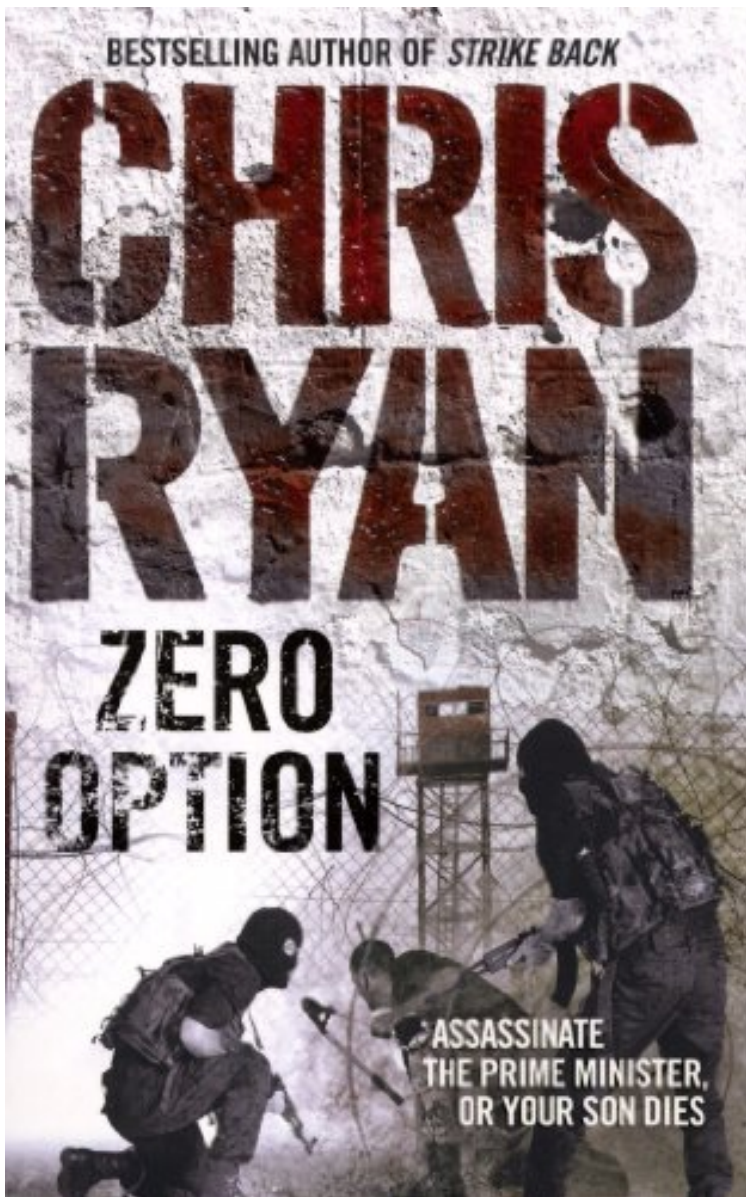


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Zero Option



*Par Chris Ryan
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAn unstoppable action thriller from the ex SAS bestselling author of Ultimate Weapon.

It's a race against time for Geordie Sharp...SAS Sergeant Geordie Sharp is required to undertake two top-secret missions, in the full knowledge that, if things go wrong, the authorities will deny all involvement. In the first mission he is to serve as a commander of a hit team on a Black, or 100 per cent non-attributable operation assigned to the SAW, the Regiment's ultra-secret Subversive Action Wing. His target is an Iraqi who defected to Libya after the Gulf War. The aim is to kill him and leave no clue to the identity or origin of the assassins. Returning to base, Sharp finds he must also carry out a high-level political assassination on

mainland Britain. If he fails, his four-year-old son will die at the hands of the IRA. Trapped between opposing forces in a fight to the death, he twists and turns through a maze of nightmare options, desperately seeking some way of averting tragedy. Who will be hit the hardest - Geordie Sharp or the British government? Another non-stop pulse-pounding thriller from the established master of the military fiction genre.

It took me a few moments to get myself together. I sat on the arm of the easy chair, practically paralysed, staring at the polaroid photo, unable to believe that my son and girlfriend - my whole family - had gone. My hand began to tremble so badly that the outline of Tim's little face blurred; I could hardly see Tracy at all. Then a shudder pulsed through my body. It seemed to start at my feet, then rose quickly through my knees, hips and trunk. When it reached my head I suddenly regained power of thought and movement. I studied the picture again. It had been taken with a flash from a few feet away. Tracy was standing in front of the fireplace holding Tim on her right hip. Her face was twisted into a smile of sorts, but I could see the fear behind it. That grin was one of bravado, defiance. Close on either side of her stood two men in black balaclava ski-masks, brandishing pistols like in those crappy, mock-heroic wall-paintings you see on the walls of buildings in West Belfast. Both were wearing dark sweatshirts. They weren't actually holding her, but you could see that if she'd moved an inch either way they'd have grabbed her. The picture had been taken horizontally, so that it cut off the grown-ups at waist-level. There must have been three intruders at least: these two, and the guy who held the camera. Fingerprints, I thought. Don't destroy any. I realised I shouldn't have touched the photo at all. Without changing my finger-and-thumb grip I stood up, crossed to the bureau, fished out a brown envelope with my left hand and slipped the photo into it. Then I spread a handkerchief over my palm and fingers before picking up the phone and dialling the emergency number in camp. 'Hello,' said the switchboard girl. 'Stirling Lines.' 'Guardroom, please.' 'One moment.' I waited, glancing at my watch. It was less than half an hour since I'd checked out of camp and said goodnight. Then I heard, 'Guardroom. Sergeant Howard.' 'Chris,' I said. 'It's Geordie.' 'What's up?' 'Listen, they've lifted the pair of them.' 'Who? What are you saying?' 'They've taken Tim and Tracy.' 'Who, for Christ's sake? Who are you talking about?' 'It's the PIRA.' 'Don't be daft. How d'you know? Where are you?' 'At home. I found a photo on the floor. Two guys in ski-masks, either side of Tracy and the kid. Nothing else. Chris, what the fuck can I do?' 'Jesus! You'd better head back into camp.' 'OK. But can you get someone out here to keep an eye on the house?' 'Of course. I'll put a guy on his way. Sit tight until he arrives. Then head right in.' 'OK. And listen: get the police to activate their plan to close every main road out of town.' 'Operation Cougar. I'll tell them right away.' I switched on the outside security lights and stood in the hall, trying to think. How in hell had the IRA found out where I lived? How had they known that I was abroad? Waiting was tough. I started pacing up and down like a lion in a cage, frantic to get some action going. Yet there was nothing positive I could do. Every minute that passed gave the snatch party a better chance to make their getaway. Deep down I knew it was already too late to intercept them anywhere nearby: they'd have had far too long to get clear. I walked out into the dark and made myself take a few deep breaths, inhaling the soft, damp, earthy smells of England in late April. For a few moments I enjoyed the night, but to somebody fresh from the jungle the air felt cool and I was soon back indoors. I tried thinking back, to see where there could have been a leak. What about the man I'd chatted to in the pub on the coast of County Antrim? The one who'd called at the cottage Tracy and I were staying in while I was out? My other immediate inclination was to blame Farrell - Declan Farrell, the big PIRA player with whom I'd been feuding for months. But now . . . it could hardly have been him. I and my mates in an SAS hit team had captured him in Colombia only a couple of days before, and the last I'd seen of him he was being hauled off to the nick in Bogot. Unless, of course, he'd ordered this operation before he went out to Colombia . . . Less than forty-eight hours earlier we'd blown the shit out of a cocaine processing laboratory beside a tributary of the . . . We'd taken one casualty - Sparky Springer, killed by shrapnel from a rocket - but after a dawn shoot-out we'd wounded Farrell and caught him. So now it was a real kick in the bollocks to find that his pernicious influence had struck on my home territory. Fighting to keep calm I took another look round, keeping a handkerchief draped over my fingers so that I left no prints. As far as I could see nothing was missing; I owned very little of any value, but the obvious targets for a gang of thieves - the hi-fi, the TV, the microwave - were all still in place. Then, in the dishwasher, I made a small find: two plates smeared with tomato sauce, two glasses, and knives and forks in the basket. In the waste-bin was an empty packet that had held two cod steaks. So they'd had tea, probably at about six o'clock. I went upstairs. Tim's bed was still made up, his pyjamas neatly folded under the pillow; he'd never gone to bed or had his evening read. The idea of the boy being grabbed made me feel sick, but I forced myself to think. The snatch must have taken place between six and eight - seven or eight hours ago. The hostages could be anywhere by now. I

went to the answerphone. The blinking red light was indicating two messages. I ran back the tape and listened, but the calls were the two I'd made myself - one from the airport, one from Camp on my way home. The scrunch of wheels on gravel whipped me to the front door. Two of the Regiment's duty Range Rovers had pulled up outside, their sidelights still on. I went to the driver's door of the first and saw that the guy at the wheel was Nobby Clarke. 'Thanks for coming,' I said. 'No sweat. I'm to run you back in. We'll leave Les Abbott here.' 'OK.' I nipped across to the second car and said, 'Hi, Les. Back off till you're level with that bush there. You'll be out of sight of anyone approaching, and you can sit in the vehicle to watch the house.' 'Fine. No one's to enter the house until the police arrive. But I'm not to walk around either. There may be footprints, and they don't want them spoilt.' 'Fair enough. Good luck, then.' 'Have you locked up?' Nobby asked. 'Just going to.' I pulled the front door to, then at the last minute I realised I probably wouldn't be back before morning, so I dived inside again and grabbed my day-sack, which contained washing kit. Finally I closed the door and turned the key. Nobby slung the Range Rover through the lanes, making the tyres scrabble, and we were back at the gates of Stirling Lines in eleven minutes flat. In the guardroom the four guys on fire-picket were watching a porn video with that glazed look that comes over everyone on duty in the small hours. Chris stood up, slim and trim in his DPM shirt and trousers and blue stable belt with its silver buckle. 'Ah, Geordie,' he said. 'I buzzed up the ops officer and he's come in already. The CID are on their way. You'd better get your arse up to the ops room.' I never looked forward to meeting the ops officer, Major Alex Macpherson (generally known as 'Mac'). He was efficient enough at his job, but he had a sarcastic manner that pissed the guys off. Having been a troop commander in the eighties, he'd returned to his regiment (the Black Watch) for a spell, and then wanted to come back to the SAS as a squadron commander; but the fact that at the age of thirty-six or thirty-seven he'd only made it to ops officer seemed to sour him. Even at the impromptu party which greeted our return he'd been low-key. I ran up the stairs of the head-shed building, known to all and sundry as the Kremlin. The door of the ops room stood open and I found Mac, dressed in a dark blue polo shirt and jeans, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. 'Serve the bugger right, I thought: normally it was he who routed us out of bed in the middle of the night, and took some pleasure in doing so. His short black hair was standing upright, as if he'd forgotten to brush it when he staggered up. His DPM uniform was thrown over a chair, and his kit - bergen and a pair of boots - stood in a corner. 'Christ, Geordie,' he said. 'That didn't take long.' 'What d'you mean?' 'You've only been back in the UK about five minutes and already you've stirred the shit something wicked.' 'For fuck's sake, Boss. It's nothing I've done.' 'No - well . . .' He stopped, looking at me. The edge in my voice must have made him realise what a state I was in. 'This is the picture they left.' I held out the envelope. 'I've touched it once, in the corner, but otherwise it's clean.' He went to a shelf and brought down a new file-holder with a flap of cellophane over the front. I decanted the photo carefully into it so that the picture was protected but visible, and laid it on a desk. 'Bastards!' he muttered as he looked at it. 'Let's get a brew on, anyway.' His tone had softened. 'We're going to have to do some talking. Sugar in your tea?' 'No, thanks.' He moved off into the little annexe where there was a kettle and stuff for making hot drinks. I glanced round at the room: desks with computer terminals on them, filing cabinets with combination locks, shelves full of books . . . this could have been an ordinary office but for the fact that on the walls drab grey curtains were drawn over boards which carried details of the Regiment's current secret operations. I heard the kettle coming to the boil, and after a couple of minutes' fiddling about Mac handed me a mug. As I drank it I could feel my head clearing. The ops room started filling up with people. First came the Intelligence Officer, a thin, bespectacled guy called Jimmy Wells, carrying ... 'Revue de presse "Slick, polished and gut-wrenching stuff" (Irish Times) "Real strength in detailing the nitty-gritty of operations" (Sunday Times) "Remarkable ... gripping" (The Daily Express)