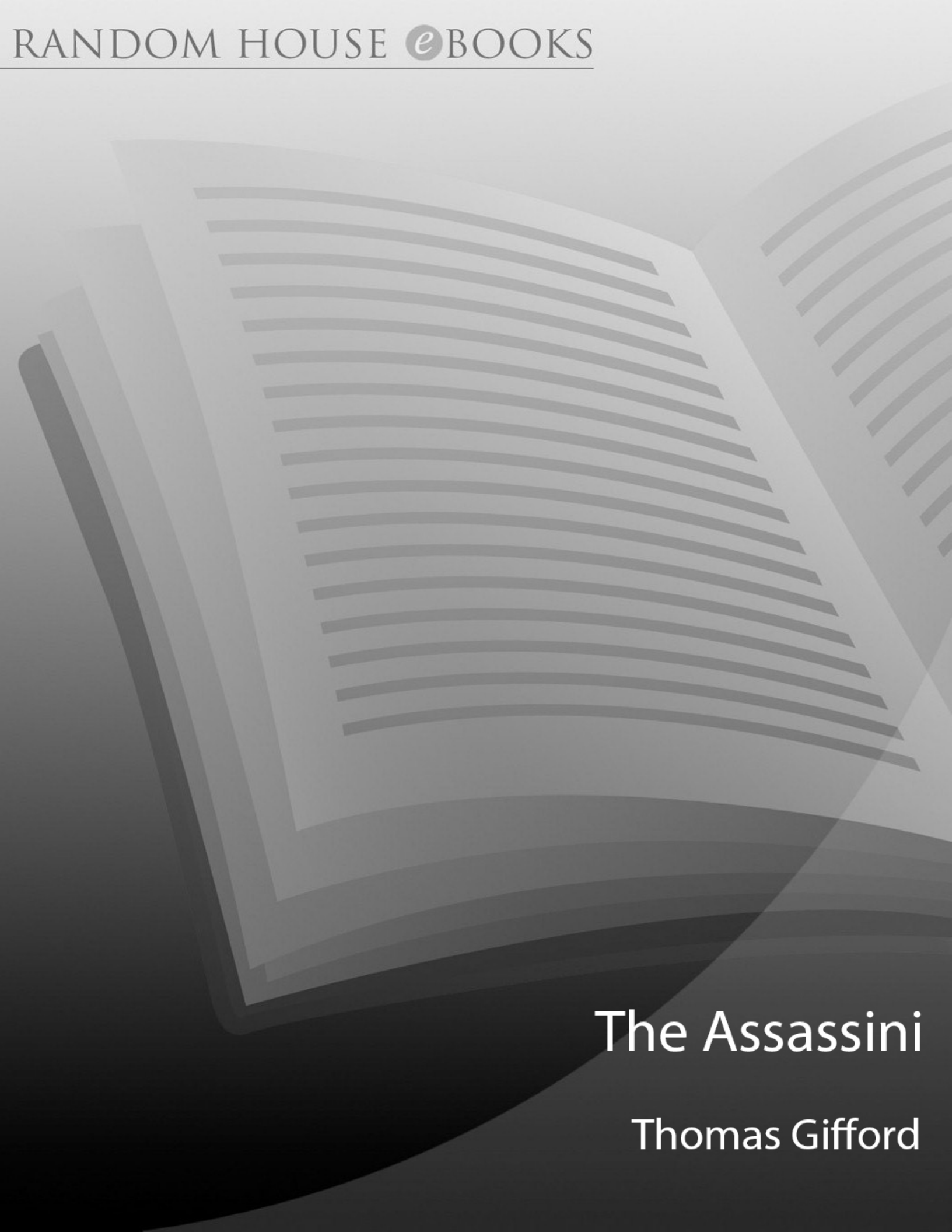


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Assassini

Thomas Gifford

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Thomas Gifford

Title Page

Dedication

Author's Note's

Prologue

Part One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Part Two

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Part Three

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Part Four

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Part Five

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Part Six

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Rest in Peace

Copyright

About the Book

The *Assassini* – an age-old brotherhood of killers once hired by princes of the Church to protect it in dangerous times. But whose orders do they obey now?

In the Vatican, the pope is dying and priestly vultures are gathering around, whispering the names of possible successors. In a forgotten monastery on Ireland's gale-swept coast, a dangerous document is hidden, waiting to be claimed. And in a family chapel in Princeton, New Jersey, a nun is murdered at her prayers.

Sister Valantine was an outspoken activist, a thorn in the Church's side and when her brother, lawyer Ben Driskill, realizes that the Church will never investigate her death, he sets out to find the murderer himself. And uncovers a dangerous, explosive secret ...

About the Author

Thomas Gifford is the internationally bestselling author of *The Assassini*, *Praetorian*, *The Wind Chill Factor*, and *The First Sacrifice*.

Also by Thomas Gifford

Praetorian
The Wind Chill Factor
The First Sacrifice
Saints Rest

The Assassini

Thomas Gifford



arrow books

FOR
Elizabeth

AUTHOR'S NOTE

SPENDING NINE YEARS researching and writing a book is a remarkably daunting task. Countless people, both from within and from outside the Church, helped and hindered the work. Each doubtless had sufficient reasons for what he or she did, whether selfless or despicable. But for each one who tried to stop my completing this book there were many more who gave of their time and energy and insight to help me. They know who they are, heroes and villains alike. But three people were utterly indispensable.

Charles Hartman inspired every aspect of the undertaking. Without him there would have been no book. He was a source of constant encouragement; he was tireless when I was at the end of my tether; at the darkest times, when the obstacles seemed too great to overcome, he never failed me.

Kathy Robbins negotiated her way through the impossibly dense thicket of emotions, conflicting aims and egos, and the vast accumulation of legal documents with the skill and good humor and wit of a great diplomat. For nearly nine years she slew the dragons, even when the dragons seemed to be winning.

Beverly Lewis joined the effort when it had reached its greatest crisis and with the clear intelligence and the determination of a Jesuit made it all come right. Her skill as an editor is exceeded only by the one quality that sets the great editors apart from the rest—her utter respect for and understanding of the author's intention.

Whatever may be wrong with the piece of work you are holding is my doing; whatever is right I gladly share with these three.

Thomas Gifford
London
November 1989

PROLOGUE

*October 1982
New York City*

HE LOOKED LIKE a bird of prey, all black and swooping against the silver sheen of ice. He was an elderly gentleman. He was very good on the blades.

He was enjoying himself, hearing the hiss of his skates carving neat, precise patterns in the Ice, feeling the crisp autumn breeze on his face. His senses were unusually acute, as they always were on such important days. The task at hand brought him to life in a unique way: on such days he was one with his destiny, one with his God. The point of his existence was clear to him on such days.

The world was clearer, too. Everything around him lost its mystery. On such days he understood. The mist of the morning had blown away and sunshine was streaming past the high white clouds. The towers of Rockefeller Center rose above him and the music from the loudspeakers set his pace and he was able to lose himself in the grace and power of his skating, almost able to ride them back through time.

As a boy he had learned his skating on the frozen canals of The Hague. The somber houses, the snowy parks, the leaden sky with heavy clouds lowering over the ancient city and the dikes and the windmills: they all stuck in his mind with the peculiar tenacity of childhood impressions, things you never forget. It didn't matter that there weren't many windmills anymore. They were still there, slowly turning,

forever in his mind. The thought of the slow-moving arms of the windmills and the sibilant swishing of the blades on ice always worked to relax him. On such days as this, when he had work to do, he always prepared by relaxing. A younger generation might call it meditating, but it all came down to the same thing. You wanted to reach a level of pure, perfect concentration, so perfect that you no longer noticed that you were trying. He was almost there. The skating was taking him there. Soon time would cease to exist. He would become a single, all-seeing eye, aware of everything, missing nothing, capable of being one with his task, one with God's purpose. Soon. Very soon.

He wore the black suit with the clerical collar and a black raincoat which furred out behind him like a cape as he moved gracefully among the other skaters, who seemed mostly to be teenagers. It had never occurred to him that the blowing coat might give him a threatening, ominous appearance. His mind didn't work like that. He was a priest. He was the Church. He had a remarkably reassuring, kindly smile. He was goodness, not someone to fear. Nevertheless, the other skaters tended to make a path for him, watched him almost furtively, as if he might be judging them morally. They couldn't have been more mistaken.

He was tall with wavy white hair combed straight back from a high, noble brow. His face was narrow with a long nose, a wide, thin-lipped mouth. It was a tolerant face, like a good country doctor who understood life and had no fear of death. His face wore an almost translucent priestly pallor, born of a lifetime spent in dim chapels, badly lit cells, confessionals. A pallor born of long hours of prayer. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles. The skating, the concentration, brought the faintest of smiles to the wide mouth. He was lean and very fit. He was seventy years old.

As he skated he held his hands before him, palms out, as if he were dancing with an invisible partner. He wore black

leather gloves that fit like skin. From the loudspeakers came a scratchy recording of a girl singing something from a movie he'd seen on the Alitalia 747 that had brought him to New York. She sang that she was going to live forever, that she was going to go out and fly ...

He weaved among the skating children, slid gracefully among the pretty girls with the tight Guess jeans and long swinging hair and strong, hard-muscled rumps about to burst the seams. Girls of a certain age had always reminded him of frisky colts. He had never seen a naked woman. He'd hardly ever thought about such a thing.

He gently kicked one leg before him, skating on a single blade, deftly switching back and forth, arms slowly pumping the air before him, eyes narrowed as if seeing into the core of time while his body skated onward, powered by the engines of memory. He moved like a great black bird, circling the rink, eyes fixed ahead of him, ice-blue and clear, as if they had no bottom, like a lake high in the mountains. There was no hint of emotion in his eyes. They just weren't participating.

Some of the girls whispered, giggled as they watched the old priest glide past, austere, formal, yet there was an air of respect in their glances, respect for his skating, the strength and the style with which he moved.

But he was busy thinking about the rest of the day and he barely noticed them. The girls doubtless thought they were going to live forever, and were going to go out and fly, which was fine, but the elderly priest knew better.

Now, ahead of him on the ice, he saw a very pretty girl of fourteen or so fall down abruptly, sit with legs splayed out before her. Her friends were laughing, she was shaking her head, the ponytail bobbing.

He swept down on her from behind, caught her under the arms and lifted her upright in a single, fluid motion. He saw the look of surprise on her face as he flickered past like a

mighty raven. Then she broke into a wide grin and called a thank-you. He nodded solemnly over his shoulder.

Soon afterward he looked at his watch. He skated off the ice, returned the rented skates, reclaimed the briefcase from the checkroom. He was breathing deeply. He felt supremely at ease and in control with a nice edge of adrenaline running.

He climbed the stairs out of the rink. He bought a hot pretzel from a vendor, smeared a bit of mustard on the salt-studded surface, stood eating it methodically, then discarded the napkin in a trash can. He walked the length of the arcade of shops to Fifth Avenue. He crossed the street, stood looking up at St. Patrick's Cathedral. He was not a sentimental man, but the sight of great church buildings—even so recent an example—inevitably moved something in his breast. He had hoped to say a prayer, but the skating had gone on too long, and he could pray inside his head anyway.

He'd come a long way to keep this appointment.

It was time to go.

Rome

The man in the bed wasn't watching the soccer match on the large television screen. One of his secretaries had put the cassette into the VCR and thoughtfully turned it on before withdrawing, but the man in the bed had begun, of late, to lose interest in soccer. If it crossed his mind at all, it was in the form of memory, boyhood matches he'd enjoyed in Turin many, many years before. As for the stuff on the cassette, recently arrived by courier from São Paulo, well, he just didn't give a damn. The World Cup wasn't a part of his plans anymore.

The man in the bed was thinking about his own impending death with the sense of detachment that had always served him well. As a young man he'd mastered the

trick of thinking of himself in the third person, as Salvatore di Mona. With part of himself standing off to one side, wearing a bemused smile, he'd observed Salvatore di Mona's diligent, systematic climb through the ranks, had nodded appreciatively as Salvatore di Mona forged alliances with powerful and worldly men, had witnessed Salvatore di Mona reaching the final lofty peak of his profession. At which time Salvatore di Mona had, in a manner of speaking, ceased to exist: at which time he had taken the name Callistus, had become the Vicar of Christ, the Holy Father—Pope Callistus IV.

Eight years as Chairman of the Board: he was neither a modest man, nor a particularly deep one, but he had been both very lucky and extraordinarily practical. He was not much given to the elaborate hocus-pocus that went with his job and he'd always looked upon his career as only marginally unlike that of any CEO of a major multinational corporation.

It was quite true, of course, that only the Emperor of Japan occupied an older office on Planet Earth, but still it had never occurred to him that, for instance, God literally expressed His will through the man who had been Sal di Mona, the bright-eyed eldest son of the prosperous Fiat dealer in Turin. No, mysticism was not his cup of tea, as Monsignor Knox had once said in his charming English manner.

No, Callistus IV was a practical man. He didn't much care for drama and intrigue, particularly in the years since he'd managed to get himself elected by the consistory of cardinals, a maneuver that had required a certain simple, heavy-handed intriguing of the sort that left no doubt of the outcome. Money systematically parceled out to relevant cardinals with the aid of the powerful American layman, Curtis Lockhardt, had gotten the job done. Cardinal di Mona had built on a solid core of support, headed by Cardinal D'Ambrizzi. The money—bribes, to give the

parcels a name—was a tradition that had put more than one sweating *papabili* over the top. Since becoming pope, he'd tried to keep all the curial plotting and whispering and tinkering and slandering to a minimum. But he had to admit that in a hothouse society like the Vatican, he was fighting a losing battle. You couldn't really alter human nature, certainly not in a place where there were at least a thousand rooms. He'd never been able to get an accurate count, but the obvious reality was simply that if you had a thousand rooms, somebody was always and inevitably up to no good in some of them. All in all, keeping a semblance of control over the curial machinations had pretty much worn him out. Still, it had been amusing as often as not. Now it just wasn't amusing anymore.

The bed upon which he lay, once the resting place of the Borgia pope Alexander VI, was an impressive affair that possessed a history he enjoyed imagining. Alexander VI had doubtless put it to better use than he had himself, but from the look of things he was at least going to die in it. The rest of the bedroom's furnishings could be described only as Apostolic Palace Eclectic—some pieces of Swedish modern dating from Paul VI, a television and a videocassette recorder, huge Gothic bookcases with glass doors once filled with the immense collection of reference works Pius XII liked to keep close at hand, chairs and tables and a desk and a prie-dieu which he'd turned up in a storage room under dust a century or two thick. It was a motley collection, but for the past eight years he'd called it home. Regarding it with a dour glance, he was relieved that he didn't have to take it where he was going.

Slowly he eased his legs over the edge of the bed and slid his bare feet into Gucci loafers. He stood up, swaying slightly, steadying himself with a gold-knobbed stick an African cardinal had with touching foresight presented him a year previously. He was never entirely sure which of his two afflictions caused which symptoms, but the dizziness

he attributed to the brain tumor. Inoperable, of course. So far as he could tell from the doddering curia-approved sawbones who attended him, it was going to be a photo finish as to what actually would carry him off: the heart or the brain. It didn't make a great deal of difference to him.

Still, there were things to be done in the time remaining. Who would succeed him?

And what exactly could he do to choose his successor?

Malibu

Sister Valentine couldn't seem to stop crying, and it was pissing her off. She'd done some reckless things in her life, she'd sought danger and certainly found plenty of it, and she'd known fear. But that had been the spontaneous kind of fear that everyone all around her was feeling: the fear of the rifle shot cracking along the lonely road, the fear of one of the truth squads or one of the death squads, the fear of the government troops or the hungry guerrillas coming out of the hills looking for trouble or blood. In some parts of the world that was just your average everyday or garden-variety kind of fear, and it was the kind of fear you knew about going in, the kind of fear you consciously chose.

The fear she felt now was something very different. It was attacking her will and her nervous system like a ravenous cancer. It had come from a long time ago, but it was still alive and it had found her, singled her out, and now she was going home because she could no longer face it alone. Ben would know what to do. Somehow he'd always known.

But first she had to stop crying and shaking and acting like a fool.

She stood at the edge of the patio, her toes dipping off into the damp grass, watching the silver, pitted boulder of moon in the blue-black sky. Tattered clouds drifted past, looking like a corny cover of a Moonlight Sonata album

from her childhood. The sound of the surf crashing on the Malibu beach far below blew up the face of the cliffs, rode on the ocean breeze that brushed her bare legs. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her robe, pulled it tighter, and walked across the grass toward the white railing at the top of the cliffs. She watched the surf foam, fan out, and recede, then begin again. A few pairs of lonely headlamps poked along the Pacific Coast Highway. In the distance, through the haze, the Malibu Colony glowed faintly like a spaceship settling down at water's edge. Fog rode offshore as if it were holding the enemy's navy at bay.

She moved along the fence until she felt the dying heat from the coals where they'd grilled sea bass for a late supper. Just the two of them, a bottle of Roederer Cristal and sea bass and hot crusty sourdough bread. A meal he was addicted to, accompanied by the same conversation they'd had in Rome, Paris, New York, and Los Angeles, all during the past year and a half. Conversation, debate, argument, call it what you will, it was always the same. She felt herself giving in to him, like a breakwater unable to resist the tide, but she fought not to crumble, wasn't quite ready to crumble. For God's sake, she *wanted* to crumble, collapse, fall into his arms, but she couldn't now. Not yet. Not quite yet. Damn. She was crying again.

She turned and walked back toward the low, sprawling hacienda, past the swimming pool and the tennis court, crossed the flagstone patio, and stood looking through the glass wall with its sliding door. An hour before she'd made love in that bed.

He was a large, solid man with a face like a good-looking bulldog. Determined. His gray hair was cut short and carefully brushed and it never seemed to get mussed. He wore dark blue pajamas with white piping, a monogrammed *CL* on the breast pocket. His right arm lay across the side of the bed where she'd lain earlier, as if he'd gone to sleep to the rhythm of her breathing, her

heartbeat. He lay still now. She knew he smelled of their sweat and Hermès's Equipage. She knew so much about him, more than she had any business knowing. But then, she'd never been a conventional nun. The fact was, as a nun she'd been a royal pain in the ass. To the Church, to the Order. She'd always known what was right: that was the way she'd been born and nothing much had ever happened to change it. She knew what was right and she knew what was wrong and very often her ideas and the Church's had been at odds. She'd gone her own way and defied *them* to do anything about it. She'd gone public, she'd written two best-sellers, she'd become a heroine of her time in the eyes of a great many people, and the publicity had ensured her safety. She had dared the Church to admit it was too small, too petty, too mean, to include her—and the Church had backed down. She had made herself an indispensable centerpiece in the great facade of the modern Church of Rome, and the only way they could ever get rid of her was—in her view at the time—feetfirst.

But all that had happened before she'd embarked on the researches of the past twelve months. Now, she reflected wryly, wiping her eyes one more time and sniffing, all the causes and speeches and publicity had only been a warm-up. Nothing, however, could have adequately prepared her for the past year, for the growing fear. She thought she'd seen it all. She thought she'd seen evil in all of its disguises and forms, and love in a good many. But she'd been wrong. She hadn't known diddly about evil or love, but, by God, she'd been finding out.

Eighteen months earlier Curtis Lockhardt had told her that he loved her. They were in Rome, where she was at the jumping-off point for her new book, which would deal with the Church's role in World War II. He had been called to the Vatican to take a hand in covering over the ever-growing scandal at the Vatican Bank, which encompassed everything from fraud, extortion, and embezzlement to

simple murder. Lockhardt was one of the few laymen that the Church—in this case Callistus IV—would turn to in a time of extreme crisis. Most laymen couldn't imagine the toughness of mind, the utter ruthlessness that controlling an octopus like the Church required. Lockhardt could: he'd made a career out of precisely those qualities while remaining the most sympathetic and charming and devout of men. As Callistus was fond of saying, Lockhardt sat very near the center of the center of the Church within the Church.

She had known Curtis Lockhardt all her life. When she had been Val Driskill thirty years earlier, dancing on her parents' lawn in the sweeping arcs of the sprinklers, in her ruffled bathing suit, looking like a fancily wrapped piece of candy, ten years old, Lockhardt had been a youthful lawyer and banker bearing the imprimaturs of both the Rockefellers and the Chase. He had frequently visited the house in Princeton to talk money business and Church business with her father. As she pranced, showing, off, glistening wet and tanned in the sunshine, she'd heard the ice clinking in their glasses, seen them from the corner of her eye sitting in white wicker chairs on the shady porch.

"You were an enchanting sprite at ten," he told her in Rome that night. "And at fifteen you were a sexy tomboy. Damn near beat me at tennis."

"You kept watching me, not the ball." She was grinning at him, remembering how she'd known he was finding her desirable as she dashed about the court, the breeze blowing her tennis skirt and drying the sweat on her face until she could feel the saltiness crack. She'd liked him, admired him. She'd been fascinated by his power, the layman who could make the priests sit up and listen. He was thirty-five at the time and she had wondered why he'd never married.

"By the time you were twenty I was flat out scared to death of you. Afraid of the effect that I knew you were

having on me every time I saw you. And I felt like such a fool. And then ... do you remember the day I took you to lunch at The Plaza, the Oak Room with the murals of fairyland castles in mountain kingdoms, and you told me what you intended to do with the rest of your life—remember? The day you told me you were going inside, joining the Order? My heart did a half gainer into the tomato bisque. I felt like a spurned lover ... and the fact was, had I been entirely sane, I'd have been looking on you as a girl, as Hugh Driskill's daughter ... a child.

"But the point was, of course, that I wasn't sane. I was in love. And I've stayed in love, Val. I've watched you, followed your career, and when you came to Los Angeles I knew I'd have to start seeing you again...." He shrugged boyishly, and the years fell away. "The bad news was that I was still in love with a nun, but the good news was that I knew the wait had been worth it."

Their love affair had begun that night in Rome in his apartment high above the Via Veneto. And he had also begun the campaign to persuade her to leave the Order and marry him. Betraying those vows—coming to his bed—had been the easy part. Those vows had always been the coercive part of her job, the necessary evil, the price she'd paid for the opportunity to serve the Church, to serve humanity through the powerful instrument of the Church. But leaving the Order, leaving the framework within which she'd built her life—that had proved to be beyond her thus far.

Now, only an hour earlier, out of their mutual frustration they had quarreled coldly, regretfully, neither accepting the other's inability to understand, but still loving, always loving. Finally they had found consolation in passion, and then he had slept and she had slid from the bed, gone outside to think. To be alone with the things she couldn't dare tell him.

Before her, out of the night and wispy fog, wings flapped, a gull swooped down, a blur going past her, and landed on the patio. It strutted for a moment, peered at itself in the glass, took wing as if frightened by its reflection. She knew just how it felt.

Suddenly she thought of her best friend, Sister Elizabeth, in Rome, in whom she had seen certain mirror images of herself. Elizabeth was also an American, several years younger, but so bright, so incisive, so understanding. Another modern nun, doing the work she wanted, but not the troublemaker Val was. They had known each other at Georgetown when Sister Val had been in the doctoral program, Elizabeth a precocious, liberal M.A. candidate. They had forged a friendship that had lasted through nearly a decade of extreme tensions within the Church. And in Rome it was to Sister Elizabeth that Val had confided Lockhardt's marriage proposal. Sister Elizabeth had listened to the whole story and waited before speaking.

"Play it by ear," she said at last, "and if that's casuistry, blame it on my basically Jesuitical nature. Situation ethics. Remember your vows but think it through—you're not a captive, you know. Nobody's locked you in a cell and thrown away the key, left you to rot."

Good advice, and if Elizabeth were in Malibu now, she'd have more good advice: what would it be? But then, Val knew what it would be because Sister Elizabeth always went back to it.

"If you're going to keep sleeping with him, Val," she'd said, "then you've got to get out of the Order. There's just no sense in going on the way you are. You may think it's a technicality but, face it, buster, it's no technicality. You took vows. Anybody can slip. But to go on slipping, make a way of life out of slipping—no way. That's just stupid and dishonest. You know it, I know it, and the Supreme Being—she knows it, too."

Remembering the certainty of Sister Elizabeth's words, she felt only drained and afraid. The fear was blotting out any other emotions.

It had begun with the research for the book. The damn book! What she'd give never to have thought of the book! But it was too late for that now and it was the fear that had brought her back to the United States, that would take her home to Princeton. It was the fear that made her so hesitant about everything—about Curtis and love and staying in or getting out.... You couldn't think straight when you were consumed with fear. She had ventured too far in her researches, had kept digging when she should have had the sense to stop short and get out, go home. She should have forgotten what she'd found, attended to her own life, to Curtis. But it wasn't just for herself that she was afraid. Overshadowing everything else was the greatest fear. Her fear for the Church.

So she'd come back to America, intending to lay it all out for Curtis. But something had warned her, told her to stop, something she hated identifying. What she had discovered was a kind of infernal device, a bomb that had been ticking for a long, long time. Curtis Lockhardt either knew about it, or—God help him—was part of it, or he knew nothing at all of it. No, she couldn't tell him. He was too close to the Church, too much a part of it. That much, at least, seemed to make sense.

But the bomb was there and she had stumbled across it. It reminded her of the time at the house in Princeton when her brother Ben, rooting around in the basement looking for the old hickory-shafted golf clubs from their father's youth, had come across the seven cans of black powder left over from some long-ago Fourth of July. She had followed him down the steps, past all the accumulated mountains of the family's history, wary of spiders real or imagined that might drop into her hair, and had suddenly become aware of his voice, dropped to a whisper, telling her for Christ's

sake to go back, and she had said she was going to tell on him for swearing.

Well, that was when he'd told her the house could blow up at any moment because that black powder had been in those cans since before they were born and was damned unstable. The water heater in the same room had a short in it, was shooting sparks. She didn't know anything about black powder, but she knew her brother Ben, and Ben wasn't kidding.

He'd made her go into the stone-walled stable while he had carefully, dripping with sweat, carried one can after another up from the basement and out across the back lawn past the family chapel all the way to the edge of the lake at the back of their property, back beyond the apple orchard. When he called the police in Princeton they'd sent some firemen, and the chief of police himself had come in the black DeSoto and they had wetted it all down and Ben was a real hero after that. The policemen gave him some kind of honorary badge, and a week or so later Ben had given it to her, a present, because she'd been a brave soldier, too, and followed orders. She'd been surprised, had cried and worn it every day all summer long, slept with it under her pillow. She was seven and Ben was fourteen and for the rest of her life she'd always gone to Ben when she needed somebody who would be a hero for her.

Now she had this bomb of her own, unstable and capable of blowing the coming papal election to smithereens, and she was going home to see Ben. Not Curtis, not her father—at least not yet. But she knew she would go back to Ben. She always smiled to herself when she thought about Ben, brother Ben, the lapsed—"collapsed is more like it," he used to say—Catholic. She could lay it all out for him, tell him what had come to light in the Torricelli papers and in the Secret Archives. He would laugh at her predicament and then he'd get serious and he'd know what to do. And

he'd know what they should tell their father, how they should approach him with the whole story....

New York

The Rolls-Royce was waiting at Kennedy when Lockhardt's private jet arrived, and took them directly through light traffic into the heart of midtown, arriving a half hour ahead of schedule. Lockhardt told his driver to drop him in the short block called Rockefeller Plaza which ran between the RCA Building and the Rockefeller Center ice rink. In the commodious backseat he looked into Val's eyes, took her hand. "You're sure there's nothing you want to tell me now?"

There was so much more behind the question than was showing. He hadn't told her about the call he'd received a week before, when she was still in Egypt, from a friend at the Vatican. There was concern in high places about what she was doing, the research trail she'd come upon, her determination in pursuing it. Lockhardt's friend in the Vatican was asking him to find out just what she'd learned, to convince her to lay off.

Lockhardt had too much respect for Val's motives and work to bring the Vatican's curiosity into the open. In any case, the Vatican did not impress Sister Val. But he also had a strong sense of self-preservation which he could easily enlarge to include her. For that reason he was disturbed by the inquiry. It never did you any good to have someone in the Vatican all over your case. And the call wouldn't have been made on a whim. Something was seriously bothering someone, and the word had been passed on. But he couldn't press Val. She'd tell him what she'd been up to but he had to give her time.

She smiled nervously, shook her head. "No, really. You've got plenty on your mind right now. Callistus is dying. And

you, my darling man, have got to decide who is going to be the next pope ... the vultures are gathering."

"Do I strike you as a vulture?"

"Not at all. You're beating the vultures to it, as usual."

"When it comes to naming popes, I don't have a vote."

"Don't be disingenuous. Didn't *Time* call you the cardinal without the red hat?" She grinned at his scowl. "You have a great deal more than a vote. You named the last pope—"

"With your father's help, Sister." He laughed. "And we could have done worse—"

"Barely," she said.

"My God, I love you, Sister."

"And you're in a position to name the next pope. Let's be realistic. And I love you, too. You're not all that bad for an older man."

"You're not supposed to have much basis for comparison," he said.

"Believe me, I don't."

He took her hand. "Val, I wish you'd trust me, too. This terrible secret of yours—it's driving you crazy. You're completely worn out. Whatever it is, it's taking a hell of a toll on you. You're thin, you're tired, you look run-down—"

"You sweet-talking, silver-tongued devil—"

"You know what I mean. Take it easy, relax, talk to Ben.... You've got to get this off your chest."

"Curtis, cut me a break on this one, okay? I don't want to look foolish if my imagination has run away with me. This can all wait until tomorrow. Then maybe I'll lay it all out for you." She squeezed his hand. "Now you go see Andy." She leaned forward and kissed him softly, felt his hand in her hair, cupping her head. His mouth brushed her ear.

He got out and stood on the sidewalk, watched her wave as the car pulled away, and then the blackened window rose and she was gone. Next stop Princeton.

He'd lived so much of his life in the corridors of power that for a very long time he'd mistaken satisfaction and

discreet camaraderie for happiness. Then Sister Valentine had revealed the mysteries of utter happiness, solved the great puzzle. Now he was sure they'd be together for good.

It was in this frame of mind that he stood gazing down at the skaters gliding rhythmically around the rink. It was true that he was worried about Val. She'd been in Rome, Paris, and had gone as far afield as Alexandria, Egypt, all in the name of research. He had tried to put the pieces together. He knew she'd also been working in the Secret Archives. And then he'd gotten that damned call from Rome.

From his vantage point at the railing above the ice he smiled at the sight of an elderly priest, full of grace and dignity, skating among the kids. He watched with admiration as the priest with his black raincoat blowing out behind him swept down and plucked a pretty girl from the ice where she'd fallen. He doubted if he had ever seen a more solemn and serene face.

He glanced at the Patek Philippe, a golden wafer on his wrist. Monsignor Heffernan, only forty-five now, destined for the red hat within the next five or ten years, was waiting. As Archbishop Cardinal Klammer's right-hand man, he had already accumulated considerable power in one of the wealthiest sees of the Church. He was not known for his dignity, certainly not for his solemnity. He was known for getting things done. And for such a hail-fellow-well-met, he was a punctual bastard who expected punctuality in others.

It was time to go.

The Church's involvement with the square block directly to the east of St. Patrick's Cathedral dated back to the late nineteenth century when it had built a rather pedestrian church, St. John's, on the site which later—after the Church sold the land—saw the construction of the famous Villard houses, which reminded some observers of the austere

Florentine dwellings of Medici princes. Too expensive to remain in private hands following World War II, the glorious houses were abandoned and sat waiting, elegant and empty memories of another age.

In 1948 Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, who was accustomed to looking at them across the traffic of Madison Avenue from his residence at St. Patrick's, decided to reacquire them. In no time the Church with its countless official selves spread through the magnificent buildings. The Gold Room at 451 Madison became the conference chamber for the Diocesan Consultors. A reception room overlooking Madison became a conference room for the Metropolitan Tribunal of the Archdiocese. The dining room was transformed into the tribunal's courtroom and the library became the Chancery office. Pushing down corridors and up marble staircases, the protean entity of the Church spread ...

Times change, however. By the 1970s, the real estate boom of the 1960s had collapsed and the Church found itself unable to unload the Villard houses, which once again sat empty, representing an annual tax burden of \$700,000. The economic problem was acute.

They were rescued by Harry Helmsley, who offered to lease the Villard houses and the adjacent Church-owned properties to construct a hotel. The Archdiocese assisted Helmsley with the red-tape problems, and, in the end, the houses were saved intact, the Church still owned the site, and Helmsley had a long-term lease. He built his hotel around the houses.

Like a Renaissance prince, he called it The Helmsley Palace.

It was this palace that Curtis Lockhardt entered beneath the nineteenth-century bronze and glass marquee on Fiftieth. He went directly through the hushed reception area with its mirrors and the rich French walnut paneling, turned abruptly right, and went into the small enclosure

that contained a concierge's desk and the out-of-the-way elevators servicing the topmost floors, the penthouses.

It was typical of Andy Heffernan to have reserved the Church's triplex penthouse for the meeting. In the highly political world he inhabited, Curtis Lockhardt was one of Monsignor Heffernan's trump cards, and he wanted to maintain as much secrecy as he could. Lockhardt was talking about a sum of money so large that not a shred of rumor could be permitted to leak out. The choice of the next pope was on the table, nestling up close to the money. Had they met across the street at St. Patrick's, the rumors would have beaten them to the street. Power, luxury, worldliness, and secrecy: that was Monsignor Heffernan.

Lockhardt knew that the Dunhill Monte Cruz 200 cigars and the Rémy Martin cognac Andy favored would be ready. Monsignor Heffernan often remarked off the record that you took all the perks you could get and the more you took the more there were to take.

Lockhardt got out of the elevator at the fifty-fourth floor and padded through the deep carpeting to the end of a long hallway running parallel to Madison Avenue. There was nothing to indicate anything out of the ordinary behind any of the doors. He pressed the buzzer and waited. A voice from a small speaker said: "Come in, Curtis me lad." It sounded as if the good monsignor might have enjoyed a two-martini lunch.

Although he was accustomed to luxury, Lockhardt was always impressed by the sight of what lay before him. He stood at the top of a curving staircase with an elaborately carved banister. The huge room below was two stories in height, completely glassed in, with Manhattan spreading out beyond like an isometric map.

The Empire State Building, the suave art deco spire of the Chrysler Building, the pristine modernity of the World Trade Center towers, beyond them in the bay the Statue of Liberty, Staten Island, the Jersey shoreline ...

Radio City, Rockefeller Center, the luminous patch of the ice rink ... and almost straight down was St. Patrick's, its twin steeples rising majestically above Fifth Avenue.

He felt as if he were standing on a cloud. He held the carved railing as he slowly descended the thickly carpeted stairs. He couldn't look away from the view. It made him feel like a child confronted by toys beyond his wildest dreams.

"I'm having a quick pee." Heffernan's voice floated out from behind some hidden door. "Be with you in two shakes."

Lockhardt turned back to the view, almost mesmerized by the clarity and detail of the city. He was standing with his nose nearly pressed to the glass, staring down at a view of St. Patrick's that its builders must never quite have imagined. God's view. It was like looking at a blueprint that had come to life, developed a third dimension rising up at you.

"God bless our little home." Monsignor Heffernan, a large man with thinning red hair and a nose that seemed to have been pilfered from a clown, lumbered toward him. He was red with sunburn that was peeling. He was wearing a black shirt and a priest's dog collar, black trousers, and black tasseled loafers. His watery blue eyes blinked behind a scrim of cigar smoke. He had battled his way up from Irish poverty, South Boston variety. He was already a very important man in his world and by cementing his alliance with the great American kingmaker he was becoming even more so. Conveniently, they were able to use each other, which the monsignor thought was as good a definition of friendship as you were likely to come across. Andy Heffernan was a happy man.

"You're looking very fit and virtuous for a rich man, Curtis. Have a cigar." He pointed to a wooden box on the corner of a cluttered trestle table topped by a slab of glass two inches thick.