



SNAKEHEAD

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First published 2007 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

This edition published 2008

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2007, 2008 Stormbreaker Productions Ltd
Cover design by Walker Books Ltd
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This book has been typeset in *Officina Sans*

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

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

ISBN 978-1-4063-1039-9

www.walkerbooks.co.uk

CODA

The airport belonged to another age, a time when air travel was an adventure, when planes still had propellers and had to stop at strange-sounding places to refuel on their way across the world. There was just one runway, a narrow strip of silver-grey concrete cutting through grass that had been perfectly mown. The single terminal was a white building with a curving entrance and a terrace where people could watch the planes take off. It could have been the clubhouse of an expensive golf course.

The airport had no name. Although it was only an hour outside London, there were no road signs pointing to it. Indeed, it seemed to have done its best to lose itself in a maze of country lanes that looped and twisted through thick woodland. The local residents – and the nearest house was more than a mile away – believed it was a private flying club, used by millionaires with their own planes. For a brief time, it had been.

It had been bought by the British secret service back in the seventies, and now it was used for flights that nobody talked about. People who weren't meant to be in the country arrived here on planes that didn't exist. There was no passport control, because very few of the travellers carried passports – and if they did, they would probably be fake. A white control tower stood at the far end of the runway. It managed not just the incoming and outgoing flights but all the surrounding airspace. When planes were ready to take off here, Heathrow and Gatwick just had to wait.

At nine thirty on a cold morning at the end of April, a blue Rover Vitesse was making its way towards this secret airport. The sound of the V8 engine was almost inaudible as it cruised through a virtual tunnel of leaves. The start of the month had been warm and sunny, but there had been a cold snap the night before, and the result was a layer of fog floating over the ground, deadening everything and turning the world a ghostly white.

A man and a woman were sitting in the back.

The driver had no idea who they were. His name was Enderby and he was a low-level MI6 operative trained for certain duties – the first of which was never to ask questions. He had picked them up at a London hotel at six o'clock exactly, loaded a single suitcase into the boot and brought them here.

And yet, glancing in the rear-view mirror, Enderby couldn't stop himself wondering about

his passengers. He guessed they were husband and wife. There was something about their body language that said as much, even though neither of them had uttered a word throughout the journey. The man was in his thirties, well built with close-cropped fair hair and dark, tired eyes. He was wearing a suit with an open-necked shirt. What would you think he was, seeing him in the street? Something in the City, perhaps. Private security. Ex-army. This was a man who knew how to look after himself. He had the relaxed confidence of someone who is very dangerous.

The woman sitting next to him was unhappy – Enderby had noticed that from the moment she had stepped reluctantly into the car. He could see it now in her eyes. They were nice eyes: blue, very bright. But they were troubled. All in all, she was very attractive. A couple of years younger than the man, maybe an actress or a dancer. She was wearing a jacket and grey trousers and – yes, there it was – a wedding ring on her finger.

Enderby was right. The two people in the back of his car were called John and Helen Rider. They had been married for four years. They were here because they were leaving the country – perhaps permanently. They had been apart for a long time, but that was all over now. Their new life together was about to begin.

They had almost arrived. Enderby had driven this route many times and recognized the elm tree with

the nesting box hanging from one of its branches. The airport was half a mile away. However, he was completely unaware of the advanced high-resolution camera with its 25mm varifocal lens concealed inside the nesting box. And he would have been surprised to learn that even now his face was being examined on a television screen inside the control tower. It was actually the third hidden camera they had passed in the last five minutes.

The car broke out of the wood and crossed a cattle grid set in the road. If the driver had been identified as an enemy agent, the grid would have rotated and shredded the tyres. The airport lay ahead; a plane was waiting on the runway. It was an old twin-engine Avro Anson C19 that might have been rolled out of a museum. Once used by the RAF for coastal patrol, the Anson hadn't been seen in regular service for twenty years. Certainly it suited the airport. They were both relics of the past.

A slim, dark-haired man stepped out of the terminal building, supporting himself on a heavy walking stick. He had been sent to supervise the departure. Enderby recognized him with surprise. He had visited the man a couple of times recently in hospital and had worked with him in the past. His name was Anthony Howell. His middle name was Sean.

People called him Ash.

The car slowed down and stopped. The man got out, went round and opened the door for the woman. The two of them moved forward to meet Ash.

"John. Helen." Ash smiled at them but he had recently been in too much pain. It still showed.

"How are you, Ash?" John Rider asked.

"I'm OK."

That obviously wasn't true. Ash was feverish, sweating. His hand was gripping the walking stick so tightly that the knuckles were white.

"You look terrible."

"Yeah." Ash didn't disagree. "They sent me to say goodbye. Are you ready? I'll get your case loaded on board."

He limped past them, over to the car. Enderby unlocked the boot and took out the suitcase.

"He's not very talkative," Helen muttered.

"He's hurt." John glanced at his wife. "Are you OK?"

"I don't like leaving Alex."

"I know that. Nor do I. But we didn't have any choice. You heard what the doctor said."

Alex Rider was three months old. Just a few days before, he had developed an ear infection which meant that he couldn't fly. Helen had left him with a cheerful Irishwoman, Maud Kelly, a maternity nurse who had been with them since the birth. Helen's first instinct had been to stay with her infant son. But she also needed to be

with her husband. The two of them had been apart for too long.

“Maud will come out with him next week,” John Rider said.

“His new home.” Helen smiled, but a little sadly. “It’s strange to think he’ll grow up speaking French.”

“With a dad who’s a fisherman.”

“Better a fisherman than a spy.”

Secret agents don’t often retire. Some are killed in action; some leave the field and end up behind a desk, providing support for the men and women who have taken their place. Even when they leave the service, they are still watched – just in case they decide to sell their secrets or go into business for themselves.

John Rider was different. He had recently completed a long and brutal assignment which had culminated in a shoot-out on the island of Malta, followed by his faked death on Albert Bridge in London. During that time, he had inflicted serious damage on the criminal organization known as Scorpia. If Scorpia discovered that he was still alive, they would make him a primary target. MI6 knew that. They understood that his usefulness was effectively over. They had decided to let him go.

Ash came back over to them. He had a mobile phone in his hand. “The control tower just called,” he said. “You’re all set for take-off.”

"Why don't you come and stay with us, Ash?" Helen suggested. "You could fly down with Alex. A week in the sun would do you good."

Ash tried to smile but something prevented him. "That's kind of you, Helen. Maybe..."

"Well, keep in touch." John Rider was examining the other man with a certain unease. The two of them had worked together, but they had also been friends for many years.

"Good luck." Ash seemed in a hurry to get away.

They shook hands. Then Ash leant forward and kissed Helen once on the cheek, but so lightly that she barely felt his lips. The husband and wife began to walk towards the plane.

"What's wrong with him?" Helen asked as soon as they were out of earshot. "I know he's hurt. But he seems so ... distant."

"He's being axed." John spoke the words casually. "He screwed up in Malta and he knows it. Blunt wants him out."

"What will happen to him?"

"An office job somewhere. A junior outpost."

"Does he blame you?"

"I don't know, Helen. To be honest, I don't really care. It's not my business any more."

They had reached the plane. The pilot saw them through the cockpit window and raised a hand in greeting. His name was Robert Fleming and he had flown with the RAF in the Falklands War. Killing Argentine soldiers, some of them just kids, had

changed his mind about active service; and after that he had allowed himself to be recruited by MI6. Now he flew all over the world for them. The co-pilot was a man called Blakeway. Both of them were married. There was no cabin crew.

Standing on the terrace outside the terminal, Ash watched John and Helen Rider climb the metal staircase that led up to the plane. John stood aside to let Helen go first, gently taking her arm as she reached the top step. They entered the aircraft and pulled the door shut from inside. A couple of ground crew in white overalls wheeled the steps away. The first of the Anson's two propellers began to turn.

Ash thought he was going to faint. The pain in his stomach was worse than ever. It was as if the Russian assassin Yassen Gregorovich had somehow managed to stab him a second time and was twisting the knife even now. The plane's engines had both started up but he could barely hear the sound. The sky, the grass, the airport, the Anson ... nothing connected any more. He could feel beads of sweat on his forehead. They were ice-cold.

Could he really do this?

Was he going to go through with it?

He had been released from hospital after six weeks of treatment that had included being given eleven pints of blood. The doctors had told him what he already knew. He would never be the same again. Not completely. There had been too much

damage. And the pain would always be with him. He would need a barrage of drugs to keep it at bay.

And had they been grateful, the people he worked for, the ones who had caused this to happen to him? He still remembered his meeting with Alan Blunt. The head of MI6 Special Operations had given him precisely five minutes: his injuries were his own fault. He had totally mishandled the operation in Mdina. He had disobeyed orders. He was being taken off active duty with immediate effect.

Blunt hadn't even asked how he was feeling.

Ash had known what he was going to do even before he left Blunt's office. For a moment, the pain was forgotten; he felt only anger and disbelief. How could they treat him like this? No. It was obvious now. They had *always* treated him like this. Nothing had changed. He had been overlooked and underrated from the start.

But he had numbers. He had contacts. He didn't care what he had to do. He would show MI6 that they were wrong about him. They had made a mistake they were going to regret.

He made the call as soon as he was in the street, away from the eavesdropping devices that were scattered all over Special Ops HQ. After that, things happened very quickly. That same evening, he met a man in a south London pub. The next day, he was interviewed at length by two blank-faced men in an abandoned warehouse behind the old

meat market at Smithfield in Clerkenwell. Patiently he repeated everything he had said the night before.

The next call came two days later. Ash was given twenty minutes to get across London to the Ritz Hotel and a suite on the second floor. He arrived in exactly the specified time, knowing that he had almost certainly been followed the whole way and that it had been arranged like this to prevent him communicating with anyone else. There was to be no chance of a trap.

After he had been thoroughly searched by the two men he had met before, he was shown into the suite. A woman was waiting for him, sitting on her own in an armchair, her perfectly manicured fingers curving round a flute of champagne. She was strikingly beautiful with shoulder-length black hair and glittering, cruel eyes. She was wearing a designer dress, a whisper of red silk; diamond earrings; and a single large diamond at her throat.

Ash tried not to show any emotion. But he knew the woman. He had never met her but he had seen her file. It was hard to believe that he was actually in the same room as her.

Julia Rothman.

According to the file, she was the daughter of Welsh nationalists, who had married – and murdered – an elderly property developer for his wealth. She was on the executive board of Scorpia. Indeed, she was one of its founding members.

"You want to join us," she said, and he heard a hint of Welsh in her voice. She seemed amused.

"Yes."

"What makes you think we'd be interested in you?"

"If you weren't interested in me, you wouldn't be here."

That made her smile. "How do I know we can trust you?"

"Mrs Rothman..." Ash wondered if he should have used her name. He spoke slowly. He knew he would only have this one chance. "I've spent four years with MI6. They've given me nothing. Now I've finished with them – or perhaps I should say they've finished with me. But you probably know that already. Scorpia always did have a reputation for being well informed. How do you know you can trust me? Only time will give you an answer to that. But I can be useful to you. A double agent. Think about it. You want someone inside Special Operations. That can be me."

Julia Rothman sipped her champagne but her eyes never left Ash. "This could be a trick," she said.

"Then let me prove myself."

"Of course. Anyone who joins Scorpia has to prove themselves to our complete satisfaction, Mr Howell. But I warn you: the test might not be an easy one."

"I'm ready for anything."

“Would you kill for us?”

Ash shrugged. “I’ve killed before.”

“Before it was duty. For queen and country. This time it would be murder.”

“I’ve already explained: I want to join Scorpia. I don’t care what I have to do.”

“We’ll see.” She set the glass down, then produced a white envelope. She slid it towards him.

“There is a name inside this envelope,” she said. “It is the name of a man who has done us a great deal of harm. Killing him will prove beyond all doubt that you mean what you say. But a warning. Once you open that envelope, you will have committed yourself. You cannot change your mind. If you try to do so, you will be dead before you leave this hotel.”

“I understand.” Ash was uneasy. He picked up the envelope and held it in front of him.

“We will provide the manner of his death,” Mrs Rothman went on, “but you will be the one who pulls the trigger. And when he is dead, you will be paid one hundred thousand pounds. It will be the first payment of many. Over the years, if you stay true to us, Scorpia will make you very rich.”

“Thank you.” Suddenly Ash’s mouth was dry. The envelope was still balanced on his fingertips.

“So are you going to open it?”

He made his decision. He ripped the envelope open with his thumb. And there was the name in front of him. Black letters on white paper.

JOHN RIDER

Julia Rothman looked at him quizzically.

So they knew. That was his first thought. The elaborate trick that had been played on Albert Bridge hadn't worked – or if it had, there had somehow been a leak. They had learnt that John Rider was still alive. And as for this test, they knew exactly what they were doing. Ash would have been happy to kill anybody in the world. He would have killed Blunt or anyone else in MI6. But Scorpia had gone one better.

They were asking him to kill his best friend.

“John Rider...” His mouth had gone dry. “But he’s—”

“Don't tell us that he's dead, Mr Howell. We know he is not.”

“But why...?”

“You said you didn't care what you did. This is your assignment. If you want to prove yourself to us, this is what you have to do.”

But could he do it? He asked himself again now, watching the ancient plane as it completed the final checks before take-off. The propellers were buzzing loudly; the whole fuselage was vibrating. And it wasn't just John. It was Helen Rider too. He had once loved her – or thought he had. She had rejected him. But John had always stood by him. No. That wasn't true. Blunt had axed him and John had done nothing to help.

The plane jerked forward and began to rumble down the runway, picking up speed.

The bomb was on board. Ash had no idea how Scorpia had got it there, or even how they had found out about the flight in the first place. Such details didn't matter. The fact was that it was there, and the cruelty of it was that Scorpia could easily have detonated it without his help. The bomb could have had a timer. They could have transmitted the signal themselves. But they had turned this into the ultimate test. If he did this, there would be no going back. He would be theirs for life.

We will provide the manner of his death, but you will be the one who pulls the trigger.

He couldn't do it. They were his closest friends. He was the godfather of their child.

He had to do it. John and Helen were dead anyway. And Scorpia would kill him if he failed.

The plane was halfway down the runway. Slowly it rose into the air.

Ash took out his mobile phone and pressed a three-digit number, followed by SEND.

The explosion was huge, much bigger than he had expected. For a moment, the plane disappeared completely, replaced by a scarlet fireball that hovered fifteen metres above the runway. There were no wings, no propellers, no wheels. Only flames. And then, like some hideous firework, broken pieces of glass and metal burst out of the

inferno, bouncing off the tarmac and slamming into the lawn.

The plane had gone. There was nothing left of it. The people inside would have died instantly.

Already alarms were sounding. Enderby and half a dozen men were running towards the wreckage, coming from every direction – as if there was anything they could do. Black smoke billowed into the sky.

Ash turned away and walked back inside. He was sure that Scorpia would be watching. They would know that he had done it. He had passed the test. He took a deep breath and tasted smoke and burning aviation fuel.

A new life. But how was he going to enjoy it when he was empty inside? Too late. He had made his choice.

Slowly he made his way down the stairs and out onto the runway, limping towards the flames that for him would never die.