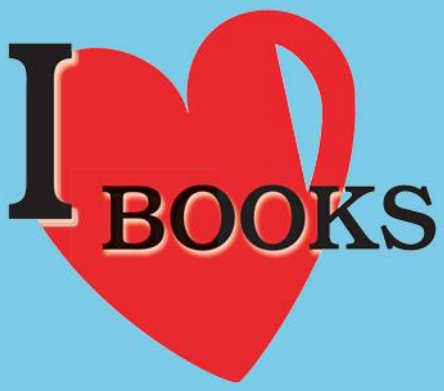


Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Never Say Die

Written by

Anthony Horowitz

Published by

Walker Books Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



For JW – 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 2017 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2017 Stormbreaker Productions Ltd
Cover illustration © 2017 Walker Books Ltd
Trademarks Alex Rider™; Boy with Torch Logo™
© 2017 Stormbreaker Productions Ltd

The right of Anthony Horowitz to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Officina Sans

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

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

ISBN 978-1-4063-7705-7
ISBN 978-1-4063-7783-5

www.walker.co.uk

THIN AIR

Fifty thousand people had come to the Suffolk Air Show on the east coast of England. But only one of them was there to commit murder.

It was the end of August, the last week of the summer holiday. The schools were closed and whole families had taken advantage of the fine weather to arrive at the old airbase, less than a mile from the sea. They had strolled around vintage planes from the First and Second World Wars: single-seat biplanes parked next to Spitfires and Hurricanes. That morning, the Red Arrows had put on a dazzling display, twisting and criss-crossing each other in the sky before swooping down, trailing plumes of red, white and blue. There had been fly-pasts by the Tornado GR4, the two-seat attack aircraft that had been used in Iraq and Libya and by the Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter, one of the most sophisticated and – at one hundred million pounds – one of the most expensive aircrafts in the world. The grounds were packed with simulator rides,

motorbike displays, drones, face-painting and fairground stalls. Everyone was having a good time.

As with every public event in the UK, an extensive, almost invisible security net had been put in place. It was impossible to stop and search all the cars but CCTV cameras recorded every arrival and every number plate was instantly checked. People might notice police and even a few sniffer dogs moving among them. These were a common sight. But they would be unaware of the plain-clothes policemen, many of them with concealed weapons, mingling with the crowd. In fact the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) had met in their offices close to the Houses of Parliament just a few days before and had agreed that the threat level at the Suffolk Air Show would remain at MODERATE. They weren't expecting any trouble.

And so nobody paid very much attention to the woman who arrived just after three o'clock. She had driven into the car park in a Ford Transit van which, according to the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system, belonged to the St John Ambulance service. This is the country's leading first-aid charity and, indeed, the woman was dressed in the green and black uniform of a local volunteer. She was carrying a nylon bag marked with a white cross which, if opened, would reveal medicine and bandages.

She was short and round-shouldered with dark red hair that had been cut so badly that it stuck

out straight on one side of her head and curled in on the other. There was something quite aggressive about the way she walked, like a boxer about to enter the ring. She was overweight, breathing heavily, with beads of sweat on her upper lip. She had a lot of make-up on but it did nothing to make her more attractive, sitting uselessly on her leathery skin. As she walked, she put on a pair of cheap sunglasses. They concealed the smouldering violence in her eyes.

There was a separate entrance leading into the airbase, reserved for paramedics, technicians, organizers ... anyone working at the event. She stopped and showed a pass which identified her as Jane Smith but this was not her real name. Nor had she ever worked for the St John Ambulance service. The security man at the gate might have wondered why she had arrived so late in the day, when the Air Show was almost over. He might have asked her why she was alone. But he was tired and he was looking forward to getting home. He glanced at her pass and waved her through. He didn't even look inside the bag.

The woman's real name was Dragana Novak. She was forty-six years old and until recently she had been a lieutenant colonel in the Serbian Air Force; a high-flyer in every sense of the word. Her career had ended following a drunken fight with another pilot. He had been twice her size, but even so, she had put him in hospital. In fact he was still there.

Inevitably, there had been a court martial and she had been looking at an uncertain future – perhaps returning to the turnip farm where she had been brought up. That was when she had received the telephone call. There was a unique job opportunity. It would pay two hundred thousand pounds for two days' work. Was she interested?

Dragana didn't need to think for a minute. She had met her contact in a local tavern in Belgrade where she had tucked into her favourite dish of *sarma* – spicy beef wrapped in cabbage leaves – washed down with a large glass of *rakija*, the local plum brandy. The man, who had never given her his name, had told her what was needed. It was a tricky operation that would demand all her skills. Dragana hadn't asked any questions. All she cared about was the money. It was more than she had been paid in her life.

She was still dreaming about jewellery, fast cars and expensive chocolates as she made her way past the various exhibition stands, the bars, the fast-food outlets. People were already drifting towards the seats for the last flying display of the afternoon. For many of them it was the high point of the entire show. The aircraft was sitting out on the tarmac, patiently waiting for the pilot to walk over and take the controls. Dragana stopped at the barrier that ran the full length of the runway and took out a pair of binoculars. Without removing her dark glasses, she raised them to her eyes.

Slowly, unable to help herself, she smiled.

This was what she had come to steal.

The American-built Sikorsky CH-53E is also known as the Super Stallion and there's really no helicopter in the world that's quite like it. To look at, it's hard to believe that it can fly at all. For a start, it's huge: as tall as a three-storey building and longer than three London buses standing end to end. It's also surprisingly ugly, bolted together as if the designers had never actually had any plans.

The Super Stallion *can* fly – at two-hundred miles an hour – and what makes it special is that it can carry an enormous load. It is the workhorse for the United States military, capable of lifting sixteen tonnes of cargo. When the Americans mount an assault, it can transport a platoon with enough weapons to obliterate an entire army. How does it even get off the ground? Part of the answer is the fact that it has no fewer than three hugely powerful turboshaft engines. It also has gigantic titanium-fibreglass rotor blades, twenty-four metres in diameter. Most helicopters have just four blades. The Super Stallion has seven.

Dragana Novak examined it, running her eyes over the grey-painted fuselage, the cockpit, the tail rotor. The Serbian Air Force couldn't possibly afford a machine like this, but Dragana had briefly flown one when she was on a training exercise with the United Nations and still remembered the

thrill it had given her. In less than thirty minutes' time, it would be hers. She had no children. She had never married. But right now, looking at the helicopter, she felt its power reaching out to her and knew that she was completely in love.

It was time to move. Everything had been planned down to the last second and she had been shown exactly where to go. There were several hangars on the other side of the runway but two buildings dominated the airfield closer by, both of them left over from the last war. One was the control tower. The other was a low, red-brick building with about twenty evenly-spaced windows and several doors. This had been an office complex but it was being used to house the pilots and technicians during the show, with changing rooms, rest areas and a cafeteria at the far end.

Hoisting her medicine bag over her shoulder, Dragana strolled towards the entrance where two more uniformed officials were standing behind a conveyor belt that fed into an X-ray machine – exactly the same sort of device that could be found at any airport. First, visitors would have their cases and carrier bags scanned. Then there was a metal detector which everyone had to pass through.

"Hello," she said. "I'm here to see Sergeant Perkins." She had spent five years studying in London before qualifying as a pilot and spoke good English, but with a heavy accent that made her seem as if she disliked everything she was saying.

"Why?" The officials glanced at each other, puzzled. They had been here all day and this was the first time they had seen her.

Dragana smiled, showing grey teeth, discoloured by wine and cigarettes. Her right hand slipped into the pocket of her jacket. "He has a headache. I have some aspirin for him."

Of course the story was ridiculous. The two men should have rung the control tower to get confirmation. But just like the guard at the events gate, they came to all the wrong conclusions. This was a single woman. She was wearing a St John Ambulance uniform. It was the end of the day, almost the end of the entire event. What possible harm could there be? "All right," one of them said. "Your bag has to go through the machine and remove any metal objects from your pockets."

"Of course." Dragana placed the medicine bag on the belt and watched as it was carried slowly into the machine. She knew that there was nothing inside to cause any alarm. Next, she stepped through the metal detector and smiled to herself as the light flashed green. She collected her things and continued on her way. This was going to be even easier than she had thought.

She made her way down a long corridor with a wooden floor and old-fashioned hanging lights.

A few people passed her but didn't give her a second glance. Again, the uniform saw to that. She came to a door at the end and knocked politely.

"Come in!" With just two words, she could detect the American accent.

There were two men sitting in the room, both wearing flight suits. Sergeant Brad Perkins was in his early thirties but looked much younger: clean-shaven, fair-haired, with blue eyes. He had recently graduated as a pilot from the US Army Aviation Center at Fort Rucker in Alabama and this was one of his first deployments. He was a little annoyed to find himself not just in England but in some place he'd never heard of. Suffolk? Where the hell was that? There was a co-pilot sitting with him, also American, about the same age, drinking Coke. Dragana didn't know his name. Nor did she care.

"How can we help you?" Perkins asked.

"Well, actually, you can die." Dragana had taken an unusual-looking gun out of her jacket pocket. It was white and made of ceramic, which was why it had passed unnoticed through the metal detector. She squeezed the trigger twice. The gun used a small chamber of compressed air to fire not bullets but plastic needles, each one tipped with tetrodotoxin, one of the deadliest poisons on the planet. Tetrodotoxin, or TTX as it's known, is a neurotoxin found in certain fish and octopuses and is extremely fast-acting, shutting down a person's nervous system in minutes. Perkins struggled to his feet but died before he was halfway there. His partner tried to say something, then collapsed.

Dragana put the gun away and went over to the two men. Sergeant Brad Perkins stared up at her with empty eyes. He was the smaller of the two, about her height. She reached down and unbuttoned his uniform.

Ten minutes later, she walked out of the building, now dressed in a flight suit and carrying a leather folder. Nobody stopped her as she reached the Super Stallion and climbed inside. The ground staff had been expecting two men, not a lone woman. And she was a few minutes early. But still nobody challenged her. After all, she looked as if she knew what she was doing. She was dressed for the part. And the very idea that somebody might be about to steal a gigantic helicopter in broad daylight was so bizarre, so outrageous that nobody even considered it.

And so Dragana was completely relaxed as she slipped on a set of headphones and strapped herself in. Quickly, she ran her eye over the various gauges, checking the fuel levels. She flicked on the master battery, the avionics and the fuel valve master, then watched as the seven huge blades began to turn, picking up speed until they were no more than a blur. Even with the headphones, she was deafened by the engines. She rested her left hand on the collective control, then leaned over and adjusted the throttle. She could feel the downdraught underneath her, beating down onto the tarmac at ninety miles an hour.

"Stallion One. You are clear for take-off..."

The voice came from the control tower; a young man, very English, stupidly cheerful.

A final check. She had reached proper operating rpm (revs per minute). Using the throttle and the foot pedals, she steered the Super Stallion along the runway, gently guiding it. This was the moment she loved, when this huge machine belonged only to her. She found herself whispering to it in her own language, urging it to obey her command.

As they left the ground she thought briefly of the two men she had killed. She had no pity for them. After all, she was a military officer who had been trained to kill people although she had never had the opportunity until today. Ten minutes in the air and two hundred thousand dollars in the bank. She would have killed fifty more people for that. She reached out and pressed on the cyclic lever, bringing the nose of the helicopter down and urging it on. The Super Stallion shot out beyond the coastline and over the sea.

"Stallion One. Turn left heading zero five zero and ascend flight level one hundred, over."

The man in the control tower was still jabbering in her ear. Of course she wasn't going to do what he said. In fact, he was beginning to annoy her. She reached down and switched the volume off. Then she turned right.

It would be obvious almost at once that something was wrong. The path of the helicopter would

be traced by primary and secondary radar systems. Very soon, there would be a red alert at the Air Traffic Control centre at Swanwick. It might have happened already. They would know that she had strayed from the agreed flight path and was not responding to their commands. They would already be tracking her. There were dozens of satellites in outer space and they would be directed to watch her every move. And of course, the Super Stallion was filled with communications equipment, which she had been unable to neutralize and would be transmitting even now. She loved the helicopter. It belonged to her. But she couldn't stop it giving the two of them away.

Timing was everything. She had memorized the exact route she had to take and made the necessary adjustments. The grey surface of the North Sea was beneath her but now she brought the helicopter round, travelling south. Looking out of the window, she saw the port of Felixstowe, the cranes and gantries lined up along the docks, the two rivers – the Stour and the Orwell – stretching inland. She checked her course and accelerated, sweeping low over the pier and the seafront. She knew she would be seen but that didn't matter. In a way, it would help.

The field she was looking for was just east of the A12, the road that led from Suffolk to London. There was a scattering of buildings, an abandoned farm. She had already been shown the maps and

photographs and had studied them so many times that she recognized the location instantly. She noticed a few cars parked around the edge. She knew that there would be half a dozen men waiting for her to complete her short journey.

And there was her target. She saw it from two thousand feet and immediately began her descent. It was a rectangular block of steel lying flat in the grass, a landing pad, just big enough for the helicopter to fit onto. Three thick metal hoops had been welded into the steel, one at the top and two below, forming the shape of a triangle. This was the difficult part. The Super Stallion had three huge wheels. Each one had to be positioned right next to the hoops. Otherwise, the plan wouldn't work.

There was no way that Dragana was going to fail. She was in command of the helicopter and it would do everything she asked. It weighed fifteen thousand kilograms but she brought it down as gently as a falling leaf. For a few seconds she hovered over the metal plate, then dropped. She felt the hydraulics take the great weight and immediately flicked the engines off. The rotors began to slow down. Already, the men who had been waiting for her were running forward, carrying with them fixing devices that looked remarkably like wheel clamps, the sort of thing the police used to immobilize cars.

Nobody hesitated. Dragana got out of the cockpit and walked over to one of the cars. At the same time, the men were kneeling

underneath the helicopter, locking the wheels to the three hoops. The clamps they were using were made of magnesium alloy, the lightest and the strongest metal in the world.

It took them two minutes. Before they had even finished, Dragana Novak had already left the field, sitting in the back of a fast car, on her way to London. The Super Stallion was securely locked in place. It was only thirty miles from the airfield where it had been stolen.

One of the men had a remote control device with two buttons. He waited for a signal, then pressed down. At once, hydraulics hidden beneath the metal slab sprang to life and slowly, inch by inch, the slab began to rise. It was like the lid of a trapdoor opening in the ground, even though there was nothing underneath it. The Super Stallion tilted backwards, the cockpit pointing up.

Finally, it was vertical. The next part of the operation could begin.

"And then?"

Sitting in her office on the sixteenth floor of the building in Liverpool Street, London, the Chief Executive of the Special Operations division of MI6 examined the report that had just been pressed into her hands.

It was only three weeks since Mrs Jones had been appointed head of Special Operations, moving into the office that had once been occupied

by her boss, Alan Blunt. Slim and dark-haired, she was wearing a black suit with only one piece of jewellery: a silver brooch shaped like a dagger. She looked exhausted. From the moment Blunt had resigned, she had felt the weight on her shoulders, understanding what it was like to be responsible for the security of the entire country. And now this! There had been problems, fears, dangers. But this was the first real crisis she had encountered since she had taken charge.

There were four men facing her across the desk: two from Special Operations and two others in uniform, from the regular armed forces. She had addressed her question to her Chief of Staff. John Crawley had been with the service for as long as anyone could remember. He had once been an extremely effective field agent. In fact it was said that in just one year, three rival organizations had tried to recruit him while three more had tried to assassinate him. Now, with his thinning hair, his tired eyes and his very ordinary appearance, it was all too easy to underestimate him. That would be a serious mistake.

"The helicopter went out to sea, heading towards the Continent," he explained. "Our first thought was that it was being taken to Russia. But then, after travelling four and a half miles, it turned south and headed back towards the coast. It was tracked by the Air Traffic Control centre primary and secondary radar systems from Swanwick.

It was last seen flying over Felixstowe. And then it vanished into thin air."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say, Mrs Jones. It was tracked by our satellite systems. We have the signal from its own transponder. And then nothing."

"So where did it go?"

Crawley shook his head. "We have absolutely no idea. It may have crashed into the River Orwell. That seems most likely. But we've already got people on the scene and there's no sign of anything whatsoever."

Mrs Jones turned to the man sitting next to Crawley. "Do we have anything from the site?"

The second agent was the youngest person in the room, in his late twenties, black, with very intelligent eyes and hair cut close to the scalp. He was smartly dressed with a crisp, white shirt and bright tie. He moved slowly as the result of a gunshot wound which he had suffered recently, on duty in the Timor Sea. He had recovered with amazing speed and had insisted on returning to work. Mrs Jones liked him. It was she who had recruited him from the SAS and brought him under her wing. His name was Ben Daniels.

He opened a laptop and tapped a button. At once, an image appeared on a seventy-two-inch screen, mounted on the wall. "All the data shows that the helicopter came down in one of these fields," he said. "We tracked it right up to the

last minute but then, as Mr Crawley says, it just disappeared." He pointed. "As you can see, there are some farm buildings, a barn, a windmill and some houses. There's a church nearby. The trouble is, none of them are big enough to conceal a helicopter the size of the Super Stallion ... even if you somehow took off the roof and landed inside."

Mrs Jones examined the photographs. There was indeed a barn – but it was half-collapsed. Could the helicopter have been buried in the straw? Surely someone would have checked. She had seen plenty of windmills in Suffolk and this one was typical: wooden-fronted with white blades, used for corn grinding long ago but now abandoned. What about the church? No. Just as Crawley had said, it was too small. She looked through the other photographs. A hill, a haystack, two electricity pylons, the river. If it wasn't here, where was it?

"It could have landed on a truck," Ben Daniels continued. "That way, it could have been driven off and we'd have no way of knowing where. You'd need a very big truck, though."

"This really isn't good enough, Mrs Jones." It was one of the military men who had spoken. His name was Air Chief Marshal Sir Norman Clarke and he was the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, the second most powerful man in the British Armed Forces. He was small, bald and angry-looking with a ginger moustache. He tended to bark every word.

"The Americans aren't too pleased. They lost two of their men. Murdered!"

"I can understand that, Sir Norman. But we're doing everything we can."

"We're clearly not doing enough. We need to search the area again. And if the Super Stallion was transported by truck, surely to goodness we should be able to get some sort of CCTV picture?"

"There's a rather more serious question we should be asking ourselves." It was the other military man who had spoken. His name was Chichester and he worked in naval intelligence. He was a very gaunt, serious man. He spoke slowly, as if he was testing his every word. "What exactly are they going to do with the helicopter?" he went on. "Could this be the prelude to some sort of terrorist attack?"

"It seems unlikely." Mrs Jones had already considered the possibility. It had been her first thought when she heard the helicopter had been taken. "The Super Stallion only has a range of a thousand kilometres and although it can carry machine guns, this one wasn't armed. It's a transport vehicle."

"Yes, of course. But who is transporting what?" Sir Norman snapped. From the way he was talking, the whole thing could have been Mrs Jones's fault. "The prime minister is extremely concerned," he went on. "We're talking about a massive piece of equipment here. We can't just have lost it."

"We haven't stopped looking," Crawley said. "We

have the police out in full force. Our agents are all over Suffolk. We've managed to keep this out of the newspapers and we're on full alert."

Mrs Jones sighed. Her instinct was telling her that this had all the hallmarks of a Scorpia operation. Firstly, the theft had been completely ruthless. Why had it been necessary to kill the two American pilots? They could just as easily have been knocked out. It had also been extremely efficient. And finally, it was completely unfathomable, a bit like a magic trick.

But that was impossible. The criminal organization known as Scorpia was finished. Its members were either dead, under arrest or on the run.

"We need to go back to the immediate area around Felixstowe," she said. "Let's get divers into the river and into the sea." She gestured at the photographs. And we need to search here … the farm, the hills, everything!"

"We've already searched it," Crawley said.

Mrs Jones looked straight into the eyes of her Chief of Staff. "Then search it again."

Even as she spoke, MI6 agents were sweeping the area. It was already getting dark but they had powerful torches. The beams swept across the grass, picking out the trees, the electricity pylons, the empty and derelict barns. They didn't go into the windmill. It was too small. There was no point.

Nobody saw that the outer shell was actually

very flimsy, made out of plywood that had been bolted together very recently.

Nor did they notice that, unusually, the windmill had seven blades.