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

Severed

Simon Kernick

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 clamminess where my cheek's resting on the pillow, and under my casually outstretched arm. For the first few seconds my vision's blurred, but I can see that it's daylight: 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 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 feels clammy with 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 have emanated 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 bloodsoaked 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.

Copyright © 2007 Simon Kernick

Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of the Random House Group

BANTAM PRESS

I flick my eyes from the lump to the clock radio and back again. The LCD display tells me it's 9.51 a.m. Very late for me. I'm usually an early riser. I switch on the bedside lamp, the brightness making me squint sharply.

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 dampness, wondering what it is under there, then pull them back in one swift movement.

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. Underneath a silver belly-button ring, the faded tattoo of a butterfly sits on her 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 the head has been either hacked or sawn off, and the blood surrounds it like a huge crimson halo. It is the only obvious injury to the body.

For some seconds – it may be as few as three, it may be as many 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. 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 never fought in any battle, 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?

Copyright © 2007 Simon Kernick
Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of the Random House Group

BANTAM PRESS

Why?

I can't look at her any more. 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 may 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 DVD player and it grabs 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 it PRESS PLAY.

For a moment, I'm too shell-shocked to figure out what it's trying to say, but then the realization hits.

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 birdsong 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 wom 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 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

Copyright © 2007 Simon Kernick
Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of the Random House Group
BANTAM PRESS

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, no tell-tale lumps, so I haven't been hit over the head. This means I've been drugged, and with something powerful enough that I wouldn't bat an 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 coagulated, and the thick patches on the sheets are also drying. She died some time ago, then, 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.

Copyright © 2007 Simon Kernick

Published by Bantam Press,
an imprint of the Random House Group

BANTAM PRESS