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Contact Zero

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Extract

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A Hodder & Stoughton Book

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Foreword

The operational information that enabled me to write this book was sourced at great length through an eclectic range of channels. The vast majority came through interviews I conducted with men and women of the Secret Intelligence Service (M16), both current and retired. Those who spoke to me about what has become known as the 'Contact Zero' network did so only on condition of complete anonymity. In the interests of security, these interviews took place in person and were not recorded. Remarkably, a small minority of interviewees displayed a deeply humbling intestinal fortitude and requested that they themselves be named, if only to give credence and legitimacy to a concept that has of late descended into the realm of myth and legend. For personal reasons, as well as for the continuing security and safety of these brave individuals and their families, I have decided not to document their identities here.

At the time of writing, no documents relating to the Contact Zero network or its infrastructure have been declassified. There are no references to its global reach or its extraordinary history. The only available record, until now, has been confined to the world of anecdote. And of course, over the years, it has evolved, quite simply, into a kind of espionage parable – an

illustrative fairy tale that amuses SIS analysts and other intelligence personnel when the nights draw in and the rain lashes down on the triple glazing of their offices at Vauxhall Cross.

However, travel up a few floors to the management level of the intelligence apparatus and the rumours persist. Like a vapour, many reach these higher altitudes and condense. Once invisible and airborne, they now take an earthly form, an unsettling reality. When operations fail spectacularly, when the blowback from a botched recruitment strikes hard and careers are jeopardized . . . when calamities such as these occur, the fingers begin to point and the tongues begin to wag. The need to siphon off blame to a third party can be all-consuming. There are many options open to an astute politician. Increasingly, a sprinkling of the Contact Zero myth has become as convenient a scapegoat as any. Entire governments have pointed at shadows in the dark or knives in the attic. An intelligence service that considers itself a city-state by other means has no qualms about doing the same. No one has proved Contact Zero exists, of course. But then, no one has proved it does not. Because as Tacitus tells us in the *Agricola*: 'Rumour is not always wrong.'

D.W.
April 2005

Beginnings

How sweet it is to be alive.

Dripping from the river, he was reborn. A crude mechanical, some might say, a needless contrivance. But the immersion was necessary, vital . . . to take these new steps, a new man must be made. No matter that the old vessel had not yet departed. These were dangerous times when men were moved to extremes. The discussions were ended. Only actions remained. What must be done, must be done. He heaved himself up on to the dockside, the dark night embracing him.

Sweet shall be my name, *he thought.*

Sludge from the boots, mud from the ears, the casting-off of a chrysalis. A shudder held his chest suddenly – partly the cold and filthy water freezing his bones, partly sunburst and flutter, the anticipation in his heart.

This liberation. This second chance to serve.

Behold, here: a modern-day Lazarus.

There were still many miles to go, many steps, many traps and unpickings to test the will. The reinvention was only beginning. But even here, on the cold stone, he felt his heart thunder in his breast and smiled.

To live in freedom. To fight anew.

How sweet it was, how sweet.

Zero

Bangkok, Thailand

Yes, these are my breasts.

Claire hated this street. She hated the crowds, she hated the dirt, the heat, the smell, the oh-so-subtle stares of every human male within a sixty-foot radius. This was Sukhumvit 4, a notoriously chaotic shopping precinct: it was on her way home, it chopped at least twenty minutes off her commute if she jumped off the bus early and cut through . . . but how she loathed running the gauntlet. If anything, the place was getting more crowded. Faces loomed out at her from street stalls, doorways. Yes. Correct. Breasts. They belong to me, Claire Elizabeth Williams, they're here, I've had them for twenty-six years and they're mine. As in: not yours. Now please bugger off and leave me alone. I've had a hard day.

Harder than you could possibly know.

The flight from Chiang Mai had been unsettlingly bumpy. She'd tried to sleep but as usual she'd woken herself up at the start of their descent and helped to land the plane. She never understood quite why she did this, as if by sitting in her window seat and turning her full mental attention to the wings she might somehow lend the pilot a bit of cosmic assistance. She would laugh about it afterwards, of course. But she could never bring herself to turn away from the

task. Somewhere inside, she felt the pilot was counting on her.

Once out of the airport, she squeezed on to a local bus, stopped at the office to drop off her notes and was on her way home, looking forward to the peaceful hum of her antiquated air conditioning. But right now, here on the street, the city was infernal. The air rippled up in a heat haze from the pavement, thick with the smell of fried chillies, sewage, molten asphalt. Her auburn hair normally cascaded down over her shoulders, but today Claire had pulled it back tight into a ponytail, in the vain hope it might cool her neck a little. Most days Claire's top looked as if she'd been wearing it in the shower. This, plus the daily eyeballing, was the reason that despite Bangkok's dehumanizing temperatures, Claire always wore her dark denim jacket. The sweat was better than the scrutiny. Claire despised being looked at. Perhaps that was why she'd joined up for this lark in the first place.

Claire walked on.

The crowds, the stares, the heat.

The hissing sound that passed for wolf whistles.

On edge now.

A Mercedes with blacked-out windows had passed her. Force of habit had made her look at the numberplate and she was sure it was the same one that had passed her a week before. Perhaps a seventh sense. Perhaps honest-to-God paranoia. Whatever it was, Claire clicked it up a gear.

Breaking out across the main drag, Claire hopped, skipped and jumped around the gridlock, dodged past a grumbling flotilla of tuk-tuks and lunged into the welcoming gloom of her doorway.

Peace. Quiet. Exhale.

Now, the stairs.

She trod heavily, taking them two at a time, as she ran back the mental videotape of her day. A constructive one, all told. She had spent the last few days up in the north of the country, making acquaintances with people who might one day become something more. She already had a handle on their likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. This was simply groundwork for a more fulfilling friendship. As she neared her landing on the second floor, she allowed herself a tired smile and hoped her footfalls worked out to an even number. For some reason, in Claire's universe, an even number of stairs meant that all would be good with the world. Claire's uncle, a psychiatrist, would have called this an 'overvalued idea'. At the top of her climb, one step was left over. She tried to brush the disappointment from her mind.

As she unlocked the door, she glanced at the fragment of hair she had placed on the doorjamb before she had departed on her trip north two days before. It was in exactly the same position as she had left it.

Good.

The familiar space embraced her. She locked the door behind her. Next, she flung her jacket on the chair, whacked on the air conditioner and, punching the answerphone, made a beeline for the fridge. On the door, a yellow Post-It note proclaimed: *Charge Your Mobile*. She saw it and cringed. She'd forgotten.

Again. Never mind.

Thought that counts.

From the answerphone, a message stuttered into being.

Hi, Greg here – checking you got in all right . . .

The freezer door disgorged a merciful mist of cooling air. Claire closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Goosebumps shivered across her forearms.

Hey, it's Scriphathan, from the mag – you said to call if I bumped into my friend again . . . well, I did . . . just letting you know.

But it wasn't the phone message or the fridge. Something else was making her skin flush, her eyelids snap open. A thought. She closed the fridge quietly and scanned the room. Three windows, sealed carefully from the narrow balcony outside. She checked the talcum powder around the sills. She had sprinkled it as carefully as she could, a uniform layer. Not a single particle had been disturbed.

Hello, love, Mum here. I sent you a birthday package yesterday, but don't open it when it comes. I want you to wait, until the day, so you've got something to open on the actual morning. Hope you're fine . . .

The floorboards creaked in protest as she strode to the desk in the corner. Every drawer, the same status quo – her security measures were all as perfect as the day she'd left them.

And that's what was starting to scare her.

Because this was Thailand – nothing stayed the same. Drops of moisture left footprints in the window dust. Mould grew in bone-dry closets. Cockroaches the size of beagles roamed with impunity. In the space of forty-eight hours the heat and humidity would have started to lift the shards of sellotape from the jambs, the drawer joints . . . The very structure itself moved and listed with the wind, the traffic, the phases of the moon . . .

As her mother's voice burbled on from the answering machine, Claire checked the landing outside her door again. The hair was absolutely fixed in place, to the millimetre. She glanced down the empty hallways and closed the door, locking it with the two deadbolts she'd purchased on her first day in the city. Her eyes darting now to surfaces, furnishings, checking

her countermeasures across the room. As she looked, she tugged the blinds down, the thought buzzing in her mind.

Nothing had changed.

Everything was exactly as she'd left it.

Exactly.

Claire moved to the phone, grabbed the portable handset from its dock and moved to the bedroom. *My security has been compromised*. Time to act. She punched the talk button and heard the dial tone purr. She got as far as pressing zero when the dark arms enfolded her.

She felt his warm hair and skin and stale sweat across her neck even as she felt her larynx *crack* . . .

The Red Sea
Fifty miles north of Port Sudan

The ocean surface was shimmering somewhere above him in a vast canopy of white. Shafts of light crept down to his left, visible through gaps in the rusted metal. Chris Dunlop knew his air would not last long. He was at a depth of fifty feet and already there was not enough to last the ascent. He was also bleeding, disorientated and without his mask, the wound in his stomach billowing clouds of red into the water. The vast looming blackness directly above him was a small part of the wreck of the *Blue Belt*, a large cargo ship that had sunk one clear December morning in 1977.

Theoretically Chris should have known better than to explore a site like this. But then his host and diving partner was an avid Jacques Cousteau freak – a man who had visited nearly every wreck in the vicinity. It made sense to get on his good side.

They'd descended quickly to fifty feet, entered the hull

through the gaping holes all along its western flank and explored the cargo bays. The sheer grotesque beauty of rusting vehicles, stacked like fallen dominoes, briefly transported Chris away from his focus.

A moment was all it took.

Under his ribs, a sharp pain made him turn – but by the time he realized he was bleeding, it was too late to move. Three cars descended from above and wedged him against the steel handrails of a catwalk on the hull. His neck was compressed and his head forced down towards his chest by the weight. His mask floated somewhere nearby, torn off by the impact. He flipped backwards over the rails but the cars followed too quickly and his legs became hooked over the edge.

For some strange reason, as his shins slowly scraped away and disintegrated under the jagged weight of metal, Chris began to think of his friends. He wondered whether Claire had ever managed to remember to recharge her mobile. What the hell the Mexicans had made of Lucy. If Jamie was injuring anyone on the Odessa dance floors with those bony elbows of his. He even thought of Ben. They all phased in and out of his mind's eye, car windows winking in the sun.

His last breath, a bubble the size of a football, ascended through a hole in the hull. It caught the attention of a passing sea turtle and stayed intact until breaking with a sigh on the surface.

Mexico City

Lucy woke in a dark space.

There was the smell of oil and sweat. The air shuddering from her in vast, animalistic breaths. Lucy had seen this

survival instinct herself once before, close up, as a teenager. She'd been walking up the steep hill behind her mother's house when she heard the squeal of brakes. Looking up, she'd seen a man falling from his bicycle. Over the handlebars, headfirst, slamming on to the road. He'd lain there, unconscious. Almost immediately, his lungs had kicked in, inflating like a balloon, devouring the air and hissing it out with startling ferocity. It was almost beautiful. And here she was now, in this moment for herself, sucking in, out. Her head sparkled with pain. She tried to shout out but her throat was like ground glass. She could hardly manage a whisper.

A deafening noise from below, wind whistling above.

She was in the trunk of a car.

She became aware of her hands behind her. A sharp pain in her shoulder explained why they felt strange. She was tied up. The car she was in was travelling at high speed along a road. The surface was smooth, probably tarmac.

It was unclear how long they'd been travelling but from the pool of sweat she could feel sloshing under the small of her back it was probably in the region of an hour. The last thing Lucy Matthews could remember was drinking in La Conchita, a boisterous tequila bar around the corner from her apartment. She thought of Juan – could he have something to do with this? It was possible. Everything was possible. Just one thing was clear. *Either someone spiked my drink or this is the worst hangover in the history of humanity*.

The car made a few sickening turns and was soon lurching over bumpy ground – a side road now, Lucy estimated. They had left the highway.

Ten minutes or so later by her reckoning, the car stopped. Lucy decided now was a good time to protest. She had her brain back and there was nothing like pain to focus the mind.

Her ankles were tied together but unattached to anything else. Rolling painfully on to her side she aimed a kick at the roof of the trunk. Not even a dent. The thing was solid. She tried again.

All she got for her efforts was pain, more pain.

Outside, a noise. Two car doors opened but only one slammed shut. Footsteps rounded on the back. She braced herself but only the quietest of voices filtered in, muffled. Lucy tried to form an image of the outside in her mind. She thought she heard the rustle of palm trees in the breeze. Her head was full of greens and yellows, the russet brown of the mud.

Then, slowly, the voices trailed off and disappeared.

Silence.

Nothing but the sound of her heart in her head, in her mouth. The shuddering was gone. She was simply hyperventilating now – with the effort, with the terror of the dark. She wondered how much air she had left.

Twenty minutes, she thought. Maybe less.

She tried to control her breathing. Gradually, her lungs calmed down. She gritted her teeth and brought her heart rate back under 160 beats a minute. *Relax, idiot girl. Relax or die.*

Then another noise. The sound of those palms, fronds, foliage, something organic at any rate, as it strafed the sides of the vehicle. The car was moving again.

Yet the engine made no sound.

It took Lucy a moment to work out that someone must have let off the handbrake. This was gravity doing its work. The car was gaining speed. The car was sliding down a hill.

Which meant – *shit shit shit shit . . .*

She aimed both heels at the trunk roof and lashed out. The metal was unforgiving. Again, again, again. The noise deafening her, her agonized screams pinching in her swollen throat, all

other sound drowned by the echoes of metal. She ground her teeth and cried with effort. The trunk was not moving.

Again.

A crack of sunlight. Crimson, like the sunset outside. The car was old. The lock began to give. *Yes*. Lucy's heart soared. Still the car accelerated, down, down. Another brutal kick. The crack widened. *Come on!* Her bound legs became a pile-driver of force and ferocity. A blur of effort, sweat, pain. The lip edged open.

A moment of elation.

It was working. The car was slowing down. Levelling. And as it slowed, Lucy heard the sound of water.

Softly at first, then gaining in volume.

Seconds later a torrent of brackish liquid spewed into the trunk void. It came in through the space Lucy had hammered open, through the join by the back seat, through the rusted holes in the spare tyre housing. It only took a few seconds for the trunk to fill with water. Lucy found her voice at last and screamed out loud, kicking again, sucking up the last of the air as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Peace for a moment.

Then the car began to sink.

As it descended, as Lucy struggled inside, the heavier engine began gently pitching forward, dragging the rest of the car down with it. A graceful arc that swiftly became a somersault. Lucy felt the blood rushing to her head and knew then that the car was upside down.

By the time Lucy had ripped her bloodied hands from their bonds and shoved her head through the tiny opening of the trunk all she could see was a murky expanse of mud and rock coming to meet her.

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SUBJECT: STAGE ONE

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