



VICIOUS
CIRCLE



LOVE. LOSS. REVENGE.

WILBUR
SMITH

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VICIOUS
CIRCLE

MACMILLAN

This book is for my wife

MOKHINISO

*who is the best thing
that has ever happened to me*



HE CAME FULLY AWAKE before he moved or opened his eyes. He lay for a second assessing his situation, checking for danger, his warrior instincts taking control. Then he smelled her delicate perfume and heard her breathing as softly and regularly as the dying surf running up a distant beach. All was well, and he smiled and opened his eyes. Gently he rolled his head so as not to awaken her.

The early sun had found a chink in the curtains and through it had laid a sliver of beaten gold across the ceiling. It cast an intriguing light on her face and form. She lay on her back. Her face was in repose and it was lovely. She had kicked off the sheet and she was naked. The golden curls covering her mons Veneris were a shade darker than the splendid tangle of the locks that had fallen over her face. Now, so far along in her pregnancy, her bosoms were swollen to almost twice their normal size. He let his gaze drift down to her belly. The skin was stretched tight and glossy by the precious cargo it contained. As he stared at it he saw the small movement as the child stirred within her womb and his breathing was stifled for an instant by the weight and strength of his love for them both, his woman and his child.

‘Stop staring at my big fat belly and give me a kiss,’ she said without opening her eyes. He chuckled and leaned over her. She reached up with both arms around his neck and as her lips parted he smelled her sweet breath. After a while she whispered into his open mouth, ‘Can’t you keep this monster of yours on a leash?’ She reached down with one hand to his groin. ‘Even he must know that at the moment there is no room at the inn.’

‘Colour him brainless,’ he said. ‘But you have never been any great help in keeping him under control. Unhand me, you brazen wench!’

‘Just wait a few weeks and I will show you the true meaning of the word brazen, Hector Cross,’ she warned him. ‘Now ring down to the kitchen for coffee.’

While they waited for the coffee to be delivered he left the bed and drew back the curtains, letting the sunlight burst into the room.

‘The swans are in the Mill Pool,’ he called to her. She struggled upright using both hands to cradle her belly. He came back to her immediately and helped her to her feet. She picked up her blue satin bed robe from the chair and slipped into it as they crossed to the picture window.

‘I feel so ungainly!’ she complained as she tied the belt. He stood behind her and with both hands reached around and gently cradled her belly.

‘Somebody is kicking again,’ Hector whispered into her ear and then took the lobe between his teeth and nibbled it lightly.

‘Don’t tell me. I feel like a ruddy football.’ She reached back over her shoulder and lightly slapped his cheek. ‘Don’t do that. You know it gives me goose bumps all over.’

They looked down at the swans in silence. The cob and the pen were a dazzling white in the early sunlight, but the three cygnets were a grubby grey. The cob dipped his long sinuous neck into the green waters and reached down to feed on the aquatic plants at the bottom of the pool.

‘Beautiful, aren’t they?’ he asked at last.

‘They are just one of the many reasons I love England,’ Hazel whispered. ‘What a perfect scene. We should have a good artist paint it.’

The river spilled into the pool over a stone weir and the waters were limpid. They could look down

ten feet and see the shadows of the big trout lying on the gravel bottom. Willows lined the banks and brushed the surface with their trailing fingers. The meadow beyond was a luscious green and the sheep grazing on it were as white as the swans.

‘It’s the perfect place to raise our little girl. You know that’s why I bought it.’ She sighed contentedly.

‘I know that. You’ve told me often enough. What I don’t know is what makes you so certain this is a girl.’ He caressed her stomach. ‘Don’t you really want to know for certain the gender, instead of just guessing?’

‘I am not guessing. I know,’ she said smugly and covered his large brown hands with her slim white ones.

‘We could ask Alan when we get up to London this morning,’ he suggested. Alan Donovan was her gynaecologist.

‘You are an awful nag. But don’t you dare ask Alan and spoil my fun. Now put on your dressing gown. You don’t want to terrify poor Mary when she comes with the coffee,’ she said fondly.

Moments later there was a discreet knock on the door. ‘Come!’ said Hector and the chambermaid carried in the coffee tray.

‘Good morning to all! How are you and the baby, Mrs Cross?’ she said in her cheerful Irish brogue placing the tray on the table.

‘All is well, Mary, but do I spy biscuits on that tray?’ Hazel demanded.

‘Only three small ones.’

‘Take them away, please.’

‘Two for Sir and just one for you. Plain oatmeal. No sugar,’ Mary wheedled.

‘Be a darling, Mary. Humour me. Take them away, please.’

‘Poor little mite must be starving,’ Mary grumbled but she picked up the biscuit dish and marched from the room. Hazel sat on the sofa and poured a single mug of coffee so black and strong that its aroma filled the room.

‘God! It smells so good,’ she said wistfully as she handed it to him. Then she poured warm unsweetened skimmed milk into her own porcelain cup.

‘Ugh!’ she exclaimed with disgust as she tasted it, but she drank it down like medicine. ‘So how are you going to keep yourself busy while I am with Alan? You know he will take at least a couple of hours. He’s very thorough.’

‘I have to take my shotguns to Paul Roberts for storage, and then I have a suit fitting with my tailor.’

‘You aren’t going to drive my beautiful Ferrari around in the London morning traffic, are you? You’d probably give it a ding, same as you did to the Rolls.’

‘Will you never forget that?’ He spread his hands in mock outrage. ‘The silly woman jumped the lights and drove into me.’

‘You drive like a maniac, Cross, and you know it.’

‘Okay, I’ll take a cab to do my errands,’ he promised. ‘I don’t want to look like a football player in that poncey machine of yours. Anyway, my new Range Rover is waiting for me. Stratstone’s phoned me yesterday to let me know that it’s ready. If you are a good girl, which we all know you are, I’ll take you to lunch in it.’

‘Talking about lunch, where are we going?’ she demanded.

‘I don’t know why I bother. We can get lettuce leaves anywhere, but I reserved our usual table at Alfred’s Club.’

‘Now I know you really love me!’

‘You had better believe it, skinny.’

‘Compliments! Compliments!’ She gave him a beatific smile.



Hazel’s red Ferrari coupé was parked under the portico that sheltered the front door. It sparkled like an enormous ruby in the sunlight. Robert, her chauffeur, had polished it lovingly. It was his favourite amongst all the many cars parked in the underground garage. Hector made an arm for her down the front steps and helped her into the driver’s seat. When she had wriggled her belly in behind the wheel, he fussed over her, getting the adjustment of the seat just right and the safety belt comfortably looped under her bump.

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to drive?’ he asked solicitously.

‘Never,’ she replied. ‘Not after all the horrid things you said about her.’ She patted the steering wheel. ‘Get in and let’s go.’

It was three-quarters of a mile from the manor house to the public highway, but the estate road was paved all the way. Where it looped into the approach to the bridge over the River Test there was a fine view back to the house. Hazel pulled over for a moment. She could seldom resist the temptation to gloat over what she humbly referred to as ‘simply the finest Georgian building in existence’.

Brandon Hall had been built in 1752 by Sir William Chambers for the Earl of Brandon. He was the same architect who had built Somerset House on The Strand. Brandon Hall had been shamefully neglected and rundown when Hazel acquired it. When Hector thought about how much money she had lavished upon the house to bring it to its present state of perfection he could barely suppress a shudder. However, he could never deny the beauty of its elegant and perfectly balanced lines. Last year Hazel had been placed seventh on *Forbes* magazine’s list of the richest women in the world. She could afford it.

Still and all, what woman in her right mind needs sixteen bedrooms, for God’s sake? But the hell with expense, the fishing in the river is truly great. Worth every dollar, he consoled himself silently. ‘Come on, baby,’ he said aloud. ‘You can admire it on your way back, but right now you are going to be late for your appointment with Alan.’

‘I do so enjoy a challenge,’ she said sweetly, and pulled away leaving black rubber burns on the tarmac surface behind her and a pale blue cloud of smoke hanging in the air.

When she reversed effortlessly into the underground parking bay beneath the Harley Street building, from which Alan Donovan had removed his own vehicle to make room for hers, she glanced at her wristwatch.

‘One hour forty-eight minutes! I do believe that’s my personal best time to date. Fifteen minutes ahead of my appointment. Would you like to retract that gibe about me being late, smarty-pants?’

‘One day you are going to hit a radar trap and they are going to pull your driver’s licence, my beloved.’

‘Mine is a US licence. These sweet Brit cops can’t touch it.’

Hector escorted her up to Alan’s suite. As soon as he heard her voice, Alan came out of his consulting room to welcome her; a rare show of respect he generally accorded only to royalty. He paused in the doorway to admire her. Hazel’s loose-fitting maternity gown in soft Sea Island cotton had been especially designed for her. Her eyes sparkled and her skin glowed. Alan bowed over her hand and touched it to his lips.

‘If all my patients were as patently healthy as you I would be out of a job,’ he murmured.

‘How long are you going to keep her, Alan?’ Hector shook hands with him.

‘I can readily understand why you are so eager to have her back.’

Such levity was seldom Alan's style, but Hector chuckled and insisted, 'When?'

'I want to run some checks and possibly consult my associates. Give me two and a half hours, will you please, Hector?' He took Hazel's arm and led her into his inner chambers. Hector watched the door close. He stared after her. He was overwhelmed by a sudden premonition of impending loss such as he had seldom experienced before. He wanted to go after her, and bring her back and hold her close to his heart for ever. It took a long moment for him to recover himself.

'Don't be a bloody idiot. Take a hold of yourself, Cross.' He turned away and went out into the passage and headed towards the lifts.



Alan Donovan's receptionist watched him go impassively. She was a pretty Afro-British girl with big sparkling dark eyes and a good figure under her white uniform. Her name was Victoria Vusamazulu and she was twenty-seven years old. She waited until she heard the elevator stop at the end of the passage and the doors open and close behind Hector as he stepped into it, then she brought her mobile phone out of her coat pocket. She had punched his phone number into her list of contacts under the name 'Him!' The phone rang once only and she heard the click on the line.

'Hello. Is that you, Aleutian?' she asked.

'I told you not to name names, bitch.' She shivered when he called her that. He was so masterful. He was unlike any man she had known before. Instinctively her hand went to her left breast. It was bruised and still tender where he had bitten her last night. She rubbed it and the nipple hardened.

'I'm sorry. I forgot.' Her voice was husky.

'Then don't forget to delete this call when we finish. Now tell me! Has she come?'

'Yes, she is here. But her husband has gone out. He told Doctor that he would return at one thirty.'

'Good!' he said, and the line went dead. The girl took the phone from her ear and stared at it. She found that she was breathing hard. She thought about him; how hard and thick he was when he was inside her. She looked down at herself and felt the warmth oozing through the crotch of her panties onto her thighs.

'Hot as a dirty little bitch in heat,' she whispered. That was what he had called her last night. Doctor would not need her for a while, he was busy with the Cross woman. She left the reception room and went down the passage to the toilet. She locked herself in one of the cubicles. Then she pulled her skirts up around her waist and dropped her panties around her ankles. She sat on the toilet seat and spread her knees. She put her hand down there. She wanted to make it last, but as soon as she touched her hot switch she could not hold back. It was so quick and so intense that it left her gasping and shaking.



Two hours later Hector returned and ensconced himself in a leather armchair in the waiting room facing Alan's door. He picked up a copy of the *Financial Times* from the side table and turned to the FTSE reports. He did not even glance up as the intercom rang on the receptionist's desk. She spoke softly into the receiver and then hung up.

'Mr Cross,' she called across to him. 'Mr Donovan would like to have a few words with you. Please would you go through to his room?' Hector dropped the newspaper and jumped up from the armchair. Again he felt the quick stab of anxiety. He had learned over the years to trust his instincts.

What dire news did Alan have for him? He hurried across the waiting room and knocked on the inner door. Alan's muffled voice bid him enter. The consulting room was panelled in oak and the shelves were lined with sets of leather-bound medical volumes. Alan sat behind a vast antique desk and Hazel faced him. She stood up as Hector entered and came to meet him, pushing her big belly ahead of her. She was smiling radiantly and that allayed Hector's premonitions of disaster. He embraced her.

'Everything all right?' he demanded, and looked at Alan over Hazel's shining blonde head.

'Tickety-boo! Calm seas and fair winds!' Alan assured him. 'Take a seat, both of you.' They sat side by side and stared at him with full attention. He removed his spectacles and polished them with a piece of chamois leather.

'Okay, shoot!' Hector encouraged him.

'The baby is doing just fine, but Hazel isn't so young any more.'

'None of us are,' Hector agreed. 'But ever so kind of you to mention it, Alan.'

'The baby is just about ready to make its move, but perhaps Hazel might need a little bit of a hand.'

'Caesarean?' she asked with alarm.

'Dear me, no!' Alan assured her. 'Nothing so extreme. What I have in mind is an induction of labour.'

'Explain please, Alan,' Hector insisted.

'Hazel is in her fortieth week of gestation. She will be good and ready by the end of this coming week. The two of you are stuck out in the wilds of darkest Hampshire. How long does it take you to get up to London?'

'Two and a half hours is good time,' Hector replied. 'Some drivers with heavy right feet do it in under two.'

Hazel pulled a face at him.

'I want you to move up to your town house in Belgravia immediately.' Alan had been a dinner guest there on more than one occasion. 'I am going to book Hazel into a private ward in the Portland Maternity Hospital in Great Portland Street for Thursday this week. It's one of the leading establishments in the country. If she goes into spontaneous labour before Thursday you will only be fifteen minutes away from it. If nothing happens by Friday I will give Hazel a little injection and pop goes the weasel, so to speak.'

Hector turned to her. 'How do you feel about that, my darling?'

'That suits me just fine. The sooner the quicker, as far as I am concerned. Everything is ready for us in the London house. I just need to pick up a few things, like the book I am reading, and we can move back into town tomorrow.'

'That's it, then,' said Alan briskly and stood up behind his desk. 'See you both on Friday at the latest.'

On their way through the waiting room Hazel stopped in front of the receptionist's desk and rummaged around in her handbag. She brought out a gift-wrapped bottle of Chanel perfume and placed it in front of the receptionist.

'Just a little thank you, Victoria. You have been so sweet.'

'Oh, you are too kind, Mrs Cross. But you really shouldn't have!'

As they rode down in the lift Hazel asked him, 'Did you get your Range Rover from Stratstone?'

'It's parked just across the street; I will take you to lunch in her and bring you back afterwards to pick up your old can of rust.' She punched his shoulder and led the way out of the building.

He took her arm crossing Harley Street and the taxi drivers coming from both directions, seeing how pretty and pregnant she was, braked sharply to a standstill. One of them leaned out of his window grinning. He signalled at her to cross in front of his taxi and called out to her, 'Best of luck, luv! Bet it's a boy!'

Hazel waved back. 'I'll let you know.'

None of them noticed the motorcycle parked in a loading zone a hundred yards up the street behind them. Both the driver and his pillion passenger wore gloves and helmets with darkened perspex visors which hid their faces. As Hazel and Hector reached the parked Rover the motorcyclist jumped on the kick starter and the engine of the powerful Japanese machine under him burred to life. The pillion passenger lifted his booted feet onto the footrests, ready to go. Hector opened the passenger door for Hazel and handed her up into the seat. Then he moved briskly around to the driver's side. He jumped in, started the engine and pulled out into the traffic stream. The motorcyclist waited until there were five vehicles separating them and then he followed. He maintained the separation discreetly. They went around Marble Arch and down to Berkeley Square. When the Rover drew up in front of No. 2 Davies Street the motorcyclist rode on past and turned left at the next road junction. He circled the block and stopped when he had a view of the front of Alfred's Club. He saw at once that the doorman had parked the Rover a little further up the street.



Mario, the restaurant manager, was waiting at the entrance to greet them, beaming with pleasure. 'Welcome, Mr and Mrs Cross, but it's been far too long.'

'Nonsense, Mario,' Hector contradicted him. 'We were here ten days ago with Lord Renwick.'

'That's far too long ago, sir,' Mario protested and led them to their favourite table.

The room went silent as they passed down it. All eyes followed them. Everybody knew who they were. Even in advanced pregnancy Hazel looked magnificent. The gossamer skirt billowed around her like a rose-coloured cloud, and the handbag she carried was one of those crocodile-skin creations which made every other woman in the room consider suicide.

Mario seated her and murmured, 'May I presume that it will be the grapefruit salad for madame, followed by the grilled St Jacques? And for you, Mr Cross, the steak tartare, followed by the lobster with Chardonnay sauce?'

'As usual, Mario,' Hector agreed seriously. 'To drink, Mrs Cross will have a small bottle of Perrier water with a bucket of ice. Please fetch a bottle of the Vosne-Romanée Aux Malconsorts 1993 from my personal wine keep for me.'

'I have already taken the liberty of doing so, Mr Cross. Fifteen minutes ago I checked that the temperature of the bottle is sixteen degrees centigrade. Shall I have the sommelier open it?'

'Thank you, Mario. I know I can always rely on you.'

'We try our best to please, sir.'

As the manager left them Hazel leaned across and placed her hand on Hector's forearm. 'I do so love your little rituals, Mr Cross. Somehow I find them very comforting.' She smiled. 'Cayla also used to find them amusing. Do you remember how we laughed when she imitated you?'

'Like mother, like daughter.' Hector smiled at her.

There had been a period when Hazel had not been able to say the name 'Cayla' out loud. That had been from the time of her daughter's brutal slaying and the mutilation of her corpse by her killers until she had discovered that she was pregnant with Hector's child. That had been a catharsis and she had wept in his arms and blurted out the name. 'Cayla! It's going to be another little Cayla,' she'd sobbed. After that the wounds had healed swiftly until she could talk about Cayla easily and often.

She wanted to talk now and when the sommelier had brought her Perrier water she sipped it and asked, 'Do you suppose Catherine Cayla Cross will have blonde hair and blue eyes like her big sister did?' She had already chosen the new infant's name as a tribute to her dead first child.

‘He will probably have black stubble on his chin like his father,’ Hector teased her. He also had loved the murdered girl. Cayla had been the magnet that had first brought them together against all the odds. Hector had been head of security at Bannock Oil when Hazel had inherited control of the company from her late husband.

From the start Hazel had detested Hector, despite the fact that he had been appointed by her own beloved deceased husband. She knew Hector’s record and reputation intimately and was repelled by the hard and sometimes brutal tactics he used to defend the company assets and personnel from any threat. He was a soldier and he fought like one. He showed no mercy. He flew in the face of all Hazel’s gentler female instincts. At their very first meeting she warned him that she was looking for the slightest excuse to fire him.

Then Hazel’s cosseted and privileged existence was plunged into chaos. The daughter who was the cornerstone of her solitary existence was kidnapped by African pirates. Hazel exerted all her vast fortune and her influence in high places to try to rescue her. No one could help her, not even the President of the United States of America with all his power. They could not even discover where her Cayla was being held. At her wits’ end, she had cast aside her pride and gone back to the cruel, brutal and merciless soldier she so hated and despised: Hector Cross.

Hector had tracked down the kidnapers to their den in the fastness of the African deserts where Cayla was being held. She was being brutally tortured by her captors. Hector had gone in with his men and brought Cayla back to safety. In the process he had demonstrated to Hazel that he was a thoroughly decent person of high principles; somebody that she could trust without reserve. She had given in to the attraction she had so carefully suppressed at their first meeting and once she had got closer to him she discovered that under his armour-plated exterior he could be warm and gentle and loving.

She looked at him now and she reached across the table to take his hand. ‘With you beside me and baby Catherine Cayla inside me, everything is perfect again.’

‘It will be like this for ever,’ he assured her and another tiny frisson of dread ran up his spine as he realized he was tempting the fates. Though he smiled tenderly at her, he was brooding on how the rescue of Cayla had not been the end of the affair either. The fanatics who had seized her had not given up. Their hired thugs had come back and murdered Cayla and sent her decapitated head to Hazel. Hector and Hazel had been forced to re-enter the fray and finally eradicate the monster who had ruined their lives.

Perhaps this time it is really over, he thought as he watched Hazel’s face. She went on talking about Cayla.

‘Do you remember how you taught her to fish?’

‘She was a natural. With just a little coaching she could cast a salmon fly at least a hundred and fifty feet in most wind conditions and she instinctively knew how to read the waters.’

‘What about the big salmon the two of you landed in Norway?’

‘It was a monster. I was hanging on to her belt, and it almost pulled us both into the river.’ He chuckled.

‘I’ll never forget the day she announced that she was not going to be an art dealer, the career I had planned for her, but that she had decided to become a veterinary surgeon. I nearly had a blue fit!’

‘That was very naughty of her.’ Hector pronounced judgement with a stern expression.

‘Naughty? You were the naughty one. You backed her up all the way. The two of you talked me right into it.’

‘Tut. Tut. She was such a bad influence on me,’ Hector admitted.

‘She loved you. You know that. She really loved you like her own father.’

‘That’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me.’

‘You are a good man, Hector Cross.’ Tears welled up in her eyes. ‘Catherine Cayla is going to love you also. All three of your girls love you.’ She gasped suddenly and clutched her stomach. ‘Oh my God! She gave me a mule kick. She obviously agrees with what I just said.’ They both burst out laughing so that the guests at the other tables looked around at them, smiling in sympathy. However, they might just as well have been alone in the room. They were totally engrossed by each other.

They had so much to remember and discuss. Both of them had filled their lives with strivings and endeavour. They had both experienced soaring triumphs and shattering disasters, but Hazel’s career had been by far the more spectacular. She had started out with little more than guts and determination. At the age of nineteen she had won her first Grand Slam tournament on the professional tennis tour. At twenty-one she had married the oil tycoon Henry Bannock and borne him a daughter. Henry had died when Hazel was almost thirty years old and left control of the Bannock Oil conglomerate to her.

The world of big business is an exclusive domain. Intruders and upstarts are not welcome there. Nobody wanted to bet on a sometime tennis-player-cum-society-glamour-girl-turned-oil-baroness. However none of them had taken into account Hazel’s innate business acumen, nor the years of her tutelage under Henry Bannock, which were worth a hundred MBA degrees. Like the crowds at the Roman circus, her detractors and critics waited in grisly anticipation for her to be devoured by the lions. Then, to the chagrin of all, she brought in the Zara No. 8.

Hector remembered vividly how *Forbes* magazine had blazoned on its front cover the image of Hazel in her white tennis kit, holding a racquet in her right hand. The headline above the photograph read ‘Hazel Bannock aces the opposition. Richest oil strike in thirty years.’

The story described how in the bleak hinterland of the godforsaken and impoverished little emirate named Abu Zara lay an oil concession once owned by the Shell Oil Company. In the period directly after World War II, Shell had pumped the reservoir dry and abandoned the exhausted concession. Since then it had lain forgotten.

Then Hazel had picked it up for a few paltry millions of dollars and the pundits nudged each other and smirked. Ignoring the protests of her advisors, she spent many millions more in sinking a rotary cone drill into a tiny subterranean anomaly at the northern extremity of the field; an anomaly which with the more primitive exploration techniques of thirty years previously had been reckoned to be an ancillary of the main reservoir. The geologists of that time had agreed that any oil contained in this area had long ago drained into the main reservoir and been pumped to the surface, leaving the entire field dry and worthless.

However, when Hazel’s drilling team pierced the impervious salt dome of the diapir, a vast subterranean chamber in which the principal oil deposits had been trapped, the gas overpressure roared up through the drill hole with such force that it ejected almost eight kilometres of steel drill string like toothpaste from the tube, and the hole blew out. High-grade crude oil spurted hundreds of feet into the air. At last it became evident that the old Zara 1 to 7 fields which Shell had abandoned were only a fraction of the total reserves.

Recalling all this seemed to draw them closer to each other over the lunch table, fascinated by the reminiscences they had repeated many times before but in which they still discovered things totally new and intriguing. At one point Hector shook his head in admiration. ‘My God, woman! Have you never been daunted by anything or anybody in your life? You have done it all on your own, and you have done it the hard way.’

She slanted her startling eyes at him and smiled. ‘Don’t you see, life was never meant to be easy; if it was, we would place no real value on it. Now that’s enough about me. Let’s talk about you.’

‘You already know everything there is to know about me. I have told you fifty times over.’

‘Okay, let’s make it fifty-one. Tell me about the day on which you took your lion. I want all the details again. Take care. I will know if you leave anything out.’

‘Very well, here I go. I was born in Kenya, but my dad and mum were both Brits, so I am a genuine British citizen.’ He paused.

‘Their names were Bob and Sheila . . .’ she prompted him.

‘Their names were Bob and Sheila Cross. My father had almost twenty-five thousand hectares of prime grazing land abutting the Maasai tribal reservation. On this he was running over two thousand head of prize Brahman cattle. So my boyhood companions were mostly Maasai boys of my own age.’

‘And your little brother, of course,’ said Hazel.

‘Yes, my little brother, Teddy. He wanted to be a rancher, like our father. He would do anything to please the old man. On the other hand, I wanted to be a warrior like my uncle who had died in the war fighting Rommel at El Alamein in the North African desert. The day my father sent me to the Duke of York School for boys in Nairobi was the most devastating experience of my life to that date.’

‘You hated it, didn’t you?’

‘I hated the rules and the restraint. I was accustomed to running wild and free,’ he said.

‘You were a rebel.’

‘My father said I was a rebel and a bloody savage. But he said it with a smile. Nevertheless, I was third from top of my class and captain of the first fifteen rugby team in my final year at the Duke. That was good enough for me. That was when I was sixteen years of age.’

‘The year of your lion!’ She leaned forward across the table and took his hand, her eyes shining with anticipation. ‘I love this part. The first part is a little tame. Not enough blood and guts, you know.’

‘My Maasai companions were coming of age. So I went to the village and spoke to the chief. I told him I wanted to become a Morani with them. A warrior.’

She nodded.

‘The chief listened to everything I asked for. Then he said that I was not a true Maasai because I had not been circumcised. He asked if I wanted to be cut by the witch doctor. I thought about it and then declined the offer.’

‘And a good job too,’ Hazel said. ‘I prefer your whistle the way that God originally designed it.’

‘What a kind thing to say. But to return to the story of my life; I discussed this rejection with my companions, and they were almost as distressed by it as I was. We argued about it for days and in the end they agreed that if I could not become a true Morani, at least I could take my lion, then I would be more than halfway a Morani.’

‘But there was just one little problem, wasn’t there?’ she reminded him.

‘The problem was that the Kenyan government, in which the Maasai tribe was poorly represented, had banned the lion ceremony of manhood. Lions were now strictly protected throughout the entire territory.’

‘But then came some divine intervention,’ she said, and he grinned at her.

‘Straight from heaven!’ he agreed. ‘In the Masai Mara National Park, which adjoined the tribal lands, an old lion was driven out of his pride by a younger and stronger rival. Without his lionesses to drive the hunt he was forced to leave the protection of the park, and to seek easier prey than zebra and wildebeest. Firstly, he started on the Maasai cattle herds, which were the tribal store of wealth. This was bad enough, but then he killed a young woman as she came down to the waterhole to draw water for her family.’

‘Much to the joy and feverish excitement of my friends the Maasai, the Government Game Department was forced to issue a licence to eradicate the old rogue. Because of the links that I had forged with the tribe over the years, and because I was big and strong for my age and the elders knew just how hard I had trained with the fighting sticks and the war spear, they invited me to join the hunt with the other young Morani candidates.’

Hector paused as the sommelier added half an inch of red wine to his glass and then topped up the Perrier water in Hazel's. Hector murmured his thanks and then wet his lips with the Burgundy before he continued.

'The lion had not killed and eaten for almost a week and we all waited in an agony of suspense for his hunger to force him to kill again. Then on the sixth evening, as the light was fading, two little naked herdboys came racing back to the village with the glad tidings. As they were bringing the herd down to the waterhole the lion had waylaid them. He had been lying in ambush in the thick grass on the downwind side of the path, and he charged out at the herd from a range of only ten paces or so. Before the cattle had time to scatter he had leapt onto the back of a five-year-old cow that was heavy with calf. He sank his fangs into the base of her neck while he reached around with one great paw and sank his long yellow claws into her snout. Then he heaved back with all the massive strength of his forearm against the lock he had on the cow's neck. The neck vertebrae parted with a crack, killing her instantly. She went down nose first as her forelegs collapsed and she somersaulted in a cloud of dust. The lion jumped clear before he was crushed by her fifteen hundred pounds of dead weight.'

'I still can't believe he was strong enough to kill a huge animal so easily,' Hazel said in awed tones.

'Not only that, but he was able to lift her in his jaws and carry her into the grass, holding her so high that only her hooves dragged in the dust.'

'Go on!' she urged him. 'Don't mind my silly questions. Get on with the story!'

'Well, it was already dark, so we had to wait for the dawn. None of us slept much that night. We sat around the fires and the older men told us gleefully what to expect when we walked up to the old lion on his kill. There was not much laughter from any of us, and our chatter was subdued. It was still dark when we dressed in our black goatskin cloaks against the chill of dawn. We were naked under the cloaks. We armed ourselves with our rawhide shields and our short stabbing spears, which we had sharpened so that we were able to shave the hair off our forearms with the bright edge. There were thirty-two of us, a band of brothers. We went singing in the dawn to meet our lion.'

'You'd think that would have warned the lion and driven him away,' said Hazel.

'It would have taken much more than that to drive a lion off his kill,' Hector told her. 'We sang a challenge to him. We called him to battle. And of course, we bolstered our own courage. We sang and we danced to warm our blood. We stabbed at the air with our spears to loosen the muscles of our arms. The young unmarried girls followed us at a distance to see who would stand to the lion and who would break and run when he came in all his noble might to answer our challenge.'

Hazel had heard the story a dozen times already, but she watched his face so raptly that it might have been the very first telling of it.

'The sun came up and showed its upper rim above the horizon directly in front of us, bright as molten metal from the furnace. It shone into our faces to dazzle us. However, we knew where we would find our lion. We saw the tops of the grass move where there was no wind, and then we heard him growl. It was a terrible sound that struck into our hearts and into our bowels. Our legs turned to water and each dancing pace was a conscious effort as we went forward to meet him.

'Then the lion stood up from where he had lain flat behind the carcass of the heifer. His mane was fully erect. It formed a majestic corona around his head. It burned with a golden light, for he was vividly back-lit by the sun. It seemed to double his bulk. He roared. It was a gale of sound that swept over us and our own voices faltered for a moment. Then we rallied and shouted back at him, calling on him to pick his man and come against him. The flanks of our line started to curl in around him, surrounding him and leaving him no escape route. He swung his head slowly from side to side, surveying us as we closed in.'

'Oh God!' she breathed. 'I know already what is going to happen, but I can barely stand the tension.'

‘Then his head stopped swinging and his tail began to lash from side to side, the black tuft on the end of it whipping his own flanks. I was in the middle of the line, the place of honour, and I was close enough to see his eyes clearly. They were yellow, bright burning yellow, and they were fastened upon me.’

‘Why you, Hector? Why you, my darling?’ She shook his hand urgently, her expression filled with dread as though it were happening before her very eyes.

‘God alone knows,’ he shrugged. ‘Perhaps because I was in the middle of the line, but most likely because my pale body was shining out from amongst the darker bodies that flanked me.’

‘Go on!’ she begged. ‘Tell me again how it ended.’

‘The lion fell into a crouch as he gathered himself for the charge. His tail stopped lashing from side to side. He held it straight out behind him, rigid and slightly upwardly curled. Then it flicked twice and he came straight at me. He came snaking low along the ground, so fast that he was only a tawny streak of sunlight, ethereal but deadly.’

‘And in those microseconds I learned the true meaning of terror. Everything slowed down. The air around me seemed to grow dense and heavy, difficult to breathe. It was like being trapped in a thick mud swamp. Every movement required a deliberate effort. I knew I was shouting, but the sound seemed to come faintly from far away. I braced myself behind the rawhide shield and raised the point of my spear. The sunlight caught the burnished metal and sent a bright splinter of light into my eyes. The form of the lion swelled up before me until it filled all my vision. I aimed the point of my spear at the centre of his chest. His chest was pumping as he deafened me with his killing fury, mighty gusts of sound like those of a steam locomotive running at full throttle.’

‘I braced myself. Then at the final instant before his weight hurtled into my shield I leaned into him and caught him on the point of my spear. I let his own weight and speed drive the point so deeply into his chest that the spearhead and half of the shaft were swallowed up. He was dying as he bore me backwards to the earth and crouched on top of me raking the shield with his claws, bellowing his rage and agony into my upturned face.’

Hazel shuddered at the picture he had created for her. ‘It’s too horrible! I have goose flesh running down both my arms. But don’t stop. Go on, Hector. Tell me the end of it.’

‘Then suddenly the lion’s whole body stiffened and he arched his back. With his jaws open wide he vomited a copious gout of his heart blood over me, drenching my head and my entire upper body before my companions could drag him off me and stab him a hundred times over with their own blades.’

‘It terrifies me to think about how differently it could have ended,’ she said. ‘How we might never have met each other and shared all that we have now. Now, tell me what your father said when you returned to the ranch that day,’ she demanded of him.

‘I rode back to the big old thatched-roof ranch house, but it was afternoon before I reached it. My family were seated at the lunch table on the front stoep. I tethered my horse at the hitching rail and climbed the steps slowly. My euphoria evaporated as I saw my family’s faces. I realized then that I had not bothered to wash. The lion’s blood had dried thickly in my hair and on my skin. My face was a mask of dried blood. It had rubbed off on my clothing, and was black on my hands and under my fingernails.’

‘My little brother Teddy broke the horrified silence. He giggled like a schoolgirl. Teddy was a giggler. At that my mother burst into tears and hid her face in her hands; she knew what my father would have to say.’

‘He rose to his feet, all six foot two of him, and his face was dark and twisted with rage. He choked incoherently on it. Then slowly his expression cleared and he said ominously, “You have been with those black savages, your bosom chums, have you not, boy?”’

“Yes, sir,” I admitted. My father was always “sir”; never “Dad”, and especially never “Daddy”.

“Yes, sir,” I repeated, and suddenly his expression changed.

“You have been for your lion, just like a bloody Maasai Morani. That’s it. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” I admitted, and my mother burst into fresh gales of tears. My father went on staring at me with that odd expression for a long while and I stood to attention in front of him. Then he spoke again.

“Did you stand or did you break?”

“I stood, sir.” Again his long silence, before he spoke again. “Go to your rondavel and get yourself cleaned up. Then I will see you in my study.” This summons was usually the equivalent of a death sentence or a least a hundred lashes.’

‘Then what happened?’ Hazel demanded, although she knew full well.

‘When I knocked at the door of his study a short while later, I was wearing my school blazer and tie with a clean white shirt. My shoes were polished and my damp hair was slicked down.

“Come in!” he bellowed. I marched in and stood in front of his desk.

“You are a bloody savage,” he said firmly. “An utterly uncivilized savage. I see only one hope for you.”

“Yes, sir.” Inwardly I quailed; I thought I knew what was coming.

“Sit down, Hector.” He indicated the armchair facing his desk. That rocked me. I had never sat in that chair, and I could not remember when last he called me Hector, and not boy.

‘When I was seated bolt upright facing him he went on, “You will never make a rancher, Hector, will you?”

“I doubt it, sir.”

“The ranch should have been yours, as the eldest son. But now I am going to leave it to Teddy.”

“I wish Teddy joy of it, sir,” I said, and he actually smiled, but fleetingly.

“Of course he will not have it too long,” the old man said, and the smile was gone again. “In a very few years we will all be booted out of here by the former owners from whom we stole it in the first place. Africa always wins in the end.” I was silent. There was no reply I could think of.

“But you, young Hector. What shall we do with you?” Again I had no answer, and I kept my mouth shut. I had long ago learned that was the safest option. He went on speaking. “You will always be a savage at heart, Hector. But that is no serious drawback. Most of our revered British heroes, from Clive to Kitchener, from Wellington to Churchill, were savages. There would never have been a British Empire without them. But I want you to be a well-educated and cultivated English savage, so I am sending you to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst to learn to kick the living shit out of all the lesser peoples of this earth.”

Hazel burst out laughing and clapped her hands. ‘What a remarkable man. He must have been completely outrageous.’

‘He was full of bluster, but it was all an act. He wanted to be known as a hard man who never backed down, and who always called a spade a bloody shovel. But under the veneer he was a kind and decent man. I think he loved me, and I certainly worshipped him.’

‘I wish I had known him,’ Hazel said wistfully.

‘Probably much better you didn’t,’ Hector assured her. Then he turned as Mario coughed politely at his elbow.

‘Will there be anything further you need, Mr Cross?’ Hector looked up at the restaurant manager as if he had never seen him before. Then he blinked and looked around the room that was now empty except for a couple of bored waiters standing by the doors to the kitchen.

‘Good Lord, what is the time?’

‘It is a few minutes past four o’clock, sir.’

‘Why on earth did you not warn us?’

‘You and Mrs Cross were enjoying yourselves so much I couldn’t bring myself to it, sir.’ Hector left a fifty-pound note on the table for him and took Hazel out to where the doorman had the Rover at the front entrance of the club with the engine running. When they reached Harley Street, Hector drove down the ramp into the underground garage of Alan’s building and helped Hazel into her Ferrari.

‘Now, my queen honey bee, remember that I am behind you and it isn’t a race. Look in your rear-view mirror occasionally.’

‘Do stop fussing, darling.’

‘I won’t stop until you give me a kiss.’

‘Come and get it, greedy boy.’

While Hector waited for her to leave the garage ahead of him he drew on a pair of soft kid leather driving gloves, then he followed the Ferrari up the ramp. The motorcyclist following them kept well back, using other vehicles as stalking horses as they weaved their way through the streets of London and at last joined the M3 motorway. There was no need for him to press too closely and run the risk of alerting the quarry. He knew exactly where they were headed. Besides that, he had been warned that the man was a hectic dude; definitely not somebody to mess around with. He would only make his move much later after they had passed through Winchester. At intervals he spoke briefly into the hands-free microphone of the phone which was fitted into his crash helmet, reporting the progress of the two vehicles ahead of him. Each time the receiving station clicked the transmit button to acknowledge the transmission.

Two hundred yards ahead of the motorcyclist Hector drove with one finger tapping time to the music on the steering wheel. He was tuned to Magic radio, his preferred station. Don McLean was singing ‘American Pie’, and Hector sang along. He knew all the intricate lyrics by heart. However, he never relaxed his vigilance. Every few seconds his eyes darted up to the rear-view mirror, scanning the following traffic. The vehicles in his line of vision were constantly changing but each one was saved in his memory. ‘Always watch your tail’ was one of his aphorisms. Just before Basingstoke the traffic thinned out and Hazel opened up the Ferrari. Hector had to push the Rover up to nearly 120 mph to keep her in sight.

He called her on his hands-free mobile: ‘Take it easy, lover. Remember you have a very important passenger riding with you.’ She blew a loud raspberry back at him, but dropped the Ferrari back to just a little over the speed limit.

‘What a good girl you can be when you really try,’ he said and eased his speed to match hers.



‘Approaching Junction 9. Red vehicle is still leading. She has taken the slip-road for Winchester. Black vehicle is tracking her.’ Behind them the motorcyclist spoke into his concealed microphone and the receiving station clicked acknowledgement again.

Still in loose formation, Hazel led them into the bypass around the ancient cathedral city of Winchester, fifteen centuries old and once the capital and stronghold of King Alfred the Great. At intervals Hector could make out the cathedral spire rising above the other buildings of the city. They left it behind. Ahead of Hector the red Ferrari slowed for the turn-off signposted Smallbridge on Test and Brandon Hall. As he followed Hazel into the turning Hector noticed two workmen on the side of the road. Dressed in yellow high-visibility coats with British Roads printed across their backs, they were unloading the components of a steel barrier from the back of a parked truck. Hector paid them little attention, but he looked ahead to where the Ferrari was dwindling in the distance. Apart from the

red machine the narrow road was deserted as far ahead as Hector could see.

Less than a minute later the biker and his passenger followed them into the road to Smallbridge. As he passed the workmen the biker raised a gloved hand to them and they were galvanized into action by his signal. Quickly they dragged the sections of the steel barrier into the road and set it up, blocking both lanes. Then they raised a large yellow and black road sign which read, Road Closed. No Entry. Diversion.

A large black arrow directed traffic to continue up the main road, effectively isolating both Hazel and Hector and the motorcycle that followed them. The pseudo workmen jumped back into their trucks and drove away. They had been paid and their job was done.

So close to home, Hector drove relaxed. Once he glanced up at the rear-view mirror and he noticed only a motorbike that was two hundred yards further back. He switched his attention to the road ahead. There was rolling green countryside on both sides of it, interrupted by copses of darker trees. Some of these pressed up close against the road as it twisted and undulated over the gentle hillsides. The road had shrunk to two narrow lanes. Even Hazel was obliged to reduce her speed.

‘Both vehicles entering demarcated zone,’ said the motorcyclist crisply, and this time he was answered by the other station.

‘Roger that, Station One. I have you and the chase both visible.’

Suddenly between the motorcycle and Hector’s Rover another vehicle turned out of a muddy farm track onto the tarmac road. It had stayed concealed behind a clump of trees until Hector had driven past. It was a large left-hand drive Mercedes Benz van with French registration plates. Apart from those, it showed no other markings. The motorcyclist accelerated until he was positioned twenty feet off the van’s rear bumper.

Ahead of them Hector’s Rover disappeared over another rise. When the Mercedes and the motorbike reached the same crest they saw that the road ahead of them descended into a shallow valley where it crossed a raised embankment with boggy ground on either side. Hector was just driving out onto the embankment while in the distance the red Ferrari was already climbing the low hill on the far side of the valley. The driver of the Mercedes van smiled with satisfaction. The trap was perfectly set. He floored his accelerator, roared down the slope and out onto the embankment. As he came up swiftly behind Hector he blew a piercing blast on his horn. Hector glanced up at his rear-view mirror.

‘Now where did this cheeky bastard spring from?’ He was startled. The van had not been there when he had last checked the mirror.

Nevertheless he judged that, despite the fact that the embankment was so narrow, there was just enough room for the two vehicles side by side. Instinctively Hector slowed and eased off onto the verge to let the bigger vehicle pass. It barged by him with only inches separating them.

Hector was level with the van of the cab for only a fraction of a second. As he had expected from the French number plates, it was left-hand drive. The van driver looked directly down at him. Hector was startled by the bizarre fact that he was wearing a rubber Halloween mask depicting the grinning face of President Richard Nixon. His left arm rested on the sill of the van’s open side window. It was a muscular arm, with a small design in red tattooed on the very dark skin.

Close behind the van, its front wheel almost touching the rear bumper, a black Honda Crossrunner motorcycle with two riders crouched on the double seat flew past Hector. Both riders wore crash helmets with full-face dark visors and complete black leather motorcycle gear.

On the far side of the boggy hollow Hazel’s Ferrari was just topping the crest of the hill. Hector realized that they had been neatly cut off from each other by the alien van and bike.

‘Hazel!’ Hector shouted her name as all his feral instincts kicked in at full force. ‘They are after Hazel!’ He grabbed his mobile phone and punched in her number.

A disembodied voice answered the call: 'The person you have called is presently unavailable. Please try again later.'

'Shit!' he swore. The reception was always intermittent along this stretch of the road. He dropped the phone.

The van and the bike were already pulling rapidly away from him. He rammed the accelerator to the floor and roared in pursuit of them. As he stared ahead he saw Hazel's Ferrari disappear over the crest of the rise, so he switched his full attention to the vehicles he was pursuing. The engine of his Range Rover was new and freshly tuned and he gained rapidly on them. Instinctively he thrust his right hand into the front of his jacket to where the Beretta 9mm automatic was usually concealed in its armpit holster. Of course, it wasn't there. Carrying handguns is strictly prohibited in Jolly Old England.

'Bloody politicians!' he snarled. It was a fleeting thought and his full attention never deviated from the menace on the road ahead. He decided he would ram the lumbering Mercedes van first. It was the easier target. If he could get up alongside he would use the old police tactic of swinging into it at the level of its rear wheels. That would spin it off the road. The bike would be more elusive, but once the van was taken out of the way he would be able to concentrate on running it down.

He was closing rapidly on the van. The Honda swerved out of his way and pulled up level with the cab of the van. Now Hector was right on its tail. The van driver began to weave from side to side, frustrating Hector's attempts to force his way past.

'Shit!' Hector swore as the rear doors of the van swung open above him. 'What now?'

He looked up through the open doors into the cargo hold. There was a massive builder's pallet packed with large concrete building blocks wrapped in transparent plastic sheeting looming over him. The pallet was mounted on rollers. There must have been another thug in the hold pushing it. It trundled back towards him. Hector saw what was about to happen, and he hit his brakes hard. Even then he was only just quick enough.

The pallet toppled out of the open rear doors of the van. It crashed into the roadway directly in front of Hector's Rover. The plastic wrapper burst on impact and tons of the huge blocks cascaded across the narrow road, piling up in a barrier that sealed it from verge to verge; an obstacle that would challenge even his powerful machine. He just managed to stop with the car's nose almost touching the tumbled wall of blocks. Over the top of the barrier he saw that the van had dropped two more pallets further on, sealing off the road for fifty yards. Far ahead, the van and the bike were starting up the rise over which Hazel's Ferrari had already disappeared.

He studied the pile of blocks briefly. It was a formidable obstacle; almost impossible to scale. Nevertheless, he had to try. He hit the gear lever and slammed the Rover into extra low. Then he revved the engine and flew at the barrier. He began to climb it torturously, the chassis banging and scraping over the jumbled blocks which shifted under the Rover's weight, denying the wheels traction. His speed bled off until he was stranded and high-centred halfway up the barrier with three of his wheels spinning futilely in the air and the offside front wheel jammed between two of the concrete blocks.

Ahead of him the van and its escort disappeared over the rise. Truly desperate by now, Hector slammed the gears into reverse. He gunned the motor again and the vehicle rocked and slewed sideways, threatening to topple over and roll back down the pile. Gravity took hold at last and it bounced back onto the level road, regaining its equilibrium. He opened the door and jumped out onto the footboard. He looked about desperately, trying to find a passable way around the heap of blocks.

He saw that hard up against the road on each side ran barbed-wire fences, obviously to keep livestock off the embankment. Below each fence ran a drainage ditch. The mud in the ditches was shiny black and glutinous, but there was no other way round.

'They set this up cunningly. Narrow road, cargo of bricks to block it, bog, fence and ditch on each

side. 'Crafty bastards!' he fumed as he slipped back behind the wheel, snapped on his seat belt again and performed a quick three-point turn. He lined up the Rover on a section of the fence in which two of the wire strands had rusted almost through. He drew a deep breath and muttered, 'Here goes nothing!' The Rover flew off the verge into the fence. The weakened strands of wire snapped like a double whiplash, and he plunged through into the ditch beyond. He was flung up against the seat belt so violently that he thought his collar bone had broken. He ignored the pain and wrestled with the steering wheel that kicked and spun in his grip. Painfully the Rover dragged itself out of the muddy ditch, and into the open meadow beyond. He turned and ran parallel to the tarmac road. The going was muddy and treacherous. Twice he nearly bogged down, but the Rover ploughed on with mud and clods of turf thrown high from the spinning wheels. Mud splattered the windscreen until he could hardly see through it. He switched on the window washer. He passed the piles of concrete blocks on the road above him. He eased the Rover back towards the embankment, making no sudden movement of the wheel. The Rover increased speed slowly as the ground firmed. He saw that the drainage ditch was shallower here. He drove straight into it. The Rover bucked and her nose slewed from side to side but she struggled out of the far side of the ditch. Here the embankment was lower and its slope gentler. He charged up it and hit the fence above it. The barbed wire checked the Rover for a heart-stopping moment but then the fence pole snapped and the fence itself was flattened. The Rover rolled over it, and lurched onto the paved roadway. Hector spun the wheel to point her up the hill and with a grunt of relief raced for the crest over which Hazel and her pursuit had disappeared.



Hazel was only three miles from the turn-off onto the estate road that led to Brandon Hall, and with the same anticipation of a horse smelling its stable she quickened her pace. Without realizing it she began to pull away from the Mercedes van coming up behind her. She was unaware of its presence. It was her habit to use the mirror above her head more for touching up her make-up rather than for any other purpose.

The driver in his Richard Nixon mask was at the limit of his speed, but abruptly he saw the Ferrari begin to pull away from him. He knew he had to catch her before she reached the turn-off onto the Brandon Hall Estate. He opened his side window and stuck his upper body out of it. He flashed his headlights and waved one arm wildly above his head while with his other hand he blew a long blast on his horn. He saw the red brake lights on the Ferrari ahead of him glow brightly. Once again the van began to overhaul the sports car, but the van driver kept his hand on the horn and his headlights flashing.

Hazel was startled by these antics, until she realized that he was signalling her to stop . . . but why would he do that? Then she saw that the road behind the van was empty. There was no sign of Hector's Range Rover and her face paled with shock.

Something terrible has happened to Hector. The van driver is trying to warn me. Maybe Hector has crashed. Perhaps he has been hurt or . . . She could not finish the thought, it was too horrible. She hit her brakes hard and swerved onto the narrow grass verge. The van raced up behind her, still hooting and flashing its headlights. The driver grinned behind his mask as he saw that his ploy had worked, and that the woman in the red sports car was confused and alarmed by his erratic behaviour. The red car was ideally positioned for his purpose on the lip of the ditch. The barbed-wire fence had ended some distance back but the drainage ditch still ran beside the road.

At that moment the Range Rover appeared on the crest of the rise behind them. Hector took in the scene at a glance.

‘Don’t stop for the bastard!’ he screamed despairingly. ‘Keep going as fast as you can, my darling. Don’t stop, for Chrissake!’ He had his foot flat on the accelerator and as the Rover felt the downward slope it spurted forward, picking up speed rapidly. But he was still a quarter of a mile back, a helpless spectator to the developing tragedy being played out ahead of him.

The Mercedes van never slowed as it came up to the stationary Ferrari, but as it drew level the driver spun his steering wheel hard over and broadsided into her. There was a clash of steel on steel and a shower of sparks. The lighter sports car was flung over the lip into the drainage ditch; the entire right-hand side of the bodywork was deeply scored and buckled. It came to rest in the bottom of the ditch. It lay on its side with its two nearside wheels high in the air. The Mercedes van rocked wildly swaying and skidding away from the impact back towards the opposite verge. The driver skilfully countered its gyrations and, as he regained control, opened the throttle and raced away with barely a reduction in his speed.

The motorbike had been following the van closely, but now it skidded to a stop in the roadway, level with the Ferrari in the ditch. The driver remained astride the saddle holding the Honda poised for a getaway, but the passenger sprang off the pillion and raced towards the upended Ferrari. The man was quick and agile as an ape. He leapt from the lip of the ditch onto the battered right-hand side of the sports car and stood poised over the driver’s window, balancing there with both arms lifted high above his head. Only then did Hector realize that he was wielding a four-pound lump hammer. Even the shatterproof glass window could not resist the tremendous blow that he delivered from on high. The glass starred and sagged in its frame. The helmeted man lifted the hammer and swung again. This time the glass exploded into thousands of sparkling chips that showered down over Hazel. She was still in the driver’s seat, held by the safety belt around her bloated waist. She threw up her hands to protect her face from the flying glass. The man above her hurled the hammer aside and in the same movement reached for something in the cargo pocket of his leather jacket.

Hector was close enough now to the scene of the crash to see exactly what it was he pulled from his pocket. It was a Smith & Wesson pistol chambered in .22 Long Rifle and fitted with a nine-inch silencer. This was the weapon of choice of the Israeli Mossad executioners. With his free hand the gunman raised the perspex visor from his face, and he aimed the elongated barrel down through the window.

Hazel looked up at him. She saw that he was young and black. Then she realized the menace of the pistol pointed at her face and she looked over the barrel into her attacker’s eyes. His stare was flat and merciless.

‘No!’ she whispered. ‘Please. I am having a baby. You mustn’t do this. My baby . . .’ She raised her hands to protect her face. The man’s expression did not change and he fired. The silenced weapon made almost no sound. It was just a soft, almost polite pop. Then the man looked up and saw Hector’s Range Rover bearing down on him. There was no time for a second shot, but he was a pro, and he knew the first had done the business. He spun round and jumped down off the battered bodywork of the Ferrari. As he landed, the Range Rover hit him squarely in his back. The sound of the impact was a meaty thump. His body was hurled back over the roof of the Rover. Hector never reduced his speed. He drove straight on, aiming for the man on the front seat of the Honda.

The biker tried to avoid his rush by dropping his machine hard over and opening the hand throttle wide to bring the Honda around in a tight skidding turn. He almost succeeded in avoiding the Rover’s charge. But Hector was too quick for him. He wrenched the steering sharply and managed to catch the Honda’s spinning rear wheel with the point of his front bumper. The bike cartwheeled end over end and the rider was thrown from the saddle, under the front wheels of the Rover. Both the front and the back wheels of the heavy vehicle bumped over his body. In his rear-view mirror Hector saw him lying sprawled in the roadway. His crash helmet must have protected him, for he sat up groggily. Hector

slammed on his brakes and crash changed the Rover into reverse. He shot backwards and his victim saw the big vehicle coming back at him and tried to get to his feet. Hector hit him again. He went down under the body of the Rover and Hector felt him bumping and thumping along under the chassis until he rolled out from under the front end and lay face down on the tarmac surface of the road. Hector jumped out of the Rover and ran to him. He stooped over him and in one quick motion he flicked open the buckle of his helmet, ripped it from his head and dropped it aside. Then he placed his knee between the man's shoulder blades to anchor him, pinned the back of his neck with one hand and reached around with the other to cup his chin. With one quick wrench he twisted his head almost full around. The vertebrae snapped with a sound like the breaking of a stick of dry firewood. There was a spluttering noise from the man's black leather breeches and a sharp fetid stink as his bowels voided. Hector snatched up the helmet, crammed it back on his head and buckled it in place. Then he carefully opened the visor of the helmet to expose the man's face. The police were going to ask questions. He was not going to blindside himself. He did not have to worry about leaving fingerprints; he was still wearing his leather gloves. He was desperate to get to Hazel, dreading what had happened to her, but he dared not leave a living enemy behind him. He had to clear his back. That was one of the vital laws of survival.

The gunman who had fired at Hazel was dragging his paralysed lower body along on his elbows. Obviously either his spine or his pelvis had been smashed when Hector had knocked him down, but he was still armed. Hector had to make sure of him. The hammer lay on the verge of the road where the gunman had thrown it. Hector scooped it up on the run. He hefted it as he came up behind the gunman. The man had his chin lowered onto his chest so that the helmet on his head was cocked forward. The lower part of his neck, just above the level of the C4 vertebra, was exposed. Accuracy rather than brute force were necessary to finish the job. Hector swung the hammer no more than eighteen inches but he whipped his wrist into the blow. The force of the steel head on bone jarred his grip and he heard the vertebrae break. The gunman's head dropped forward and he lay still. Hector dropped on one knee and flipped the gunman over onto his back. His visor was lifted. His eyes were wide open but unfocussed. There was a look of mild surprise on his dark Nilotic features. Hector slipped off his glove and touched the man's throat, feeling for the carotid artery. There was no pulse. Hector grunted with satisfaction, and pulled on his glove again.

'No doubt where you come from, laddie. I've seen your ilk before,' he said grimly as he glanced at the face of the corpse. He deliberately left the helmet visor open. He took a moment longer to place the shaft of the sledgehammer in the man's dead hand and squeeze his fingers closed around it. When the police studied the scene they would be unlikely to conclude that he had used the hammer to break his own neck.

Waste no more time looking for his pistol. Leave that for the police to find, he decided as he jumped to his feet and ran to the overturned Ferrari. He scrambled up onto it. He stood over the shattered window and looked down on Hazel. She was slumped over the steering wheel. He knelt quickly and reached down to cup her head in both his hands. Gently he rolled it back so he was able to see her face. With a huge lift of relief he saw that no sign of a bullet wound marred her lovely features. Her eyes were open, but they stared ahead blankly.

Concussion. He tried to rationalize her lack of reaction. *She must have hit her head when the car went over.* Then he spoke aloud. 'You are going to be okay, my baby. We'll have you out of there in a jiffy.' But still he used his teeth to pull off one of his gloves, then slipped his bare fingers down under her chin and felt for her carotid just to make certain.

'Thank you, Lord.' He felt the artery pulsing, softly but steadily under his fingers. He had to wriggle the upper half of his own body into the empty window frame to reach down to the buckle of her seat belt. He steadied her with one arm round her shoulders as he clicked open the buckle, and the

with both hands under her armpits he lifted her. She was big with the child in her and his stance on the body of the wreck was insecure, but he used all his strength to lift her dead weight. He growled with the effort, but slowly he brought her head out of the window. Her chin was lolling forward on her chest.

‘That’s my girl,’ he gasped. ‘We are nearly there. Hold tight.’ With another convulsion of every muscle in his upper body he lifted her high enough to get her swollen belly clear of the windowsill. Then he eased her into a sitting position and slipped her left arm over his own shoulders to prevent her flopping over backwards. He recovered his breath quickly, for he was still in very good physical condition despite the soft life he had lived recently. He turned his head to kiss her cheek and whispered close to her ear, ‘That’s my good brave girl.’ As he shifted his grip on her arm he saw with a jump of his own heart that her left hand was bleeding. He stared at it in trepidation until he realized that the heavy gold wedding ring on her third finger had been beaten or knocked out of shape by some powerful force. The metal had cut into her flesh and the blood oozed from the wound.

‘The bullet!’ he breathed. She must have covered her face with her hands as that swine aimed at her. The bullet must have hit the ring. It was only a light .22 calibre and it had been deflected from her face. He exulted. ‘She’s going to live. It’s all going to be all right.’

His strength came flooding back. He swung his legs over the side of the Ferrari and once he was in a sitting position he was able to work her legs out of the window and swivel her whole body round until he held her on his lap with her head cushioned against his shoulder. Then he lowered his feet to the ground and ran to the Range Rover, carrying Hazel in his arms like a sleeping child. He opened the back door and carefully laid her on the seat. He wedged the travelling blanket and the seat cushions around her to prevent her slipping onto the floor. He stood back and smiled at her, but it was a thin and desperate smile which never reached his eyes.

‘You will never know how much I love you,’ he told her, and was about to close the door when he saw something which brought his fear flooding back. A thin glistening snake of blood crawled out from under her blonde hairline and ran down her cheek, onto her chin and neck.

‘No!’ he blurted. ‘Oh God, no!’ He reached out one hand to her, but he was reluctant to touch her and discover the worst. He forced himself to do it, and he parted the golden waves of her hair. The bullet hole had been hidden beneath them. Hector brought his face close to hers and studied the wound. He was a soldier, and he had seen countless bullet wounds. His first estimate of the situation was confirmed. The light bullet must have been deflected by the heavy gold ring, but it had also been tumbled. The deflection had not been sufficient to leave Hazel untouched. The bullet had hit her high in the front of the skull. The entry wound was not a neat circular puncture but an elongated tear in her scalp. The bullet had rolled in flight and hit her sideways on.

Gently he ran his fingers back through her hair, examining her scalp. There was no sign of any exit wound. The bullet was still inside her skull; inside her brain.

He closed his eyes tightly. Yes, he was a soldier and he had seen many good men go down. But not this, never the one woman he had ever truly loved. He had thought he was tough and he had thought he could take it. But he discovered now he was not and he couldn’t. His soul quailed. His universe reeled. He braced himself. It took an enormous physical effort, but he spoke aloud to himself. ‘You stupid bastard! Standing here moping while her life bleeds away. Move! Damn you, move!’

He closed the door and ran round to the driver’s side. He clambered into the seat. The engine had stalled. He started it again. His mind was racing now. The nearest general hospital was the Royal Hampshire in Winchester. The road behind him was blocked and impassable. He calculated the quickest alternative route to reach it. It would put an extra eight miles on the journey.

Nothing else for it, he told himself grimly and gunned the Rover. He drove fast, very fast. He took his chances passing other vehicles in dangerous situations. This was nearly his downfall, but also his

ultimate salvation. He shot past a heavily laden lorry that was lumbering up a blind rise. In doing so he avoided by mere inches a head-on collision with an oncoming police car. The driver made an immediate U-turn and came after him with the siren blaring. Hector saw in the rear-view mirror the vivid blue and yellow reflective markings of the vehicle, and the peaked cap of the police driver chasing him.

‘Thank you, God!’ he breathed and pulled over immediately. The police car parked in front of him and two uniformed officers jumped out and came back to him with grim expressions. Hector lowered his window and stuck his head out. Before either of the traffic officers could speak he shouted at them.

‘My wife has been shot in the head. She is dying. You must give me an escort to Winchester Hospital A & E.’ They both paused with their grim expressions changing to consternation. ‘Here! Take a look. She is on the back seat,’ Hector insisted. The man with sergeant’s chevrons on his sleeve ran to the rear window and peered in.

‘Jesus!’ he said. ‘There is blood all over the place.’ He straightened up and looked at Hector. ‘Okay. Follow me, sir.’

‘Let your mate ride in the back with my wife. He can cushion her head from being thrown about.’ ‘Peter, you heard the man,’ the sergeant snapped, and the younger man scrambled into the back seat of the Rover.

Gently Hector helped him settle Hazel’s head onto his lap. Then he shouted to the sergeant, ‘All set. Let’s go.’ The patrol car raced away with its siren howling and Hector’s Range Rover close on its tail.

There was an ambulance parked outside the main doors to the emergency room at the hospital, but the sergeant gave it a blast with the siren and it moved off the stand hurriedly as Hector drove up. The sergeant jumped out and ran into the building. He came back almost at once leading a white-coated orderly pushing a theatre trolley. Hector helped the orderly lift Hazel’s limp body onto the trolley and cover her with a sheet.

‘Go with your wife, sir,’ the sergeant told him. ‘I’ll wait here to take your statement later. You will have to tell us how this happened.’

‘Thank you, officer.’ Hector turned and followed the trolley into the entrance. A young female doctor accosted him.

‘What happened to this lady?’

‘She was shot in the head. There is a bullet in her brain.’

‘Take the patient to X-ray,’ the doctor snapped at the orderly. ‘Tell them, I want front and side plates of the head.’ Then she glanced at Hector. ‘Are you related to the patient?’

‘She is my wife.’

‘You’re in the best place, sir. The consulting neurosurgeon from London is here today. I will ask him to come to examine your wife as soon as he can.’

‘Can I stay with her?’

‘I am afraid I have to ask you to wait until she has been to X-ray and until the neurosurgeon has examined her.’

‘I understand,’ Hector said. ‘You will be able to find me outside with the police. They want to take a statement from me.’

Hector spent the next half-hour with the police sergeant sitting in the front seat of the police car. The officer’s name was Evan Evans. Hector gave him directions to the scene, and a brief description of the nature of the attack.

‘I was trying to defend my wife from the assailants,’ Hector explained, but he was careful not to give too many details. As far as the law was concerned he had committed a double murder. He had to have time to think his cover story through. ‘I drove my Range Rover into their motorcycle and I think both the riders were injured. I did not have time to attend to them. I was most anxious to get my wife

under proper medical care.'

'I can understand that, sir. I will phone my headquarters immediately and have them send a vehicle to the scene. I am afraid they will have to impound your wife's car for a full forensic examination.' Hector nodded his understanding, and the sergeant went on, 'I know you will want to be with your wife now, but we shall require a full written and signed statement from you as soon as possible.'

'You have my home address and my mobile phone number.' Hector opened the car door. 'I will be available any time you need me. Thank you, Sergeant Evans. When my wife recovers, a great deal of the credit for that will go to you.'

As he walked back into the hospital the young doctor hurried to meet him.

'Mr Cross, the neurosurgeon has examined your wife and her X-ray plates. He would like to speak to you. He is still with Mrs Cross. Come with me, please.'

The neurosurgeon was in a screened examination cubicle bending over Hazel's supine figure, which was still on the trolley. He straightened up as Hector entered the cubicle and came to meet him. He was a handsome middle-aged man. He had the self-assured air of one both intelligent and highly competent; a master of his craft.

'I am Trevor Irving, Mr . . . ?'

'Cross. Hector Cross. How is my wife, Mr Irving?' Hector cut across the pleasantries.

'The bullet has not exited.' Irving was just as business-like. 'It's lying in an extremely delicate position, and there is bleeding. It must be removed, and at once.' He pointed to the backlit X-ray plate on the scanner beside Hazel's bed. The dark shadow of the tiny round-nosed projectile stood out boldly against the soft billows of brain tissue that surrounded it.

'I understand.' Hector averted his eyes. He didn't want to look at that terrible harbinger of her death.

'There is a complication in that your wife is pregnant. How far along is she?'

'Forty weeks. She was examined by her gynaecologist this morning.'

'I thought it might be that far advanced,' Irving said. 'The foetus will be dangerously distressed by the mother's surgery. If we lose her, we might lose her child with her.'

'You have to save my wife at all costs. She is the one who bloody counts.' Hector's tone was savage. Irving blinked.

'They both bloody count, Mr Cross. And don't you bloody forget that.' His tone matched Hector's.

'I apologize unreservedly, Mr Irving. Of course I did not mean that. My only excuse is that I am distraught.'

Irving recognized in Hector Cross a man who did not back down easily. 'I am going to do my utmost to save both of them, mother and child. However, we will need your permission for Doctor Naidoo here to immediately remove the child by Caesarean section using a spinal block anaesthetic. Only then can I proceed to remove the bullet.'

He turned to the other physician in the cubicle, who came forward to shake Hector's hand. He was a young Indian man but there was almost no trace of an accent as he said, 'The baby is still in very good condition. Caesarean section is a very simple procedure. There is almost no danger involved and neither your wife nor your child will be traumatized.'

'All right, then. Do it. I'll sign any piece of paper you need,' Hector said. He felt as cold as his voice sounded in his own ears.



A nurse conducted Hector to a hospital waiting room. There were half a dozen other people there

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