



**ALEX**  
**RIDER**



**NIGHTSHADE**  
**REVENGE**

**ANTHONY HOROWITZ**

**ALEX** ACTION  
ADRENALINE  
ADVENTURE  
**RIDER**  
NIGHTSHADE REVENGE

**ANTHONY HOROWITZ**



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WALKER  
BOOKS

# ***THE INVISIBLE BULLET***

The three-headed dog was sitting on the corner of Times Square in the middle of New York.

As he climbed out of the subway and caught his breath, Steven Chan got the sense that the dog was searching for him. It would have the advantage, of course. With its twisting necks and its six smouldering red eyes, it could look in three directions at once. Had it actually seen him? The dog was built like a Dobermann but it was several times larger, looming over the traffic that was snarled up in the surrounding streets, the swarms of yellow cabs all blaring their horns as if that would actually help them find a way through the tangled knot of cars, delivery vans and open-top tourist buses.

It was a bitterly cold February evening. Although it was only five o'clock, the sky was already slate grey. The neon advertisements all around the square seemed to be fighting with each other: NBC, Pepsi, Levi's, *The Lion King*, *The Phantom of the Opera*. Clouds of steam and smoke were rising into the air, spilling out of the various braziers cooking hot dogs, burgers and candied nuts, or billowing through the manholes, escaping from the miles of service pipes below the pavements.

Steven Chan tightened the hood of his silver-grey puffer jacket and hurried along Seventh Avenue, trying

to lose himself in the crowd. He was in his twenties, Asian American, with a round face, black hair and haunted eyes. He was in danger and he knew it. Had he really allowed himself to fly almost three thousand miles, from West Coast to East Coast, simply to walk into a trap? For that was what New York had become. The whole city. And he was already wondering how he was going to get out alive.

He should have known better.

Chan wasn't exactly a private detective. His friends would have laughed if he'd called himself that. But he was most certainly an investigator, working in the closely related fields of computer fraud, identity theft and industrial espionage. His job had often brought him up against people who were as wealthy and powerful as they were dangerous, and he knew how to look after himself. After all, he had worked for three years as a field agent with the CIA. Trained in the use of firearms, he had a licence to carry the SIG Sauer P226 pistol, which was his weapon of choice. Right now he wished he had brought it with him. He would have liked to have felt the weight of it, tucked into his waistband. But it was too late now. He had to find a way out. He had to get home.

He glanced back. The dog was still there. One of its three mouths was hanging open, revealing a drooling tongue and impossibly sharp teeth. The crowds of pedestrians were passing by on either side. Nobody else seemed to have noticed it.

As he urged himself on, Steven Chan thought back to the moment, two hours ago, when his nightmare had begun.

He had come to New York to meet the one man who could

help him with his investigation and tell him everything he needed to know. He had managed to piece it all together for himself, but the truth was so shocking, so unbelievable, that he needed proof. That was what Paul Shaffer had promised to give him.

The two men couldn't have been more careful. They had only ever spoken using "burners": cheap cell phones that they used once and then destroyed. They had sent disposable emails that self-destructed the moment they were read. And Shaffer had been clear about the arrangements for the meeting.

Come alone.

Tell no one.

Don't be late.

Chan had obeyed all three instructions. His plane had landed exactly on time at LaGuardia Airport and he had taken a taxi straight to SoHo, a smart area much loved by writers and artists at the southern end of Manhattan. This was where Shaffer lived. The taxi had pulled up in front of a tall, red-brick structure in Mercer Street, a warehouse that had been converted into a handful of spacious apartments. As he paid the driver and got out, Chan had wondered how much it would cost to buy a place like this. Five million dollars? Ten?

Shaffer would easily have been able to afford it. He was one of the most famous video game designers in America, the man behind *Zombie Nights 1, 2* and *3*. He had joined Real Time, one of the biggest tech companies in America, and had helped them create the shooter *Trigger Happy*, which had sold half a million copies in the week following

its launch. Most recently, he had been the guiding force behind the creation of *Eden Fall*, the augmented reality game that had taken the world by storm. Many people were saying that it was going to be as big as *Pokémon GO*. Real Time boasted that it already was.

Chan had walked up to the door and rung the bell. Nobody had answered. Should that have warned him that something was wrong? Would it have made any difference if he had turned round and left, there and then?

But this is what had happened. As he stood at the entrance, wondering what to do, the door had opened and one of the other residents had come out: a woman in a fake fur coat with a large handbag. Chan had smiled at her as if he had just been buzzed in and walked past her before she had a chance to question him. He found himself in a gloomy hallway with a lift on one side, but he had been trained to avoid lifts whenever possible. To any field agent, a lift was a small room with just one metal door and no other way out. He took the stairs.

Paul Shaffer owned the penthouse, six storeys up. When Chan reached the top of the stairs, he saw that the door was ajar, and that should have been another warning, but it was too late to go back now. He knocked and waited. Then, with a rising sense of dread, he pushed the door open and went in.

He continued along a wide corridor with a polished wooden floor and brightly coloured Marvel posters – originals – on the walls. One door opened into a kitchen, old-fashioned but full of modern gadgets; the next led into a bathroom. Chan didn't call out. He moved carefully,

making no sound. The instinct that he had developed as a CIA agent told him that he was alone in the apartment, but he couldn't be sure. Once again, he thought of the SIG Sauer P226 that he had left behind. He missed the cold comfort of the metal in his hands. As he entered the living room, he felt completely naked.

The living room was huge, with double-height ceilings and four oversized windows with views stretching out over West Broadway. The day was already nearing its end, but Chan didn't reach for the light switch. There might be someone watching the flat. Why advertise that he was here? His eyes took in expensive furniture, a jukebox, shelves jammed with photographs and awards, a long metal table surrounded by chairs, a Persian rug. No sign of any computer equipment. Shaffer must work somewhere else. A spiral staircase led to a gallery with more doors at the back. Chan climbed up.

The man he had come to meet was in the bedroom. Paul Shaffer was lying on his back, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, his bare feet sticking out. He was staring at the ceiling with eyes that no longer saw anything. It was impossible to say how the games designer had died. It could have been natural causes: a heart attack or a stroke. But Chan knew otherwise. The meeting had been planned very carefully. The stakes could not have been higher. It was too much of a coincidence that Shaffer should have chosen this moment to pass away in his sleep. He had been murdered, and Chan realized that he had to get out of this place as quickly as he could if he didn't want to be next.

He was about to leave when he noticed that the dead

man was clutching something, holding it against his chest. It was a pair of goggles, the sort of thing a skier or a motorcyclist might wear. They had large lenses, a thick frame made out of black, moulded plastic and a wide strap that went over the ears and all the way round the head. Chan would have recognized them instantly, even without the Real Time logo of a miniature clock face and the letters RT printed on the side. This wasn't just a headset; it was one of the most advanced computers on the planet, battery-powered and stuffed with state-of-the-art processors, 3D sensing modules, high-resolution displays.

More than that, it was Paul Shaffer's headset. He could have left a message inside it. He could have left the entire story of his life. The headset connected Chan with all the information he needed about Real Time. He knew at once that he had to take it and, leaning forward, he prised it loose from the dead man's grip.

The fingers had not yet become stiff and offered no resistance. That told him that Shaffer had been alive only a short while ago.

All the more reason to get out fast.

Holding the headset, Chan hurried into the kitchen. He had noticed the fire escape before he entered the building and now he used it, zigzagging down to the narrow alleyway that ran along the side. He pulled his hood over his head, then, walking more slowly, slipped out into the main street. He had already worked out what he had to do. The first thing was to find a place of safety as far away from the apartment as possible. There was no point trying to go back to the airport. If anyone was following him, that



was the first place they would look. He needed to surround himself with people. No more alleyways. No parking lots. Nowhere that he could be picked off on his own. He would take the least obvious way out of New York. He might travel by train from Penn Station to Boston or Washington, for example. Or he could take a Greyhound bus all the way to California. Chan was carrying two thousand dollars in his wallet. He would pay in cash. Any form of electronic or Internet banking was out of the question.

He followed the crowd along Canal Street. It was mainly workers leaving their offices, but there were tourists and early-evening shoppers too. Safety in numbers. It felt good being surrounded. He came to a subway entrance and, without thinking about it, plunged down the narrow staircase, disappearing underneath the street. This was the fastest way to get uptown, and the further he was from SoHo, the more anonymous he would become. The New York subway system was more than a hundred years old and felt like it, with old-fashioned tiles and a meshwork of grimy steel girders. But it was efficient. Chan had only been on the platform for a minute before a train came grinding in. He climbed inside and sat down, relieved when the doors slammed shut behind him.

As the train thundered through the darkness, Chan examined the headset he had taken. Should he put it on? No. Not down here. There were too many people watching. But once he reached the surface, it might actually be useful. The headset would have a map with street directions built into it, and the simple truth was that Steven Chan didn't know New York all that well. It would

provide him with bus routes, train stations and timetables, distances, news reports and more, all of them projected directly into his eyes. That was how augmented reality worked. It was like an overlay. A whole world of games and information printed on top of the real world.

He looked up. A young woman was staring at him from the other side of the carriage. She had a headset folded around her neck. She could have been completely innocent, a gamer on her way home, but why had her eyes locked into his? Suddenly, Chan was worried. Perhaps it wasn't so good being surrounded, not when he was trapped underground. The train slowed down and pulled into a station: Times Square/42nd Street. Making an instant decision, Chan got up and left the train.

As soon as he had climbed up into Times Square, he slipped his own headset on and everything changed. At once he was surrounded by information he didn't need. Ticket prices for the Shubert Theatre. Ripley's Believe It or Not! opening times. The weather forecast: snow expected tonight. The words were floating in rectangular boxes, suspended in the air. He turned his head, and that was when he saw the three-headed dog, sitting on the pavement. For a brief moment, Chan was jolted. The dog looked so real, as if it had stepped out of a Greek myth. But of course it didn't exist. It was computer-generated and presumably belonged to *Eden Fall*. Steven Chan had to smile. Paul Shaffer was a real genius. Working with maybe a hundred or even a thousand programmers, he had first created the monster and then placed it in the middle of New York.

As he continued up Seventh Avenue, Chan saw a horned owl perching on a fire hydrant and a huge snake slithering underneath a parked car. Overhead, three winged pigs flew above the traffic. A number 17 bus went past with a naked pink demon sitting, cross-legged, on its roof. There were creatures everywhere and as Chan continued moving, he couldn't help noticing that they were taking more and more of an interest in him. None of them approached him, but their heads turned in his direction. The owl smiled at him. An octopus, wrapped around a lamppost, smoking eight cigarettes, pointed one of its tentacles at him and laughed as if at some private joke.

The headset was feeding him information too. **Traffic accident ahead. Snow expected at 10.15 p.m. Police officer approaching: identified as Jim Fletcher, Midtown South Precinct.** And so on. Line after line of data was being thrown at him from every direction.

He had travelled ten blocks, reaching 55th Street with the dark emptiness of Central Park ahead, when a man stepped in front of him. At least, it was a man as far as the shoulders. It had the head of an enormous rat.

"You don't think you're going to escape us?" the creature asked.

Chan stared at the black eyes, the twitching nose and lips, the brown hair brushing over the collar. He realized he was hearing the words through speakers hidden in the wrap-around bands of the headset. They were being fed directly into his ears. He saw something out of the corner of his eye and, despite himself, ducked down. One of the pigs had dive-bombed him.

*They can't hurt me, he told himself. They're not real. They don't exist.*

The rat grinned, showing two rows of vicious little teeth. It was almost as if it had heard what he was thinking and wanted to prove him wrong.

On the other side of the road, the octopus let out another burst of high-pitched laughter and slid down towards the ground.

He heard buzzing and saw a swarm of wasps, each one the size of a tennis ball. They had appeared out of nowhere and were circling around his head. Another demon with a trident leaned out of the window, its tail waving lazily above its head. It seemed to be looking right at him.

The headset might be a useful source of information, but Chan decided he'd had enough. He tore it off and instantly all the creatures disappeared and the sounds stopped. Seventh Avenue returned to normal. Chan had played *Eden Fall*. He knew how brilliantly the computer images had been constructed. Some of the figures – Adam and Eve, angels and demons – had been created with so much detail that it was impossible to tell them apart from actual human beings. He also knew they couldn't hurt him. They were ghosts, holograms. But even so, he had been shaken to find himself surrounded by them. Right now, he just wanted to get away.

He hadn't stopped moving, and before he knew it, he had crossed another road and suddenly there was grass beneath his feet. He had entered Central Park! It was another world. The moon had come out and it was reflecting off the grass, which had a coating of winter

frost, stripping away every colour apart from the darkest green and white. Leaving the traffic and the crowds behind him, Chan walked into an all-surrounding silence. He could see thousands of squares of light but they all looked the same, and he realized he was lost.

He had to find his way out of here, and there was only one way to do it.

He put the headset back on.

More boxes blinked to life. **Central Park. Created in 1857. 1.4 square miles in size.** He saw that he had just crossed West Drive (six-mile loop, popular for biking and trail running). Signposts sprang up. **This way to the zoo. This way to Lounging Rock. This way to the Pond.** He raised the headset to make sure. The signs existed in the game, not in real life. Well, he could still use them. He would make his way over to the Upper West Side. He would find a taxi and drive to Washington Heights. He had friends who lived there. Why had he allowed a pack of augmented reality animals to unsettle him? They could taunt him and buzz around him, but they couldn't hurt him. He just needed somewhere to hide out.

He stopped.

There were two young girls standing in front of him, both of them dressed in red coats. One had fair hair and looked about thirteen. The other was younger, with pigtails. Chan wondered what they were doing on their own in Central Park at night. He had forgotten he was still wearing the headset. Nothing seemed real any more.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I'm Amy," the first girl said.

“I’m Jasmine.” The second girl smiled.

They were only children. Chan wasn’t scared of them. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m in a hurry. I can’t help you.”

“We don’t need your help,” Amy muttered.

“You’re the one who needs help,” Jasmine agreed.

She had taken a gun out of her pocket. But Chan saw that it wasn’t a real gun at all. It was bright pink and made of plastic, the sort of thing you might buy in a toy shop for ten dollars. In fact, he knew exactly what it was. Gamers used weapons just like this in shooter video games. It was controlled by Bluetooth and although it might fire invisible bullets that could bring down an owl or a flying pig, it was useless against him. It wasn’t real.

“What are you...?” he began.

They were the last words he ever spoke.

Jasmine pulled the trigger and – through his headset – Steven Chan saw the single word BANG suspended in the air. Despite himself, he smiled. Then something exploded between his eyes. It was as if he had been hit by an invisible bullet. He felt a moment of searing pain before both worlds – real and fake – turned themselves off. The darkness rushed in and he pitched forward, his knees and then his chest plunging into the soft ground. His hands twitched for a moment, but then he lay still. A pool of blood formed itself around his head, almost black in the moonlight.

Although he would never know it, Chan had been doomed from the moment he had taken the headset. The thick black plastic had contained two devices. The first was a micro-locator which had allowed the girls to follow

him. The second was much more deadly. A tiny pipe bomb filled with PETN, one of the most explosive chemicals in the world, had been concealed in the crosspiece that fitted above his nose, slanting towards his head. When Jasmine pressed the trigger of her gun, she had sent a radio signal that had set off a firing pulse. The effect had been of a tiny gun firing a tiny bullet that had gone directly into Chan's brain.

The two girls looked at what they'd done.

"You got him," Amy said.

"It was easy," Jasmine replied.

Neither of them showed any emotion, but then they had killed many times. They both worked for an organization that specialized in murder, and they had spent most of their lives learning how to kill people. The organization was called Nightshade and, quite recently, it had sent them to poison a senior and much-respected British politician, with a chocolate muffin filled with cyanide. His death had set off a chain of events that could have led to a major terrorist incident in London.

It had been a lot of fun.

But for now their work was done. Carefully, they removed all that remained of the headset from Steven Chan's head, leaving the body stretched out on the grass. After all, they didn't want the police to find any evidence. Then they turned round and, holding hands, walked back across the park, heading for the bright lights.

## SEPARATE WAYS

*In a box there are only black balls, white balls, red balls and yellow balls. A ball is taken at random from the box. The table shows the probability that the ball will be red or yellow.*

<b>Colour:</b>	Black	White	Red	Yellow
<b>Probability:</b>			0.35	0.20

*The probability that the ball will be black is twice the probability that the ball will be white. There are 21 red balls in the box. How many black balls are there in the box?*

Alex Rider stared at the exam paper in front of him. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he realized that it made absolutely no sense at all. Why were there all these balls in a box? What sort of balls were they? Cricket balls? Tennis balls? Ping-pong balls? How could he possibly know how many of them were black and, at the end of the day, why did it matter?

He sighed and forced himself to concentrate. This might be a mock exam, but his maths teacher, Mr Donovan, took it very seriously. GCSEs were only two months away and he had already told Alex that he expected top marks from



him. "Goodness knows how many lessons you've missed over the past couple of years," he said to Alex. "But I'll give you credit. You've really applied yourself this term and you deserve your Easter break. Just don't make any silly mistakes."

Silly mistakes. Right.

Alex tried to focus on the page. He was sitting in the front row of the gymnasium, which had been turned into an exam room at Brookland School, surrounded by the rest of Year Eleven, all of them in uniform, trying to untangle the problems in front of them. His best friend, Tom Harris, was two desks away, staring into space with a pencil sticking out of his mouth and a dreamy expression on his face. There was a clock high up on the front wall. In some corner of his mind, Alex knew that the four values had to add up to one. This sort of problem was easy. He'd done it plenty of times. But with the minutes ticking past, his brain was refusing to work.

Instead, he began to drift away until he had arrived at the final moments in St Paul's Cathedral, when he had grappled with Freddy Grey, a fifteen-year-old terrorist who had been sent to take out the entire British government. Once again, he saw himself fighting for the cylinder of deadly VX nerve gas ... enough to kill everyone in the building. As he sat there with the exam paper in front of him, the entire room seemed to tilt and suddenly he was falling, falling with the ground rushing up towards him...

"Five more minutes!" Mr Donovan announced.

Alex closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he looked again, the room had returned to normal and the

black and white balls were still waiting for him to sort them out.

All right.

Alex spent the next five minutes working out the problem and scribbled the answer down just as Mr Donovan called time and began to collect the papers. Over to his right, Tom was slumped back in his chair, his pencil now being twiddled in his ear. Alex looked down at what he'd written. Had he got it right? Did he even care?

Yes. It was important to him. At the end of the summer he was going to be starting sixth form and he had already decided that he wanted to go on to university. Jack Starbright, who had been his housekeeper when his uncle had died and who was now closer to him than anyone in the world, had agreed. He needed to take control of his own life. For too long, he'd allowed other people to tell him what to do.

MI6. Alan Blunt. Mrs Jones.

The worst of it was, as much as Alex wanted to leave all that behind him, it wasn't over yet.

In just two days' time, he was going to be taking the train from London to Salisbury, as he had every week for the last three months. He didn't really want to go. But Freddy Grey, the boy who had come so close to killing two thousand people, was being held prisoner near there and, like it or not, Alex felt responsible for him.

It wasn't Freddy's fault. Ten years ago, when he was just five years old, Freddy had been kidnapped along with twenty-four other children from different parts of the world. They had all been told that their parents had

abandoned them. They had been brainwashed and turned into an army that would do anything and kill anyone without a second thought. The children had no names. They thought of themselves only as Numbers: Freddy had been Number Nine and in many ways he had been the most dangerous of them all. Taken prisoner by the Special Operations of the Brazilian police, one of the toughest security outfits in the world, he had managed to kill five men and injure three more while he was trying to break free.

Nightshade had turned him into a monster. There was no other word for it. And Alex couldn't think of the four so-called "Teachers" – who had run the organization – without feeling sick. They had been making millions of pounds by turning children into cold-blooded assassins and then renting them out to the highest bidder. The children didn't care if they lived or died. They just did what they were told.

Thanks to Alex, Nightshade was finished. The four leaders had abandoned their secret hideaway in Crete and disappeared. Freddy, along with two other Numbers, had been arrested in London. All this had happened over five months ago, but Alex was still visiting him because he thought he could help him. Freddy was being held in a maximum-security facility inside a huge army base at Tidworth in Wiltshire. He had a team of doctors and psychiatrists working with him, but none of them thought it would be easy to reverse the brainwashing that had lasted his entire lifetime. What Freddy needed, everyone agreed, was someone normal, a boy his own age who might somehow help steer him back into the real world.

Who else was there but Alex?

Alex had met Freddy's parents – Sir Christopher and Lady Susan Grey – and they too had encouraged him to keep up the friendship. They were visiting their son regularly, but there were times when he still didn't recognize them or refused to believe they were who they said they were. Alex couldn't help feeling sorry for them. First they had thought their son had drowned in a boating accident. Then they had discovered that he was a professional killer with a trail of bodies behind him. How could Alex turn down their request for help?

Perhaps Freddy was beginning to show signs of improvement. Alex couldn't be sure, but every time he had gone back to Tidworth Camp, he had noticed small differences. First of all, Freddy was using his own name and didn't insist on being called Number Nine. He had started reading books and sometimes asked questions about the outside world. When he had been with Nightshade, he had barely been allowed to talk at all. He was smiling more. Very occasionally, Alex felt that he could relax, as if Freddy was just another boy, almost exactly the same age as him, getting better after a long illness.

But always he had to ask himself: was Freddy just faking it? Was he trying to get his guards to relax, waiting for the moment when he could make a break for freedom? It was horribly possible. That was exactly what he had done when he had been held prisoner in Rio de Janeiro. He had pretended to be a little boy, asking permission to use the toilet. But once the door had been unlocked, he had sprung into lethal action, cutting down eight professional

soldiers. Freddy Grey was a killing machine and it was impossible to forget it. Alone in the room with him, Alex knew that he was surrounded by CCTV cameras and that there were several panic buttons with soldiers waiting at the door in case of an emergency. He was doing his best to be a friend to Freddy Grey, but he could never be sure.

“Your paper, Alex?”

Alex looked up and saw Mr Donovan, the maths teacher, standing over him. He realized he’d been miles away. “Yes, sir.” He handed the paper over.

There were eighteen black balls in the box. There had to be.

Alex got up and followed the rest of Year Eleven out into the sun.

It was half past three and the school day had come to an end. Everyone was buzzing as they hurried through the main gates. The following day was the start of the spring holiday, two glorious weeks without class. Alex himself was heading off for a five-day break with Jack Starbright. The two of them had decided to go hiking in Ireland along the Wild Atlantic Way with perhaps a stop at Dunfanaghy beach in Donegal for some surfing. Jack was also studying for exams – in her case, the Bar Course Aptitude Test that she needed to pass to become a lawyer. They both needed a break.

Alex found Tom unloading his bike from the rack. He was looking exhausted. “How did it go?” Alex asked.

“Maths ... not my strong suit,” Tom muttered. “I just about managed to count the pages.”

“Was it really as bad as that?”

“I’m finished here.” Tom swung his bike round. “I’m not going into sixth form. I don’t want to go to uni. I just want to get on with my life.”

Alex found his own bike and the two boys walked out of the school gates together. Alex couldn’t help feeling a bit sad. He and Tom had been best friends since they were twelve. More than that, Tom was the only boy at Brookland who knew the truth about Alex: that his uncle had been a spy and that Alex had been recruited by MI6 after Ian Rider’s death. Tom had become increasingly involved in Alex’s adventures, helping to cover for him when he was away from school. He had even been there at the end, when Alex had single-handedly taken on Nightshade at St Paul’s Cathedral. It was surprising that Tom had never been made to sign the Official Secrets Act.

But now it seemed that they were going separate ways. If Tom really did drop out of school before sixth form, Alex would spend his last two years at Brookland without him. Of course they would still see each other and Alex had plenty of other friends, but it wouldn’t be the same. And what would happen if Tom got a job on the other side of the country or even abroad? He had often talked of joining his older brother, Jerry, in Naples. Tom and Jerry. Neither of them had ever forgiven their parents.

“You still on for skateboarding tomorrow?” Alex asked.

“Sure.” Tom didn’t sound enthusiastic.

“I thought you enjoyed it.”

“I enjoy it when I’m not falling off and breaking both my legs.”

This was another recent development. Alex had gone back to the sport at the start of the year. He wasn't sure what had first got him interested, although watching a sixteen-year-old Australian winning gold at the Tokyo Olympics had certainly been part of it. But it was more than that. Perhaps it was all the training he had been given by Ian Rider when he was growing up. There was a part of Alex that always needed to test himself. He also loved the freedom and the sense of exhilaration that came with a sport that had few rules, which demanded skill but very little equipment, and which could cause you serious harm if you made a mistake. When things went right, Alex felt as if he were flying. He could go anywhere he wanted and it was as if London belonged to him. When he made a mistake, he paid for it. Alex had turned up at school with so many bruises that Miss Bedfordshire, the school secretary, had considered reporting him to social services.

Alex had managed to persuade Tom to join him and they occasionally went to Southbank Undercroft, a skatepark underneath the Queen Elizabeth Hall, close to the River Thames. Tom's older brother was seriously into extreme sports, and if the two of them really were going to hang out together in Naples, this would be good practice. Tom had been reluctant to begin with, but he was pleasantly surprised to find that he liked the other skateboarders, particularly some of the girls who quickly latched on to the fact that he was a beginner and fussed over him, offering to help him with his technique.

Alex and Tom might only have another term together at Brookland. Quite soon, they'd have left their childhoods

behind them. But they were both determined to enjoy the months ahead. Together, as they had always been.

"You want to come round for supper?" Alex asked. Tom lived up near Earl's Court. His parents had got divorced and now he was on his own with his mother. Alex's journey home would take him in the other direction.

"I can't." Tom sighed. "Dad's taking me out tonight. Fish and chips and two hours of him moaning on at me. It's all Mum's fault. I should move in with him. I'll love his new girlfriend..." Tom got on his bike. "Why are adults so rubbish?"

"They've forgotten they were kids."

"My parents were never young. I think they were born aged forty."

Despite himself, Alex smiled. He had his cycle helmet over his arm and now he pedalled away. "See you tomorrow!"

If Alex had still been working for MI6, he might have been more attentive. Perhaps he had been too occupied by his mock GCSEs. But he hadn't noticed that he and Tom had been followed from the moment they left Brookland.

There were four of them.

The first had been outside the school gates, a Deliveroo driver on a bust-up Honda SFX 50cc moped. He had been idling on the other side of the road, pretending to look for directions on his mobile phone. A few minutes later, a girl on a rented electric scooter had swerved in behind them, never travelling more than five miles per hour. Like the Deliveroo driver, she was wearing a helmet. This didn't just keep her safe. It concealed her identity.



As Alex and Tom parted company, two cyclists pulled up at the traffic lights ahead of them, both with helmets and sunglasses. They did not turn round but used their mirrors to watch what was happening. They saw Alex go one way and Tom the other. One of them spoke into a concealed throat mic. "Targets separating at Sydney Street. We'll follow Rider. Thirteen and Twenty-Two, you stay with Harris."

Thirteen was the Deliveroo driver. Twenty-Two was the girl on the e-scooter. At once they swung into action, setting off smoothly through the traffic.

Alex was still going over that last question in the maths exam. Eighteen black balls in a box. He saw nothing.

On all sides, Nightshade was drawing in.

*For Guy Burt, who brilliantly  
adapted Alex Rider for TV. With thanks.*



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2023 by Walker Books Ltd  
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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Cover artwork by Two Dots  
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This book has been typeset in Officina Sans

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:  
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-9122-0  
ISBN 978-1-5295-0793-5

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