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...

Someone Else's Skin

Written by Sarah Hilary

Published by Headline

All text is copyright © of the author

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

SOMEONE ELSE'S SKIN

sarah hilary

headline

Copyright © 2014 Sarah Hilary

The right of Sarah Hilary to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2014 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 0768 5

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

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

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Five years ago

They've cordoned off the house by the time she gets home. A uniformed stranger is unwinding police tape, methodically.

Marnie watches from the safety of the car, her fingers icy on the ignition key, the engine running as if she might make a quick getaway, drive past and keep driving . . .

She knows she won't get through the police cordon, but she also knows she has to. Whatever else is in the house – and she's scared, so scared her teeth ache – *answers* are in there. She needs to get inside.

She cuts the engine, burying the keys in her fist, their teeth biting the hollow pocket of her palm. She's shivering before she's out of the car.

An ambulance, there's an ambulance, but it's standing silent, no sirens or sweeping lights. The crew's in the house, no one's in a hurry to leave. That's not good. It means there isn't any hope, the worst possible thing has happened. Her face is wet and she looks for rain, but the sky's empty, grey, as if someone has dragged a tarpaulin across it. There's no rain, just the dull, raspy pressure that comes before a storm.

It's been raining all month. Like the rest of London, she's got used to it; there's an umbrella in her glove compartment, another in her desk back at the station, and in the bag at her shoulder. She's not going to get wet queuing for coffee or coming out of the tube station, or standing around at crime scenes. Be prepared isn't a motto, it's common sense. When you can pull it off. When it's not something so huge and horrible you're afraid to get close.

She looks for the PCSO.

There, wearing a fluorescent vest over his uniform by the side of Dad's car, the brown Vauxhall, his pride and joy. The car manages to shine even without the sun, like the windows to the house, dazzling her. As if everything behind the tape is made of glass, breakable. Even the hanging basket of petunias over the door. Breakable.

Marnie stands on the pavement, her teeth knocking together with cold, knowing she has to get into the house, knowing she can't.

She's fourteen again, home late, hoping to sneak in under her parents' radar. Her eyes are itchy with mascara, her tongue dry and patchy with tequila. It feels like a snake's crawled inside her left boot and strangled her toes to sleep. She's limping, heroic and guilt-stricken. She'll never make it in there alive . . .

She shakes herself back into the present. She's not fourteen. She's twenty-eight, petrified of what she's going to find the other side of the police cordon. Silence, and that dark zoo stink that'll be in her clothes for hours and on her skin for longer.

She forces herself to think of something else. A different crime scene, one she's survived, worse than whatever's waiting in the house. Albie Crane . . .

She thinks of Albie Crane. A homeless old man, no next of kin. Burned alive in a doorway down by the docks, by

kids high on pocket-money-priced pills. Back before the rain started, while it was still dry enough for an old coat and six flattened cardboard boxes to burn all night so that what's left is a sticky mess of flayed ribs, a blackly lacquered skull. Old Albie Crane with no one to cry for him, and she made herself repeat the lie, 'He was sleeping when it happened,' as if you could sleep through a thing like that. The worst she'd seen, or smelt, until the next thing: a couple in a house fire, melted together by the flames.

The PCSO is young enough to have acne, but it doesn't make any difference. He's in charge here. He could stop the Chief Constable crossing that line.

Something – a breeze, traffic – makes the police tape stiffen and turn. The sound it makes is *snick-snick-snick*.

The edge of her eye catches Mrs Poole, her parents' neighbour, huddled in the porch of number 12. Her face is spotty with shock and there's a foil blanket around her shoulders, but no one is with her. All the action is next door. No one else is hurt, or the cordon would be wider.

Normally, that would be a comfort, the fact that the damage is contained. Private.

Seeing Marnie, Mrs Poole moans, a hand coming up to hide her mouth.

Marnie ducks to pass under the tape.

'Miss. You can't go in there.' Up close, the acne is lurid, red and yellow. The PCSO squares up to her, authority lending him an inch in all directions.

She shows her badge, remembering too late that after the DS, it gives her surname. Rome, like the couple in the house. DS Marnie Rome. Greg and Lisa's little girl.

A big hand on her shoulder makes her jump.

Tim Welland, her boss.

Now she knows it's as bad as it gets.

'DS Rome,' he says quietly. 'Marnie.'

Using her first name. It's worse, much worse.

'Please.' She just wants to get inside the house. She's shaking with cold out here. 'Sir, please . . .'

He steers her with his hand on her shoulder, back towards the tape. She feels it tap the waist of her shirt. 'Sir . . .'

Welland has a scab above his left eyebrow, too high to be a shaving scar. It's crusty, ringed like a bull's eye. Red veins spoil the whites of his eyes. He looks ill. Old.

'Let me go in,' she says. 'Please. Let me go in to them.'

'Not yet. Not – yet.'

He holds her in place with his bear's paw, but he can't stop her seeing past his shoulder to where a SOCO is coming out, bloody knees to his white overalls and a polybag held in front of him, at arm's length.

A knife. Mum's bread knife, its steel teeth full of tattered red skin.

There's a low noise of protest, like an animal in chronic pain, before a dry barking sob. Marnie can't stand it, wants to block her ears, but it's her mouth she needs to block; the sound's coming out of her.

Welland lowers her to the kerb. She fights him. She's not this person. She won't *be* this person – the one who collapses and weeps at the roadside, who can't take the knock on the door, who falls and never gets back up again.

The *victim*. She won't be the victim.

'Take a minute, Detective.' Welland's hand is heavy on the back of her neck. She has no choice but to put her forehead on her knees. 'Just . . . take a minute.'

PART 1

1

Now

From the road, DI Marnie Rome's flat was stucco-fronted, very neat and narrow. Noah Jake imagined she'd furnished it plainly, with an eye for functional style. Wooden shutters at the windows, a stone-coloured vase filled with upright orange flowers. A hall-floor flat, two bedrooms, Noah guessed. He was curious to see inside, but not enough to make a nuisance of himself, resting his hands on the steering wheel instead and waiting, seeing the light lift from the stucco as the sun broke through London's cloud cover.

Some days it was easy to remember the city was built on plague pits. Nothing stood still, not even the road, throbbing with traffic from the main drag into the West End. He'd read somewhere – probably in one of Dan's exhibition guides – that Primrose Hill had narrowly missed being a mass graveyard; nineteenth-century plans were drawn up for a multi-storey pyramid taller than St Paul's, to house five million of the city's dead. This was back when the town planners were obsessed with Egyptology, hurling hieroglyphs at everything, on the advice of returning

tomb-raiders. Now it was the all-seeing London Eye that dominated the city's skyline, its spindle like a church spire, turning.

Noah checked his watch, and then the flat.

DI Rome's front door was dark blue, glossy. Like her eyes. The kind of door with deadlocks. In another minute, she'd be running late. He'd never known her run late. Should he knock on the door? No, that'd be intrusive. He hadn't learned much about Marnie Rome in the five months he'd been working with her, but he'd learned that she was an intensely private person.

The blue door opened in any case, before her minute was up. She came down the steps to the car, wearing a dark trouser suit over a white shirt, a tooled leather bag at one shoulder. Everything about her was neat, from her short red curls to her low heels.

Noah checked the passenger seat of the car, even though he knew it was clean, dusting the sleeves of his suit in the hope it would pass muster. He reached across to push open the door for her. 'Morning.'

'Good morning.' She slipped into the car, dropping her bag on the floor. 'You were lucky with the parking.'

'I got here early, thought we'd better not be late.'

'You thought right.'

Noah started the engine, waiting for Marnie to put on her seat belt.

She saw him waiting and smiled, fastening the belt with extravagant care. 'Safety first, Detective.'

Safe was the last thing Noah Jake felt, half an hour later, looking at the photographs on OCU Commander Tim Welland's desk.

'Nasif Mirza.' Welland tossed down the photos, one after another, as if he was dealing a pack of cards. 'A person of

interest in a serious assault. Involving a scimitar, in case that wasn't clear yet.' The photos made his desk look like the storyboard for a horror film. A glossy 18-certificate horror film with DVD-extra deleted scenes.

Marnie Rome picked up a photo and studied it before putting it back down. Noah kept his hands out of sight, under the lip of the desk.

Welland said, 'You're looking at what's left of Lee Hurran's right arm.'

What was left was yellow, knuckled by fat, frilled by torn flesh. The scimitar had severed Hurran's hand at the wrist. Not a clean amputation; it had taken two or three blows to get the hand off, the raw stump of wrist bone splintered by the impact.

Noah's palms prickled with sweat. It was stiflingly hot in this office; Tim Welland was in remission from skin cancer and kept the heating turned up all year round. Immune to the heat, Welland never broke a sweat. Nor did Marnie Rome. Noah glanced in her direction, seeing the crisp edge of her shirt, the cool skin of her neck. A bead of perspiration inched its way between his shoulder blades, itching.

'Hurran won't give evidence. Popular theory is that he's scared of losing his other hand, or possibly his balls.' Welland nodded at the photos. 'Nasif isn't fussy when it comes to butchery.'

'Hurran's still in hospital.' Marnie's eyes flicked across the litter of photos. 'They're monitoring for infection. There was a lot of dirt in the wound . . . Maybe he'll feel safer when he's back home.'

'Home being the shithole estate where they found him? I tend to doubt that.'

'We have the scimitar. With Mirza's prints on it. That's no good?'

'Not even close. The Crown Prosecution Service,' Welland

served each syllable as if it was an individually foul taste in his mouth, 'need more evidence before they'll make a move against Nasif. Apparently this . . . dog's dinner isn't enough.'

Marnie picked up the worst of the photos for a closer look. Noah wished he had her backbone for this part of the job. He was too easily disgusted, needed to toughen up, get used to seeing things like this. Things like . . .

Lee Hurran's hand, half eaten. By rats, or a feral cat. The hand wasn't found in the warehouse where the attack happened. Nasif Mirza, or someone, had tossed it over a wall, into a fly-tipped piece of scrubland.

'Ayana Mirza . . .' Marnie started to say.

'CPS wants a statement from her,' Welland said, 'about her brother's violent temperament. Better still, they'd like her to press charges for what was done to her.'

'We can arrest Nasif without her testimony.'

'For this?' Welland pointed at the photographs. 'Or the other thing?'

Noah didn't want to think about the other thing – what Nasif Mirza had done to his sister, in their family home. The pictures of Hurran's half-eaten hand were bad enough.

Neither he nor Marnie had met Ayana Mirza. They'd inherited the case from another department, a casualty of the recent public-sector cuts.

'CPS is cagey about the chances of bringing Nasif to trial,' Welland said. 'Other prints on the scimitar, the chance it was stolen, blah-blah. They think Ayana's evidence might swing it. She's a walking testament to Nasif's worst tendencies. No denying she'd look good in court.'

'And they don't see this as victim harassment?'

'They're cagey, Detective. You and I know what happens when the CPS gets cagey.'

'I know what happened to Ayana.' Marnie's eyes were dark. 'It wasn't just Nasif, either. It was three of them – her brothers.'

'The crap that happens in families . . .' Welland winced, as if he'd said something tactless, cutting his eyes away from Marnie.

She shrugged. 'It's a good living, if you're a psychiatrist.'

Noah felt he'd missed a beat, tuned out for a vital second. The heat was boiling his brain in his skull. How could Welland work like this?

'You'll want to tread carefully. She's terrified of her brothers tracing her. She's hiding . . .' Welland consulted a notepad.

'In a women's refuge in Finchley,' Marnie supplied. 'I spoke with Ed Belloc.'

'Finchley.' Welland nodded. 'What's Ed got to say about her?'

Ed Belloc worked in Victim Support. Noah hadn't met him, but from what Marnie said, he was a good man doing a difficult job. He'd helped the police to trace Ayana Mirza after she escaped her family.

'She won't risk upsetting the refuge,' Marnie said, 'or losing her place there. She doesn't have many options, can't afford rent. If she gets a job or starts claiming benefits, there's the danger her brothers can trace her through her National Insurance number. So . . . she's trying to stay missing.'

Welland nodded. He climbed to his feet. 'DS Jake, you'll want to check your emails. DI Rome, a word?'

Marnie waited while Noah left the office, knowing what was coming. She folded her hands in her lap as a contingency against fidgeting. The ends of her fingers were sticky from touching the photos; she wanted to wash. It didn't help that Tim Welland kept this place heated like a sauna. She'd bet Noah Jake was running a cold shower in the station's washroom.

When they were alone, Welland leaned back, steepling his thumbs under his chin. 'How're you doing?'

Under the hot light, the dome of his head was glassy and freckled. His face, with no eyelashes or brows, looked naked. Open. Good for drawing confidences, or confessions. He'd come close to losing an eye to the cancer. Even now, in remission for two years, the shadow of the disease tugged at the skin there, keeping the eye bleakly peeled so that those who didn't know about his operations – his battle – joked that Tim Welland slept with one eye open.

'I'm fine.' She smiled across the desk at him. The heat shone on the photos scattered between them. Teeth marks on Lee Hurran's dead hand. Had he asked to see it? she wondered. Hurran. Had he asked to see his hand, even though there was no hope of surgeons reattaching it? By the time they found it, it was long dead.

'I'm fine,' she repeated.

Welland searched her face for another answer. Some of this, she suspected, was box-ticking. Management 101: *Show concern for those under your command, especially at times of stress*. He wasn't enjoying it. 'I may do a terrific impersonation of an insensitive shit, but I know what day it is.'

'It's Friday,' she deflected, still smiling.

He nodded at the wall calendar. Pictures of bridges. Welland loved bridges. March's picture was the rolling bridge in Paddington Basin. It looked like a giant hamster wheel.

'Tomorrow . . . it'll be five years to the day. How're you coping?'

'By not counting,' Marnie said.

Not counting, not remembering. Not sharing.

'But you're still seeing him.'

'Yes.' She'd never made a secret of her visits, knowing Welland would find out anyway; murder detectives didn't go into secure units without lighting flags on the system. 'Tomorrow, in fact.'

'Tomorrow,' Welland repeated. 'On the anniversary.'

'It was booked ages ago. I'm not taking balloons.' The smile hurt her face but she stuck with it. 'If that's what you're thinking.'

'Of course I'm not thinking of bloody balloons. I'm thinking of what he did, five years ago . . .'

'A long time, five years.' She picked up a photo of Lee Hurran's hand, pretending to study it again. It meant she could lose the smile, for one thing. 'For him. Five years is a long time, for Stephen.'

'Not long enough,' Welland growled. He cleared his throat. 'Detective Inspector . . . Marnie.' He grimaced. First names weren't his thing. It'd been hard on him five years ago, outside her parents' house, calling her Marnie, holding her in his arms.

She decided to spare him any further discomfort. 'I've got a job to do.' She stood up. 'Clearing the way for the CPS, right?'

Welland looked relieved, hunching back in his chair, freeing his fingers to wash at his face, where the skin was taut from repeated surgery. 'Right.'