

AN ALEX RIDER ADVENTURE



FEATURES A  
CHAPTER FROM  
THE UPCOMING  
*EAGLE STRIKE*

# SKELETON KEY

**ANTHONY HOROWITZ**

*Author of the Best-Selling  
STORMBREAKER*



## HE HAD ONLY SECONDS TO SPARE.

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Alex saw the cylinders of compressed gas and dragged one out of its wire frame. At that moment, the guard appeared around the side of the fridge.

Alex swung the cylinder like a baseball bat, hitting the man with incredible force in the shoulder and neck. The guard never had a chance. He didn't even cry out as he was thrown off his feet and sent hurtling forward into the open fridge.

Alex dropped the cylinder and groaned. He limped forward and looked into the fridge. The guard had landed in the middle of the boxes of strawberries, crushing many of them.

He took one last look at the man who had tried to kill him.

"Out cold," he said.

Then he reached out and twisted the thermostat control, sending the temperature down below zero.

Out colder.

He closed the refrigerator door and limped painfully away.



*The Devil and His Boy*

THE ALEX RIDER ADVENTURES:

*Stormbreaker*

*Point Blank*

*Skeleton Key*

*Eagle Strike*

*Scorpia*

*Ark Angel*

THE DIAMOND BROTHERS MYSTERIES:

*Public Enemy Number Two*

*The Falcon's Malteser*

*Three of Diamonds*

*South by Southeast*



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**ALEX RIDER**

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**ANTHONY HOROWITZ**

**speak**

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SPEAK

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## IN THE DARK

NIGHT CAME QUICKLY to Skeleton Key.

The sun hovered briefly on the horizon, then dipped below. At once, the clouds rolled in—first red, then mauve, silver, green, and black, as though all the colors in the world were being sucked into a vast melting pot. A single frigatebird soared over the mangroves, its own colors lost in the chaos behind it. The air was close. Rain hung waiting. There was going to be a storm.

The single-engine Cessna Skyhawk SP circled twice before coming in to land. It was the sort of plane that would barely have been noticed, flying in this part of the world. That was why it had been chosen. If anyone had been curious enough to check the registration number, printed under the wing, they would have learned that this plane belonged to a photographic company based in Jamaica. This was not true. There was no company, and it was already too dark to take photographs. But nothing had been left to chance.

There were three men in the aircraft. They were all dark-skinned, wearing faded jeans and loose open-neck shirts. The pilot had long, black hair, deep brown eyes, and a thin scar running down the side of his face. He had met his two passengers only that afternoon. They had introduced themselves as Carlo and Marc, but he doubted that these were their real names. He knew their journey had begun long time ago, somewhere in Eastern Europe. He knew this short flight was the last leg. He knew what they were carrying. Already, he knew too much.

He glanced down at the multifunction display in the control board. The illuminated computer screen was warning him about the storm that was closing in. That didn't worry the pilot. Low clouds and rain gave him cover. The authorities were less vigilant during a storm. Even so, he was nervous. He had flown in to Cuba many times. But never here. And tonight he would have preferred to have been going almost anywhere else.

*Cayo Esqueleto*. Skeleton Key.

There it was, stretching out before him, twenty-five miles long and six miles across at its widest point. The sea around it, which had been an extraordinary, brilliant blue until a few minutes ago, had suddenly darkened, as if someone had thrown a switch. Over to the west, he made out the twinkling lights of Puerto Madre, the island's second-biggest town. The main airport was farther north, outside the capital of Santiago. But that wasn't where he was heading. He pressed down on the joystick and the plane veered to the right, circling over the forests and mangrove swamps that surrounded the old, abandoned airport at the bottom end of the island.

The Cessna had been equipped with a thermal intensifier, similar to the sort used in American spy satellites. He flicked a switch and glanced at the display. A few birds appeared as tiny pinpricks of red. More dots pulsated in the swamp: crocodiles or perhaps manatees. And a single dot about twenty yards from the runway. He turned to speak to the man called Carlo, but there was no need. Carlo was already leaning over his shoulder, staring at the screen.

Carlo nodded. Only one man was waiting for them, as agreed. Anyone hiding within half a mile of the airstrip would have shown up on the radar. It was safe to land.

The pilot looked out the window. The runway was a rough strip of land on the edge of the coast, hacked out of the jungle and running parallel with the sea. The pilot could have missed it altogether in the dying light but for the two lines of electric bulbs burning at ground level, outlining the path for the plane.

The Cessna swooped out of the sky. At the last minute it was buffeted about by a sudden, damp squall that had been sent to try the pilot's nerve. But the pilot didn't blink, and a moment later the

squall that had been sent to try the pilot's nerve. But the pilot didn't blink, and a moment later the wheels hit the ground and the plane was bouncing and shuddering along, dead center between the two rows of lights. He was grateful they were there. The mangroves—thick bushes, half floating on pools of stagnant water—came almost to the edge of the runway. Veer even a couple of yards in the wrong direction and a wheel might snag. It would be enough to destroy the plane.

The pilot flicked switches. The engine died and the twin-blade propellers slowed down and came to a halt. He looked out the window. A Jeep was parked next to one of the buildings, and it was here that the single man—the red dot on his screen—waited. He turned to his passengers.

“He’s there.”

The older of the two men nodded. Carlo was about thirty years old with black, curly hair. He hadn’t shaved. Stubble the color of cigarette ash clung to his jaw. He turned to the other passenger.

“Marc? Are you ready?”

The man who called himself Marc could have been Carlo’s younger brother. He was barely twenty-five, and although he was trying not to show it, he was scared. There was sweat on the side of his face, glowing green as it caught the reflection from the control panel. He reached behind him and took out a gun, a German-built 10mm Glock Automatic. He made sure it was loaded, then slipped it into the waistband of his trousers, under his shirt.

“I’m ready,” he said.

“There is only him. There are two of us,” Carlo tried to reassure Marc. Or perhaps he was trying to reassure himself. “We’re both armed. There is nothing he can do.”

“Then let’s go.”

Carlo turned to the pilot. “Have the plane ready,” he commanded. “When we walk back, I will give you a sign.” He raised a hand, one finger and thumb forming an O. “That is the signal that the business has been successfully concluded. Start the engine at that time. We don’t want to stay here one second longer than we have to.”

They got out of the plane. A thin layer of sand crunched underneath their combat boots as they walked around the side and opened the cargo door. They felt the sullen heat in the air, the heaviness of the night sky. The island seemed to be holding its breath. Carlo reached up and opened a door. In the back of the plane was a single steel chest. With difficulty, he and Marc lowered it to the ground.

The younger man looked up. The lights on the landing strip dazzled him, but he could just make out a figure standing, still as a statue, beside the Jeep, waiting for them to approach. He hadn’t moved since the plane had landed. “Why doesn’t he come to us?” he asked.

Carlo spat and said nothing.

There were two handles, one on either side of the chest. The two men carried it between them, walking awkwardly, bending over their load. It took them a long time to reach the Jeep. But at last they were there. For a second time, they set the box down.

Carlo straightened up, rubbing his palms on his jeans. “Good evening, General,” he said. He was speaking in English. This was not his native language. Nor was it the general’s. But it was the only language they had in common.

“Good evening.” The general did not bother with names that he knew would be fake anyway. “You had no trouble getting here?”

“No trouble at all, General.”

“You have it?”

“One kilogram of weapons-grade uranium. Enough to build a bomb powerful enough to destroy a city. I would be interested to know which city you have in mind.”

General Alexei Sarov took a step forward and the lights from the runway illuminated him. He was not a big man, yet he radiated power and control. He still carried with him his years in the army. They could be seen in his close-cut, iron-gray hair, his watchful, pale blue eyes, his almost

They could be seen in his close-cut, iron gray hair, his watchful, pale blue eyes, his almost emotionless face. They were in the very way he carried himself. He was perfectly poised, relaxed and wary at the same time. General Sarov was sixty-two years old but looked twenty years younger. He was dressed in a dark suit, a white shirt, and a narrow, dark blue tie. In the damp heat of the evening, his clothes should have been creased. He should have been sweating. But to look at him, he could have just stepped out of an air-conditioned room.

He crouched down beside the box, at the same time producing a small device from his pocket. It looked like a car cigarette lighter with a dial attached. He found a socket in the side of the metal crate and plugged in the device. Briefly, he examined the dial. He nodded. It was satisfactory.

“You have the rest of the money?” Carlo asked.

“Of course.” The general straightened up and walked over to the Jeep. Carlo and Marc tensed themselves, for this was the moment when he might produce a gun. But when he turned around he was holding a black leather attaché case. He flicked the locks and opened it. The case was filled with banknotes: one-hundred-dollar bills neatly banded together in packets of fifty. One hundred packets in all. A total of half a million dollars. More money than Carlo had ever seen in his life.

But still not enough.

“We’ve had a problem,” Carlo said.

“Yes?” Sarov did not sound surprised.

Marc could feel the sweat as it drew a comma down the side of his neck. A mosquito was whining in his ear but he resisted the urge to slap it. This was what he had been waiting for. He was standing a few steps away, his hands hanging limply by his sides. Slowly, he allowed them to creep behind him, closer to the concealed gun. He glanced at the ruined buildings. One might once have been a control tower. The other looked like a customs shed. Both of them were broken and empty, the brickwork crumbling, the windows smashed. Could there be someone hiding there? No. The thermal intensifier would have shown them. They were alone.

“The cost of the uranium.” Carlo shrugged. “Our friend in Miami sends his apologies. But there are new security systems all over the world. Smuggling...particularly this sort of thing...has become much more difficult. And that’s meant extra expense.”

“How much extra expense?”

“A quarter of a million dollars.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate for you, General. You’re the one who must pay.”

Sarov considered. “We had an agreement,” he said.

“Our friend in Miami hoped you’d understand.”

There was a long silence. Marc’s fingers reached out behind his back, closing around the Glock Automatic. But then Sarov nodded. “I will have to raise the money,” he said.

“You can have it transferred to the same account that we used before,” Carlo said. “But I have to warn you, General. If the money hasn’t arrived in three days, the American intelligence services will be told what has happened here tonight...what you’ve just received. You may think you are safe here on this island. I can assure you, you won’t be safe anymore.”

“You’re threatening me,” Sarov muttered, and there was something at once calm and deadly in the way he spoke.

“It’s nothing personal,” Carlo said.

Quickly, Marc produced a cloth bag. He unfolded it, then tipped the money out of the case and into the bag. The case might contain a radio transmitter. It might contain a small bomb. He left it behind.

“Good night, General,” Carlo said.

“Good night,” Sarov smiled. “I hope you enjoy the flight.”

Good night. Sarov smiled. I hope you enjoy the night.

The two men walked away. Marc could feel the money, the bundles pressing through the cloth against the side of his leg. "The man's a fool," he whispered, returning to his own language. "An old man. Why were we afraid?"

"Let's just get out of here," Carlo said. He was thinking about what the general had said. *I hope you enjoy the flight.* Had he been smiling when he said that?

He made the agreed-upon signal, pressing his finger and thumb together. At once the Cessna's engine started up.

General Sarov was still watching them. He hadn't moved, but now his hand reached once again into his jacket pocket. His fingers closed around the radio transmitter waiting there. He had wondered if it would be necessary to kill the two men and their pilot. Personally, he would have preferred not to even as an insurance policy. But their demands had made it necessary. He should have known they would be greedy. Given the sort of people they were, it was almost inevitable.

Back in the plane, the two men were strapping themselves into their seats while the pilot prepared for takeoff. Carlo heard the engine rev up as the plane began slowly to turn. Far away, there was a low rumble of thunder. Now he wished that they had turned the plane around immediately after they had landed. It would have saved some precious seconds and he was eager to be away, back in the air.

*I hope you enjoy the flight.*

There had been no emotion whatsoever in the general's voice. He could have meant what he was saying. But Carlo guessed he would have spoken exactly the same way if he had been passing a sentence of death.

Next to him, Marc was already counting the money, running his hands through the piles of bills. He looked back at the ruined buildings, at the waiting Jeep. Would Sarov try something? What sort of resources did he have on the island? But as the plane turned in a tight circle, nothing moved. The general stayed where he was. There was nobody else in sight.

Then the runway lights went out.

"What the?... " The pilot swore viciously.

Marc stopped his counting. Carlo understood at once what had happened. "He's turned the lights off," he said. "He wants to keep us here. Can you take off without them?"

The plane had turned a half circle so that it was facing the way it had come. The pilot stared out the cockpit window, straining to see into the night. It was very dark now, but there was an ugly, unnatural light pulsating in the sky. He nodded. "It won't be easy..."

The lights came back on again.

There they were, stretching into the distance, an arrow that pointed to freedom and an extra profit of a quarter of a million dollars. The pilot relaxed. "It must have been the storm," he said. "It disrupted the electricity supply."

"Just get us out of here," Carlo muttered. "The sooner we're in the air, the happier I'll be."

The pilot nodded. "Whatever you say." He pressed down with the controls and the Cessna lumbered forward, picking up speed quickly. The runway lights blurred, guiding him forward. Carlo settled back into his seat. Marc was still watching out of the window.

And then, seconds before the wheels left the ground, the plane suddenly lurched. The whole world twisted as a giant, invisible hand seized hold of it and wrenched it sideways. The Cessna had been traveling at 120 miles per hour. It came to a grinding halt in a matter of seconds, the deceleration throwing all three men forward in their seats. If they hadn't been belted in, they would have been hurled out the front window—or what was left of the shattered glass. At the same time there was a series of ear-shattering crashes as something whipped into the fuselage. One of the wings had dipped down and the propeller was torn off, spinning into the night. Suddenly the plane was still, resting

down and the propeller was torn off, spinning into the night. Suddenly the plane was still, resting, tilted, on one side.

For a moment, nobody inside the cabin moved. The plane's engines rattled and stopped. Then Marc pulled himself up in his seat. "What happened?" he screamed. "What happened?" He had bitten his tongue. Blood trickled down his chin. The bag was still open and money had spilled into his lap.

"I don't understand..." The pilot was too dazed to speak.

"You left the runway!" Carlo's face was twisted with anger.

"I didn't!"

"There!" Marc was pointing at something and Carlo followed his quivering finger. The door on the underside of the plane had buckled. Black water was seeping in underneath, forming a pool around their feet.

There was another rumble of thunder, closer this time.

"He did this!" the pilot said.

"What did he do?" Carlo demanded.

"He moved the runway!"

It had been a simple trick. As the plane had turned, Sarov had turned the lights off on the runway using the radio transmitter in his pocket. For a moment, the pilot had been disoriented, lost in the darkness. Then the plane had finished its turn and the lights had come back on. But what the pilot hadn't known, what he wouldn't have been able to see, was that it was a second set of lights that had been activated—and that these had run off at an angle, leaving the safety of the runway and continuing over the surface of the swamp.

"He led us into the mangroves," the pilot said.

Now Carlo understood what had happened to the plane. The moment its wheels had touched the water, its fate had been sealed. Without solid ground underneath them, they had become bogged down and had toppled over. Swamp water was even now pouring in as they slowly sank beneath the surface. The branches of the mangrove trees that had almost torn the plane apart now surrounded them, bars of a living prison.

"What are we going to do?" Marc demanded, and suddenly he was sounding like a child. "We're going to drown!"

"We can get out!" Carlo had suffered whiplash injuries in the collision. He moved one arm painfully, unfastening his seat belt.

"We shouldn't have tried to cheat him!" Marc cried. "You knew what he was. You were told—"

"Shut up!" Carlo had a gun of his own. He pulled it out of the holster underneath his shirt and balanced it on his knee. "We'll get out of here and we'll kill him. And then somehow we'll find a way off this damn island."

"There's something out there," the pilot said.

Something had moved outside.

"What is it?" Marc whispered.

"Sssh!" Carlo half stood up, his body filling the cramped space of the cabin. The plane tilted again, settling farther into the swamp. He lost his balance, then steadied himself. He reached out, passing the pilot, as though he was going to climb out the broken front window.

Something huge and horrible lunged toward him, blocking out what little light there was in the night sky. Carlo screamed as it threw itself headfirst into the plane and onto him. There was a glint of white and a dreadful grunting sound. The other men were screaming now too.

General Sarov stood watching. It wasn't raining yet, but the water was heavy in the air. A sudden flash of lightning crossed the sky in slow motion, relishing its journey. In that moment, he saw the Cessna half buried on its side in the swamp. There were now half a dozen crocodiles swarming all over it. The largest of them had dived headfirst into the cockpit. Only its tail was visible, thrashing

over it. The largest of them had dived headfirst into the cockpit. Only its tail was visible, thrashing about as it gorged itself.

He reached down and lifted up the lead chest. Although it had taken two men to carry it to him, seemed to weigh nothing in his hands. He placed it in the Jeep, then stood back. He allowed himself the rare privilege of a smile and he felt it, briefly, on his lips. Tomorrow, when the crocodiles had finished their meal, he would send his fieldworkers—the *macheteros*—in to recover the banknotes. Not that the money was important. He was the owner of a kilogram of weapons-grade uranium. As Carlo had said, he now had the power to destroy a small city.

But Sarov had no intention of destroying a city.

His target was the entire world.



## MATCH POINT

ALEX CAUGHT THE BALL ON the top of his chest, bounced it forward, and kicked it into the back of the net. It was then that he noticed the man with the large, white dog.

It was a warm, bright Friday afternoon in May, the weather caught between early summer and late spring. This was only a practice match but Alex took the game seriously. Mr. Wiseman, who taught PE, had selected him for first team and he was looking forward to playing against other schools in West London. Unfortunately, his school—Brookland—didn't have its own playing fields. Anyone could walk past. And they could bring their dogs.

Alex recognized the man at once and his heart sank. At the same time he was angry. How could he have the nerve to come here, into the school arena, in the middle of a game? Weren't these people ever going to leave him alone? The man's name was Crawley. With his thinning hair, blotchy face, and old-fashioned clothes, he looked like a teacher in a second-rate private school. But Alex knew the truth. Crawley belonged to MI6. Not exactly a spy but someone who was very much a part of that world. Crawley was an office manager in one of the country's most secret offices. He did the paperwork, made the arrangements, set up the meetings. When someone died with a knife in his back or a bullet in his chest, it would be Crawley who had signed on the bottom line.

As Alex ran back to the center line, Crawley walked over to a bench, dragging the dog behind. The animal didn't seem to want to walk. It didn't want to be there at all. Crawley sat down. He was still sitting there, ten minutes later, when the final whistle blew and the game came to an end. Alex considered for a moment. Then he picked up his jersey and went over to him.

Crawley seemed surprised to see him. "Alex!" he exclaimed. "What a surprise! I haven't seen you since...well, since you got back from France."

It had been only four weeks since MI6 had forced Alex to investigate a school for the super-rich in southeast France. Using a false name, he had become a student at the Point Blanc Academy, only to find himself taken prisoner by the mad headmaster, Dr. Grief. Alex had been chased down a mountain, shot at, and almost dissected alive in a biology class. Alex had never wanted to be a spy, and the whole business had convinced him he was right. Crawley was the last person he wanted to see.

But the MI6 man was beaming. "Are you on the school team? Is this where you play? I'm surprised I haven't noticed you before. Barker and I walk here often."

"Barker?"

"The dog." Crawley reached out and patted it. "He's a Dalmatian."

"I thought Dalmatians had spots."

"Not this one." Crawley hesitated. "Actually, Alex, it's a bit of luck running into you. I wonder if I could have a word with you."

Alex shook his head. "Forget it, Mr. Crawley. I told you the last time. I'm not interested in MI6. I'm a schoolboy. I'm not a spy."

"Absolutely!" Crawley agreed. "This has got nothing to do with the...um...company. No, no, no." He looked almost embarrassed. "The thing is, what I wanted to ask you was...how would you like a front-row seat at Wimbledon?"

The question took Alex completely by surprise. "Wimbledon? You mean the tennis tournament?"

"That's right." Crawley smiled. "The All England Tennis Club. I'm on the committee."

"And you're offering me a ticket?"

"Yes."

"What's the catch?"

“There is no catch, Alex. Not really. But let me explain.” Alex was aware that the other players were getting ready to leave. It was a ten-minute walk back to the school. They would shower, change and go home. The school day was almost over. He listened as Crawley went on. “The thing is, you see a week ago we had a break-in. Security at the club is always tight, but someone managed to climb over the wall and get into the Millennium Building through a forced window.”

“What’s the Millennium Building?”

“It’s where the players have their changing rooms. It also has a gym, a restaurant, a couple of lounges, and so on. We have closed-circuit television cameras, but the intruder disabled the system, along with the main alarm. It was a thoroughly professional job. We’d never have known anyone had been there except for a stroke of luck. One of our night guards saw the man leaving. He was Chinese, early twenties—”

“The guard?”

“The intruder. Dressed from head to foot in black with some sort of knapsack on his back. The guard alerted the police and we had the whole place searched. The Millennium Building, the courts, the cafés...everything. It took three days. There are no terrorist cells active in London at the moment, thank goodness, but there was always a chance that some lunatic might have planted a bomb. We had the antiterrorist squad in. Sniffer dogs. Nothing! Whoever it was had vanished into thin air, and it seemed he’d left nothing behind.

“Now, here’s the strange thing, Alex. He didn’t leave anything, but nor did he take anything. In fact, nothing seems to have been touched. As I say, if the guard hadn’t seen this chap, we’d never have known he had been there. What do you make of that?”

Alex shrugged. “Maybe the guard disturbed him before he could get his hands on whatever it was he wanted.”

“No. He was already leaving when he was seen.”

“Could the guard have imagined it?”

“We examined the cameras. The film is time coded and we discovered that they had definitely been out of action for two hours. From midnight until two in the morning.”

“Then what do you think, Mr. Crawley? Why are you telling me this?”

Crawley sighed and stretched his legs. He was wearing Hush Puppies, shabby and worn at the heel. The white dog had fallen asleep. “My belief is that somebody is intending to sabotage Wimbledon this year,” he said. Alex was about to interrupt, but Crawley held up a hand. “I know it sounds ridiculous and I have to admit, the other committee members don’t believe me. On the other hand, they don’t have my instincts. They don’t work in the same business as me. But think about it, Alex. There had to be a reason for such a carefully planned and executed break-in. But there is no reason. Something’s wrong.”

“Why would anyone want to sabotage Wimbledon?”

“I don’t know. But you have to remember, the Wimbledon tennis fortnight is a huge business. There are millions of dollars at stake. Prize money alone adds up to eight and a half million. And then there are television rights, merchandising rights, corporate sponsorship...We get VIPs flying in from all over the planet—everyone from film stars to presidents—and tickets for the men’s final have been known to change hands for literally thousands of dollars. It’s not just a game. It’s a world event, and anything should happen...well, it doesn’t bear thinking about.”

Crawley obviously *had* been thinking about it. He looked tired. The worry was deep in his eyes.

Alex thought for a moment. “You want me to look around.” He smiled. “I’ve never been to Wimbledon. I’ve only watched it on TV. I’d love a ticket for Centre Court. But I don’t see how a one-day visit would actually help.”

“Exactly, Alex. But a one-day visit isn’t quite what I had in mind.”

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