# ALEX RIDER

# SECRET WEAPON

## ANTHONY HOROWITZ



WALKER
BOOKS

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*For JF and S*



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# *ALEX IN AFGHANISTAN*

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# *FALCON'S EDGE*

There were five men sitting around the fire, huddled together in the Herat mountains in the north-west corner of Afghanistan. Although it was May and the plains were dotted with spring flowers, up here, five thousand feet above sea level, the winds still came rushing round the corners in icy blasts and the temperature tumbled towards zero once the sun had set. The men had erected a tent, made from woven goat-hair and tied down with long ropes nailed into the hard ground. They had rested here for three hours and now squatted down with their backs to it, waiting for their meal to cook. The horses that had brought them here were tethered near by.

Five men and a boy.

Alex Rider came out of the tent and took his place on the rough piece of carpet that had been set down for him. He examined the food that was bubbling away in the metal cauldron in the middle of the fire. It was some sort of lamb stew and he



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had to admit that it smelled delicious. The men had barely spoken to him since they had picked him up at the rendezvous point, a day's ride away on the other side of the Afghanistan border. He knew that they were Kochis – Afghan nomads – and that they were loyal only to themselves. They would have been paid to bring him this far … gold, weapons, food, or all three. He wasn't sure if he trusted them. Certainly, from the moment they had set eyes on him, they hadn't trusted him.

They had not been told why it was necessary to escort a fourteen-year-old English boy into a landscape that really could be described as the middle of nowhere. They knew only that he was important. He had been brought to them in a Lynx Mk9A, the British Army primary battlefield utility helicopter said to be the fastest in the world. It had landed on the outskirts of the town of Yazdan, in Iran, and that had told them something at once. It could not have been there without the permission of the Iranians. The British and the Iranian government working together! This was serious.

The food was ready. The leader of the Kochis, a man Alex knew only as Rafiq, unwrapped a piece of cloth and laid out several pieces of flatbread, which they would use as plates. There were no knives or forks. He scooped out some of the meat and vegetables and handed it to Alex.

"*Mamnoon*," Alex said. It was the Farsi word for "thank you".



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The other men served themselves and they all began to eat. The moon had come out, giving them enough light to see what they were doing and the sky was also crowded with hundreds of stars, shimmering over the mountains with a silver glow. Holding the flatbread in both hands, Alex tore into it with his teeth. The lamb was cooked in yoghurt, lotus roots, chickpeas and garlic. After the long journey he would have eaten anything, but it was even better than he'd expected. As he ate, he glanced at his companions. They all looked very similar with skin beaten dark by the sun and the wind, tangled black hair, hooded eyes. They were dressed in loose-fitting clothes, neutral colours, with either turbans or the soft, round-topped berets that were known as *pakols*. Rafiq had a velvet waistcoat, which might have been green and gold when his grandfather wore it, but was now threadbare and faded. It was impossible to tell their age. They could have been twenty. They could have been fifty. They hardly seemed to belong in the modern world.

And what did they think of him, he wondered. He had seen their astonishment when he had climbed out of the helicopter, and as they travelled together towards the mountains they had kept glancing at him as if they still couldn't believe he was there. He couldn't have looked more different to them. He was half their size, fair-haired, European. He was wearing a black combat suit with



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hiking boots and a backpack. It was unfortunate that horse-riding was one of the few outdoor activities that he had never fully mastered. They had given him a sleek, Egyptian black colt with a white blaze on its chest but he was barely able to control it, bouncing along helplessly.

He was very glad to dismount for a rest. The lower parts of his body felt like they'd been mangled.

"English boy!" It was Faisal, the second in command who had spoken. Alex didn't like him. He had an ugly, crooked smile and a cataract had turned one of his eyes a milky white.

Alex looked up.

"You living in London?"

Alex nodded. He didn't want to pass on any information, but there was no point denying it.

"Big Ben! The Queen! Chelsea football!" Faisal roared with laughter as if he had said something hilarious.

Rafiq muttered something in Farsi but Faisal snapped back angrily, then turned to Alex once again. "Why you come here?" he demanded.

Alex shrugged. "There's no school at the moment," he said. "And I didn't know what else to do."

Faisal had only half understood and frowned. "You go to Falcon's Edge," he said.

A gust of wind tugged at the flames and Faisal's face seemed to become distorted. The other men were waiting to hear what Alex said. Even Rafiq



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was gazing at him intently. Once again, Alex didn't want to reply. But they knew anyway. They had been paid to take him there. "Yes," he said, simply.

"Why?"

Alex ignored him. But then another of the men spoke. His name was Usman. As well as a rifle strapped across his shoulders, he had an ornate dagger with a curved blade hanging from his waist. "You no go there, English boy," he said. "You enter Falcon's Edge, you no come out." The others nodded in agreement.

"Nice lamb," Alex said, holding up his food. "What's for pudding?"

Falcon's Edge. Alex had never heard the name until a few days before. Suddenly he was three thousand miles away, back home in Chelsea, relaxing in the comfort of his bedroom. The sun was shining. It was going to be a warm day. Alex had schoolwork to do – but no school. A large part of Brookland had burned down and all the students had been sent home while the police investigated what had happened. Alex could have told them, of course. He had been there when the fire began. He was lucky he hadn't died in the flames.

The doorbell rang.

Alex waited for Jack Starbright to answer it, then remembered that she had gone out shopping. He swung himself off the bed and padded downstairs with no shoes on. This was the house



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that his uncle had bought. All his life, while Alex was growing up, Ian Rider had pretended to be a banker, but it was only after his death that Alex had discovered the truth. He was a spy, working for the Special Operations Division of MI6. As Alex had unravelled all the lies, there had been a part of him that had wanted to sell the house, to move out of London, to start living a life that was actually real. In fact, the exact opposite had happened. MI6 had come for Alex, sucking him into their world, sending him on two missions – first to Cornwall and then to a private academy in the French Alps. He had been lucky to escape from Point Blanc. He had even been invited to his own funeral.

He reached the front door and opened it. Who had he been expecting? The postman? Of course it wasn't as easy as that. Mrs Jones, the Deputy Chief Executive and number two to Alan Blunt, was standing there, wearing a light raincoat, with her hands in her pockets. Alex recognized the man who was with her, dressed as he always was in a cheap suit and what looked like an old school tie. This was John Crawley. "Crawley from Personnel..." That was how he had described himself after Ian's death.

"Can we come in, Alex?" Mrs Jones asked.

"Maybe you should wait for Jack to get back," Alex said.

"Actually, we waited until she'd left."

Alex didn't remember inviting them in but



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somehow the two agents made their way past him and entered the house. Alex led them into the kitchen. He didn't offer them coffee.

"You're not at school," Mrs Jones began.

"You know very well that the school burned down," Alex said.

"Yes. That was very unfortunate. We should have realized that one of Dr Grief's clones was still on the loose."

Alex had been chased around the building by a boy who was an exact replica of himself. It was like being attacked by his own reflection. He remembered the last moment, seeing the boy falling through a crater in the roof, disappearing into the smoke and flames. "What happened to him?" he asked.

"We're looking after him," Mrs Jones said. Alex didn't even want to think what that might mean. "How are you?"

"I'm still alive. No thanks to you."

Mrs Jones smiled thinly. She took out a packet of mints and, without offering one to Alex, slipped one into her mouth. She always sucked peppermints when she was about to deliver bad news. Behind her, Crawley was perched on a kitchen chair with his hands on his knees. He somehow reminded Alex of a ventriloquist's dummy. "We need your help again," Mrs Jones said.

"I'm afraid I'm not interested," Alex said. "I've got maths homework."



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"I know…"

"And science homework, history homework, geography homework, French homework. I'm still trying to catch up from last term."

"Mr Blunt asked me to pay you a visit. Something's come up, and from what we understand, Brookland won't be open for at least another week. That gives you plenty of time to do what we have in mind and to be back without anyone noticing."

"You'd have thought most young people would jump at a chance to visit Afghanistan," Crawley said, speaking for the first time.

"Afghani—?" Alex's head swam. "No!" he exclaimed. "Forget it! You've got to be joking! Why do you keep asking me? Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Because you're very good, Alex," Mrs Jones replied. "Ian Rider trained you for this. All your life you were prepared for it and you've already proved yourself twice. That business with Dr Grief really was spectacular."

"You forced me into all that," Alex reminded her. "Why should I be interested now?"

"I'll explain." Mrs Jones turned to Crawley. "John, would you mind making us some coffee?"

"Certainly, Mrs Jones." Crawley swung himself off the stool and busied himself in the kitchen.

Alex watched him in disbelief. "Do you know where the milk is?" he asked.



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"Oh yes." Crawley smiled. "I know everything."

Mrs Jones looked back at Alex and began to explain. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you, Alex, that terrorism is now the greatest threat to world peace. You'll have read about horrible incidents in New York, in London and in Paris. The whole of the Middle East is a cauldron and for the security services, it's a situation that's almost impossible to control ... especially when you have so many tiny groups that are ready to strike at any time with no overall plan.

"Imagine how much worse it would become if those groups were able to get their hands on the most advanced weapons, by which I mean nuclear or bio-chemical technology. That's our biggest nightmare. A terrorist with a nuclear bomb – and intelligence services all over the world have been working together to make sure it never happens."

"Caffeinated or decaffeinated?" Crawley asked. He had filled the kettle and flicked it on.

"I don't really mind, thank you." Mrs Jones hadn't taken her eyes off Alex. "It could be about to happen," she went on. "And all because of a man called Darcus Drake."

"Who is he?" Alex had to ask.

"He's a very interesting person. For many years, he was a photographer, working for the international press. He lived in London. He was wealthy. He won a great many awards. Darcus travelled the world, taking photographs of war zones. That was



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his speciality. When bombs went off, when children were hurt, when the hospitals began to fill up, somehow he'd be there. He didn't care about his own safety. He made it his mission to show people what was happening in places like Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan and Ethiopia. The strange thing is, Alex, there was something almost beautiful about the images he took. He had a knack of capturing horror in a way that made you want to look."

"He sounds like a good guy," Alex said.

"He was. There's no doubt about that. But somewhere along the way, he changed. I suppose it's impossible to keep witnessing so much pain and suffering and just to click away with your camera as if it's got nothing to do with you. Darcus Drake came to believe that the West was responsible for everything that he was seeing. He became more and more interested in terrorism until the inevitable happened and he became a terrorist himself.

"The thing is, he had travelled all over the Middle East. He had made hundreds of contacts. He knew journalists, intelligence officers, field agents, local tribesmen … he'd even met some of the terrorist groups. He spoke four languages, including Arabic and Farsi. There's no question that he had a brilliant mind. I don't know exactly what happened. I don't know if there was a light-bulb moment. But suddenly, he realized he was in a perfect position to take control, to form his own terrorist group, fighting against the West. And that is what he did."



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"What's all this got to do with me?" Alex asked.

"I'm coming to that, Alex. For the last two years, Darcus Drake dropped out of sight, but he recently emerged again in Afghanistan. We've received intelligence that he's holed up in the Herat mountains, quite close to the border with Iran. He's occupying an ancient citadel that was actually built around 300 BC by Alexander the Great. It's been rebuilt many times since then. In the nineteenth century, British soldiers fighting in Afghanistan gave it a name: Falcon's Edge. That's how it's been known ever since.

"It's a fantastic place. It looks out over an empty plain with Iran just to the west. The entrance to the citadel is very high up. There's a wide, stone platform open to the elements with a three hundred metre drop. During the First Anglo-Afghan War, the local tribesmen used to tie up their prisoners and throw them to their deaths. Only one track winds up through the mountains to this entrance and it's heavily guarded. It would be impossible to approach without being seen. And there's more to Falcon's Edge than meets the eye. It's perched on the edge of the mountain, but more recently it's been extended … into the mountain itself. There's a network of tunnels and chambers. It has electricity and advanced telecommunications. But there's worse. According to our latest reports, the citadel is hiding a terrible secret."

"Here you are!" Crawley brought a tray over to



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the counter. He had set out three cups and a small jug of milk. He glanced at Alex reproachfully. "You don't have any biscuits."

"I try not to eat them," Alex growled. He was annoyed. He had allowed himself to be drawn into this story. Despite himself, he wanted to know more. "What secret?" he asked.

"For the answer to that, you have to go back to nineteen seventy-nine," Mrs Jones replied. "That was when the Soviets occupied Afghanistan at the start of what turned out to be a disastrous nine-year war. While they were there, for their own reasons, they decided to build something called a calutron. I don't suppose you know what that is."

"It's a giant particle accelerator," Alex said. "It produces uranium-235, which you can use to make a bomb. We did it last term in science." He sighed. "I was actually there for that lesson…"

"Well … yes." Mrs Jones blinked. "A calutron is used to produce small quantities of pure uranium. For what it's worth, it needs a huge amount of electrical power to run it and an equally huge cooling system to stop it blowing up." Crawley handed her a cup of coffee and she took it. "We've learned that there's a Soviet-built calutron inside Falcon's Edge and Darcus Drake is trying to get it working. He's planning to produce uranium and basically what he's going to do is to open a nuclear supermarket. He's offering to arm every terrorist group in the Middle East with nuclear weapons."



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She paused. Was it Alex's imagination or had it suddenly got very quiet outside?

"Think about it Alex," Crawley muttered. "A nuclear explosion in London or Paris..."

"Go on," Alex said.

"To begin with, we didn't believe it," Mrs Jones said. "A plant that size would have to show up. We've had planes over the country looking for heat signatures. Satellite photography. Nothing. But then, two weeks ago, we were contacted by a Russian scientist who had worked on the project. He confirmed that the calutron is there, buried deep in the mountain, invisible to the world outside. And very soon it's going to start production."

"So why don't you bomb it?" Alex asked.

"Because it's too well protected. The walls of the citadel are far too thick and the mountains make it almost impossible for an air-to-ground missile to get a proper sighting on the target. Anyway, these days you can't fly bombing missions without evidence that you can show the world first. Photographic evidence. That's what we need now. Someone has to get into the mountain and prove that the calutron is really there. Then we can go to the United Nations and persuade them to take action."

There were many questions Alex could have asked, but in the end, he knew it boiled down to two words. "Why me?"

"We've managed to look at some blueprints and



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as far as we can see, there's only one way into Falcon's Edge. As I've explained, the front entrance is impossible. But if you were to climb through the mountains and go in the back way, there is a possibility. The Soviets built a network of pipes and ventilation shafts and there's an access panel that could be opened. It's the one weak link in their security and the reason it's been overlooked is simple. Some of the pipework is very narrow. Too narrow for a man..."

But not too narrow for a boy...

Alex found himself staring into the flames of the bonfire, the cool breeze tugging at his hair as he remembered the conversation with Mrs Jones. The man called Usman had brewed mint tea. He handed Alex a tiny bowl that burned his fingers. He raised it to his lips and sipped. The tea was hot and sweet. The other men had lit cigarettes. They were talking among themselves in low voices, ignoring him now. How had he allowed MI6 to talk him into this? It seemed to Alex that everything had happened in a whirl. He had been driven to the seventeen-storey building near Liverpool Street Station which pretended to be a bank and where Special Operations was based. There had been further briefings. He had been provided with all the equipment he would need. And then, finally, a Royal Navy Jetstream T3 aircraft had flown him halfway across the world. He had transferred to



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the Lynx Mk9A helicopter in Cyprus and then – after refuelling on an aircraft carrier in the south Mediterranean – he had been dropped on the edge of a dusty town in Iran. And now he was here.

Why him? There was no answer to that question and, anyway, it was already far too late to ask.

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