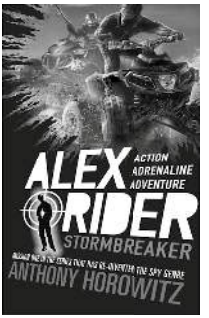
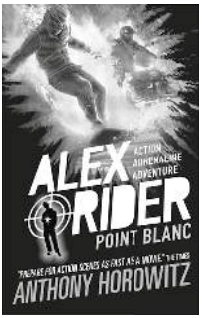
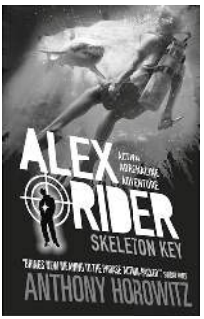


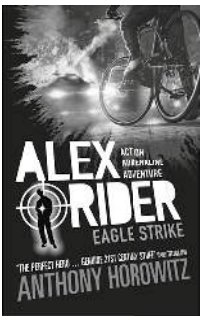
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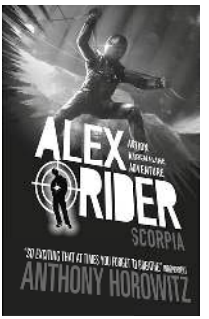
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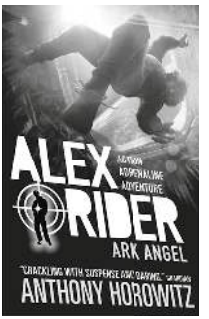


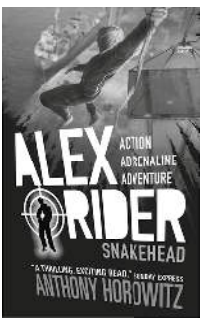


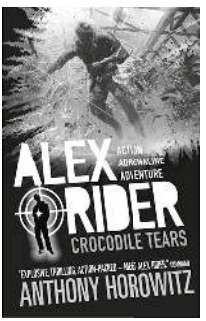


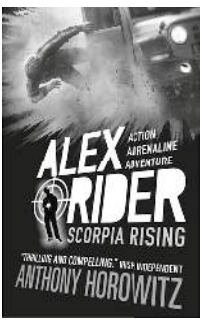


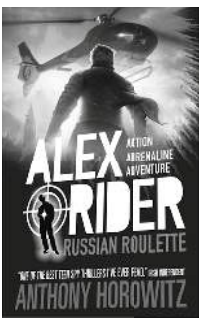


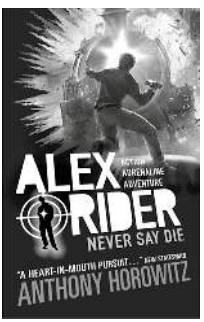


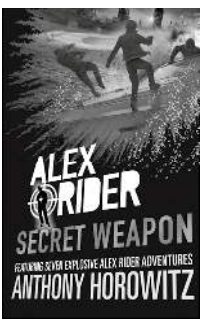


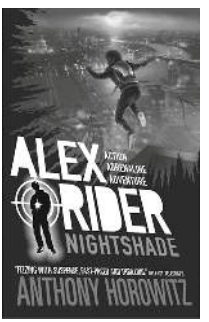


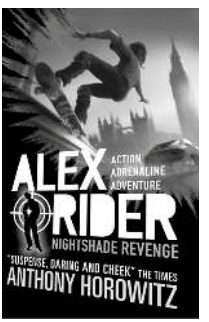












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Snakehead • Crocodile Tears
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Granny
Groosham Grange
Return to Groosham Grange
Scared to Death
The Switch

The Diamond Brothers

The Falcon's Malteser • Public Enemy Number Two
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The Blurred Man & I Know What You Did Last Wednesday
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SILVER EDITION

STORMBREAKER

ANTHONY HOROWITZ

WALKER
BOOKS

For J, N, C and L



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CONTENTS

	Introduction	9
1	Funeral Voices	17
2	Heaven for Cars	28
3	Royal & General	42
4	“So What Do You Say?”	53
5	Double O Nothing	70
6	Toys Aren’t Us	85
7	Physalia Physalis	98
8	Looking for Trouble	111
9	Night Visitors	123
10	Death in the Long Grass	139
11	Dozmary Mine	152
12	Behind the Door	170
13	The School Bully	184
14	Deep Water	195
15	Eleven O’Clock	207
16	Twelve O’Clock	215
17	Yassen	227
	Nine Ways to Die	241

INTRODUCTION

If you are new to the world of Alex Rider, welcome! It's incredible to think that it's been twenty-five years since my reluctant teenaged spy first sprang to life and began the adventure you are about to read. Since then, there have been thirteen more books, a feature film, three series on television and worldwide sales of over twenty-one million copies. You can buy Alex in Greek, in Welsh, in Russian, in Thai – and it makes me smile to think that he's been chased, tied up and shot at in all those countries and more.

If you already know the Alex Rider series, then do take a look at this new edition as you may enjoy the extra short story, "Nine Ways to Die", which takes Alex to Iceland for the first time and is included in the back.

How did Alex Rider begin?

In the year 2000, I was already a published author with twelve books to my name, and I'm proud of the

fact that pretty much all of them are still in print to this day. I had written half a dozen adventures for the Diamond brothers, an idiotic detective who is helped by his much smarter younger brother. Then there was a series called The Power of Five, which told the story of five children with supernatural powers, brought together to save the world. I wrote comedies – *Granny* and *The Switch*. And two collections of horror stories.

The truth is, though, that my career only took off after the publication of the book you are holding in your hand. In fact, I'd had the idea of writing it a very long time before I actually went ahead and started. I was watching a James Bond movie (I've always loved Bond) and I noticed that the actor playing Bond was beginning to look a bit ... well, old. I still enjoyed the film, but I found myself wondering why it wasn't possible to have a much younger spy up there on the screen. At the time, I had two sons who were both in their early teens. It was so much more fun to imagine them scuba-diving, skiing, hang-gliding, mountain climbing and dodging bullets than the actor Roger Moore, who was the fifty-seven-year-old man I was watching.

Cut forward fifteen years. A series of books had just been published about a certain boy wizard and suddenly everyone was looking for the next big

thing in young fiction. That was when I remembered that moment in the cinema. It was such a simple idea, really, but at the time there were no young spies. Was it possible, I wondered, to write a book that had as much action as a Bond movie but with a central character who would be the very opposite of Bond? A boy who didn't want to be a spy. Who wasn't exactly a patriot and certainly didn't want to die "for king and country". A quite ordinary boy in many ways but one who had been secretly trained for a life he would one day be forced to accept.

I will never forget writing the first sentence of *Stormbreaker*. "When the doorbell rings at three in the morning, it's never good news." At the time, I was living in Crouch End, North London. I had a little office that looked like a bomb shelter at the bottom of the garden – which often looked as if a bomb had hit it. I remember looking at the page with those words at the top (and an awful lot of space below), and I knew that I was about to write something very different. Not a children's book but an adult book for kids.

In the fourteen Alex Rider books I've written, I have tried to think up action sequences that would put even a Bond movie to shame. Alex is chased around an oil rig, a container ship and, in zero gravity, a space station. He goes over the edge of

a waterfall in a home-made canoe. He is sucked into a computer game and is forced to confront monsters and demons ... only these ones are for real. He comes face to face with sharks, crocodiles and – in a palace in Venice – a man-eating tiger. In one of my favourite sequences, he rides a horse off the edge of a mountain (with parachute attached).

I've loved writing the Alex Rider books. You might like to know that all the technology you'll come across in these stories is based on fact. Invisible Sword, the terrifying weapon in *Scorpia*, uses nanotechnology. *Point Blanc* looks at cloning, which will one day allow scientists to produce a one hundred per cent accurate copy of you. In *Crocodile Tears*, I look at genetic engineering, which could change the world's food supply for better or for worse (it depends who's in control). *Nightshade Revenge*, the most recent book I wrote, explores augmented reality, which is most certainly coming your way and which will change the way you learn, the way you play – even the way you see.

The one thing I hope science won't change is the way we read. There is something very magical about books that's hard to define, but what it boils down to is this: I may have written *Stormbreaker*, but, without you, it would have been a complete waste of time. This book would be sitting on some dusty

shelf or, worse still, propping up a table that had one leg too short, or even worse than that, sent off to be pulped. It is your imagination and brainpower that are going to bring Alex to life. You are going to travel with him, see what he sees, feel what he feels. Reading is often thought of as a leisure activity but in fact it's an extraordinary act of creativity. I shouldn't say this, but young people who enjoy reading are always so much more interesting than those who don't. Ask anyone. It's a simple truth.

So that's the end of the introduction but, I hope, the beginning of a story that you will enjoy and that will encourage you to keep reading.

Twenty-five years of Alex Rider. And it all started here.

Anthony Horowitz
Richmond, 2025

STORMBREAKER

FUNERAL VOICES

When the doorbell rings at three in the morning, it's never good news.

Alex Rider was woken by the first chime. His eyes flickered open but for a moment he stayed completely still in his bed, lying on his back with his head resting on the pillow. He heard a bedroom door open and a creak of wood as somebody went downstairs. The bell rang a second time and he looked at the alarm clock glowing beside him. 3.02 a.m. There was a rattle as someone slid the security chain off the front door.

He rolled out of bed and walked over to the open window, his bare feet pressing down the carpet pile. The moonlight spilled onto his chest and shoulders. Alex was fourteen, already well-built, with the body of an athlete. His hair, cut short apart from two thick strands hanging over his forehead, was fair. His eyes were brown and serious. For a moment he stood silently, half hidden in the shadow, looking

out. There was a police car parked outside. From his second-floor window Alex could see the black ID number on the roof and the caps of the two men who were standing in front of the door. The porch light went on and, at the same time, the door opened.

"Mrs Rider?"

"No. I'm the housekeeper. What is it? What's happened?"

"This is the home of Mr Ian Rider?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if we could come in..."

And Alex already knew. He knew from the way the police stood there, awkward and unhappy. But he also knew from the tone of their voices. Funeral voices ... that was how he would describe them later. The sort of voices people use when they come to tell you that someone close to you has died.

He went to his door and opened it. He could hear the two policemen talking down in the hall, but only some of the words reached him.

"...a car accident ... called the ambulance ... intensive care ... nothing anyone could do ... so sorry."

It was only hours later, sitting in the kitchen, watching as the grey light of morning bled slowly through the west London streets, that Alex could try to make sense of what had happened. His uncle

– Ian Rider – was dead. Driving home, his car had been hit by a lorry at Old Street roundabout and he had been killed almost instantly. He hadn't been wearing a seat belt, the police said. Otherwise, he might have had a chance.

Alex thought of the man who had been his only relation for as long as he could remember. He had never known his own parents. They had died in an accident, that one a plane crash, a few weeks after he had been born. He had been brought up by his father's brother (never "uncle" – Ian Rider had hated that word) and had spent most of his fourteen years in the same terraced house in Chelsea, London, between the King's Road and the river. But it was only now Alex realized just how little he knew about the man.

A banker. People said Alex looked quite like him. Ian Rider was always travelling. A quiet, private man who liked good wine, classical music and books. Who didn't seem to have any girlfriends ... in fact he didn't have any friends at all. He had kept himself fit, had never smoked and had dressed expensively. But that wasn't enough. That wasn't a picture of a life. It was only a thumbnail sketch.

"Are you all right, Alex?" A young woman had come into the room. She was in her late twenties, with a sprawl of red hair and a round, boyish face.

Jack Starbright was American. She had come to London as a student seven years ago, rented a room in the house – in return for light housework and babysitting duties – and had stayed on to become housekeeper and one of Alex's closest friends. Sometimes he wondered what the Jack was short for. Jackie? Jacqueline? Neither of them suited her and although he had once asked, she had never said.

Alex nodded. "What do you think will happen?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"To the house. To me. To you."

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I guess Ian will have made a will. He'll have left instructions."

"Maybe we should look in his office."

"Yes. But not today, Alex. Let's take it one step at a time."

Ian's office was a room running the full length of the house, high up at the top. It was the only room that was always locked – Alex had only been in there three or four times, never on his own. When he was younger, he had fantasized that there might be something strange up there; a time machine or a UFO. But it was only an office with a desk, a couple of filing cabinets, shelves full of papers and books. Bank stuff – that's what Ian said. Even so, Alex

wanted to go up there now. Because it had never been allowed.

"The police said he wasn't wearing his seat belt." Alex turned to look at Jack.

She nodded. "Yes. That's what they said."

"Doesn't that seem strange to you? You know how careful he was. He always wore his seat belt. He wouldn't even drive me round the corner without making me put mine on."

Jack thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, it's strange," she said. "But that must have been the way it was. Why would the police have lied?"

The day dragged on. Alex hadn't gone to school even though, secretly, he had wanted to. He would have preferred to escape back into normal life – the clang of the bell, the crowds of familiar faces – instead of sitting there, trapped inside the house. But he had to be there for the visitors who came throughout the morning and the rest of the afternoon.

There were five of them. A solicitor who knew nothing about a will, but seemed to have been charged with organizing the funeral. A funeral director who had been recommended by the solicitor. A vicar – tall, elderly – who seemed disappointed that Alex didn't look more upset.

A neighbour from across the road – how did she even know that anyone had died? And finally a man from the bank.

"All of us at the Royal & General are deeply shocked," he said. He was in his thirties, wearing a polyester suit with a Marks & Spencer tie. He had the sort of face you forgot even while you were looking at it, and had introduced himself as Crawley, from Personnel. "But if there's anything we can do..."

"What will happen?" Alex asked for the second time that day.

"You don't have to worry," Crawley said. "The bank will take care of everything. That's my job. You leave everything to me."

The day passed. Alex killed a couple of hours in the evening playing his Playstation – and then felt vaguely guilty when Jack caught him at it. But what else was he to do? Later on she took him to a Burger King. He was glad to get out of the house, but the two of them barely spoke. Alex assumed Jack would have to go back to America. She certainly couldn't stay in London for ever. So who would look after him? By law, he was still too young to look after himself. His whole future looked so uncertain that he preferred not to talk about it. He preferred not to talk at all.

And then the day of the funeral arrived and Alex found himself dressed in a dark jacket, preparing to leave in a black car that had come from nowhere, surrounded by people he had never met. Ian Rider was buried in the Brompton Cemetery on the Fulham Road, just in the shadow of Chelsea football ground, and Alex knew where he would have preferred to be on that Wednesday afternoon. About thirty people had turned up but he hardly recognized any of them. A grave had been dug close to the lane that ran the length of the cemetery and as the service began, a black Rolls-Royce drew up, the back door opened and a man got out. Alex watched him as he walked forward and stopped. Overhead, a plane coming in to land at Heathrow momentarily blotted out the sun. Alex shivered. There was something about the new arrival that made his skin crawl.

And yet the man was ordinary to look at. Grey suit, grey hair, grey lips and grey eyes. His face was expressionless, the eyes behind the square, gunmetal spectacles completely empty. Perhaps that was what disturbed Alex. Whoever this man was, he seemed to have less life than anyone in the cemetery. Above or below ground.

Someone tapped Alex on the shoulder and he turned round to see Mr Crawley leaning over

him. "That's Mr Blunt," the personnel manager whispered. "He's the chairman of the bank."

Alex's eyes travelled past Blunt and over to the Rolls-Royce. Two more men had come with him, one of them the driver. They were wearing identical suits and, although it wasn't a particularly bright day, sunglasses. Both of them were watching the funeral with the same grim faces. Alex looked from them to Blunt and then to the other people who had come to the cemetery. Had they really known Ian Rider? Why had he never met any of them before? And why did he find it so difficult to believe that any of them really worked for a bank?

"...a good man, a patriotic man. He will be missed."

The vicar had finished his grave-side address. His choice of words struck Alex as odd. Patriotic? That meant he loved his country. But as far as Alex knew, Ian Rider had barely spent any time in it. Certainly he had never been one for waving the Union Jack. He looked round, hoping to find Jack, but saw instead that Blunt was making his way towards him, stepping carefully round the grave.

"You must be Alex." The chairman was only a little taller than him. Close to, his skin was strangely unreal. It could have been made of plastic. "My name is Alan Blunt," he said. "Your uncle often spoke about you."

"That's funny," Alex said. "He never mentioned you."

The grey lips twitched briefly. "We'll miss him. He was a good man."

"What was he good at?" Alex asked. "He never talked about his work."

Suddenly Crawley was there. "Your uncle was Overseas Finance Manager, Alex," he said. "He was responsible for our foreign branches. You must have known that."

"I know he travelled a lot," Alex said. "And I know he was very careful. About things like seat belts."

"Well, sadly he wasn't careful enough." Blunt's eyes, magnified by the thick lenses of his spectacles, lasered into his own and for a moment Alex felt himself pinned down, like an insect under a microscope. "I hope we'll meet again," Blunt went on. He tapped the side of his face with a single grey finger. "Yes..." Then he turned and went back to his car.

It was as he was getting into the Rolls-Royce that it happened. The driver leaned across to open the back door and his jacket fell open, revealing the shirt underneath. And not just the shirt. The man was wearing a leather holster with an automatic pistol strapped inside. Alex saw it even as the man, realizing what had happened, quickly straightened

up and pulled the jacket across his chest. Blunt had seen it too. He turned back and looked again at Alex. Something very close to an emotion slithered over his face. Then he got into the car, the door closed and he was gone.

A gun at a funeral. Why? Why would bank managers carry guns?

"Let's get out of here." Suddenly Jack was at his side. "Cemeteries give me the creeps."

"Yes. And quite a few creeps have turned up," Alex muttered.

They slipped away quietly and went home. The car that had taken them to the funeral was still waiting, but they preferred the open air. The walk took them fifteen minutes. As they turned the corner into their street, Alex noticed a removals van parked in front of the house, the words STRYKER & SON painted on its side.

"What's that doing...?" he began.

At the same moment, the van shot off, its wheels skidding over the surface of the road.

Alex said nothing as Jack unlocked the door and let them in, but while she went into the kitchen to make some tea, he looked quickly round the house. A letter that had been on the hall table now lay on the carpet. A door that had been half open was now closed. Tiny details, but Alex's eyes missed nothing.

Somebody had been in the house. He was almost sure of it.

But he wasn't certain until he got to the top floor. The door to the office which had always, always been locked, was unlocked now. Alex opened it and went in. The room was empty. Ian Rider had gone and so had everything else. The desk drawers, the cupboards, the shelves ... anything that might have told him about the dead man's work had been taken.

"Alex...!" Jack was calling to him from downstairs.

Alex took one last look around the forbidden room, wondering again about the man who had once worked there. Then he closed the door and went back down.

HEAVEN FOR CARS

With Hammersmith Bridge just ahead of him, Alex left the river and swung his bike through the lights and down the hill towards Brookland School. The bike was a Condor Junior Roadracer, custom-built for him on his twelfth birthday. It was a teenager's bike with a cut-down Reynolds 531 frame, but the wheels were full-sized so he could ride at speed with hardly any rolling resistance. He spun past a Mini and cut through the school gates. He would be sorry when he grew out of the bike. For two years now it had almost been part of him.

He double-locked it in the shed and went into the yard. Brookland was a new comprehensive, red brick and glass, modern and ugly. Alex could have gone to any of the smart private schools around Chelsea, but Ian Rider had decided to send him here. He had said it would be more of a challenge.

The first lesson of the day was maths. When Alex came into the classroom, the teacher, Mr Donovan,

was already scribbling on the whiteboard, setting out a complicated equation. It was hot in the room, the sunlight streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows put in by architects who should have known better. As Alex took his place near the back, he wondered how he was going to get through the lesson. How could he possibly think about algebra when there were so many other questions churning through his mind?

The gun at the funeral. The way Blunt had looked at him. The van with STRYKER & SON written on the side. The empty office. And the biggest question of all, the one detail that refused to go away. The seat belt. Ian Rider hadn't been wearing a seat belt.

But of course he had.

Ian Rider had never been one to give lectures. He had always said Alex should make up his own mind about things. But he'd had this thing about seat-belts. The more Alex thought about it, the less he believed it. A collision at a roundabout. Suddenly he wished he could see the car. At least the wreckage would tell him that the accident had really happened, that Ian Rider really had died that way.

"Alex?"

Alex looked up and realized that everyone was staring at him. Mr Donovan had just asked him something. He quickly scanned the whiteboard,

taking in the figures. "Yes, sir," he said, "x equals seven and y is fifteen."

The maths teacher sighed. "Yes, Alex. You're absolutely right. But actually I was just asking you to open the window."

Somehow he managed to get through the rest of the day, but by the time the final bell rang, his mind was made up. While everyone else streamed out, he made his way to the secretary's office and borrowed a local directory.

"What are you looking for?" the secretary asked. Jane Bedfordshire was a young woman in her twenties, and she'd always had a soft spot for Alex.

"Breakers' yards..." Alex flicked through the pages. "If a car got smashed up near Old Street, they'd take it somewhere near by, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose so."

"Here..." Alex had found the yards listed under "Car Dismantlers". But there were dozens of them fighting for attention over four pages.

"Is this for a school project?" the secretary asked. She knew Alex had lost a relative, but not how.

"Sort of..." Alex was reading the addresses, but they told him nothing.

"This one's quite near Old Street." Miss Bedfordshire pointed at the corner of the page.

"Wait!" Alex tugged the book towards him

and looked at the entry underneath the one the secretary had chosen:



"That's in Vauxhall," Miss Bedfordshire said. "Not too far from here."

"I know." But Alex had recognized the name. J.B. Stryker. He thought back to the van he had seen outside his house on the day of the funeral. STRYKER & SON. Of course it might just be a coincidence, but it was still somewhere to start. He closed the book. "I'll see you, Miss Bedfordshire."

"Be careful how you go." The secretary watched Alex leave, wondering why she had said that. Maybe it was his eyes. Dark and serious, there was something dangerous there. Then the phone rang and she forgot him as she went back to work.

J.B. Stryker's was a square of wasteland behind the railway tracks running out of Waterloo Station. The area was enclosed by a high brick wall topped with broken glass and razor wire. Two wooden gates hung open, and from the other side of the road Alex could

see a shed with a security window and beyond it the tottering piles of dead and broken cars. Everything of any value had been stripped away and only the rusting carcasses remained, heaped one on top of the other, waiting to be fed into the crusher.

There was a guard sitting in the shed, reading the *Sun*. In the distance, a crane coughed into life, then roared down on a battered Ford Mondeo, its metal claw smashing through the window to scoop up the vehicle and carry it away. A phone rang somewhere in the shed and the guard turned round to answer it. That was enough for Alex. Holding his bike and wheeling it along beside him, he sprinted through the gates.

He found himself surrounded by dirt and debris. The smell of diesel was thick in the air and the roar of the engines was deafening. Alex watched as the crane swooped down on another of the cars, seized it in a metallic grip and dropped it into a crusher. For a moment the car rested on a pair of shelves. Then the shelves lifted up, toppling the car over and down into a trough. The operator – sitting in a glass cabin at one end of the crusher – pressed a button and there was a great belch of black smoke. The shelves closed in on the car like a monster insect folding in its wings. There was a grinding sound as the car was crushed until it was no bigger than

a rolled-up carpet. Then the operator threw a gear and the car was squeezed out, metallic toothpaste being chopped up by a hidden blade. The slices tumbled onto the ground.

Leaving his bike propped against the wall, Alex ran further into the yard, crouching down behind the wrecks. With the din from the machines, there was no chance that anyone would hear him, but he was still afraid of being seen. He stopped to catch his breath, drawing a grimy hand across his face. His eyes were watering from the diesel fumes. The air was as filthy as the ground beneath him.

He was beginning to regret coming – but then he saw it. His uncle's BMW was parked a few metres away, separated from the other cars. At first glance it looked absolutely fine, the metallic silver bodywork not even scratched. Certainly there was no way this car could have been involved in a fatal collision with a lorry or anything else. But it was his uncle's car. Alex recognized the number plate. He hurried closer, and it was then he saw that the car was damaged after all. The windscreen had been smashed, along with all the windows on one side. Alex made his way round the bonnet. He reached the other side. And froze.

Ian Rider hadn't died in any accident. What had killed him was plain to see – even to someone

who had never seen such a thing before. A spray of bullets had caught the car full on the driver's side, shattering the front tyre, then smashing the windscreen and side windows and punching into the side panels. Alex ran his fingers over the holes. The metal felt cold against his flesh. He opened the door and looked inside. The front seats, pale grey leather, were strewn with fragments of broken glass and stained with patches of dark brown. He didn't need to ask what the stains were. He could see everything. The flash of the machine gun, the bullets ripping into the car, Ian Rider jerking in the driver's seat...

But why? Why kill a bank manager? And why had the murder been covered up? It was the police who had brought the news, so they must be part of it. Had they deliberately lied? None of it made sense.

"You should have got rid of it two days ago. Do it now."

The machines must have stopped for a moment. If there hadn't been a sudden lull, Alex would never have heard the men coming. Quickly he looked across the steering wheel and out the other side. There were two of them, both dressed in loose-fitting overalls. Alex had a feeling he'd seen them before. At the funeral. One of them was the driver, the man he had seen with the gun. He was sure of it.

Whoever they were, they were only a few paces away from the car, talking in low voices. Another few steps and they would be there. Without thinking, Alex threw himself into the only hiding place available, inside the car itself. Using his foot, he hooked the door and closed it. At the same time, he became aware that the machines had started again and he could no longer hear the men. He didn't dare look up. A shadow fell across the window as the two men passed. But then they were gone. He was safe.

And then something hit the BMW with such force that Alex cried out, his whole body caught in a massive shock wave that tore him away from the steering wheel and threw him helplessly into the back. At the same time, the roof buckled and three huge metal fingers tore through the skin of the car like a fork through an eggshell, trailing dust and sunlight. One of the fingers grazed the side of his head – any closer and it would have cracked his skull. Alex yelled as blood trickled over his eye. He tried to move, then was jerked back a second time as the car was yanked off the ground and tilted high up in the air.

He couldn't see. He couldn't move. But his stomach lurched as the car swung in an arc, the metal grinding and the light spinning. It had been

picked up by the crane. It was going to be put inside the crusher. With him inside.

He tried to raise himself up, to punch through the windows. But the claw of the crane had already flattened the roof, pinning his left leg, perhaps even breaking it. He could feel nothing. He lifted a hand and managed to pound on the back window, but he couldn't break the glass, and even if the workmen were staring at the BMW, they would never see anything moving inside.

His short flight across the breaker's yard ended with a bone-shattering crash as the crane deposited the car on the iron shelves of the crusher. Alex tried to fight back his sickness and despair and think of what to do. He had seen a car being processed only a few minutes before. Any moment now, the operator would send the car tipping into the coffin-shaped trough. The machine was a Lefort Shear, a slow-motion guillotine. At the press of a button, the two wings would close on the car with a joint pressure of five hundred tonnes. The car, with Alex inside it, would be crushed beyond recognition. And the broken metal – and flesh – would then be chopped into sections. Nobody would ever know what had happened.

He tried with all his strength to free himself. But the roof was too low. His leg and part of his back

were trapped. Then his whole world tilted and he felt himself falling into darkness. The shelves had lifted. The BMW slid to one side and fell the few metres into the trough. Alex felt the metalwork collapsing all around him. The back window exploded and glass showered around his head, dust and diesel fumes punching into his nose and eyes. There was hardly any daylight now, but looking out of the back he could see the huge steel head of the piston that would push what was left of the car through the exit hole on the other side.

The engine tone of the Lefort Shear changed as it prepared for the final act. The metal wings shuddered. In a few seconds' time, the two of them would meet, crumpling the BMW like a paper bag.

Alex pulled with all his strength and was astonished when his leg came free. It took him perhaps a second – one precious second – to work out what had happened. When the car had fallen into the trough, it had landed on its side. The roof had buckled again ... enough to free him. His hand scrabbled for the door – but of course that was useless. The doors were too bent. They would never open. The back window! With the glass gone, he could crawl through the frame, but only if he moved fast...

The wings began to move. The BMW screamed as

two walls of solid steel relentlessly crushed it. Glass shattered. One of the wheel axles snapped with the sound of a thunderbolt. The darkness closed in. Alex grabbed hold of what was left of the back seat. Ahead of him he could see a single triangle of light, shrinking faster and faster. With all his strength, he surged forward, finding some sort of purchase on the gear column. He could feel the weight of the two walls pressing down on him. Behind him the car was no longer a car, but the fist of some hideous monster snatching at the insect that he had become.

His shoulders passed through the triangle, out into the light. But his legs were still inside. If his foot snagged on something he would be squeezed into two pieces. Alex yelled out loud and jerked his knee forward. His legs came clear, then his feet, but at the last moment his shoe caught on the closing triangle and disappeared back into the car. Alex imagined he heard the sound of the leather being squashed, but that was impossible. Clinging to the black, oily surface of the observation platform at the back of the crusher, he dragged himself clear and managed to stand up.

He found himself face to face with a man so fat that he could barely fit into the small cabin of the crusher. The man's stomach was pressed against the glass, his shoulders squeezed into the corners.

A cigarette dangled on his lower lip as his mouth fell open and his eyes stared. In front of him was a boy in the rags of what had once been a school uniform. A whole sleeve had been torn off and his arm, streaked with blood and oil, hung limply by his side. By the time the operator had taken all this in, come to his senses and turned the machine off, Alex had gone.

He clambered down the side of the crusher, landing on the one foot that still had a shoe. He was aware now of pieces of jagged metal lying everywhere. If he wasn't careful, he would cut the other foot open. His bicycle was where he had left it, leaning against the wall, and gingerly, half hopping, he made for it. Behind him he heard the cabin of the crusher open and a man's voice call out, raising the alarm. At the same time, a second man ran forward, stopping between Alex and his bike. It was the driver, the man he had seen at the funeral. His face, twisted into a hostile frown, was curiously ugly; greasy hair, watery eyes, pale, lifeless skin.

"What do you think...!" he began. His hand slid into his jacket. Alex remembered the gun and instantly, without even thinking, swung into action.

He had started learning karate when he was six years old. One afternoon, with no explanation, Ian Rider had taken him to a local club for his first

lesson and he had been going there, once a week, ever since. Over the years he had passed through the various *Kyu* – student – grades. But it was only the year before that he had become a first grade *Dan*, a black belt. When he had arrived at Brookland School, his looks and accent had quickly brought him to the attention of the school bullies: three hulking sixteen-year-olds. They had cornered him once behind the bike shed. The encounter had lasted less than a minute, and after it one of the bullies had left Brookland and the other two had never troubled anyone again.

Now Alex brought up one leg, twisted his body round and lashed out. The back kick – *Ushiro-geri* – is said to be the most lethal in karate. His foot powered into the man's abdomen with such force that he didn't even have time to cry out. His eyes bulged and his mouth half opened in surprise. Then, with his hand still halfway into his jacket, he crumpled to the ground.

Alex jumped over him, snatched up his bike and swung himself onto it. In the distance, a third man was running towards him. He heard the single word "Stop!" called out. Then there was a crack and a bullet whipped past. Alex gripped the handlebars and pedalled as hard as he could. The bike shot forward, over the rubble and out through the gates.

He took one look over his shoulder. Nobody had followed him.

With one shoe on and one shoe off, his clothes in rags and his body streaked with blood and oil, Alex knew he must look a strange sight. But then he thought back to his last seconds inside the crusher and sighed with relief. He could have been looking a lot worse.

ROYAL & GENERAL

The bank rang the following day.

"This is John Crawley. Do you remember me? Personnel Manager at the Royal & General. We were wondering if you could come in."

"Come in?" Alex was half dressed, already late for school.

"This afternoon. We found some papers of your uncle's. We need to talk to you ... about your own position."

Was there something faintly threatening in the man's voice? "What time this afternoon?" Alex asked.

"Could you manage half past four? We're on Liverpool Street. We can send a cab—"

"I'll be there," Alex said. "And I'll take the tube."

He hung up.

"Who was that?" Jack called out from the kitchen. She was cooking breakfast for the two of them, although how long she could remain with Alex was

a growing worry. Her wages hadn't been paid. She had only her own money to buy food and pay for the running of the house. Worse still, her visa was about to expire. Soon she wouldn't even be allowed to stay in the country.

"That was the bank." Alex came into the room, wearing his spare uniform. He hadn't told her what had happened at the breaker's yard. He hadn't even told her about the empty office. Jack had enough on her mind. "I'm going there this afternoon," he said.

"Do you want me to come?"

"No. I'll be fine."

He came out of Liverpool Street tube station just after four-fifteen that afternoon, still wearing his school uniform: dark blue jacket, grey trousers, striped tie. He found the bank easily enough. The Royal & General occupied a tall, antique-looking building with a Union Jack fluttering from a pole about fifteen floors up. There was a brass name-plate next to the main door and a security camera swivelling slowly over the pavement.

Alex stopped in front of it. For a moment he wondered if he was making a mistake going in. If the bank had been responsible in some way for Ian Rider's death, maybe they had asked him here to arrange his own. No. The bank wouldn't kill him. He didn't even have an account there. He went in.

In an office on the seventeenth floor, the image on the security monitor flickered and changed as Street Camera #1 smoothly cut across to Reception Cameras #2 and #3 and Alex passed from the brightness outside to the cool shadows of the interior. A man sitting behind a desk reached out and pressed a button and the camera zoomed in until Alex's face filled the screen.

"So he came," the chairman of the bank muttered.

"That's the boy?" The speaker was a middle-aged woman. She had a strange, potato-shaped head and her black hair looked as if it had been cut using a pair of blunt scissors and an upturned bowl. Her eyes were almost black too. She was dressed in a severe grey suit and she was sucking a peppermint. "Are you sure about this, Alan?" she asked.

Alan Blunt nodded. "Oh yes. Quite sure. You know what to do?"

This last question was addressed to his driver, who was standing uncomfortably, slightly hunched over. His face was a chalky white. He had been like that ever since he had tried to stop Alex in the breaker's yard. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Then do it," Blunt said. His eyes never left the screen.

In Reception, Alex had asked for John Crawley and was sitting on a leather sofa, vaguely

wondering why so few people were going in or out. The reception area was wide and airy, with a brown marble floor, three elevators to one side and, above the desk, a row of clocks showing the time in every major world city. But it could have been the entrance to anywhere. A hospital. A concert hall. Even a cruise liner. The place had no identity of its own.

One of the lifts pinged open and Crawley appeared in his usual suit, but with a different tie. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Alex," he said. "Have you come straight from school?"

Alex stood up but said nothing, allowing his uniform to answer the man's question.

"Let's go up to my office," Crawley said. He gestured. "We'll take the lift."

Alex didn't notice the fourth camera inside the lift, but then it was concealed on the other side of the two-way mirror that covered the back wall. Nor did he see the thermal intensifier next to the camera. But this second machine both looked at him and through him as he stood there, turning him into a pulsating mass of different colours, none of which translated into the cold steel of a hidden gun or knife. In less than the time it took Alex to blink, the machine had passed its information down to a computer which had instantly evaluated

it and then sent its own signal back to the circuits that controlled the elevator. *It's OK. He's unarmed. Continue to the fifteenth floor.*

"Here we are!" Crawley smiled and ushered Alex out into a long corridor with an uncarpeted, wooden floor and modern lighting. A series of doors was punctuated by framed paintings, brightly coloured abstracts. "My office is just along here." Crawley pointed the way.

They had passed three doors when Alex stopped. Each door had a nameplate and this one he recognized – 1504: Ian Rider. White letters on black plastic.

Crawley nodded sadly. "Yes. This was where your uncle worked. He'll be much missed."

"Can I go inside?" Alex asked.

Crawley seemed surprised. "Why do you want to do that?"

"I'd be interested to see where he worked."

"I'm sorry." Crawley sighed. "The door will have been locked and I don't have the key. Another time perhaps." He gestured again. He used his hands like a magician, as if he was about to produce a fan of cards. "I have the office next door. Just here."

They went into 1505. It was a large, square room with three windows looking out over the station. There was a flutter of red and blue outside and Alex

remembered the flag he had seen. The flagpole was right next to Crawley's office. Inside there was a desk and chair, a couple of sofas, in the corner a fridge, on the wall a couple of prints. A boring executive office. Perfect for a boring executive.

"Please, Alex. Sit down," Crawley said. He went over to the fridge. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Do you have Coke?"

"Yes." Crawley opened a can and filled a glass, then handed it to Alex. "Ice?"

"No thanks." Alex took a sip. It wasn't Coke. It wasn't even Pepsi. He recognized the over-sweet, slightly cloying taste of supermarket cola and wished he'd asked for water. "So what do you want to talk to me about?"

"Your uncle's will—"

The telephone rang and with another hand-sign, this one for "excuse me", Crawley answered it. He spoke for a few moments then hung up again. "I'm very sorry, Alex. I have to go back down to Reception. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead." Alex settled himself on the sofa.

"I'll be about five minutes." With a final nod of apology, Crawley left.

Alex waited a few seconds. Then he poured the cola into a potted plant and stood up. He went over to the door and back into the corridor. At the far

end, a woman carrying a pile of papers appeared and then disappeared through a door. There was no sign of Crawley. Quickly, Alex moved back to the door of 1504 and tried the handle. But Crawley had been telling the truth. It was locked.

Alex went back into Crawley's office. He would have given anything to spend a few minutes alone in Ian Rider's office. Somebody thought the dead man's work was important enough to keep hidden from him. They had broken into his house and cleaned out everything they'd found in the office there. Perhaps the next-door room might tell him why. What exactly had Ian Rider been involved in? And was it the reason why he had been killed?

The flag fluttered again and, seeing it, Alex went over to the window. The pole jutted out of the building exactly halfway between rooms 1504 and 1505. If he could somehow reach it, he should be able to jump onto the ledge that ran along the side of the building outside room 1504. Of course, he was fifteen floors up. If he jumped and missed there would be about seventy metres to fall. It was a stupid idea. It wasn't even worth thinking about.

Alex opened the window and climbed out. It was better not to think about it at all. He would just do it. After all, if this had been the ground floor, or

a climbing frame in the schoolyard, it would have been child's play. It was only the sheer brick wall stretching down to the pavement, the cars and buses moving like toys so far below and the blast of the wind against his face that made it terrifying. Don't think about it. Do it.

Alex lowered himself onto the ledge outside Crawley's office. His hands were behind him, clutching on to the window sill. He took a deep breath. And jumped.

A camera located in an office across the road caught Alex as he launched himself into space. Two floors above, Alan Blunt was still sitting in front of the screen. He chuckled. It was a humourless sound. "I told you," he said. "The boy's extraordinary."

"The boy's quite mad," the woman retorted.

"Well, maybe that's what we need."

"You're just going to sit here and watch him kill himself?"

"I'm going to sit here and hope he survives."

Alex had miscalculated the jump. He had missed the flagpole by a centimetre and would have plunged down to the pavement if his hands hadn't caught hold of the Union Jack itself. He was hanging now with his feet in mid-air. Slowly, with huge effort, he pulled himself up, his fingers hooking into the material. Somehow he managed to climb

back up onto the pole. He still didn't look down. He just hoped that no passer-by would look up.

It was easier after that. He squatted on the pole, then threw himself across to the ledge outside Ian Rider's office. He had to be careful. Too far to the left and he would crash into the side of the building, but too far the other way and he would fall. In fact he landed perfectly, grabbing hold of the ledge with both hands and then pulling himself up until he was level with the window. It was only then that he wondered if the window would be locked. If so, he'd just have to go back.

It wasn't. Alex slid the window open and hoisted himself into the second office, which was in many ways a carbon copy of the first. It had the same furniture, the same carpet, even a similar print on the wall. He went over to the desk and sat down. The first thing he saw was a photograph of himself, taken the summer before on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, where he had gone diving. There was a second picture tucked into the corner of the frame. Alex aged five or six. He was surprised by the photographs. He had never thought of Ian Rider as a sentimental man.

Alex glanced at his watch. About three minutes had passed since Crawley had left the office, and he had said he would be back in five. If he was going

to find anything here, he had to find it quickly. He pulled open a drawer of the desk. It contained five or six thick files. Alex took them and opened them. He saw at once that they had nothing to do with banking.

The first was marked: NERVE POISONS – NEW METHODS OF CONCEALMENT AND DISSEMINATION. Alex put it aside and looked at the second. ASSASSINATIONS – FOUR CASE STUDIES. Growing ever more puzzled, he quickly flicked through the rest of the files, which covered counter-terrorism, the movement of uranium across Europe and interrogation techniques. The last file was simply labelled: STORMBREAKER.

Alex was about to read it when the door suddenly opened and two men walked in. One of them was Crawley. The other was the driver from the breaker's yard. Alex knew there was no point trying to explain what he was doing. He was sitting behind the desk with the Stormbreaker file open in his hands. But at the same time he realized that the two men weren't surprised to see him there. From the way they had come into the room, they had expected to find him.

"This isn't a bank," Alex said. "Who are you? Was my uncle working for you? Did you kill him?"

"So many questions," Crawley muttered. "But I'm afraid we're not authorized to give you the answers."

The other man lifted his hand and Alex saw that he was holding a gun. He stood up behind the desk, holding the file as if to protect himself. "No—" he began.

The man fired. There was no explosion. The gun spat at Alex and he felt something slam into his heart. His hand opened and the file tumbled to the ground. Then his legs buckled, the room twisted and he fell back into nothing.

"SO WHAT DO YOU SAY?"

Alex opened his eyes. So he was still alive! That was a nice surprise.

He was lying on a bed in a large, comfortable room. The bed was modern but the room was old, with beams running across the ceiling, a stone fireplace and narrow windows in ornate wooden frames. He had seen rooms like this in books when he was studying Shakespeare. He would have said the building was Elizabethan. It had to be somewhere in the country. There was no sound of traffic. Outside he could see trees.

Someone had undressed him. His school uniform was gone. Instead he was wearing loose pyjamas, silk from the feel of them. From the light outside he would have guessed it was early evening. He found his watch lying on the table beside the bed and he reached out for it. The time was twelve o'clock. It had been half past four when he was shot with what must have been

a drugged dart. He had lost a whole night and half a day.

There was a bathroom leading off the bedroom; bright white tiles and a huge shower behind a cylinder of glass and chrome. Alex stripped off the pyjamas and stood for five minutes under a jet of steaming water. He felt better after that.

He went back into the bedroom and opened the cupboard. Someone had been to his house in Chelsea. All his clothes were here, neatly hung up. He wondered what Crawley had told Jack. Presumably he would have made up some story to explain his sudden disappearance. He took out a pair of Gap combat trousers, a Nike sweatshirt and trainers, got dressed, then sat on the bed and waited.

About fifteen minutes later there was a knock and the door opened. A young Asian woman in a nurse's uniform came in, beaming.

"Oh, you're awake. And dressed. How are you feeling? Not too groggy, I hope. Please come this way. Mr Blunt is expecting you for lunch."

Alex hadn't spoken a word to her. He followed her out of the room, along a corridor and down a flight of stairs. The house was indeed Elizabethan, with wooden panels along the corridors, ornate chandeliers and oil paintings of old, bearded men

in tunics and ruffs. The stairs led down into a tall, galleried room with a rug spread out over flagstones and a fireplace big enough to park a car in. A long, polished wooden table had been laid for three. Alan Blunt and a dark-haired, rather masculine woman unwrapping a sweet were already sitting down. Mrs Blunt?

"Alex." Blunt smiled briefly, as if it was something he didn't enjoy doing. "It's good of you to join us."

Alex sat down. "You didn't give me a lot of choice."

"Yes. I don't quite know what Crawley was thinking of, shooting you like that, but I suppose it was the easiest way. May I introduce my colleague, Mrs Jones."

The woman nodded at Alex. Her eyes seemed to examine him minutely, but she said nothing.

"Who are you?" Alex asked. "What do you want with me?"

"I'm sure you have a great many questions. But first, let's eat." Blunt must have pressed a hidden button, or else he was being overheard, for at that precise moment a door opened and a waiter – in white jacket and black trousers – appeared carrying three plates. "I hope you eat meat," Blunt continued. "Today it's *carré d'agneau*."

"You mean, roast lamb."

"The chef is French."

Alex waited until the food had been served. Blunt and Mrs Jones drank red wine. He stuck to water. Finally, Blunt began.

"As I'm sure you've gathered," he said, "the Royal & General is not a bank. In fact it doesn't exist ... it's nothing more than a cover. And it follows, of course, that your uncle had nothing to do with banking. He worked for me. My name, as I told you at the funeral, is Blunt. I am Chief Executive of the Special Operations Division of MI6. And your uncle was, for want of a better word, a spy."

Alex couldn't help smiling. "You mean ... like James Bond?"

"Similar, although we don't go in for numbers. Double O and all the rest of it. He was a field agent, highly trained and very courageous. He successfully completed assignments in Iran, Washington, Hong Kong and Cairo – to name but a few. I imagine this must come as a bit of a shock to you."

Alex thought about the dead man, what he had known of him. His privacy. His long absences abroad. And the times he had come home injured. A bandaged arm one time. A bruised face another. Little accidents, Alex had been told. But now it all made sense. "I'm not shocked," he said.

Blunt cut a neat slice of meat. "Ian Rider's

luck ran out on his last mission," he went on. "He had been working undercover here in England, in Cornwall, and was driving back to London to make a report when he was killed. You saw his car at the yard."

"Stryker & Son," Alex muttered. "Who are they?"

"Just people we use. We have budget restraints. We have to contract some of our work out. Mrs Jones here is our Head of Special Operations. She gave your uncle his last assignment."

"We're very sorry to have lost him, Alex." The woman spoke for the first time. She didn't sound very sorry at all.

"Do you know who killed him?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"No. Not now."

"Why not?"

"Because you don't need to know. Not at this stage."

"All right." Alex put down his knife and fork. He hadn't actually eaten anything. "My uncle was a spy. Thanks to you he's dead. I found out too much, so you knocked me out and brought me here. Where am I, by the way?"

"This is one of our training centres," Mrs Jones said.