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...

The Dark Heroine

Dinner with a Vampire

Written by Abigail Gibbs

Published by HarperVoyager

All text is copyright © of the author

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

ABIGAIL GIBBS

THE DARK HEROINE

DINNER WITH A VAMPIRE



HARPER
Voyager

HarperVoyager
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2012
1

Copyright © Abigail Gibbs 2012

Abigail Gibbs asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

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

ISBN: 978 0 00 750367 4

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote
the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the
FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and
ecological needs of present and future generations,
and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

For wattpad.com.
To the team for providing a place to share.
To each and every member who read, voted, nagged and criticized. You shaped this story.

To Joanne and Terran, and lastly, to Soraya. You reached out to a child across the world and gave her the encouragement she needed. You started this journey.

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

– The Sick Rose, William Blake

ONE

Violet

Trafalgar Square is probably not the best place to stand at one o'clock in the morning. In fact, it is probably not the best place to be if you are alone at any time of the night.

The shadow of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square loomed above as I shivered, the cool air of the July night rushing between the buildings. I shuddered again, pulling my coat tightly around myself, seriously beginning to regret wearing a skimpy black dress – my choice of wardrobe for the evening. *The sacrifices I make for a good night out.*

Jumping as a pigeon fluttered down beside my feet, I scanned the empty streets for any sign of my friends. So much for getting a 'late night snack'. The sushi bar was only a two-minute walk away; twenty minutes had passed. I rolled my eyes, in no doubt that some guys were in their knickers by now. *Good for them. Why would they have to worry about little old Violet Lee?*

I walked towards the benches, sheltered by the sparse and gloomy canopy of trees. I sighed as I rubbed my hands across

my knees to try to get the blood flowing, bitterly regretting the decision to wait behind.

Taking one last glance around the square, I pulled out my mobile, hitting speed dial. It continued to ring until, eventually, the voicemail cut in.

'Hi, this is Ruby. I can't answer right now, so leave a message after the tone. Lovage!'

I groaned in frustration as the tone beeped. 'Ruby, where the hell are you? If you're with that guy, I swear I'll kill you! It's bloody freezing out here! As soon as you get this, call back.'

I ended the call, slipping the phone back into the inside pocket of my coat, knowing that my efforts were likely to be in vain as she probably wouldn't listen to the message for days. Rubbing my hands together and drawing my knees up to my chest in a bid to keep warm, I debated whether I should just get a cab home. But if Ruby did turn up, I'd be in trouble. Resigning myself to a long wait, I laid my head on my knees in the quiet, watching the orange haze that coated the city of London.

Opposite, late-night drinkers disappeared into a side-alley, stumbling along until their raucous laughter was lost in the darkness. A few minutes later, a red double-decker bus with the words 'Visit the National Gallery' splashed across its side appeared from behind the very attraction it was advertising. It followed the road around the square before disappearing amidst the maze of Victorian buildings that dominated the city centre. As it left, the dull hum of far-away London traffic seemed to fade away into silence with it.

I wondered which of the two boys we had met tonight had struck lucky with Ruby. I felt a pang of regret, wishing I could be as carefree and, well, *loose* as she was. But I couldn't. Not after Joel.

More minutes passed and I began to feel uneasy. Nobody had drunkenly stumbled through for a while and the cold night air was descending like a blanket around my exposed legs. I glanced about for a taxi but the roads were empty and the square deserted, save for the light skimming over the surface of the water in the two fountains either side of the central column.

I pulled my phone back out, thinking I could call my father and ask him to pick me up, when something flickered in the corner of my eye. Almost dropping my phone I jerked up, heart in my mouth, scanning the square for any sign of movement.

Nothing. I shook my head, the panic waning. *It was probably just a pigeon*, I assured myself. I began to dial my home number, the cold numbing my fingers, though I glanced up every few seconds, willing my breathing to slow.

But no, something *had* moved.

A shadow had flitted across one of the huge fountains, too quick for my eyes to discern a shape. The square, on the other hand, was deserted, save for a few panicked pigeons taking flight. I shook my head, pressing my phone to my ear. The line crackled, ringing feebly and breaking every few seconds.

I tapped my foot impatiently. 'C'mon . . .' I muttered, glancing at the screen. *Full signal.*

My eyes wandered as the number dialled and dialled, lingering on Nelson's Column, towering hundreds of feet in the air. The blazing floodlights that lit up the statue at the very top flickered, like a flame in the breeze. They stilled again, as intense and bright as before.

I shivered, but not from the cold. I prayed someone would answer the phone, but the line crackled and with one last pitiful ring, went dead. I stared at it, wide-eyed, before

adrenaline began to rush into my veins and instinct cut in. I slipped off one of my heels as my eyes glued themselves to the column, watching in disbelief as the shadow I had seen just moments before swept across the statue, vanishing from view as quickly as it had come. Fumbling with the last strap, I wrenched the other shoe from my foot and snatched both up in my hands. I started forward. But no sooner had I taken a few steps than I froze, rooted to the spot.

A gang of men, clothed in brown coats and carrying long, sharpened canes were descending the steps. Their grim, weather-beaten faces were dark and heavily scarred, every brow set in an unwavering, determined line. Their heavy footfall rang in my ears, pounding out an uneven march on the paving as they moved ever closer.

Stunned, I shrank back into the shadows, silently crouching behind the bench. Hardly daring to breathe, I tried to make myself as small as possible whilst inching towards the edge of the square.

The man at the head of the group barked something and the men spread out, creating a line as wide as the square, stretching from one fountain to the other. There were easily thirty of them. As one, they came to a halt just in front of the column, only their coats moving as the wind billowed in the fabric behind them.

Not even the trees made a sound. Every one of the men looked straight ahead with unwavering concentration, watching and waiting. I glanced towards the top of the column, but the statue was bathed in light as usual, the only shadows being those cast by the men and the trees that I sheltered under. A few leaves drifted languidly to the ground, settling on the bench beside me.

Then it happened.

The square came alive in a frenzy of movement and out

of nowhere something sprung from behind the trees, soaring high above my head and landing without so much as a stumble on the hard stone, about ten feet away. I blinked, not believing that my eyes had seen a person, but before I could take a second look, whatever it was had disappeared.

Taken as much by surprise as I was, the line of men staggered back a few paces in panic. Those at the very end of the line edged inwards, order only restored as the man I presumed to be the leader raised a hand. From his coat he pulled a silvery baton, one end sharpened to a lethal point. With a flick of his wrist, it became twice as long. He spun the baton a few times, as though admiring the way it glinted when it caught the light. His lips curled into a satisfied smile and he stilled, waiting once more.

The leader was quite young – twenty at the most. Tall and lean, his face was free of scars unlike those around him. His hair, cut short, was bleached so it was almost white, a stark contrast to his leathery coat and tanned skin. His smile widened as his eyes darted towards the figure that had landed so close to me. I drew in a sharp breath, expecting him to spot me, but his attention was whipped away as a man stepped out from around the fountains.

No, *not a man*, but a boy, not much older than I was. His eyes were sunken, skin ashen pale and almost translucent, pulled taut over hollow cheeks. He too was tall, but beneath his tight shirt I could see the rippling trace of muscles. His arms were just as pale but covered in red blotches, as though he had been badly sunburnt. His lips were stained a bright, bloody red, as was his hair, which was spiked and unkempt.

I blinked, and he was gone. I searched the square as others appeared, all with the same pale skin and haggard gaze. They circled the group in the middle, their faces twisted into a mixture of amusement and disgust. They appeared from

nowhere, darting from one side to the other at inhuman speed, vanishing and emerging within a second. I rubbed my eyes, convinced that I was just too tired to focus. They couldn't be moving *that* fast.

The boy with the flaming hair appeared again, leaning against the fountain as though standing at the bar. Near him stood a young man with sandy-blond hair who I thought I recognized as the one who had sprung from behind me.

In total there were five of them, casually herding the group of brown-coats into the centre like animals. The tanned men's faces were contorted into a picture of fear and loathing as they broke their ranks, stumbling back a few steps with their stakes lowered. Only the leader remained unmoved, his smile becoming a smirk as he clasped his baton to his side and jerked his head upwards.

Suddenly, a man dropped from the column – all one hundred and sixty-nine feet of it. He plummeted faster and faster towards the ground, surely to his death. But I watched, amazed, as he landed nimbly on the stone, dropping to a crouch in front of the gang's leader.

The square stilled and the leader, for the first time, stirred. 'Kaspar Varn, such a pleasure to see you again,' he said, his voice tinged with an accent I couldn't place.

The man, Kaspar, straightened up, his face blank and unreadable. He was as tall as the leader but his bearing and well-built, muscled stature made the other man seem a lot smaller.

'The pleasure's all mine, Claude,' he answered coolly, his gaze sweeping right to left. He gave a curt nod to the sandy-haired boy and I managed to steal a look at him.

He, like the others, had pallid, slightly sallow skin, devoid of any colour or blush. His dark, almost black hair was streaked with shades of brown and was windswept, his fringe

falling across his forehead. If anything, his features were gaunter than any of the others; his face shadowy as though he had not slept for days.

Perhaps he doesn't sleep, a voice in my head muttered. As the thought crossed my mind, he seemed to look past the sandy-haired boy, his brow creasing a fraction. I held my breath, realizing he was looking directly at me. But if he saw me, he chose to pay no attention as he turned back to the leader, his face clearing and becoming impassive again.

'What do you want, Claude? I have no time to waste on you and the Pierre clan,' the darker haired man said, addressing the other.

Claude's smile widened, running a single finger down the sharp edge of his stake. 'Yet you came.'

Kaspar waved his hand dismissively. 'We were hunting anyway; it was no great distance.'

I shuddered. *What is there to hunt in a city?*

Claude chuckled darkly. 'As are we.'

In a flash, he brought the stake up to the other man's chest, thrusting forward. But it never found its mark: Kaspar reached up and brushed it away. It seemed to take no effort; he hardly blinked, but Claude lurched backwards as though a truck had hit him. The stake clattered to the ground, the metallic ring echoing in the silence.

Claude staggered, tripped, then clumsily regained his balance and straightened himself up. His narrow eyes darted towards the stake and then back to the man stood in front of him. His lips curled back into a smile.

'Tell me, Kaspar, how is your mother?'

Out of nowhere, the pale man's hand snatched forward, seizing Claude's throat. Horrified, I watched as his eyes bulged and his feet left the floor, the colour draining from his face. He coughed and spluttered, his feet writhing in midair. His

hands grappled with Kaspar's wrists, but he soon began to give up as slowly, agonizingly slowly, he turned purple.

Without warning, the pale man let go. Claude crumpled to the ground, gasping for breath, feverishly rubbing his neck. I breathed a sigh of relief, but the man collapsed on the ground didn't. His whimpers became pleas and his face seemed to show some sort of recognition as he stared up at the maddened face of Kaspar. He shuffled back, squirming and grabbing the hem of a coat one of his men was wearing. The man did not move.

Kaspar's chest was heaving and a deranged, sick expression was twisted onto his face. He lowered his hand, clenching it into a tight fist.

'Do you have any last words, Claude Pierre?' he growled, the menace in his voice barely restrained.

The leader drew in several long, shaky breaths. He wiped away the sweat and tears on his sleeve, bracing himself. 'I hope you and your bloody Kingdom burn in hell.'

Kaspar's lips widened into a smirk. 'Wishful thinking.'

With that, he pounced forward, his head ducking behind Claude's neck. There was a sickening crack.

I gagged. My hands instinctively clapped to my mouth as bile rose in my throat. With it, came fear. Tears leaked from my eyes, but I knew that if I made any noise I would be next.

Self-preservation kicked in as Claude's lifeless body dropped to the stone. I was witness to a murder and I had watched enough of the six o'clock news to know what happened to witnesses who stuck around. *I have to get out of here. I have to tell someone.*

If you ever get out of here, said that same, niggling voice.

I hated to admit it, but it was right: all hell had broken loose.

The pale skins jumped onto the men, a huge, bloody fight breaking out, if you could call it a fight. The men barely had time to use their stakes to defend themselves against these killers: like lambs to the slaughter, their tanned bodies dropped to the floor, blood splattering everywhere.

My stomach clenched and I swallowed hard as I felt burning in my throat. Unable to look away, I watched as Kaspar yanked yet another of the men towards him. My mind told me he must have a weapon; my eyes saw none. Instead, he sank his mouth into the flesh above the man's collar and tore. I caught a glimpse of twisted sinew before the man collapsed to the ground, shrieking. His killer followed him, dropping to one knee and wrapping his lips around the wound, cradling the man in his arms. Drops of blood pooled on the stone beneath them and into the cracks between the paving. My eyes followed it as it seeped outwards, forming a bloody grid, joining with the blood of another man, and another, until my eyes had risen to take in the full carnage they had created.

Every one of the tanned men was dead, or dying, their necks broken or bleeding; several had sunken to the bottom of the fountains, staining the water a grim red. One man near me lay on his back, his head so contorted his ear rested on his shoulder.

Six teenagers had just slaughtered thirty men.

I whimpered on the bench, drawn as far into the shadows as I could possibly get, praying to every deity alive that they wouldn't see me.

'Kaspar, are we going to clean this one up or just leave it?' said the one who stood nearest the fountain, even his fiery red hair dull compared to the water he swirled his fingers through.

'We'll leave it as a little message for any other hunters

who think they can cross us,' he replied. 'Scum,' he added, spitting on the nearest limp body.

His voice had lost its cool and had been replaced with a deep, satisfied sneer, and anger began to override the fear as I watched him carelessly kick the arm of another dying man out of his way, causing him to let out one last meagre moan.

'Jerk,' I breathed.

He froze.

So did I. I held my breath, stomach knotted. *He can't possibly have heard me from across the square. That's just not possible.* But slowly, almost leisurely, he turned so that he faced me.

'Well, what do we have here?' He chuckled darkly, voice carrying, his lips curling into that same cruel smirk.

Instinct worked faster than my mind and before I knew it I had jumped up, sprinting my way across the square. Leaving my heels far behind, my feet thudded against the cold stone as I ran, literally, for my life. The nearest police station wasn't too far, and I would bet on the fact I knew London better than them.

'And where do you think you're going, Girly?'

I inhaled sharply as I crashed into something hard and cold, so cold I sprung back from it instantly. Standing right in front of me was the dark-haired man. I recoiled, eyes darting from the spot he had been stood in before to where he stood now. *That really isn't possible*. I backed away, my hands grabbing at the air behind me as though they expected some magical saviour to appear. He didn't even flinch, as though a girl running into his chest was an everyday occurrence.

'N-nothing. I was just going to . . . err . . .' I stuttered, my eyes cycling between the bodies, the man and the road: my only possible escape route.

'Going to report us?' he questioned. He already knew the answer, but my eyes widened guiltily and he leaned in so close that I could see that his eyes were a vivid shade of emerald. His voice lowered to a whisper. 'I'm afraid you can't do that.'

Close up, I could not help but notice how staggeringly handsome he was. Something deep in the pit of my stomach stirred. I recoiled again, repulsed.

'Like hell, I can't!' I yelled, ducking around him and making another frantic getaway. Running, I glanced behind me. To my astonishment, none of them pursued me. Spurred on I kept going, the tiniest spark of hope striking into life in my heart. I was just metres away from the road when I stole another look over my shoulder.

This time he seemed to give an exasperated sigh and I didn't allow myself to watch any longer, not wanting to slow down. My feet were just about to step out onto the road when I was yanked back, a hand clutching at the collar of my coat. I teetered, fighting for balance whilst also fighting the hand that restrained me. I wrestled, kicking and screaming, but it was no use – he held me with ease.

Turning around with my eyes ablaze and sounding a lot braver than I felt, I screeched out a threat: 'You have ten seconds to get off me, freak, before I kick you so hard in the bollocks that you'll wish you were never born!'

He chuckled again. 'You're a feisty one, aren't you?'

As he laughed, I caught sight of his upper canines, both perfectly white. Perfectly white, and tapered to an unnatural point.

Hunting. Hunters.

Something in my brain registered that this was not normal. Not even close to normal, but just as quickly, rational thought dismissed the conclusion my mind was rapidly forming.

Struggling again, I tried to get close enough to kick him, but his grip tightened on my collar, holding me firmly away.

'You saw all of that.' His words were chillingly cold. It was a statement, not a question, but I answered it anyway.

'What do you think?' I retorted, pouring as much sarcasm into my voice as I could muster.

'I think you're going to have to come with us,' he growled, taking my elbow and beginning to drag me away. I opened my mouth, but he was quicker. He clamped a hand down on my lips. 'Scream and I swear I will kill you.'

And, thrashing and biting, I was dragged away; dragged away from the gruesome bloodbath these pale monsters had created.