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KILL A STRANGER

Written by **Simon Kernick**

Published By **Headline**

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**KILL
A
STRANGER**

**SIMON
KERNICK**



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First published in 2020 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 4722 7095 5
Trade paperback ISBN 978 1 4722 7096 2

Typeset in Sabon by CC Book Production

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in well-managed forests and other controlled sources. 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
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

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

PROLOGUE

DCI Cameron Doyle

Justice. I've spent a thirty-year career being paid to uphold it. I've had successes, sure. I've put no fewer than twenty-six killers behind bars, as well as numerous other lowlifes who've committed serious crimes. But almost to a man and woman, the people I sent down were either poor, desperate or, in some cases, just downright stupid.

The truly successful criminals, the ones with the money and the power, they've always been a far harder proposition. They've got the resources to fend you off time and time again. Eventually your bosses tire of the fight and decide to leave them in search of easier targets. That's how it works, especially when success in police work is all based on performance targets.

But that's not how I work. Call me old-fashioned, but I never give up. I'm patient. I'm methodical. And in the end, I get there. However long it takes.

And I'm here now. Ready to close the curtain on a case that's been troubling me for a long, long time. I've got three murder suspects in this police station, and a trail of dead

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bodies. I need to hear from each suspect what happened in the twenty-four hours leading up to their arrest. I want to let them tell it their way, with as little interruption as possible. Give them the rope to hang themselves.

Because right now, I think they're all lying.

1

Matt

A word to the wise. Appreciate every waking second of your life. Breathe in the fresh air. Smell the roses. Don't put off things that'll make you happy. Do the stuff on your bucket list. Now. Don't waste your time with worry. Pretty much everything you've ever worried about never happened.

So live.

Jesus, live. Because let me tell you this. Even if you think your life's a long line of disappointments, it can always get worse. Much, much worse.

And it can all happen in an instant. Like it did that night.

It was just short of 1 a.m. when I got out of the car with a yawn and walked to the front door of the cottage. The rain had stopped but a chill November wind still blew hard across the fields. A light was on in the living room, though I knew Kate wouldn't still be up. She was an early bird. It was rare that she ever lasted past 11, especially now she was pregnant. She might be only a couple of months gone, but she'd suffered a lot from

morning sickness, which was one of the reasons we'd returned home to England for a few months, so we could get access to the best healthcare.

I was in a good mood as I went inside. I remember that. Thinking that I'd had a good evening in London, that life was going well. That I had a lot to look forward to.

I locked the door behind me and took off my shoes, cutting the light and using the dying embers from the open fire to guide me as I crept through the living room, trying not to make a noise. Kate was a light sleeper, and she wouldn't take kindly to being woken. I hadn't given her a time I'd be back from London – we don't have the kind of relationship where we have to be in each other's pockets – but I knew this was on the late side, so I took the stairs one at a time with exaggerated slowness, trying in vain to stop them creaking and whining beneath my feet. That was the problem with character cottages. They never shut up.

Our bedroom door was open a foot and I tiptoed past it into the bathroom. I washed my face and cleaned my teeth, and even stopped for a few moments to smile at my reflection in the mirror. 'We've come a long way, you and me,' I whispered. Which was true. We had. Thirty-six years. Some big ups, some even bigger downs. And then finally, when all looked lost, the biggest up of them all. Falling in love, against the odds, and starting a whole new life in the sunshine.

I took off my clothes in the bathroom, switched off the light and slipped into our bedroom, gently closing the door

behind me and listening, just to be on the safe side, for the telltale sound of Kate's breathing as she slept.

Except I couldn't hear it.

The window frame was rattling a little from the wind and I wondered if that was obscuring the noise, because she was definitely in bed. I could see her in the darkness. She was almost completely covered by the duvet, though I could make out the bulge of her figure under it, her head poking out of the top.

But she wasn't moving. At all. Not even when one of the floorboards creaked loudly under my bare foot.

This was a result. She was sleeping heavily for once.

Gently I pulled up my side of the duvet and lay down in the bed, stifling a yawn, feeling that warm pleasure at the prospect of sleep.

And felt it immediately. A cold, clammy wetness on my arm.

Frowning, I slid my hand across the sheet. It was soaking, yet Kate still wasn't moving.

Something was wrong.

I lifted my hand from under the duvet, saw the darkness of the stain on my palm, and cried out. 'Oh Jesus.'

Instinctively I grabbed Kate's shoulder, which was when I realised she was wearing a coat.

'Kate? Kate?' I shook her. Nothing.

Panicking, I reached over and switched on the light, blinking against the sudden brightness, and yanked back the covers.

She was lying on her front, fully clothed, her head turned

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sideways towards me, pale blue eyes staring blankly into space.

I'd never seen a corpse before, but straight away I knew the woman in front of me was dead.

But the thing was, it wasn't Kate.

2

Kate

If you've never been in a situation like this before, you just can't understand it. I'll be blunt. It was absolutely terrifying.

The nightmare started just like that. Bang. I literally woke with a start, and realised that I was being flung around in complete darkness in a suffocating confined space. I tried to open my eyes but couldn't. Then tried to open my mouth. I couldn't do that either. I was utterly disorientated, with an intense throbbing pain between my eyes.

For another confused few seconds I couldn't compute what was going on. My first thought was that I was in some incredibly vivid dream, where I could actually experience pain and discomfort. Then, as my head banged against something metal and hollow, and the artificial sound of an engine forced its way into my consciousness, it finally dawned on me that I was being transported somewhere in the boot of a car.

My first thought was my baby. I'm two months pregnant. He or she – and I have a gut feeling it's a she, don't ask me why – will be my first child, and already I felt that intense,

indescribable bond with her that I've heard about from so many mothers. Without thinking, I tried to reach for my belly to protect her from all the violent movements, but I couldn't do that either. I was lying bunched up in a tight foetal position, with my hands tied painfully behind my back and my feet bound together. I was also blindfolded and gagged.

And that was when the panic set in. I wanted to throw up, and that made me even more scared, because I knew that if I did, then the gag would cause me to choke on my own vomit. My breathing was getting faster and faster, and I felt close to hyperventilating for the first time in years.

I had to calm down. But you try it when one minute you're flat out asleep, the next you're trussed up going God knows where. It's a lot easier said than done. I could feel everything running away from me. I had to slow my breathing. For the baby's sake.

Calm, calm, breathe slowly, I kept telling myself, like one of those crappy mindfulness apps that rich Pilates-loving women of a certain age all seem to have. Take stock. Think positive.

I tried to. It felt almost impossible. And yet . . . A chink of hope popped into my head like a light switching on. Because I was still alive, and if whoever had snatched me from my bed wanted me dead, I'd be dead. Simple as that.

The thought went a very small way to consoling me, and I finally felt my breathing come back under control.

I could tell that I was still in my silk pyjamas, but a thick blanket had been placed over the top of me, presumably

to keep me warm. Again this meant I was better to them living and breathing.

And obviously, the most important thing was to keep it that way.

All my life I've had to fight. I grew up in a single-parent family where we had next to no money. According to my mum – who basically told me nothing else about him – my dad wasn't interested in having anything to do with me. And my mum's boyfriends (and there were quite a few of them) tended to just come and go, passing through as if she was just a tired port of call on the voyage to better things. But while they were there, they tended to treat both of us with varying degrees of contempt. In other words, there wasn't a lot of love to go around and I grew up harder than people think.

As a consequence, I don't scare easily.

I tried to remember how I'd got here. My last memory was heading up to bed. I'd spent the evening at home in our new rental cottage while Matt was catching up with old friends in London. He hadn't asked me to go with him, and I would have said no anyway. On a wet, miserable November night, the last thing I needed was to traipse up to town. Instead, I'd relaxed by the fire, watched some crap TV and read my book – a hard-boiled thriller I wasn't really enjoying. Then I'd headed for bed at about 10.30, 11, something like that, leaving the light on downstairs for Matt.

I'd locked the doors. I remember that.

I'd read some more, turned out the lights and gone to sleep. Then what?

I racked my brains. It was a huge effort. My head was

killing me, a heavy white pain, accompanied by a terrible raging thirst and an unpleasant chemical smell in the still air of the boot.

That smell. It was suddenly familiar.

I remembered waking up from a light sleep, almost before I'd really gone under, and sensing the presence of someone else in the room, thinking it was Matt . . .

And the next second a silhouetted figure looming out of the darkness, thrusting a wet cloth with the same chemical odour I was smelling now – but much stronger – over my nose and mouth. I had another vague memory of struggling violently against whoever was holding me down, but I couldn't honestly say for certain whether it was real or imagined.

And that was it.

God knows how much time had passed. Ten minutes. Two hours. As I lay there bracing myself for bumps in the road, the car made a sharp turn and stopped. A car door opened, then I heard a gate opening with a whine.

Now we were travelling up a gravel track in a gentle curve. I calculated the distance, knowing that any information I could get might assist me later. Fifty metres. One hundred. Going fairly slowly.

The car stopped and the engine was cut. Two doors opened. Which meant two kidnappers.

I took a deep breath, swallowed. Waiting. Scared of what was going to happen next.

The boot opened and I felt two pairs of hands on me, one yanking off the blanket, the other untying my feet. I

was hauled from the car into a strong wind that my silk pyjamas, bought in tropical Colombo, did nothing to protect me from.

I shivered violently, making muffled sounds beneath the gag, hoping they'd have some pity and remove it.

The blanket was thrust back round my shoulders and my feet untied, but no attempt was made to remove the gag or the blindfold. They led me, each one holding an arm, for a distance I counted as thirty-six steps before they stopped again. Neither of them spoke. I tried to smell them. That way I'd be able to detect whether or not they were male or female, but the lingering chemical smell in my nostrils was playing havoc with my senses. I managed to bump against the one on my left, immediately bouncing off, estimating that he was a stocky male, two or three inches taller than me, so about five ten. Both had firm grips, making me think the one on my right was a man too.

The one on the left temporarily let go of me as I heard him unlock a door. I never seriously considered running. Where the hell was I going to go with a blindfold on and my hands tied behind my back? There was no way I was going to risk hurting my baby.

I remained utterly passive, my heart thumping hard in my chest as I was led inside. I immediately caught a whiff of damp and smoke, strong enough that it overpowered the chemical smell in my nostrils. It was as cold in there as it was outside. That told me something important. Not only had they got into our locked cottage, but they'd found a building nearby to hold me in. Judging by the silence on

the walk from the car, it was suitably out of the way. This kidnap had been well planned by people who knew what they were doing. More importantly, if they were holding me here, it meant they weren't intending to kill me yet. They wanted something from me first.

Bide your time, I repeated to myself as I was led slowly through the building, down a corridor, through a door and then up half a dozen steps onto what felt from the sound it was making beneath my feet like some sort of wooden stage.

They brought me to a halt and turned me round so I was facing the other way. The man on the left moved away for a few seconds before returning and slipping something over my head.

I was still telling myself to stay calm. That there would be a way out of this. Right until the moment the rope tightened around my throat.

Which was when I realised it was a noose.