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BOOK ONE

Openings

ONE

Charleston

Friday, Dec. 12, 1980

Nina was going to take credit for the death of that Beatle, John. I thought that was in very bad taste. She had her scrapbook laid out on my mahogany coffee table, newspaper clippings neatly arranged in chronological order, the bald statements of death recording all of her Feedings. Nina Drayton's smile was as radiant as ever, but her pale blue eyes showed no hint of warmth.

"We should wait for Willi," I said.

"Of course, Melanie. You're right, as always. How silly of me. I know the rules." Nina stood and began walking around the room, idly touching the furnishings or exclaiming softly over a ceramic statuette or piece of needlepoint. This part of the house had once been the conservatory, but now I used it as my sewing room. Green plants still caught the morning light. The sunlight made it a warm, cozy place in the daytime, but now that winter had come the room was too chilly to use at night. Nor did I like the sense of darkness closing in against all those panes of glass.

"I love this house," said Nina. She turned and smiled at me. "I can't tell you how much I look forward to coming back to Charleston. We should hold all of our reunions here."

I knew how much Nina loathed this city, this house.

"Willi would be hurt," I said. "You know how he likes to show off his place in Beverly Hills. And his new girlfriends."

"And boyfriends," said Nina and laughed. Of all the changes and darkenings in Nina, her laugh has been least affected. It was still the husky but childish laugh that I had first heard so long ago. It had drawn me to her then—one lonely, adolescent girl responding to the warmth of another like a moth to a flame. Now it only served to chill me and put me even more on my guard. Enough moths had been drawn to Nina's flame over the many decades.

"I'll send for tea," I said.

Mr. Thorne brought the tea in my best Wedgwood china. Nina and I sat in the slowly moving squares of sunlight and spoke softly of nothing important; mutually ignorant comments on the economy, references to books which the other had not got around to reading, and sympathetic murmurs about the low class of persons one meets while flying these days. Someone peering in from the garden might have thought they were seeing an aging but attractive niece visiting her favorite aunt. (I draw the line at

suggesting that anyone would mistake us for mother and daughter.) People usually consider me a well-dressed if not stylish person. Heaven knows I have paid enough to have the wool skirts and silk blouses mailed from Scotland and France. But next to Nina I always felt dowdy. This day she wore an elegant, light blue dress which must have cost several thousand dollars if I had identified the designer correctly. The color made her complexion seem even more perfect than usual and brought out the blue of her eyes. Her hair had gone as gray as mine, but somehow she managed to get away with wearing it long and tied back with a single barrette. It looked youthful and chic on Nina and made me feel that my short, artificial curls were glowing with a blue rinse.

Few would suspect that I was four years younger than Nina. Time had been kind to her. And she had Fed more often.

She set down her cup and saucer and moved aimlessly around the room again. It was not like Nina to show such signs of nervousness. She stopped in front of the glass display case. Her gaze passed over the Hummels, the pewter pieces, and then stopped in surprise.

"Good heavens, Melanie. A pistol! What an odd place to put an old pistol."

"It's an heirloom," I said. "Quite expensive. And you're right, it *is* a silly place to keep it. But it's the only case I have in the house with a lock on it and Mrs. Hodges often brings her grandchildren when she visits . . ."

"You mean it's *loaded*?"

"No, of course not," I lied. "But children should not play with such things . . ." I trailed off lamely. Nina nodded but did not bother to conceal the condescension in her smile. She went to look out the south window into the garden.

Damn her. It said volumes about Nina Drayton that she did not recognize that pistol.

On the day he was killed, Charles Edgar Larchmont had been my beau for precisely five months and two days. There had been no formal announcement, but we were to be married. Those five months had been a microcosm of the era itself—naive, flirtatious, formal to the point of precision, and romantic. Most of all romantic. Romantic in the worst sense of the word; dedicated to saccharine or insipid ideals that only an adolescent—or an adolescent society—would strive to maintain. We were children playing with loaded weapons.

Nina, she was Nina Hawkins then, had her own beau—a tall, awkward, but well-meaning Englishman named Roger Harrison. Mr. Harrison had met Nina in London a year earlier during the first stages of the Hawkins's Grand Tour. Declaring himself smitten—another absurdity of those childish times—the tall Englishman had followed her from one European capital to another until, after being firmly reprimanded by Nina's father (an unimaginative little milliner who was constantly on the defensive

about his doubtful social status), Harrison returned to London to “settle his affairs” only to show up some months later in New York just as Nina was being packed off to her aunt’s home in Charleston in order to terminate yet another flirtation. Still undaunted, the clumsy Englishman followed her south, ever mindful of the protocols and restrictions of the day.

We were a gay group. The day after I met Nina at Cousin Celia’s June Ball, the four of us were taking a hired boat up the Cooper River for a picnic on Daniel Island. Roger Harrison, serious and solemn on every topic, was a perfect foil for Charles’s irreverent sense of humor. Nor did Roger seem to mind the good-natured jesting since he was soon joining in the laughter with his peculiar *haw-haw-haw*.

Nina loved it all. Both gentlemen showered attention on her and while Charles never failed to show the primacy of his affection for me, it was understood by all that Nina Hawkins was one of those young women who invariably becomes the center of male gallantry and attention in any gathering. Nor were the social strata of Charleston blind to the combined charm of our foursome. For two months of that now distant summer, no party was complete, no excursion adequately planned, and no occasion considered a success unless we four merry pranksters were invited and had chosen to attend. Our happy dominance of the youthful social scene was so pronounced that Cousins Celia and Loraine wheedled their parents into leaving two weeks early for their annual August sojourns in Maine.

I am not sure when Nina and I came up with the idea of the duel. Perhaps it was during one of the long, hot nights when the other “slept over”—creeping into the other’s bed, whispering and giggling, stifling our laughter when the rustling of starched uniforms betrayed the presence of our colored maids moving through the darkened halls. In any case, the idea was the natural outgrowth of the romantic pretensions of the time. The picture of Charles and Roger actually dueling over some abstract point of honor related to *us* thrilled both of us in a physical way which I recognize now as a simple form of sexual titillation.

It would have been harmless except for our Ability. We had been so successful in our manipulation of male behavior—a manipulation which was both expected and encouraged in those days—that neither of us had yet suspected that there lay anything beyond the ordinary in the way we could translate our whims into other people’s actions. The field of parapsychology did not exist then: or rather, it existed only in the rappings and knockings of parlor game séances. At any rate, we amused ourselves with whispered fantasies for several weeks and then one of us—or perhaps both of us—used the Ability to translate the fantasy into reality.

In a sense it was our first Feeding.

I do not remember the purported cause of the quarrel, perhaps some deliberate misinterpretation of one of Charles’s jokes. I can not recall who Charles and Roger arranged to have serve as seconds on that illegal outing. I do remember the hurt and confused expression on Roger Harrison’s

face during those few days. It was a caricature of ponderous dullness, the confusion of a man who finds himself in a situation not of his making and from which he cannot escape. I remember Charles and his mercurial swings of mood—the bouts of humor, periods of black anger, and the tears and kisses the night before the duel.

I remember with great clarity the beauty of that morning. Mists were floating up from the river and diffusing the rays of the rising sun as we rode out to the dueling field. I remember Nina reaching over and squeezing my hand with an impetuous excitement that was communicated through my body like an electric shock.

Much of the rest of that morning is missing. Perhaps in the intensity of that first, subconscious Feeding I literally lost consciousness as I was engulfed in the waves of fear, excitement, pride . . . of *maleness* . . . that was emanating from our two beaus as they faced death on that lovely morning. I remember experiencing the shock of realizing *this is really happening* as I shared the tread of high boots through the grass. Someone was calling off the paces. I dimly recall the weight of the pistol in my hand . . . Charles's hand I think, I will never know for sure . . . and a second of cold clarity before an explosion broke the connection and the acrid smell of gunpowder brought me back to myself.

It was Charles who died. I have never been able to forget the incredible quantities of blood which poured from the small, round hole in his breast. His white shirt was crimson by the time I reached him. There had been no blood in our fantasies. Nor had there been the sight of Charles with his head lolling, mouth dribbling saliva onto his bloodied chest while his eyes rolled back to show the whites like two eggs embedded in his skull. Roger Harrison was sobbing as Charles breathed his final, shuddering gasps on that field of innocence.

I remember nothing at all about the confused hours which followed. It was the next morning that I opened my cloth bag to find Charles's pistol lying with my things. Why would I have kept that revolver? If I had wished to take something from my fallen lover as a sign of remembrance, why that alien piece of metal? Why pry from his dead fingers the symbol of our thoughtless sin?

It said volumes about Nina that she did not recognize that pistol.

“Willi's here.”

It was not Mr. Thorne announcing the arrival of our guest but Nina's “amanuensis,” the loathsome Miss Barrett Kramer. Kramer's appearance was as unisex as her name; short cropped, black hair, powerful shoulders, and a blank, aggressive gaze which I associated with lesbians and criminals. She looked to be in her mid-thirties.

“Thank you, Barrett, dear,” said Nina.

I went to greet Willi, but Mr. Thorne had already let him in and we met in the hallway.

"Melanie! You look marvelous! You grow younger each time I see you. Nina!" The change in Willi's voice was evident. Men continued to be overpowered by their first sight of Nina after an absence. There were hugs and kisses. Willi himself looked more dissolute than ever. His alpaca sports coat was exquisitely tailored, his turtleneck sweater successfully concealed the eroded lines of his wattled neck, but when he swept off his jaunty sportscar cap the long strands of white hair he had brushed forward to hide his encroaching baldness were knocked into disarray. Willi's face was flushed with excitement, but there was also the telltale capillary redness about the nose and cheeks which spoke of too much liquor, too many drugs.

"Ladies, I think you've met my associates . . . Tom Reynolds and Jensen Luhar?" The two men added to the crowd in my narrow hall. Mr. Reynolds was thin and blond, smiling with perfectly capped teeth. Mr. Luhar was a gigantic Negro, hulking forward with a sullen, bruised look on his coarse face. I was sure that neither Nina nor I had encountered these specific catspaws of Willi's before.

"Why don't we go into the parlor?" I suggested. It was an awkward procession ending with the three of us seated on the heavily upholstered chairs surrounding the Georgian tea table which had been my grandmother's. "More tea, please, Mr. Thorne." Miss Kramer took that as her cue to leave, but Willi's two pawns stood uncertainly by the door, shifting from foot to foot and glancing at the crystal on display as if their mere proximity could break something. I would not have been surprised if that had proven to be the case.

"Jensen!" Willi snapped his fingers. The Negro hesitated and then brought forward an expensive leather attaché case. Willi set it on the tea table and clicked the catches open with his short, broad fingers. "Why don't you two see Miz Fuller's man about getting something to drink?"

When they were gone Willi shook his head and smiled at Nina. "Sorry about that, love."

Nina put her hand on Willi's sleeve. She leaned forward with an air of expectancy. "Melanie wouldn't let me begin the Game without you. Wasn't that *awful* of me to want to start without you, Willi dear?"

Willi frowned. After fifty years he still bridled at being called Willi. In Los Angeles he was Big Bill Borden. When he returned to his native Germany—which was not often because of the dangers involved—he was once again Wilhelm von Borchert, lord of dark manor, forest, and hunt. But Nina had called him Willi when they had first met in 1925, in Vienna, and Willi he had remained.

"You begin, Willi," said Nina. "You go first."

I could remember the time when we would have spent the first few days of our reunion in conversation and catching up with each other's lives. Now there was not even time for small talk.

Willi showed his teeth and removed news clippings, notebooks, and a stack of cassettes from his briefcase. No sooner had he covered the small

table with his material than Mr. Thorne arrived with the tea and Nina's scrapbook from the sewing room. Willi brusquely cleared a small space.

At first glance one might see certain similarities between Willi Borchert and Mr. Thorne. One would be mistaken. Both men tend to the florid, but Willi's complexion was the result of excess and emotion: Mr. Thorne had known neither of these for many years. Willi's balding was a patchy, self-consciously concealed thing—a weasel with the mange—while Mr. Thorne's bare head was smooth and unwrinkled. One could not imagine Mr. Thorne ever having *had* hair. Both men had gray eyes—what a novelist would call cold, gray eyes—but Mr. Thorne's eyes were cold with indifference, cold with a clarity coming from an absolute absence of troublesome emotion or thought. Willi's eyes were the cold of a blustery North Sea winter and were often clouded with shifting curtains of the emotions that controlled him—pride, hatred, love of pain, the pleasures of destruction. Willi never referred to his use of the Ability as Feedings—I was evidently the only one who thought in those terms—but Willi sometimes talked of the Hunt. Perhaps it was the dark forests of his homeland that he thought of as he stalked his human quarry through the sterile streets of Los Angeles. Did Willi dream of the forest? I wondered. Did he look back to green wool hunting jackets, the applause of retainers, the gout of blood from the dying boar? Or did Willi remember the slam of jackboots on cobblestones and the pounding of his lieutenants' fists on doors? Perhaps Willi still associated his Hunt with the dark European night of the oven which he had helped to oversee.

I called it Feeding. Willi called it the Hunt. I had never heard Nina call it anything.

“Where is your VCR?” asked Willi. “I have put them all on tape.”

“Oh, Willi,” said Nina in an exasperated tone. “You know Melanie. She's *so* old-fashioned. She wouldn't have a video player.”

“I don't even have a television,” I said. Nina laughed.

“Goddamn it,” muttered Willi. “It doesn't matter. I have other records here.” He snapped rubber bands from around the small, black notebooks. “It just would have been better on tape. The Los Angeles stations gave much coverage to the Hollywood Strangler and I edited in the . . . Ach! Never mind.” He tossed the videocassettes into his briefcase and slammed the lid shut.

“Twenty-three,” he said. “Twenty-three since we met twelve months ago. It doesn't seem that long, does it?”

“Show us,” said Nina. She was leaning forward and her blue eyes seemed very bright. “I've been curious since I saw the Strangler interviewed on *Sixty Minutes*. He was yours, Willi? He seemed so . . .”

“*Ja, ja*, he was mine. A nobody. A timid little man. He was the gardener of a neighbor of mine. I left him alive so the police could question him, erase any doubts. He will hang himself in his cell next month after

the press loses interest. But this is more interesting. Look at this.” Willi slid across several glossy black and white photographs. The NBC executive had murdered the five members of his family and drowned a visiting soap opera actress in his pool. He had then stabbed himself repeatedly and written 50 SHARE in blood on the wall of the bathhouse.

“Reliving old glories, Willi?” asked Nina. “‘Death to the Pigs’ and all that?”

“No, goddamn it. I think it should receive points for irony. The girl had been scheduled to drown on the program. It was already in the script outline.”

“Was he hard to Use?” It was my question. I was curious despite myself.

Willi lifted one eyebrow. “Not really. He was an alcoholic and heavily into cocaine. There was not much left. And he hated his family. Most people do.”

“Most people in California, perhaps,” said Nina primly. It was an odd comment from Nina. Her father had committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a trolley car.

I asked, “Where did you make contact?”

“A party. The usual place. He bought the coke from a director who had ruined one of my . . .”

“Did you have to repeat the contact?”

Willi frowned at me. He kept his anger under control, but his face grew redder. “*Ja, ja*. I saw him twice more. Once I just watched from my car as he played tennis.”

“Points for irony,” said Nina. “But you lose points for repeated contact. If he was as empty as you say, you should have been able to Use him after only one touch. What else do you have?”

He had his usual assortment. Pathetic skid row murders. Two domestic slayings. A highway collision which turned into a fatal shooting. “I was in the crowd,” said Willi. “I made contact. He had a gun in the glove compartment.”

“Two points,” said Nina.

Willi had saved a good one for last. A once famous child star had suffered a bizarre accident. He had left his Bel Air apartment while it filled with gas and then returned to light a match. Two others had died in the ensuing fire.

“You get credit only for him,” said Nina.

“*Ja, ja*.”

“Are you sure about this one? It *could* have been an accident . . .”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” snapped Willi. He turned toward me. “*This* one was very hard to Use. Very strong. I blocked his memory of turning on the gas. Had to hold it away for two hours. Then forced him into the room. He struggled not to strike the match.”

"You should have had him use his lighter," said Nina.

"He didn't smoke," growled Willi. "He gave it up last year."

"Yes." Nina smiled. "I seem to remember him saying that to Johnny Carson." I could not tell if Nina was jesting.

The three of us went through the ritual of assigning points. Nina did most of the talking. Willi went from being sullen to expansive to sullen again. At one point he reached over and patted my knee as he laughingly asked for help. I said nothing. Finally he gave up, crossed the parlor to the liquor cabinet, and poured himself a tall glass of bourbon from Father's decanter. The evening light was sending its final, horizontal rays through the stained glass panels of the bay windows and it cast a red hue on Willi as he stood next to the oak cupboard. His eyes were small red embers in a bloody mask.

"Forty-one," said Nina at last. She looked up brightly and showed the calculator as if it verified some objective fact. "I count forty-one points. What do you have, Melanie?"

"Ja," interrupted Willi. "That is fine. Now let us see your claims, Nina." His voice was flat and empty. Even Willi had lost some interest in the Game.

Before Nina could begin, Mr. Thorne entered and motioned that dinner was served. We adjourned to the dining room, Willi pouring himself another glass of bourbon and Nina fluttering her hands in mock frustration at the interruption of the Game. Once seated at the long, mahogany table, I worked at being a hostess. From decades of tradition, talk of the Game was banned from the dinner table. Over soup we discussed Willi's new movie and the purchase of another store for Nina's line of boutiques. It seemed that Nina's monthly column in *Vogue* was to be discontinued but that a newspaper syndicate was interested in picking it up.

Both of my guests exclaimed over the perfection of the baked ham, but I thought that Mr. Thorne had made the gravy a trifle too sweet. Darkness had filled the windows before we finished our chocolate mousse. The refracted light from the chandelier made Nina's hair dance with high-lights while I feared that mine glowed more blue than ever.

Suddenly there was a sound from the kitchen. The huge Negro's face appeared at the swinging door. His shoulder was hunched against white hands and his expression was that of a querulous child.

". . . the hell you think we are sittin' here like . . ." The white hands pulled him out of sight.

"Excuse me, ladies." Willi dabbed linen at his lips and stood up. He still moved gracefully for all of his years.

Nina poked at her chocolate. There was one sharp, barked command from the kitchen and the sound of a slap. It was the slap of a man's hand—hard and flat as a small caliber rifle shot. I looked up and Mr. Thorne was at my elbow, clearing away the dessert dishes.

“Coffee, please, Mr. Thorne. For all of us.” He nodded and his smile was gentle.

Franz Anton Mesmer had known of it even if he had not understood it. I suspect that Mesmer must have had some small touch of the Ability. Modern pseudo-sciences have studied it and renamed it, removed most of its power, confused its uses and origins, but it remains the shadow of what Mesmer discovered. They have no idea of what it is like to Feed.

I despair at the rise of modern violence. I truly give in to despair at times, that deep, futureless pit of despair which Hopkins called carrion comfort. I watch the American slaughterhouse, the casual attacks on popes, presidents, and uncounted others, and I wonder if there are many more out there with the Ability or if butchery has simply become the modern way of life.

All humans feed on violence, on the small exercises of power over another, but few have tasted—as we have—the ultimate power. And without that Ability, few know the unequalled pleasure of taking a human life. Without the Ability, even those who do feed on life cannot savor the flow of emotions in stalker and victim, the total exhilaration of the attacker who has moved beyond all rules and punishments, the strange, almost sexual submission of the victim in that final second of truth when all options are canceled, all futures denied, all possibilities erased in an exercise of absolute power over another.

I despair at modern violence. I despair at the impersonal nature of it and the casual quality which has made it accessible to so many. I had a television set until I sold it at the height of the Vietnam War. Those sanitized snippets of death—made distant by the camera’s lens—meant nothing to me. But I believe it meant something to these cattle which surround me. When the war and the nightly televised body counts ended, they demanded more, *more*, and the movie screens and streets of this sweet and dying nation have provided it in mediocre, mob abundance. It is an addiction I know well.

They miss the point. Merely observed, violent death is a sad and sullied tapestry of confusion. But to those of us who have Fed, death can be a *sacrament*.

“My turn! My turn!” Nina’s voice still resembled that of the visiting belle who had just filled her dance card at Cousin Celia’s June Ball.

We had returned to the parlor, Willi had finished his coffee and requested a brandy from Mr. Thorne. I was embarrassed for Willi. To have one’s closest associates show any hint of unplanned behavior was certainly a sign of weakening Ability. Nina did not appear to have noticed.

“I have them all in order,” said Nina. She opened the scrapbook on the now empty tea table. Willi went through them carefully, sometimes asking a question, more often grunting assent. I murmured occasional agreement

although I had heard of none of them. Except for the Beatle, of course. Nina saved that for near the end.

“Good God, Nina, that was you?” Willi seemed near anger. Nina’s Feedings had always run to Park Avenue suicides and matrimonial disagreements ending in shots fired from expensive, small calibered ladies’ guns. This type of thing was more in Willi’s crude style. Perhaps he felt that his territory was being invaded. “I mean . . . you were risking a lot, weren’t you? It’s so . . . damn it . . . so *public*.”

Nina laughed and set down the calculator. “Willi, *dear*, that’s what the Game is *about*, is it not?”

Willi strode to the liquor cabinet and refilled his brandy snifter. The wind tossed bare branches against the leaded glass of the bay window. I do not like winter. Even in the South it takes its toll on the spirit.

“Didn’t this guy . . . whatshisname . . . buy the gun in Hawaii or someplace?” asked Willi from across the room. “That sounds like his initiative to me. I mean, if he was *already* stalking the fellow . . .”

“Willi, dear,” Nina’s voice had gone as cold as the wind that raked the branches, “no one said he was *stable*. How many of yours are stable, Willi? But I made it *happen*, darling. I chose the place and the time. Don’t you see the irony of the *place*, Willi? After that little prank on the director of that witchcraft movie a few years ago? It was straight from the script . . .”

“I don’t know,” said Willi. He sat heavily on the divan, spilling brandy on his expensive sports coat. He did not notice. The lamplight reflected from his balding skull. The mottles of age were more visible at night and his neck, where it disappeared into his turtleneck, was all ropes and tendons. “I don’t know.” He looked up at me and smiled suddenly, as if we shared a conspiracy. “It could be like that writer fellow, eh, Melanie? It could be like that.”

Nina looked down at the hands on her lap. The well-manicured fingers were white at the tips.

The Mind Vampires. That’s what the writer was going to call his book. I sometimes wonder if he really would have written anything. What was his name? Something Russian.

Willi and I received the telegram from Nina: COME QUICKLY. YOU ARE NEEDED. That was enough. I was on the next morning’s flight to New York. The plane was a noisy, propeller-driven Constellation and I spent much of the flight assuring the oversolicitous stewardess that I needed nothing, that, indeed, I felt fine. She obviously had decided that I was someone’s grandmother who was flying for the first time.

Willi managed to arrive twenty minutes before me. Nina was distraught and as close to hysteria as I had ever seen her. She had been at a party in lower Manhattan two days before—she was not so distraught that she forgot to tell us what important names had been there—when she found herself sharing a corner, a fondue pot, and confidences with a

young writer. Or rather, the writer was sharing confidences. Nina described him as a scruffy sort, wispy little beard, thick glasses, a corduroy sports coat worn over an old plaid shirt—one of the type invariably sprinkled around successful parties of that era according to Nina. She knew enough not to call him a beatnik for that term had just become passé, but no one had yet heard the term hippie and it wouldn't have applied to him anyway. He was a writer of the sort that barely ekes out a living, these days at least, by selling blood and doing novelizations of television series. Alexander something.

His idea for a book—he told Nina that he had been working on it for some time—was that many of the murders then being committed were actually the result of a small group of psychic killers—he called them *mind vampires*—who used others to carry out their grisly deeds. He said that a paperback publisher had already shown interest in his outline and would offer him a contract tomorrow if he would change the title to *The Zombie Factor* and put in more sex.

“So what?” Willi had said to Nina in disgust. “You have me fly across the continent for this? I might buy that idea to produce myself.”

That turned out to be the excuse we used to interrogate this Alexander Somebody when Nina threw an impromptu party the next evening. I did not attend. The party was not overly successful according to Nina, but it gave Willi the chance to have a long chat with the young, would-be novelist. In the writer's almost pitiable eagerness to do business with Bill Borden, producer of *Paris Memories*, *Three On a Swing*, and at least two other completely forgettable Technicolor features touring the drive-ins that summer, he revealed that the book consisted of a well-worn outline and a dozen pages of notes. However, he was sure that he could do a “treatment” for Mr. Borden in five weeks, perhaps three weeks if he was flown out to Hollywood to get the proper creative stimulation.

Later that evening we discussed the possibility of Willi simply buying an option on the treatment, but Willi was short on cash at the time and Nina was insistent. In the end, the young writer opened his femoral artery with a Gillette blade and ran screaming into a narrow Greenwich Village side street to die. I don't believe that anyone ever bothered to sort through the clutter and debris of his remaining notes.

“It could be like that writer, *ja*, Melanie?” Willi patted my knee. I nodded. “He was mine,” continued Willi, “and Nina tried to take credit. Remember?”

Again I nodded. Actually he had not been Nina's or Willi's. I had avoided the party so I could make contact later without the young man noticing he was being followed. I did so easily. I remember sitting in an overheated little delicatessen across the street from the apartment building. It was not at all difficult. It was over so quickly that there was almost no sense of Feeding. Then I was aware once again of the sputtering radiators and the

smell of salami as people rushed to the door to see what the screaming was about. I remember finishing my tea slowly so that I did not have to leave before the ambulance was gone.

"Nonsense," said Nina. She busied herself with her little calculator. "How many points?" She looked at me. I looked at Willi.

"Six," he said with a shrug. Nina made a small show of totaling the numbers.

"Thirty-eight," she said and sighed theatrically. "You win again, Willi. Or rather, you beat *me* again. We must hear from Melanie. You've been so quiet, dear. You must have some surprise for us."

"Yes," said Willi, "it is your turn to win. It has been several years."

"None," I said. I had expected an explosion of questions, but the silence was broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. Nina was looking away from me, at something hidden by the shadows in the corner.

"None?" echoed Willi.

"There was . . . one," I said at last. "But it was by accident. I came across them robbing an old man behind . . . it was by accident."

Willi was agitated. He stood up, walked to the window, turned a straight-backed old chair around and straddled it, arms folded. "What does this mean?"

"You're quitting the Game?" asked Nina as she turned to look at me. I let the question serve as the answer.

"Why?" snapped Willi. In his excitement it came out with a hard "V."

If I had been raised in an era when young ladies were allowed to shrug, I would have done so then. As it was, I contented myself with running my fingers along an imaginary seam on my skirt. Willi had asked the question, but I stared straight into Nina's eyes when I finally answered. "I'm tired. It's been too long. I guess I'm getting old."

"You'll get a lot *older* if you do not Hunt," said Willi. His body, his voice, the red mask of his face, everything signaled great anger just kept in check. "My God, Melanie, you *already* look older! You look terrible. This is *why* we Hunt, woman. Look at yourself in the mirror! Do you want to die an old woman just because you're tired of using *them*? Acch!" Willi stood and turned his back on us.

"Nonsense!" Nina's voice was strong, confident, in command once more. "Melanie's *tired*, Willi. Be nice. We all have times like that. I remember how *you* were after the war. Like a whipped puppy. You wouldn't even go outside your miserable little flat in Baden. Even after we helped you get to New Jersey you just sulked around feeling sorry for yourself. Melanie *made up* the Game to help you feel better. So quiet! *Never* tell a lady who feels tired and depressed that she looks terrible. Honestly, Willi, you're such a *Schwächsiniger* sometimes. And a crashing boor to boot."

I had anticipated many reactions to my announcement, but this was the

one I feared the most. It meant that Nina had also tired of the Game. It meant that she was ready to move to another level of play. It had to mean that.

"Thank you, Nina, darling," I said. "I knew you would understand."

She reached across and touched my knee reassuringly. Even through my wool skirt I could feel the cold of her white fingers.

My guests would not stay the night. I implored. I remonstrated. I pointed out that their rooms were ready, that Mr. Thorne had already turned down the quilts.

"Next time," said Willi. "Next time, Melanie, my little love. We'll make a weekend of it as we used to. A week!" Willi was in a much better mood since he had been paid his thousand dollar "prize" by each of us. He had sulked, but I had insisted. It soothed his ego when Mr. Thorne brought in a check already made out to William D. Borden.

Again I asked him to stay, but he protested that he had a midnight flight to Chicago. He had to see a prizewinning author about a screenplay. Then he was hugging me good-bye, his companions were in the hall behind me, and I had a brief moment of terror.

But they left. The blond young man showed his white smile and the Negro bobbed his head in what I took as a farewell. Then we were alone. Nina and I were alone.

Not quite alone. Miss Kramer was standing next to Nina at the end of the hall. Mr. Thorne was out of sight behind the swinging door to the kitchen. I left him there.

Miss Kramer took three steps forward. I felt my breath stop for an instant. Mr. Thorne put his hand on the swinging door. Then the husky little brunette went to the hall closet, removed Nina's coat, and stepped back to help her into it.

"Are you sure you won't stay?"

"No, thank you, darling. I've promised Barrett that we would drive to Hilton Head tonight."

"But it's late . . ."

"We have reservations. Thank you, anyway, Melanie. I *will* be in touch."

"Yes."

"I mean it, dear. We must talk. I understand *exactly* how you feel, but you have to remember that the Game is still important to Willi. We'll have to find a way to end it without hurting his feelings. Perhaps we could visit him next spring in Karinhall or whatever he calls that gloomy old Bavarian place of his. A trip to the Continent would do wonders for you, dear."

"Yes."

"I *will* be in touch. After this deal with the new store is settled. We need to spend some time together, Melanie . . . just the two of us . . . like old

times.” Her lips kissed the air next to my cheek. She held my forearms tightly for a few seconds. “Good-bye, darling.”

“Good-bye, Nina.”

I carried the brandy glass to the kitchen. Mr. Thorne took it in silence.

“Make sure the house is secure,” I said. He nodded and went off to check the locks and alarm system. It was only nine forty-five, but I was very tired. *Age*, I thought. I went up the wide staircase—perhaps the finest feature of the house—and dressed for bed. It had begun to storm and the sound of the cold raindrops on the window carried a sad rhythm to it.

Mr. Thorne looked in as I was brushing my hair and wishing it were longer. I turned to him. He reached into the pocket of his dark vest. When his hand emerged, a slim blade flicked out. I nodded. He palmed the blade shut and closed the door behind him. I listened to his footsteps recede down the stairs to the chair in the front hall where he would spend the night.

I believe that I dreamed of vampires that night. Or perhaps I was thinking about them just prior to falling asleep and a fragment had stayed with me until morning. Of all of mankind’s self-inflicted terrors, of all their pathetic little monsters, only the myth of the vampire had any vestige of dignity. Like the humans it fed on, the vampire responded to its own dark compulsions. But unlike its petty human prey, the vampire carried out its sordid means to the only possible ends which could justify such actions—the goal of literal immortality. There was a nobility there. And a sadness.

Willi was right—I had aged. The past year had taken a greater toll than the preceding decade. But I had not Fed. Despite the hunger, despite the aging reflection in the mirror, despite the dark compulsion which had ruled our lives for so many years, *I had not Fed*.

I fell asleep trying to remember the details of Charles’s face.

I fell asleep hungry.