

Quite a Ride

Alex Rider

by Anthony Horowitz, 1955–

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IT WAS ANOTHER PERFECT DAY in the south of France. Once again, the mistral—that irritating wind that pokes in from the northwest—had decided to stay away and the sky was a huge, empty blue. In London, the summer had gotten off to its usual shaky start. It was pouring with rain and, with Wimbledon just a week away, everyone was watching the forecasts with a mixture of gloom and resignation. But the French Riviera, the famous Côte d’Azur, knew nothing of that. Here the sun rose early, shone all day, and only crept behind the horizon reluctantly and with the promise that it would soon return.

Alex Rider stood on the terrace of the villa at Mont Boron, just outside Nice. From here he had a stunning view of the entire bay, with the beaches of the Promenade des Anglais sweeping around in a great curve that reached all the way to the airport at the far end. Even as he watched, a British Airways jet took off, tiny in the distance, rising steeply before banking left and corkscrewing up into the sky. It was a reminder that tomorrow he too would be returning home. The visit would be over all too quickly.

This had been a stolen weekend. A school friend of his—James Hale—had an incredibly rich uncle and aunt with a villa perched on the rock face: a couple of living rooms, three bedrooms, and a series of terraces, one above the other, with a circular swimming pool at the bottom and a vertical drop to the Mediterranean far below. James had been invited out and he had taken Alex with him—five days of luxury and a welcome break from school.

Andrew and Celestine Hale were pleasant enough, elderly with no children of their own. He was English. She was French. The two of them ran a gardening and maintenance business looking after vacation homes. If there had been one fly in the ointment, it was that Celestine was always worrying about the boys. She had watched in horror as they'd jumped off the terrace and into the pool. She didn't want them to go out on their own—she was afraid they'd get lost. When they had gone snorkeling near the old port, she had been hunched up on the beach, certain they'd be run over by one of the ferries heading out to Corsica. She was a real tantine, Alex thought. Not so much an aunt as an auntie, with a touch of the granny thrown in too.

But she was also a wonderful cook, and in the evenings, after a few glasses of wine, she seemed more relaxed. Most nights they'd eaten in. Andrew Hale insisted that the restaurants in Nice were mainly overpriced and strictly for tourists. And with the views from the villa—the sea glowing red and the city ablaze with pinpricks of light—there was nowhere else that Alex would rather have been.

„So, what are you doing this morning?“ Alex hadn't heard Mr. Hale step out onto the terrace behind him. James's uncle was wearing a white jacket and a panama hat. He was on his way to visit a relative at Villefranche just down the coast, and for some reason James had to go with him. Until mid-afternoon, Alex would be on his own.

„I'm happy staying here,“ Alex said. „I can hang out by the pool.“

„Nonsense!“ Andrew came over and stood beside him. „This is your last day. You ought to do something memorable.“ He thought for a moment, then a gleam came into his eyes. „Have you ever been parasailing?“

„No.“

„Well, it's great fun. You're not scared of heights, are you?“

„Not really.“

„Then you should give it a go.“ He called back into the kitchen. „Celestine! Why don't you take Alex down to the Blue Beach?“ Celestine appeared in the doorway. She was holding a plate, wiping it dry. „He wants to go parasailing,“ Andrew explained.

This wasn't quite true. But that was the way with Andrew Hale. Once he got an idea in his head, he always assumed that everyone would agree.

Celestine frowned. „Why do you always have to suggest these dangerous sports?“ she scolded. She spoke perfect English but with an accent.

„It's not dangerous. It'll give him a laugh—if it doesn't scare the socks off him first.“

Somehow, Alex didn't think that being dragged behind a motorboat while attached to a half-sized parachute would be particularly frightening... not after what he had been through just a couple of months before. He had been forced to launch himself out of a cargo plane, twenty thousand feet above London, crash-landing through the glass roof of the Science Museum moments before the deadly Stormbreaker computers would have been activated all over the country. And there had been a second parachute jump here in France—storming the Point Blanc Academy high up in the Alps, near Grenoble. Not that he could tell Andrew or Celestine Hale anything about it, of course. He hadn't even told James.

At eleven o'clock that morning, a grumpy-looking James („Visiting old people I don't even know isn't my idea of a vacation“) set off with his uncle and Celestine drove Alex down the steeply winding Boulevard Carnot that led into the old port of Nice and then around the headland into the city itself. The beaches were already busy. The summer had barely begun, but this was a Saturday and the water was unusually warm and clear enough to be inviting.

They parked near the opera house and crossed the main road with the sea in front of them. Alex had noticed two or three facilities offering parasailing and other water sports. From his balcony, he had watched the miniature figures dangling underneath the wisps of brightly colored silk as they were towed up and down the bay. He was actually quite looking forward to trying it for himself. It looked fun and it would surely be very peaceful, hanging over the water in his own little space between the sea and the sky. At least nobody would be trying to machine-gun him.

It was also going to be expensive—seventy-five dollars for around ten minutes. But Jack had given him plenty of money before he left, and so far the Hales hadn't let him pay for anything.

He and Celestine reached a makeshift hut on the beach where two slim and permanently suntanned Australians were getting everything ready while a third man, on a speedboat, waited to launch the ride. The parachute that would lift Alex into the air was already spread out on the sand. A narrow strip of carpet led down to the edge of the water. The runway.

„You gonna give it a try, mate?“ The Australian had somehow guessed he was English.

„Sure. Why not?“ Alex handed over the fee.

„Okay. Let's get you hooked up.“

Celestine watched unhappily as Alex was given a life jacket, which he buckled across his chest. The Australian held up a harness, which was nothing more than a strong canvas belt shaped like a figure-eight with two industrial hooks like the ones used by mountain climbers. The harness was fastened around his waist.

„This way...“ The Australian led him across to the carpet. At the same time, Celestine came over to him.

„Alex, do you mind terribly if I don't watch? To be honest, this whole thing makes me nervous. If you like, I can buy you an ice cream for when you come down.“ She nodded at some shops on the other side of the Promenade des Anglais.

„Thank you.“ It made no difference to Alex if she was there or not.

„What flavor would you like?“

„Lemon, please.“

„All right.“ Celestine took one last glance at the tangle of ropes, the waiting parachute. „Enjoy yourself,“ she said, but without much conviction.

The Australian was in a hurry to get Alex airborne. The sooner he was finished, the sooner he might be able to sell another ride. „When the boat starts, you take three or four steps,“ he explained as he handed Alex a black metal bar with about a dozen different cords leading back to the parachute. The parachute was now securely attached to Alex’s waist. When he took off, the metal bar would be pulled above his head. A long rope led from the bar to a pole in the motorboat, just behind the driver’s seat.

The driver was old and overweight. He was hunched over the steering wheel and didn’t seem happy at all. Alex noticed that he was smoking. It seemed odd and out of sorts with what was meant to be a healthy outdoor activity.

The Australian must have seen the look in Alex’s eyes. „That’s Kristof,“ he said. „The usual guy’s got the day off. But don’t worry. He’ll give you a good ride.“ He stepped back and took hold of one corner of the parachute. The other Australian did the same, the two of them holding it up so that it would catch the wind. One of them gave a signal. Kristof suddenly perked up and gunned the engine. Alex saw the boat move forward and the rope began to go taut.

He took three steps and rose effortlessly off the beach. He could barely even feel the parachute pulling him—all the strain was taken by the harness and divided equally between his thighs. As the boat picked up speed, he climbed faster until he was about sixty feet above the water. He noticed the various swimmers watch him go. There must have been forty or fifty people in the sea and maybe a couple of hundred more spread out on towels on the public beach or lying sardine-like on the blue-and-white sun loungers on the private Plage Neptune next door. A couple of children, both about six years old, waved at him as he soared above them.

The speedboat was an American-built Tigé 21V Fox Racer, 20' 6" long, with a single 315-horsepower outboard engine. It was speeding down a narrow channel between two lines of buoys with the open sea ahead. Alex was quite surprised how high up he was. From this height, even Kristof seemed to be doll-sized. Alex watched as the driver flicked his cigarette into the slipstream. That surprised him too. The butt of a cigarette is made of cellulose acetate, a type of plastic, and would take years to biodegrade. It would also seep out tiny amounts of lead, formaldehyde, cadmium, and arsenic. Hardly very ecological!

He put it out of his mind. He was actually enjoying this. They were still heading out to sea, leaving Nice behind them, and Alex felt a strange sense of both calm and exhilaration. He was too high up to hear the Tigé’s engine. The sun was sparkling off the sea, the wind rushing through his hair. He would be sorry when Kristof turned around and headed back.

Suddenly Kristof stood up. He turned as if he was about to shout out to Alex. Then he clutched at his chest and toppled sideways, landing on the steering wheel.

He lay still. The boat surged on toward the horizon.

Dangling high above, Alex couldn't quite believe what he had just seen. From the look of it, Kristof had just suffered a heart attack! It was hard to say if he was dead or alive, but he was certainly unmoving, his hands hanging limply above the deck. Alex almost wanted to laugh. This could only happen to him! Well, it looked as if he was going to get a rather longer ride than he had bargained for.

He waited for Kristof to wake up.

Kristof didn't wake up. Oh no... was the poor man dead?

Alex took stock of the situation. He was in no real danger. Provided the Tigé kept moving forward, he would continue to fly behind it. It wouldn't take very long for the Australians to realize that something had gone wrong. They would raise the alarm and send another boat after him. Somehow they would have to climb onto the Tigé and bring it back to shore, slowing it down so that Alex could descend. Then they would call an ambulance for the unfortunate Kristof. Alex felt terrible. He wondered if the man had a family.

The boat, left to itself, was still speeding in a more or less straight line. Alex glanced back. Nice was now a long way away, the sun glinting off the apartments and the hotels, packed together facing the sea with the mountains behind. Despite his first thoughts, Alex was growing a little uneasy. He had absolutely no control over the situation. He really was a puppet on a string.

Could he unhook the harness? It might be possible if he shifted some of his weight onto the metal bar, which was now above his head. Then he would be able to let go and drop down into the water. But that would do no good at all. He was miles out to sea.

Suddenly the Tigé was rocked by a wave. Kristof slid off the steering wheel and fell back, slumping against the rope that connected Alex to the boat. The movement caused the wheel to turn. The speedboat cut a semicircle in the water and began to head back the way it had come. Alex felt himself being pulled around. He was now facing Nice, but rather than feeling relieved, he realized, with a jolt of horror, exactly what was going to happen next.

Unless Kristof regained consciousness, which seemed unlikely, the boat would keep going until it hit the beach, slamming its way through any swimmers who happened to be in the way. Alex would be all right—he was safe so long as he was up in the air—but other people would be killed. And what about the dozens of sunbathers on their beach towels? Unless the boat was stopped, it would plow across the sand and into them too. Alex was four or maybe five minutes away from a catastrophe. And perhaps the most horrible part of it was that he had been given a grandstand seat.

There was nothing he could do.

Or was there? If Alex could get into the boat, he could take over the controls... slow down and stop. But how was that possible when he was sixty feet up in the air? The metal hooks! Alex reached up and grasped the metal bar, using it to drag his weight upward. That took the strain off the hooks and, with great difficulty, he managed to unclasp one of them, contorting his body and reaching back with one hand. Then he did the same on the other side. This was even more difficult because once the second hook was unfastened, all his weight would be transferred to his wrists and hands—and if he let go, he would fall.

The beach was getting closer. The boat seemed to be drawn to it. Why couldn't another wave hit it and turn it back again?

The second hook came free. Now Alex was clinging to the bar with the harness hanging uselessly off his thighs. All the pleasure had gone out of the ride. He could imagine the crushing impact if he let go and fell. And the carnage as the boat smashed into the beach.

He still had to get down to the level of the water. That was the second phase of what he had planned. And he knew how to do it. On his first mission, chasing after the Stormbreaker computers, he had been given parachute training by the SAS in the Brecon Beacons, and part of it had involved emergency procedures. If he could fold the edge of the parachute in against the wind, he would be able to force a controlled descent. He looked up and caught sight of two colored cords. That was what he was looking for.

It wasn't easy. Having unhooked himself, he was now supporting all his own weight, and as he let go with one hand, he felt the strain on the other. There was no time to rest. No time to hesitate. Nice was looming ahead of him. He could already see the swimmers—dots in the distance—bobbing up and down in the water, close to the beach. The Tigé was heading straight for them, almost deliberately, as if it wanted to do as much harm as possible before it crashed into the beach. Alex still hoped that Kristof would come to, get up, and see what was happening. But he was as still as a corpse.

Somehow, Alex's flailing hand caught hold of the rope. With the breeze beating at his face, he transferred some of his weight and pulled with all his strength, expecting the parachute to fold in on itself and then flutter down. But it didn't work. With a sense of dismay he realized that, as the boat plowed forward, the rush of the wind was too great. He couldn't fight it. He was stuck in midair.

He could still save himself. All he had to do was let go and he would fall. It might be a rough landing, but the life jacket wouldn't let him drown. The people on the beach would be less fortunate. Alex remembered the two young children he had seen in the water. What if they were hit? Ahead of him, the buildings were getting closer and closer. He could make out the improbable pink-and-green roof of the exclusive Negresco Hotel... he could even read the letters of its name. How much longer did he have? A minute, maybe more. He pulled again. The cord didn't give an inch.

Alex heard a roar and looked up to see an EasyJet airbus coming in to land at Nice airport. It was far too high up to be any threat to him, but all the parasailing companies were aware of the blowback from the jet engines and the danger they could pose. Alex felt the blast as it hit the parachute. He pulled one last time and the silk folded and suddenly he was plunging down, the water rushing up.

He hit the surface with both feet—not hard enough to do himself damage. Even so, he was shocked by the impact. One moment he had been floating in the air, the next he was being dragged at speed through the sea, salt water lashing into his face. He was blinded. He couldn't even open his eyes. At the very last moment, he had let go of the parachute—which had been instantly dragged away behind him—and transferred his grip to the towrope. This was the critical moment. Time was running out.

He forced his eyes open. The Tigé was in front of him. Fighting against the rush of the water, he began to pull himself forward, one hand over the other. He was being bounced violently up and down, the water pounding into him. He could hardly breathe. His arms were being torn out of their sockets. He was being tortured a dozen different ways.

But the boat was getting nearer. Now Alex became aware of one last danger. The Tigé's propeller was chopping up the water, turning it into a vicious white froth. If Alex tried to drag himself over it, he would be chopped up too. Gasping for breath, he hoisted himself above the surface, peering through the curtain of water that hammered into his face.

He had been lucky. When Kristof had fallen, he had snagged the rope, carrying it slightly to the side. As Alex drew himself toward the back of the boat, the propeller was horribly close. He could feel it churning the water, inches from his stomach and legs. But by turning on his side, he was just able to avoid it. There was a duckboard at the back of the boat. Alex reached it and caught hold of a stanchion at the very corner. He had used up almost all his strength. He was choking. The roar of the water was in his ears. He cried out and pulled himself up. Somehow his body came clear. He felt the wooden deck under the life jacket across his chest. He wriggled forward. He was on board!

He looked up and saw at once that he was too late. The Tigé was traveling at about forty miles per hour and the first swimmers were only yards away. Alex could see the horror in their eyes as they took in what was about to happen. They were frozen with fear. On the beach, sunbathers were rising out of their loungers, staring openmouthed, watching the disaster unfold in front of them. Someone screamed. Alex could pull back the throttle, cut the engine. But even that wouldn't help. Propelled by its own momentum, the boat would still shoot forward, its prow crashing into the swimmers before it hit the beach and stopped. People were about to die. He had no doubt of it at all.

In the last remaining seconds, Alex threw himself forward. Ignoring the unconscious driver, he grabbed hold of the wheel and wrenched it to one side. The prow swung around, missing the first of the swimmers by inches. There were people everywhere. Alex swung the wheel the other way, weaving through them. He heard more screams rising even above the roar of the outboard motor. Somehow, he managed to avoid them all. But the Tigé had reached the beach. The sand was right in front of him. The bottom of the boat was grinding against the shallows. Finally, Alex pulled back on the throttle even as the propeller came into contact with the ocean floor and shattered. He felt the whole deck shudder.

The boat had left the water. He was on dry land, sun loungers and umbrellas on one side of him, beach towels on the other, a blur of astonished faces watching him as he shot past. At the very end, he twisted the steering wheel one last time. There was narrow gulley with boulders on both sides and, straight ahead, directly underneath the Promenade des Anglais, a dark tunnel with a wire fence blocking the entrance. Some sort of storm drain. The boat was slowing down, dragging against the ground. The prow hit the wire.

The boat finally stopped.

Alex heard shouting behind him—a gabble of French voices. Quickly, he unfastened the life jacket and the harness. Someone else would look after the

unconscious driver, and he had no desire to answer questions. Before anyone could reach him, he dropped out of the boat and ran up a flight of steps leading to the main road.

He had no sooner reached the top than he saw Celestine on the other side, coming out of an ice cream shop with a cone in each hand. Alex was dripping wet. He was only wearing his swimming shorts. Fortunately, in Nice, he didn't look out of place.

Dodging the traffic, he ran over to her.

„Alex!“ She was surprised to see him. „What happened? Are you all right?“

„I'm fine.“ Alex had no intention of telling her what had happened. He looked back. He had moved so fast that nobody had seen where he had gone.

„Where's your T-shirt? And your sandals?“

„They were stolen.“

„Stolen? But that's terrible!“

„It doesn't matter. I've got more back at the house.“ Alex took one of the ice cream cones. He needed something to cool him down. „Can we go home?“ he asked.

„Of course. But how was the parasailing? Did you enjoy it?“

Alex glanced back one last time. He could hear the scream of an approaching ambulance. He could imagine the pandemonium on the beach. „Well,“ he said. „It was certainly quite a ride.“

