

**Severed**

**Simon Kernick**

*'Spin a coin, spin a coin; all fall down.  
Queen Nefartiti stalks through the town.'*

**Childrens' Rhyme. Anonymous**

**Friday**

# 1

From the moment I open my eyes, I know it's going to be a bad day. The room's stifling hot; my head feels like a dwarf on speed's dancing a jig on it; and the blood... Well, the blood's everywhere. I can feel its clammy wetness where my cheek's resting on the pillow, and on my casually outstretched arm. For the first few seconds my vision's blurred, but I can see that it's daylight and that thin shafts of sunlight are flickering round the edges of the chintzy, flower-patterned curtains covering the room's only window. This place is totally unfamiliar. I have no idea where I am.

Slowly, I roll over in the bed. It's a massive effort. Every part of my body seems to ache, my head especially. Even in the dim half-light and at the angle that I'm lying, I can see that the pillows and crisp white sheets are all drenched crimson. I focus on my arm, the one that's been soaking up the blood. It looks as if it's been dipped to the elbow in dark paint, with a few stray splashes further up.

Shock hits me then. I sit bolt upright and my vision blurs for a second time. I stare down at the bed and try to make some sort of sense of what's going on. There's a lump beneath the sheets, completely obscured. It's worryingly human shaped. The blood seems to be emanating from its top half. I feel dizzy and nauseous. For a moment, I try to remember the previous night, searching for a clue that'll tell me what I'm doing in a blood-soaked bed in a strange room I have no recollection of entering. But nothing presents itself. Nothing at all.

The previous day is a complete blank.

A panic-stricken thought flashes across my mind. How much of my memory have I lost? Am I going to be one of those poor bastards whose whole past's disappeared on them, who can't even remember his own name? But no, I know exactly who I am. My name is Tyler. I'm a car salesman by trade, a high class one too. I own a BMW franchise. I was in the army for a long time. I am a veteran of

Northern Ireland, the first Gulf War, Bosnia and Sierra Leone. And I am in a lot of trouble, this much I know immediately.

Without taking my eyes off the lump, I switch on the bedside lamp, the brightness making me squint sharply. The LCD display on the clock radio next to it tells me it's 9.51 am. Very late for me. I'm usually an early riser.

My mouth is bone dry and I feel like shit. I really don't want to look under the covers but I know I'm going to have to.

Clambering unsteadily out of the bed, I reach over with hands that I notice are shaking a little and touch the top of the sheets, recoiling against the wetness, wondering what it is under there, then pull them back in one swift movement so that I can find out.

Oh, Jesus.

Retching, gasping for breath, I stumble backwards, banging into the wall. I can't believe what I'm seeing. The shock is blinding, terrifying...

A naked young woman with very pale skin lies stiff and lifeless on her back. Her body is lithe and athletic, if a little on the skinny side. Distinguishing marks are a silver belly button ring and the faded tattoo of a butterfly on the waxed skin next to a thin, perfectly straight strip of very short dark pubic hair. Her fingernails are varnished a sky blue colour and she has rings with Celtic symbols on the middle and index fingers of her right hand.

But what scares and revolts me the most is the simple, inescapable fact that her head is missing. The neck is a jagged, raw stump where it has been either hacked or sawed off, and the blood surrounds it like a huge crimson halo. It is the only obvious injury to the body.

For some seconds- it might be as little as three, it might be as long as twenty- I simply stare at the corpse, and although I can remember nothing of the previous night,

I know without a doubt that there is no way I am responsible for what's happened here because, you see, I recognize this girl, even without her head.

Her name was Leah Torness and I was in love with her.

I can't believe this is happening. Yesterday, she was a smiling, chatty young woman with everything to live for. Today, she is a butchered corpse, as pale and lifeless as an alabaster statue. My head spins with the confusion of what I'm witnessing. I feel like I have a terrible hangover, and the nausea rises through me in bitter, debilitating waves. I've seen sudden death before, on the battlefield. It's always a terrifying sight, but this is worse. Far worse. On the battlefield, you are psyched up for death. As a soldier you are constantly preparing for it, but I have been a civilian now for three years, and the memories of blood and cordite are fading. And as for the woman lying in front of me, she's never fought in any battles, never put herself in the firing line. She was a twenty-five year old nanny, enjoying life in the big city. She was innocent. Why kill her?

Why?

I can't look at her anymore. If I do, I think I might break down. It's an obscene sight and yet somehow, brutally compelling. But I tear my gaze away and look round the room, trying to find something familiar to hang on to, something that might explain how I got here. Apart from the bed, which is drenched in Leah's blood, the room is neatly decorated and furnished in a distinctly feminine but old-fashioned style with cheap reprints of still-life and classical oil paintings dotting the pastel-coloured walls. The furniture- a huge double wardrobe, a chest of drawers, and a dressing table with oval mirror- is all antique pine and matching. It reminds me of the inside of a kid's dolls house. Except that in the corner there's a TV on a metallic black stand with a DVD player in the space beneath. A folded cardboard sign sits on top of the TV and it snatches my attention immediately. It's handwritten in black marker pen, the words in neat block capitals. Still shaking, I take a couple of steps towards it.

And curse.

The top line says simply **TYLER**, and then beneath: **PRESS PLAY**.

For a moment, I'm still too shell-shocked to figure out what it's trying to say, but then I look down at the DVD player and realize.

**TYLER.**

Someone else knows I'm here.

I take a step back, shut my eyes, and attempt to take stock of what's going on. Outside the window, I can hear the sound of birds singing, which tells me I am a fair way from home. No one ever hears the sound of birds singing in central London. I don't even know whether or not I came here voluntarily. I know nothing- that is the huge and insurmountable problem I face at the moment. I am in a strange room next to the headless corpse of the woman I still love, with a sign telling me to press PLAY on the DVD player. I feel a sudden burst of panic, which I have to fight down ruthlessly. I need to hold myself together. Different emotions- revulsion; shock; grief at the loss of a loved one- come at me with the force of explosions, but I was a soldier for more than fifteen years and I'm trained to remain calm in tense situations, and to deal with events rationally.

I take a series of deep breaths, trying to clear my head. I need to remember how we got here, and why we came.

Think.

I think so hard it hurts. I concentrate like a contestant on a game show one answer away from a million with the answer on the tip of my tongue, the effort draining what little strength I have. But still nothing comes back. My last memory is watching a documentary about global warming on the TV with a takeaway Chinese meal: squid in black bean sauce with egg fried rice. It had tasted greasy, and I didn't finish it. I was alone. I seem to recall that Leah was seeing friends that night. As an ex-soldier, I tend to like routine and I almost always have takeaways on a Wednesday,

so I'm guessing this was when it was. But it doesn't help a lot, because I don't know what day it is today.

I feel the back of my head. There's no tenderness on the skin, or tell-tale lumps, so I haven't been hit over the head. This means I've been drugged, and with something powerful enough so that I didn't bat any eyelid while Leah, who was a fit, young woman, was slaughtered only inches away from me.

I shut my eyes, fighting off another wave of nausea. When I open them again, I find my gaze returning to Leah's body. The blood on her neck wound has long ago coagulated, and the thick patches on the sheets are also drying. She died some time ago, two or three hours at least, probably longer, and for the first time, I notice the smell in the room, the vague sour odour of faeces and decay that lingers round the recently dead like a humiliating farewell.

Standing there in the dim, leaden silence, it feels as if I've stepped into the middle of someone else's nightmare.

But I'm wrong. As I crouch down and press the PLAY button, I am about to find out that this is my nightmare. And it's only just beginning.

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## 2

I can hear my heart thumping as I sit on the edge of the bed and wait. For several seconds the screen remains blank before wobbling slightly with interference. Then the film starts.

It opens with a static shot of the room I am now in, taken at roughly chest height and facing towards the top of the bed. The bedside lights are on and it's night. Although the focus is very slightly blurred, like a bad home video, it's easy enough to make out Leah lying spread eagled above the sheets, and in the film she is very much alive. Her wrists and ankles are tied to each of the small wooden posts at the head and foot of the bed and she is naked. The expression on her face is one of lust. The sight catches me out. In the few short weeks I've known her, Leah and I had a healthy and enjoyable sex life, but it never involved bondage, and I suddenly feel uncomfortable, like some kind of voyeur, unearthing secrets that are best left alone.

Her full pink lips quiver and form a lazy half-smile, and her eyes are half-shut. It is obvious she's enjoying her confinement; that she's viewing the situation as part of some kind of sex game. The pale contours of her soft young skin ripple with life, her hips snaking as she tries to rub herself against the sheets. She looks good, too; just as I remember her from our first meeting. Her hennaed hair is cut short and stylish, spiky at the top, and her face is a perfect oval, with prominent cheekbones that are dotted with a scattering of freckles. She has mischievous brown eyes that sparkle with the vibrancy of youth, and a model's aquiline nose, with an emerald stud in its left side. Seeing her alive on the screen is like a hammer blow and I feel my jaw tighten.

As I watch, there's the sound of the bedroom door opening off camera and someone coming inside. Leah turns her head in the direction of the newcomer and her expression changes perceptibly, the lust replaced by a flicker of confusion.

“Tyler,” she says, addressing the person off camera, “what are you doing? Why are you wearing that mask?” Her words are distorted on the film and sound tinny and of poor quality.

There’s a mumbled reply that I can’t make out from off camera and then suddenly Leah’s expression changes again, this time the confusion being replaced by a wide-eyed fear. “What’s that?” she asks, panicky now. “Why have you got a knife? Tyler, tell me.”

I feel my head throbbing painfully as the person she’s talking to finally appears on camera, moving round the foot of the bed in profile to the camera. He’s naked as well but his head is completely covered by a black rubber bondage mask, and in his right hand he holds a long, wicked-looking, wide-bladed butcher’s knife.

Leah is speaking again, but I can no longer see her, as the man with the knife is in the way. “Tyler, if this is a game, stop it now. Please. You’re scaring the shit out of me.”

I know the guy isn’t me- I would never do anything like this- but I have an extremely serious problem. He is roughly my height and build, and given the poor quality of the recording, it’s not that easy to tell one way or another. So a court of law might see things differently. Especially with the way Leah is talking. Either she’s a damn fine actress or she genuinely believes it’s me standing there behind the mask. And I don’t think you can act as fearful as she’s sounding. Her fear comes right from her bones, and it is easy to see why. The man pretending to be me slowly advances round the front of the bed towards her side, taking his time and enjoying each step, lifting the knife higher so that she can see it more easily. The blade glints threateningly in the lamp light as he raises it above his head. Beyond him, I can see her struggling vainly on the bed, but the knots that bind her hold easily. She’s helpless.

And then as the guy turns his back to the camera, the trouble I’m in increases ten fold. You see, there’s one way to tell without any doubt whatsoever, whether or not the man with the knife, the one Leah is calling Tyler, is me. Ten years ago, I

suffered a number of shrapnel injuries in a bomb attack, and I still carry the scars. Most are deep but small puncture marks, and only three are noticeable from a distance. They are all on my upper back. One is like a pink birthmark, about three inches across, near the right shoulder blade. The other two are deep, thick lacerations that run down on either side of my spine, almost symmetrically.

The man with the knife has those three scars. They aren't that clear in the film, but if you know what you're looking for, you'll see them. And I know. I stare at them grimly, my teeth clenched tight. They are in the right place on his back, there's no doubt of that. The man in the shot may not be me but the way things are looking, I could well end up in a minority of one holding that opinion.

Leah cries out again, her voice loud and full of confused desperation as she continues to struggle uselessly against the bonds. "Tyler, please! Don't do this! Please!" This last word seems to stretch out for seconds, ending in a terrified, unintelligible sob. It is the sound of someone whose world has suddenly and inexplicably fallen apart, who cannot come to terms with the simple, cold fact that she is about to die.

And that's it. I can't watch any more. Not another second.

Scrambling to my feet, I grab the TV in both hands and tear it from its wiring, hurling it against the wall. It lands heavily on the floor and something inside shatters.

The room descends into a heavy, tomb-like silence. The smell of death is so thick, it feels like I could almost reach out and touch it. I stand naked and alone, staring at the wall, trying to control the nausea that's rising up in me.

Slowly, very slowly, I turn round and face the bed where Leah's body lies. The sheets are bloodstained almost black. The absolute stillness is almost impossible to bear.

"Oh God, Leah," I whisper. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here for you."

As I speak, I sink to my knees, my eyes squeezed shut against the tears that are forming. My head aches ferociously and my mouth is bone dry. In those few moments, I honestly feel like I want to die and the question that keeps running through my mind is why. Why has someone inflicted this savagery on an innocent young woman like Leah, and left me alive in here with her?

I have to get out of here. The cloying atmosphere is beginning to envelop me, but I can't leave her behind. Not alone, in this place. It would be an act of cowardice, something I could never forgive myself for, because God knows what would be done with her after I'm gone. The least she deserves is a proper resting place.

My mind's a maelstrom as I try to work out how I can take her with me, and I hardly hear the movement behind me- the soft scrape of a shoe on carpet.

But hear it I eventually do, and my eyes fly open. I turn round fast, just in time to feel the ferocious electric shock that surges right through me from my toes to my skull. I jangle on the floor, helpless and wild, rolling and writhing, unable to focus on who's doing this to me. The seconds seemed to last forever as my body spasms uncontrollably, and my vision fuzzes and mists.

The current stops as quickly as it's begun. I'm lying on my back, staring upwards into nothingness. Through the gloom and fog I can make out blurred, dark figure, almost like a shadow. He grows larger as he leans in close to me.

And then I feel a light sting on my upper arm and everything goes black.

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