

Insatiable

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One

Venneman dropped the coffee carafe in the sink as he was filling it with cold water. It smashed into flying slivers. One sliver hit him on the knuckle. He sensed as much as saw one fly past his eye, just missing him.

“Damn!”

His knuckle was bleeding. He held his hand under the stream of cold water, washing the cut until the blood stopped flowing. It stung deeply, but he kept his hand there. He deserved some pain for such carelessness.

It was a small cut, but Venneman was worried that the piece of glass might still be in there. Years ago, his mother had warned him that cuts from broken glass were the worst kind, because often one could not feel the glass in the wound. Unlike a splinter of wood, glass didn't always give its presence away. The image of a glass splinter under the skin, cleanly slicing away the very nerve endings whenever the wound was touched and thus preventing telltale feelings of pain, had stayed with Venneman ever since.

He shivered and told himself not to fret about such things. Surely the fact that the cut had already stopped bleeding was a good sign. He should expend more energy worrying about the invisible pieces of glass he had just scattered all over the kitchen.

Venneman spent the next quarter-hour sweeping the floor carefully and wiping off all the counters. Then he stepped outside and wiped his shoes on the wet grass just in case there were some slivers in the soles. It was still dark outside, and cold and drizzling, a prelude to the snow predicted for the day. Venneman took his time anyway and did a thorough job before going back inside. Finally he was ready to get the

spare carafe from the cupboard and start the coffee-making process all over again. Once the coffee had started dripping, he took the shopping list off the refrigerator door and added to it Coffee Carafe — 12 Cups.

Jill came into the kitchen as he was pinning the list back on the refrigerator door with a magnet. She was wearing only her bra and panties, and she was toweling her hair. “Did you yell, Richie?”

“Yeah, I yelled.” He held up his hand, knuckle toward her, and told her what had happened. “Better not walk around in here until you get your shoes on.”

“Right. Bring me a cup when it’s ready, will you?”

He watched her as she left the kitchen, still rubbing the towel over her hair. The wetness made her hair look dark, but when it was dry, it was a light brown, almost blonde, shining and healthy. It reached almost to her shoulders, turning under at the end. It was naturally fairly straight hair, with only a slight, soft wave. Jill had always avoided permanents, preferring her hair’s natural beauty. It complemented the aristocratic beauty of her face — high cheekbones, firm jaw, straight, slender nose, pale skin. Her eyes were brown and her eyebrows almost black, a startling contrast to her hair and skin color. She stared at people fixedly, sometimes; it was an unconscious habit. Venneman had seen its effect: uneasiness followed by fascination.

Jill was tall for a woman, only a couple of inches shorter than Venneman. She was slender and firm, despite a sedentary job and lifestyle and a large appetite. She had always seemed unaware how blessed she was by heredity.

Venneman knew that Jill Kennedy in her underwear would have excited most other men, but she no longer had that effect on him. Living together, he thought. It’s as good as marriage for suppressing libido.

Not that he had found her as arousing even in the beginning as he was sure other men would have. Their lovemaking was certainly pleasant, though, and Venneman would rather make love to Jill than not do so, most times.

In the early days of their living together, he remembered, Jill had always taken care not to appear in front of him naked, or even so nearly naked as she had just done. He had always assumed that that was due to her shyness about nudity and her uneasiness with her own body. For the

first time, it occurred to him now that she might have been afraid of exciting him too much. She had had as many unpleasant experiences with the libidos of others as he had, and she must have feared his. For a moment, the idea amused him.

Later, they had breakfast, drank the last of the coffee, and went to church. Then they came back and read the newspaper, did their various housekeeping chores, and went out on a brief shopping trip. After all of which, it was time for Jill to prepare their lunches for the next day, for Venneman to make sure that all the non-food items he wanted to have in his lunchpail were in there, and for both of them to go to bed.

They were both very tired. They gave each other a quick kiss, said goodnight, lay down back to back, and fell asleep quickly. Despite his fear that it would wake him, the cut in Venneman's hand didn't bother him at all during the night, and by the next morning, he had forgotten about it.

The young woman at the front of the bus kept watching him. Venneman tried to keep his eyes glued to his newspaper, but he could not avoid looking up now and then. Whenever he did, his eyes met hers and she smiled warmly at him. Even Jill's presence in the seat beside him was no deterrence to the young woman.

Predators, Venneman thought. The world's full of them. He had always hated being stared at, especially when the look had in it that element of sexual interest that he had learned to recognize and fear even as a child.

The bus went all the way downtown, but Venneman and Jill normally got off at an earlier point, at one edge of the university where both worked, Venneman in the basement of Currigan Hall, the building housing the physics department, and Jill as the receptionist for the history department. Today, Jill had an appointment at a doctor's office along the way.

"Here's my stop," Jill said. "'Bye."

Venneman offered his cheek, and she gave him a peck on it. Then she hurried from the bus into the grey light of a winter morning.

Quickly, Venneman slid his lunchpail from his lap onto the seat Jill had just vacated. He tried to watch the young woman at the front of the

bus without actually looking at her. She had half risen from her seat as Jill headed for the exit. Now, seeing what Venneman had done with his lunchpail, she sat down again. She was watching him, though, still trying to catch his eye. Venneman stared at his newspaper again, pretending to read it.

The bus reached the university, and the young woman stood up. This was Venneman's normal stop, but he decided to stay on the bus for a while this morning. After a long look at Venneman, the young woman shrugged and got off. Venneman relaxed for the first time since boarding the bus and managed to finish the main section of the newspaper before the bus reached its next stop, which was downtown. Venneman left the bus and began the trek back toward the campus.

Walking carefully along the wet, slippery sidewalk, Venneman wondered when it would end. Age would do it, he supposed. At some point, he'd be old and wrinkled enough that women would no longer want him. He had once decided to take up smoking in order to hasten that day, but Jill had objected strenuously. Possibly he would one day get used to the unwanted invitations and learn to ignore them, but he doubted it.

He got to work five minutes late instead of his usual ten minutes early. Not that it mattered all that much. The first supercilious Ph.D. wouldn't show up until ten or eleven o' clock. Of course everything had better be ready by then, and both lab technicians must pretend to be eager to jump to the lordly one's commands.

He and Dale did all the work, but the faculty members got all the credit. No doubt a really good Christian would be able to accept that and even be content with the way things were, Venneman thought. He had never pretended to be a particularly good Christian, though, much as he thought he ought to be. Instead, he was sure he was one of the most sinful ones.

Faculty members and students were already roaming about in the hallways, but none of them paid any attention to Venneman. He was beneath the notice of the faculty members except when they needed his help in the lab, and the students ignored him because they knew he was of no use to their academic careers.

Oh, ease up, Venneman told himself. Less bitterness and more

understanding, please.

He went down the main stairway, down to the basement level of Currihan Hall, trying to put a spring in his step, as if doing so would in turn affect his mood and make him feel happy and carefree.

At the bottom of the stairs, the way was blocked by double glass doors. A box was attached to the wall beside the right-hand door. A small light on the box glowed red. Venneman unclipped from his shirt pocket the badge which functioned as a cardkey. He inserted it into the slot in the box and pulled it out again. The red light changed to green, and Venneman heard the faint click as the door was unlocked. He reattached the badge to his shirt and pushed the door open. "Home again," he muttered.

In fact, though, he had always liked the cleanliness and order of the lab.

Upstairs, there were other labs, the ones where first- and second-year physics students did what were grandly called experiments as part of their course work. No matter how often the students were preached to about the importance of neatness in a lab, those rooms were always a mess — in Venneman's opinion, anyway. He had started out up there, setting things up for the kids beforehand and then cleaning up after them. It had seemed a hopeless and endless task. At least he had done it, unlike his successor, who was really little more than a glorified janitor, and not a very good one.

Down here, matters were different. This was Dale and Venneman's domain. Oh, not in the view of the physics faculty, but in the view of the two lab technicians, who knew the truth of the matter far better than the part-time visitors with doctorates did.

Although the truth of the matter, Venneman knew, was that he was still little more than a glorified janitor. And this was Dale's domain if it was anyone's.

Dale was there already, seated at her desk, bending forward to concentrate on the screen of her computer. Venneman could see that she had on her usual Serious Graduate Student expression, but the blue light from the screen made her look like The Graduate Student from Another World.

Venneman was not surprised that Dale had arrived before him. She

was as punctual as he, and frequently worked even later.

She had a future to work for, which could not be said for him. She had chosen this way to pay her way through graduate school, preferring it to teaching undergraduate courses or grading papers for one of the faculty members. From what Venneman had heard, Dale was highly respected in the department and was doing very well. She'd be gone all too soon, off to her no-doubt brilliant career. At which time, Venneman was sure, she would be replaced by someone considerably less pleasant to work with.

He called out across the room to her. "Hi, Dale! How's Dr. Dirtbag's little darling today?"

Dale looked up from her console, gave him a quick smile, and returned her attention to the panel in front of her. "Humming right along. All the little dials keep spelling out 'Nobel Prize.'"

Could Harold Dinsmuir with a Nobel Prize to his credit be any more insufferable than he already was? Venneman doubted it.

He put his lunchpail on his desk, hung his coat on the rack beside the desk, and walked over to Dale's desk. He stood behind her and looked over her shoulder. He realized that he was halfway hoping Dale had found a glitch, some sign that Dinsmuir's project wasn't working. Venneman felt guilty immediately. Don't think about Dinsmuir getting glory out of this, he told himself. Think of the university and the department getting the glory. Think of your job security.

If Dinsmuir succeeded, Venneman was sure, money would start flowing into the department, this lab would expand, and maybe Venneman could even swing a raise for himself. Such a raise would be even more likely if he could bring himself to stay in Dinsmuir's favor, since much of the money flowing into the department would flow to Dinsmuir, whom other universities would be trying to recruit. Should Dinsmuir choose to stay, he would have more money, more prestige, and more power. A pay raise was important to Venneman and Jill. If it were large enough, they could get on with serious planning for the future.

He realized that he had rarely stood this close to Dale before. For the first time, he noticed a few grey hairs in her short, thick cap of black hair.

Poor Dale, he thought. It's a good thing for her she's so good at physics and will be able to support herself. She'll never get a man.

Immediately, Venneman felt guilty for those thoughts. Dale was a wonderful young woman, he told himself sternly, and the man who won her heart would be lucky, indeed.

“What does he have you doing for the presentation?” Dale asked him.

She was twenty-five, the same age as Jill, but that was the only similarity between the two women. Dale was taller than Venneman, her face was plain, and her body was slender, shapeless, and sexless. “I’m the kind of woman every man expects to find in a physics lab,” she had once told Venneman. But her face was pleasant and open, and Venneman had always found that looking at her relaxed him inside, made him feel calm and peaceful. Perhaps that was largely due to her being one of the few woman who didn’t openly want him sexually.

He said, “I copied and collated all the handouts for Dirtbag. He also told me to double check all the tables and graphs against the original readings. You know, he’s terrified that his positive results will turn out to be an artifact of the instruments, and he’ll look like an idiot.”

“Even more of an idiot, you mean. I bet there are lots of physicists who would be happy to disprove his results. In fact, a lot of them are on the faculty right here.”

“Yeah, well, they might dream of undermining him, but they’re also happy enough to hold onto his coattails as long as he’s a rising star.”

Dale laughed. “You’re mixing your metaphors.”

“Dale, I don’t even know what a metaphor is, let alone how to mix one. Anyway, now I have to put the stuff into those glossy binders he bought. Oh, and give the place a once over, make it neat and shiny. I’d better get to it. Dr. Dirtbag’ll probably be along in an hour or two.”

Dale widened her eyes at him and said loudly, “Why, here’s Dr. Dinsmuir now. Hi, Dr. Dinsmuir! Everything’s swimming along swimmingly.”

Venneman pasted a smile on his face and turned toward the door.

“Good girl,” Dinsmuir said. The tone of his voice dismissed her. His gaze slid over her and came to rest on Venneman, and his face lit up. Harold Dinsmuir was a tall, athletic man, darkly handsome. Venneman knew that he was past forty, but he looked no more than thirty, and the quantity and quality of his research were those of a young scientist. The current project, the complex of machinery which occupied all of the west

end of the lab, was Dinsmuir's most ambitious research yet. It was also his ticket to worldwide fame. Today, Dinsmuir would be showing a group of money men and policy makers what he had accomplished. It would be the first step toward cashing in that ticket.

"Richard," Dinsmuir said. He had the voice of an orator even when he wasn't trying, and now he *was* trying. His voice grew deeper, richer, more commanding. "Let's go up to my office, Richard. We need to talk about what you'll be doing today."

Venneman stood his ground. "We discussed it yesterday afternoon, Doctor. I know what to do, and all the handouts are ready. I've got them stacked over there on my desk."

Dinsmuir's glance flicked back to Dale and away again, back to Venneman. "Hm. I see. Okay, carry on, both of you. I'll check in later today."

After Dinsmuir had left, Dale said, "I wish I knew your secret, Richie."

"I wish *I* knew, so I could get rid of it."

Dale shook her head. "I don't think it's something you *can* get rid of. Or transfer to someone else, which is what I really wish you could do. You're more than handsome, you know. In an earlier age, you'd have been called beautiful."

"No," Venneman said quickly. "Jill's beautiful. Men are just handsome. But I'm not even that."

Dale said, "Jill *is* beautiful, but so are you. Or handsome, if you prefer. Very handsome. You're about six feet tall, aren't you?"

Venneman shook his head. "Five ten."

Dale laughed. "Okay, let's compromise. Say five eleven. And in good shape. And you've got that gorgeous hair — I don't even know what color to call it."

"Let's call it brown and change the subject. Please."

But Dale persisted. "No, it's not really brown. More like auburn — such a dark red that it's almost brown, but it's much more interesting than brown. It's a color women want to touch, to see if it feels as beautiful and sexy as it looks."

"It feels like hair," Venneman said.

"Of course it does. But you're avoiding my point. And then there are

your eyes. They're even larger and darker than Jill's, and hers are killers. But you don't look at people the way she does. You're always looking at the ground, instead of the person you're talking to."

"That's not true!" Venneman said. "I'm looking at you right now." He forced himself to keep his eyes on her face.

"With an effort," Dale said. "I can tell. Anyway, it's more than just your looks. I think you'd have that amazing sexual attraction, that sexual magnetism, even if you were ordinary looking. Maybe it's pheromones. Every woman wants you. And a lot of men, too, obviously."

"Not every woman, thank God." He smiled at Dale, feeling safe doing so.

"Most men probably envy you."

"They don't know what it's like. Anyway, I'd better get on with making Dr. Dirtbag look good."

Venneman put the handouts for the presentation into the new binders that had "Harold Dinsmuir" prominently printed on their covers. Then he scoured the lab. He found a few stray pieces of equipment and put them back on the appropriate shelves in the appropriate cabinets or in the supply closet, as appropriate. He noticed a couple of crumpled-up pieces of paper on the floor, and he picked them up and threw them away. He dusted surfaces and washed and dried the coffee mug with DINSMUIR stenciled on it. He worked mechanically. He was thorough, but his conscious mind was elsewhere.

He, too, wished that he could transfer whatever it was to someone else — to one of those men who supposedly envied him, perhaps, or to Dale, who obviously also envied him. Whatever it was, in Venneman's opinion it was a curse.

It had been with him for as long as he could remember. It predated puberty, the awakening of his own very mild interest in sex. As far back as he could remember anything, he could remember adults of every age and both sexes stroking him, hugging him, kissing him, and all those memories filled him with disgust. In school, teachers and other children had done the same thing to him.

God, how he hated being pursued! Pursued, desired, the protagonist in others' fantasies . . . He would sell his soul, he sometimes thought, to be free of all that.

Thank God for Jill Kennedy. She too was beautiful, desirable in the eyes of others. And she too wanted to be free of others' eyes on her body, wanted to be liberated from other people's needs. She and Venneman had found each other with vast relief. Each had become the other's shield against the world's lust.

They had been living together for more than a year. True, they slept together, but the physical side of their relationship was so subdued, so almost chaste, that Venneman was sure God would forgive them for it, especially since it protected them from the temptations of others and since they fully intended to marry very soon — as soon as money permitted, as soon as their financial future seemed secure enough.

Much of that depended on Dinsmuir, unchaste Dinsmuir, lust-filled Dinsmuir.

Campus rumor had it that no attractive student in Dinsmuir's classes — male or female — was safe from him. A man of lesser professional ability would have destroyed his career with even half of the escapades that were attributed to him, but Dinsmuir — Dirty Harold, Dirty Dinsmuir, Dr. Dirtbag — had so high a record of achievement in his field that a university administration desperate for national recognition had chosen to hold its breath and ignore his trespasses and hope that Dinsmuir had the sense to know how far was too far.

Sometimes Venneman felt dirty working in the man's lab. He also had no options. He was lucky to have this job. Were he to lose it, he would have a hard time finding another like it.

He was only here because of Dinsmuir, in the first place. There seemed no end to Venneman's dependence on the vile man.

Venneman's parents had died when he was a senior in high school. He had spent the small insurance settlement on college tuition, books, and room and board. In retrospect, it had been a foolish gamble, and he might have been better off spending the money at the racetrack.

He had reached the first semester of his junior year before admitting that his intellectual abilities weren't equal to his ambitions: he would never be a physicist. He had signed up for a course in Electricity and Magnetism and one in Optics, both required for physics majors, both taught by Dinsmuir, and both acknowledged as killers. They had certainly killed Richard Venneman's academic career.

There was nothing else Venneman had ever dreamt of being, nothing but a physicist. But it had become clear to him that it wouldn't matter if there were anything else, for he was talentless, as inadequate for everything else as he was for physics.

Of all people, Dinsmuir had come to his rescue. Dinsmuir, so vile in Venneman's eyes, had exerted his influence and persuaded the university to create a permanent lab-assistant position and hire Venneman to fill it.

Ten years later, Venneman was still there.

Even in his own eyes, he was just a glorified janitor. He made up for his lack of intellectual ability, his lack of any qualification for advancement, by an obsessive attention to detail. In any lab that was his responsibility, every surface would be spotlessly clean and every item would be in its proper place.

He would be here, he knew, doing this kind of work, until he was an old man. The years that should have constituted his career in science, he would instead spend in this lab or one like it, cleaning up after those with real ability, surrounded by science he could not hope to understand.

The afternoon visit and demonstration went well for Dinsmuir.

Venneman did his part. He was appropriately unobtrusive except when Dinsmuir needed help, and then he was there immediately, handing Dinsmuir photocopies to distribute to the visitors, getting a clean ashtray for the two smokers in the group, refreshing drinks as necessary. Smoking was not supposed to be permitted in the lab, and drinking was outlawed everywhere on the campus except in one restaurant in the student union building. But Venneman said nothing about that. It was understood that laws did not apply to such visitors as these.

He and Dale had an hour of peace after the tour was over. Then Dinsmuir returned, alone.

He came into the lab shouting. "Great job, guys! They loved it. More important, they believed it. Which means money, funding, greenbacks for everyone. Dale, your doctorate's in the bag. I'll see to it. Richard, you still living with that little Kennedy girl?"

"Jill. Yes, sir."

"Yeah, I remember her from back when she was in my Physics 101 class. Hmm. Dropped out of school, didn't she?"

Physics 101, Venneman thought. What other faculty member of Dinsmuir's fame and accomplishments would teach a beginning physics course for non-science majors? But Dinsmuir wasn't doing it out a sense of academic philanthropy. Dinsmuir did it so that he could bask in the awe of a roomful of freshmen and sophomores and simultaneously select his prey for the semester. Jill had described her experience in that class to Venneman. She remembered no formulas from it; she remembered only the constant feeling of Dinsmuir's eyes on her body. Venneman had once overheard Dinsmuir refer to the 101 classes as being "filled with juicy little freshmen with elastic skin."

"Yes, Professor," Venneman said. "That's right. She hopes to go back and finish her degree some day. When we have the money saved up."

"Yeah, money. Everyone's problem. Well, listen, Richard. You deserve a reward for all your hard work on this presentation. You and Jill ever ski?"

"No, Professor." What a question, Venneman thought. As if ski vacations were within his economic compass!

"That's too bad. I've got a couple of plane tickets and reservations for a place in Colorado for next weekend, for me and a friend. But now I won't be able to go, because I've got to follow up with these money men, and my friend won't be able to go because her husband will be in town after all. So, if you and Jill want to use the tickets and the reservation, you can have them. It's too bad you don't ski. But hell, no one really goes out there to ski, anyway. Know what I mean? Maybe if you're really lucky, little Jill won't be able to go with you, and you'll get to go by yourself, you know?" He winked at Venneman.

"I think Jill would love a vacation in Colorado, Dr. Dinsmuir. Thanks."

"Uh huh. Well, then, come on up to my office later. I'll leave the packet on my desk, in case I'm not there."

They watched him leave, and then Dale said, "Good thing you know when he's scheduled to teach, so you can be sure he's not in his office when you go there. You know," she added, "it just occurred to me. I bet I know what he really meant when he said that about Jill not going with you. I bet he was thinking about her being here alone, with you out of town, so that he could get in touch with her and offer to keep her

company.”

Venneman snorted. “You’re probably right. God, what a slimy toad!”

Dale smiled faintly. “Sex isn’t necessarily bad, Richie. Just complicated, that’s all.”

Sex. Venneman thought about the word as he finished the few small tasks that remained. Such a small word for something that loomed so large in the lives of so many. What explained their obsession with it? It was the physical process God had designed for the propagation of the species. It was mildly pleasurable, but it wrinkled the sheets. Big deal.

It was a big deal for many, as Venneman knew. People like Dinsmuir risked their entire careers in the pursuit of it. So many people — Dale and Jill being among the rare exceptions — wanted Venneman for sex, even though he tried so hard not to attract them, not to radiate anything. It was as if his broadcasting of sexuality, a broadcast that lied, was another natural force, like sex itself, beyond his control and having nothing to do with his real nature.

In a way, he thought, it was like Dinsmuir’s project.

Venneman came to a halt in front of the mass of equipment. It was two cylinders bolted together to form one longer cylinder, turned on their side, encrusted with the devices that controlled and measured the progress of the experiment. He corrected himself. This afternoon, it had officially progressed beyond being an experiment to being something else. Being what? A prototype, Venneman supposed. A first stage in something new and strange, something that would unsettle the world. Or so Dinsmuir hoped.

Venneman had read and tried to understand the handouts as he had copied and stapled them. He had, he thought, a vague understanding of the project and its significance.

Somewhere inside that long cylinder, a plasma burned. Venneman pictured it as a slender bar of light, a glowing cylinder within the metal cylinder. Perhaps it was unmoving, unchanging, or perhaps it writhed and twisted as though alive. Atoms tore themselves apart, shedding electrons, becoming naked nuclei. The nuclei rushed together and merged — no, “fused.” But what was generated was not heat, but electricity, direct current.

That was where Venneman’s understanding broke down. He had read

enough popular science articles about fusion power to understand what the giant experimental setups in various parts of the world were working toward. But Dinsmuir, he gathered, had bypassed all of them and leaped ahead. Some new physical principles were involved, principles discovered by Dinsmuir. If Dinsmuir were not really responsible for their discovery, he would no doubt manage to claim credit for them.

Venneman didn't understand the physical principles themselves, but he understood the result obtained by applying them. Dinsmuir had used these new concepts to cobble together a pile of machinery which contained a small plasma in which fusion took place and electricity was produced directly from the plasma. The plasma was small enough, and well-enough contained, that there was supposed to be little physical degradation of the equipment inside the cylinder. The entire project was small and fairly simple and required little maintenance by humans. If Dinsmuir had come even close to achieving all of this, then he would very soon be famous and rich, and he would have changed the world.

Dinsmuir planned to run the experiment for a few weeks more, to gather enough data to put his achievement beyond any possibility of doubt. Then he would shut the experiment down and unbolt the two cylinders and pull them apart to see how much damage the plasma had actually done to the equipment on the inside. His hope was that the damage would be slight enough to verify the commercial feasibility of his approach to fusion power. Overnight, giant power projects would shut down all over the world and industrialists would beat a path to his door. Could the Nobel Prize be far behind?

Venneman knew he should be impressed by Dinsmuir's accomplishment, but it was the plasma at the core of the experiment that fascinated him, the fiercely gleaming thread of sun hidden within that silent cylinder. It was all so mundane on the outside, but what must it look like beyond those metal walls?

It was like human nature, he thought. Rather, it was like the nature of humans as one normally perceived it. Outwardly, most people were bland, ordinary, quiet. But the glances Venneman always felt on him, the gazes that moved up and down his body, showed what blazed inside, the fascinating, deadly fire that would consume him if he ever dared expose himself to it. The mundane exteriors shielded him and must be

maintained.

Only he — and Jill, thank God — lacked that awful inner flame. Only with Jill was he safe.

He wondered, though, what it would be like to have that fire blazing within him.

Two

*F*irst class, of course. What else should he have expected?

Venneman shifted from side to side. First class seats were designed for much wider hips than his; they were designed for the hips of the rich, the kind of rich whose hips are wider than those of the poor. But there's a kind of rich people whose hips are narrower than those of the poor, Venneman thought. People like that would slide around in these seats. They'd be knocked from side to side every time the plane hit some turbulence.

He chuckled aloud at the image. Four free glasses of champagne made it easier to chuckle aloud. Anyway, even here in first class, there was enough noise from the engines to hide the sound of his laughter.

No, they wouldn't slide from side to side. They'd have all kinds of expensive doodads with them on the seat, doodads enclosed in expensive leather. They'd be using the doodads to work as they flew, to increase their wealth and power. "Must be nice," he muttered.

It would be even nicer if Jill were with him. That had been the plan, but the head of the history department had decreed otherwise. At the last moment, on Thursday afternoon, with their flight scheduled for Friday morning, Montfort, the chairman of the history department, had rounded up his office staff and told them that any weekend plans they had were canceled.

"But he knew about that damned conference months ago," Venneman had complained to Jill on Thursday evening. He was packing for the trip. Jill, looking unhappy, was unpacking what she had already packed and hanging it back in her side of the closet. "So why didn't he prepare ahead of time?" Venneman persisted. "Why is he doing this to you now?"

"Who knows?" Jill said. "That's just the way he is. Why didn't you

pack your stuff ahead of time, so you wouldn't be doing it now, the night before? Same with him."

"No, it's not the same. The difference is, because I didn't pack ahead of time, I'll end up losing some sleep in order to get it all done in time. But I'm not screwing up someone else's weekend. I'm only screwing myself."

"I wish you wouldn't use expressions like that," Jill said. "Anyway, it's irrelevant, right? I'm stuck here, so you might as well go to Colorado and enjoy yourself."

"Enjoy myself without you? I doubt it. Why don't you just tell Montfort to go scr — To get lost."

Jill's hands dropped to her sides. She felt exhausted, physically and spiritually. "Oh, Richie. We're not making it financially now. Let alone saving up anything for the future, for me to back to school, which we said we'd do. I can't risk my job, especially not with the way the economy is these days, and me without any kind of marketable skill."

"You could be a model," he said impulsively. "You could get rich that way."

Jill smiled at him. "That's sweet of you to say, Richie. But I'm already too old to break into modeling — even if I thought I could do that sort of thing, which I never could. Can you imagine having people looking at you and taking pictures of your face and your body like that?" She grimaced. "Thanks, but I'll stay with the job I've got. Montfort's not so bad. I've heard about bosses who're a lot worse."

"I'd rather not go without you. If you've got to stay here, then I should stay here, too. Just say the word."

"Oh, don't be silly, Richie!" She laughed. "Just because I'll be stuck here doesn't mean you should be, too. I'll feel better knowing that you're enjoying yourself."

"I won't enjoy myself at all without you," Venneman assured her, but he felt relieved that she had rejected his offer to bypass the vacation.

So now here he was, lolling in the luxury of a first-class seat, drinking free champagne, waiting for his lunch, and watching the snow-dusted farmland of the Midwest slide away beneath him. And doing his best to ignore the gaze of the stewardess, who kept trying to make eye contact

with him.

Dinsmuir wouldn't ignore her, Venneman thought. Dinsmuir would jump at the chance. Dinsmuir would maybe even grab the pretty young woman and see if these first-class seats were wide enough to hold two. Hell, Dinsmuir would probably grab the pretty young man from the coach class, too. Venneman chuckled again. Dinsmuir would . . .

Maybe Dinsmuir would drink less of the free champagne and keep his wits about him. And maybe Venneman should do the same.

He sat up straight and put his champagne glass on the fold-out tray in front of him. It was still about a quarter full, and Venneman was determined to leave it that way.

The stewardess took his gesture as a request for more champagne, or perhaps simply as an opportunity to approach him. She came down the aisle with the open bottle. "A refill, sir?"

What a lovely smile she has, Venneman thought. She *is* very pretty. Not quite so pretty as Jill, but that left considerable leeway for prettiness. And she was trying very hard to be friendly. Venneman smiled back. "No, thanks, Miss. I've had more than enough. Lunch is coming, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, sir. It's heating right now. It should be ready in less than a minute. Traveling alone, are you?"

No, it wasn't a lovely smile; it was a frightening one. The lips wanted to touch him, the tongue to suck, the teeth to nibble and tease. Venneman shriveled within and drew back, shutting himself off, donning his armor. "Only to Denver," he told her. "My fiancée is meeting me there." A lie was surely forgivable in such circumstances as these.

The stewardess nodded. "I see. She lives there?"

"No, we're meeting there. We're spending the weekend in Steamboat Springs."

"That's a nice town. Hope you enjoy yourselves." She paused. "I have a layover in Denver this weekend, and I was kinda thinking of going to Steamboat myself. Maybe I'll see you there. My name's Karen, by the way."

Venneman smiled and nodded but said nothing. It was unlikely that she would see him in Steamboat Springs, since he would not be there. His weekend reservations were for another resort town entirely. He had

seen the name Steamboat Springs on the map of Colorado he had been looking at before leaving on this trip. The name had appealed to him, and it had come in handy to mislead this particular predator.

A few hours later, when Venneman was wandering around helplessly in the winter-vacation madness of Stapleton Airport, he bumped into Karen again. Or she bumped into him.

She was pulling a small suitcase behind her on a wheeled metal frame. Amid the colorfully garbed skiers with their bulky jackets, she looked trim and appealing in her dark, form-fitting uniform. “Hi!” she said. “Fiancée didn’t show up?”

“Oh, ah, no. Minor change in plans. We’re going to meet in Steamboat Springs, instead. If I can find the airline that flies there, that is.”

“If you don’t, I could put you up for the weekend here in town.”

“It’s called Rocky Mountain Ski Transport,” Venneman said, pretending he hadn’t heard her. “But I don’t see any signs for it.”

“Oh, I know where that is. Come on.” She took his arm and steered him through the crowd.

Her hand was small, but her grip was strong. Venneman, despite himself, found that exciting. The feeling frightened him. At last he saw a sign for Rocky Mountain Ski Transport ahead of him, above the heads of the crowd. “There it is!” he said, relieved. “I’m okay now. I can find my way. Thank you, Karen.”

She smiled that lovely, predatory smile at him again. “At least you remembered my name. I remember yours: Richard Venneman. Thank you for flying with us, Mr. Venneman. Climb aboard any time.”

Venneman mumbled something and pushed his way through the crowd toward the Rocky Mountain Ski Transport ticket counter, thankful when the mass of people closed again behind him and hid Karen from him. He realized that he was sweating. She could not have realized, of course, how she had terrified him. He told himself that, excusing her.

He verified his reservation and then headed for the appropriate gate. He had little time to spare. The small prop-jet would be leaving soon.

After Venneman had disappeared, Karen approached the desk and asked the young man behind the counter what Venneman’s destination was. The agent grinned at her. “Better taste than usual, Karen.” He told

her what she wanted to know.

“I bet it tastes very good,” she told him. “And I intend to find out.”

This was another world, and Venneman wasn't sure if it was one he cared for.

There was snow everywhere up here in the mountains. And it wasn't dirty from traffic like the snow at home. Colored lights draped buildings and the coniferous trees along the streets, as though the whole town were already decorated for Christmas. There were people in a party mood everywhere, the same gaudily dressed skiers he had encountered at the airport, and all in frantic pursuit of fun. For the most part, they went in pairs, happy couples bent on enjoying the slopes, the restaurants, and each other. As he watched them, Venneman's mild missing of Jill became rather less mild.

The biggest difference between this world and the one he knew was the prices. Everything cost two or three times as much as he was used to. It became clear to him suddenly just how generous Dinsmuir's gift really was. The seasonal room rates listed behind the receptionist's desk at the hotel took Venneman's breath away. Dinsmuir, however, had telephoned ahead and made sure that the room cost was covered and that Venneman would be able to eat in the hotel's coffee shop and charge his meals to his room — which meant to Dinsmuir's charge card. If not for that arrangement, Venneman realized, looking at the prices on the menu, he would have had to manage with one meal a day for the whole weekend. If this was what he would have to pay for simple food in a coffee shop, what would he be charged in one of the town's fancier restaurants? He would never find out, obviously.

Well, it would be a very simple vacation. He would spend a couple of days wandering around, watching other people having fun. He would eat only in the coffee shop at the hotel. He might window shop, but he would not be able to buy anything. And then he would go back to the small airport and begin his trip back home. It would not be an escape and it would not even be fun; he could already foresee that.

It was still only Friday evening. He had a long, lonely weekend ahead of him.

I think, Venneman told himself, that I will splurge on a lonely drink in

some sleazy bar.

It seemed an appropriate way to kill what was left of his first evening alone in this town dedicated to skiing and sex. He showered with the hotel's fragrant soap, dried himself off with the thick towel, and put on layers of clothing. He had brought with him the warmest clothes he had, but it was scarcely enough, as he had already discovered from his stroll around town in the late afternoon. Now, with the sun long down, it was bound to be even colder. His woolen cap should be adequate, but he wasn't sure about his gloves. He looked at himself in the mirror, contrasting his bulky, drab appearance with the brilliant peacocks he had seen earlier roaming around the town. He felt poor and out of place.

You *are* poor and out of place, he told himself. So, all the more reason for a drink.

One drink would probably be all he could afford. He hoped Jill would understand his spending the money. He would tell her how lonely he had been and how silly he had felt for coming here. She would be sympathetic, he knew.

Venneman need not have worried about his colorless clothes. The revelers on the sidewalks ignored him. They were far more interested in each other.

He walked past the bars the peacocks seemed to be frequenting and kept on going. Eventually he should reach a part of town where the streetlights were further apart and there were no colored lights on the buildings. Even in a town like this, there must be an area frequented by those with less money. There, perhaps, he would find a bar where he could afford to buy a drink. Or maybe even two.

One of the peacocks blocked his path.

"Well, hi, fancy meeting you here! Another change in plans, right?"

It was Karen. She took his arm as she had in the airport in Denver and held on. "Going for a walk?" she asked. "I'll go with you."

"Uh, no, I was just going to head back to my hotel room."

"'My' hotel room? No fiancée?"

"A delay. She'll be here tomorrow. Well, 'bye."

But Karen held tight to his arm. "In that case, come on in here and let me buy you a drink."

Weakly, Venneman let her lead him into one of the bars he had

shunned earlier. Inside, the place was a bewildering riot of color and noise and the smells of cigarette smoke, alcohol fumes, and something pungent that Venneman didn't recognize. Karen seemed to know everyone there. They exchanged cryptic greetings with her, and twisted their faces, and it all seemed to be a secret language, communicating whole volumes that were closed to Venneman.

She pushed him onto a bar stool and climbed onto the one next to him. "There, now. What do you want?"

"I shouldn't let you—"

"Of course you should. Hey, Stan, margarita. Okay, Rich, what?"

"Uh, just a beer." The bartender was looking at him with raised eyebrows. "Miller Lite, if you've got it."

The bartender shook his head, but it must have been in disapproval rather than negation, for he opened a cabinet beneath the bar and took out a bottle of Miller Lite beer, opened it, and put it and an empty mug on the bar in front of Venneman. "You gotta watch those things," the bartender said. "Two or three of them, and you're flyin'." He winked at Karen.

"Stan," she said, "you're a killer. Where's my margarita?"

Stan held his hands up, palms out. "Comin', darlin'."

"Stan left his g's behind when he moved out here from Boston," Karen told Venneman. "But if you can get him drunk, he finds them again."

Venneman grabbed his beer with relief and drank a large part of it, from the bottle, without pause. He decided that as soon as he finished it, he would be justified in leaving the bar and Karen and this whole repellent subculture and heading back to his hotel room.

In the dim light of the bar, Karen looked even prettier and younger than she had on the plane. She surely couldn't be spending much of her time in this sort of unhealthy, smoke-filled atmosphere. How old *is* she? Venneman wondered. A kid, for Heaven's sake! What am I doing here, feeling lonely, out of place, with a girl hardly out of high school buying me drinks? I should be at home with Jill.

For the first time, Venneman noticed another woman, seated around the curve of the bar and watching him with interest. She reminded Venneman vaguely of Jill. She was blonde, like Jill, and although her

face was only moderately pretty, there was something about the bone structure and the eyes that resembled Jill's. She wasn't as pretty as Karen, either, he decided, after a longer examination. And her clothes were less colorful and flamboyant than those of Karen and most of the others in the bar. But more expensive, he decided, after a closer look. Through all of this, Karen was talking to Venneman, trying unsuccessfully to draw words from him. She was already on her second margarita.

The woman across the bar smiled at Venneman. It was a smile that lit up her face, transforming her from pretty to beautiful. It was also a conspiratorial smile, as if she were expressing her sympathy for his awkward situation.

But behind all of that, Venneman knew, was something else, something old, something he knew too well and hated with all of his heart. He finished his beer quickly.

"Gee, don't drink so fast," Karen told him. "You'll get nonfunctional. Alcohol really does affect you a lot more at this altitude, you know. Less oxygen in the air. I think that's the reason. Stan, another one for Rich."

"No, really, Karen, no more for me."

"Hell, yes, Rich. Just accept what you're offered, okay? Now, I've got to go pee. Will you just stay here and sip your beer and wait for me? Really, just *sip* it. Okay?"

Venneman sighed. Perhaps this *was* marginally better than a lonely hotel room. "Okay, I'll wait. Go on."

Karen left. This time Venneman poured his beer into the mug. He sipped at the beer and then stared into it. He told himself that he had not felt so foolish and out of place since adolescence.

Someone slid onto Karen's barstool. It was the woman whom Venneman had been watching earlier.

"I'm Elizabeth," she said. Her voice was low, strong, and pleasant.

"Good grief," Venneman muttered. No one had any shame or self-restraint in this place.

"I said, I'm Elizabeth," the woman repeated. She had raised her voice, and now it was not quite so pleasant to Venneman's ear. She seemed demanding, and she reminded Venneman momentarily of Harold Dinsmuir.

“You’re Elizabeth, and I’m leaving,” Venneman said. Karen would have no trouble finding someone else to fill her evening, he was sure. He finished his beer in a few gulps, then slid off the bar stool. “Good night.”

To his surprise, Elizabeth laughed. “Whoa.” She grabbed Venneman’s coat sleeve and kept him from leaving. With her free hand, she picked up Karen’s margarita and swallowed what was left of it. “Wait for me.”

They left the bar side by side, Elizabeth keeping a firm grip on Venneman’s coat. Outside, she finally let go of him, and he turned to face her. He put his hands in his pockets for warmth. His gloves were in there, but he felt more protected this way, with his hands inside his clothing. Elizabeth stood there without gloves, without even a coat. For the moment, at least, she seemed unbothered by the cold.

She was taller than he had realized. She was quite a bit taller than Jill — almost as tall as he, in fact. The light from the bar window lit up the right side of her face, and the left side was almost in shadow. For a moment, Venneman wondered how he could have thought her only moderately pretty. She radiated something — sexual power, or perhaps just her desire for him — that affected him despite himself. He was aware that his heart was beating fast and that he had the beginning of an erection. She’s a dangerous and unclear influence, he thought.

He said, “Thank you for walking me out, but now that I’m safely here, I’d better get back to my room. I need a good night’s sleep. My fiancée will be flying in tomorrow, and —”

“And that’s all the more reason to enjoy yourself tonight, while you still can,” Elizabeth said.

“This is ridiculous,” Venneman snapped. “You people ought to be ashamed of yourselves!”

Elizabeth drew away from him. She frowned and stared at him. “‘You people’?” she repeated. “What people are those?”

Venneman waved his hand toward the bar. He was trying to work himself up into a fit of anger to match his words, hoping that the anger would dampen his growing sexual arousal. “All of you. All those people in there, all the people walking around the streets in this town. All of you oversexed people. You all seem to be thinking about nothing except picking each other up and going to bed with each other.”

Elizabeth’s frown disappeared. She laughed again. Her laugh, like her

speaking voice, was strong and low pitched, and it stirred Venneman all the more. “Oh, *those* people,” Elizabeth said. She stepped closer and put one hand on his cheek and stroked him gently.

Her hand was very warm. It sent a thrill through him, like a wave of heat. His heart was hammering now. He had never felt anything like this with anyone before. God, she’s a stranger, he told himself. I don’t even know her last name!

Behind Venneman, someone said, “Why didn’t you wait for me, Rich?”

It broke the spell Elizabeth had cast, and he turned around. Karen stood in the doorway of the bar, her coat over one arm. Now she saw Elizabeth. Karen glared at Venneman. “Oh, I see. So much for your shy act, you son of a bitch.” She spun around and went back inside the bar.

“Rich,” Elizabeth said softly.

Venneman turned back to her.

“Richard, is it?”

“Yes, Richard.” He had trouble making his voice work properly. The words came out in a broken whisper.

Elizabeth whispered in response. “Richard,” she said, caressing the word with her voice. “Richard.” She put her hand against his cheek again. “Come, Richard.”

She lowered her hand from his cheek and gently tugged his hand from his pocket. Clutching his hand firmly, she led him from the well-lit street and down a short alley.

Even her hand was almost as large as his, and he sensed that it was stronger. Her skin was like a flame against his, sending heat into him, kindling something inside him that he had always thought he lacked.

The alley was narrow, a snow-packed walkway between dark building walls. They could just barely walk side by side, and Venneman could scarcely walk at all. His knees were weak and he was gasping for breath. Elizabeth gripped his hand more and more tightly, pulling him along urgently. Her breath came unevenly, too. “I wanted you right away,” she said. “As soon as I saw you. All women want you, don’t they?”

Venneman said nothing. He was overwhelmed by what he felt growing and burning inside him. Was this how other people felt all the time, whenever they were excited by each other? Was this was he had

been missing all his life? It was wonderful and it was terrifying.

“Now,” Elizabeth said. “Here.”

They were far away from the buildings of the town, at the base of a mountain. Far above them, along a ski run, the mountainside was brightly lighted. Behind them, the town gleamed against the night. Around them, the snow glimmered with reflected light. But Venneman and Elizabeth were two silhouettes, dark figures against the whiteness. They reached for each other, mouths meeting and opening, tongues sucking eagerly.

Venneman wanted to fill her with himself in every way he could. He wanted to touch her everywhere. She was hard and strong through her clothes, large, powerful — different from Jill in every detail.

Somehow, she had stripped her clothes off, and now she was tugging at Venneman’s. He didn’t think of the cold, didn’t notice it. They sank down onto the snow, onto the pile of clothing, bodies glued together.

He was in her, her legs were wrapped around his, her arms around his neck. Her body was like a fire inside. She rolled on top of him and raised herself slightly. She stared into his eyes as she thrust her hips against his. His body responded without his willing it to consciously. He was under her control, or else under the control of this new force inside him.

“Never,” Venneman tried to say. “Never, never, never.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “Never,” she whispered. She lowered her mouth onto his and sucked his tongue into her mouth. Even her mouth was afire. She gripped his head with both arms, his legs with hers. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed as hard as he could, thrusting into her rhythmically, knowing he need not fear hurting her.

His climax began and went on and on, growing more intense, drawing more from him than he would have thought he had in him. Elizabeth was moaning into his mouth. Her eyes were closed. Her eyelids fluttered open slightly, showing only white. She pulled her mouth away from his. “Oh, God!” she whispered. “Oh, God!”

She slid her arms down from his head, past his neck, down his torso until she was embracing him around the waist, trapping his arms. She began to move even more urgently, pounding against him, hurting him. The pain added to his own excitement, lengthening his climax still more. Her arms tightened around him until he could scarcely breathe, and her

legs squeezed his still tighter.

She lowered her mouth again, this time to his neck. She kissed him, a long kiss that he felt throughout his body. She opened her mouth and bit deeply into his neck, through the skin, through muscles and ligaments, down to his carotid artery and into it.

Venneman tried to scream, but it came out as a choking gurgle. He tried to pull away, but Elizabeth held him immobile. Her face pressed into his neck, and he could not get away from her mouth. Through the agony, he could hear and feel her sucking at him, drawing his blood in with huge gulps. All the while, her pelvis kept thrusting and rotating against his, and she moaned repeatedly as her orgasm continued, and his own hips kept responding to hers and his ejaculations continued.

Venneman kept struggling, kept trying to free his arms and pull away from her. But she was too strong, and already he was growing weaker. He tried again to draw a breath and scream, but he couldn't quite manage it. He was too weak, and her crushing grip around his waist kept him even from being able to pull air into himself.

Now the pain was fading. All feeling was fading. No, not quite all. He could feel the cold, now. He could hear Elizabeth sucking at his neck, a slurping sound, and he could hear her moans, which were growing even louder. And he could feel his own ejaculations, still going on, becoming more intense.

It would never end, he thought. It would last forever.

His thoughts became more and more muddled and then stopped.

When even her powerful tongue could suck no more blood from him, and her orgasm had diminished to nothing at last, Elizabeth pulled herself slowly off Venneman's still erect penis and pushed herself to her knees.

She knelt above Venneman's corpse for a moment. She touched his cheek as she had before and whispered, "Richard. Thank you, Richard. Goodbye."

She put the corpse's clothing back on it quickly, hurrying while the joints were still warm enough to be flexible. Then she scooped up a handful of snow and carefully wiped away the trace of blood that remained on his neck. She pulled his woolen hat down over his face and

turned up his collar. The huge wound she had made was completely covered. No one would notice it — not while it still mattered.

Now Elizabeth put her own clothes on quickly. Sated and happy, she walked back into town. Her strides were long and energetic.

By the time dawn came, and some early-morning skiers discovered Venneman's body, it was frozen stiff. The sheriff was called. He said to himself, "Another drunken idiot frozen to death after an evening in a bar," but he kept his expression grave and reverent. He arranged for the body to be taken to the local funeral parlor, whose director doubled as county coroner, for the inquest required by state law. The coroner promised to get to it as soon as the corpse was sufficiently thawed. Or possibly the following morning, depending on the press of other business.

It was in the funeral parlor, in the early morning hours, that Venneman awoke.

Three

He was cold. Jill had pulled the covers off him again. He was filled with a slow, sluggish rage. He fumbled toward his right, toward her, to yank them back, and his hand encountered empty space. At the same time, Venneman became aware that he was lying on a hard surface, not the mattress he was used to.

What? he asked himself. This isn't right.

He struggled to wake up. He had been trapped in some dark, deep place. Light shone high above him, and he felt himself rising toward it, toward the world and life.

But even his eyelids felt sluggish and glued together. He rubbed at his face with both hands, numb and awkward hands that felt like someone else's, and managed to open his eyes.

He was in a dimly lit room he did not recognize. A faint light shone through thin curtains covering a window off to his left. Venneman pushed himself slowly and painfully into a sitting position. He was hungry and thirsty, and his joints felt stiff and uncooperative. Suddenly, he remembered drinking some beer and that stewardess, Karen, warning him that alcohol affected people more at higher altitudes. This must have been what she was talking about. You could wake up in someone else's bedroom feeling like hell. And, he realized, looking at himself in the dim light, still dressed in all your clothing. That last was a relief, in a way. It meant he had not done anything for which he would have to apologize to Jill.

Elizabeth. He remembered a woman named Elizabeth, and he remembered kissing her. Had they done more? He couldn't bring any more memories about her to the surface.

He turned and let his legs dangle over the edge of the hard surface he

had been sleeping on. Some sort of table, he thought. He had actually fallen asleep on someone's table! I'll never drink alcohol again, he vowed to himself.

It was a long, narrow metal table with a raised edge, and it was cold. His clothes were damp, and so was the woolen cap that covered his head and his forehead down to his eyebrows. He pulled it off and ran his hand through his cold, wet hair. He longed for a hot shower, but even more, he longed for food and drink.

He slid off the table, onto his feet. His knees buckled, and he grabbed the edge of the table just in time to keep himself from falling. He held onto the table. His legs were shaking, his head swimming. His pulse pounded in his ears.

Venneman stood still for a while, bent over, leaning against the table, and breathed deeply. At last he felt able to stand straight. In the dim light, he could just make out glass-fronted cabinets lining the walls and filled with unidentifiable objects. He walked cautiously over to the window and drew the curtain aside. Outside was a snow-covered hillside, gleaming with reflected light. The sky overhead was dark, filled with brilliant stars.

Venneman let the curtain fall back into place and walked cautiously across the room to the doorway. He began to feel stronger, more his normal self. His legs had regained their strength, he no longer felt dizzy, and his pulse seemed normal again. His hunger and thirst, though, were overwhelming.

Wherever he was, he thought, there must be something to eat and drink in the place. Finding it was his first priority. And then dry, warm clothing.

He opened the door and stepped through it. Some light came through the door from the room behind him, but not enough to see anything. Venneman slid his hand around on the wall beside the doorway and found a switch. He threw it, and a brilliant white light came on overhead, showing him another room much like the one in which he had awakened. In this room, too, there was a metal table in the center of the room. Someone was lying on it. The person was asleep on the table, just as Venneman had been, but was covered by a sheet up to the chin.

Venneman hesitated. The other person might also be sleeping off the

effects of alcohol at high altitude. But Venneman's hunger and thirst were becoming too powerful to ignore. He stepped forward and cleared his throat.

Now he was close enough to see that something was wrong with the sleeper's face.

Venneman stepped even closer. The sleeper was a young man. His eyes were closed, and one seemed lower than the other, with the eyebrow where the eyelashes should be. His forehead sagged down on the same side. Above that, his scalp had been sliced open in a line running from side to side across the top of the head, and the skull gleamed through the opening.

Venneman gasped in horror and jumped back. Where was he? What had he gotten himself into?

Elizabeth, the woman in the snow. . . Something moved beneath the surface of his mind, some nightmarish memory involving her, something this mutilated young man reminded him of.

Hesitantly, Venneman stepped forward again. He couldn't just run away and leave this injured man alone, much as he wanted to. He reached for the sheet. "Listen," he said, "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to see if you have any other injuries before I go looking for a doctor, okay?"

He peeled the sheet back. The young man had been sliced open from shoulder to shoulder, and from the breastbone down to his genitals. Bone and muscle and skin had been pulled back in two huge flaps, exposing a dark emptiness within.

Venneman stood staring down into the opening, unable to breathe, unwilling to move. "Jesus," he whispered at last. "Oh, God!"

He leaned over the corpse for a closer look. His first impression had been wrong. There were some organs within the opening. Which was which? he wondered. That one, he thought. What's that one? He reached in cautiously and touched something reddish-yellow with a veined surface. It was cold. He had somehow expected it to be hot. The coldness disgusted him. He pulled back and grimaced and let the sheet fall over the corpse.

And then he realized what he had just done. A wave of nausea hit him. It's the cold, he told himself. Hunger. I'm confused because I'm so

hungry.

That was *his* excuse. What excuse could the mutilators of this poor young man have?

He had to get out of this place, wherever and whatever it was, and find the police and tell them what was going on in here.

The room had another door. Venneman went to it and turned the handle. The door was locked. "Damn you!" he shouted. He turned quickly to the corpse. "Sorry." Jesus, he thought, I'm going off the deep end. Apologizing to a goddamned corpse. A sliced-open corpse. He laughed, and stopped short. "I'm going crazy," he said aloud. "Hey! Open the door! Let me out!"

He rattled the handle. "Let me out!" he shouted. He threw himself against the door. It shook on its hinges but remained locked. "God damn you!" Venneman shrieked. He took a few steps back, then ran at the door, hitting it with his shoulder. The door split down its middle, and Venneman was free.

He stood on a sidewalk in the night. At one end of the street, a quarter moon hung above the mountain peaks visible between the low buildings. At the other end, the horizon was almost flat and the sky was turning grey. There were no human beings in sight. Venneman didn't recognize the building he had just escaped from or anything else around him. Where was his hotel? What had happened to him while he slept?

Have to find the police, he thought.

The strength and alertness he had felt before now drained away again. Once again, hunger gnawed at him, and thirst made his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth. He was cold, shivering. He feared he would freeze to death. He staggered down the sidewalk, choosing his direction at random. Got to find someone, he thought. Got to find help. Got to clear my head.

A few blocks along, he saw someone coming toward him on the sidewalk. Venneman stopped and waited, weaving slightly from side to side, lacking the strength to walk further.

For a nightmarish moment, Venneman thought the figure walking toward him was the young man he had seen moments before, cut open and lying on a metal table. Then, as the other pedestrian came closer, he realized that it was also a young man covered in white, but the white was

a coat covered with white fur and a white ski cap. There the resemblance ended. This young man was filled with life and warmth.

Venneman held up a trembling hand to stop him. "Help me," he tried to say, but the words came out garbled and incomprehensible. "Police. A body." He couldn't seem to make his tongue work properly.

The young man looked at him warily and kept his distance. "Wrong town for a handout, buddy."

Venneman shook his head. He felt a faint return of his anger. "No, no. Police. Murder."

The young man's face cleared. "Oh, a foreign tourist, huh?" He started speaking slowly and louder. "You tell me what you need, okay? I help you, okay?"

Loud though they were, his words faded away, drowned out by the sound of his beating heart. Venneman could hear nothing else.

The young man's coat was open at the neck, as was the collar of the shirt underneath it. Venneman stared intently at his neck. He could see blood vessels pulsating there. Listening with all his being, Venneman heard the faint whisper of the blood rushing through them.

How young and alive this man was, how vital!

That was what Venneman needed, that vitality. His hunger and his thirst became intolerable, but now they were a force urging him forward, not a weakness holding him back.

He took a step toward the other man, reaching for his neck.

"Hey!" The other man stepped back. "Watch it, buddy! This is America!"

Venneman lunged at him, flinging his arms around the other man's chest, trapping his arms against his side. There was something familiar about this, but he could spare no thought for that. He could think only of the blood now so close to him.

His victim shouted, "What the fuck!" He struggled vigorously, but he was helpless against Venneman.

Venneman seemed to be watching all of this from somewhere outside. He watched Richard Venneman lower his face to the struggling man's neck and sink his teeth in, deep, down to where the blood flowed.

The other man was large and heavily muscled. How, Venneman wondered, watching himself from the side, could the weakened Richard

Venneman hope to overpower him? And yet he was doing it. The other man's shouts had turned to weak gurgles, and his struggles were subsiding. He was unable to pull his arms free and unable to wrench his neck away from Venneman's teeth. His kicks against Venneman's legs seemed to have no effect.

Venneman snapped back into his own body, drawn by the rush of blood through his mouth.

It was honey, it was wine, it was electricity. He had never tasted anything like it before. He had never felt such delight. He had never felt so strong. He was possessed by a strength that had come from somewhere outside. No, it came from the blood he swallowed greedily. That strength flooded his body and his being, suffusing his every cell, filling him with the other man's life and heat.

Venneman's victim hung limp in his arms. With some difficulty, Venneman loosened his grip and let the man slide to the ground, where he lay on his back, staring sightlessly up at Venneman. His head was bent to one side, away from the ragged hole in the side of his neck. The edges of the wound were colorless, bloodless. His face was pale.

Venneman's hunger and thirst were gone. He was filled with life and warmth. His clothes were still damp, but that no longer bothered him. His mind was now clear and alert.

With alertness came horror and disgust at what he had done.

With it came memory, too. He remembered everything that had happened with Elizabeth, from their glances at the bar to his death outside in the snow. She had done to him what he had just done to this young man.

Understanding came as well. Elizabeth was a creature that, until now, Venneman had thought was only a myth. She was a vampire, and she had made him one.

The street was still deserted. Venneman picked up the pale, drained body of his victim and carried it between two adjacent buildings and left it in the narrow, dark space.

How easily he had picked it up and carried it! He was something more than he had been before Elizabeth.

No, he thought, I'm only superior physically. Morally, I've become a

beast, a killer, a predator. I've murdered a fellow human being.

But he could no longer speak of fellow human beings. Those old movies he had watched on television as a boy had taught him that much about vampires. He had become a nonhuman, a creature of night and nightmare. He had died and come back as one of the undead — soulless and beyond salvation.

What good had all his years of going to church and believing in God done him? Through no fault of his own, Venneman was now cut off from God, from Heaven, from any hope of an afterlife. This was his afterlife: to lurk in the shadows and avoid the light and kill innocent human beings. This would be his eternal life, until the world ended.

Venneman raised his face to the lightning sky and shouted, "No!" He would put an end to this.

Vampires could be killed. So the movies had told him. He considered driving a sharpened stake into his own heart, but the idea horrified him, and he doubted if even this new vampirish strength filling his body would be sufficient for that. He had felt weakened by his hunger and thirst, so perhaps he could simply starve himself to death, but he couldn't remember seeing anything in a movie about vampires dying that way. Nor was he sure he could exert enough self-control to starve himself. He remembered how little control he had had over himself when his victim's blood had called to him. The blood had been in control, not Venneman. What chance that he could hold back from feeding again, when the hunger and thirst struck, and the blood sang?

That left sunlight. A single touch of a sunbeam was supposed to make a vampire burn and shrivel and steam away into nothingness. He had seen that scene often. It looked like an agonizing way to die, but didn't he deserve a painful death for having committed a terrible murder?

Venneman stepped back out onto the sidewalk and stood still and waited for the sunlight to find him.

Overhead, the grey was turning to blue. On the horizon, the blue was tinged with red. Any moment now, Venneman knew, the first golden edge of the sun would appear, coming over the horizon to destroy him. He felt gripped with panic, with the need to run and seek a place where he could hide until nightfall. That's not me feeling the panic, he thought. That's the vampire inside me. I'll defeat him.

But his panic grew. His body vibrated with the need to move. He clenched his jaws and held himself stiff and still.

His right foot began to slide along the sidewalk, moving in the direction of the dark place where he had left his victim's body.

"No!" Venneman said. He forced his feet together and squeezed his knees against one another, willing his legs not to move.

The edge of the sun glared above the horizon, and Venneman shut his eyes.

His face was on fire.

The sun rose higher, and the furnace heat moved slowly down over Venneman's clothing, seeking a way in, to his skin. It caught his ungloved hands and set them ablaze, too.

Venneman yanked at his coat, pulling it open, trying to expose more of himself.

But it was intolerable. He couldn't control his need to escape any more than he could have ignored his earlier need to kill and feed. He broke and ran, diving head first into the dark, cool space between buildings where his first victim lay.

He landed on the corpse, rolled off it, and lay half conscious beside it.

When the first pedestrians passed by an hour later, their voices echoing from the walls to either side of him, Venneman roused himself enough to crawl further back into the shadows, dragging his victim's corpse behind him. Well back in the dark, safe from the eyes of the living and the light of the sun, Venneman curled himself into a ball beside the stiffening corpse and slept.

In his sleep, he shivered with fever. He dreamed dreams of blood and fire and pain, of a sea of blood that choked him with its smell, and lakes of fire that burned his ever-renewing skin off him over and over. He dreamed of agony that filled the universe, inescapable, that chewed him and swallowed him and spat him out so that it could chew and swallow him again.

Slowly, the pain and fire disappeared. Only the blood remained. Rivers of blood rushed and pulsated through his dreams, emptying into a sluggish red ocean. The smell was a perfume.

Venneman drifted up into wakefulness.

He opened his eyes and stared into the empty eyes of his victim.

He jerked away and sat up. Above, visible between the buildings, the sky was fading into darkness again. The brilliant stars of the high altitudes gleamed down at him.

Each one is a sun, Venneman thought. Why don't they burn me? Distance. I'm far enough removed from their light. Distance from the light means safety, distance from the light that powers creation.

He rose to his feet. He felt strong again. He ran his hands over his face. The skin felt smooth and unharmed, and he felt no pain from his own touch. But his mouth was dry, and in his stomach once again he felt the beginning pangs of hunger.

"No, please," Venneman whispered. "Not again. I can't do it again."

He brushed the snow from his clothes and walked out onto the sidewalk.

The glow of sunset was still fading in the west, where the mountains were a jagged silhouette against the orange afterglow. Venneman looked in that direction, squinting against the brilliance, and then turned away. He walked toward the darkest horizon.

The sidewalks were alive with vacationers, the same gaudy peacocks Venneman had sneered at before. But now, as he walked, they didn't ignore him. Their eyes seemed drawn to him, and yet they moved aside for him, leaving him walking in an island of loneliness.

And now he saw them differently, too: not as a superior species, looking down at him, but as a herd of cattle, walking repositories of a life that was by natural right his to take when he needed it. Their blood pounded in them and filled the air about them with its sound and smell.

I will not, he told himself. I will not do it again. I will not.

To keep that pledge, he had to avoid these creatures. Their blood and his hunger would overpower him.

Venneman walked as fast he could, desperate to leave the crowds behind.

The street and the sidewalk ended abruptly. The town had been planned and built as a ski resort. Beyond its designed edges, the original landscape reasserted itself. Venneman found himself in a snowy field surrounded by tree-covered hillsides, with the light and life of the town behind him. Here, the snow came up above his knees. Yet the cold didn't bother him, and he had so much more strength than before that he could

plough his way through the snow with little difficulty.

Off to his right, he could see a steep hillside. A wide swath running from its top down to its base glowed in the remnants of twilight and the man-made lights strung along its length. Around it, the hillside was dark. It was a ski run, Venneman realized, and a familiar one. He was not far from the place where Elizabeth had made love to him and killed him.

Drawn against his will, he made his way through the snow in that direction. The place of his death was still hidden from him by the shadowy bulk of a snow bank when he heard a last faint, gurgling cry, dying away, and then a slurping, sucking sound that lasted for minutes more.

Frozen in place, his heart pounding, Venneman listened. The sucking ended, and then he heard a sigh of satisfaction.

Then he heard Elizabeth's voice, clear and loud in the darkness. "Come, Richard. Come here."

For a moment, Venneman stood still. Elizabeth must have heard him somehow, but if he didn't move, didn't make another sound, then she wouldn't be able to find him.

"Come here, Richard." Louder, deeper, thrilling through him. His legs moved. Control of them had been taken from him. He pushed his way forward through the snow, breaking through the head-high snow bank as easily as if it had been mist. The powdery snow floated in the air and drifted slowly away. He could feel it faintly on his face, cold little points of ice. He could see it sparkling in the air, reflecting manmade light.

Elizabeth knelt in the snow, looking up at him. She was a dark figure against the white. On the ground before her lay another dark figure.

"Come closer, Richard. Look." She lowered her head toward the still figure on the ground.

Venneman stepped forward. Her victim this time was a middle-aged man. He lay on his back, his head tilted to the right. His heavy coat was pulled open at the throat. The left side of his neck was a huge wound, its edges pale and bloodless. His eyes were open, staring over Venneman's shoulder. His face was slack, expressionless.

"He has his clothes on," Venneman said. "So do you."

Elizabeth smiled. "Of course, Richard. Did you think I make love to

all my prey? You have a lot to learn about what you are. I have a lot to teach you. Look.” She gestured again at the body in the snow. “He was prey, that’s all. A sack of blood, a reservoir of life that I needed. I didn’t want him after that. Not like you.”

She rose to her feet. She was as graceful and strong, he thought, as a lioness. She stepped over the corpse, not even looking at it. “You came because I called you,” she said. “You’ll learn to do that, too. You can keep your prey alive for your future use. You don’t have to kill them. You can take just some blood from them. You’ll learn how to do that, too. I think we must have something in our saliva that stops their bleeding and encourages their wounds to heal quite fast, even a deep bite that would otherwise be fatal. So they live and become healthy again — and filled with blood again. And then you can call them to you when you need them again. Always, for the rest of their lives.”

Venneman stepped back, filled with disgust. “I’m not going to be a parasite like that. I won’t live that way.”

Elizabeth smiled and stepped forward, stopping inches away from Venneman. “You can’t live any other way, Richard. And you won’t want to do anything but live.”

He tried to protest, but he couldn’t speak. And now he couldn’t move. Elizabeth put her hand up slowly and stroked his cheek, as she had done before. Venneman’s heart raced and his knees felt weak.

“I can hear your heart,” Elizabeth whispered. “I can hear your blood. Oh, Richard, it’s so much stronger than it was! Come, Richard.”

She stepped back and undressed slowly. She laid her clothes out on the snow and stretched out on them and held her arms up to him.

Venneman pulled his clothes off and fell on her, hungry in a different way, in a way he had felt only once before, and that with her. But now he was stronger than Elizabeth. He could feel strength and vitality surging through him, growing with each thrust into her, each grinding of body against body. He was unaware of the cold snow beneath, of the cold sky above, of the cooling corpse beside them.

But when they finished, hours later, he was drained and weak again. He rolled off Elizabeth and lay on his back in the snow. “I need . . .” he gasped. “I need . . .”

Elizabeth raised herself onto one elbow and looked down at him,

stroking his face. “You need blood. You need it most at the beginning of your life. You have to feed frequently, now, to build and grow properly, to complete the process. The need diminishes later. I usually feed once a month or even less. Here.” She leaned closer. “Just for now, just to give you a bit of strength, take a little sip of mine. Vampire blood is so much stronger than human blood, it only takes a little bit.” She bent down over him and pressed her throat against his mouth. She whispered, “Just a tiny nip, Richard.”

Venneman tried to turn his head away, to take his mouth away from her skin, but the sound and smell of her vampire blood overpowered him. He bit carefully into her skin, making only a tiny wound, and sucked.

And pushed her away and rolled off the clothing and into the snow, coughing. Her blood was sour and bitter and nauseating. He spat it out again and again, unable to get the disgusting taste from his mouth.

“See how well evolution works, Richard?” Elizabeth said. “We can’t take blood from each other, only from our natural prey. I could have told you, but this way, you’ll always remember it. We never attack each other. Come, now. Let’s go into town and find you someone.”

Venneman scooped up a handful of snow, stuffed it into his mouth, and let it melt there. He swished it around in his mouth and spat it out. The taste of Elizabeth’s foul blood was almost gone. Only a faint, stomach-churning hint of it remained. He struggled to his feet and stumbled backward. He picked up his clothes and pulled them on clumsily. “Evolution? This doesn’t have anything to do with nature! We’re not part of nature, we’re something unnatural!”

She shook her head. “We’re the top of the food chain, Richard. Whether you like it or not, you’re very much a part of nature. You’ve never seen a lion take its prey, have you? Or a bear or a tiger or any of the other great predators? It’s magnificent to see, Richard. Thrilling. Now you’re the same as they are. And you have to learn how to live the predator’s life properly, just as they do. You must have felt that when you encountered humans on the way out of town. Didn’t you?”

“No,” he lied. “All I could feel was that I was something unnatural and evil and that God hates me now.”

“God?” Elizabeth repeated. “Oh, my. Richard, if God exists, and if He’s all-powerful, then He created us, too. He’s responsible for our

needs and our deeds, isn't He?" She thought for a moment. "Perhaps our victims deserve what they get. Perhaps we're their punishment for some sin, and we're helping to fulfill God's plan, whatever that is. If one believes in God."

"I believe in God," Venneman said. "But He didn't create us. The Devil did."

"While God wasn't looking? God must have allowed the Devil to create vampires for some impenetrable reason of His own. So, once again, everything's as it should be, and we should just get on with enjoying our lives. Our very long lives. Richard, this is the sort of theological silliness college boys argue about late at night. We have pleasure to concern ourselves with, and that's far more important than religious arguments."

"There's nothing more important than this," Venneman said. "Because of you, I'm going to spend eternity in Hell." He stopped, struck by a new idea. "I think I'm already there, God help me."

Elizabeth smiled. "You'll change your mind about that. Come. Let's go into town, and I'll show you that for us, this world is Heaven. Your mind isn't working properly because you need blood. You'll see how much better you'll feel after you feed."

"You mean kill another innocent victim?" Venneman said. "I'll die first. I'll die," he repeated. "I'll do it somehow. I'll kill myself."

"You'll try, perhaps, but you won't succeed. Forget the stake and the cross and the silver bullet. They don't work. And you might as well forget God, too, Richard. If God does exist, He didn't raise a finger to help you, and now He'll shun you. We're immortal, and we have dominion over mankind. That makes us the true gods."

"Damn you," Venneman said. "You and your smooth tongue. The Devil has a smooth tongue, too."

"Come and see again how smooth mine is, Richard."

Venneman snarled at her. "You're going to Hell, but I can still redeem myself." He staggered away from her. His feet were almost too heavy to lift, and he gasped for breath. His belly shrieked with hunger, and his tongue stuck to the dry roof of his mouth.

From the darkness behind him, Elizabeth said, "Don't go too far away, Richard. I'll be calling you later." Then she laughed.