

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...

Girl Seven

Written by Hanna Jameson

Published by Head of Zeus

All text is copyright © of the author

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

HANNA JAMESON

GIRL SEVEN



First published in the UK in 2014 by Head of Zeus Ltd.

Copyright © Hanna Jameson, 2014

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

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 both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

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

ISBN (HB) 9781781851449

ISBN (TPB) 9781781851432

ISBN (E) 9781781851463

Printed in Germany.

Head of Zeus Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45–47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

GIRL SEVEN

Because once you've got one scar on your face or your heart, it's only a matter of time before someone gives you another – and another – until a day doesn't go by when you aren't being bashed senseless, nor a town that you haven't been run out of, and you get to be such a goddamn mess that finally it doesn't feel right unless you're getting the Christ beaten out of you – and within a year of that first damning fall, those first down-borne fists, your first run-out, you wind up with flies buzzing around your eyes, back at the same place, the same town, deader than when you left, bobbing around in the swill – a dirty deadbeat whore in a roadside ditch. But a little part of you doesn't die. A little part of you lives on. And you make an orphan of that corrupt and contemptible part, dumping it right smack in the lap of the ones who first robbed you of your sweetness, for it is the wicked fruit of their crimes, it is their blood, their sin, it belongs there, this child of blood, this spawn of sin. . .

Nick Cave, *And the Ass Saw the Angel*

Prologue

I could almost see my block of flats from his window, less than two streets away.

Outside the grey cloud melted into grey buildings. Inside I was wrapped in grey sheets with my legs wrapped around Jensen McNamara's head. I couldn't stand him, but he was passably attractive and there was nothing else to do. Everyone here was fucking, being fucked over, getting fucked, on drink, on drugs, on a daily basis.

He was a talker, that was for sure.

'I fucking knew you wanted it. . . You know, right from that moment you were scaring those kids away and you caught my eyes through the window and you knew I was watching you but you didn't find it weird, did you? Most girls would find it weird, get scared by a guy looking at them like that, but not you. . .'

When a guy has his tongue between your legs there's really only one acceptable response.

'Mm.'

It could almost be mistaken for pleasure and I thought I'd heard the end of it. What the fuck else did he expect me to say?

'Go on, talk dirty to me!' he said.

I wondered if I could gag him. It could always be passed off as erotic.

'Talk dirty to me, go on, I bet you can. I bet you can be a right nasty little bitch. . .'

It was funny listening to him for a while but I lost heart not long after that. Even my naturally tanned skin was starting to look grey, like the walls. Everything looked as though it might have been white once, before the flecks of dirt started spreading. I looked down and saw white streaks where some bodily fluid had cut through the grime on the inside of my right thigh.

I couldn't do this, not again, not now, not with this fucking running commentary. . .

'You can stop now,' I said to the ceiling.

'What, babe?'

'I said you can stop now, it's fine.' I swung my legs away from him and over the side of the bed, pulling down the edges of my skirt. 'I'm not in the mood actually.'

'What. . . babe?'

I gave him an exasperated look and stood up.

His hurt pride followed me all the way downstairs and through the doors into the humid air hanging over the estate outside. I walked back towards my tower block with my shoulders hunched and head up. Constantly dodging missiles thrown from the roof taught you to walk with your eyes to the sky.

I'd told my family I'd be back by now. I felt some mild guilt that I hadn't said goodbye to any of them, hadn't looked at whatever my little sister had wanted me to look at as I'd left. . . But then, she was five. How interesting was anything

a five-year-old wanted to show you going to be anyway? It was hardly going to be salacious gossip about other people in the building or classified government documents.

I entered the stairwell and broken syringes crunched under my feet. No one touched the handrails now. Too many people had gripped it only to catch their hands on concealed needles.

A gang of kids passed me on the way down, reeking of something faecal.

‘Oi, Jap, you got any fags?’

I was half Japanese and half English and couldn’t be mistaken for either nationality, but the nickname had caught on months ago.

‘No.’ I didn’t make eye contact.

‘Think there’s been a fight upstairs, a big one.’

I looked around at them, eyes narrowed. There were three of them, bony and feral with a spattering of red marks down their arms. Even though they only looked thirteen I was barely taller than them.

‘Yeah?’ I raised my eyebrows.

They shifted.

‘Couple of blokes went up, big geezers, like. They had blades like this,’ said the eldest, holding his hands in the air a foot apart. ‘I thought they were the filth for a second but then there was banging and shouting and all sorts. Someone’s got carved up big time. Look.’

The kid pointed and I followed his finger to the blood on the floor. It wasn’t an unusual sight. It was fresh though; wet enough to catch the light.

My mind was with my parents and my sister as I carried

on up the stairs.

‘I wouldn’t go up there. There might still be someone waiting.’

Nausea clouded my head, like I already knew.

I ignored them, avoiding the blood on the floor, trying not to think of the blood on the floor and my parents and my sister and *blades like this*. . .

Fifth floor and I stopped.

I didn’t want to go further.

I could see my front door, in pieces.

The bile rising in my throat and all I could think of was my parents and my sister and the blood and *blades like this*.

I could have turned around then, called for help downstairs and spared myself, but I didn’t. My heart pounded into the silence, thumping on the inside of my skull as I moved forwards to ease myself through the wreckage of the door.

More blood on the carpet and my entire body shook.

Blood on the walls blurred as my eyes filled with tears.

I smelt copper and my eyes refocused on an arm, on the floor, an arm and a body, red matted hair and a five-year-old skull cleaved in two.

Bile hit the carpet with the blood: mine. My knees gave way; choking and shaking, hands over my eyes so hard that my cheekbones bruised but I could still see it, still see it and I would never stop seeing it.

I was out of the flat, scrabbling backwards through the blood as it covered my legs. There was blood on my hands, my hands over my eyes and blood on my face. On my feet, hanging on to the wall, on to the banister, forgetting the needles, and then down the stairs, so fast I was barely

touching them. . .

I crashed through the doors on the bottom floor, back out on to the warm concrete. The three kids I had seen on the stairs were loitering, eyes wide and poised to run.

‘You!’ I pointed with a bloodied hand.

They ran.

I ran.

I was faster.

The nearest boy choked as I yanked him backwards by the hood of his jacket, hitting the tarmac with a strangled yelp and a dry slap before I dragged him up and threw him into the wall.

‘YOU SAW THEM!’

He was thrashing, kicking, almost hanging in mid-air with my hands too tight around his throat.

‘YOU SAW THEM! YOU FUCKING SAW THEM!’

He was screaming, almost louder than me.

The other kids hung back, terrified. ‘Fucking leave him alone! Leave off, what’re you doing?’

I punched him, just to stop the noise, just because he was there. All I could see was the blood, and the arm, and the red matted hair and the five-year-old skull cleaved in two.

I let him go and he sank to the ground, cowering and holding his nose, red outlines around his throat and blood trickling through his fingers. The two other kids came forwards, slinking past me to pick him up and pull him away out of harm’s reach.

‘Crazy bitch. . .’

None of the blood was my own. It was all from my flat, my carpet, my parents and the five-year-old skull cleaved in two.

I caught my reflection in a parked red Peugeot and couldn't recognize it.

Behind me was grey brick and in front of me blinding sky.

I could hear one of the kids on a phone, calling someone. Their voices were a meaningless hum in my ears, ringing with screams and later with sirens. I wanted it to stop, this relentless sound. I wanted to back into a corner and drown in silence.

The blood was still wet.

I didn't go back in, but when the police cars arrived it still hadn't dried. I sat on the kerb ignoring their questions, trying not to remember, trying to unsee it, but the blood was still on my hands, on my face, on my bare legs, and it wasn't mine.

I had been less than two streets away and the blood was still wet.

Chapter One

Almost three years later and it didn't feel as though that much had changed. Not really. Everyone was still being fucked. It was just in a slightly nicer and more expensive setting. The Underground club was a place that seemed to form itself around me, like a demanding and dysfunctional family that kept my thoughts and actions occupied day to day, night to night.

I was drifting back and forth across the club floor, ferrying drinks in the dark purple light, when one of the Irish girls stopped me. Onstage behind us, another girl was singing in French. Even after a year of working here I still didn't register many names or personalities; they all looked the same to me, sounded the same, apart from their various nationalities.

But I hadn't started working here to make friends.

'Mark Chester wants you serving his table tonight,' Irish said, winking at me. She winked all the time, to the point where I'd started to think she had a Tourette's-like condition.

I scanned the club, recognizing the name but not a face. 'What, he asked for me? Why?'

'He probably asked Noel for a rec. He doesn't play for our team, if you know what I mean, but he likes to talk. I'm well

jealous actually; he's so clever and intellectual, like, you're going to have such a good night!

'So, Noel recommended me for my conversation? Right.' I could barely contain my sarcasm. 'Which one is he?'

'He's the tall hot one over there. Looks like a model, but a kinda weird one. . . That one!'

Irish put her cocktails on a tray and pushed her mermaid-like blonde hair behind her shoulders. Her name might have been Elise, but I didn't have a clue really. 'He'll either have whiskey or gin and tonic usually. Go ask him.'

She slapped me on the ass as she left.

I ducked into the dressing room behind the stage for a moment to check my outfit. Even if Mark Chester was gay, my primary function here was to be ornamental. My outfit was a black and white bandage-style playsuit and heels; there wasn't enough of it to risk falling into disarray. My eyeliner was a little smudged around my heavily lidded eyes. All make-up looked awkward on me. My features were too large and exaggerated for such a tiny face and my plain black hair had never been long enough to sweep back like Irish.

Plain, as Mum had always said. But men had always liked it. Go figure.

I wondered exactly how my employer and manager, Noel Braben, had come to recommend me. It was common knowledge that he had hired me for his own personal preferences and not for any of my attributes as an employee. It was a running joke of his that for someone working in customer service I was one of the most caustic people he had ever met.

I left the dressing room and its suffocating cloud of perfumes and made my way over to Mark Chester's table, where he was

sitting with two other men. Even seated you could tell how tall he was, and he already had a drink.

‘Hi, I’m Seven,’ I said, smiling, but not too much. ‘Can I get you anything?’

‘You’re Seven?’ Mark stood up and shook my hand, an unusual gesture in a place like this. ‘How charming; sit down. I’ve had more than enough to drink tonight already. Do you want anything for yourself?’

‘No, thank you.’ I did as I was told and sat down beside him. ‘How did you ask for me by name? Did Noel suggest me or something?’

‘Yeah, Noel told me – I hope you don’t mind.’

‘No, I don’t mind, it’s just. . . Sorry, what did he say about me?’

‘Well, I was going to be here tonight shadowing a couple of business pals and, as you probably well know, I’d get bored if I didn’t find a decent conversationalist.’

‘Yeah, I was told I wouldn’t be your type.’ I shrugged, fixing the half-smile on my face.

‘I like my women how I like my coffee.’

‘With a massive cock, right?’

He started laughing. ‘Well, I was going to say. . . Ha! Yeah, right!’

‘How long have you known Noel then?’ I asked, looking up at the exposed copper piping snaking its way across the ceiling.

‘Oh, years. We chat a lot. . . If you didn’t mind, there was actually something particular I wanted to talk to you about.’

‘It’s a nickname,’ I said, pre-empting the inevitable question about my name. ‘I got it when I was young. I had an OCD thing.’

I met his eyes. They were an intense green and he had tattoos on the backs of his hands and fingers, from what I could see of them.

He folded his hands across each other, masking some of the tattoos I was trying to examine out of the corner of my eye. ‘That wasn’t what I was going to ask.’

‘Oh. Well, I’ll do my best,’ I said, worried that he wanted to discuss something I’d be woefully undereducated to handle. ‘But I’m not exactly a *University Challenge* contestant with questions. I can do art, martial arts, bit of geography, languages, but I was never that into hard-core subjects, you know. If you’re after politics or history or something like that go for, uh. . . Abigail, over there. She’s at UCL.’

He seemed amused by me. At least I had made some kind of impression.

‘It wasn’t so much about stuff like that,’ he said, lowering his voice a little. ‘Forgive me if I’m crossing a line or if this makes you feel uncomfortable, but I wanted to talk to you about your parents.’

For a moment there was only background noise, electro-guitar music, the clink of glasses and masculine chatter.

Mark had sat forwards with his hands linked on his knees, ignoring his other companions, who seemed happy to chat between themselves.

It was the last thing I’d expected him to say.

I thought about it every day but not at work. The images had never come to me here, when my mind was taken over by mundane repetitive tasks. I’d never thought about the skull cleaved in two and the fifth floor and the front door hanging askew on its hinges. . .

‘Um, sorry, what?’ I said, hoping I’d misheard. Maybe he’d said *patients*? Or *patents*?

‘Your parents,’ he repeated. ‘Noel mentioned them to me. Don’t blame him, he probably never expected me to talk to you. I promise this isn’t a joke or morbid curiosity or anything trivial like that. I’m genuinely very interested in your life. Do you know what I do for a living? Did anyone tell you?’

I shook my head.

‘I solve problems,’ he said, with a glance over my shoulder. ‘I solve problems, when problems are people. You understand?’

I understood what he was saying, in a literal sense, but not why. I couldn’t recall ever being so wrong-footed by a statement. Noel called me a born smart-arse; it was rarity for me to be unable to muster a response. Maybe I should have been angry at Noel, but in my shock the thought didn’t occur to me.

‘So you’re a private detective or something?’ I said.

‘I’m. . . more than that. I can track people down, make people disappear, make people suffer. I can make people do most things.’

‘So you’re a killer?’

‘Well, at least make it sound professional. I’m a very professional killer.’ He smiled. ‘If you don’t want to talk to me, I’d completely understand and won’t be offended at all. But at the moment, you’re the person I find *easily* the most fascinating in this room. And I’d like to make you an offer.’

I watched Irish or Elise or whatever her name was standing across the club, with her hand draped over a man’s shoulders.

The girl onstage was still singing.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, blood rushing to my face. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t think I want to talk to you.’

‘That’s fine, my love.’ He nodded. His smile seemed genuine. He reached into the pocket of his skinny jeans and handed me a card with a number and no name printed on it. ‘If you change your mind.’

‘Excuse me,’ I said, already standing up.

I crossed the club floor heading for the dressing room, but then changed direction and slipped out into the concrete stairwell instead. There wouldn’t be anyone there. My legs were unsteady and I was lightheaded, on the verge of throwing up.

I leant my forehead against the wall next to the fire escape and swallowed, thinking, *You will not cry*. Almost three years and I hadn’t yet cried. Everyone thought it was weird. Noel thought it was weird. I didn’t think it was weird; I’d just resigned myself to an inevitable nervous breakdown in my early thirties, when it would all come out, having been given time to rot.

I shut my eyes and tried to steady my breathing. The sharp edges of the business card were hurting my palm.

You will not cry.

You will not cry.

You will not cry.

After a while, when I’d forced myself to meditate for a moment and clear my head, I left the stairwell and asked around to see if Noel was at the club tonight. But he wasn’t. He wasn’t going to be there until early the next morning.

Without anyone to vent my fury on, I told them all I was feeling ill and went home early. I avoided looking back in the direction of Mark Chester’s table, but I took the professional killer’s business card with the number and no name.

*

I didn't sleep that night, which allowed plenty of time for the rage to build by the time I left for the Underground again at ten in the morning. The air had a bite to it: cold and bitter for this time of year. Some skinhead was already shouting at his young girlfriend outside a Starbucks. I fantasized about putting him in an armlock and breaking his wrist.

I let myself into the club through the staff entrance and found Daisy, the bleached-blonde barmaid, already counting the float into the till.

'All right, Bitch-face,' I called. 'You're early. Is Noel upstairs?'

Daisy looked up at me and smiled. 'Hey, Fuck-rabbit.' Even in the colder days of summer she didn't wear much. In fact, even during winter I couldn't recall seeing her wearing anything that covered her legs, nipples and midriff simultaneously. 'So are you. Yeah, he's upstairs. Do I need to put on the old headphones and whack-up some Tool?'

'Maybe, but not for the reason you're thinking.'

'Yeah, whatever.' She gave me an animated thumbs-up.

Daisy was the only one here whom I distinguished from the other girls. In a way, she *was* distinguished from the other girls. She didn't entertain and perform and fuck and get fucked like the rest of us. Rumour was, her boyfriend had got her the bar job to stop her from getting bored. Her boyfriend was a hitman called Nic Caruana.

A professional killer, I thought, like Mark.

I left her and headed upstairs to Noel's office.

It was silent on the second floor. He never worked to music. He was remarkably sensitive to sound and couldn't sleep with the slightest background noise. Even when he had

the TV on it was at a volume almost no one else could hear.

I let myself into his office without knocking.

Noel looked up from his laptop, affronted, but then he smiled. Unlike most men, he became more handsome when he smiled. It showed his age; the late-thirties lines around his blue eyes stood out and his face became more weathered. But he wore middle age well, like an expensive luxury accessory, like the suit jackets he wore over his jeans.

‘Hey you,’ he said, beginning to stand. ‘What are you doing here?’

I shut the door, pulled out the second wheeled chair with some commotion and sat down. The office was psychotically tidy, with papers and folders stacked in size order and everything arranged at right angles.

He stared at me, and slowly lowered himself back into his chair.

I raised my eyebrows, damned if I was going to speak first.

‘Am I about to be told off?’ he ventured.

‘Well, I’ll give you some credit for realizing you’ve done something wrong.’

A couple more seconds.

‘Ah,’ he said, chewing his lip a little. ‘Ah. I . . . didn’t think he’d speak to you.’

‘What kind of excuse is that?’ I snapped, reciting a mantra in my head to stay calm, stay calm, stay calm. . . ‘So it’s OK for you to share my private business about my family with a stranger as long as it doesn’t get back to me? Is that your logic here? If Noel Braben shoots his mouth off to a random guy in the forest and Seven doesn’t hear, does it make a sound?’

‘Well, *you* once shared your private business with a stranger

the first time you met them. You had no issue with telling me.'

He never raised his voice to anyone, not that I'd heard. It was unnerving.

I hesitated. Maybe it should have done, but that fact hadn't crossed my mind once while thinking about this the night before. I still wasn't sure why I'd told Noel anything about my personal life in the first place. If I'd been able to share the story of what happened to my family with him so freely, before anything had happened between us, it didn't seem outlandish that he'd thought it might be OK to regale someone else with it.

I am sitting on a mountaintop.

I can hear the wind in the trees.

I am calm.

I am calm.

Noel pushed a silver thermos across the desk at me. 'Do you want some coffee?'

I picked it up without a word and took a gulp of the coffee inside. I never drank coffee. He knew I didn't drink coffee. It was black and disgusting and made me want to gag but I drank it anyway, to avoid speaking for a few seconds longer.

'What did he say to you? It's kinda unlike Mark to do something like that. He's a stand-up guy. I didn't think he'd just start talking to you about it.'

'It wasn't just talking to me about it, to be fair to him. He wasn't simply looking for a fun conversation. He. . . He made me an offer actually.' I fished the business card out of the pocket of my leather jacket and held it out for Noel to see. 'He said he's a guy who solves problems.'

'He. . . Wo. Wow. He said that to you?'

I nodded.

Noel let out a snort of disbelief. ‘No, really. I mean, Mark, he’s. . . expensive and he’s. . . he’s *Mark*. Wow, he must be really interested in you. He doesn’t talk business with just anybody; he works for the Russians and spends half his time out there doing. . . God knows what.’

There had been a festering sensation of dread and excitement in my stomach that had crept into my consciousness the night before and worsened now.

I am sitting on a mountaintop. . .

He started laughing and clapped his hands together, making me start. ‘Fucking hell, this is. . . OK, I know you’re pissed off with me and everything but this is pretty fucking amazing, you know. If Mark Chester wants to take an interest in you then maybe you should think about it? Maybe just talk to him? I don’t know. You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but he’s serious, he’d probably find out stuff you never would. . .’

I stared hard at the plain business card, with the number and no name. ‘So he’s kinda a big deal then?’

‘Yeah. He’s a big deal.’

‘You really think he’d find something?’ I asked, sceptical. ‘After three years? I mean. . . it’s almost three years now and there was no evidence then. You really think he’d find something?’

‘Well, I’m not one to exaggerate. . . much.’ He thought for a moment. ‘But I don’t think Mark’s ever left a job unfinished. I don’t think he’s ever lost a person he’s tried to track down and I don’t think he’s ever left a person alive who he was paid to take care of. He basically never fails, I think.’

I didn’t know if this was what I wanted to hear.

‘Are you still pissed at me?’ Noel asked, leaning forwards

across the desk and pushing his laptop to one side. 'Look, I wasn't just gossiping like some old bloody woman, I was just. . . Lighten up, OK? This could be a really good thing for you.'

I wasn't sure if he was right or not so I nodded. It wasn't as if I was going to draw an apology out of him.

He tried to prompt a smile from me. 'Yeah? We OK?'

'Yeah.' I forced my lips to twitch, to appease him.

'Yeah? Good, I hate it when you look at me like that, baby.' He reached across the desk and gestured for me to take his hand. 'And you know, I could have done something super smart here.'

As I put my hand in his, I noticed that his wedding ring was back on.