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Opening Extract from...

Vampire State of Mind

Written by Jane Lovering

Published by Choc Lit

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Vampire State of Mind

Jane Lovering

Extract:
First & second chapter.



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Published 2012 by Choc Lit Limited
Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK
www.choclitpublishing.com

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

ISBN-978-1-906931-74-2

Chapter One

***Yorkshire Herald* Tuesday 3rd February 1914**

> Increasing reports of ‘monsters’ appearing throughout the British Isles have been put down to the work of politicals, possibly Italian. The public are advised to disregard such anti-British sentiments …

Jonathan Wilberforce smiled to himself, flipping the pages of his newspaper over to make walking and reading a little easier, then shook his head. The press seemed to have nothing better to report these days than rumour and supposition – although he almost hoped that these new Gothic tales of half-men, half-demons running amok through the streets of York were true. That beautiful new rifle that Christina had bought him this past December would be just the thing for hunting, whether lions, bears or those creatures that had been dubbed ‘vampires’… he blamed that *Dracula* story. One man writes a slightly torrid novel featuring bloodsucking beasts with a human face and suddenly people are imagining themselves under attack from the creatures! He shook his head again at the gullibility of the lower classes. The whole event would probably turn out to be yet another escaped tiger from those circuses that constantly plied their tawdry acts around the open spaces, the brutes driven mad with hunger and confusion and forced to attack humans in order to feed.

‘Sir! Sir, please, would you help me?’

Startled out of his pleasant dream of shooting an enormous tiger ravaging the streets of his own city and being heralded a hero, Jonathan stopped walking. ‘Hello?’

‘Oh, thank the Lord!’ At the mouth of an alleyway stood a ragged but well-spoken woman, body hunched forward at the waist over a bundle which appeared child-shaped and sized. ‘Sir, please help me. My child, my daughter, she’s taken suddenly ill and I am at a loss …’

Jonathan had a sudden image of his own daughter, an infant, held thus in her mother’s arms, tiny arms and legs dangling, and his heart

threw itself high in his chest. ‘What is it? What happened?’

The woman moved a step backwards, the darkness of the alley preventing him from seeing her face in true detail. Not that he was really looking; his attention was captivated by the deathly stillness of the collection of ill-assorted rags that she held.

‘It was here, sir, just here upon the ground, if you would care to look …’

‘Where? In the alley?’

‘She fell there, upon these cobbles, just slipped and lay so pale and still and now I fear she may have passed from us!’

He moved after her, two steps into the closed darkness, and the sounds and lights of the evening street he had walked down were blocked, as though by screens. Another step, following the huddled form, and he could hardly see his own feet moving over the slippery stones. One more step and he could just make out her figure bending down, dropping the bundle without care on to a pile of sacking and then straightening again to face him. ‘I’m sorry, I really don’t understand what it is that you would have me do,’ he began, and then caught sight of her face. Even in this inadequate light he could see that she was beautiful, but her lips were drawn back to reveal teeth that had no right belonging in the mouth of anything human.

‘You need do nothing, sir.’ And her hand was upon his shoulder, her fingers like iron even through the fabric of his best evening coat. ‘Nothing at all.’

His final thought was of Christina and the children; dear God, let them never know what happened here …

Chapter Two

York – 2012

Fangs dripping bloodstained saliva the vampire came at me from the far side of the graveyard, moving fast.

I saw him coming, dropped to one knee and came up hard underneath; felt the brief cold shock through me as our bodies made contact and then he was up, on his feet, coming back. I stayed hunched on the ground, breathing carefully. He broke over me, a hard, relentless block of power, but I wasn't about to let him get the drop on me and drew myself suddenly up from defeated bent-double to full-firing. As our combined weights sent us toppling slowly backwards I reached around and jabbed him in the neck.

'Oh, *bugger*.'

'Sorry, Daim. You know the rules.'

'But – ' It was all he had time to say before the tranq pounded into his bloodstream and he was out for the count, sprawled less-than-sexily on top of me, dribbling the remnants of cheap synthetic blood into my ear and with his tasteless death's head belt buckle snagging a hole in my tights. And I'd ruined yet another pair of heels.

Welcome to my life.

There was a splash of applause from the watching crowd, who'd all paused in their tour of 'York by Night' as though Daim and I were an alternative attraction, which was embarrassing because I was still flat on the flagstones pinned under the weight of the rubbish vampire from the far side of town, not exactly doing Buffy back flips. *And* he was snoring.

'Hey, cool fight!' One of the watchers exclaimed. Just my luck, a teenage American boy with join-the-dots acne and an expression which indicated that he was looking for trouble but hoping not to find it.

'Thank you.' It hadn't been cool, of course, more of a mad

scramble for pole position, but I was prepared to take any appreciation I could get.

'You do much of this? Y'know, bringing down vamps n' stuff?'

'Only … sort of. I'm a liaison officer. It's my job to make sure they stay on the right side of the line.'

'And this guy didn't?' I thought for one horrible moment that the boy was going to kick Daim. 'What did he do?'

As I scrambled and pushed my way clear of the prone vampire, I thought how best to phrase the answer. Being crap wasn't a crime, although in vampire-land it was as reprehensible as being uncool. 'Wrong place, wrong time.' I limped a few, broken-heeled, steps and buzzed through to the office.

'Hi, Jessie!' Liam answered. Well, he would, he was the only other person in our under-funded department. He described himself as my sidekick, which, I suppose was true, if you took into account that there were no front or back kicks.

'Hey, Liam. I've bagged and tagged our man. It was young Daim, breaking territorial bounds. Could you send the wagon for him?'

'Sure. I'll let the Enforcement boys know.'

'Thanks. Who's on wagon-duty tonight?'

'Harry. Oh, and Eleanor. So, maybe you'd like to be somewhere else when they arrive?'

'Perceptive. Okay, I'll wait until they turn up and then I'll get on back.' I heard his grunt of agreement as I disconnected, and sighed. Eleanor and I had, as they say, history. Oh, not in a romantic context, I couldn't imagine anyone feeling romantically inclined towards a woman whose fashion choices came in shades of khaki and, anyway, I'm one hundred per cent pure heterosexual. No, our history was more – well, shall we say that I wanted to kill her, and the feeling was mutual? But, because we were both employed by York City Council to help keep the human/Other peace, albeit in our case in an almost invisible capacity, we kept our animosity to ourselves.

Oh, and Liam. Liam knew all about it. You couldn't keep anything from Liam without a restraining order.

A mist was beginning to rise; greasy coils of white roping themselves around the already sinister outlines of St Michael-le-Belfry. I could smell a nearby chip-van doling out its wares to the clubbing crowd. It made my mouth water and I wondered whether I dared leave the downed vampire. I was *starving*. Lunch had been a Cup-a-Soup and, even with croutons, it frankly wasn't enough.

The mist thickened; tendrils of damp working their way through my light jacket as I returned to the downed Daim and straddled his body to look around. It was highly unlikely that any vampire worth his Armani would willingly wander about on this chilly damp spring evening, but there was always the chance that, unbeknown to all tracking systems, Hunters, Enforcement crew and all other mechanisms in place, someone had gone rogue and might think it was worth bringing down the entire Peace Treaty for the sake of a nibble at an official neck. Even though in terms of officialdom I was only marginally higher than the bloke who goes round checking the drains, the one with the wig and the bad breath. *And* I bet he got paid more than me. Probably had better shoes too, I thought sulkily, rubbing a sore patch on my elbow where I'd hit the ground. Still my job had its compensations – all the paperclips I could carry home and … Okay, just the paperclips, but everyone needs paperclips, right?

The ladder in my tights shot suddenly from thigh to ankle and I wriggled around trying to straighten my gusset, lurching on my snapped heel like a horror-movie zombie. The watching crowd, bored by the lack of hordes of vampires piling upon me to wreak bloodstained revenge, had wandered off following their guide. Beyond me and the ratchet-snoring vampire, nothing moved and I was overwhelmed by a sudden wave of loneliness. Somewhere out there, I knew, the city was a hotbed of life; drunks and improperly dressed girls would be crowding the streets, but here in this graveyard it was like another world. I sighed again and thought of Liam tucked up in the warm office, probably getting his coat on ready to go home to his cosy girlfriend and their new baby, full of

tales of what a hard shift it had been. Huh. A hard shift's filing was all he'd had to contend with, while I'd ruined another pair of Faith sandals. Honestly, it was bloody unfair. I sniffed miserably as the mist formed a drop on the end of my nose.

Suddenly something grabbed my ankle and pulled. Without thinking I twisted, but was already stumbling, as a cold hand clenched around my lower leg, the sting of acid biting through my skin. Down I went, over the body at my feet. Almost dislocating my leg I wrenched myself into a sitting position and was confronted by a reddish-yellow mass squatting on Daim's gently moving chest and gripping me round the top of my heel-less shoe. It looked like a partially microwaved cat covered in mucus.

It was Daim's demon, the thing that drove him, and not in a figurative sense.

'Tezrael? What – I thought I hit you with the tranq?'

'I fought it.' The voice was, in contrast to the body, quite pleasant. A little like a gust of wind caught in a chimney.

'Why? They're only going to take you back to the other side of the river. We've got our quota of vampires over here; Daim's broken the terms of his agreement. And, I might add, put up a completely unnecessary fight.' I waggled my broken shoe, although why a demon would be interested in my footwear problems, I wasn't sure.

'This I know.' The demon wheezed for a moment. 'Cold night to be out, human woman.'

'Cut the pleasantries, Tez and tell me why you're bothering to talk to me.'

'You saved me once, Jessica Grant, and now I return the favour. There is great danger to you.'

'Danger?' I frowned at the demon. 'Are you sure? I mean, I'm not exactly at the pointy end of things, danger-wise. Unless the electric pencil-sharpener goes rogue. They don't let me do anything dangerous, because I'm the only one who knows how the petty-cash system works.'

'Yet you are here tonight.' Tezrael raised his scabby head and

pale-green eyes met mine.

'Yeah, but I'm only doing a tagging. And it's only Daim.'

'And this is not dangerous?'

'They have to send someone who can tell a vampire from an estate agent, Tez. Well, a non-vampire estate agent, and I've not met one of those yet, there's something about estate agency that just seems to draw them in … You know as well as I do that it's only five per cent of the human population who can spot a vampire. I thought that was part of the attraction of this world, the general invisibility?'

Tezrael moved his body in what might have been, in another creature, a shrug. 'Listen. For this message I brought my soul over the river, do not be hard on him when he wakes.' The demon was slipping now, becoming more mucus than solid form. 'Do not trust … family.'

'Tez!' But he'd gone, slithering back into Daim's possessed body in the form that I had once managed to prevent from sliding ignominiously down a drain when his previous host had been killed by an allergic reaction to the tranq.

Really, though … danger? I rocked back on my heel-and-a-half with the ridiculousness of the idea. I leave the big-gun work to the vampire-Hunters, the élite trained to deal with the beasts that go off the rails. The guys in the long coats, the bastards that get to sign all the autographs while the rest of us keep the files up-to-date and give them advance warning so that they can get their razor-sharp suits from the cleaners for the press calls. I'm Liaison, which means I deal in persuasion, in long, long telephone calls with leaders of various communities, with paperwork and, when all that fails, I tranq them. I'm in more danger from paper-cuts than from the street-level vamps. The higher-level ones, now *those* you have to watch. They can polite you to death.

But Tez had deliberately brought Daim over the river, to warn me. Me, Jessica Grant, queen of the safety-lock cabinet, whose main challenge in life was keeping the vampire-tracking programme up-to-date and the 'Mc' 'Mac' and 'McC' filing from going completely

mental?

And what had he said? ‘Do not trust family?’ Whose family? My septuagenarian, retired teacher parents? They were hardly dangerous, although they could be quite sharp when grammar was wrongly used. My sister? But Abbie loved kittens and worked with sick children. Although she had inherited the parental severity if she detected any sibling favouritism, you’d be more likely to get an overdose of saccharine from standing too close to her. But it wasn’t really *danger*.

I poked Daim’s recumbent form. It had to be a mistake, surely; if I *had* been in danger, how on earth would Tezrael know? He wasn’t exactly a player in the demon community, otherwise he wouldn’t be possessing a flat-out no-hoper like Daim Willis. He’d be driving one of the big boys; all designer clothes, scatter-gun stubble and high cheekbones. Like Sil.

No. I wouldn’t think of Sil, not here. Not anywhere. All right, maybe in the private depths of my dreams, where I could pretend. But *definitely not now*.

A blue light strobed through the air and the vamp-wagon pulled into the area in front of the church, radio crackling. I could see Harry and Eleanor scanning the area with their portable detectors, checking for activity. I stayed where I was, standing over the body, until Harry left the vehicle and crossed the graveyard, still swinging his detector.

‘Oh, hello, Jessie.’ He gave a quick, nervous glance over his shoulder, but it wasn’t vampires he was scared of. ‘Didn’t know this was your call.’

‘Yeah, well. Take care of him, Harry, he’s only here because – it was a mistake, all right?’

Harry looked down. ‘Daim Willis? Didn’t know he had the intellect to *make* mistakes. Sometimes you have to feel sorry for the demons, don’t you? Okay, Jessie, I’ll take it from here.’ Another glance towards the van.

‘It’s all right, Harry. I shouldn’t think she wants to talk to me any more than I want to pose naked for *Hunters’ Weekly*. I’ll head off back to the office now, take over from Liam.’

‘Right.’ Harry bent, slung Daim across his shoulder like an unlovely rucksack. ‘Don’t worry, Jessie. About Ellie, I mean. Things will work out.’

Yeah, I thought as I watched him cross the churchyard, things will work out. Right.

She’s thinking of me.

Sil stood outside the club, sober, focused, eyes on the brick horizon fifty feet away. *She’s thinking of me.* Somewhere out there, Jessica Grant – leggy, lovely, and probably totally unsuitably dressed – was letting her memory run away with her.

The connection pulled him again, briefly, like a thin silver wire attached to … well, he wanted to say his groin but it was more than that. He caught himself before a little sigh escaped; he was vampire, not a love-starved teenager. Supreme predator. Top of the food chain, master of all he surveyed and, although he shouldn’t say it, *spectacularly* well dressed, and here he was mooning over lost opportunities and a woman who’d probably not even strain herself to raise two fingers at him.

He shook his head, quickly, dismissively, trying to lose the feeling that his immaculate suit was out of place, as though he should have been back in the old uniform of jeans and shirt, back in the office, back at her side. But – he allowed the sigh this time, knowing what it was for – that was never going to happen. *That was then and this is now and there is a woman watching me, I can smell the vodka and excitement coming from her. Well, that’s tonight taken care of.*

You can stop thinking about me now, Jessica, you made your choice.

To be continued ….

Ebook available soon, paperback 7th August 2012