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Opening Extract from...

Red Right Hand

Written by Chris Holm

Published by Mulholland Books

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RED RIGHT HAND

CHRIS HOLM

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Mulholland Books
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 60620 3
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 60618 0

The author is grateful for permission to reprint lines from "Red RightHand," written by Nick Cave and published by Mute Song Limited.

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Steve—thanks for the push

What if the breath that kindl'd those grim fires
Awak'd should blow them into sevenfold rage
And plunge us in the flames? or from above
Should intermitted vengeance arm again
His red right hand to plague us?

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

You're one microscopic cog
In his catastrophic plan
Designed and directed by
His red right hand

—Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, "Red Right Hand"

SEVEN YEARS AGO

THE MAN STAGGERED into the lobby of the Albuquerque field office shortly after three a.m. His hair, black streaked with gray, was matted down by rain. His face was dusted with stubble and deeply lined. Tattered clothing clung to his lithe frame. His feet were bare and bleeding. Water, tinged red, pooled beneath him.

Special Agent Charlie Thompson glanced up from her paperwork in surprise. He hadn't shown up on any of the building's exterior surveillance cameras. If it weren't for the sudden roar of the storm through the open door, she might not have noticed him come in.

Thompson had graduated from Quantico only a month before, but somehow she'd already managed to piss off her new boss. Yancey had her pulling overnights on the front desk all week. Truthfully, she didn't mind. The odd phone call aside—conspiracy nuts, usually, too

tangled up in their delusions to sleep—the graveyard shift was pretty quiet.

Tonight, though, a thunderstorm had blown in like the wrath of God. Lightning forked across the sky. Rolling thunder shook the building. Sheets of rain reduced the streetlights to blurry smears.

Poor guy's probably just a vagrant trying to get out of the rain, Thompson thought—although for some reason, she didn't quite believe it.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Pale blue eyes regarded Thompson from bruised sockets. The man opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a dry croak. He swallowed hard, wincing, and limped across the lobby toward her. As he approached, she realized his knuckles were scraped raw. She flashed him a smile intended to disarm and surreptitiously thumbed the emergency-alert button on the two-way radio clipped to her belt.

When he reached the desk, he tried again. "I…need to talk to the special agent in charge." The words came out thick and wrong. Dried blood was caked in the creases at the corners of his mouth, and his jawline was misshapen, as if he'd recently had teeth removed, and not consensually.

"What's this regarding?" Thompson asked.

He fixed her with his cold, unblinking gaze. A crack of thunder rattled the windows. "I think it's better for the both of us"—he breathed deeply—"if I save that information for the special agent in charge."

"It's late, sir. SAIC Yancey left hours ago. He's probably asleep by now."

"Then pick up the fucking phone and wake him up!"

He banged a fist on the front desk to accentuate his point—and only then noticed the security guards.

There were four of them. They'd come running when they heard Thompson's distress signal via their walkies. Three fanned out to flank him, guns drawn. One attempted to approach him from behind, his hand resting on his holstered weapon, but froze when the man wheeled on him.

"Don't move," one of the guards shouted. "Hands in the air!"

The stranger crouched into a forward fighting stance, his eyes darting from one guard to the next. Despite his age and his disheveled appearance, he was corded with lean muscle like a middleweight boxer. The guards tensed, their fingers tightening on their triggers.

"I'm not playing, asshole! Get on the ground—now!"

Thompson stood and put her hands up, palms out—a calming gesture. "Whoa! Easy, guys. Everyone just take a breath. I'm sure we can sort this out."

In that moment, lightning struck the building. The thunder that accompanied it was immediate, deafening. The lobby plunged into darkness.

And the stranger made his move.

He lunged at the nearby guard, his left hand extended. A flash of gunfire lit the room—blinding Thompson momentarily—as one of the other guards discharged his weapon. The bullet zipped through the space he'd just vacated and dimpled the far wall. Then the web between the man's thumb and forefinger connected with his quarry's throat. The guard gurgled sickeningly as his airway collapsed. He would have fallen had the man not grabbed his trachea in a pinch grip

and yanked, twisting his wrist so that the guard's back wound up pressed to his chest—a gasping, wheezing human shield.

The man drew the guard's sidearm and opened fire.

Thompson saw the rest unfold in freeze-frames, the darkness punctuated by lightning and muzzle flashes. One guard's knee exploded, and he went down screaming. Another took rounds to the shoulder, the wrist, the hip. The last guard standing rushed the man and tried to tackle him. The man released his human shield—who slumped, unconscious, to the floor—sidestepped the assault, grabbed his would-be attacker by the hair, and drove his knee into the man's nose. Then he yanked the guard upright—blood spraying in an arc from both nostrils—and tossed him through a glass display case.

Less than thirty seconds had elapsed since the storm had knocked out the building's power. Thompson clutched her shiny new sidearm in trembling hands and waited for the lightning to reveal her target.

The emergency backup lights kicked in, illuminating the fallen guards. Their assailant was nowhere in sight. Thompson, feeling suddenly exposed, took cover in the foot well of the desk.

For a long while, nothing happened. The only sounds she heard were the static hiss of rain against the windows and her own shallow, panicked breathing. Eventually, she mustered up the courage to climb out from beneath the desk and look around.

But when she emerged, she felt a gun barrel, still warm from firing, press against the back of her head.

"Put your weapon on the ground and get up slow."

She did as he instructed, her hands raised, her heartbeat a manic drumroll in her chest.

"Listen very carefully," he said. "I don't give a flying fuck what time it is. Get your goddamn boss on the line and tell him that the Devil's Red Right Hand would like a word with him."

TODAY

1.

Jake Reston's gaze traveled from the yellowed photo in his hand to the squat brick structure of Fort Point jutting into San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge looming above it. Then he frowned and shook his head.

His wife, Emily, sighed. "Still no good?" Their youngest squirmed in her arms and let out a cry. Emily rocked her idly to settle her. "Sophia's hungry. She's going to get cranky if I don't feed her soon."

"We're getting closer," Jake replied. "Looks like we're maybe ten yards off—twenty at most."

"You said that half an hour ago," Emily said wearily. She looked as tired as she sounded. Her face was pale and drawn. Dark circles framed her eyes. She'd been averaging an hour or two of shut-eye a night since they left home a week ago. Apparently Sophia didn't sleep well in hotels—which meant neither did Emily.

"I know. I'm sorry. This time, I mean it."

Emily pursed her lips but said nothing. Hannah—their eldest, at thirteen—rolled her eyes and plucked her cell phone from her pocket. Jake struggled to tamp down his frustration at their lack of enthusiasm. He couldn't blame them, really; this was taking way longer than he'd anticipated. At least their middle child, Aidan—who was, at present, twirling in place with his arms out while making airplane noises—seemed content to let his dad fritter away the last Saturday of summer vacation.

"Just a little longer, guys—I promise."

"Uh-huh," said Hannah without looking up from her phone.

"You know," he said, gesturing toward the crowded overlook behind them, "some people actually come here of their own accord."

"They're probably just waiting to see somebody jump," Hannah muttered.

Aidan stopped spinning. His face lit up with glee. "They let you jump off the bridge into the water?"

"No!" Jake and Emily said in unison, a moment of parental telepathy.

"Your sister was just kidding," Emily added, flashing Hannah a stern look.

"No, I'm not." She waved her cell phone at her mother. "Says here sixteen hundred people have leaped off it to their deaths since it first opened. A record forty-six in 2013 alone."

Aidan's expression turned worried. "Wait—the people who jumped *died?*"

"Don't listen to her, buddy—she's just messing with you. Hannah, stop being morbid. C'mon," Jake said, head-

ing farther down the path, "I think the photo was taken over here somewhere."

The photo was of Jake's parents—Jake's favorite picture of them, in fact. Forty years ago next month, they'd driven down the coast from Eugene on their honeymoon and asked a passerby to snap the shot. Over time, the colors had washed out, lending the photo a slightly magical quality, and their pose—his father's hands thrust into the pockets of his jeans, his mother clinging to his arm, their hair mussed by the breeze—exuded effortless cool. The photo felt like a secret window to a foreign land, and the people in it were so young and hip, Jake had trouble reconciling them with the hopeless squares who'd raised him. Looking at it, he couldn't help but wonder how he must appear to his own children.

Jake thought it would be cute to stop off on their way home from Disneyland and re-create the photo as a video to wish his parents a happy anniversary, but it had proved harder than anticipated. First, they got stuck in the Bay Area's brutal traffic. Then the city was socked in with morning fog. Once the fog burned off, Jake had trouble finding the right spot. It was no wonder Emily's patience was wearing thin.

Now, though, things were looking up. The day was clear and bright. The sky behind the bridge was a field of blue, unbroken save for the gulls that circled overhead. A lone tugboat chugged across the choppy bay. The temperate ocean breeze blunted the sun's rays and dashed the surf against the rocks. Sea spray filled the air with saline and cast fleeting rainbows at the water's edge. It looked like a postcard come to life.

Jake raised a hand to halt his family and checked the view against the photo again. This time, he smiled.

"Gather up, guys—we're here!"

"Finally," Hannah said.

"Hannah!" her mother chastised, more out of reflex than disagreement.

"What? We've been walking forever."

Jake patted his pockets, looking for his phone. It wasn't there. He cursed under his breath.

Emily shot him a look that could have stopped a city bus. "Don't tell me you left it in the car."

"Okay," he said, flashing her a crooked grin. "I won't tell you." Normally, she found his goofy sense of humor charming. Today, though, she didn't seem amused.

Hannah held her cell phone out. "Here, use mine. Your camera app sucks anyway."

"Thanks, kiddo," Jake said—not remembering until her expression darkened that she'd asked him not to call her that anymore. It seemed like only yesterday that she was greeting him at the door when he came home from work with a squealed "Daddy!" and a knee-height hug.

He opened her camera app and toggled it to video. Then he took a big step backward, trying to fit everyone into the shot. "Aidan, squeeze in closer to your mom. Em, Sophia's got her fingers in her nose again. Hannah, no bunny ears, okay? Once I start recording, I'll count down from three, and we'll all yell *happy anniversary!*"

"Dad," Aidan said, "aren't you going to get in here with us?"

"I'd love to, buddy, but somebody's got to work the camera!"

"But Nan and Papa had a stranger take *their* picture."

You know, Jake thought, the kid had a point. He looked around for someone to hit up, but his prospects were slim. A trio of cyclists rode past, headed toward the bridge. A teenage couple sat hand in hand to one side of the trail, staring moonily into each other's eyes. A woman jogged by in a blur of neon green, her face flushed, her exposed skin gleaming with sweat. None of them looked as if they'd welcome the interruption.

Then Jake spotted an older gentleman moving their way. His face was pallid, his gait halting. Despite the day's warmth, he wore a tweed driving cap and khaki trousers, an argyle sweater over a collared shirt. His clothes hung baggily around his scrawny frame, like dry-cleaning on a wire hanger. Jake thought he looked lonely—the kind of guy who might feed pigeons in the park.

"Excuse me, sir? Would you mind holding my daughter's phone so my family can record an anniversary message for my parents? It'll only take a second, I swear."

The man looked at the phone and then at Jake. His eyes were the pale blue of faded denim. "Sorry," he said, "but I ain't much for gadgets. I got no idea how to work that thing."

"That's fine—I can press record. All you'll have to do is point it." He thumbed the button on the screen and held the phone out to the man.

The man hesitated for a moment, as if searching for some way to decline politely. Then he shrugged and shuffled over. When he took Hannah's ridiculous, bedazzled phone from Jake, he did so gingerly, as if it might break.

Jake trotted over to his family. Tousled Aidan's hair. Turned to face the camera. Put his arms around Hannah and Emily. "Are we all in the shot?"

The old man peered into the phone's camera lens as if it were a viewfinder. "I dunno," he said, "I can't see shit."

Aidan giggled. Emily reddened and gave Jake a gentle elbow to the ribs. Jake forced a smile and said, "I think you're holding it backward."

"What? Oh, hell." He turned the phone around. "There you are. Wait—does that mean I'm on your video now?"

"Don't worry—we can cut that bit when we get home. Ready, guys?"

One by one, all save the baby murmured their assent.

"Three…two…one…"

But they never did record their message.

Because that's when the tugboat slammed into the bridge's south tower and exploded.