

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 on to 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 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 baby-sitting 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 Nintendo 64 – 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.