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PETER JAMES

**THE
FIRST
48
HOURS**

...will decide if you live or die.

**SIMON
KERNICK**

THE NO.1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**THE
FIRST
48
HOURS**

**SIMON
KERNICK**



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First published in 2023 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

This Ebook edition published in 2023 by Headline Publishing Group

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 1 4722 9243 8

Cover image © mbbirdy/ Getty Images

Cover design by Patrick Insole

Author photograph © Johnny Ring

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

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

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About the Author



Simon Kernick is a number one bestseller and one of the UK's most popular thriller writers, with huge hits including **GOOD COP BAD COP**, **KILL A STRANGER**, **RELENTLESS**, **THE LAST 10 SECONDS**, **SIEGE** and **THE BONE FIELD** series.

Also by Simon Kernick

The Business of Dying
The Murder Exchange
The Crime Trade
A Good Day to Die
Relentless
Severed
Deadline
Target
The Last 10 Seconds
The Payback
Siege
Ultimatum
Wrong Time, Wrong Place
Stay Alive
The Final Minute
The Witness
The Bone Field
The Hanged Man
Dead Man's Gift and Other Stories
We Can See You
Die Alone
Kill a Stranger
Good Cop Bad Cop

About the Book



A COP NEEDS TO CRACK A DEADLY CASE

He's a detective hunting cold-blooded killers, but does he know more than he admits?

A MOTHER HAS TO SAVE HER DAUGHTER

She's a lawyer who must defend a murderer – but how far will she go to protect her only child?

A COUPLE WILL COMMIT THE PERFECT CRIME

They have a plan – but can they trust each other with their lives?

THREE STORIES. TWO DAYS. DOES ONE SECRET CONNECT THEM ALL?

THE FIRST 48 HOURS . . . MAY ALSO BE THEIR LAST.

Praise for Simon Kernick:

‘Great plots, great characters, great action’

Lee Child

‘An absolute master of the adrenaline-fuelled ride’

Peter James

‘Simon Kernick writes with his foot pressed hard on the pedal. Hang on tight!’

Harlan Coben

‘That thud you hear is Kernick whipping the rug from under your feet again’

The Times

‘Simon Kernick is one of the most reliable purveyors of the edge-of-your-seat thriller . . .
gives a more powerful adrenaline rush than an EpiPen’

Sunday Express

‘Pace, pace, pace is what Simon Kernick does best’

Daily Mirror

‘Thriller-meister Simon Kernick’s standalone books are always worth picking up’

Sunday Sport

‘One of Britain’s top thriller writers’

The Sun

Prologue

‘If anything happens to my precious boy, I don’t know what I’ll do . . .’

These are the words that no police officer ever wants to hear. They’re delivered with such animal anguish that Cotton and I just look at each other, knowing full well we’re taking a real risk here. And as the senior officer of the two of us, I’m the one whose career goes down the pan if we fail.

The woman who utters those words is forty-six-year-old Jenny Day. She’s in the front passenger seat of the car fifty yards in front of ours, and she’s talking to us on an open phone line. The man driving her is her husband, Nigel, and they’re the parents of eighteen-year-old Henry Day, the latest victim of a team of professional kidnapers operating throughout south-east England known by both the media and the National Crime Agency’s Anti Kidnap and Extortion Unit – the people who employ both Cotton and me – as the Vanishers.

These days, kidnapping’s often considered something of an old-fashioned crime, and one that, in the age of cameras on every street corner, has had its day. But nothing could be further from the truth. There are kidnappings and abductions happening around you all the time, whether it be drug dealers holding those who owe them money for ransom, or parents snatching kids from their partners. The difference is, they don’t tend to make the headlines. For a long time, the Vanishers flew under the radar too, because they made use of the one technological development that takes out a huge amount of the risk involved in kidnapping.

Cryptocurrency.

Crypto is every criminal’s friend. It may not be quite so anonymous as its proponents think it is, but it’s still very hard for law enforcement to trace if you know how to move it around, and it’s helped make the Vanishers’ MO near-perfect.

They pick an ordinary upper-middle-class family, one that’s got ready access to significant liquid savings, and then snatch the most vulnerable member. Contrary to popular belief, this isn’t usually a young child. The easiest to take out are those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, especially if they come from a good family. They’re the ones making the most of the freedom that adulthood brings them, and who are still naïve enough to trust people, as well as being generally unobservant of their surroundings.

They're not going to be missed quickly, especially if they're at uni, and if the abduction's done swiftly and efficiently (potentially when they're inebriated), no one's going to notice a thing.

When the Vanishers have their victim safely stored, one of their number calls the mother (it's always the mother), using the victim's phone, and explains the situation. As long as the family cooperate and don't involve the police, then as soon as a ransom is paid into a specified crypto wallet in bitcoin (the amount varies but is usually equivalent to about half a million pounds), the son (it's been a son in every case so far) is released unharmed. However, it's made very clear that if they don't pay, or are foolish enough to involve the police, then they'll never see their child again. As an added security measure, the caller warns them that if they contact the police after the victim's release, they'll be targeted again.

It may or may not come as a surprise to find out that almost everyone cooperates and pays the ransom without involving us, and it's for that reason that we still don't know the exact number of kidnaps there've actually been. But it appears that in every instance, the Vanishers have been true to their word and have released their victim unharmed within twenty-four hours of receipt of the money. It's only afterwards that the truth has begun to seep out. When someone's been the victim of a trauma like a kidnapping, it's very hard for them to keep quiet about it to those around them, so word ends up spreading. In one case, a nineteen-year-old man who'd spent three days locked in a basement tried to commit suicide three months later, causing his family to finally report what had happened to the police, even though they were still terrified of being targeted again, and the media to pick up on the story. As a result of the press coverage, three other families came forward anonymously, which is how the NCA's Anti Kidnap team, which I head up, finally built a picture of what had been happening. The four cases we know about for sure took place over a period of just under three years, and the problem's been that the trail on all of them has long gone cold. The bitcoin ransoms have disappeared into the ether; the CCTV footage has been wiped; and there's no longer even any DNA evidence of any kind.

The Vanishers have left clues behind, of course. There was no way they could avoid that. We know for a fact that there are at least two of them: a man who liaises with the victims while they're being held (although because they're always blindfolded, there's no description of him other than that he talks in a London accent and sounds like he could be in his thirties or forties, which doesn't exactly narrow it down); and a woman aged somewhere between twenty-five and forty-five, who's taken an active part in all four abductions. They like to snatch their targets from the street at night. According to the victims, the female kidnapper approaches them pretending to be drunk or distressed, and unsteady on her feet. As they go to help her, she jabs them with a needle containing a powerful sedative, and in every case the next thing they can remember is waking up in a locked basement cell, where they're kept for the duration of their stay. During that time, they're fed and given water by the male, but they have no real communication with him.

At the end of their ordeal, they're injected with a sedative again, always without warning, and the next thing they know, they're waking up in the middle of nowhere (an abandoned quarry in one case; a field in the middle of the countryside in another), often only minutes before they're discovered by their family members, who've been given the coordinates of where they are. All four known victims were released within an area of approximately fifty square miles around south-west Surrey, which suggests that the Vanishers have connections to the area and are keeping their captives somewhere in the vicinity.

But that was it. And it wasn't much to go on. The media made a big thing of the story when it first broke, but when it became clear that the Vanishers weren't going to be identified and arrested any time soon, interest faded away. Which meant we had to wait and hope and keep alive in the minds of the public the fact that there remained a dangerous kidnap gang out there somewhere, and if anyone else fell victim to them, it was imperative they contact the police straight away so they could finally be brought to justice. But our big problem is that the Vanishers are almost too reliable: every prospective victim knows that if they pay the ransom, they get their loved one back in one piece, whereas if they call the police, there's no guarantee that they'll achieve the same result.

And then three days ago, we finally got our break when we received a phone call from property developer Nigel Day to say that the Vanishers had their son, a student at Reading University, and were demanding a ransom in bitcoin just short of half a million pounds.

The first thing we did was get hold of the council camera footage for the previous twenty-four hours covering the street where Day lived. And that was when we got break number two. At 7.23 p.m. the previous night, Henry Day had walked out of his front door, turned left and gone approximately fifteen yards before a woman approached him from out of shot, appearing to ask him a question. As he paused to talk to her, she jabbed him with something. He then stumbled, and she put her arm round his shoulders and led him to where a grey Chrysler people carrier had pulled up. She slid open the rear passenger door, pushed him inside, and the car drove off.

We knew it was the Vanishers. The woman matched the basic description we'd been given of the female kidnapper, although it looked in the footage like she was wearing a long blonde wig. The driver of the Chrysler was wearing a cap, glasses and the criminal's other best friend, the face mask. As soon as we ran the car's plates through the ANPR system, we saw that they were fake. So we now had a confirmed kidnapping in progress, although the suspects had again made sure they were hard to recognise and track.

Our plan with the Days has been to keep a low profile and let them pay the ransom before simply following its trail to the kidnappers. And that's what the couple have done, paying the whole sum into a crypto wallet in the name of a non-existent individual called Arthur11138. Theoretically, any wallet can be traced back to its real owner, because every transaction is recorded on a public ledger called a blockchain. However, this process

can take months, or even years, if the owner is tech-savvy enough to set up virtual barriers: fake IP addresses, logless VPNs, etc.

But that doesn't matter to us, because our plan is to wait for the Vanishers to grab the money from the wallet, at which point we'll be able to watch as they move it round the system. Because here's the thing. Eventually they'll want to turn it into hard cash – the type you can actually spend – and in order to do that, they'll need a bank, which means identifying themselves and setting up accounts. And that's when we'll pounce.

So for the last twenty-three hours, we've been waiting for Arthur11138 to take the money out of the wallet, which any self-respecting kidnapper would want to do as soon as possible so he can start the process of making it disappear.

Except it hasn't moved.

Which is something of a worry.

But then just over an hour ago, one of the kidnappers got in touch with the Days via text, using a burner phone that was then immediately switched off, acknowledging receipt of the money and telling them where they could find their son.

That's where we're heading now, to an abandoned barn two miles south of the village of Ockham, in the same general area where the other victims have been released. We haven't had time to put a surveillance team in place, nor have we told the local police what's going on, in case they inadvertently do something that tips off the kidnappers.

'Your son's going to be okay, Mrs Day,' I tell her. 'We're almost there now.'

'Then why is he not answering his phone?' she replies, an almost hysterical edge to her tone. 'The man said he would have his mobile phone with him. I've just tried to call it.'

Henry Day's mobile phone started pinging from the location we're heading to approximately five minutes after the kidnappers' call to the Days, but they were under strict instructions not to call it until 10 a.m., which was two minutes ago.

'He's almost certainly been drugged before release,' I explain, 'because that's what happened with the other victims. Which means he's probably still suffering the effects of it.'

'Will he be all right? They won't have given him an overdose, will they?'

'I very much doubt it, Mrs Day. None of the other victims suffered any tangible side effects.'

'None of the other victims' families involved the police,' she says, her voice shrill. Contacting us was her husband's idea, and Jenny Day has been something of a reluctant participant, who clearly would have kept quiet about the kidnap if she'd had her way.

'These people don't know you've involved the police,' I say, exchanging another look with Cotton. 'We've kept everything completely under wraps. Only a handful of people are aware of what's going on.'

'They could have been watching.'

'They weren't watching, Mrs Day, and even if they were, they would never have seen us together. And neither your phone nor your house was bugged, so they wouldn't have

known about any phone calls either. It's going to be okay.'

'It will be,' I hear her husband telling her. 'We're nearly there.'

And we are. We have a tracker on the Days' car, and we can see on the dashboard screen that they're pulling up to a T-junction, having moved a little further ahead. Now they turn right. It's only another two hundred metres to the barn from where Henry's phone is sending its signal.

'I'm going to try him again,' says Mrs Day, and inadvertently or otherwise, she ends the call with us.

'Do you think it's a good idea to let them go first, Fish?' asks Cotton, now that we're not being overheard.

'We'll let them pull up outside. If he comes out to greet them, fine. Otherwise they wait for us to go inside.' Our plan has always been to let the Days arrive first while we stay back, just in case the kidnappers are watching the barn – although doing so would again represent the kind of needless risk that the Vanishers tend to avoid. But like all hastily made plans around kidnaps, you never know.

We're at the T-junction now, and I use the radio to tell the convoy of unmarked vehicles following us that our ETA is only one minute, and that they should keep a mile back and wait for further instructions.

Mrs Day comes on the line again, sounding worried. 'He's still not answering.'

Cotton looks at me. He mouths the words: 'I don't like this.'

I know exactly what he means. All four prior victims we know about were drugged before release, but they'd all woken up before their families got to them. Also, none of them were in possession of their mobile phones. It's always a dangerous move for criminals to keep hold of traceable mobile phones, because even switched off, we're able to track them. And yet they've turned Henry's back on. Which is not like them.

And still the ransom money hasn't moved from the account.

The combination of all these things makes the atmosphere in the car tense. I'm ultimately responsible for this operation, and it's my head that's going to be the one rolling.

I can see from the tracker signal on my phone that the Days' car has turned onto the short track leading to the barn and is pulling up directly in front of it. I call their mobile phone, and when Mr Day answers it, putting us on speaker, I tell the two of them to stay in the car. 'Can you see any sign of Henry?' I ask.

'No, we can't,' he says. 'The place looks empty and the doors are shut.'

'I need to go in there,' says Mrs Day. 'I need to find him. It's freezing. He could die of exposure.'

I hear the passenger door opening. 'Please stay where you are, Mrs Day. I don't want either of you contaminating the scene. There may be clues we can pick up about the kidnappers.'

'I don't care,' she answers. 'I just want my boy back.'

‘Please stay put,’ I tell her firmly. Then, to Cotton: ‘Pull in next to them.’

Cotton nods and slows down as he comes to the turning at the end of a high hedge running along the road. The barn, a large one-storey structure with a dilapidated roof, sits behind a piece of potholed waste ground. I look round as we stop next to the Days’ car, and Cotton cuts the engine. The ground here is flat and open, interspersed with hedges and fences that divide the fields all around the property, and although there are a couple of outhouses and residential dwellings in the distance, there are no obvious vantage points from where we can be observed.

‘The Vanishers aren’t going to be watching this place,’ I say, before getting out of the car and shivering against the wind. It’s a dreary, cold December day, the kind that makes you wonder why you live in this country, with sleet forecast for later.

The Days are out of their car too, both looking at me. Mr Day, early fifties, dressed too young for his age, is clearly working hard to stay stoic and calm. Mrs Day, a short, intense woman brimming with nervous energy, and the look of someone who’s used to being in charge, is almost bouncing up and down on her feet. ‘He’s going to freeze in this. Get in there if you won’t let us in,’ she says. ‘I’ve called his name. There’s no answer.’

‘We’re going in now,’ I say, putting on a pair of evidence gloves and motioning for Cotton to follow me. I repeat the instruction for the Days to remain where they are. I’m feeling anxious now, although I try not to show it.

But I know Cotton can see my tension. He looks worried too. We’ve worked together in Kidnap for close to six years and we know each other well. Every case is very different, and you can usually predict the way it’s going to go. But there are alarm bells sounding all over the place with this one.

We get to the barn door. I can feel Nigel and Jenny Day’s eyes boring into my back. Once again Jenny calls her son’s name, her voice rising above the wind.

I knock loudly and call his name too, asking if he’s in there and all right.

No answer.

There’s no point hanging about. If Henry is lying in there unconscious, he will be at risk of hypothermia, so I open the door and step inside, Cotton following.

The barn is empty. Completely. Even the cobblestoned floor is comparatively clean. I look up, as if I’m going to see him there, but there’s nothing but cobwebs between the beams, and a hole the size of a suitcase that looks straight out onto a relentlessly grey sky.

‘The phone’s got to be in here somewhere,’ says Cotton, glancing at his own phone as he walks across the room. ‘The signal’s coming from south of the barn.’

‘But where the hell’s Henry?’ I say, conscious of the helplessness in my voice. ‘This isn’t how these people operate. He should be here.’ But the fact is, I’m not missing anything. He isn’t here, and that’s the end of it.

‘Here’s the phone,’ says Cotton, crouching down at a spot in the corner of the building.

Then he says something that stills the room. ‘There’s a note with it.’

I’m at his side in two steps as he stands back up, unfolding a piece of A4 paper with

gloved hands.

We both stand in silence for a moment as the bold typewritten words on the page sink in.

YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE INVOLVED THE POLICE. NOW YOU'LL NEVER SEE HENRY AGAIN. CHECK THE PHOTOS SECTION. PASSCODE 999911.

It's me who picks up the phone. I do it instinctively, wanting to get this over with. Without speaking, I punch in the passcode. The home screen comes up with a photo of Henry Day looking mean and moody in a hoodie

'How could they have known, Fish?' says Cotton, incredulous. 'We kept it tight. We kept it fucking tight.'

I don't answer. I find the photo icon, open it up, and there it is. The first picture I see. It's a close-to-full-body shot of Henry lying on a bare stone floor in the foetal position, a thick puddle of blood pooled beside him, emanating from what look like a number of stab wounds to his abdomen. His mouth is gagged, his hands tied behind his back. This photo is not faked. When you've seen as many dead bodies as I have, in twenty-one years of police work, you know what a dead person looks like. This is definitely Henry. And he is very definitely dead.

'Oh Christ,' says Cotton. 'They really did it.'

Because he knows a dead body when he sees one too.

'Have you got an evidence bag?' I say, my voice quiet, constricted. The words an effort to get out.

He reaches into his coat pocket and takes one out, and I hand him the phone, not wanting to look at the picture any more as the barn door opens and Jenny Day strides inside, followed closely by her husband.

'Where is he?' she demands as I turn to face her. 'Where's my son?'

But as I walk towards her, not sure how I'm going to say this, she must see the expression of defeat etched into my face, because she lets out an animal howl and comes at me. 'Where is he? What's happened to my boy?'

'We don't know yet for sure,' I say, and I could take the coward's way out and not elaborate until I've got more information, but I don't, because I owe them the truth. 'The kidnappers found out we were involved,' I continue. 'There's a possibility he may have come to harm.'

She goes for me then, and who can blame her? She slaps my face, tries to scratch me, and though I put my hands up to defend myself, such is her fury that she just keeps coming, her nails cutting my cheeks, until finally Mr Day grabs her with both arms in a bear hug and pulls her backwards, his eyes flashing a cold fury as they meet mine.

I stumble outside, just keep walking into the blessed biting cold, knowing that this whole thing is on me. That I have failed.

And I'd say that this is going to be something that haunts me for the rest of my life. But that wouldn't be true.

Because, you see, I planned the whole thing.

THREE MONTHS LATER

Thursday, 11.15 a.m.

Okay. So let me introduce myself. My name's Keith Fisher, but no one calls me Keith because, frankly, it's a terrible name, and I've always been known as Fish. Obviously you know by now that I'm not one of the good guys, although I suspect it was a shock to find that out.

I wouldn't say I'm evil. That would be far too simplistic. Let's just say that twenty-one years of dealing with criminals, back-stabbing bosses and an unappreciative public has left me with the opinion that if you want to get on in this world, you've got to step on a lot of toes and not worry too much about the consequences. There are plenty of arseholes out there who deserve what's coming to them.

Take the Day family, for instance. Nigel Day, the dad, is a property developer who knocks down perfectly good houses and sticks back-to-back monstrosities in their place, cutting financial corners wherever he can and basically not giving a monkey's about anyone else. He and his wife also own a portfolio of five student rental properties in various locations where they charge young people extortionate rents to live in mould--infested dumps, thereby helping them to pile up huge amounts of debt for the future. Jenny is also a Conservative local councillor, which probably helps explain why planning approval never seems to be a problem for Nigel's latest development company (he's had two others in the past, both of which went bankrupt, owing their suppliers a lot of money that none of them ever saw). He's also fucking his secretary, the dirty dog.

Both of them have behaved appallingly since the disappearance and presumed death of their son (who, incidentally, wasn't an especially nice kid either, although more on that later). They've been appearing on TV criticising the police, writing articles in newspapers about the incompetence of the Anti Kidnap unit and especially its former head (i.e., me), acting like they're the only people in the country let down by the forces of law and order. Message to the Days: you're not. Everyone gets let down by the forces of law and order these days.

So why does a man who's a bit of a villain make a career out of the police? Well, to be honest – and I feel I can be honest with you now – I wanted adventure, and power too. At first, my plan was to join the army. I'd always fancied the idea of carrying a gun and potentially firing it at people, but at that time, in the mid nineties, the only war zone the