

---

# ELEVEN O'CLOCK

ALEX BURST OUT of the house and stopped in the open air, taking stock of his surroundings. He was aware of alarms ringing, guards running toward him, and two cars, still some distance away, tearing up the main drive, heading for the house. He just hoped that although it was obvious something was wrong, nobody would yet know what it was. They shouldn't be looking for him—at least, not yet. That might give him the edge.

It looked like he was too late. Sayle's private helicopter had already gone. Only the cargo plane was left. If Alex was going to reach the Science Museum in London in the fifty-nine minutes left to him, he had to be on it. But the cargo plane was already in motion, rolling slowly away from its chocks. In a minute or two it would go through the preflight tests. Then it would take off.

Alex looked around and saw an open-topped army jeep parked on the drive near the front door. There was a guard standing next to it, a cigarette slipping out of his hand, looking around to see what was happening but looking the wrong way. Perfect. Alex sprinted across the gravel. He had brought a weapon from the house. One of Sayle's harpoon guns had floated past him just as he left the room and he'd snatched it up, determined at last to have something he could use to defend himself. It would be easy enough to shoot the guard right now. A harpoon in the back and the jeep would be his. But Alex knew he couldn't do it.

Whatever Alan Blunt and M16 wanted to turn him into, he wasn't ready to shoot in cold blood. Not for his country. Not even to save his own life.

The guard looked up as Alex approached and fumbled for the pistol in a holster at his belt. He never made it. Alex used the handle of the harpoon gun, swinging it around and up to hit him, hard, under the chin.

The guard crumpled, the pistol falling out of his hand. Alex grabbed it and leaped into the jeep, grateful to see the keys were in the ignition. He turned them and heard the engine start up. He knew how to drive.

That was something else Ian Rider had made sure he'd learned ... as soon as his legs were long enough to reach the pedals. The other cars were closing in on him. They must have seen him attack the guard.

Meanwhile, the plane had wheeled around and was already taxiing up to the start of the runway.

He wasn't going to reach it in time.

Maybe it was the danger closing in from all sides that had sharpened his senses. Maybe it was his close escape from so many dangers before. But Alex didn't even have to think. He knew what to do, as if he had done it a dozen times before. Maybe the training he'd been given had been more effective than he'd thought.

He reached into his pocket and took out the yo-yo that Smithers had given him. There was a metal stud on the belt he was wearing and he slammed the yo-yo against it, feeling it click into place, as it had been designed to. Then, as quickly as he could, he tied the end of the nylon cord around the bolt of the harpoon.

Finally, he tucked the pistol he had taken from the guard into the back of his trousers. He was ready.

The plane was facing down the runway. Its propellers were at full speed.

Alex wrenched the gear into first, released the hand brake, and gunned the jeep forward, shooting over the drive and onto the grass, heading for the airstrip. At the same time there was a chatter of machine-gun fire.

He yanked down on the steering wheel and twisted away as his wing mirror exploded and a spray of bullets slammed into the windshield and door. The two cars that he had seen coming up the main drive had wheeled around to come up behind him. Each of them had a guard in the backseat, leaning out of the window, firing at him. And they were getting closer.

Alex tried to go faster, but it was already too late. The two cars had reached him, and for a horrible second, he found himself sandwiched between them, one on each side. He was only inches away from the guards.

Looking left and right, he could see into the barrels of their machine guns. There was only one thing to do.

He slammed his foot on the brake, ducking at the same time. The jeep skidded to a halt and the other two cars flashed past him. There was a chatter as both machine guns opened fire. Alex looked up.

The two guards had squeezed their triggers simultaneously. They had both been aiming at him, but with the jeep suddenly out of their sights, they had ended up firing at each other. There was a yell. One of the cars lost control and crashed into a tree, metalwork crumpling against wood. The other screeched to a halt, reversed, then turned to come after him.

Alex slammed the car back into first gear and set off again. Where was the plane? With a groan, he saw that it had begun rolling down the runway. It was still moving slowly but was rapidly picking up speed. Alex hit the tarmac and followed.

His foot was pressed down, the gas pedal against the floor. The jeep was doing about seventy, but it wasn't fast enough. And straight ahead of him, the way was blocked. Two more cars had arrived on the runway.

More guards with machine guns balanced themselves, half leaning out of the windows. They had a clear shot. There was nothing to stop them from hitting him. Unless ...

He turned the steering wheel and yelled out as the jeep spun across the runway, behind the plane. Now he had the plane between him and the approaching cars. He was safe. But only for a few more seconds. The plane was about to leave the ground. Alex saw the front wheel separate itself from the runway. He glanced in his mirror. The car that had chased him from the house was right on his tail. He had nowhere left to go.

One car behind him. Two more ahead. The plane was now in the air, the back wheels lifting off. The guards taking aim. Everything at seventy miles an hour.

Alex let go of the steering wheel, grabbed the harpoon gun, and fired. The harpoon flashed through the air.

The yo-yo attached to Alex's belt spun, trailing out thirty yards of specially designed advanced nylon cord.



The pointed head of the harpoon buried itself in the underbelly of the plane. Alex felt himself almost being torn in half as he was yanked out of the jeep on the end of the cord. In seconds he was forty, fifty yards above the runway, dangling underneath the plane. His jeep swerved, out of control. The two oncoming cars tried to avoid it—and failed. Both of them hit it in a three-way head-on collision. There was an explosion, a ball of flame and a fist of gray smoke that followed Alex up as if trying to seize him. A moment later there was another explosion. The third car had been traveling too fast. It plowed into the burning wrecks, flipped over, and continued, screeching along the runway on its back before it too burst into flames.

Alex saw little of this. He was suspended underneath the plane by a single thin white cord, twisting around and around as he was carried ever farther into the air. The wind was rushing past him, battering his face and deafening him. He couldn't even hear the propellers, just above his head. The belt was cutting into his waist. He could hardly breathe. Desperately, he scrabbled for the yo-yo and found the control he wanted. A single button. He pressed it and the tiny powerful motor inside the yo-yo began to turn. The yo-yo rotated on his belt, pulling in the cord. Very slowly, an inch at a time, Alex was drawn up toward the plane.

He had aimed the harpoon accurately. There was a door at the back of the plane, and when he turned off the engine mechanism in the yo-yo, he was close enough to reach out for the handle. He wondered who was flying the plane and where he was going. The pilot must have seen the destruction down on the runway, but he couldn't have heard the harpoon. He couldn't know he'd picked up an extra passenger.

Opening the door was harder than Alex thought. He was still dangling under the plane and every time he got close to the handle the wind drove him back. The current was tearing into his eyes and Alex could hardly see. Twice his fingers found the metal handle, only to be pulled away before he could turn it. The third time he managed to get a better grip, but it still took all his strength to yank the handle down.

The door swung open and he clambered into the hold. He took one last look down. The runway was already a thousand feet below. There were two fires raging, but at this distance, they seemed no more than match heads. Alex unplugged the yo-yo, freeing himself. Then he reached into the waistband of his trousers and took out the gun.

The plane was empty apart from a couple of bundles that Alex vaguely recognized. There was a single pilot at the controls, and something on his instrumentation must have told him that the door was open because he suddenly twisted around. Alex found himself face-to-face with Mr. Grin.

"Warg?" the butler muttered.

Alex raised the gun. He wondered if he would have the courage to use it. But he wasn't going to let Mr. Grin know that. "All right, Mr. Grin," he shouted above the noise of the propeller and the howl of the wind. "You may not be able to talk, but you'd better listen. I want you to fly this plane to London. We're going to the Science Museum in South Kensington and we've got to be there in less than an hour. And if you think you're trying to trick me, I'll put a bullet in you. Do you understand?"

Mr. Grin said nothing.

Alex fired the gun. The bullet slammed into the floor just beside Mr. Grin's foot. Mr. Grin stared at Alex, then nodded slowly.

He reached out and turned the joystick. The plane dipped and began to head north.

---

# TWELVE O'CLOCK

LONDON APPEARED.

Suddenly the clouds rolled back and the late morning sun brought the whole city, shining, into view. There was Battersea Power Station, standing proud with its four great chimneys still intact, even though much of its roof had long ago been eaten away. Behind it, Battersea Park appeared as a square of dense green bushes and trees that were making a last stand, fighting back the urban spread. In the far distance the Millennium Wheel perched like a fabulous silver coin, balancing effortlessly on its rim. And all around it London crouched; gas towers and apartment blocks, endless rows of shops and houses, roads, railways, and bridges stretching away on both sides, separated only by the bright silver crack in the landscape that was the River Thames.

Alex saw all this with a clenched stomach, looking out through the open door of the aircraft. He'd had fifty minutes to think about what he had to do. Fifty minutes while the plane droned over Cornwall and Devon, then Somerset and the Salisbury Plains before reaching the North Downs and on toward Windsor and London.

When he had got into the plane, he had intended to use the radio to call the police or anyone else who might be listening. But seeing Mr. Grin at the controls had changed all that. He remembered how fast the man had been when he encountered him outside the bedroom. He knew he was safe enough in the cargo area, with Mr. Grin strapped into the pilot seat at the front of the plane. But he didn't dare get any closer.

Even with the gun it would be too dangerous.

He had thought of forcing Mr. Grin to land the plane at Heathrow. The radio had started squawking the moment they'd entered London airspace and had only stopped when Mr. Grin turned it off. But that would never have worked. By the time they reached the airport, touched down, and coasted to a halt, it would be far too late.

And then, sitting hunched up in the cargo area, Alex had recognized the two bundles lying on the floor next to him. They had told him exactly what he had to do.

"Eeerg!" Mr. Grin said. He twisted around in his seat, and for the last time, Alex saw the hideous smile that the circus knife had torn through his cheeks.

"Thanks for the ride," Alex said, and jumped out of the open door.

The bundles were parachutes. Alex had checked them out and strapped one onto his back when they were still over Reading. He was glad that he'd spent a day on parachute training with the SAS, although this flight had been even worse than the one he'd endured over the Welsh valleys. This time there was no static line. There had been no one to reassure him that his parachute was properly packed. If he could have thought of any other way to reach the Science Museum in the seven minutes that he had left, he would have taken it. There was no other way. He knew that. So he had jumped.

Once he was over the threshold, it wasn't so bad. There was a moment of dizzying confusion as the wind hit him once again. He closed his eyes and forced himself to count to three. Pull too early and the parachute might snag on the plane's tail. Even so, his hand was clenched and he had barely



reached three before he was pulling with all his strength. The parachute blossomed open above him and he was jerked back upward, the harness cutting into his armpits and sides.

They had been flying at ten thousand feet. When Alex opened his eyes, he was surprised by his sense of calm. He was dangling in the air, underneath a comforting canopy of white silk. He felt as if he wasn't moving at all. Now that he had left the plane, the city seemed even more distant and unreal. It was just him, the sky, and London. He was almost enjoying himself.

And then he heard the plane coming back.

It was already a mile or more away, but now he saw it bank steeply to the right, making a sharp turn. The engines rose, the plane leveled out, and it headed straight toward him. Mr. Grin wasn't going to let him get away so easily. As the plane drew closer and closer, he could imagine the man's never-ending smile behind the window of the cockpit. Mr. Grin intended to steer the plane straight into him, to cut him to shreds in midair.

But Alex had been expecting it.

He reached down and took the Game Boy out of his trouser pocket. This time there was no game cartridge in it, but he had slipped Bomber Boy out a long time ago and slid it across the floor of the empty cargo plane. That was where it was now. Just behind Mr. Grin's seat. A smoke bomb. Set off by remote control.

He pressed the start button three times.

Inside the plane the cartridge exploded, releasing a cloud of acrid yellow smoke. The smoke billowed out through the hold, curling against the windows, trailing out of the open door. Mr. Grin vanished, completely surrounded by smoke. The plane wobbled, then plunged down.

Alex watched the plane dive. He could imagine Mr. Grin blinded, fighting for control. The plane began to twist, slowly at first, then faster and faster. The engines whined. Now it was heading straight for the ground, howling through the sky. Yellow smoke trailed out in its wake. At the last minute Mr. Grin managed to bring up the nose again. But it was much too late. The plane smashed into what looked like a deserted piece of dock land near the River Thames and disappeared in a ball of flame.

Alex looked at his watch. Three minutes to twelve.

He was still thousands of feet in the air, and unless he landed on the very doorstep of the Science Museum, he wasn't going to make it. Grabbing hold of the ropes, using them to steer himself, he tried to work out the fastest way down.

Inside the East Hall of the Science Museum, Herod Sayle was coming to the end of his speech. The entire chamber had been transformed for the great moment when the Stormbreakers would be brought on-line.

The room was caught between old and new, between stone colonnades and stainless steel floors, between the very latest in high tech and old curiosities from the Industrial Revolution.

A podium had been set up in the center for Sayle, the prime minister, his press secretary, and the minister of state for education. In front of them were twelve rows of chairs—for journalists, teachers, invited friends.

Alan Blunt was in the front row, as emotionless as ever. Mrs. Jones, dressed in black with a large

brooch on her lapel, was next to him. On either side television towers had been constructed with cameras focusing in as Sayle spoke. The speech was being broadcast live to schools throughout the country and it would also be shown on the evening news. The hall was packed with another two or three hundred people, standing on first- and second-floor galleries, looking down on the podium from all sides. As Sayle spoke, tape recorders turned and lightbulbs flashed. Never before had a private individual made so generous a gift to the nation.

This was an event. History in the making.

“...it is the prime minister, and the prime minister alone who is responsible for what is about to happen,”

Sayle was saying. “And I hope that tonight, when he reflects on what has happened today throughout this country, that he will remember our days together at school and everything he did at that time. I think tonight the country will know him for the man he is. One thing is sure. This is a day you will never forget.”

He bowed. There was a scattering of applause. The prime minister glanced at his press secretary, puzzled.

The press secretary shrugged with barely concealed rudeness. The prime minister took his place in front of the microphone.

“I’m not quite sure how to respond to that,” he joked, and all the journalists laughed. The government had such a large majority that they knew it was in their best interests to laugh at the prime minister’s jokes. “I’m glad that Mr. Sayle has such happy memories of our school days together and I’m glad that the two of us, together, today, can make such a vital difference to our nation’s schools.”

Herod Sayle gestured at a table slightly to one side of the podium. On the table was a Stormbreaker computer and, next to it, a mouse. “This is the master control,” he said. “Click on the mouse and all the computers will come on-line.”

“Right.” The prime minister lifted his finger and adjusted his position so that the cameras could get his best profile. Somewhere outside the museum, a clock struck twelve.

Alex heard the clock from about five hundred feet up, with the roof of the Science Museum rushing toward him.

He had seen the building just after the plane had crashed. It hadn’t been easy finding it, with the city spread out like a three-dimensional map right underneath him. On the other hand, he had lived his whole life in West London and had visited the museum often enough. First he had seen the Victorian pile that was Albert Hall. Directly south of it was a tall white tower surmounted by a green dome: Imperial College. As Alex dropped, he seemed to be moving faster. The whole city had become a fantastic jigsaw puzzle and he knew he only had seconds to piece it together. A wide, extravagant building with churchlike towers and windows. That had to be the Natural History Museum. The Natural History Museum was on Cromwell Road. How did you get from there to the Science Museum? Of course, turn left at the lights up Exhibition Road.

And there it was. Alex pulled at the parachute, guiding himself toward it. How small it looked compared to the other landmarks, a rectangular building jutting in from the main road with a flat gray roof and, next to it, a series of arches, the sort of thing you might see on a railway station or perhaps



an enormous conservatory. They were a dull orange in color, curving one after the other. It looked as if they were made of glass. Alex could land on the flat roof. Then all he would have to do was look through the curved one.

He still had the gun he had taken from the guard. He could use it to warn the prime minister. If he had to, he figured, he could use it to shoot Herod Sayle.

Somehow he managed to maneuver himself over the museum. But it was only as he fell the last five hundred feet, as he heard the clock strike twelve, that he realized two things. He was falling much too fast.

And he had missed the flat roof.

In fact, the Science Museum has two roofs. The original is Georgian and made of wired glass. But sometime recently it must have leaked because the curators constructed a second roof of plastic sheeting over the top.

This was the orange roof that Alex had seen.

He crashed into it with both feet at about thirty miles per hour. The roof shattered. He continued straight through, into an inner chamber, just missing a network of steel girders and maintenance ladders. He barely had time to register what looked like a brown carpet, stretched out over the curving surface below. Then he hit it and tore through that too. It was no more than a thin cover, designed to keep the light and dust off the glass that it covered. With a yell, Alex smashed through the glass. At last his parachute caught on a beam.

He jerked to a halt, swinging in midair inside the East Hall.

This was what he saw.

Far below him, all around him, three hundred people had stopped and were staring up at him in shock.

There were more people sitting on chairs directly underneath him and some of them had been hit. There was blood and broken glass. A bridge made of green glass slats stretched across the hall. There was a futuristic information desk and in front of it, at the very center of everything, was a makeshift stage. He saw the Stormbreaker first. Then, with a sense of disbelief, he recognized the prime minister standing, slack jawed, next to Herod Sayle.

Alex hung in the air, dangling at the end of the parachute. As the last pieces of glass fell and disintegrated on the terra-cotta floor, movement and sound returned to the East Hall in an ever-widening wave.

The security men were the first to react. Anonymous and invisible when they needed to be, they were suddenly everywhere, appearing from behind colonnades, from underneath the television towers, running across the green bridge, guns in hands that had been empty a second before. Alex had also drawn his own gun, pulling it out from the waistband of his trousers. Maybe he could explain why he was here before Sayle or the prime minister activated the Stormbreakers. But he doubted it. Shoot first and ask questions later was a line from a bad film. But even bad films are sometimes right.

He emptied the gun.

The bullets echoed around the room, surprisingly loud. Now people were screaming, the journalists

punching and pushing as they fought for cover. The first bullet smashed into the information desk. The second hit the prime minister in the hand, his finger less than an inch away from the mouse. The third hit the mouse, blowing it into fragments. The fourth hit an electrical connection, disintegrating the plug and short-circuiting it. Sayle had dived forward, determined to click on the mouse himself. The fifth and the sixth bullets hit him.

As soon as Alex had fired the last bullet, he dropped the gun, letting it clatter to the floor below, and held up the palms of his hands. He felt ridiculous, hanging there from the ceiling, his arms outstretched. But there were already a dozen guns pointing at him and he had to show them that he was no longer armed, that they didn't need to shoot. Even so, he braced himself, waiting for the security men to open fire. He could almost imagine the hail of bullets tearing into him. As far as they were concerned, he was some sort of crazy terrorist who had just parachuted into the Science Museum and taken six shots at the prime minister. It was their job to kill him. It was what they'd been trained for.

But the bullets never came. All the security men were equipped with radio microphones, and in the front row, Mrs. Jones had control. The moment she had recognized Alex she had been speaking urgently into her brooch.

"Don't shoot! Repeat—don't shoot! Await my command!"

On the podium, a plume of gray smoke rose out of the side of the broken, useless Stormbreaker. Two security men had rushed to the prime minister, who was clutching his wrist, blood dripping out of his hand. The photographers and journalists had begun to shout questions. Their cameras were flashing and the television cameras too had been swung around to focus in on the figure swaying high above. More security men were moving to seal off the exits, following orders from Mrs. Jones, while Alan Blunt looked on, for once in his life out of his depth.

But there was no sign of Herod Sayle. The head of Sayle Enterprises had been shot twice, but somehow he had disappeared.