

ALEX RIDER

SLIDESHOW



THURSDAY, JUNE 26, 2008

Christmas at Gunpoint

My uncle, Ian Rider, always told me he worked in international banking. Why did I believe him? Bankers don't usually spend weeks or even months away from home, returning with strange scars and bruises they are reluctant to explain.

They don't receive phone calls in the middle of the night and disappear at the drop of a hat. And how many of them are proficient in Thai boxing and karate; speak three languages and keep themselves in perfect physical shape?

Ian Rider was a secret agent; a spy. From the day he left Cambridge University, he had worked for the Special Operations division of MI6.

Just about everything he told me was a lie, but I believed him because, as an orphan, I had no parents and had lived with him all my life. And, I suppose, because when you're 13 years old you believe what adults say.

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Votes so far: 1

Poll closed

STORMBREAKER

When his guardian dies in suspicious circumstances,

But there was one occasion when I came very close to realising the truth. It happened one Christmas, at the ski resort of Gunpoint, Colorado. Although I didn't know it at the time, this was going to be the last Christmas we would spend together.

By the following spring, Ian would have been killed on a mission in Cornwall, investigating the Stormbreaker computers being manufactured there. That was just a couple of months after my 14th birthday, when my life span out of control and I was eventually to become a spy myself.

Gunpoint had been named after the man who first settled there, a gold prospector called Jeremiah Gun. It was about 50 miles north of Aspen, and if you've ever skied in America you'll know the set-up.

There was a central village with gas fires burning late into the night, mulled wine and toasted marshmallows, and shops with prices as high as the mountains around them.

We'd booked into a hotel, the Granary, which was on the edge of the village, about a five-minute walk to the main ski lift. The two of us shared a suite of rooms on the second floor. We each had our own bedroom, opening on to a shared living space with a balcony that ran round the side of the hotel.

The Granary was one of those brand-new places designed to look 100 years old, with big stone fireplaces, woven rugs and moose heads on the walls. I hoped they were fake, but they probably weren't.

For the first couple of days we were on our own. The snow was excellent. There had been a heavy fall just before we arrived, but at the same time the weather was unusually warm, so we were talking powder and lifts with no queues. Soon we were racing each other down the dizzyingly steep runs high up over Gunpoint itself.

It was on the third day that things changed. It began with two new arrivals who moved into the room next door: a father and his daughter who was just a couple of years older than me. Her name was Sahara.

Her dad lived and worked in Washington DC. She told me he was 'something in government', and I guessed she was being purposely vague. Her mother was a lawyer in New York. The two of them

fourteen-year-old Alex Rider finds his world turned upside down. Forcibly recruited into MI6, Alex has to take part in gruelling SAS training exercises. Then, armed with his own special set of secret gadgets, he's off on his first mission to Cornwall, where Middle-Eastern multi-billionaire Herod Sayle is producing his state-of-the-art Stormbreaker computers. Sayle has offered to give one free to every school in the country - but there's more to the gift than meets the eye.

POINT BLANC

Investigations into the "accidental" deaths of two of the world's most powerful men have revealed just one link: both had a son attending Point Blanc Academy - an exclusive school for rebellious rich kids, run by the sinister Dr Grief and set high on an isolated mountain peak in the French Alps. Armed only with a false ID and a new collection of brilliantly disguised gadgets, Alex must infiltrate the academy as a pupil and establish the truth about what is really happening there.

SKELETON KEY

Teenage superspy Alex Rider is enlisted by the national security services again - this

were divorced and Sahara had to share Christmases between them.

She was very pretty, with long black hair and blue eyes, only an inch taller than me despite the age gap. She'd been skiing all her life, and she was fearless. Unlike me, she had her own boots and skis. At the time my feet were growing too fast so, as usual, I'd had to rent.

Sahara Sands. Her father was Cameron Sands, with silver hair, silver glasses and a laptop computer that hardly seemed to leave his side. He spent every afternoon in his room, working. Sahara didn't seem to mind. She was used to it, and anyway, now she had Ian and me.

SUSPICIOUS MINDS

Two more people arrived on the same day as Sahara. They were sharing a smaller room across the corridor. I noticed them pretty quickly because they rarely seemed to be far away, although they never spoke to us.

They were both men in their late 20s, smartly dressed and very fit. They could have graduated from the same college.

One night in the hotel lounge I suggested they might be gay and Ian laughed. 'I don't think so, Alex. Try again.' I thought for a moment. 'Are they bodyguards?'

'Better. At a guess, I'd say they're American Secret Service.'

I blinked. 'How do you know?'

'Well, they're both carrying guns.'

'Under their jackets?'

Ian shook his head. 'You could never draw a gun out of a ski jacket in time. They've got ankle holsters. Take a look the next time you see them.'

He looked at me over his brandy. 'You have to notice these things, Alex. Whenever you meet someone, you have to check them out... all the details. People tell a story the moment they walk into a room. You can read them.'

He was always saying stuff like that to me. I used to think he was

time for a routine reconnaissance mission at the Wimbledon Tennis Championships. But before long, Alex finds himself caught up in a terrifying chain of events that leads from the Chinese Triad gangs in London to an undercover assignment in Cuba. Alex begins to make chilling links between suspicious deaths, an illegal nuclear weapons deal and the plans of his host, Russian General Sarov, for the future of the world...

EAGLE STRIKE

Reluctant MI6 agent Alex Rider is relaxing in the south of France until a sudden, ruthless attack on his hosts plunges him back into a world of violence and mystery - and this time, MI6 don't want to know. Alex is determined to track down his friends' attackers, even if he must do it alone. But it's a path that leads to a long-buried secret - and a discovery more terrible than anything he could have imagined.

SCORPIA

Still reeling from the terrible discovery he has made about his father, teenage MI6 superspy, Alex Rider, is determined to find out more. Travelling to Italy, he manages to infiltrate the

just passing the time. It was only much later I realised he'd been preparing me. Just like the skiing and the scuba lessons. He was quietly following a plan that had begun almost the day I was born.

'Are they here with Cameron Sands?' I asked.

'What do you think?'

I nodded. 'They are always hanging around. And Sahara says her dad works in government.'

'Then maybe he needs protection.' Ian smiled. 'Let's see if you can find out their names by the end of the week,' he said. 'And the make of their guns.'

But the next day I had forgotten the conversation. It had snowed again. There must have been 10 inches on the ground, and it was bulging out over the roofs of the hotel like over-stuffed duvets.

Sahara and I switched to snowboards and spent about five hours on the chutes, bomb drops and powder stashes at the bowl area high up over Bear Creek.

I never guessed that just five months later I'd be using the same skills to avoid being killed by half a dozen thugs on snowmobiles, racing down the side of Point Blanc in southern France.

By half past three, with the sun already dipping behind the mountains, we decided to call it a day. We were both bruised, exhausted and soaked with sweat and melted snow. Sahara went off to meet her dad for a hot chocolate. I went back to the Granary on my own.

I had just dropped the board off at the rental shop and was slouching into the reception area when I saw my uncle, sitting on the corner of a sofa. I was about to call out to him - but then I stopped. I knew at once that something was wrong.

It's not easy to explain, but he had never looked like this before. He was completely silent and tense in a way that was almost animal. Ian had dark brown eyes, like me, but right now they were cold and colourless.

He hadn't noticed me come in: his attention was focused on the reception desk and a man who was checking into the hotel.

glamorous world of Claudia Rothman, beautiful society hostess and member of the international criminal organization, Scorpia. She reveals that Alex's father was murdered by MI6, in an operation masterminded by Head of Special Operations, Mrs Jones. Shocked and angry, Alex faces a choice: to continue to work with the British security services, or to become an agent for Scorpia and get revenge.

ARK ANGEL

Alex Rider is in hospital and determined to put his spying days behind him. But he is forced back into action when the vicious terrorist group Force Three takes him prisoner. Alex makes his escape - yet his most perilous adventure is only just beginning. Alex must stop Force Three in their attempt to destroy Russian billionaire Nikolei Drevin and his revolutionary space hotel Ark Angel; but this time, the teenage superspy will have to push himself to the limits - and beyond.

SNAKEHEAD

Splashing down off the coast of Australia, Alex is soon working undercover - this time for ASIS, the Australian Secret Service - on a mission to infiltrate the criminal underworld of South-East

MYSTERY MAN

'People tell a story,' Ian had said. 'You can read them.' Looking at the man at the reception desk, I tried to do just that.

He was wearing a black rollneck jersey with dark trousers and a gold Rolex watch, heavy on his wrist.

He had blond hair; an intense yellow and cut short. It almost looked painted on. I would have said he was 30 years old, with a pock-marked face and a lazy smile. I could hear him talking to the receptionist. He had a Bronx accent.

So much for Chapter One. What else could I read in him? His skin was unusually pale. In fact it was almost white, as if he had spent half his life indoors. He worked out; I could see the muscles bulging under his sleeves.

And he had very bad teeth. That was strange. Americans wealthy enough to stay in a hotel like this would have taken more care of their dental work.

'You're on the fourth floor, Mr da Silva,' the receptionist said. 'Enjoy your stay.' The man had brought a cheap suitcase with him. That was also unusual in the land of Gucci and Louis Vuitton. He picked it up and disappeared into the lift.

I walked further into the reception area and Ian saw me. He knew I had been watching him. 'Is everything OK?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'Who was that?'

'The man who just checked in? I don't know.' Ian shook his head as if trying to dismiss the whole thing. 'I thought I knew him from somewhere. How was Bear Creek?'

He obviously didn't want to talk about it, so I went up to my room, showered and got ready for dinner.

As I made my way back downstairs, I noticed one of the Secret Service men coming out of their room. He walked off down the corridor without saying anything to me. Sahara and her father weren't around.

Asia: the ruthless world of the Snakehead. Faced with an old enemy and troubled by the shadows of his own past, Alex is caught between two secret services, with no one he can trust - and this time he needs all his wits to survive...

We ate. We talked. Ian ordered half a bottle of wine for himself and a Coke for me. At around half past ten I found myself yawning. Ian suggested I go up and watch TV.

'What about you?' I asked.

'Oh...I might get a breath of air. I'll follow you up later.'

I left him and went back to the room - and discovered I didn't have the electronic card that would open the door. I must have left it inside when I was getting changed.

I went back to the dining room. Ian was no longer there. Remembering what he had said, I followed him outside.

And there he was. I will never forget what I saw that night.

There was a courtyard round the side of the hotel, covered with snow, a frozen fountain in the middle. It was surrounded by walls on three sides, with the hotel roofs - also snow-covered -slanting steeply down. The whole area was lit by a full moon like a prison searchlight.

Ian Rider and the man who called himself Da Silva were locked together, standing like some bizarre statue in the middle of the courtyard. They were fighting for control of a single gun, clasped in their hands, high above their heads.

I could see the strain on their faces. But what made the scene even more surreal was that neither of them was making a sound. In fact they were barely moving. Both were focused on the gun. Whichever brought it down would be able to use it on the other.

I called out. It was a stupid thing to do. I could have got my uncle killed. Both men turned to look at me, but it was Ian who took advantage of the interruption.

He let go of the gun and slammed his elbow into Da Silva's stomach, then bent his arm up, the side of his hand scything the other man's wrist. I had already been learning karate for six years and recognised the perfectly executed sideways block.

The gun flew out of the man's hand, slid across the snow and came to rest in front of the fountain.

'Go back, Alex!' my uncle shouted.

It took him less than two seconds but it was enough to lose him the advantage. Da Silva lashed out, the heel of his hand pounding into Ian's chest, winding him.

A moment later the blond man wheeled round in a vicious roundhouse kick. My uncle tried to avoid it, but the snow, the slippery surface, didn't help. He was thrown off his feet and went crashing down.

Da Silva stopped and caught his breath. His mouth was twisted in an ugly sneer, his teeth grey in the moonlight. He knew the fight was over. He had won.

That was when I acted. I dived forward, throwing myself on to my stomach and sliding across the ice. My momentum carried me as far as the gun. I snatched it up, noticing for the first time that it was fitted with a silencer. I had never held a handgun before. It was much heavier than I had expected. Da Silva stared at me.

'No!' My uncle uttered the single word quietly. It didn't matter what the circumstances were. He didn't want me to kill a man.

SNOWED UNDER

I couldn't do that. I knew it, even as I lifted the gun and pulled the trigger. I emptied the gun - all seven bullets - but not at da Silva. I shot into the air above him, over his head. I felt the gun jerking in my hand. The recoil hurt my wrist. But then it was over. All the bullets had been fired.

Da Silva reached behind him and took out a second gun. My uncle was still on the ground; there was nothing he could do. I lay where I was, my breath coming out in white clouds. Da Silva raised his gun. I could see him deciding which one of us he was going to kill first.

And then there was a gentle rumble and a ton of snow slid off the roof directly above him. I had cut a dotted line with the bullets and - as I had hoped - the weight of the snow had done the rest.

Da Silva just had time to look up before the avalanche hit him. I think he opened his mouth -to swear or scream - but it was too late. The snow made almost no sound, just a soft thwump as it hit. In a second, he had gone. Buried under a huge white curtain.

My uncle got to his feet. I did the same. The two of us looked at each other. 'Do you think we should dig him up?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'No. Let's leave him to chill out.'

There were so many things I wanted to know when we finally got back to our room. 'Who was he? Why did he have a gun? Why were you fighting him?'

Ian had phoned the police. They were already on the way, he told me. He would talk to them when they arrived. The gun he and Da Silva had been fighting over was beside him. I could still feel the weight of it in my hand. My wrist was aching from the recoil; I had never fired a handgun before.

'Forget about it, Alex,' he said. 'I recognised Da Silva from a news story. He's a wanted criminal. Bank fraud...'

'Bank fraud?' I could hardly believe it.

'I met him outside quite by chance. I challenged him - which was pretty stupid of me. He pulled out the gun...and the rest you saw.' Ian smiled. 'I expect he'll have frozen solid by now. At least he won't be needing a morgue.'

If I'd thought a little more, I'd have realised none of this added up. When I had come upon the two men, they were fighting for control of a single gun.

They had dropped it - and then Da Silva had produced a second gun of his own. So logic should have told me the first gun belonged to my uncle.

But why would he have brought a gun with him on a skiing holiday? How could he even have got it through airport security? It was such an unlikely thought - Ian carrying a firearm - that I accepted his story because there was no alternative.

Anyway, I was exhausted. It had been a long day and I was glad to crawl into bed. The next morning Ian told me he wouldn't be coming skiing.

Apparently he'd spoken to the police when they finally arrived, and they wanted him to go to the precinct and tell them as much as he could about Da Silva and the fight outside the hotel. The bad news was, Da Silva had got away.

'He must have burrowed out,' Ian said over breakfast; boiled eggs and grilled bacon. He never ate anything fried.

'Do you think he'll come back?' I asked. Ian shook his head. 'I doubt it. He knows I recognised him and he's probably out of Colorado by now. He won't want to hang around.'

'How long do you think you'll be?'

'A few hours. Don't let this spoil the holiday, Alex. Put it out of your mind. You can ski with Sahara today. She'll be glad to have you on your own.'

SLIPPERY SLOPE

But Sahara wasn't in her room. When I knocked on her door, it was opened by her father, Cameron.

'I'm sorry, Alex,' he said. 'You're just too late. She left a few minutes ago. But she'll probably call in later. I can ask her to meet you.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'I'll be up at Bear Creek.'

He nodded and closed the door, and as he did so I looked over his shoulder and saw he wasn't alone. The two young men were with him; one sitting on the sofa, the other standing by the window. The Secret Service men.

I could see his desk too. There, as always, was the laptop, surrounded by a pile of papers. If this was a holiday, I wondered what Cameron Sands did when he was at work.

I went downstairs to the boot room and a few minutes later I was clumping out to the ski lift with my skis over my shoulder. I wondered if Sahara would be able to find me. There were quite a few people around, and the thing about skiers is they all look more or less the same.

On the other hand, I was wearing a bright green jacket; a North Face Freethinker. She'd already joked about the colour and I was sure she'd recognise it a mile away.

But I saw her before she saw me. The nearest lift to the hotel was

a gondola, taking 20 people at a time up to an area called Black Ridge, about 1,000 metres higher up. Sahara was at the front of the queue, standing between two men.

I knew right away they weren't ski instructors. They were too close to her, sandwiching her between them as if they didn't want to let her slip away.

One of them was round-faced and white. The other looked Korean or Japanese. Neither were smiling. They were big men: even with the ski suits I got a sense of over-worked muscle. Sahara was scared, I saw that too. And a moment later I saw why.

A third man had gone ahead of them and was waiting inside the gondola. I only glimpsed his face behind the glass but I recognised it instantly. It was Da Silva. His hood was up and he was wearing sunglasses, but his pale skin and ugly teeth were unmistakable. He was waiting while the other men joined him with the girl.

I started towards them, but I was already too late. Sahara was inside the gondola. The doors slid shut and the whole thing jerked forward, rising up over the snow. Sahara caught sight of me just as she was swept away. Her eyes widened and she jerked her head in the direction of the hotel. The message was obvious. Get help!

Sahara was being kidnapped in broad daylight. It was crazy, but there could be no doubt about it.

I turned and began to run...

I was running to get help. Six months later, I might have tried to do something myself. Three men had grabbed Sahara - and they weren't expecting trouble.

I might have gone after them, taking the next gondola and tracking them down. It might have occurred to me to stop the gondola in mid-air.

But, of course, everything was very different then. I was 13 years old. I was on my own in a Colorado ski resort called Gunpoint. And I wasn't even certain about what I'd just seen.

Could I really be sure that Sahara was being kidnapped? And if so, why? According to my uncle Ian, Da Silva, the kidnapers' leader, had been involved in some sort of bank fraud. Why would he be interested in the daughter of...

But Sahara's father, Cameron Sands, worked for the US government. He travelled with a pair of Secret Service men. That was when I knew I was right. Whatever was happening to his daughter, it must be aimed at him. He was the one I had to tell.

I stabbed my skis and poles into a mound of snow and ran back as fast as I could to the hotel - not easy in ski boots. You were meant to take your boots off downstairs, but I just clomped right in, through the reception area, into the lift and up to the second floor, where all our rooms were.

Because of the layout of the hotel, I got to the suite I shared with Ian before I reached Cameron's room. Acting on impulse, I went into the suite. Ian had said he was going to the police precinct to talk about Da Silva, but there was a chance he would still be there. If I told Ian what had happened, he would know what to do.

But he had already gone. I turned round and was about to leave when I heard someone talking. I recognised the voice. It was Sahara's dad. He was standing outside on the terrace, talking into a phone.

I went over to the French windows and saw him standing with his back to me. He was talking into the cordless phone from his hotel room. I could tell straight away there was something very wrong - his whole body was rigid, like he'd just been electrocuted. I heard him speak.

'Where is she? What have you done with her Da Silva?'

It had to be him at the end of the phone, calling on a mobile. He'd taken the girl and now he was talking to the dad, just like in the movies. What was he demanding? Money? Somehow, I didn't think so.

If you were into the money-with-menaces business, you'd be after the film stars and multi-millionaires staying at the resort.

Gently, I slid the window open so I could hear more. 'OK,' Sands spoke slowly. In the cold air his breath was white smoke, curling around him. 'I'll bring it. And I'll come alone. But I'm warning you...'

Whoever was talking to him had already cut him off. Sands lowered his arm, the phone sitting loose in his hand.

As far as I was concerned, that should have been it. I liked Sahara but I hardly knew her. Her dad had two Secret Service men somewhere in the hotel. Maybe they were still in the room, waiting for him to come back inside. This was none of my business.

But somehow I couldn't leave it there. At the very least, I had to know what was going to happen. I told myself I wasn't going to get involved, that I was being stupid. But I still couldn't hold back.

When Cameron came out of his room five minutes later, I was waiting for him in the corridor. He had changed into his ski suit and - here was the weird thing - he was carrying his laptop computer.

It was sticking out of a black nylon bag. As he went downstairs he pushed it inside and fastened the zip. There was no sign of the Secret Service men - but I'd heard what he said on the phone: he wasn't going to involve them. Wherever he was heading, he was going alone.

I followed him downstairs, out of the hotel and across to the gondola that carried skiers up to the mountains. I picked up my skis and poles on the way. He had his skis too.

The laptop was hanging around his chest in its nylon bag, slightly hidden under one arm. There weren't many people at the gondola now. Ski school had begun and the various classes were already practising their snowploughs on the lower slopes.

I watched Sahara's dad hold his lift pass out to be scanned, waited a few moments, then did the same. I'd pulled up my hood and put on my goggles.

We got into the same gondola and were only a few inches apart. But even if he looked in my direction, I knew he wouldn't recognise me. Anyway, he wasn't taking any notice of the people around him. He looked sick with worry.

Five minutes later we got out at Black Ridge, a wide shelf in the mountains with three other lifts climbing in different directions. Cameron put on his skis and I did the same. I knew he was a strong skier, but I reckoned I could keep up with him.

I didn't need to worry. He skied only as far as the nearest lift - a double chair - and took it up to Gun Hill. There was just one more lift that went up from here. It led to an area called The Needle.

It was as high as you could get, so high that even on a bright day like today the clouds still licked the surface of the snow. Once again I went with him, just a few chairs behind.

Da Silva was waiting for him at The Needle.

After we got off the lift, I stayed behind, tucked in close to the lift building's brickwork, watching as Cameron Sands skied down about 30 metres to a flat area beside the piste known as Breakneck Pass.

The name tells you all you need to know. It was the only way down, a double black diamond run of ice and moguls that started with a stomach-churning, zig-zagging chute, continued along the edge of a precipice and then plunged into a wood, with no obvious way between the trees.

Not many people came up here. My uncle said you'd need nerves of steel to take on Breakneck. Or a death wish.

Waiting with Da Silva were the fat man and the Korean I'd seen helping him kidnap Sahara at earlier. They had a scared-looking Sahara trapped between them. No one could see me.

I was 30 metres higher up, and the clouds and snow flurries chasing along the mountain ridge separated me from them. I wiped the ice off my goggles and watched.

Cameron said something. Sahara started forward but the two men held her back. Now it was Da Silva's turn. He was smiling. I saw him point at the laptop. Sands hesitated but not for very long. He lifted it off his shoulder and handed it over. Da Silva nodded to his companions.

They let Sahara go and she slithered - I wouldn't even call it skiing - across to her dad. He put an arm around her. The business was finished.

Except that it wasn't. I hadn't decided what I was going to do - until I did it. Suddenly I found myself racing down the slope, my legs bent and my shoulders low, my poles tucked under my arms, picking up as much speed as I could. Nobody was looking my way. They didn't realise I was there until it was too late.

I was moving so fast that, to them, I must have been no more than a blur. I snatched the laptop out of Da Silva's hand and kept going, over the lip and down the first stretch of Breakneck Pass.

In the next few seconds I found myself almost falling off the edge of the mountain, poling like crazy to avoid the first moguls and, at the same time, managing to get the bag strap over my head so the computer dangled behind me.

I nearly fell twice. If I'd had time to think what I was doing, I'd probably have lost control and broken both my legs. But instinct had taken over. I was 20 metres down the chute and heading for the next segment before Da Silva even knew what had happened.

He didn't hang around. I heard a shout and somehow I knew, without looking back, that the three men were after me. Da Silva wanted the computer. Sands had given it to him.

So he and his daughter weren't needed any more. I was the target now. All I had to do was get down to the bottom, which couldn't be more than two or three thousand metres from here. It was just a pity there was no one else around. If I could get back into a crowd, I'd be safe.

I heard a crack. A bullet slammed into the snow inches from my left ski. Who had fired? The answer was obvious but even so I found it hard to believe. Was it really possible to ski in these conditions and bring out a gun at the same time? The snow was horrible, wind-packed and hard as metal.

My skis were grinding as they carried me over the surface. I was grateful my uncle had insisted on choosing my equipment for me; I was using Nordica twin tips, wide under the foot and seriously stiff. It had taken me a while to get used to them but the whole point was that they were built for speed.

Right now they seemed to be flying, and as I carved and pivoted around the moguls I almost wanted to laugh. I didn't think anyone in the world would be able to catch up with me.

But I was wrong. Either Da Silva and his men had spent a long time training for this or they'd been experts to begin with. I came to a gully and risked a glance back. There were less than 15 metres between us and they were gaining fast.

Worse still, they didn't seem to be exerting themselves. They had that slow, fluid quality you get in only the best skiers. They could have been cutting their way down a nursery slope.

I cursed myself for getting involved in the first place. Why had I done it? This had nothing to do with me.

But then I made it to the woodland. At least the trunks and branches would make it harder for anyone to take another shot at me. I was lucky I'd done plenty of tree skiing with Ian.

I knew that I had to keep up speed otherwise I'd lose control. Go too fast, though, and I'd risk impaling myself on a branch. The secret is balance. Or luck. Or something.

I didn't really know where I was going. Everything was just streaks of green and brown and white. I was getting tired. Branches were slashing at my face; my legs were already aching with all the twists and turns and the laptop was half-strangling me, threatening to pull me over backwards.

One of my skis almost snagged on a root. I shifted my body weight and cried out as my left shoulder slammed into a trunk - it felt as if I'd broken a bone. I almost lost control.

One of the men shouted something. I couldn't see them but it sounded as if they were just inches away. That gave me new strength. I shot forward on to a miniature ramp, which propelled me into the air and through a tangle of branches that scratched my face and tore at my goggles.

I was in the clear. The wood disappeared behind me and I fell into a wide, empty area. But I landed badly. My skis slipped and there was a sickening crash as I dived headlong into the snow. My bones shuddered. Then I was sliding helplessly in a blinding white explosion. My skis came free.

I was aware the surface underneath me had changed. It was smoother and more slippery. I stretched out a hand and tried to stop myself, but there was no purchase at all. Where was I? At last I slowed down and stopped.

Breathless and confused, I was sure I must have broken several bones. The laptop was round my throat and the ground seemed to be cracking up where I lay. No, actually it was cracking up.

As I struggled to my feet, I realised what had happened. I had gone spectacularly off-piste. There was a frozen lake on the west side of the mountain called Coldwater. I had landed right next to it and managed to slide in. I was on the surface of the ice. And it was

breaking under my weight.

Da Silva and the two men had stopped on the edge of the lake. All three were facing me. Two of them had guns. My goggles had come off in the fall and Da Silva recognised me. 'You!' He spat out the single word. He didn't sound friendly.

There were about ten metres between us. Nobody moved.

'Give me the laptop,' he demanded.

I said nothing. If I gave him the laptop, he would kill me. That much I knew.

'Give me it or I will take it,' he continued.

There was the sound of something cracking. A black line snaked towards my foot. I steadied myself, trying not to breathe. Water, as cold as death, welled up around me. I wondered how much longer the ice would hold. If it broke I would disappear for ever.

'Why don't you come and get it?' I said.

Da Silva nodded and the Korean man stepped forward. I could see he wasn't too happy about it - I guess he'd been chosen because he was the lightest of the three.

But he wasn't light enough. On the third step, the ice broke. One minute he was there, the next he was down, his arms floundering and his face filling with panic as he tried to grip the sides of the hole. His breath came out as great mushrooms of white steam.

He tried to scream but no sound came out. His lungs must already have frozen.

He had taken a gun with him. They had only one other. Da Silva snatched it from the fat man - at least there was no way he was going to trust his weight on the ice - and pointed it at me.

'Give me the laptop,' he said. 'Or I will shoot you where you stand.'

'What will you do then?' I said. I took another step, moving away from the edge of the lake. The ice creaked. I could feel it straining underneath my feet. 'You can't reach me. You're too heavy.'

'The ice will harden in the night. I'll return for it tomorrow.'

'You think the laptop will still be working? A whole day and a night out here?'

'Give it to me!' Da Silva didn't want to argue any more. I could almost see his finger tightening on the trigger. I had absolutely no doubt that he was about to kill me.

'Alex . . . get down. Now!'

My uncle's voice came out of the wood. As Da Silva spun round, I dropped low, hoping the sudden movement wouldn't crack the ice. At the same time there were two shots. Da Silva had fired first. He'd missed. My uncle hadn't.

Da Silva seemed to throw his own gun away. He had been hit in the shoulder. He sank to his knees, gripping the wound. Blood, bright red in the morning sun, seeped through his fingers.

Ian Rider appeared. I had no idea how he'd managed to follow us down from The Needle. I'd never so much as glimpsed him. But that must have been what he'd done.

He skied to the very edge of the lake and spoke to me, his eyes never leaving Da Silva or the other man.

'Are you all right, Alex?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Come back over here. Give me the laptop and get your skis back on.'

I did as he told me. I'd begun to tremble. I'd like to say it was just the cold but I'm not sure that would be true.

'Who are you?' Da Silva demanded. I'd never heard a voice so full of hate.

'Your skis. Both of you . . .' My uncle raised the gun. The two men took off their skis. He gestured. They knew what to do. Da Silva and the fat man threw their skis into the lake.

Meanwhile, the Korean had managed to pull himself out. He was lying there shivering, blue with cold.

'Enjoy the rest of the day, gentlemen, my uncle said, and he and I set off together.

Da Silva and the others would have to walk down. It would take them hours - and I had no doubt the police would be waiting for them when they arrived.

And that was it really. What you might call my first mission. Sahara and her dad left the resort that day. I thought I'd never see them again but in fact I met Sahara a couple of years later.

She told me that her dad had been working in the office of America's Secretary of State for Defence - and his laptop had contained classified information about the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. If it had leaked, the result would have been a huge embarrassment for the US government.

Someone must have paid Da Silva to steal the laptop, but he had failed. So he then engineered the kidnap and the attempted ransom. Something like that, anyway.

I never did find out how my uncle had arrived just in time to rescue me. He said it was just luck, that he'd seen Da Silva on the gondola and followed him up the mountain while I was racing back to the hotel.

Maybe that was true. He also said the gun he'd used was the same gun he'd snatched in the fight the night before. That certainly wasn't.

The funny thing was, we hardly talked about it again while we were in Colorado. It was as if there was an unspoken agreement between us. Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies.

When I look back on it, I wonder how stupid I could have been not to see what Ian Rider really was. A spy. But then again, I didn't know what I was either - what he'd made me. I remember he pretended to be very angry that I'd put myself in danger.

But at the same time I could see that secretly he was pleased. He'd been training me all my life to follow in his footsteps, and what happened at Gunpoint had shown him I was ready.

And that was just as well. In a few months time, I'd need to be.

POSTED BY GABBY GOODE AT 4:55 PM 

3 COMMENTS:



dragonite21_inoppl said...

OMG dood. I just stumbled upon ur blog and it's great! I've been looking for a great Alex Rider blog for a while and I finally found one! Thanks!

JULY 3, 2009 5:29 AM



FallingUp said...

I'm so glad I found it! I've been looking for this for a couple of months.I found a link a while back but it was dead...

AUGUST 16, 2009 9:31 AM



marybeth.hp7 said...

Thanks I've been trying to find this story for a long time, and your blog is fantastic!!

AUGUST 22, 2009 10:18 PM

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