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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The 9th Girl**

Written by Tami Hoag

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TAMI  
HOAG

The \_\_\_\_\_  
9<sup>th</sup>  
Girl



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# 1

New Year's Eve. The worst possible night of the year to be the limo driver of a party bus. Of course, Jamar Jackson had really not found a night or an occasion when it was good to be a limo driver. In the last two years working for his cousin's company, he had come to the conclusion that the vast majority of people hired stretch limos for one reason: so they could be drunk, high, obnoxious, and out of control without fear of being arrested. Getting from one place to the next was secondary.

He drove the Wild Thing—a twenty-passenger white Hummer with zebra-print upholstery. A rolling nightclub awash in purple light, it was tricked out with a state-of-the-art sound system, satellite television, and a fully stocked bar. It cost a month's rent to hire on New Year's Eve, which included a twenty percent gratuity—which was what made hauling these assholes around worth the headache.

Jamar worked hard for his money. His evenings consisted of shrieking girls in various stages of undress as the night wore on and frat boys who, regardless of age, never lost the humor of belching

and farting. Without fail, driving party groups always involved at least one woman sobbing, one verbal and/or physical altercation between guests, some kind of sex, and a copious amount of vomit by journey's end. And Jamar handled it all with a smile.

*Twenty percent gratuity included* was his mantra.

On the upside: These experiences were all grist for the mill. He was a sociology grad student at the University of Minnesota with a master's thesis to write.

His customers for this New Year's Eve were a group of young attorneys and their dates, drunk on champagne and a couple of days' freedom from seventy-hour workweeks. His assignment for the evening was carting them from one party to the next until they all passed out or ended up in the hospital with alcohol poisoning.

Sadly, the night was young by New Year's Eve standards, the booze was flowing, and if he had to listen to Maroon 5's "Moves Like Jagger" one more time, he was going to run this fucking bus into a ditch.

*Twenty percent gratuity included . . .*

His passengers were loud. They wouldn't stay in their seats. If one of them wasn't sprawled on the floor, it was another of them. Every time Jamar checked the rearview he caught a flash of female anatomy. One girl couldn't keep her top from falling down; another's skirt was so short she was a squirming advertisement for the salon that did her bikini wax.

Jamar tried to keep his eyes on the road, but he was a twenty-five-year-old guy, after all, with a free view of a naked pussy behind him.

They had started the evening at a private party in the tony suburb of Edina, then moved to a party in a hip restaurant in the Uptown district. Now they would make their way to downtown Minneapolis to a hot club.

The streets were busy and dangerous with drivers who were half-

drunk and half-lost. Compounding the situation, the temperature was minus seventeen degrees, and the moisture from the car exhaust was condensing and instantly freezing into a thin layer of clear ice that was nearly impossible to see on the pavement. An unwelcome complication on a rotten stretch of road that was pockmarked with potholes big enough to swallow a man whole.

*Twenty percent gratuity included . . .*

Jamar's nerves were vibrating at a frequency almost as loud as the music. His head was pounding with the beat. He had one eye on the girl in the back, one eye on the road. They were coming to a spaghetti tangle of streets and highways crossing and merging into one another. Hennepin and Lyndale, 55 and 94.

The girl with her top down started making out with Miss Naked Pussy. The hoots and hollers of the partygoers rose to a pitch to rival Adam Levine's voice.

*“ . . . moves like Jagger . . . I got the moves like Jagger . . . ”*

Jamar was only vaguely aware of the box truck passing on his left and the dark car merging onto the road in front of him. He wasn't thinking about how long it would take to stop the tank he was driving if the need arose. His attention was fractured among too many things.

Then, in a split second, everything changed.

Brake lights blazed red too close in front of him.

Jamar shouted, “Shit!” and hit his brakes in reflex.

The Wild Thing just kept rolling. The car seemed to drop, then bounce, the trunk flying open.

Now his attention was laser focused on what was right in front of him, a tableau from a horror movie illuminated by harsh white xenon headlights. A woman popped up in the trunk of the car like a freak-show jack-in-the-box. Jamar shrieked at the sight as the woman flipped out of the trunk, hit the pavement, and came upright. Directly in front of him.

He would have nightmares for years after. She looked like a freaking zombie—one eye wide open, mouth gaping in a scream; half her face looked melted away. She was covered in blood.

The screams were deafening then as the Wild Thing struck the zombie—Jamar’s screams, the screams of the girls behind him, the shouts of the guys. The Hummer went into a skid, sliding sideways on the ice-slick road. Bodies were tumbling inside the vehicle. There was a bang and a crash from the back, then another. The Hummer came to a rocking halt as Jamar’s bladder let go and he peed himself.

*Twenty percent gratuity included . . .*

*Happy New Year’s fucking Eve.*

## 2

“Happy freakin’ New Year,” Sam Kovac said with no small amount of disgust.

What a mess. Headlights and portable floodlights illuminated the scene, with road flares and red-and-blue cruiser lights adding a festive element. The television news vans had already swooped in and set up camp. The on-air talent bundled into their various team color-coordinated winter storm coats had staked out their own angles on the wreck.

Fucking vultures. Kovac kept his head down and his hat brim low as he walked toward the scene.

A white Hummer of ridiculous proportions sat sideways across two lanes of road. The back window was busted out, allowing a glimpse of the interior: purple LED lights and zebra-striped upholstery.

Erstwhile holiday revelers milled around the vehicle, overdone and underdressed for the weather. Most of them were either talking or texting on their cell phones. The girls, who had undoubtedly begun the evening looking the height of hip fashion, now looked



like cheap hookers on a hard night: hair a mess, makeup smeared, clothes disheveled. They were in short dresses. One was wrapped in a fur coat; another was wrapped in a tuxedo jacket. They all either had been crying or were crying, while their dates tried to look important and serious in the face of the crisis.

A Lexus coupe appeared to have rear-ended the party-mobile, which hadn't worked out for the Lexus. With the front end smashed back almost to the windshield, the car looked like a pug dog on wheels. A third car had hit the Lexus from behind. A Chevy Caprice with a busted-up front end had pulled to the shoulder.

But Kovac hadn't come out in the minus-freezing-ass cold on New Year's Eve to attend to a three-car pileup. He was a homicide cop. His business was murder. How murder figured into this mess, he had no idea. But it was a good bet it was going to take half the damn night to sort it out.

Not that he had anything better to do with his time. He didn't have any hot date to ring in the New Year with. He wasn't going to any parties to watch people get drunk and make fools of themselves for no other reason than having to buy a new calendar.

"Happy New Year, Detective."

Kovac growled at the fresh-faced uniformed officer. "What's happy about it?"

"Uh . . . nothing, I guess."

"I'm assuming there's somebody dead here. Should we be happy about that?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Jesus, Kojak. Just 'cause you're not getting laid tonight doesn't mean you get to take it out on young Officer Hottie here."

Kovac turned his scowl on his partner as she walked up. Nikki Liska was decked out in her standard subzero outfit—a thick down-filled parka that reached past her knees and a fur-lined Elmer Fudd hat with the earflaps down. She looked ridiculous.

Liska was five foot five by sheer dint of will. Kovac called her Tinks—short for Tinker Bell on steroids. Small but mighty. If she'd been any bigger, she would have taken over the world by now. But bundled up like this she looked like the little brother in *A Christmas Story*, ready to have someone knock her down on the way to school so she could lie helpless on her back like a stranded turtle.

"How do you know I'm not getting laid tonight?" he grumbled.

"You're here, aren't you?" she said. "Neither one of us is ringing in the New Year with an orgasm. And I *did* have a date, thank you very much."

"Yeah, well, I've got news for you," Kovac said. "If that's what you were wearing, you weren't gonna get laid either."

"Shows what you know," Liska shot back. "I'm bare-ass naked under this coat."

Kovac barked a laugh. They'd been partners for a long time. While she could still make him blush, he was never surprised by the shit that came out of her mouth.

The uniform didn't know what to make of either of them. He might have been blushing. Then again, his face might have been frozen.

"So what's the story here, Junior?" Kovac asked.

"The guy driving the Hummer says a zombie jumped out of the trunk of the vehicle ahead of him," the kid said with a perfectly straight face. "He hit his brakes but couldn't stop. The Hummer hit the zombie. The Lexus rear-ended the Hummer. The Caprice rear-ended the Lexus. No serious injuries or fatalities—other than the zombie."

"You had me at 'a zombie jumped out of the trunk,'" Liska said.

"A zombie," Kovac said flatly.

Shaking his head, he walked toward the small knot of people hovering around the body in the middle of the road. The crime scene team was taking photographs. A couple of state troopers were work-

ing the accident, taking measurements of the road, of the distances between the vehicles.

Steve Culbertson, the ME's investigator, spotted Kovac and started toward him. He was lean and slightly scruffy, with salt-and-pepper beard stubble and the narrow, shifty eyes of a coyote. He always had the look of a man who might open up one side of his topcoat and try to sell you a hot watch.

"Steve, if I got called out here for a traffic fatality, I'm gonna kick somebody's ass," Kovac said. "It's too fucking cold for this shit. The hair in my nose is frozen."

"Tell me about it. Try to get an accurate temp on a corpse on a night like this."

"I don't want to hear about your social life."

"Very funny."

"So a zombie falls out of the trunk of a car . . . ?"

"I don't have a punch line, if that's what you're looking for," Culbertson said. "But I will quote my favorite movie: This was no boating accident."

Kovac arched a brow. "My vic was attacked by a great white shark?"

Culbertson cast an ironic look at the giant white Hummer. "Hit by one. But I don't think that was the worst of her problems. Have a look."

Kovac had seen more dead bodies than he could count: men, women, children; victims of shootings, stabbings, strangulations, beatings; fresh corpses and bodies that had been left for days in the trunks of cars in the dead of summer. But he had never seen anything quite like this.

"F-f-f-uck," he said as the air left his lungs.

Liska was right beside him. "Holy crap. . . . It *is* a zombie."

Half of the female victim's face appeared to have melted. It

looked as if the skin and flesh had been burned away, exposing muscle and bone, exposing her teeth where her cheek should have been. The right eye was missing from its socket. The skull had shattered and cracked open like an egg. Brain matter had already frozen in the dark hair and on the pavement.

“The car hit one of these craters we call potholes, and the body bounced out of the trunk. The limo driver says she was upright and facing him when he hit her,” Culbertson explained. “So the head hit the pavement and busted open like a rotten melon.”

“The back of the head,” Kovac said. “What about this face? What caused that?”

“You’ll have to ask the boss,” Culbertson said. “Looks like some kind of chemical burn to me, or contact with something hot under the car. I don’t know, but look at this,” he said, pointing a gloved finger at the victim’s upper chest. “She didn’t get stabbed repeatedly by that Hummer, so my money is on a homicide.”

Kovac squatted down for a closer look. The damage to the face was so horrific, it was difficult to get his brain to accept that this was a real human being he was looking at and not some Halloween prop. She lay like a broken doll, limbs at unnatural angles to the body. Young, he thought, looking at her arm and hand—the smooth skin, the blue nail polish. Several of the fingernails were broken. A couple were torn nearly off. There were cuts and scrapes on the knuckles, indicative of defensive wounds. She had fought. Whoever had done this to her, she had fought.

*Good for you, honey,* he thought. *I hope you did some damage.*

She was naked from the waist down. The left leg was badly broken. She had been stabbed repeatedly in the chest and throat. The top she wore was torn and drenched in blood.

*Who hated you this much?* Kovac wondered. *Who did you piss off so badly that they would do this to you?*

“Any ID on the body, Steve?” Liska asked.

“Nope.”

“Great.”

Kovac straightened to his feet, knees and back protesting. Even the fluid in his joints was freezing.

“What time is it?” Liska asked.

He checked his watch. “Eleven fifty-three. Why?”

“I want this year to be over.”

They had started the year just a few miles from where they were standing, New Year’s Day, on a callout to a dead body, a young woman who had been brutally murdered, her body chucked out of a vehicle into a ditch. No ID. A Jane Doe. Their first of the year. The press had dubbed her “New Year’s Doe.” It had taken weeks before they were able to match their unidentified body with a missing persons report out of Missouri. The case remained open.

And here they were, twelve months later, standing over the body of a murdered female with no ID. The ninth Jane Doe of the year.

Doe cases generally got names fairly quickly. They often turned out to be transients, people on the fringes of society, people who had minor criminal records and could be ID’d from their fingerprints or were matched to local or regional missing persons reports. Their deaths were related to their high-risk lifestyles. They died of drug overdoses or suicide or because they pissed off the wrong thug. But this year had been different. This year, of their now nine Jane Doe victims, three had fit a very troubling pattern.

Jane Doe 01-11 had turned out to be an eighteen-year-old Kansas girl, Rose Ellen Reiser. A college student, she had been abducted December 29 outside a convenience store in Columbia, Missouri, just off Interstate 70 while on her way back to school in St. Louis.

Jane Doe 04-11—found on the Fourth of July—had eventually been identified as a twenty-three-year-old mother of one from Des

Moines, Iowa, who had gone missing while jogging in a park near Interstate 35 on July first.

A Jane Doe found Labor Day weekend had yet to be identified. The body had been found near the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, making it a case for the St. Paul PD, but the obvious similarities to the two prior cases in Kovac's jurisdiction had earned him a phone call to consult.

He had dubbed the killer Doc Holiday, a name that had stuck not only with the Minneapolis cops but also with detectives in agencies throughout the Midwest where young women had been abducted—or their bodies had been found—always on or around a holiday, always near an interstate highway. Over the months, it had become clear that the Midwest had a serial killer cruising the highways.

“She came out of the trunk of a car,” Liska said.

The prevailing theory was that Doc Holiday was a long-haul trucker. The serial killer's dream job. His chamber of horrors ran on wheels. He could snatch a victim in one city and dump her in another with no one questioning his movements. Victims were readily available all along his route.

“So he's a traveling salesman,” Kovac said. “I don't care what he's driving.”

He cared that he was standing over another young woman who would never have the chance to become an old woman. Whoever this girl was, she would never have a career, get married, have children, get divorced. She would never have the opportunity to be successful or make a shambles of her life, because she didn't have a life anymore.

And no matter if she had been the perfect girl or a perfect bitch, somewhere tonight someone would be missing her, wondering where she was. Somewhere on this New Year's Eve a family believed they would see her again. It would be Kovac's job to tell them the hard truth. If he could manage to figure out who the hell she was.

On the sidelines, the reporters had begun to get restless, wanting details. One of them called out, “Hey, Detective! We heard there was a zombie. Is that true?”

Off to the southwest the sky suddenly exploded with color. Fireworks over the burbs.

Kovac looked at his partner. “Happy freaking New Year.”