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Opening extract from

Scorpia

Written by

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For MN 

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EXTRA WORK

For the two thieves on the 200cc Vespa scooter, it was a case of the wrong victim, in the wrong place, on the wrong Sunday morning in September.

It seemed that all life had gathered in the Piazza Esmeralda, a few miles outside Venice. Church had just finished and families were strolling together in the brilliant sunlight: grandmothers in black, boys and girls in their best suits and communion dresses. The coffee bars and ice-cream shops were open, their customers spilling onto the pavements and out into the street. A huge fountain – all naked gods and serpents – gushed jets of ice-cold water. And there was a market. Stalls had been set up selling kites, dried flowers, old postcards, clockwork birds and sacks of seed for the hundreds of pigeons that strutted around.

In the middle of all this were a dozen English schoolchildren. It was bad luck for the two thieves

that one of them was Alex Rider.

It was the beginning of September. Less than a month had passed since Alex's final confrontation with Damian Cray on Air Force One – the American presidential plane. It had been the end of an adventure that had taken him to Paris and Amsterdam, and finally to the main runway at Heathrow Airport even as twenty-five nuclear missiles had been fired at targets all around the world. Alex had managed to destroy these missiles. He had been there when Cray died. And at last he had gone home with the usual collection of bruises and scratches only to find a grim-faced and determined Jack Starbright waiting for him. Jack was his housekeeper but she was also his friend, and, as always, she was worried about him.

"You can't keep this up, Alex," she said. "You're never at school. You missed half the summer term when you were at Skeleton Key and loads of the spring term when you were in Cornwall and then at that awful academy Point Blanc. If you keep this up, you'll flunk all your exams and then what will you do?"

"It's not my fault—" Alex began.

"I know it's not your fault. But it's my job to do something about it, and I've decided to hire a tutor for what's left of the summer."

"You're not serious!"

"I am serious. You've still got quite a bit of holiday left. And you can start right now."

"I don't want a tutor—" Alex started to protest.

"I'm not giving you any choice, Alex. I don't care what gadgets you've got or what smart moves you might try – this time there's no escape!"

Alex wanted to argue with her but in his heart he knew she was right. MI6 always provided him with a doctor's note to explain his long absences from school, but the teachers were more or less giving up on him. His last report had said it all:

> *Alex continues to spend more time out of school than in it, and if this carries on, he might as well forget his GCSEs. Although he cannot be blamed for what seems to be a catalogue of medical problems, if he falls any further behind, I fear he may disappear altogether.*

So that was it. Alex had stopped an insane, multi-millionaire pop singer from destroying half the world – and what had he got for it? Extra work!

He started with ill grace – particularly when he discovered that the tutor Jack had found actually taught at Brookland, his own school. Alex wasn't in his class, but even so it was an embarrassment and he hoped nobody would find out. However, he had to admit that Mr Grey was good at his job. Charlie Grey was young and easy-going, arriving on a bicycle with a saddlebag crammed with books. He taught humanities but seemed to know

his way round the entire syllabus.

"We've only got a few weeks," he announced. "That may not seem very much, but you'd be surprised how much you can achieve one to one. I'm going to work you seven hours a day, and on top of that I'm going to leave you with homework. By the end of the holidays you'll probably hate me. But at least you'll start the new school year on a more or less even keel."

Alex didn't hate Charlie Grey. They worked quietly and quickly, moving through the day from maths to history to science and so on. Every weekend, the teacher left behind exam papers, and gradually Alex saw his percentages improve. And then Mr Grey sprang his surprise.

"You've done really well, Alex. I wasn't going to mention this to you, but how would you like to come with me on the school trip?"

"Where are you going?"

"Well, last year it was Paris; the year before that it was Rome. We look at museums, churches, palaces ... that sort of thing. This year we're going to Venice. Do you want to come?"

Venice.

It had been in Alex's mind all along – the final minutes on the plane after Damian Cray had died. Yassen Gregorovich had been there, the Russian assassin who had cast a shadow over so much of Alex's life. Yassen had been dying, a bullet lodged in his chest. But just before the end he'd managed

to blurt out a secret that had been buried for fourteen years.

Alex's parents had been killed shortly after he was born and he had been brought up by his father's brother, Ian Rider. Earlier this year, Ian Rider had died too, supposedly in a car accident. It had been the shock of Alex's life to discover that his uncle was actually a spy and had been killed on a mission in Cornwall. That was when MI6 had made their appearance. Somehow they had succeeded in sucking Alex into their world, and he had been working for them ever since.

Alex knew very little about his mother and father, John and Helen Rider. In his bedroom he had a photo of them: a watchful, handsome man with close-cut hair standing with his arm round a pretty, half-smiling woman. He had been in the army and still looked like a soldier. She had been a nurse, working in radiology. But they were strangers to him; he couldn't remember anything about them. They had died while he was still a baby. In a plane crash. That was what he had been told.

Now he knew otherwise.

The plane crash had been as much a lie as his uncle's car accident. Yassen Gregorovich had told him the truth on Air Force One. Alex's father had been an assassin – just like Yassen. The two of them had even worked together; John Rider had once saved Yassen's life. But then his father had been killed by MI6 – the very same people who

had forced Alex to work for them three times, lying to him, manipulating him and finally dumping him when he was no longer needed. It was almost impossible to believe, but Yassen had offered him a way to find proof.

Go to Venice. Find Scorpia. And you will find your destiny…

Alex had to know what had happened fourteen years ago. Discovering the truth about John Rider would be the same as finding out about himself. Because, if his father really had killed people for money, what did that make him? Alex was angry, unhappy … and confused. He had to find Scorpia, whatever it was. Scorpia would tell him what he needed to know.

A school trip to Venice couldn't have come at a better time. And Jack didn't stop him from going. In fact, she encouraged him.

"It's exactly what you need, Alex. A chance to hang out with your friends and just be an ordinary schoolboy. I'm sure you'll have a great time."

Alex said nothing. He hated having to lie to her, but there was no way he could tell her the truth. Jack had never met his father; this wasn't her affair.

So he let her help him pack, knowing that, for him, the trip would have little to do with churches and museums. He would use it to explore the city and see what he unearthed. Five days wasn't a long time. But it would be a start. Five days in

Venice. Five days to find Scorpia.

And now here he was. In an Italian square. Three days of the trip had already gone by and he had found nothing.

"Alex – you fancy an ice cream?"

"No. I'm all right."

"I'm hot. I'm going to get one of those things you told me about. What did you call it? A *granada* or something…"

Alex was standing beside another fourteen-year-old boy who happened to be his closest friend at Brookland. He had been surprised to hear that Tom Harris was going to be on the trip, as Tom wasn't exactly interested in art or history. Tom wasn't interested in any school subjects and was regularly bottom in everything. But the best thing about him was that he didn't care. He was always cheerful, and even the teachers had to admit that he was fun to be with. And what Tom lacked in the classroom, he made up for on the sports field. He was captain of the school football team and Alex's main rival on sports day, beating him at hurdles, four hundred metres and the pole vault. Tom was small for his age, with spiky black hair and bright blue eyes. He wouldn't have been found dead in a museum, so why was he here? Alex soon found out. Tom's parents were going through a messy divorce, and they had packed him off to get him out of the way.

"It's a *granita*," Alex said. It was what he always

ordered when he was in Italy: crushed ice with fresh lemon juice squeezed over it. It was halfway between an ice cream and a drink and there was nothing in the world more refreshing.

"Come on. You can order it for me. When I ask anyone for anything in Italian they just stare at me like I'm mad."

In fact, Alex only spoke a few phrases himself. Italian was one language Ian Rider hadn't taught him. Even so, he went with Tom and ordered two ices from a shop near the market stalls, one for Tom and one – Tom insisted – for himself. Tom had plenty of money. His parents had showered him with euros before he left.

"Are you going to be at school this term?" he asked.

Alex shrugged. "Of course."

"You were hardly there last term – or the term before."

"I was ill."

Tom nodded. He was wearing Diesel light-sensitive sunglasses that he had bought at Heathrow duty-free. They were too big for his face and kept slipping down his nose. "You do realize that no one believes that," he commented.

"Why not?"

"Because nobody's that ill. It's just not possible." Tom lowered his voice. "There's a rumour you're a thief," he confided.

"What?"

"That's why you're away so much. You're in trouble with the police."

"Is that what you think?"

"No. But Miss Bedfordshire asked me about you. She knows we're mates. She said you got into trouble once for nicking a crane or something. She heard about that from someone and she thinks you're in therapy."

"Therapy?" Alex was staggered.

"Yeah. She's quite sorry for you. She thinks that's why you have to go away so much. You know, to see a shrink."

Jane Bedfordshire was the school secretary, an attractive woman in her twenties. She had come on the trip too, as she did every year. Alex could see her now on the other side of the square, talking to Mr Grey. A lot of people said there was something going on between them, but Alex guessed the rumour was probably as accurate as the one about him.

A clock chimed twelve. In half an hour they would have lunch at the hotel where they were staying. Brookland School was an ordinary west London comprehensive and they'd decided to keep costs down by staying outside Venice. Mr Grey had chosen a hotel in the little town of San Lorenzo, just ten minutes away by train. Every morning they'd arrive at the station and take the water bus into the heart of the city. But not today. This was Sunday and they had the morning off.

"So are you—" Tom began. He broke off. It had happened very quickly but both boys had seen it.

On the opposite side of the square a motorbike had surged forward. It was a 200cc Vespa Granturismo, almost brand new, with two men riding it. They were both dressed in jeans and loose, long-sleeved shirts. The passenger had on a visored helmet, as much to hide his identity as to protect him if they crashed. The driver – wearing sunglasses – steered towards Miss Bedfordshire, as if he intended to run her over. But, a split second before contact, he veered away. At the same time, the man riding pillion reached out and snatched her handbag. It was done so neatly that Alex knew the two men were professionals – *scippatori* as they were known in Italy. Bag snatchers.

Some of the other pupils had seen it too. One or two were shouting and pointing, but there was nothing they could do. The bike was already accelerating away. The driver was crouched low over the handlebars; his partner was cradling the leather bag in his lap. They were speeding diagonally across the square, heading towards Alex and Tom. A few moments before, there had been people everywhere, but suddenly the centre of the square was empty and there was nothing to prevent their escape.

"Alex!" Tom shouted.

"Stay back," Alex warned. He briefly considered blocking the Vespa's path. But it was hopeless.

The driver would easily be able to swerve round him – and if he chose not to, Alex really would spend the following term in hospital. The bike was already doing about twenty miles an hour, its single-cylinder four-stroke engine carrying the two thieves effortlessly towards him. Alex certainly wasn't going to stand in its way.

He looked around him, wondering if there was something he could throw. A net? A bucket of water? But there was no net and the fountain was too far away, although there were buckets…

The bike was less than twenty metres away, accelerating all the time. Alex sprinted and snatched a bucket from the flower stall, emptied it, scattering dried flowers across the pavement, and filled it with bird seed from the stall next door. Both stall owners were shouting something at him but he ignored them. Without stopping, he swung round and hurled the seed at the Vespa just as it was about to flash past him. Tom watched – first in amazement, then with disappointment. If Alex had thought the great shower of seed would knock the two men off the bike, he'd been mistaken. They were continuing regardless.

But that hadn't been his plan.

There must have been two or three hundred pigeons in the square and all of them had seen the seed spraying out of the bucket. The two riders were covered in it. Seed had lodged in the folds of their clothes, under their collars and in the sides

of their shoes. There was a small pile of it caught in the driver's crotch. Some had fallen into Miss Bedfordshire's bag; some had become trapped in the driver's hair.

For the pigeons, the bag thieves had suddenly become a meal on wheels. With a soft explosion of grey feathers, they came swooping down, diving on the two men from all directions. Suddenly the driver had a bird clinging to the side of his face, its beak hammering at his head, ripping the seed out of his hair. There was another pigeon at his throat, and a third between his legs, pecking at the most sensitive area of all. His passenger had two on his neck, another hanging off his shirt, and another half buried in the stolen bag. And more were joining in. There must have been at least twenty pigeons, flapping and batting around them, a swirling cloud of feathers, claws and – triggered by greed and excitement – flying splatters of white bird droppings.

The driver was blinded. One hand clutched the handlebars, the other tore at his face. As Alex watched, the bike performed a hundred and eighty degree turn so that now it was coming back, heading straight towards them, moving faster than ever. For a moment he stood poised, waiting to hurl himself aside. It looked as if he was going to be run over. But then the bike swerved a second time and now it was heading for the fountain, the two men barely visible in a cloud of beating

wings. The front wheel hit the fountain's edge and the bike crumpled. Both men were thrown off. The birds scattered. In the brief pause before he hit the water, the man riding pillion yelled and let go of the handbag. Almost in slow motion, the bag arced through the air. Alex took two steps and caught it.

And then it was all over. The two thieves were a tangled heap, half submerged in cold water. The Vespa was lying, buckled and broken, on the ground. Two policemen, who had arrived when it was almost too late, were hurrying towards them. The stall owners were laughing and applauding. Tom was staring. Alex went over to Miss Bedfordshire and gave her the bag.

"I think this is yours," he said.

"Alex..." Miss Bedfordshire was lost for words. "How...?"

"It was just something I picked up in therapy," Alex said.

He turned and walked back to his friend.