

Pearl, a temptress vampire, discovers that the blood of her next would-be victim, Salaam, lacks that certain something she craves – necromantic energy that comes from eating meat. Yet he may offer her something that she needs even more...

Through fast-paced prose peppered with surprises, *The Vampire and The Vegan* explores the complex relationship between a carnivore and her food.

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Saurabh Dalal, President of the Vegetarian Society of DC

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The **Vampire** and The **Vegan**

Book I: Food

Merlene Alicia Vassall

First Edition



Mount Rainier, MD

The Vampire and The Vegan
Book I: Food by Merlene Alicia Vassall



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You're the best!

Merlene

I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts.

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast; for all is vanity.

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

– Ecclesiastes 3:18-20

Chapter 1

I walked into Christopher's Seafood Restaurant, and before the *maitre d'* could seat me, I had already spotted my next meal. Tall, handsome, and well-dressed, he appeared to be in his thirties. His skin was a rich caramel color, and his shoulder-length dreadlocks were each exactly the same thickness and length. His short goatee was also painstakingly groomed. I smiled as the word "dapper" came to mind. I guess "metrosexual" is the more modern term.

Most women would have probably focused on the muscularity of his arms and chest – clearly visible through his lavender silk shirt – or his firm, round buttocks for that matter, but what allured me was his choice of entree: lobster.

I watched intently as he carefully selected his prey from the large fish tank that had been situated just inside the entrance to the restaurant. This was an obvious attempt to entice those with a taste for freshly killed sea animals. He pointed out the largest lobster and watched lustfully as the chef's assistant removed the tired and bewildered animal from the cloudy, gray water. His claws had been restrained with two thick rubber bands, but this was unnecessary. There was no way for him to escape, nowhere for him to go, and he was too confused and exhausted to fight any longer. In a few minutes, he would experience the searing pain of being boiled alive.

The dapper man returned to his table and his date, an attractive young woman of no consequence. I knew that he would be leaving with me. I waited impatiently to be seated, my hunger piqued now that dinner was so imminent.

This was my first time at this particular restaurant, but it was frequently mentioned in the "Style" section of *The Washington Post* as one of the hot gathering spots for young professionals who thought

themselves to be destined for greatness. The decor was pleasant enough. The walls were painted a deep green with intricate mahogany wainscoting and woodwork surrounding the many floor-to-ceiling windows facing out onto the Potomac River. The tiny, flickering flames of the candles on the tables mirrored the stars outside. But the odor of seafood mixed uneasily with the sweet scent of rum buns for which the restaurant was apparently known.

"Good evening," the young woman serving as *maitre d'* finally greeted me. "How many in your party?"

"Just one."

"Would you like a table by the window?"

"No. A seat at the end of the bar."

As I followed her the short distance, I felt a deep emptiness in my gut. My body was aching for nourishment, and the sensation was almost unbearable. It was as if my insides were caving in, and I was even getting a little lightheaded. Yet my visible demeanor never changed. No one who looked at me could see even a hint of the intense hunger that I was experiencing.

Gracefully, I seated myself on the bar stool, crossing my legs to reveal their sensuous contours accented by black silk stockings and stiletto heels. The hem of my dress rode up to mid thigh. From the vantage point of the bar, I would be able to see and be seen by my prey.

I wouldn't have much longer to wait. Despite his banter with his date, it was clear that my target had noticed me, and he was unable to stop glancing in my direction.

He was momentarily distracted as the waiter brought the dead crustacean to his table, along with a shrimp entree for the young woman. Once the food arrived, the couple's conversation ceased. I watched as the man used a nutcracker to break the animal's claw, and a fork to pull out the soft tissue within. He dipped the flesh into a small bowl of melted butter, put it into his mouth, and slowly chewed, savoring the flavor in a manner that was almost erotic.

I caught his eye and deliberately held his gaze for a moment too long. Then I bent over to brush an imaginary speck from the top of

my shoe. This offered him a glimpse of cleavage peeking out over the plunging neckline of the lipstick-red dress that I had chosen for tonight's hunt. He smiled at me. I stared into his eyes and enthralled him.

He was now doomed, like a hungry fish drawn to a fisherman's bait, unaware that within the tasty morsel lies a jagged hook about to tear into his flesh. The one seeking a meal would become a meal himself. I could hardly wait.

I continued to watch my prey enjoy his meal for a while longer. It would be his last, and I wanted him to finish it. But he was a slow eater, and I could see that his date was trying to make conversation. I was starving!

"Good evening." The bartender interrupted my thoughts, and I turned my head to look at him. He was young and appeared to be of Italian or Middle Eastern descent. He had straight, jet black hair and olive skin and was clad in the typical bartender uniform of a white dress shirt and black pants. "What will you be drinking this evening?"

I smiled to myself. "A Bloody Mary."

"Unusual choice. Mixes good nutrition with poison." He waited for a reply that never came. "Would you like to see a menu?"

"No. Just the drink. Where are the restrooms?"

"Back there, behind that wall," the bartender gestured and smiled at me. I guess I hadn't made my disinterest clear enough. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll be sure to save your seat for you."

"I never worry," I said coldly and turned away from him.

I figured that my prey had had enough time to complete most of his meal, so I stood up and looked at him again. Predictably, he was still staring at me even as his date continued to chatter. Without uttering a word, I commanded him to follow me and walked slowly across the room. My stomach was beginning to contract, but I remained outwardly calm.

He was right behind me by the time I reached the wall that separated the restrooms from the main dining area. Even before I

turned around, I knew he was there. As he came closer to me, the air changed. It became tangible and electric.

When we were both out of view of his date, he said, "Hey, pretty lady. Did you ask me to follow you, or was I imagining things?"

"I sent the message, and you received it. Get rid of your date, and take me to your place."

"What? Right now? Are you serious?"

"Very."

"Damn!" he said with a combination of both shock and awe. He looked me up and down in such a lustful manner that I would have been offended – if only I cared what humans thought of me. "Just give me a few minutes. I'll be right with you."

I returned to the bar, and he went to his table. Standing over his date, he whispered in her ear. I tuned out the other sounds in the restaurant and focused on their conversation.

"We have to leave," he said to her in a hushed voice.

"Why? What happened?"

"When I was in the bathroom, I got a call from Derrick. You know he's always getting himself into something. I gotta go and bail him out of some mess."

"Really. What exactly is his problem?"

"You know. Something with some girl. I can tell you about it later."

"You must really think I'm stupid, Tony."

"Here we go again! What are you talking about, *Lisa*?" He sat down on the edge of his seat, steeling himself for the argument.

"Do you think I didn't see you eyeballing that woman at the bar and meeting up with her in front of the bathrooms?" Her voice was beginning to rise. "I couldn't tell which was making you drool more, your lobster or her."

Tony glanced at me. "Oh please! Don't be ridiculous. I don't even know her."

"And that's what makes it all the more exciting! I remember how you were when we first met, three whole months ago! You have the attention span of a two year old."

“Things may not be as hot as they were, but whose fault is that? Anyway, I don’t have time for this argument right now. I’m putting you in a cab, and we can talk later.”

“I can manage to get myself home – without your assistance. This is it. Don’t bother to call me again. I hope she’s worth it.”

Lisa opened her purse, threw some cash on the table, and hurried out of the restaurant.

Tony signaled to the waiter to bring the check. After he paid the bill, he came over to me at the bar. He was visibly upset, but he pulled himself together. Hunger was gnawing at my insides, but my appearance was relaxed.

“All right now, pretty lady. I did what you asked and got rid of her, even though I think that she was really into me. I hope you’re ready to make it worth my while.”

“I will be, as soon as you pay for my drink.”

He frowned but placed a \$10 bill on the bar for the Bloody Mary that I had not even touched.

“What’s your name?” he asked as we walked out of the restaurant.

I was tempted to say “Mary” but figured that the irony would be lost on him, so I said, “Vanessa,” which is not my name.

“I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance, Vanessa. I’m Tony.”

I did not reply.

“My car’s right across the street ... the silver, convertible Porsche there. It’s a great car for driving with the top down on hot summer nights.”

As we crossed the street, he unlocked the doors remotely with his key fob. I walked around to the passenger side and let myself in. Once he was comfortable in the leather seat, he retracted the roof and turned on the sound system, loud. We drove through the streets with his obnoxious rap music blasting a monotonous beat and spewing out lurid lyrics, and I knew I would enjoy ending his life.

After about fifteen minutes, while we were stopped at a light, he grabbed my chin and kissed me roughly on the lips, catching me by

surprise. I guess he thought he was being sexy. I was furious but said nothing.

Another twenty minutes passed, and we parked behind a tall condominium building in the Chevy Chase area. As we entered, the contrast between the warm air outdoors and the cold air inside was harsh. Soon, we were at the door of his sixth floor apartment.

I paused, waiting for an invitation to enter his home. I didn’t actually need one, but this was a courtesy that I liked to maintain. Along with sexually arousing prey to release endorphin, it was a part of the humane slaughter tradition.

“Come on in.”

Looking at his apartment, not to mention his car, it was clear that Tony prided himself in being a stylish lover above all else. The living room was furnished completely in black and white. Two black leather sofas flanked a white Mongolian fur rug, which lay in front of a marble fireplace. The walls were painted white, and black drapes pooled on the floor in front of the windows. The tables and lamps were made of glass, chrome, and more black leather. A mammoth television set was across from the fireplace. White candles and a few small sculptures had been placed throughout the room. It was neat, clean, colorless, and deadly cold.

I walked into the center of the room, took off my shoes, and stood on the rug in front of the empty fireplace. Then I turned to look at him.

Still standing by the door, Tony removed his shoes, took off his socks, and put one neatly in each shoe. He then placed the shoes side by side by the front door. Next, he turned on the television set with a remote that had been on an end table. An adult movie began, but the sound was just barely audible. An anonymous man and two Plasticine women were engaged in sexual acrobatics. Was this supposed to excite me?

It seemed that Tony had a routine that he was hell-bent on following. In silence, he retrieved a box of matches from the mantel and lit a musky incense stick that was already halfway burned. I remained standing. He turned on some soft jazz. He went to another

room and returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses. As he placed them on the end table, I finally sat down on one of the sofas and watched him fill each glass halfway with white wine.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. “Don’t go anywhere.”

He left the room, *again*, and I decided to give him five more minutes, at best. I was famished and had lost patience long ago. I heard a toilet flush and the sounds of him brushing his teeth. I shook my head. Unbelievable!

Finally, Tony came back into the living room. Again, I stood in the middle of the rug, and he walked over to me. I began unbuttoning his shirt. The silk and mother-of-pearl buttons were smooth and cold against my fingers. I unbuckled his snake skin belt. As soon as I unfastened his pants, they fell to the floor. He had on black silk boxers, of course.

I placed my hands on his upper arms to keep him still and basked in the energy he radiated, moving my face slowly across and down his neck, shoulders, chest, abdomen, and groin. It almost overwhelmed my senses. This was going to be exquisite.

Tony pulled me up to a standing position and unzipped my dress to reveal my red lace teddy and lace-topped stockings. “Beautiful lady in red,” he said softly.

I smiled at his cliched response. Men were so predictable and easily manipulated. I always wore red when I went out hunting because I knew that the color excited and agitated them. It seemed to elicit almost a reflex reaction, like the cape waved in front of a bull by the *matador* – Spanish for “killer.”

Tony tried to kiss me on the mouth again, but I pulled away. Instead of kissing him, I picked up our clothing and tossed the pile onto one of the sofas. Tony seemed to be at a loss, confused by my behavior, so he remained almost motionless until I pulled him down onto the rug.

I paused to look at him for a moment. He was in an awkward position, not quite sitting, not quite kneeling.

“What are you waiting for? I’m dying to see what you have in mind. Enough with the suspense!”

“Lie flat on your back.”

He obeyed, and I removed the decorative comb that had been holding my braided hair in a neat bun. It was sleek, simple, and made of smooth sterling silver. Two of the teeth were longer than the others, spaced about an inch apart. Very deliberately, I placed the comb on the rug, next to Tony’s head.

As I straddled him, he eagerly cupped my breasts with his hands, which were surprisingly warm and soft. He ran them down my abdomen, but before he could go any further, I grabbed both of his wrists with my left hand and forcefully pushed them to the floor above his head. I held them there.

He smiled and exclaimed, “You’re wicked, aren’t you!”

“Very.”

I picked up my comb and slowly dragged it down his left cheek, stopping at the side of his neck. At this point, he was still smiling, but his expression soon changed. I pressed the comb against him, and the two long teeth pierced his skin and sank into his carotid artery.

“What the hell are you doing?” he cried out in pain. I said nothing.

At first, he struggled to get up, but I held him fast, using my will more than my muscles to subdue him. He was a fool to think that he was stronger than I. And my aim had been precise. Soon a pool of blood was forming on the white fur rug.

“Be still,” I commanded. His struggling ceased, but he continued to watch me in silent terror.

Once Tony was motionless, I noticed the jazz music playing and the sounds of the threesome on the life-sized television set, their exaggerated moans making a mockery of passion. But this was just a fleeting thought. My focus quickly returned to my meal.

Careful to avoid getting blood on me, I leaned over Tony’s body and covered the wounds on his neck with my mouth. Blood coursed from his artery into my throat, and I could finally exploit the necromantic energy that he had accumulated during his lifetime of eating slaughtered animals.

Tony's offense may have been unwitting, but nevertheless, every action has a consequence. He probably didn't know that each animal's suffering and death at the hands of humans created mystical energy that permeated the animal's body. Each time Tony had eaten meat or any other substance derived from a brutalized creature, he had defiled himself, contaminated his own blood, and made himself enticing to those of us at the top of the food chain.

Now, he was fully charged, and I delighted in draining him. It invigorated me.

As I consumed Tony's blood, I witnessed the pathetic lives of the animals he had eaten passing before me like images on a movie screen, there for my entertainment. The energy from his last meal brought me to the greatest heights of ecstasy. I relished the terror and pain of the lobster who had been taken from his home, imprisoned, and boiled alive only an hour or two earlier. The creature had been stupid to let himself get caught! I reveled in his anguish – and the torment of several hundred animals whose flesh Tony had eaten over his lifetime. Their suffering flooded back more quickly and in less detail, but it was just as real and amusing to me.

This is what I had been waiting for, and what a feast! His tainted blood was warm and thick and a little bit bitter. It had a flavor and a power like no other substance, well worth the wait. Gulping it down, I became almost dizzy. I could feel myself getting stronger. I drank until I was cloyed, and then I drank a little more.

All in all, Tony was a very satisfying meal. And now he, too, was dead.

I wiped the blood off of my comb and returned it to my hair. *Funny*, I thought, *Tony's dead body is strangely beautiful and peaceful.*

I stood up, turned off the television, and put the air conditioning on an even lower setting, to keep Tony smelling fresh longer. Rifling through his music collection, I was surprised to find that he actually exhibited good taste.

What else might I discover? I walked around his apartment, absentmindedly touching and looking at his possessions: a set of golf

clubs in a corner in the hallway, a wooden box of cigars on the desk in his den, a paddle emblazoned with the Greek letters of a fraternity on his kitchen wall. His refrigerator held little besides meat and animal products: chicken breasts, pork chops, steaks, eggs, cheese, and a lonely, half empty bottle of wine inside the door.

I returned to the den and took a cigar and matches from his desk. Still dressed in only a teddy and stockings, I sat on the leather couch in the living room with my toes in the fur rug. I liked the smell of a good cigar, so I lit it and set it down in a small dish on the end table.

What a wonderful night! Good food, good music – but all good things must come to an end, I thought.

I switched off the sound system and put my dress and shoes back on. Then I removed the car keys from Tony's pants and put them in my purse. Sated and in a much better mood, I turned around as I reached the door to take one last look at Tony. He was an excellent man!

I left the building and drove his car to Union Station. Leaving it in the parking lot, I took the escalator down two levels and exited the front of the huge edifice. Immediately, I caught a cab at the taxi stand and returned to my home to sleep peacefully.

Chapter 2

Three weeks had passed since I had made a meal of Tony, and I was hungry once again. Yet I was not at all in the mood to hunt. If I didn't have to eat, I would probably never leave home. I had grown increasingly loathe to mingle with humans – filthy vermin that leave a trail of destruction and disease wherever they go. In small numbers, they're good for labor and food, but that's the extent of their usefulness. The rest should be exterminated.

I could hardly believe that I had actually been one of them, once. But that was a long time ago, before Kwamena tasted me and turned me into a higher being.

I could still remember how confused I was right after the change, when Kwamena told me all about necromantic energy and the rules and traditions I should follow. He had explained my new powers to me – sensing people's thoughts, perceiving the nearly imperceptible, captivating a human with a mere look, subduing my prey with a simple word or two – yet it took me a few months of practice to perfect my techniques and develop a hunting strategy that suited me and always worked. Ironically, my first meal, a woman, led me to the answer: targeting men.

A few days after Kwamena had changed me, I grew hungry for necromantic energy. Unsure of how to capture my prey, I did what I was used to doing when I was restless. I put on a lacy black cocktail dress and headed to the piano lounge at The Waterfall, one of the most exclusive hotels in the city.

As I stood near the piano, cognac in hand, I basked in the energy of the men and women who brushed past me – teasing me, tempting me. I wanted to eat someone. Anyone would do, but I would have to

get my prey alone, and I didn't know how to do that without arousing suspicion or leaving evidence.

In those days, I still had a fear of getting caught, not realizing how many homicides go unsolved every year, particularly once the victim's friends and family members were ruled out. At that time, I didn't know that it took two decades and ninety bodies before authorities caught the Green River Killer in Washington State, and it was three months before the Washington, DC snipers were caught – even though they shot more than a dozen people in public.

Back then, standing at the piano in that dark, smoky room, I thought I needed to come up with a clever plan to capture my prey and escape police detection. As I stood there thinking, too much time was passing, and eventually, the concierge noticed and approached me.

She was a young woman with big green eyes and straight, shoulder-length hair. Although she was wearing a teal hotel uniform, it was so stylish that I wouldn't have realized it wasn't an ordinary dress. Only her name tag gave it away.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Yvonne whispered to me. "I hate to do this, and I'm terribly embarrassed, but it's part of my job."

She put her hand on my elbow and gently steered me toward the end of the bar, where there were only a few other people.

"Recently, we've had some problems with... well, with women without, you know, the best of intentions... coming to our lounge and sort of looking for... men who might be interested in... spending some time and money on them. Please forgive me. I know that *couldn't* be you, but it's my job to ask if you are staying at this hotel or if you are meeting one of our guests here. Again, I'm sorry to have to ask you this."

I smiled at her discomfort and leaned in close to whisper my response. As I did so, the energy that she was emitting washed over me and made my entire body tingle. She was delectable! I was emboldened and decided to take a chance.

"What if I told you that I *don't* have the best of intentions," I said in a slow, steady voice. "In fact, my only intention right now is to

find a monied man who is willing to share his wealth with me for a lifetime – or at least an evening.”

“I... I... I appreciate your honesty.” She leaned away from me and studied my face, obviously intrigued and looking for the right words to say. She moved in close to me again, her full lips nearly brushing against my ear. “Have you been successful at it? Are you making good money? Do men actually buy you expensive things?”

I put my hand on her shoulder and whispered my answer to her. “Would I be here if they didn’t? And I only choose the tastiest men. I don’t know why you’re wasting your youth working for this hotel. You could be making a killing!”

“Really? You really think I could?”

“Of course!”

“I don’t know... I see all these men here with so much money... Some of them are kind of handsome. It’s just a crazy fantasy of mine.”

“It doesn’t have to be. You could be making top dollar for something that you’d do for free. But you need to know how to attract the right type of man and how to get him to open up his wallet. It’s all in the technique. I can show you. I’d love to have a partner. So tell me, when do you get off?”

She glanced at her watch. “In about twenty minutes.” She took a deep breath and held it for several seconds. Finally, she exhaled, and I knew I had her hooked.

“Will you wait for me?”

“Sure. Not much is happening here tonight, anyway. We can go to your place so you can change. Then we’ll go to one of my favorite spots. But I won’t tell you where until I know that you’re serious about this.”

I nursed my drink until she came back to the bar about a half an hour later wearing a plain, blue shirt and black pants. She appeared to be very tense, so I bought her a large cognac and watched her gulp it down nervously. That loosened her up quite a bit. During the entire taxi ride to her building in nearby Alexandria, Virginia, we joked and laughed and touched like old friends.

She was completely relaxed and more than a little giddy when we reached her apartment. Slightly off balance, she managed to open the door, strolled in, and put her purse on a small table near the entryway. I stood in the hallway, waiting for her to invite me into her home.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “Come in here and help me find something to wear!”

I entered, closed the door behind me, and followed her. As we walked through the dimly lit living room toward her bedroom, she kicked off her shoes and began unbuttoning her shirt. She dropped it on the floor just outside of the bedroom door. Inside the room, she flipped on the light and immediately stepped out of her pants and left them there. I stood in the doorway watching her.

Clothed only in a white, satin bra and panty set, she slid open the doors to her wall closet.

“Here,” she said. “This is everything I’ve got. Tell me what you think.”

As she walked the length of the closet, she swept her hand along the row of clothing and almost tripped over a shoe. I rushed over and grabbed her arm to steady her.

“All right,” I said. “Show me your sexiest outfit.”

She reached into the closet and pulled out a short, white, strapless dress in a clingy fabric. Holding it up against her body, she waited for my approval.

“Perfect. Put that on while I look for some jewelry to go with it.”

I glanced around the room. There was a vanity with a small stool against one wall, the surface covered with cosmetics, perfumes, brushes, and jewelry. I immediately noticed the silver, decorative comb with uneven teeth. Picking it up, I looked over at Yvonne. She was twirling around in her little white dress, panties showing.

“So what do you think of it? When I bought it, the sales lady said, ‘It has wonderful movement.’”

“It’s very sexy, just like you.” I walked toward her. “But you should wear your hair up so that everyone can see your bare neck and shoulders. We can use this beautiful comb. Where did you get it?”

I stood behind her, gathering her hair together and pulling it back. She became quiet and still as soon as I began touching her. I moved her hair to the left and exposed her smooth skin.

“Oh, I bought that a long time ago in New Orleans,” she said in a soft, nervous voice. “I hardly ever use it.”

Gently, I twisted her hair into a knot and slipped the comb in place. Then I put my hands on her shoulders and pulled her back against me.

Standing so close to her and feeling the energy that she was generating, my appetite took over. I almost expected to grow fangs, as I had seen so many times in the movies. I ran my tongue across the tips of my teeth, but they had not changed.

Still, I couldn't help but give in to my passion and put my mouth on her neck. I began gently kissing and sucking her warm skin, and she let me. But that wasn't enough. Without thinking, I found myself biting into her – hard – breaking the skin and releasing precious blood.

She cried out and tried to pull away from me, but I had a firm grip on her arms.

“Be quiet!” I said firmly and was surprised when she immediately grew silent. “Don't fight me.”

She stopped struggling, and I dragged her over to the bed and pulled her into the middle of it. Blood had dripped down the front of her dress and was now trickling back off of her shoulder, blending in with the roses printed on her comforter.

As she lay there motionlessly with her eyes tightly shut, I squatted over her and tore at her throat with my teeth in utter abandon. As I lapped up her warm blood, I felt euphoric and completely alive. Every cell in my body was charged.

The pleasure of consuming necromantic energy for the first time was so overwhelming that I couldn't fully distinguish the many images and sensations that passed through my mind and body. All I can remember is feeling intense delight as I witnessed the misery of the animals that Yvonne had eaten. It was clear to me that the more they suffered, the more energy they created – and the more energy

my prey had absorbed, the more gratification I experienced. In an instant, I realized that guilt, shame, and mercy were for fools. I was far above both humans and the animals they ate.

I ripped out Yvonne's throat and gulped down the blood. By the time that I was finished, she and I were both a bloody mess, but only one of us was still alive.

I removed my wet, sticky clothes and took a long shower in her bathroom. Yvonne and I were about the same size, so I was able to find a pair of leggings and a billowy shirt to wear home. I placed my own clothing in a plastic bag to dispose of later and left her body sprawled on the bed for someone else to clean up.

As I was about to leave, I turned back. I wanted to take her silver comb with me as a memento from my first meal.

During the taxi ride home, I thought through my hunting technique and decided that I would utilize the dating skills that I had honed in my former life to capture my prey. And I would use Yvonne's silver comb to make my meals more civilized.

In all of the years since that time, I rarely deviated from this formula. But with every meal, I grew increasingly disgusted with humans. I hated them all for their weakness and hypocrisy. Yet I had to eat, and necromantic energy was only found in the blood of humans. I surmised that it was probably a byproduct of the ability to make bad life-and-death decisions.

Anyway, it was Friday, about 8:45 pm, which was a good time to hunt. Resigned to do what I must, I put on a pair of black, wide-legged pants and a red, satin and lace camisole. As usual, I pulled my braided hair into a bun, held in place with my silver comb. Then I slipped into a pair of red, high-heeled sandals, grabbed my purse, and left my apartment to hunt.

I walked down the long, empty corridor and turned left into the lobby, where a slender man was entering the building carrying several plastic bags.

“Hey! How are you doing?” he asked, as if I were an old friend that he hadn't seen in months. His warm smile revealed perfect, bright white teeth.

I glared at him. “Do I know you?”

I was offended by his show of familiarity, but there was something about him that immediately caught my attention. It wasn’t something that attracted me, just something that was out of place. I didn’t know exactly what it was.

I took a good look at him. Probably in his late thirties or early forties, he had very dark skin and a very short hair cut. He was tall, and through his jeans and white tee shirt, I could tell that he was in excellent condition. Yet something was wrong that I couldn’t quite pinpoint.

“Well, no, you don’t know me, but I’ve seen you around the building a few times, always alone, for some inexplicable and inexcusable reason. Let me introduce myself: My name is Salaam.”

He put his bags down and extended his right hand. In an unusual move for me, I shook his hand and introduced myself.

“You can call me ‘Pearl,’” I said without thinking.

Why did I tell him my real name? I was slipping up because I was distracted. Well, it didn’t really matter. He might be no more than my next meal.

“I don’t know if you were about to leave or just came in the back door, but if you’re not busy, why don’t you come and have dinner with me? I just bought enough food to feed a family of twelve.”

“I *was* going out, but I’m not in any rush.”

“Excellent, Pearl. I’m in apartment 301,” he said as we walked toward the elevators. “It’s just an efficiency the size of a broom closet, but it works for me, and it’s pretty cheap. Which apartment are you in?”

“I live on the first floor.”

“Is it one of those split-level apartments?”

“Yes.”

The elevator on the right arrived first. Once we got in, he put down the bags and pressed the button for the third floor. The spicy aroma of Salaam’s carryout food quickly filled the small space.

“I’d love to see it sometime. I’ve been in a couple of other apartments like that in this building, and they’re great – like mini

townhomes. But the rent! I’m trying to live on as little money as possible, since I’m also trying to be as free as possible.”

We walked down the hallway toward his place, and I wondered if I were doing the right thing. Slaughtering a man who lived in my own building could bring police attention that I didn’t need. I wasn’t concerned that DC’s police department could actually capture me, but I didn’t need the hassle. On the other hand, I wanted to know what it was about this man, Salaam, that perplexed me. In any case, I didn’t have to make an immediate decision about my dinner. I would see where events led me and decide later.

“Here we are,” he said as he opened the door to his apartment. “Welcome to my humble abode!”

I stepped in and was greeted by a slender, tiger-back cat who sidled up to me and rubbed against my leg.

“I hope you like cats. Obviously, Twiggy likes you.”

I brushed away the fur that the cat had left on my pants leg.

“I don’t mind them if they leave me alone.”

I descended the half flight of stairs that led to the main room, and I saw a dark cat dart under the futon. Salaam followed me and placed his bags down in the middle of the floor.

“That was Two-Face. She’ll warm up to you.”

I said nothing.

“I hope you wouldn’t mind removing your shoes. It helps keep the rug clean and, I hope, also makes your feet more comfortable.”

I slipped off my sandals and placed them near the foot of the stairs. Salaam kicked off his basketball shoes and left them where they fell.

“You have such beautiful little feet! Do you wear such high heels all the time? Feet like those deserve to be pampered. And you should have a toe ring.”

I smiled, slightly, but said nothing. He was more down to earth than most men I had dined on.

“Let me give you the grand tour,” he offered, and we walked around the place, with Twiggy following close behind.

Well, he hadn't been exaggerating when he said that the efficiency was tiny. Beside the L-shaped main room, the apartment had a galley kitchen, a bathroom with a shower (there wasn't room for a tub), and a small balcony. He mentioned that there were two closets: a small reach-in closet at the foot of the stairs and a walk-in closet in the bedroom area.

In the living room, a denim-covered futon and a Papasan chair formed the seating area. A black and silver trunk was used as a coffee table, and the furniture grouping was anchored by a large, worn rug with a Southwestern pattern. A card table and two old Windsor chairs by the window served as the dining area. Designed as a space for a bed, the alcove instead held a beat-up, roll-top desk on which Salaam had placed his laptop computer and printer. A few mismatched bookcases were stuffed with books, records, and an old, suitcase-style record player.

His extensive collection of artwork on the walls and shelves consisted of carvings, paintings, and crafts from Africa and South America. The walls and blinds were standard apartment-building white, but the other colors in the room were earth tones: brown woods, green plants, russets, and blues. Two green, sun-bleached plastic chairs were on the balcony, along with a small container garden of herbs, tomatoes, and a few vegetables. The apartment was fairly neat, except for the desk area.

Salaam had furnished his entire home with obvious hand-me-downs and thrift store finds. The only items he had in abundance were books, record albums, and art.

"Well, that's it," he said with a sigh that was supposed to indicate that he was a bit embarrassed by his home, but it was clear that he wasn't.

I tossed my purse on the trunk and picked up a framed photograph that caught my eye. Displayed prominently on one of the bookshelves, it was a very old, black and white portrait of a plump but dignified-looking woman. Her hair was pressed and set in large waves, a style popular in the 40s or 50s, I supposed.

"Is this your mother?"

"Yes," he said, taking the picture from me and looking at it with a sad half smile. "I'm not embarrassed to admit that she was the love of my life."

Salaam put the photo back on the shelf and invited me to sit at the table while he prepared to serve dinner. The other cat, Two-Face, came out from under the futon and sat across the room in a corner watching me.

What a strange looking cat! She was predominately black, with random tan and orange speckles. But her face was divided almost perfectly down the center, with one side black and the other side mostly tan and orange.

"Usually, I cook, but on Fridays, I treat myself to take-out. This stuff comes from that Thai restaurant near 14th and U Streets. I hope you're open to vegan food. I can't pronounce the names of these dishes, but this one is stir-fried watercress in a hot chili bean sauce; this one is fried tofu sauteed with mixed vegetables in garlic sauce; and this one is tofu with ginger, onions, carrots, and broccoli in a bean sauce. We also have vegetable fried rice and spring rolls. Oh, and my favorite, sweet and sour tofu."

I was only half listening to his ramblings about the food. Why should I care about the ethnic background of the food he was going to eat? As long as it contained meat, it didn't matter. My stomach was rumbling, and I needed to decide whether he would make a good meal for me.

"I'm not really hungry," I lied. "But you should go ahead and eat."

"Well, can I offer you something to drink?" he asked as he brought the bags into the kitchen and put them on the counter. "I have a bunch of different juices – cranberry, mango, peach nectar, orange, or," he opened the refrigerator and looked in, "a bottle of white wine that I've been saving for a special occasion."

"A glass of wine," I said with no intention of actually drinking it.

Still in the kitchen area, Salaam opened the wine, filled two glasses, and brought them over to the table. Then he returned to the

kitchenette to prepare a plate of food for himself. Once everything was ready, we both sat down at the table.

“The kitchen’s about to close. Are you sure you don’t want any food?”

“I’m sure.”

I swished the wine around in my glass. He began to eat.

“Oh, man! This food is excellent! You really should try it.”

“It smells pretty good. What are you eating, anyway?”

“This is the sweet and sour tofu. It has onions, scallions, tomatoes, green peppers, cucumbers, and pineapple, in sweet and sour sauce.”

“What type of meat is in there?” I glanced at my watch.

“None. I’m vegan.”

This caught my attention. “What do you mean, ‘vegan’?”

“I’m a very strict vegetarian. I don’t eat meat or any animal products, such as eggs, dairy products, gelatin, or honey.” He ate another forkful of food. “I also don’t wear or otherwise use animal products – leather, fur, wool, silk, lanolin, pearls, etc. The only thing that’s not vegan in this place is the cat food. I haven’t been able to find a vegan solution for that.”

This was one of the most ridiculous things I had heard in a long time. “Why?”

“Why am I vegan? Well,” he said while still eating, “the short answer is that I want to minimize my contribution to the suffering of animals. If you’re really interested, I can give you the long answer.”

The telephone rang and startled both of us.

“I’ll let my machine pick up.”

Given the size of his apartment, it was impossible not to listen to the message as it was being left.

“Hey, No-Meat,” a man’s voice said. “Where are you on this Friday night? Have you fallen off the wagon and gone back to your bad-ass ways? Don’t expect me to believe that you have a date. You must be in the water closet, as usual. I keep tellin’ you that you eat way too much fiber! I had another interesting ride home on the Metro today. A White guy and an Asian woman sat down in the seat in front

of me, and next thing you know, they’re practically – how shall I say – knockin’ boots right there. Usually, I’m all for a good live show, but I had my daughter with me, so I tapped the guy on the shoulder and said, ‘Look man, I didn’t sign up for a front row seat at some type of Eurasian peep show. You need to take her home or to a hotel, motel, Holiday Inn...’ I don’t think he got the reference, or appreciated my advice, for that matter. At any rate, they stopped. Gimme a call. Later.”

Salaam smirked and rolled his eyes. “That’s my friend, Lynford. Always the comedian, sometimes actually funny. I’ll get back to him.”

“He sounds charming,” I said sarcastically. “Now, let’s get back to this vegan thing. How long have you been vegan?”

“About thirty years now. Have you ever considered vegetarianism?”

“Of course not. People need to eat meat.”

Salaam continued eating for a few moments in silence before saying, “Well, not according to the American Dietetic Association. Its experts say that vegan diets can actually prevent or treat certain diseases. Maybe you would enjoy learning more about it. You might be surprised how delicious vegan food can be. And you might discover that you like the idea as well as the results for your health, the animals, and the environment.”

I looked at him blankly.

“Well, I haven’t eaten anything from an animal since I was 22 years old, and I’m still kickin’. If you pull out your calculator and do the very complicated math, that makes me 52.”

That surprised me. He looked much younger.

“But enough about me. I’d like to know more about you. If you don’t mind my asking, how old are you?”

“I don’t make a habit of telling people my age.”

“Fair enough. So here’s a less personal question. Where are you from?”

“I grew up in Brooklyn, went to college in Boston, moved around a bit, and ended up here.”

“Do you like DC? Plan to stay?”

“I do like it and will stay as long as it continues to be comfortable.”

I stood up and walked over to the futon. I sat down on one side, leaving plenty of room for him next to me. I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but if I were going to eat him, I needed to get him away from the table and closer to me.

“What do you do for a living?” He picked up his empty plate and took it into the kitchen.

“I make money through investments. You'd be amazed at how much money you can accumulate without actually making a product or delivering a service to anyone.”

“Do you find that satisfying?” He stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame.

“Satisfying? It pays for the things that I want. That's the only reason I do it.”

“Oh. Fair enough. I work as a fundraising consultant, writing grant proposals for nonprofit organizations, mostly in the fields of drug abuse prevention and treatment. It doesn't pay for much, but I do find it satisfying, and my flexible schedule allows me to pursue my other interests.”

He paused, but I didn't ask him to elaborate.

“I love to read, sketch, and I play the guitar a little.”

“I enjoy music. Why don't you put on a record? You've got enough of them!”

He went over to the bookcase that held his collection. Slowly, he ran his index finger across the spines of the albums that filled the third shelf. He stopped midway across and said, “Oh, I love this one, but I haven't listened to it in ages. Do you like Earth, Wind, and Fire?”

“They're all right.”

“Are you familiar with ‘New World Symphony’?”

“No. Let's hear it.”

He removed the album from the shelf and took the record out of its beat-up jacket. Then he lifted the top of the suitcase-style record

player and turned it on. Carefully, he placed the record on the spindle and the needle in the groove. Finally, he sat down on the other end of the futon, resting his back against its arm, legs crossed. The music started off with slow, African-inspired rhythms and the sounds of percussion instruments that I couldn't identify, ending in a crescendo after about ten minutes.

As the music played, he began to ask me questions again. “So tell me about yourself. Are you always so quiet, or are you purposely trying to be mysterious?”

I was surprised that he was so inquisitive about me. Most of my prey were usually only interested in talking about themselves and finding out what I could do for them.

“There's not much to tell. Come closer,” I said.

“Why?” He looked genuinely concerned.

“I just want to get a better look at you.” I added, “You don't look like you're in your fifties.”

As he moved closer to me, I kneeled on the seat of the futon, facing him. I examined his face carefully and was startled by the openness in his eyes. I pulled him toward me by the shoulders.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to smell you,” I lied. I actually wanted to sense his energy, which I now realized was somehow imperceptible to me.

“Why? Am I funky?” He pulled back and sniffed his underarms. Apparently satisfied that he didn't smell sweaty, he cupped his hand over his mouth to smell his breath.

“I just want to smell you.” I pulled him toward me again. Putting my face near his neck and inhaling deeply, I still couldn't detect the presence of necromantic energy. It was as though he had already been drained. Apparently surprised and confused, he did nothing.

Equally bewildered, I whispered, primarily to myself, “What the hell...?”

“What?” He pulled away.

I became a little flustered, and I never get flustered.

“I didn't mean that the way it sounded. You just seem so different from every other man that I've met.”

“Of course I’m different,” he laughed. “I’m *very* different. If you take the time to get to know me, you may be amazed!”

Salaam was intriguing – but I was not curious enough to pursue this mystery any further. I looked at my watch and saw that it was already almost ten o’clock.

“Well, I’m not going to get to know you tonight. I’ve got to go,” I said, picking up my purse. I was hungry, and he could not satisfy me, so I stood up to leave.

As he walked me to the door, he said, “I hope we’ll get to know each other better. Especially being neighbors and what have you. Not because I think you’re beautiful or anything like that...”

“If you take the time to get to know me,” I said as I put on my sandals, “we’ll both be amazed.”

“Good night,” he said as I stepped into the hallway.

“Good night,” I replied as he closed the door.

Chapter 3

I left Salaam’s apartment and went out into the hot, humid night. There were no stars; it was unusually dark, and I thought it would probably storm. The wind was blowing the trees about ominously, and a large paper cup bounced down the empty sidewalk.

I walked the half block or so to the corner and immediately hailed a yellow cab.

“Take me to The Labyrinth, that night club at 21st and M Streets.”

I had been to The Labyrinth several times before and knew it would be easy to find an appropriate source of nourishment there. Plus, the club was only about a ten-minute drive from home, so I would not have long to wait.

Located in a renovated four-story townhouse in the Dupont Circle area, The Labyrinth was literally a maze, with numerous rooms that were interconnected. It had only been open for about a year, so it was still at the height of its popularity. When I arrived, the place was already jumping. Lights and shadows could be seen moving in all of the windows.

There was a queue outside, with about forty well-dressed people on it. Instead of walking right in as I had in the past, I decided to wait on line to see who else was going in. A fairly diverse mix of people had flocked there: about an equal number of men and women, most Black, most under thirty, but quite a few who were older. I preferred older men but didn’t immediately see anyone of interest.

When I finally reached the entrance, I noticed a poster in the lobby advertising male and female “exotic dancers” that evening. *Good*, I thought, *that will make the hunt even easier*. I handed a \$10 bill to the man at the door, a small price to pay for dinner.

As I made my way through the noisy crowd in the lobby, people instinctively moved out of my path. I entered the main room on the first level. The ambient lights were low, so low that you couldn't tell what color the walls were painted. Three or four spotlights randomly darted across the room. Hip hop music blasted, and a mob of twenty-somethings danced suggestively to the beat – the women in skimpy outfits and the men in clothing so large that it was impossible to determine what condition they were in: obese or emaciated. Every once in a while, one of the spotlights would illuminate the face of a young man or woman dancing to the pulsating rhythm. His or her eyes were invariably vacant.

The only seats in the room were half a dozen stools at the bar. They were already taken by a few lucky women who had managed to find some respite for their feet, pained from dancing in four-inch heels.

Looking around, I was not impressed with any of the men that I saw. They seemed too young to have accumulated the quantity of necromantic energy that I craved. Slowly, I walked across the dance floor and made it to the dimly lit stairs leading to the second floor. The stairwell was crowded with men and women trying to sweet talk each other over the din of the music. They stepped aside as I ascended.

The atmosphere upstairs was completely different. The disc jockey was playing dance hall reggae loudly, but it was not so loud as to be deafening. Most of the people on this floor were women, some young and very attractive, but quite a few who were trying to forestall the aging process by dressing too youthfully, and many who were overweight. They stood in small clusters, sipping glasses of wine and mixed drinks, looking around in anticipation, and occasionally leaning over to comment on what they were seeing and what they expected to see.

A catwalk had been erected across one side of the room, and several tables and chairs were arranged along the length of it. There was standing room only, and the women sitting close to the catwalk

were talking and laughing comfortably, as though they were old timers.

The music faded, and a tall, buxom woman came out onto the runway wearing a tight fitting black tuxedo and a top hat. Surprisingly, she actually looked good in it.

“Ladies,” she said in a loud voice into a microphone, then paused dramatically and looked around the room. “Ladies, do you know what time it is...? I said, do you know what time it is?”

The crowd shouted in reply, but each woman seemed to be shouting something different. The result was just noise.

“We have for you tonight one of the hottest male strippers in the Mid-Atlantic, in the Northeast, probably in the entire country.” She looked down at a heavysset woman sitting with three other women at one of the tables near the catwalk. She was wearing a very gaudy gold sequined hat and matching blouse and held an old-fashioned glass, empty except for slivers of ice. “You know who I’m talking about, don’t you?”

The robust woman stood up, grabbed the microphone out of the mistress of ceremonies’ hand, and spoke into it. “I sure do, honey! It’s got to be The Long Ranger!”

Visibly annoyed at having her thunder stolen, the mistress of ceremonies glared at the exuberant fan for a few seconds before regaining her composure. “That’s right,” she said, taking control of the microphone. “The Labyrinth is proud to present – the amazing, the incredible, the extremely well hung, the one and only – Long Ranger!”

Suddenly, reggae music was blaring from the sound system again. From out of the shadows behind the catwalk, a man leaped onto the stage. He was wearing a white cowboy hat and a black domino mask. His otherwise nude chest was partially covered by a tan leather vest that contrasted his chocolate brown skin. His muscular legs were clad in tan leather chaps over denim blue briefs and brown cowboy boots.

The women went crazy. Everyone started screaming. Those at the tables in the front stood up. The ones toward the back of the room pushed forward.

The Long Ranger began his routine by strolling down the full length of the catwalk, flexing his biceps and pecs and showing off his massive quadriceps. When he reached the end of the catwalk, he slowly removed his vest and turned around to make another trip across the stage. He dropped his vest on the catwalk, strutted to the center of the stage, and began unbuckling his chaps. The women went wild, some screaming, some laughing, and some briefly covering their eyes. With one hand, The Long Ranger pulled off his chaps and threw them to the floor. He was now wearing the hat and mask, briefs and boots.

I watched for a while, amused by the way that the women shrieked and screamed every time the stripper removed an article of clothing or gyrated on the stage. It was typical, ignorant human lust, set free by alcohol and the anonymity of the crowd.

Clearly, The Long Ranger spent many hours in the gym. His muscles were large and very well defined, and his dark skin looked smooth and flawless.

He walked to the other end of the stage and dropped down to the floor. The audience surged closer to get a better view. He did a few one-armed push-ups, to everyone's delight, and then turned over, sat on the floor, and slowly and dramatically removed his boots.

He stood up and tipped his hat to the crowd. Then he inched his briefs downward. The women screamed. He teasingly pulled his briefs back on, and the crowd let out a collective, "Aw!" The Long Ranger turned his back to the crowd and again began slowly inching his briefs down. This time, he did not stop. He eased the elastic waistband over his very round and very firm butt and revealed a white thong made of a loosely woven mesh fabric. The crowd roared as he spun around to face them dressed only in the white hat, black domino mask, and tiny white thong, which was practically see-through.

At this point, The Long Ranger jumped off of the makeshift stage and started to work the room, beginning with those at the tables closest to the catwalk, going from woman to woman, stroking himself, flexing, and gyrating until she slipped a dollar bill into his

sweaty thong. Some of the women were glad to join in the routine. Those who ran their hands over his body or inserted their cash into his thong with flair were rewarded with a kiss on the cheek. The less vivacious women sat back in their chairs, watched him intensely – some almost clinically – and then tipped him. A few of the shy ones were aghast, covering their eyes with their hands, and trying to become invisible as he attempted to collect his tips.

Before The Long Ranger could make it over to where I was standing, I left, not wanting any physical contact with him. As I walked toward yet another staircase, which led to the third floor, the throng of women parted to allow me through. From the stairway, I could hear house music playing.

The main room on this floor was crowded with men watching a young woman who was apparently midway through her striptease when I arrived. I watched her for just a few moments. She was executing an elaborate routine quite skillfully, but she didn't look like she was enjoying herself. I wondered what had possessed her to choose this for a career?

Uncomfortable because the room was warmer and even more tightly packed than the others, I decided to venture up to the fourth floor. However, before I could make it to the stairs, I felt a hand on my arm.

"Excuse me," a man's voice spoke into my ear.

I turned around to see a short man of about forty-five staring back at me. He was light skinned, balding, and a bit plump, but very well dressed in a gray linen jacket, navy pants, and a light blue polo shirt. Most important, he radiated strong necromantic energy.

"This place is a little bit too wild for me," he said loudly over the sounds of the music and the crowd. "I was wondering if you could recommend a quieter night spot."

This was too easy. Is it even a hunt if your prey walks up to you, lies down, and plays dead? But he promised to be delicious and filling, so who was I to complain about my good fortune?

"I'm here on business for a few days," he explained, "and I really don't want to go back to the hotel. But this place is freaky!"

“Let’s check out the fourth floor,” I suggested. “Maybe it’s better up there.”

“Sounds like a plan. And by the way, my name is Ben.”

Although the effort was unnecessary, I looked into his mind to find a name that would appeal to him. “I’m Serena.”

“That’s a beautiful name. It’s my pleasure to meet you.”

He took me by the hand, a gesture that I didn’t appreciate, and walked toward the staircase. With him in the lead, this was no easy task. He needed to say, “pardon me,” “excuse me,” and “coming through,” numerous times to get the men who were engrossed in the action on the stage to let us pass.

When we finally made it upstairs, we saw that there were several smaller rooms with a few loveseats in each. As in the rest of the club, the lighting was low. However, soft R&B was playing at a reasonable volume such that people could hold conversations. In two of the rooms, couples were necking, or more, on the sofas, so we chose a room that only had one other couple in it, talking.

Ben told me that he was from Chicago. He had been in DC for three days already and became bored staying in his hotel room alone each night. One of the room service waiters had suggested that he check out The Labyrinth, so here he was.

He worked as the business manager for a famous actor who, Ben claimed, would remain unnamed. Ben was in town working on a restaurant deal. He pulled out his wallet and showed me a few pictures of himself with various celebrities from the sports and entertainment industries.

I feigned excitement and agreed to go back to his hotel room with him to talk further. By this point, it was past midnight, and I was famished.

He was staying at the Barrington Hotel on 16th and K Streets, which was very nearby. We quickly caught a cab and were there in a few minutes.

The Barrington was a beautiful hotel, with the plush carpeting, ornate fixtures, and lovely furnishings that you would expect. It had

undoubtedly witnessed its share of liaisons, but probably none like the one that was about to occur.

We took the elevator up to the seventh floor and walked down the hallway to his room. All the while, he was talking about the unnamed actor for whom he worked and dropping the names of the famous people he had met. Finally, we reached his door, and he invited me in.

“So, this is my home away from home. Make yourself comfortable.”

I took off my shoes and sat down in the middle of one of the two full-size beds in the room.

“I didn’t get a chance to eat dinner,” he said. “What would you like from room service, Serena? They have late-night breakfast here.”

“I’m not hungry. But you go ahead, please. Maybe I’ll just have something to drink, a cup of coffee.”

Nodding his head, Ben retrieved the Directory of Services from the nightstand and studied it before calling room service. He placed an order for my coffee and for a ham and cheese omelet with a side order of bacon and orange juice for himself.

“They said it should take fifteen to twenty minutes,” he reported. “What can we do until then?”

“Tell me more about yourself. It seems like you’ve led a fascinating life, meeting all kinds of interesting people.”

I wanted to keep him happy, and prey always enjoy talking about themselves, bragging about their accomplishments, pounding on their chests like gorillas. It puts them in a good mood, which is the humane thing to do for them on their last night.

“Okay. That’ll be my pleasure!”

He prattled on for a while. I pretended to be impressed.

Eventually, he said, “Excuse me for a minute while I go to the little boys’ room.”

Once Ben was gone, I stood up to stretch my legs. Just at that moment, there was a knock at the door.

“Room service.”

Ben was still in the bathroom, so I opened the door. Standing before me was a handsome man of Asian descent in an unflattering burgundy uniform. He was carrying a large tray.

"I'm here with your breakfast. May I come in?"

"That's what they pay you for. Put the tray on the bed."

He walked into the room but continued to hold the tray.

"Are you sure you don't want it on the desk? Something might spill."

"Whatever."

He put the tray on the desk and began arranging the silverware. It occurred to me that he was stalling. Maybe he hoped that I was interested in more than just breakfast.

He removed the metal cover that was keeping the entrée warm. The smell of bacon filled the room. "Is this what you ordered?"

"Yes, it is. Charge this meal to the room, and add a tip for yourself. Whatever you want."

"Thank you. That's very generous. I need you to sign this," he said, handing me the check.

As I was signing the bill, he commented, "That's a very nice outfit you're wearing. It really hugs your curves. Are you staying here alone?" He looked around for signs of a male presence, but Ben had left no obvious clues.

Ignoring his questions, I handed him the check and said, "Good-night."

He made one last effort. "My name is Ruben. If you need anything, anything at all, call room service and ask for me by name, Ruben."

I said nothing as he left, pulling the door behind him.

Ben came out of the bathroom.

"Was that our food?" He looked over at the desk and saw the tray. "Excellent! I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse! I hope you don't mind if we get right to it."

"Of course not. Go ahead and get started. I like a man who likes to eat."

He sat down at the desk and began buttering his toast.

"You're my kind of woman," he mumbled as he took a bite of the toast and put a forkful of omelette in his mouth. I walked over to the tray, put sugar and cream in the coffee, and picked up the cup. Marking time, I began slowly pacing back and forth in front of the beds, cradling the cup in both hands to warm them.

"How can I amuse you while you're eating?"

"I know," he said excitedly, a bit of food falling out of his mouth. "Tell me about one of your fantasies, what brings you pleasure. Something unusual but not so wild that it couldn't be done. Something that maybe you and I could do sometime down the road, if everything works out, and you wanted to."

Pretending to be shy, I said, "You would really want to hear that? I don't know if I could tell you. It's a little embarrassing, and I might shock you."

Still eating, he said, "Oh, now I really must know. I've got to hear it."

"OK. I'll try to tell you."

I put the coffee cup, still full, back on the tray and walked around the desk to where he was sitting. Standing behind him, I put my hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear, "My fantasy is to tie a man down to the bed and dominate him."

He paused, smiled, and said, "Tell me more, please!" Then he went right back to eating, stuffing a whole strip of bacon in his mouth, along with another large piece of the omelette.

As I resumed my slow pacing in front of the beds, I again reached into his mind to find out what phrases would arouse him.

"Well," I began to speak slowly and softly. "In my fantasy, first I would get a warm, wet washcloth from the bathroom and give you a long sponge bath. I would wash your strong, muscular arms. I would rub down your bulging chest. I would stroke your rugged thighs, calves, and feet. And I would kiss and lick your entire body, from head to toe."

I walked over to the desk to see how much of this meal was left. He was just about done. "I don't think you need any more details."

"I don't think I can *stand* any more details!"

Now that he was finished eating, I was beginning to feel my own hunger rising up in me even stronger. I walked over to the bed furthest from the door and stretched out on top of the covers.

“It’s a little cold in here. Come and warm me up.”

He put the last bit of food – a piece of toast – into his mouth, and said, “Just one second.”

After wiping the grease and crumbs from his mouth with the napkin from the room service tray, he took off his shoes and joined me on the bed.

“Was your meal good?”

“It was pure pleasure! What’s for dessert?”

Lying next to me, he pulled me toward him.

When he made a move to kiss my mouth, I turned my head, and let him kiss my neck instead.

“Why don’t you just lie back and let me do the work?” I asked.

Slowly, I removed his shirt and pants while he was lying on the bed. Running my fingers through the hair on his chest, I put my face close to his large abdomen and inhaled deeply.

“Take it slow, or I’m not going to last!” he cautioned.

I continued to run my face up and down his torso. His necromantic energy made my entire body tingle. He pulled me toward his face, presumably to try to kiss me again.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Would you like to try something different?”

“If it’s gonna feel good, I’m all for it!”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes. Yes!”

I stood up and stepped out of my pants to reveal red panties that matched my camisole. A huge grin spread across his face. “You have a spectacular body!”

Ignoring his comment, I retrieved my purse from the other bed and took four long, black ribbons from it. I placed them next to Ben, climbed onto the bed, and knelt on it by his side.

“What are those for?”

“I thought you said that you trust me! I’m going to tie you to the bed and have my way with you.”

“I prefer bondage as a fantasy, not a reality. Let’s do something else.”

“Your cooperation is not optional. Play along.”

“No. I’m not comfortable with this.” He was beginning to get annoyed.

“Don’t make a fuss.” I forced his right arm to the corner of the bed. He tried to free himself of my grip.

“You’re strong,” he said. “But I’m stronger.”

“Be still,” I commanded, and against his will, he obeyed.

I tied his wrist to the headboard. He was unable to struggle but continued to protest.

“Wait a minute! I don’t understand what’s going on! Stop! I can’t move! How are you doing this?”

I said nothing as I tied his other wrist to the headboard and one of his ankles to the footboard.

“You must have drugged me!” His voice grew louder. “You put drugs in my food while I was in the bathroom, and now you’re going to rob me! Is that what you’re about? I can’t believe that I fell for your come-on!”

While I was securing his other ankle to the bed, I heard a soft knock on the door.

“Room service. I’ve come to pick up your tray.”

Damn it! It was Ruben.

“Help me! Help me! She’s trying to rob me!”

Ruben tried the doorknob and found that the lock had not been completely latched. Perhaps he had left it that way on purpose. The door opened easily, and he peeked in tentatively.

When Ruben saw Ben tied to the bed, he said, “Excuse me. I thought someone was in trouble.”

“I *am* in trouble,” Ben exclaimed. “Help me! She’s a conniving thief who’s trying to rob me!”

Ruben rushed into the room and pulled me backwards by the shoulders. I lost my balance and fell off of the bed.

“You’ll pay for that!”

Before Ruben could even think about untying Ben’s arms, I grabbed him from behind and placed him in a choke hold. Gasping for breath, he clawed at my arms, but my grip was firm. After a few moments, he lost consciousness. I continued to hold him as Ben watched helplessly in shock. Ruben’s body went limp. When he collapsed onto the floor, I stepped over his body and headed to the open door.

I would not be interrupted again. I hung the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the knob before closing the door securely and locking it.

“Is he dead?” Ben whispered.

“Probably, but if not, I’ll take care of him later.” My attitude was matter of fact. “He shouldn’t have tried to be a hero.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

I kneeled beside him on the bed again. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Oh God, how could this be happening to me,” he moaned.

He got no sympathy from me. This was not what I had planned for the night either. I had wanted Ben high on endorphin, not in a state of terror. But there was no way to make that happen now.

“Please don’t kill me! Listen. I have at least \$500 in my wallet and a couple of thousand dollars hidden in this room. I’ll show you where. You can have it all, just untie me.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“Then I can help you become a model or an actress. I have the connections. You have the looks and talent. What do you say? I bet you always wanted to be rich and famous. You may never have this opportunity again!”

“I’m not interested in that. Just try to relax. I’m not going to hurt you. I like you. I’ll be gentle. Everything’s going to be fine.” I began stroking his chest again, but he winced at my touch. He began weeping, and I realized there was no way to calm him at all.

“Close your eyes, and it will all be over soon.”

He did.

I removed the comb from my hair, untied one of his arms, and quickly pierced the artery in his wrist with the comb’s long teeth. Ben was no longer crying or moving at all.

Covering the wounds with my mouth, I drank the slow, steady stream of blood as it was released. It was a long, wonderful feast for me, lasting almost a half hour!

The first experiences that washed over me were the most delicious. I savored the fresh necromantic energy from his omelette. I could almost see the pain of the layer hen as the tip of her beak was clipped off before she was imprisoned in a huge building – a concentration camp – with tens of thousands of others like her. I sensed her suffering as she spent her short existence crammed into a small battery cage with seven other hens, the wire floor constantly digging into the skin on her feet, ammonia fumes from the urine-soaked cages constantly burning her eyes as she laid egg after unfertilized egg into the filthy enclosure.

As always, I also absorbed the energy from all of the other animals that had been a part of Ben’s last meal and the meals before that. I became so full that I was actually exhausted, like I used to be after Thanksgiving dinner. I untied one of Ben’s ankles and pushed his leg aside, making more room for me to sit on the edge of the bed. After relaxing for a while, I opened the television armoire, retrieved the remote control from the nightstand, and found a horror movie that looked interesting.

I stretched out on the bed next to my leftovers and watched the film until it was over at three o’clock. Finished for the night, I collected my ribbons and comb, dressed, and left the hotel. Even at that late hour, it was easy to catch a cab in front of the Barrington Hotel, so I was happily at home in about twenty minutes.

Resources

Compassion Over Killing (COK)

<http://www.cok.net/>

Farm Animal Rights Movement (FARM)

<http://www.farmusa.org/about.htm>

Michael Greger, M.D.

<http://www.drgreger.org/>

Humane Society of the United States

<http://www.humanesociety.org/>

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)

<http://www.peta.org>

Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM)

<http://www.pcrm.org/>

Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary

<http://animalsanctuary.org/>

United Poultry Concerns

<http://www.upc-online.org/>

Vegan Society

<http://www.vegansociety.com/>

Vegetarian Resource Group

<http://www.vrg.org/>

Vegetarian Society of DC (VSDC)

<http://www.vsdc.org/>

Vegetarian Union of North America (VUNA)

<http://www.ivu.org/vuna/>

About the Author

Merlene Alicia Vassall has been an avid reader and writer since childhood and has been fascinated with vampires for just as long. Her ideas about the vampire mythology have been influenced over the years by the campy Dracula movies of the '70s to the more recent interpretations. In contrast, Merlene has been vegetarian since the mid 1980s and vegan since 1996, primarily for reasons of compassion toward animals. *The Vampire and The Vegan, Book I: Food* ties together these two diverse interests.

Professionally, Merlene has worked with nonprofit organizations since 1983, first as an employee and then via her firm, Technical Assistance & Support Consultants. For more than two decades, her services have been utilized by a range of progressive nonprofit organizations to raise funds to meet the needs of at-risk children, disadvantaged communities, and developing nations.

She has been actively involved with the Vegetarian Society of the District of Columbia (VSDC) since 1996. She has served on the VSDC Board of Directors and raised approximately \$150,000 for the VSDC Eat Smart Program, which she conceptualized. Since the program began in 2004, hundreds of individuals have learned how to make the transition to a healthful vegan diet.

Merlene earned her Bachelor of Science from Cornell University's College of Human Ecology and her Juris Doctor from Georgetown University Law Center.

The Vampire and The Vegan, Book I: Food is Merlene's first novel. Her next book will be the sequel, *The Vampire and The Vegan, Book II: Livestock*.