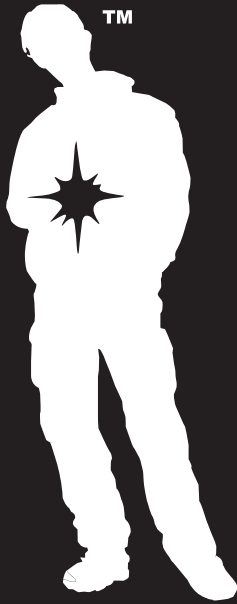


ALEX RIDER



NEVER
SAY
DIE

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EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT

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Never Say Die

Exclusive Extract

The start of another day.

Alex went into the bathroom, showered and cleaned his teeth. Then he got dressed. He had started school a week ago, arriving at the start of the fall semester – the autumn term, he would have called it back in London. There was no uniform at the Elmer E. Robinson High School. Today, Alex threw on sweats, a T-shirt and a hoodie – all of them brought from the same branch of Hollister on Market Street. Glancing at himself in the full-length mirror next to the bed, he decided that he looked American and anonymous. It was only when he spoke that he stood out. Of course, everyone said how much they loved his British accent.

There was a homework assignment on his desk. “Do animals have a conscious life?” It was an essay he’d been asked to write for Human Geography class but Alex wasn’t even sure that he understood the question. He’d managed to scrawl out the five hundred words demanded but he was fairly sure that he’d get a bad grade...a C or even a fail. When Alex was at Brookland, he’d always done well, even when he was missing classes, dragged out of school by MI6. But there was a part of him now that just didn’t care. He picked up the pages and stuffed them into his backpack. Then he went downstairs.

Sabina was already in the kitchen with her mother, sitting down to breakfast. Liz Pleasure had set out pancakes and fresh fruit, cereal and coffee. Alex remembered the first time he had met the family – when they had invited him on a surfing holiday in Cornwall. He had thought then how close they were and had secretly envied them. His own parents had died soon after he was born and he had never had a proper family of his own. Well, now he was one of them. He had become a son to Edward and Liz, a younger brother to Sabina (she was three months older than him). So why didn’t he feel that he belonged? Why did he still walk into the room like an invited guest?

“Good morning, Alex!” Liz beamed at him and poured him a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. She was a large, round-faced woman who was always cheerful. If she worried about Alex, she was careful never to show it. “Did you get your homework done?”

“Yes. I finished it last night.” Alex sat down next to Sabina. In the corner, Rocky, the family Labrador, thumped his tail lazily against the floor as if he was glad to see Alex too.

“I had two pages of math,” Sabina complained. “It took me ages!”

“Well you should have started it when you got in,” her mother scolded her. “Instead of watching all that TV.”

Math not maths. Alex noticed what Sabina had said. She had been in America for less than a year but it seemed to him that she had quickly folded herself into her new life.

Edward Pleasure was away. He was working on a news story in Los Angeles and wouldn't be back for a couple of weeks. Liz was also a writer, finishing a book about fashion. She had a study at the back of the house, overlooking the garden, and worked from there. “Did you sleep OK?” she asked.

Alex looked up. He hesitated for just a moment, then answered automatically. “Yes. I slept fine.”

He hadn't. The nightmare had woken him again. He was back in the chapel at the eighteenth century fort in the desert outside Cairo. Razim was there – the madman and agent of Scorpia who hoped to make a name for himself by finding an exact measurement for pain. And Julius Grief was standing in front of him, bobbing up and down in excitement. The boy was also mad in his own way. He had been surgically altered to turn him into an exact replica of Alex, and it was as if Alex was looking into a fairground mirror, seeing a distorted version of himself.

Alex was tied to a chair, unable to take his eyes off the television screen in front of him. Wires had been attached to different parts of his body: his neck, his fingers, his forehead, his naked chest. He could feel the chill of the air-conditioning against his skin. But there was something even colder in the room. It was his own terror. Razim and Julius Grief were about to murder the person he most loved and they were forcing him to watch.

He saw Jack Starbright on the screen. She had managed to escape from her cell by prising out one of the bars in the window. She had found a car, parked in the courtyard outside. The keys had been left in the ignition. She climbed in, unaware that this was what they wanted her to do, that her every move was being monitored. Alex screamed at her to stop. He was twisting in the chair, straining against the ropes that

held him. Julius Grief was laughing. Once again, Alex felt the tears coursing down his cheeks.

The car drove out of the fort and into the desert. And then, as it had done the night before and every night after Alex had finally managed to fall asleep, it blew up. There had been a bomb concealed inside. Razim had stage-managed the entire escape simply to torture him. Alex saw the flames as he had seen them fifty times before and woke up in his room on the fourth floor, his pillow damp with sweat and tears. It was a long time before he had got back to sleep again.

Sabina's mother had served him a pancake but he pushed the plate away, unable to eat. She noticed this and eyed him warily. "Aren't you hungry, Alex?"

"No, thanks." Alex tried to smile. "I'm fine with orange juice."

"Well, make sure you eat at mid-day. Sabina – keep an eye on him!"

"Yes, mum," Sabina said. She couldn't keep the worry out of her voice. She knew there was something wrong.

A few minutes later, the two of them left. They were both at the same High School, just a few blocks north, close to the huge park – the Presidio - that gave the area its name. To Alex, the Elmer E. Robinson High School looked more like a university, with half a dozen low-rise buildings spread across beautifully-kept lawns and an oversized Stars & Stripes fluttering at the entrance. There was a theatre, a brand new library, a 1,000-seat auditorium, tennis courts, basketball courts and of course an American football field. It was home to over two thousand students and made Brookland in North London seem small and old-fashioned.

"Are you sure you're OK?" Sabina asked as they approached the fountain that stood outside the main entrance. "I know how hard this must be for you."

"I'm fine, Sab. Really."

"Maybe you should change your mind about Los Angeles. We can have lots of fun down there and Dad really wants to see you."

Normally, Edward Pleasure came home at weekends but he had a Saturday meeting and the family had decided to take advantage of the warm weather and spend some time together on the coast at Santa Monica.

"No. I'll be fine and it's good that the three of you have a bit of time on your own." They'd reached the steps leading up to the front door. "I'll see you later. Have a good day."

"You too."

The two of them went their separate ways. Sabina had deliberately stayed close to Alex in his first week as he tried to settle in but they'd agreed that it would probably be easier for both of them if they stayed apart, allowing Alex to make his own friends.

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Anyway, Alex had noticed that Sabina had met someone else. Blake was seventeen, broad-shouldered, blonde-haired, with an easy smile. He was the senior basketball captain and one of the most popular boys in the school. Alex had taken an immediate dislike to him and then felt annoyed with himself for doing so. What was wrong with him? He'd never been like this when he was in the UK.

It wasn't working out. He had to admit it. Most of the students at EERHS had been welcoming but somehow he was still on his own...and he understood why. You can't make friends unless you're completely honest and there was simply too much mystery about Alex, too much that he couldn't explain. He couldn't tell anyone why he had no parents, why he was living with Sabina and her family, what he had been doing for the past year, why he had come to the United States or even how he had managed to get a visa. He just hoped things would get better in time. A year, or two years... and maybe people would begin to accept him.

Never Say Die

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