

THE DIRECTOR

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1

Dark eyes, deep-set eyes that gleam as gray-black as the drowned pebbles at the bottom of a stream, gaze straight ahead. His red robes billow behind him as he strides through coffer-ceilinged foyers, the soft leather of his slippers whispering on the marble and parquet floors. He passes down staircases sculpted by Michelangelo, through beehive rooms filled with profane treasures, a crucifix with a phallus head, a monstrance with the ears of an ass. Swiftly he glides, almost too swiftly to be human, almost flying, as if his consecrated robes give him wings.

He reaches a paneled corridor, its bronze doors decorated by Ghiberti. Uniformed Swiss Guards stand at each end of its length. His dark eyes give them the unspoken command. One guard hurries to join the other. They round a corner and disappear. Wan twilight is fading into dusk through the tall windows of the corridor as he reaches the double door. He turns a heavy key of ornate wrought iron in the matching lock. His pale, long-fingered hands gently push the doors open. Little by little we can see into the room--a

jumble of royal luxuries. He sits at a desk of inlaid wood and mother of pearl and folds his hands in his lap.

The room is more opulent than many a king's bedchamber-- paintings, sculptures, artifacts, the detritus of a lifetime in the shadow of the Medicis' three lilies. A tapestry glowing with gold and silver threads runs the entire length of one chiseled-stone wall, as if to shelter the bed canopied in crimson velvet. In the dimness of the chamber, the crimson of his robes seems to merge with the bed hangings that were brought to him on horseback from Venetian merchants. He removes his slippers, having no need of them on these thick carpets loomed in Persia and carried on camelback to the great ships and thence to the Vatican.

Shadows cast by the burning torches mounted head-high on the walls illuminate his face, his eyes as deep-gray and gleaming as the drowned pebbles at the bottom of a stream. He goes to a huge Spanish armoire and unlocks the doors, which slowly swing open to reveal a sinister array of instruments-- pincers, tongs--hanging on hooks.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, he closes the doors and moves away from the armoire.

Flanked by the two guards, a woman stands in the doorway. Her blonde hair hangs loose and long over her shoulders, flows down her back, gleams against her jewel-embroidered green silk gown. Her face is pale, high-bred. She smiles and holds out her hands to him as he hurries to her and leads her to a seat

on the couch near the bed.

"Please, sit down."

He waves his hand. The guards salute and leave, closing the doors behind them.

"How did you hear about my experiments?" He looks at her expectantly.

"Isn't the important thing that I want to volunteer?"

"I still want you to tell me."

She hesitates, then murmurs, "Cardinal Soderini, Your Holiness."

He smiles, sits back, and continues in a pleasant, conversational tone. "And just what do you think my experiments are?"

"I've been told that they reveal new worlds of experience."

"So you've come to me because you're bored? Fed up with your husband, tired of your lovers?"

She makes a scornful gesture. "My lovers!"

He continues, apparently unnoticing. "Looking for something that will rekindle the flame of your first virginal experiences? Perhaps you think I'm going to seduce you in a new, unimagined way that you can't quite visualize but which will surpass all your dreams. Am I right?"

She blushes and begins to study the tapestry on the right wall--his predecessor Leo X at the hunt, wearing high riding boots made of soft Spanish leather, holding a spear in his

hand, poised to administer the coup de grace to his prey.

"So you like the tapestry?"

She looks confused.

"I do too. Let's say it inspires me."

1 Fear clouds her eyes. He smiles ironically and holds her gaze for a moment before adding, "You can put an end to this conversation whenever you like, my dear."

After a pause she asks, "What happens in that secret room?"

"My volunteers enter a state of absolute fulfillment, an earthly paradise that eclipses the difference between heaven and hell."

"You're speaking in riddles."

"Come with me." He moves toward another door. She follows.

"Open it."

She obeys. The door swings open slowly. Her gaze races over the instruments that hang from the walls.

"So this is your 'place of ultimate bliss'?" Her voice contains both scorn and fear.

"You're pretending to be amused!" he replies angrily.

"You would stop laughing very soon once the procedures were underway, my dear! Remember, both pain and pleasure are a matter of definition. That is what people come here to discover."

As he leads her out of the room with a courtier's grace, she holds back slightly as if ambivalent about leaving.

"In any event," he continues, closing the dark portal behind them, "I don't think the experiment I had in mind for you would have provided you the kind of pleasure you are seeking. Its power is of a different kind--although by no means inferior."

As they begin strolling through a labyrinth of columns, she says hesitantly, "You told me that those who cross that threshold no longer have the option of turning back."

"That is correct."

"But you made an exception for me just now."

"So you wanted me to force you to stay!" He laughs. "The moment you appeared hesitant, I desisted, because genuine resistance can never be pleasurable for me."

"But don't the others sometimes resist?"

"At first they sometimes pretend to struggle because they don't trust my skill. They mistakenly believe that artificial stimulation will heighten their experience."

"But sometimes they must wish they had never heard of you."

"Yes. Afterwards."

They return to his study. He gestures to the guards stationed in front of the doors.

"Escort her to the side gate."

She genuflects. "I'm grateful for your openness, Your Holiness."

He shrugs. "There seems to be nothing more to discuss."

The guards bow to her. She turns to leave, but seems unhappy with her decision. Clemente goes to his desk and picks up a heavy book. The skin of his hands is stark-white against the chestnut-brown leather binding. As he sits down and opens it, the camera picks up the gold lettering of the title--An Introduction to the Art and Process of the Holy Inquisition.

The closeup of the Clement's white hands changed suddenly to a bottle of Cynar, the artichoke-scented aperitif.

"*Basta!*" The man on the bed made an impatient movement and reached for the remote control on his bedside table. In so doing, he withdrew from the woman lying under him on the wide bed. She gasped and opened her eyes. Her hands, which had been clenched around the tendrils of the intricate wrought-iron bedframe, flexed and released. She lay still. The man--the same man who had just been watching his own image on the television screen as Clemente VII--punched the sound button as the announcer's voice reassured watchers that the interview with the Vatican representative would begin in a few moments.

The sudden silence magnified the uneven sound of the woman's breathing. Still kneeling above her, the director switched to another station, and another, as if he had forgotten her. She lay waiting. The staccato images on the screen cast quick-moving shadows on the high, white walls of his bedroom, on his face. At last he looked down at her.

"Channel-surfing." He laughed. "A new American term. I

heard it on the radio as Roberto was driving me home."

She opened her legs wider, revealing labia more crimson than the velvet spread on which she lay. He pulled her up toward him, entering her again with tender force. Her head jerked back, her pale, slender neck arching, her abundant dark hair whipping. He thrust, his eyes still fixed on the television set, hands pulling her hips forward and back in an ever-faster rhythm. Suddenly, he seized her in the tightest of embraces. His body went as still as his breath and his eyes closed for a second that obliterated space and time.

She fell back onto the scarlet spread. He grabbed the remote control with a sudden movement that startled her. She rolled over to one side and pulled her fragile pink silk dress down over her thighs before moving silently into the bathroom that adjoined his bedroom. The clicking of the remote control grew faster as the director sought the interview.

He had missed the opening words. Ah, yes, the Vatican representative. The cardinal.

"*Eccellenza*, the Vatican's campaign against *Clemente VII*-
-"

"That's not correct--"

"With due respect, *eccellenza*, one moment, please, if I may ask my question." The interviewer appeared tense. "The Italian Film Review Board has limited itself to ruling that minor children not be permitted to see it. But it appears that the Curia refuses to give up. You've continued to denounce it

as blasphemous and subversive. Because of its violence--"

"I believe," the cardinal replied, his words precise, clipped, "that the sequence you have just shown proves my point--the aestheticization of violence. Not to mention its sexualization. This film tries to convince us that violence is beautiful--a way to personal gratification--the expression of gratification on their faces--"

Disgusted, the director again muted the sound and switched on the videocassette recorder to record the rest of the interview with the cardinal's mouth moving in silent, dignified outrage on the screen.

"Angela," he called. "Do you have other appointments?"

She came out of the bathroom holding a clean white hand towel. "No. Not if you don't want me to." She knelt and wiped him tenderly, then reached for him again, but he stepped away and adjusted his clothing. Then he cracked open the French doors, only to shut them immediately against the rush-hour din coming from the Via Tritone.

"I must work."

"Bene." She sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed her damp dress against her stomach and thighs. "They're letting you make a new movie?"

"They're throwing more money at me than ever!"

"You don't want to hear what he's saying about you?" She gestured at the silent debate on the television set.

"I'll tell you a secret." He drew her face close to his

and she saw the laughter in his eyes. "I've already written to the cardinal asking him humbly for a meeting."

"To get the rating changed."

"To get him to finally see my true message."

"And will you then punish him for being so zealous?"

He laughed and held his palms above the dim light of the bedside lamp, watching his fingers gleam faintly red around their edges.

"That closeup of my hands, at the end of that scene. That was the only flaw--the halogens were too strong. We lost all the grain and color nuances of the skin."

He lowered his hands and gave her the banknotes that had been lying on his bedside table.

She pocketed them. "No matter, caro. There will be other films."

2

Clemente VII locks a door behind him and enters a dim, claustrophobic chapel. The dim light of several candles reveals that the altar is bedecked with obscene relics. He hurries to a small door in the darkest corner of the room. When it creaks open, his shadow obscures the narrow bar of light shining through from the room beyond. He disappears into a narrow corridor where a black-robed figure with a hood pulled over his head stands in front of another door. Clemente

goes to him.

"So, you've rounded up all her lovers?"

The other man pushes back his hood, revealing a youthful, decadent face. "Fortune smiled on us. All seven of them." His teeth gleam in a wolfish grin. "As you requested, Cardinal Orsini invited all seven of them to the banquet. It would have been a tremendous affront had they declined the invitation."

"And you've proceeded with caution and discretion?"

"The utmost, Your Holiness. During the evening, we invited first one and then another to a certain room. There they beheld a beautiful girl lying naked on a sofa. But as soon as they approached her, the guards seized them and gagged them."

"And no one noticed anything! Excellent!"

The man ducks his head. "Just as you ordered, Your Holiness."

The pope opens the door and passes into the room.

Seven men garbed in the formal raiment of Renaissance courtiers are shackled to the wall in a row facing him. He scans them and smiles at their desperate attempts to conceal their terror. Clearly, they don't know what's going to happen but expect the worst. He steps up to the first prisoner and claps his hands. A half-dozen hulking guards emerge from the shadows to form a protective semicircle around him.

At Clemente's signal, the tallest of the guards pulls out a stiletto. The prisoner stifles a gasp but tries to maintain

his defiant dignity. The guard moves toward him, seizes the front of his embroidered tunic, pulls it away from his chest, and slices upward through the cloth without cutting the skin. The prisoner's shirt and pants fall away, revealing the thatch of hair that furs his chest and runs downward to his navel and his naked, vulnerable genitals.

Clemente stands eyeing him as if studying an odd animal. The prisoner, momentarily reassured, straightens proudly. The pope's eyes flash with anger. He steps backward and scans the line of men.

"You no doubt believe I owe you an explanation," he sneers. "I am acting on behalf of one of my best-beloved friends--whose name I can't reveal for reasons you'll surely understand. I wish to examine the reasons for your pathetic inability to satisfy her. Especially after all your promises! And I must confess that I'm as curious as she is to learn more about the nature of your prowess."

"Compared to your own, no doubt!" spits a young man at the end of the line.

Clemente saunters toward him and stations himself in front of the young man. The guards follow. A flick of the pope's ringed hand, and the protestor's clothing is stripped from him.

"Then let us start with you." Clemente laughs. "Perhaps you'll set a new standard of virility for your comrades!"

He leans forward slightly and places one hand on the

prisoner's shoulder, the other at the height of the man's slender, muscular hips. The movements of Clement's upper arms suggest the delicate maneuvers of his hands. The prisoner closes his eyes, visibly fighting the enforced arousal. Moments later, his mouth opens in a moan of agonized pleasure. Clement lets his hand fall to his side. The man's eyes open and in spite of himself he gasps, "Don't stop--"

Clement makes a sign and one of the servants takes his place, increasing the rhythm. The pope watches coldly as the prisoner's arousal grows--peaks--erupts--dies. The other prisoners are unable to look away but are filled with growing horror as they realize that they are all to be subjected to the same indignity.

The defiant prisoner's gasps fade. His eyes closed, he struggles to swallow his humiliation. Clement marches back down the line, sliding his palm across the front of each one's clothing and squeezing their crotch contemptuously.

At the end of the line, he turns back to the first man and gestures roughly for a servant to move forward. The servant's body blocks the prisoner's as he begins to manipulate him. Clemente stands to one side, his head tilted in mock concern as he listens to the prisoner's moans.

The cardinal strode to the glowing television screen in the corner of his office and paused the video of Clemente VII, freezing the frame on the director's sneering face.

Tall and aristocratic, the silver of his hair intensifying the darkness of his deep-set brown eyes now cold with disdain, he paced back and forth before his sixteenth-century desk, a gift of the Curia on the silver anniversary of his elevation to the cardinalship. The single lamp on his desk shed a latticework of shadows the soft carpets scattered about the office. He was alone except for the glowing cherubs frolicking in the fresco of the domed ceiling high above his head. His secretaries had long since left for the night.

He buttoned his cassock against the evening chill and picked up the sheet of heavy ivory-colored stationery from his desk--the director's letter, a respectful request for a meeting to discuss the film. He pondered, picked up a pen, set it down again. All was silent except for the faint buzzing of bees in the formal gardens outside the tall, half-open french doors. The click as the pause button of the videocassette recorder switched off roused him from his thoughts. The video resumed. The sound of the prisoner's moans mounted, growing in the silent office. The cardinal flicked off the video impatiently and escaped into the garden.

He paced along the overgrown walkways of the fourteenth-century palazzo, past the night scents of the roses and the swordlike spikes of lavender that bloomed with the aroma of centuries, but he was unable to concentrate. The letter haunted him. He wanted to cast it from him, tread it underfoot like a snake or a scorpion. Suddenly he tore open the cassock

and pulled it away from his flesh. Despite the night breeze, he felt feverish.

3

The garbage bags in the street below the kitchen windows had grown to a heap, giving off a foul stench in the dusty heat. Julie held her breath, sat down on a kitchen chair, and stared at the small countertop television set. She had already seen *Clemente VII* three times, and each time the same quiver of sensuality had struck deep within her at the moment when Clemente reached his hand toward the armoire. She turned up the sound but the cardinal's invective grated on her. Suddenly, she wanted to see the film again. It would reinforce the fantasies she had been having about killing her husband.

Recently she had begun to suffer more and more from barely controllable attacks of rage. At times her fury was so great that she pictured herself murdering Bruno in great and gory detail, soundtrack and all. For example, when he was sitting at the dining table, guileless, protected by old habit and the evening paper, she imagined herself taking a knife to him and stabbing him again and again. Then she saw herself sitting with a glass of amaretto, relaxing in her armchair, triumphantly looking at Bruno's body before proceeding on to getting rid of it without a trace. The careful planning of every step along the way always had a soothing effect on her.

Rage engulfed her again as she thought about Iraq. Only that morning, when she had been preparing his cappuccino just the way he insisted, he had informed her that he had accepted the supervision of the chemical plant project in Baghdad after all!

The intercom buzzed. Was he back from work already? Yes, and a little earlier than usual. Apparently he hadn't gone out drinking with his cronies tonight. But she was furious. She needed at least an hour to prepare herself to deal with his presence.

Bruno brushed by her to the bathroom. She had already assembled their meal. As she got the seafood salad from the refrigerator, she wondered how easy it would be to have Bruno "disappear" in Iraq. But perhaps her situation wasn't hopeless here in Rome either. Bruno slammed the bathroom door behind him as he came back into the kitchen, installed himself at the kitchen table, buried his face in the newspaper, and waited for her to serve him.

From the very beginning of their marriage, he had refused to help around the house. And not only did he expect her to carry out even the most arduous chores, he refused to let her hire any outside help. In their early days together, she had been too inexperienced to rebel against his demands. Then, later, although the cancer of her discontent grew larger and larger, she no longer dared to bring up the issue. Their life together had become such a habit that it was impossible to

talk to him about any of it.

Julie served the seafood salad on a paper plate, sat down across the table from him, and tried to look straight through him. Ever since the moment she had decided to kill him, she had found that at times she could completely ignore his presence. In the same way that she could now look at him and see herself stabbing him to death, so too had she learned to look at him and simply not see him. Unfortunately it worked only sometimes.

Bruno was reading the paper and eating at the same time, serving himself blindly from the plate, dropping morsels of food on the table. Julie felt only relief that he wasn't paying any attention to her.

She gazed glumly out the window and tried to escape into her daydreams, but--Baghdad! Only a week before they were to leave. It's too late for everything, she thought. *Non cambia piu nulla*. Nothing's going to change anymore.

The table legs screeched as Bruno pushed it away, dropped the newspaper on the floor, and shoved it in her direction with his foot to indicate that she should dispose of it.

While she was busy clearing the table, the television in the living room blared on.

After Angela left, the director stood in the shower and let

the scalding needles of water beat down on his back. He fantasized about what it would feel like if the water were skewers, or knives...His thoughts returned to the cardinal's diatribe. How could he could push even further in the new film? Thank God the financing and distribution were already in place! And the script was almost finished. Tonight when he met with Mia, they would resolve the final small problems. He would tell her his vision of the final scene, and she would be able to finish the writing.

As he stepped out of the shower and toweled himself dry, his palms cradled the heaviness of his penis for a moment and he remembered the touch of Angela's fingers on him only an hour ago. Excitement rose in him again. He padded naked through his bedroom and down the marble-tiled corridor to Roberto's room, even though he knew that Roberto was still down in the courtyard washing the day's dust from the white Bentley before driving him to the restaurant.

He pictured Roberto's muscled arms waving the hose over the roof and along the doors of the sparkling white limousine. His financial backers had insisted on the Bentley. He would have preferred another Ferrari, a twin to the one he already owned, but it wouldn't have had room for the bar and miniature television set and other accoutrements that the producers insisted were necessary. He shrugged, walked into the kitchen, and looked down into the courtyard. Yes, Roberto was bare-chested, barefoot. The drenched fabric of his white slacks

slapped and clung to his calves as he walked around the limousine coiling up the still-dripping hose in the darkening twilight.

When they pulled in front of the restaurant, the director looked up and saw Mia already waiting at a table on the rooftop terrace that overlooked the ruins of the Coliseum. He strode up the broad staircase imagining the sun beating down on blood-stained sand and shrieking mobs and crumpled bodies, and he wondered whether the early Christians had realized that their deaths would echo down two millennia.

The moment Mia saw him in the entry, she set down her pen and notebook. He knew she had been sketching shadows of the ruins in the twilight. She had a talent for art as well as words, a combination that he found piquant but also irritating because he was never completely sure where her true commitment lay. He grimaced. No. It was only too obvious that her most overpowering commitment was to him. And as he crossed the terrace to join her, apparently ignoring the glances of other diners who recognized him, he was only too aware that some of them were feeling just as Mia did.

He sighed, his thoughts tumbling past him as he strode toward her. Women--most often women, but not infrequently men as well--always expected the same of him. They didn't realize that it was his supreme sovereignty over himself that drew them. They all wanted to be released. Their first glimpse of

him seemed to tear the scales from their eyes and they realized that something had always been missing from their lives. They began lusting after the extraordinary--and immediately became convinced that they could get it only from him. That in just one moment--in one moment of fucking him--in one moment of letting him fill them with himself, he would also fill them with the extraordinary. That they would be able to eat of his genius and taste it, partake of it and have it become part of them as well. All of them, those who had never known such experiences and those who had, were convinced that one such moment would be sufficient. But it never was, though time after time they clung to the illusion of just one more time. So they tore at him like cannibals, frenziedly seeking transubstantiation.

Sometimes he was amused by this, sometimes angered, but most often it wearied him. Tonight, however, he wasn't weary. It did him good to fuck Angela. He smiled to himself, but Mia thought he was smiling at her and rose from the table to accept his kiss on her hand and then on her cheeks. As he touched his lips to the cool flesh at her wrist, he was still considering that he were to ever give his all to anyone, he would squander his powers. These only grew more powerful, more concentrated, by being held back and channeled into his visions. Nor did he find the holding back difficult. He knew that life had to be planned and directed--even if at times it began to feel like a movie in which he was the sole

protagonist. The life he wanted demanded only that he create a mood of anticipation while remaining always detached and distant.

As he kissed Mia's cheek, he noticed the dark-blue vein that pulsed along the side of her neck and coursed down until it disappeared in the fragile hollow of her collarbone. He had seen it before, and knew from it and from the sudden heat that flowered in her cheeks that she was overcome with desire for him.

He took his seat across from her and also saw that she had dressed modestly, no doubt to avoid the impression that she was trying to please him. The contradiction between her clothing and the pent-up hunger in her eyes suddenly irritated him. He wanted her to surrender totally to him, even though he refused, without ever saying so, to meet with her anywhere but in public. Her struggle to maintain her dignity in the face of her longing amused him greatly. He wanted neither to rebuff her nor to speak of it, but rather to see how far they could go and what she would do when he had pushed her too far. He knew it would help her writing.

He felt the tension between them as a return of his sexual appetite and smiled again at the thought of how easily he would be able to satisfy it later in the evening. Roberto would be waiting for him, would gracefully receive him. Their bodies would slowly become part of the evening heat, and he would let go of him only after a long time, after they were

both soaked in sweat.

A waiter came up to the table.

"Bring me a platter of stuffed artichokes," the director said. "I don't have time to stay."

He saw that the meaning of his statement wasn't lost on Mia. She tried to conceal her distress, and he again felt charmed by her efforts to defend herself against her feelings. However, he feigned not to notice them as he poured out two glasses of pale-green verdicchio and began telling her about the final scenes of the new film.

When he explained the ending to her, using his hands to draw the pictures he saw in his mind of himself being stabbed, bleeding from countless wounds, gasping his last breath in front of the camera, she blushed and sipped at the wine to moisten her lips. When he drank, she did, and when he leaned forward over the table to make a point, she leaned forward as well and even crossed her legs to mirror his. He was amused that she seemed unconscious of her behavior. Her unusually long blue eyes remained fixed on his as if the terrace and the other diners had ceased to exist. He also knew that the power he was wielding over her had as much to do with her almost atavistic sexual responsiveness to him as with the scene he was inventing.

"The only thing that remains," he concluded, "is the unusual murder scene at the end. I want my death to be a random killing. A difficult task for you, because as you know

randomness is the mark of real life, not fiction."

Mia bit her lips as a whiff of his eau de cologne reached her. She cast her eyes down and toyed with her eggplant caponata, pulling out grayish strings with her fork and forming them into a circle on her plate. After a few moments, he realized from the look of pain around her lips that his presence was now blocking her. No further ideas would be forthcoming while he remained. But she would solve it, she always came through for him. He pushed back his chair.

"I know you'll think of something," he reassured her. Then he rose, tossed some bills on the table, and added casually, "Let's meet again tomorrow. In the early evening, if you're free."

"Bene--at what time?"

He shrugged. "Nine-thirty."

"Here?"

He looked at her as if surprised.

"No. My villa." He allowed himself his dazzling smile.

"I'll have Maria cook for us."

As he turned from her, she reached out her hand as if to clasp his in farewell--or to hold him back. But she let it fall to her notebook and reached blindly for her pencil. He felt her bewildered gaze following him. At the exit, he turned once more, bowed lightly, and disappeared down the staircase to the street below.

He reached the Bentley. As Roberto tossed his newspaper

aside and opened the door for him, he waved up at Mia, who was still gazing down at them.

"Around the corner, quickly," he ordered Roberto as he moved to get inside the car. Then, sure that she could both hear and see him, he laughed loudly and fondled Roberto's heavy, shoulder-length hair.

The long white car rolled down the street and turned, disappearing into the black shadows of the Forum. Roberto pulled over and rolled up all the dark-tinted windows, leaving the engine on and the air-conditioning running on high against the dense night heat. He opened the rear door and locked it behind him.

The director was reclining on the back seat, his lightweight linen jacket crumpled beside him. One of Vivaldi's lesser-known concerti grossi was singing through the speakers. The director reached out and turned the music down in anticipation of the sounds that he and Roberto would make. Their own music. Roberto knelt in front of him on the thick midnight-blue carpeting, and the director clasped the back of Roberto's neck with one hand. Suddenly his fist tightened and he pulled Roberto down toward him firmly. Roberto reached out and freed him from his clothes as if peeling a large piece of fruit. With his other hand the director took his fully erect penis and put it to Roberto's half-parted lips.

At last the television was silent. Julie followed Bruno into the bedroom as she did every evening. He refused to let her come to bed at her own time because the smallest noise woke him up.

His only goodnight to her was a comment that he thought she should have made more progress in packing up the apartment. Yes, she thought resentfully, while he was attending one festive farewell lunch after another with his colleagues!

For the next two hours, she lay sleeplessly by his side and wondered why she had chosen him in the first place. At first, there had been the erotic attraction, especially his ruthlessness--a touch of brutality that had lent him a special sexual attractiveness. But whatever attraction she had felt had now turned into its exact opposite.

She lay quietly, trying not to stir, but sleep still wouldn't come. Slowly, she eased herself to the side of the bed, got up, and went through to the living room, where she opened the door to the balcony and contemplated the deserted street. The stench was there, but she inhaled deeply.

A lone Arab in a thin, ankle-length robe crossed the street. His muscular back and slender hips reminded her that Bruno's firm buttocks had been the main physical component of her attraction to him. But if her sexual interest in Bruno had disappeared exponentially in the course of their living

together, his had not. She had to please him almost every day after lunch--on the days he came home to eat--but it was less terrible when he lay there almost fully clothed and all she had to do was use her hand, around and up and down, to tease the sticky white fluid from him.

She walked barefoot into the dark kitchen, sprayed some wax on the wooden table, scrubbed it off, and folded the paper towel into a neat square, over and over, smaller and smaller until it was only a small cube in her hand.

Only a few weeks ago, when she had been watching *Clemente VII*, she had understood at last that she had to *do* something. The catalyst had been one look that the director, in his persona as the Pope, had cast to the side of the camera's eye during a scene with the blonde prisoner. She could no longer remember the exact moment, but she had lived with the sudden, exultant feeling of certainty ever since.

Before Bruno, her dreams had often circled around a mysterious man who would lock her up in a faraway house where he would possess her, hold her completely at his mercy. Lately the dream had come back but with a twist. The situation of being controlled by the man, whose face and voice had become more and more clearly the director's as time went on, maintained its attraction, but only when she imagined herself managing to terminate the situation, either by an adventurous escape, or--the more romantic version--by killing her beloved captor.

Beloved captor...The scene between Clement VII and his prisoner returned to her. She wished she had videotaped it earlier in the evening. She unfolded the paper towel and threaded it between her fingers. How could she regain her freedom? Again, the vision of Bruno dead and bleeding filled her imagination and a sense of well-being consumed her as she created yet another death to the hundred-odd that she had already inflicted on him in her imagination. Now, she knew, she would be able to sleep.

6

A drop of sweat rolled down the director's forehead into his left eye. He was lying next to Roberto on his own bed and staring at the speckles of moonlight that shone into the room through the huge potted trees on the terrace. A shiver ran down his face, an aftershock of the voluptuousness they had experienced throughout the past hours. Exhausted, he closed his eyes and turned to his face to the wall as Roberto got up to leave. The door closed quietly.

Roberto knew that the director always slept alone because he could not tolerate anyone watching him.