Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Vigil

Written by Angela Slatter

Published by Jo Fletcher Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by

Jo Fletcher Books
an imprint of Quercus Editions Ltd.
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

Copyright © 2016 Angela Slatter
Map copyright © 2016 Howell Illustration

The moral right of Angela Slatter to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

TPB ISBN 978 1 78429 402 1
EBOOK ISBN 978 1 78429 405 2

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



Beginnings

The night moved. Liquid sheets of black spread out then folded back in on themselves. The breeze, seemingly benign, made its way down Robertson Street. It picked up pieces of garbage as it went – discarded newspapers, chip packets, soft-drink cans, cigarette packs. It plucked detritus from the gutters, sweeping all it could find into an ever-growing, swiftly forming body. It looked like a figure, a rough-torn thing: a man of rags and trash and darkness.

Had anyone been paying attention, they might have noticed when it began its journey – turning off Brunswick Street and taking the slow incline – that the sound of footsteps had become audible. But as the road sloped, drawing further away from the lights, as the whirlwind picked up speed and mass, the noise of anything remotely human was lost.

At the bottom of the thoroughfare, almost at the glamour of the James Street precinct, the thing feinted right as if it had no interest in going any other way, then turned a hard left.

The homeless man who'd been sheltering in the curve of the concrete garden wall, praying he would not be noticed, felt only a brief sting of ice reaching into his lungs, then the crushing sensation of too much air all around him as he was lifted from the ground and quickly ceased to be.

At the very end of the strip, where the streetlights bloomed, footfalls were heard once again, a kind of a hiccough in their rhythm this time, as if something

had changed. As if the tread beat out a broken tattoo of unexpected grief. Yet the two who'd watched the procession from their vantage point on the balcony of a vacant apartment smiled, pride palpable.

They did not see death. They did not feel bereft at the loss of innocence. All they saw was their plan coming to fruition.



Chapter One

The ribbon was judging me, I knew it.

It had become increasingly apparent that wrapping things was not my forte. Even a simple rectangular gift was obviously too much of a challenge. Corners broke through the too-thin tissue I'd bought because I'd thought, *Hey, an eight-year old would love that*! She probably would have, too, if it hadn't developed holes within moments of me trying to swaddle a big book of fairy tales in it. The stiff lace ribbon I'd finally managed to tie around the middle looked self-conscious and a bit embarrassed.

Oh, well. Lizzie would turn the gold and silver paper into confetti in a matter of seconds anyway. I could hear the sounds of the birthday party-cum-sleepover already ramping up next door, and looking through my kitchen window into Mel's garden I could see a circle of small girls in pastel party dresses made of shiny fabrics, glitter and sequins. They all wore fairy wings that caught the last of the sun's rays as they danced and ran, lithe and careless as sprites. It made me smile. Mums and dads were scattered across the grass, some carrying platters of cocktail sausages, fairy bread, mini pies and other essential party foods while others seized the opportunity to laze around being waited on. It would be nice, I thought, to socialise, do something ordinary for a change.

I took a last look in the mirror to make sure I was presentable – or

at least as presentable as I was likely to get. I picked up the offering, and that's when the hammering started at the front door. It wasn't the good kind of knocking and my spirits sank. Things didn't improve when I saw who was waiting on the patio.

Zvezdomir 'Bela' Tepes, model-handsome in pressed black jeans and a black shirt, managed his usual trick of appearing ephemeral as a shadow, yet as all-encompassing as darkness. He gave a wave so casual it could have been mistaken for a dismissal. Just seeing him made my leg ache.

'Verity. I've got a job for you.'

'But I'm going to a birthday party,' I blurted, clutching the present like a shield. 'There'll be cake, and lollies.'

He blinked, caught off guard by my unlikely defence. 'I need you to come right now.'

'Party pies, Bela. Fairy cakes. Mini sausage rolls. *Small* food,' I said, then added lamely, 'It tastes better.'

'Kids are going missing,' he said, gritting his teeth, and it was all over bar the shouting. 'And someone wants to talk to you.'

He pointed towards the familiar purple taxi parked at the kerb in the late afternoon light. There weren't too many cabs like this in the city, although I guessed demand would be growing as the population did; it wasn't just people fleeing the southern states who wanted a new start in Brisbane – also known as Brisneyland or Brisrael if you were feeling playful, or Brisbanal if you were tired of restaurants closing at 8.30 p.m. The taxi's general clientele covered Weyrd, wandering Goths and too-plastered-to-notice Normal, though most times even the drunkest thought twice about getting into this kind of car. It was almost like they were snapped out of their alcohol-fuelled stupor by the strangeness it exuded.

Through the passenger window I made out a fine profile and

meticulously styled auburn hair. When the head turned slowly towards me, I recognised its owner, though I'd not formally met Eleanor Aviva, one of the Council of Five, before. It was a bit like having the queen drop in. The driver next to her gave a brisk wave.

My shoulders slumped. 'How many kids?'

'Twenty-five we can identify for sure, but that's out of a couple of hundred a week. Not all those are ours.'

'Don't say *ours*, Bela. They're nothing to do with me.' I regretted the comment as soon as I said it; people had looked out for me when I needed it and I'd determined long ago to try to pay that back. 'Let me drop this off, make my apologies.'

'Don't be long,' he said. As he retreated to the vehicle I made a rude gesture behind his back, which Eleanor Aviva saw. After a moment, her very proper mask cracked and she gave me a conspiratorial smile, then faced forward again.

As I dragged my feet towards Mel's house, I wondered if Lizzie would save me some ice cream cake.

I looked out of the window. My reflection stared back, and beyond that I watched the night speed past. I should be singing 'Happy Birthday', not here with my ex in the back seat of the world's most disreputable-looking gypsy cab. Parts of it had been cannibalised from other cars. Any original white surfaces had been reduced to grey, and the vinyl of the seats was a little sticky with age. The rubber mats on the floor, though so thin as to be almost transparent, were, I was pretty sure, all that stopped me from seeing the bitumen of Wynnum Road beneath us. Instead of the traditional pine tree-shaped air freshener there was a *gris-gris* hanging from the rear-view mirror. It wasn't minty-fresh, but then again it didn't smell bad – it was rather cinnamony, if anything. It just *looked* bad: a shrunken head

with dried lavender sticking out of its ears. Scratched along the inside of the doors were symbols and sigils I couldn't read, in a language so old I suspected no one knew how to pronounce it any more. I never looked too close, not since I'd realised that some of the etchings were really fingernail marks. I didn't want to linger on that thought.

'It's only been street kids so far,' said Bela. He didn't even stumble on that bit – he didn't even know he'd said the wrong thing, though no column inches were going to be devoted to those lost children. In the front seat, Ziggi loaded a CD and the exquisite a cappella opening of 'Bohemian Rhapsody' poured forth. Eleanor Aviva made an annoyed clicking sound with her tongue. *Philistine*.

'Turn that racket down,' Aviva ordered in clipped tones, and to my mild surprise, the driver obeyed without argument. The councillor retreated back into silence. Despite Bela's earlier comment we'd not been introduced and I wondered why she was here.

The eye in the back of Ziggi Hassman's head examined me through fine ginger hair. He'd landed in Brisbane about ten years ago and got a job with Bela immediately, thanks to a sheaf of references, so we'd known each other for a long time and I could generally interpret his expressions, facial – and otherwise. But I'd not seen that single orb as inscrutable since I'd ended up haemorrhaging on his back seat after following him and Bela into an abandoned house a few months ago . . . coincidentally, that was the same night I'd lost my enthusiasm for the phrase 'let's split up and cover more ground'. We'd been looking for something that shouldn't have been there – shouldn't have been in this plane of existence. It was a something with claws and teeth and a bad attitude; a something that had been making red messes of pets around the city. Luckily, not people. Not then, at least.

I found it first, and won the fight that ensued, but ultimately wound up in Accident and Emergency. Ziggi had saved my life,

wrapping every bandage from the taxi's first-aid kit around my leg to stem the bleeding while Bela had busied himself making phone calls to highly unlisted numbers and reeling in favours while reporting to superiors, which added another couple of layers of resentment to how I felt about him.

'I should be eating ice cream cake,' I announced to no one in particular. 'I should be watching Lizzie open her presents. I really should.'

'Verity, if it's—' Bela started.

'It's not, Bela' I said shortly, pressing down on the rage his voice habitually produced in me nowadays. Before I could give rein to my full displeasure, I was distracted by the vibration of the mobile in my jacket pocket and reached for it.

'Ms Fassbinder, kindly give us the courtesy of your undivided attention,' Eleanor Aviva said sharply and my hand fell away as I instinctively sat up straighter, the response to that schoolmarm tone deeply ingrained.

Bela tried again, and his pitch was softer. 'V, if it *is*, then maybe it's like your dad.' He waited for me to speak, to deny the past, to defend myself. I rewarded him with silence, so he went on. 'If it's a *Kinderfresser*—'

'Well, at least we know it's not *my daddy* this time,' I sniped.

'—then we need to get to him quickly because he – or she – won't stop by themselves. I can't keep this out of the papers for too long. Any undue attention on our community will put everyone in danger.'

There was a time, not so long ago, when I'd been bleeding and screaming in the back seat of this very taxi and swearing I wouldn't ever work for Bela Tepes again, yet here I was, listening meekly to what was expected of me. The weekly retainer was deposited into my account on the assumption that I'd do what was asked. I might

not have followed through on my plans to quit – quite frankly, what else was I going to do with an Arts degree in Ancient History and slightly dead languages? – but that didn't make me feel any more biddable.

'Do you really think I don't know that?' My glare was enough to make him look away. Then I felt bad; my temper had become short and my nature less than pleasant in recent months and it was Bela who was bearing the brunt of it. Then again, once upon a time I didn't ache inside with every step; I didn't wake up sweating, thinking something was at my window, and I didn't dream of claws reaching through the gaps in the stairs and tearing so much flesh from my leg that I looked like I'd been ring-barked.

'Perhaps Ms Fassbinder isn't really the person for this task, Zvezdomir?' said Aviva evenly. She pronounced his given name with an assurance and an accent I'd never manage in a hundred years, which was one of the reasons I so seldom used it. That and the Bela Lugosi eyebrows.

'Ms Fassbinder is the *only* person for this job, Eleanor.' Bela matched her timbre, but there was an underlying edge.

Part of me wanted to tell them both where to go, but the sad fact was that I needed money. Though I owned the house, things like food and phone bills didn't get paid with a sunny smile. Things had been quiet in Weyrd-town recently, and the Normal world hadn't been much busier, so the independent consulting assignments I did occasionally had been few and far between too. Bela was a generous paymaster – possibly because his missions were generally the reason I ended up in harm's way – but we'd broken up two years ago and the job meant closure was an issue. Spending all this time together – and not happy fun times – meant I kept wondering when the 'ex' part of ex-boyfriend would kick in.

'Ms Fassbinder, I cannot stress strongly enough how important it is that this matter be dealt with swiftly and shrewdly,' Aviva said. 'And quietly. Any member of our community who risks exposing the rest of us to danger has no rights in the eyes of the Council. There is to be no prevarication, and no mercy for this individual.' She tapped long fingernails on the dashboard in front of her. 'Of course, you know that better than most.'

Behind my head, Freddie Mercury's voice soared, but quietly, as if afraid of Eleanor Aviva's disapproval. I controlled my breathing, counted to ten and remained calm. 'Has anyone thought about asking the Boatman if he knows anything? I mean, all the dead end up with him eventually.'

'I don't think that's necessary, do you?' said Aviva. 'He hardly chats with his passengers. He obeys his own rules, answers to none, keeps his own counsel. He does not come when called.'

She was probably right, but it felt like she was baiting me and I had no idea why. Her attitude wasn't improving my mood. 'I don't mean to be rude, Councillor, but why are you here? The Five have always kept their distance from me.'

'Consider this a performance appraisal,' she answered, not even bothering to look over her shoulder at me. Was she trying to get a reaction? Did she not realise I'd spent my life ignoring stuff like that? I smiled at Ziggi's stare in the rear-view mirror. It had gone from inscrutable to concerned.

Bela, apparently not confident of my self-control, raised his voice to drown out any reply I might have made. 'Eleanor and I are on our way to a Council session and she wanted to take the opportunity to meet you. I assured her you'd treat this matter seriously.' He cleared his throat. 'Where are you going to start?'

'I've got some ideas.' I could feel his gaze, even though I was

peering out of the window again. I thought he might be staring at my neck, at the pale curve where the vein pulsed blue close to the surface. I wondered if he was remembering what the sweat on my skin tasted like. I didn't turn around but said softly, 'It's okay, Bela, leave it to me.'

'Ziggi, keep an eye on her,' he said abruptly. 'And V, when you're done with this, there's something else I want you to look into.'

And he was gone, just like that, leaving the seat beside me empty, smelling vaguely of his expensive aftershave, a chill coming off the faux-leather. Eleanor Aviva had evaporated too. That disappearing act was draining in the extreme and only a very few Weyrd could do it. Things were quiet, except for the final coda of Freddie's delicate piano work.

'I hate it when Bela does that. Freaks me out,' said Ziggi, the only other person I knew who got away with using that nickname.

Bela made even other Weyrd uncomfortable. I felt kind of proud, in spite of everything.

'He used to just appear in the kitchen. I dropped a lot of dishes,' I admitted, then bit down on my lip – I hadn't meant that to slip out, hadn't meant to dwell on the past domestic situation. It wasn't as if Ziggi hadn't witnessed all the ups and downs of my relationship with Bela – he once claimed he didn't watch TV for three years because we provided all the drama he needed – but I felt compelled to say, 'It takes a lot of effort, so that's how I gauged how much he wanted to get away.'

'You were a little challenging,' he pointed out. 'You need to cut him some slack, you know.'

I didn't answer; we both knew Ziggi was right. He hesitated, then said, 'How's your leg? I mean, really?'

'How the hell do you think it is?' Even as I snapped at him, I knew

I should have been a bit more gracious. 'I'm sorry I'm being an arse. It still hurts, and that makes me cranky.'

'To be honest, you were pretty cranky before it happened.'

We laughed and the tension dissipated.

'You were trying to annoy Aviva, weren't you?' I asked. 'With the music.'

'What do you think? I don't like uppity folk who think they're better than everyone else.' He sniffed. Ziggi Hassman: melodic anarchist.

'Turned it off pretty quickly though.' I grinned.

'Hey, I'm not stupid.' Then, unable to resist it, he circled back to his topic of choice. 'Should've gone to a healer with that leg of yours.'

'Well, if you remember, there wasn't much time to fiddle about that night and the hospital was closest,' I pointed out. The upshot of my injury was that Ziggi had become my chauffeur, so we'd been spending a lot of time together while doing Bela's assorted jobs. We investigated things that needed looking into, acted as go-betweens and problem-solvers for him – and by extension, the Council – and generally kept an eye on the Weyrd population, trying to make sure it stayed as unknown as possible. This was sometimes a challenge when the community included those who were still looking for a taste of the old days: feline-shaped things who stole breath, succubi and incubi out for a good time, and creatures who swapped their own offspring for babies left unguarded in their cribs.

He gave a grunt that might have been a concession. 'So, where to? You said you'd got some ideas?'

'I might have exaggerated. I have *one* idea. Let's start with Little Venice.'

'Probably should have told me that three seconds ago when I could

have taken the turn-off,' he said mildly. 'Now we're going the long way round.'

He cut off a dully-gleaming SUV to change lanes. The sun had fled, and as we drove onto the Story Bridge, the lights of the city down and to the left, and those of New Farm down and to the right, swam in the blackness. High-rise office towers stood out like beacons, standing cheek-by-jowl with the new apartment blocks: all that modern steel and glass juxtaposed with the verdigris dome and sandstone of Customs House and the past it represented. During the day, the river would show its true colour – a thorough brown – but in that moment it was an undulating ebony ribbon reflecting the diamonds of night-time illuminations.

'It's okay. We've got nothing but time,' I lied and hunched into the upholstery, thinking about melting ice cream cake and kids who wouldn't ever know what that tasted like.