

PART ONE THE HAMMERTON CURSE

CHAPTER ONE

THE GIRL struggled, tried to fight off her rising panic as well as the man who held her, but he pulled her back. She swung wildly at him screaming her fear and frustration. 'Let go of me, Steve. I want to look.'

'No.' He spoke firmly, a silhouette against the starlight of a warm August night. 'That's one thing I'm not going to allow you to do.'

'But he might still be ... alive.' Her voice tailed off in a tremble of hopelessness. She knew there was no way her father could still live, in the same way that she had known that there could have been no hope for her brother, Justin, when she had seen the photographs in the papers of his mangled burned-out car on the Le Mans track less than a month ago. And now this!

Lee Hammerton did not try to break free now, just accepted the inevitable and stared into the night until she was able to make out the shape of the huge baler, a robot made by Man; stronger than Man. Ruthless if it got out of control, a hungry carnivorous beast if you under-estimated it, got in its way.

The machine was still running, a clanking monster that seemed to be laughing in its own mechanical way, grinding its teeth. It had fed but still it was hungry.

'He might not ... be in there,' she said weakly.

The tall, fair-haired man sighed, wished that he could tell a convincing lie but it was pointless. The police and the

doctor would be here any minute and then every detail would have to be revealed. Nobody would be able to hide anything no matter how gruesome. Lee would have to face the truth then.

'He's in there.' Steve Kilby looked down at the girl: even in shocked terror she was beautiful, had a man wanting her no matter what. The long dark hair was tangled, her perfect features white and streaked with tears. Her bottom lip was bleeding where she had bitten it but you still wanted to kiss her, to hold her close, tell her that everything was going to be OK even though you knew it wasn't. You didn't give a damn whether or not Craig Hammerton had been baled into a pulped bloody square of flesh and bone or not, because his daughter still lived and that was all that mattered. You'd fake grief and make a good job of it for her sake.

'Clyde found him.' Kilby was afraid she might slip his hold and go and see for herself. There's no point in either of us looking. We'd better get back. There's nothing we can do.'

'No!' Defiant as always. Lee Hammerton's mind was made up. She was staying. A thought crossed her mind, one that had her stomach knotting and brought on a desire to be violently sick: I'm the boss now that Daddy's gone, and Justin, too. A millionairess. I give the orders, everybody else has to obey them. Kilby isn't just my lover nor my chief driver. He's my servant. Clyde, too.

'All right, we'll stay until the others get here.' Kilby tried to edge her a yard or so back but she held her ground.

'How could it have happened?' Suddenly she felt calmer, more logical. 'Daddy wasn't driving the baler. He wouldn't want to, anyway.'

'I don't know, but accidents happen when you least expect them.' It sounded trite but if anybody mentioned suicide then it had to be the police. 'I guess your father must have gone on a tour of inspection of his farms, maybe wondering how the harvest had gone, and he got curious and tinkered with the baler when there was nobody around.'

They fell into an uneasy silence. This was one night when they didn't want to be alone out here in the fields, a late summer night that no longer smelted of honeysuckle and wild flowers. Just death. A chill breeze had sprung up and Kilby felt his flesh goosepimpling. Maybe it had been just an accident; he couldn't think of any reason why Craig Hammerton would want to kill himself, not with all his millions. He felt embarrassed, too, because he couldn't think of anything to say to Lee and maybe she was expecting him to say something. After all, he was her lover. Or was he? There were rumours, stories of other men in her life, that he'd shut his ears to. She was in the driving seat right now; she only had to snap her fingers and she could have what she wanted. John Clyde would write out the cheques and Lee Hammerton would sign them. She didn't need money, only what it bought.

The baler shuddered suddenly and cut out. A faint whirring noise, a propeller gradually losing its momentum. Then silence. She clung to him tightly so that he could feel her breasts heaving, small firm mounds of flesh that he had once fondled and kissed. Hallowed Hammerton breasts that money couldn't buy.

'It's . . . it's the . . . the curse again, isn't it, Steve? The Hammerton Curse!' Her voice was a cracked whisper that he scarcely recognised.

That's silly talk. A legend that has been embroidered over the years and . . . '

'No, it isn't.' She looked up at him and he read the fear in her expression, a terror that was eating deep into her. 'My ancestor, Jasper Hammerton, was killed in an almost identical accident two hundred years ago . . . beheaded by a careless farmworker scything corn. And in the same month his son was killed when his horse threw him and trampled him! And his daughter Edwina . . . ' She began to sob.

'Don't think about them.' He kissed her forehead. 'They're dead and gone centuries ago and there's no way of knowing how they really died.'

'Oh yes, there is! It's all written down in the parish records. You can read it for yourself in the church if you don't believe me.'

'And what about Edwina?' Kilby wished in the same second that he hadn't asked.

'Edwina got herself pregnant by the groom.' There was no mistaking the note of contempt in her voice. 'And that was when mongrel blood infiltrated the Hammerton line. She died in childbirth but in her death throes she cursed the Hammertons, that future generations should experience the tragedies that they went through. And my God, Steve, she was right. Just look what's happened to us now.'

Kilby thought she was on the verge of hysteria, wondered whether he ought to slap her, and drag her forcibly from this field of violent death. But even as he hesitated twin shafts of brilliant white light swung across the landscape, focused on them like the principal actors in the final act of a tragic play, held them for the audience to dwell upon their trauma. Kilby turned his head, saw the close-set headlights of the old Series I Land Rover, more vehicles following on behind, bumping their way across the uneven stubble.

'Here's Clyde,' he said, and added, 'and the police, too.'

Lee Hammerton stood watching in a daze as the Land Rover and three cars came to a halt, figures getting out, the engines maybe left running purposely so that she wouldn't be able to hear what was being said. John Clyde was pointing towards the baler; she knew what he was saying. 'He's in there, baled into a neat little square so that you wouldn't recognise what he was. He'll have to be scraped out.'

She turned away, retched, shook off Kilby's hand and he didn't clutch at her again. She was the boss now and if she wanted to go across there and look nobody could stop her. But she didn't want to look. Jesus, it wasn't as though she and the old man were close. If you looked at it realistically he had been a right bastard most of his life, long before her mother had died fifteen years ago. All he'd ever thought about was women, the flat slob! And motor-racing, a kind of prestige symbol. He'd wanted to win the IROC and put the name of Hammerton amongst the elite, that way the women would fawn around him. But he didn't have to go out there on the circuit and risk his neck. Instead he sent Justin. And now maybe Kilby, except that Steve wasn't quite in that class. Lambs to the slaughter, sacrifices to the Hammerton idol. Oh Christ, it was bloody funny when you thought about it, the great Craig Hammerton ignominiously sliced up and compressed into a chunk of unrecognisable raw meat, going out as small as he had come into the world. She hadn't loved him, she'd hated him, feigned adoration because in the end she knew it would bring her what she had now. And Justin hadn't been any better. She started to laugh aloud, heard herself above the drone of the idling engines.

'Stop it!'

Lee recoiled, almost lost her balance as the flat of Steve Kilby's hand hit her across the face.

'Damn you. Damn you, Steve Kilby!' Subconsciously she tasted blood in her mouth. 'Don't you ever dare touch me again, for any reason!'

The hands reaching out for her checked. Surprise on his face because he suddenly realised that she wasn't hysterical, just coldly ruthless. Even the fear in her eyes was temporarily gone, replaced by a fury that had him backing off.

'I'm sorry. I . . . ' He licked his lips, glanced away and saw a number of figures had clambered up onto the stationary baler.

'If I want to laugh I'll bloody well laugh.' She spoke softly, words that were loaded with venom yet barely audible. 'You've had it too easy, Steve, and from this moment on there are going to be a number of changes around here. And don't go pushing your luck. I'm going to win the IROC, not because Craig Hammerton would have wanted it that way but because that's the way I want it. And remember you're a

driver, not the driver. I'll find the man I want to win the championship, you mark my words. Now I'm going back to the house. It's well past midnight and I need my sleep. Tell Clyde I'm not to be disturbed until morning.'

Steve Kilby stood and watched her walk away until she was lost in the darkness beyond the glare of the headlights. Now it was his turn to feel the nausea rising up in him, and not just because of what had happened to Craig Hammer-ton. In those few moments Lee Hammerton had undergone a frightening change, almost as though the girl whose bed he had shared had died alongside her father in the baler and a reincarnation had materialised in her shapely body without any physical change.

And now it was Steve Kilby's turn to experience fear, a mounting inexplicable terror that was eating into him like a fast-growing cancer. It had suddenly gone very cold and he shivered.

CHAPTER TWO

SLADE HAD not exceeded thirty-five m.p.h. for the last ten miles. Even on the wide straight stretches of country roads, the heather a deep purple in the sunshine, his foot pressure did not increase on the throttle. A steady trundling. An articulated Foden overtook him, a gesture of impatience on the part of its driver as he cut in abruptly, forcing Slade to drop down to thirty. The lorry picked up speed, forging ahead. Slade kept the Cortina at thirty, no incentive to move back up to thirty-five again.

His lean suntanned face, beneath the two-week-old growth of beard, was expressionless, vacant. Short cropped hair, a hand habitually left the steering wheel and brushed away non-existent strands that had once hung below his collar, an aggravation at times, but fashionable. Everything had had to be fashionable up until recently, casual clothing that all went to create the image, a personality that required a certain amount of uniformity which was at once recognisable and acceptable in a harsh world of glamour. One pandered to the media, to the public, presented oneself in accordance with their ideas. Hero-worship, somebody they could identify with. Film stars, television personalities, footballers . . . racing drivers.

A faint smile momentarily crossed Mark Slade's features, but it was mirthless. Irony perhaps, maybe a touch of regret. Right now he did not even understand his own feelings. An instinct beyond his comprehension urged

him to blend himself into the jungle of convention that existed around him. The majority of his fellow beings accepted a routine, mundane existence. They did things because they had to, because they were forced to do so in order to survive, a mode of life totally in contrast to the inner personality of every individual, but they overcame it by a submergence, an acceptance, or perhaps by fantasy that would never materialise into reality. Occasionally, the odd one made the effort to climb out of the rut, a brief show of some previously hidden talent, perched precariously on a pedestal above their fellows. Some made it, remained there, if only for a brief spell, then toppled back, clinging to a few precious memories. Fantasies again, dreaming of what might have been.

Slade understood better than most. He'd made it, right to the top. Almost. Second placing in the International Race of Champions at Daytona, beaten by half a length. He was tipped to win it next time, a World Champion on the verge of greatness, a man alone standing out above millions. An idol.

But there would be no next time. A kind of suicide. Driving back into the world of convention from which he had risen. A total reversal.

His thoughts turned to the Chevy Camaros, gutted and rebuilt according to individual specifications, tuned for speeds of 160 m.p.h., perhaps more, Stock-car and Indianapolis drivers claiming supremacy over their Grand Prix rivals, equally matched in Formula One racing, fighting it out for the number one placing. Not just for money, either, but for something that meant a great deal more to the one who finished first. Slade knew he could have done it next time, except. . . With an effort he pushed all thoughts of Formula One from his mind. Somehow he had to get it all out of his system, in the same way that an alcoholic would refuse a half-pint of shandy, fighting every inch of the way, an inveterate smoker tossing a packet of cigarettes into a litter bin, steeling himself to walk on past the nearest tobacconist's shop.

Slade compromised. Somehow he had to divorce himself from cars. The Cortina presented him with the ideal opportunity to make a start. He pressed down on the seat-adjustment lever, pushing against the back-rest with his powerful shoulders. With some reluctance the seat slid back to the furthest notch. The controls were still well within his reach, but not comfortably. That meant that he would continue to drive steadily instead of hunching over the wheel and succumbing to instincts which even a man who has lost his nerve on the track cannot entirely suppress. A lazy pose that defied speed.

Thirty m.p.h. Constant. Three cars and another lorry overtook him. He sensed their annoyance at his own performance; impatience, muttered curses. He smiled to himself. It was going to be a long process, but he would make it all the way back to the very bottom. Just another motorist cluttering up the overcrowded roads. Or staying at home like a hermit. The choice was his.

The Cortina. Totally in contrast to everything which he had driven for the past five years. A 2000 XL Estate. Power, a status symbol to the average man who had not quite made it to the Jag or Mercedes faction. Another step up the social ladder for some, but several rungs down for Slade.

A lumbering giant, the way he was driving it. Three years old, 50,000 miles on the clock. Some rust on the sills. A broken window-winder, a rip in the upholstery on the back seat. The pistons were knocking a bit. He didn't give a damn. He hated cars. He kept on silently reminding himself of that fact.

He slowed down still further, moved over to the middle of the road, and turned right by an impressive looking hotel, subconsciously noticing the sign on the adjacent car park which requested patrons to 'park prettily'. The phrase appealed to his declining sense of humour, so starkly removed from circuit regulations. A request, not an order.

The car shuddered, still in top gear. That pleased him even more, a sure sign that he was returning to the realm of the average motorist. He should have changed down into third, maybe second. The omission had been deliberate although he refused to admit it.

Parked cars, some two or three feet from the kerb, as he took the road on the right. Lack of forethought and consideration for other motorists. He would become like that eventually, too.

The narrow winding road headed out into remote countryside, thickly wooded hills on either side. He took a fork to the left; now the roads were narrower, snaking bends, and twice he had to pull well over

to the left in order to avoid oncoming cattle-trucks. More shuddering, the engine labouring, and as the lanes began to rise sharply he was forced down into second gear. High hedges obscured his view on either side, not that he was interested in panoramic scenery. Mark Slade wasn't interested in anything in particular.

The lanes narrowed still more, and he was compelled to remain in second gear. No room for oncoming vehicles to pass. He remembered those two trucks, the speed at which they had been travelling . . . blind bends. A clammy hand wiped the sweat from his forehead. One thing was a certainty. He had lost his nerve, all right. Daytona or out here, it was all the same.

On through a small village, half-timbered houses, many in need of restoration, a brook rushing down the side of the road. Houses on one side, a hedge, fields, hills on the other. The muddy lane rose even more sharply once he was clear of this place of semi-primitive civilisation. Life was all so easy for some people. Sheep, a few crops, nothing else. Boredom, but they accepted it, something which he would have to learn to do also.

A nasty 'S' bend in the midst of a massive larch forest. He took it at ten m.p.h. His training had taught him to go into a bend slowly, and come out of it fast. He simply drove slowly. To hell with techniques. They counted for nothing up here.

Down past a couple of farms, the lane following a course between two barns. Rising even more sharply now. He engaged bottom gear. He could see over the hedges in places, through gaps in others. Golden fields led up to the lush dark green of Forestry Commission plantations. Stocked corn, so beautifully primitive. These lanes were not wide enough to admit a combine-harvester, anyway. He wondered how long it would remain that way before some progress-minded councillor put forward road-widening schemes.

The lane had levelled out now. A towering forest on his right, an unrestricted view of distant mountain peaks beyond the valley on his left, a perfect blend of green, purple, and brown, offset by infrequent patches of golden stubble.

Life could be very good up here once one adapted. That was the only problem. To Slade it presented even greater difficulties than winning the IROC. He was determined to make it somehow, though.

Then he saw his own place, standing on a kind of crossroads, the way he had come, the road leading down to the nearest village straight ahead, a left turn that headed somewhere in the direction of those distant mountains, and a rough unsurfaced track on the right up into the forestry. 'Crossways'. Mark Slade was certainly at a crossroads.

Once it had been a farmworker's cottage. Probably before that it had been a barn or a stable. Various extensions and renovations by the previous owner had transformed it into what the estate agent had described as a 'cottage residence of exquisite beauty with panoramic views'. Low ceilings, oak beams, recently whitewashed exterior walls, and a quarter of an acre of triangular-shaped garden, the latter in need of some attention. Mark Slade had already contemplated taking up gardening. The idea did not appeal, but, nevertheless, it was yet another challenge of the right kind. Escapism.

He did not drive straight into the lean-to garage, but instead left the Cortina parked on the adjacent forestry track. In the three weeks during which he had sampled life as a recluse here he had never known a vehicle to use that route. Two or three a day, maybe, on the surfaced roads, mostly tractors and Land Rovers to and from the farms lower down.

As he switched off the engine he heard for the first time the mechanical whirring and clanking sound, slowing down, then dying away. His experience located the source of the trouble at once. The heater fan was on the verge of packing up. Good, Chevy Camaros designed for Formula One did not have heaters. Anything, the slightest thing which was in contrast to his former life pleased him. Especially this clapped-out Cortina.

It was as he was fitting his key into the front door that he heard the telephone ringing inside the house. The unexpected harsh jangling caused him to stiffen momentarily. Telephones, too, had been a large part of his world of so-called glamour. This one was already installed when he had moved in. He should have instructed the GPO engineers to disconnect it. Anyway, who the hell knew he was living here? He had taken steps to fade into obscurity. His name certainly wouldn't be in the directory.

The lock was stiff, or maybe it was the key that was bent. It took him a couple of minutes to gain entry, and just as he closed the door behind him the phone stopped ringing. A sigh of relief mingled with natural curiosity. He shrugged his shoulders. Probably it was somebody trying to contact the last owner. If so, they would ring again. He dismissed the matter from his mind. There were chores to be done. Fires had to be made and lit, food prepared, rooms cleaned ... all foreign to his nature, but he'd learn. The hard way. He would not seek help from anybody. If it was offered he would spurn it. Politely at first, of course. But it had to be a lone battle. All the way. Every house, every man needs a woman. He tried to find an alternative to that one as he filled a glass with water from the tap in the sink, reached down a small brown bottle from the shelf above, shook out a tiny yellow tablet, and swallowed it. Valium 5. Three times a day. Possibly a third of the population existed on them. Their reasons over-work, family and business pressures, something to help ease a routine of boredom. At least those were the reasons Slade had given the doctor. Hell, how else could he have explained it? 'Fact is, Doc, I've just lost my nerve. Can't face the track again.' He knew it, but he would never be able to put it into words.

Few people admit to losing their nerve over anything, even to themselves. A steeplejack takes a motorway construction labouring job and tells everybody that it's because he earns more money that way. The only person he doesn't succeed in kidding is himself. He'll never do that. He fears that one day he'll step off a piece of scaffolding and drop seventy feet to the concrete below. Likewise Slade had lied to Stern, his manager. Seamark, too. All lies.

'My contract finished at Daytona. I've made my pile. I'll never spend it if I live it up for the rest of my days. That's why I'm quitting.'

Persuasion. Pleading. Cursing. Ill-feeling on both sides, but they still wanted him back. He hadn't the guts to tell them that before every race he was scared that it might be his last. He had seen better drivers than himself burned to a cinder in a heap of crumpled, twisted metal. Cremated within a matter of minutes, rescue-teams and ambulancemen helpless. Christ, he might not even make it to the finals at Daytona. It could happen in the qualifying rounds at Riverside. Or even on the Seamark circuit. Anywhere. These lanes, a speeding Land Rover. All over in seconds. God, he hated cars. Even that bloody run-of-the-mill Cortina.

He studied his reflection in the mirror on the kitchen wall, stroking his new growth of dark beard, amazed to note flecks of grey already evident amongst the stubble. Thirty-three. According to the so-called allotted life span of three score years and ten he was practically half-way there. Middle-aged. He hadn't thought of it that way before. And so far he hadn't started to live. Well, this was it, the beginning of life, right here in these remote hills. The beard, the cropped hair, a new approach, fresh thinking, new ideals that all added up to one thing. Mark Slade, racing idol, was dead. In his place was just an ordinary guy whom people in the streets would scarcely glance at a second time. That was the way it would be from now on. He might even change his name by deed-poll.

He settled for a scratch meal of corned beef and baked beans. Sometime he would have to learn to cook properly. The idea was not attractive to him, but his determination would overcome it. Perhaps it was something else at which he would eventually attempt to attain perfection. Cordon bleu, another Daytona. The ultimate. Something more to chicken out of when it was within his reach?

As he ate, his thoughts turned to Yvonne. He knew he would never be able to get her off his mind . . . ever. That was the way with racing drivers, another occupational hazard. One got through wives like sets of tyres. They couldn't stand the pace. Husbands away from home for long periods, other women fawning on their idols.

Temptations on both sides. Yvonne had never taken a lover whilst Mark had been away. Perhaps it would have been better if she had. There was no way of knowing. AH too often fidelity does not make a marriage work. Slade had had other women, though. Zoe in the States had given him everything that his physical needs demanded. She would not have made the marital grade, though. He wouldn't have wanted her, anyway.

His gaze rested on the framed photograph which stood on the oak Welsh-dresser. Yvonne was twenty-three then. She hadn't changed any, not since the last time he had seen her, eleven months ago. That was when she had presented him with the ultimatum. Quit racing or else. He couldn't make up his mind then. Two loves, and he had had to make his choice. Yvonne or Daytona. Maybe he hadn't taken her seriously. When he returned to England it was too late. She knew all about his affair with Zoe, and she had put the wheels of divorce proceedings into action right away. No real animosity. Just a woman who had been hurt deeper than she could stand. Hell, if only he'd lost his nerve earlier. At least he'd still have a wife. The divorce had gone through; all too easy these days. Time was not on his side. She'd never disclosed how she had learned about his adultery, but Slade had his own ideas. That bastard Stern. Seamark, too. They wanted the IROC. It would put Seamark Cruises on the map and to hell with Slade. He'd get his cut, but only a fraction in comparison with theirs. Probably that was his only small crumb of satisfaction from opting out. Sure, they'd find another driver, but not of Slade's calibre. They had until February to sort it out. It was almost worth a visit to the States to watch them lose, maybe not even qualify at Riverside. Hell, no. He wasn't going to go near a circuit again. It was all over.

He had phoned Yvonne once and told her that he was thinking of quitting. It was too late, though. She had somebody else. A widower. A bank manager, ten years older than herself. But she also had something which she had never ever had before. Security. No more weeks, months of loneliness. No more wondering whether or not her husband would come out of each race alive, trembling every time she watched the television, rushing to the telephone with anxiety in her heart every time it rang.

Slade was bitter, but he hoped that she would make a go of it. That was the very least he owed her. He didn't hate the banker. He just envied him.

The day dragged on. There were chores to be done, but they could wait until the morrow, or the day after. He had all the time in the world now.

Each evening he went and stood in the small conservatory which faced west. From here he had an unrestricted view of the distant mountains. A setting sun was something comparatively new to him. He had overlooked it for thirty-three years, taking the elements for granted, his only concern being the condition of the track before a race. He hated rain more than anything else. It was a killer. He would never be able to regard it as anything else. Even up here it depressed him.

Yet, the magnificent splendour of those mountain sunsets enthralled him. Something so big, something

beyond the control of mankind. An aura of beauty, a hint of power that was far greater than either Stern or Seamark. The latter with his multi-million backed company was just as other mortals when it came to the crunch. Out here they were nothing. These farmers were real men, learning to live with the wind in their teeth.

Slade stood with the conservatory door open, breathing in the freshness of the mountain air, filling his lungs, expelling it slowly. Something else which he had missed out on. So natural, so different from the tearing, whipping winds on a race-track.

The sun sank lower and lower. Soon it would be hidden behind the nearest range of peaks. Already one or two stars were beginning to twinkle in the cloudless sky. Dusk came so gradually out here. One scarcely noticed it until it was almost dark, especially a man who had turned his back on an artificial world where neon-lighting predominated. Slade thought of Las Vegas. Night or day, it made no difference there, a place to which he vowed he would never return. That had been Zoe's home. He wondered whether she would have appreciated it out here. More than likely not. She hadn't that kind of grit.

A steady droning sound from all around. These hill-farmers worked a natural day. Dawn till dusk. They were still harvesting, taking advantage of the current spell of fine weather. Tomorrow it might rain. Slade hoped that it would not. Perhaps when he had lived here long enough he would be able to read the weather signs in the sky the way these locals did. This was just the beginning of his new life.

Darkness fell, and still he stood there. No longer was he able to discern the distant mountains. The hum of tractors ceased. The day was over. A scent assailed his nostrils which at first he was unable to recognise. It was vaguely familiar. Finally, he realised what it was. Woodsmoke, drifting up from the valley on the evening breeze; pine logs. No central-heating systems here. He had taken a step back in time, too.

Then came the silence. Not even the sound of a tractor and trailer on its way home. Twinkling lights from isolated farms and cottages scattered in this area of borderland.

Slade was reluctant to go back inside the house. The atmosphere was much colder now. Perhaps there would be a slight frost. Yet it did not even cause him to shiver. It was all so fresh and wonderful, the opening up of a new existence.

The telephone rang again with harsh reality, reminding him that even out here connections with the world from which he had fled were not totally severed. It continued to ring.

His first inclination was to ignore it. More than likely it was the previous caller trying again. Slade had no idea where the former owner of Crossways lived now. He did not care. It would be pointless answering the call. On the other hand, whoever it was would pester him with further calls until he answered it.

With a sigh of regret he went back inside, closed the door, and lifted the receiver.

'Slade?'

The voice, distorted by distance and mountain telephone cables, was only too recognisable. Slade tensed, every nerve in his body tautening.

'Stern.'

There was a harsh note of unwelcome in the former racing driver's tone, a tightening of his lips, an urge to slam the receiver back on its cradle. Yet curiosity prevailed. He knew only too well what Seamark's racing-team manager wanted, but he felt himself compelled to listen. A last throw on Seamark's part, more harsh words, and then it would all be over for good. In no way would Mark Slade ever return to the circuits.

'I rang earlier.' A hint of annoyance, presumption. Stern had always expected everyone to jump to his immediate command, almost as though Slade should have sat by the telephone in anticipation. No, the implication was that the driver should have made the call in the first place.

'How the hell did you find me?'

'I made enquiries.'

Slade let it pass. Stern would not reveal the source of his information. It was pointless pursuing the matter.

'I heard the phone ringing.' Slade seized upon the earliest opportunity to provoke the other. 'I just let it ring. That's my policy now. I'm going to contact the engineers tomorrow. Get 'em to take it out. I don't need it. I've no calls to make, and I don't anticipate receiving any, either.'

'You're bloody crazy, Mark.'

'That's my privilege.'

Slade was tempted to slam the receiver down. There was no point, though. Stern would only ring again. Persistently. He was another, like Slade himself, who never gave up. Never took no for an answer. Well, this was one time he would have to.

'Daytona is only next February. The Riverside rounds begin in January. There isn't much time.'

'So what?'

'What d'you mean, "so what"? You can't lay off much longer, Mark. You've got to get behind the wheel again pretty quick. Martin tested a car yesterday. A Chevy, tuned to the specifications laid down. He clocked 170. We can do it this time, Mark. No doubt about that.'

'Let Martin drive at Daytona, then.'

'Don't be fucking stupid. He's fine on a test-run. No competition experience, though.'

'Well, start training him. He's got the makings of a top-class IROC driver.'

'We don't bloody well want Martin to drive at Daytona. There isn't time, anyway. He hasn't the experience, maybe not the nerve when it comes to the real thing.'

Mark Slade sighed audibly. When would everybody stop talking about nerve? He contemplated telling Stern the truth, changed his mind. No, he'd taken his last bow in his own way. Conned everybody.

'I've made my pile.'

To hell with that. Your contract. . . '

'My contract ended with Seamark the moment I crossed the finishing line at Daytona last year. You know that as well as I do. Same goes for all the perks. I've put paid to the after-shave advert by growing some face-fungus.'

'Let me finish, will you?' Stern was becoming angry. There was also a note of frustration in his voice. Slade enjoyed that. He could visualise the other's pencil-line moustache twitching, uneven teeth scraping the lower lip the way it always did when Stern failed to get his own way. He fawned on Seamark, and that gave him a sense of power. Basically, that was what it was all about. Power.

'There's nothing more to say. I've said it all. Take it or leave it.'

'Just listen, damn you!' Harsh, abrupt, an order, but still Slade did not replace the receiver. 'We know your contract ended at Daytona last year. We've drawn up a new one. A hundred and fifty grand, two hundred if you win. Seamark's already signed it. It only needs your signature. . . '

'Sorry, nothing doing. I wouldn't be interested if it was a million. Like I've already said, I've made my bread. So you'd better start training Martin up.'

'You've got to. . . '

'I don't have to do anything any more that I don't want to.'

'We'll sue you.'

'Now you're really talking crap. You've got no comeback on me.'

'You'll drive at Daytona.'

'No chance.'

'OK, so you've made your pile.' A sudden change of attitude. Forced tact. An attempt at persuasion. Stern fawned on Seamark. Now he was trying it on Slade. 'Seamark's been good to you, Mark. A hell of a lot better than most sponsors. Without them you could still be just testing. I reckon you owe it to us.'

'I owe you nothing, Stern. Nor Seamark. Just the reverse. Seamark Cruises owes me something that they can never repay.'

'Oh, yeah, and what's that?'

'A wife. The best woman I ever had.*'

A pause. Pregnant silence.

'You know how fickle women are, Mark, as well as I do.' A faint sigh from Stern. 'I've had two wives leave me. Personally, I don't want another. But that's no reason to chuck the sponge in. Win the International Race of Champions at Daytona, and you can have the pick of the women in almost any country in the world. Damn it, man, one woman's much the same as another.'

That was when Mark Slade finally slammed the receiver down. Anger seethed inside him, then came to

the boil as his gaze rested once more on that photograph on the Welsh-dresser.

A fit of frenzy seized him. His hands closed over the nearest object, a bulky telephone directory. His arm went back, then forward, flinging the heavy book with all his force at the opposite wall. A dull thud. He stood there, trembling. Seamark. Stern. He wondered if he would ever be able to push them out of his life. Demanding. Enticing. The one lure, money. Everything revolved around money. It bought power.

Except Yvonne. She was the only person who could not be bought. Not even Seamark Cruises, with all its subsidiary companies, could get her back for him.

He calmed down somewhat, switched out the light, and stretched himself out on the sofa. Sleep would not come easily tonight. There was little point in bothering to go upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS well after ten o'clock the following morning when Mark Slade awoke. His limbs ached after a night spent in a cramped position on the sofa. His head throbbed, his neck was stiff, and there was a sour taste in his mouth.

Sunlight streamed in through the latticed windows. He made no attempt to rise. There was nothing to get up for, anyway. From now onwards one day would be much the same as another. Sometimes it would be sunny, sometimes it would rain. That was the only difference. Yet, this was what he had sought, and he was not prepared to discard it. It was all a matter of adjustment. It would take time.

It was midday before he finally roused himself, went through to the kitchen, and performed a few perfunctory ablutions. His headache persisted, the kind which one awoke with and endured for the remainder of the day. He stepped outside, and stood looking at the scenery again. Sheer magnificence. It had a kind of hypnotic effect upon him, as though he could stand and view it, day after day, for the rest of his life without tiring. The steady hum of distant tractors providing soothing background music, like a documentary film on television without the accompaniment of a human voice.

He remembered that the Cortina was still parked on the forestry road. The thought of driving it into the garage did not appeal to him. It could stay there until he needed it again, or somebody requested him to move it. He envied those farmers on their tractors. No speed, no competitive atmosphere. They probably assisted each other with mechanical repairs when one of the machines broke down. That spirit did not exist in the racing world. It never had, and it never would. It was every man for himself. Worse. A dog-eat-dog attitude. Survival of the fittest.

He turned his attention to the garden. It would need tidying up before the winter set in. There were some tools in the shed at the bottom of his land where the apex of the triangle terminated in a half-grown Scots

pine, a tree that had weathered a decade of winters. It would still be there in three or four decades time, bigger, stronger. Slade wondered where he would be then.

The idea of winter appealed to him. The snow would drift up in these hills, blocking the narrow lanes, perhaps for weeks at a time. Total isolation. Even Seamark and Stern would not be able to reach him then. Today he would give instructions for the disconnection of the telephone.

His headache had subsided a little by the time he went back indoors. He boiled the kettle and made some coffee, hot and black, the way he had always been used to it. Little things like that would remain unchanged. He could do just as he liked. He felt more at peace with the world now than he could ever remember. He decided it would work out after all. No effort would be needed; just drift, let everything sort itself out.

The telephone rang. Slade tensed, his fingers tightening around the mug of coffee, threatening to crush the pottery. The harsh jangling continued. Stern or Seamark? Probably the latter, he decided. They wouldn't give up.

He crossed the room, carrying the coffee in one hand, ignored the incessant ringing, stepped outside, and closed the door behind him. The noise which had disturbed his pleasant reverie was muffled now. He walked on down the narrow path, and stopped only when he was beyond the patch of soft fruit bushes. A partially rotted rustic garden seat was set back on some broken paving slabs. Slade wondered if it would bear his weight. Hesitantly he lowered his body onto it. It creaked and swayed slightly, but held.

He sighed, sipped his coffee, and looked across at the mountains again. Only the hum of tractors came to his ears. He sensed that the phone was still ringing, but he could not hear it. That was all that mattered.

The sun was well past its zenith, moving slowly towards those western mountain peaks. It was too late to make a start on the garden now. The Cortina was still blocking the rough road leading up to the Forestry Commission plantations. But there was always tomorrow. Slade decided that that was a philosophy which he must adopt. Never do today what can be done tomorrow. A total contrast to everything which he had known hitherto. No scurrying, no mechanics working throughout the nocturnal hours in order to complete a specification to meet a deadline.

He stayed there until dusk, even then reluctant to go inside again. The total silence returned, a few lights appeared in the distance. At last he retraced his steps in the direction of the conservatory. A feeling engulfed him which he could not at first determine. It had been creeping up on him this last hour. Fear. Of what? He paused, and thought about it. Then he realised what it was. Nothing to do with cars or racing. Not directly, anyway. It was a kind of terror that emanated from one single invention of rapid communication. The telephone. Alexander Graham Bell had inflicted a curse upon certain people. Slade was one of them. He knew it would ring again. He should have phoned the engineers and insisted upon an immediate disconnection. Already he was practising his chosen philosophy. Tomorrow would do. Hell, this was one task that should have been done today. But it was too late now. Tomorrow, definitely.

9.15 pm. The telephone rang again. This time he did not even tense. It was almost a relief to hear it. Ignore it. Five minutes later it was still ringing. Maybe if he lifted the receiver, replaced it, then took it off altogether it would solve his problem. So easy. He wondered why he had not thought of it before. He stood up. Something caught his eye. That photograph. A faint hope flickered within him. No, it couldn't be. Even if Yvonne had heard of his decision, changed her mind, she wouldn't know where to contact him. Unless Seamark had worked on her, and was using her. No, she couldn't be bought at any price. Nevertheless. . .

Slade yielded to the persistent ringing, curiosity now predominating. His hand reached out, closed over the receiver, but did not lift it immediately. He had never cursed Seamark in his life. Few men had dared. A faint smile. Mentally he consulted his vocabulary of four-lettered words. He would use them all. A spate of the foulest language. Tell him what a bastard he was. He'd make Mister Big himself ring off. Victory.

Mark Slade smiled. He wished that he had not delayed. He could have settled it hours ago this way. He lifted the receiver.

'Mark Slade?'

There are times in the life of every man, however determined or verbose, when he finds himself at a total loss for words. This was one of them.

Slade had braced himself for the thick nasal tones of Seamark. His reply was building up in his own vocal chords, ready to insult the multi-millionaire, cutting off the first demand in mid-sentence. Instead, he heard the soft, cultured sound of a female voice. And it most certainly was not Yvonne on the other end of the line. Husky, sophisticated.

He caught his breath, dispelled his prepared speech, sought vainly for another to replace it.

'Mark Slade?'

'Yes . . . speaking. . . '

He sensed already that he was at a disadvantage. The element of surprise had caught him off his guard. Scores of women used to phone his Hampstead flat. Mostly teenage fans, the sound of his voice temporarily satisfying their quest for idol worship. Many rang again. More mature women had ulterior motives in contacting him. That was the part Yvonne had hated most. Now it was beginning all over again.

'My name is Lee Hammerton. I'm sorry if I've called at an inopportune moment. I tried to ring earlier in the day but there was no reply.'

'Oh, that's all right. I wasn't doing anything in particular. . . '

He realised subconsciously that he was already pandering to her. His mind was confused, dazed by the unexpectedness of it all. Lee Hammerton? The name was familiar. He should have known. Somewhere in racing circles . . . damn racing! All the same. . .

'I don't know if my name is familiar to you. Possibly you knew of my late father, Craig Hammerton. . . ?'

It clicked. Two years ago. One of the only unsponsored British teams. Riverside. They hadn't qualified. Neither machine nor driver had been quite up to standard. Good, but not good enough. Hammerton's son had been at the wheel. There had been some trouble a few months afterwards. Hammerton junior had been mixed up in some kind of scandal. Drugs. Slade couldn't recall the details. The son had tried to get back into Formula One racing. He'd been killed in an accident at Le Mans recently. The old man ... a horrific farming accident; he remembered the newspaper headlines. Fortunately, Slade had a good memory. Vague recollections just at this moment, though, trying to piece them together.

'Are you still there?'

'Oh ... er ... yes. Sorry. I was just trying to place you. I remember your father, and. . . 'He checked himself just in time.

'And my brother,' she went on. 'Justin. A frame-up and a terrible tragedy. But that's not what I rang you about. I heard you'd quit the Seamark team.'

'I've quit racing. That's why I'm living out here.'

'Oh!' Shock and disappointment. 'I . . . I didn't realise. . . '

'How did you find me?'

'It wasn't easy.'

'You're the second caller I've had in two days. I'm having the phone taken out tomorrow.'

It was as well that I called you tonight then, wasn't it?' She laughed softly, a sound that somehow reminded him of Yvonne. Perhaps that was the reason he did not bring the conversation to a close, and replace the receiver. He had no intention of discussing motor-racing. Neither did he want another woman in his life. Not yet, anyway.

'I've quit,' he repeated. 'For good.' Make it plain here and now. No compromises.

'I'm sorry.' 'I'm not.'

A slight pause. Slade still wondered why she had rung. He knew that he could not hang up until he had discovered her reason. Maybe it was a put-up job, Seamark using a woman to get through to him. 'I'm entered at Riverside in January.' Slade checked the retort which rose instantaneously. Hell! She had to be crazy. Motor-racing was no place for women.

Instead, he said, 'Continuing where your father left off, eh?'

'That's right. Or, more to the point, where Justin left off. I owe him that. The very least I owe him.' 'I admire you for it.'

'In other words you think I'm crazy, Mark.' She lapsed into using his first name as though she had known him all his life. They had never even met. Vaguely he remembered once having seen a photograph of her in a magazine. He could not recall the particular publication. An American one, certainly. A group standing around a car. Hammer-ton's car. She had caught his eye. He could not remember exactly what she looked like. Attractive, certainly. It was slowly coming back to him. He reminded himself once again that he was finished with both cars and women.

'I didn't say that.'

'No, but you thought it.'

'You don't realise what you're taking on. Building up hopes, then having them dashed. There's no glory in also-rans. You lose money, too.'

'I've got it to lose.'

'Apart from the cash you need a top-class driver with Formula One experience. You can rule me out. You also need mechanics capable of carrying out the IROC specifications, tuning the engine up to speeds of 160 m.p.h. plus. The Seamark team reckon they can top that.'

'Frank Wylie's as good a mechanic as any you'll find. I've taken on another guy, too. No doubt you know him. Chris Fogg.'

'The hell you have!' Mark Slade was unable to contain his surprise. A Seamark man. Another test-driver who might, given the opportunity, make it to the top. Might. He was good enough, but lacked certain qualities. Determination, for one. Fogg had been with Slade at Daytona last year. Now he was with Lee Hammerton. Stern hadn't mentioned anything about that. Maybe he didn't consider it important, his main task being to get Slade back. Slade wondered again whether this was all part of some intricate plot on the part of Seamark to get him back to the circuits. No possibility could be ruled out. All the same, his curiosity had to be satisfied.

'So if I don't drive for you, Fogg will, eh?'

'No. He'll work in the pits. There isn't time to prepare him for Riverside. If you won't drive for me, it'll have to be Steve Kilby. He's good. He's got a house full of trophies.'

'Maybe, but that won't count for much when it comes to Riverside. You can't compare this type of racing with Silverstone or Mallory.'

'You're putting the ball in your own court, Mark. I know you could win for me. So do you.'

The hell I could, Slade sweated at the idea. Already too much was coming back to him. The roar of bunching cars, the smell of oil, smouldering rubber, all adding up to one thing in his mind - fear!

'Sorry, Lee.' He was surprised at the ease with which he too, resorted to familiarity. 'Nothing doing. I'm sorry. But that's the way it is. I'll never drive again.'

'The money will be better than Seamark's.'

'Money doesn't bother me any more.'

'Nor a chance to beat Seamark?'

He hesitated. 'I don't give a damn for Seamark, whether they win or lose is immaterial to me. I wish you luck, though, and luck does play a large part in it. By the way, why did Chris Fogg quit the Seamark team?'

'That's not really for me to say. I wish you hadn't asked.'

Then let me tell you. He didn't want to be part of certain things which were going on. Things that go on in one helluva tot of teams, only they're a hundred times worse at Seamark.'

'You said it, not me.'

'Right enough, but I've yet to find a team that's one hundred per cent on the level. Money and power breed corruption.'

'You won't change your mind?'

'No, I'm sorry. I'm not racing again. By the way, you still haven't told me how you found me.'

'I don't think it's really that important, is it?'

'No. I guess not really.'

As he hung up Slade's eyes focused on the photograph of Yvonne. A thought crossed his mind. He asked himself a question. No, there couldn't be any tie-up. Two totally different types.

He decided to go upstairs to bed. The sofa was too cramped, and suddenly he realised that he needed an awful lot of sleep, something else he had to catch up on.

Tomorrow he would do something about getting that phone taken out.

Another bright clear day. Slade awoke earlier than on the previous morning, and a glance at his watch showed him that it was just after eight o'clock. He felt totally relaxed, refreshed, a comparatively new experience for him. He was adapting faster than he had anticipated. The slight headache which had plagued him yesterday was gone, too.

He contemplated a lie-in. There was nothing to get up for. He changed his mind. It would be a sure way to bring the headache back again.

He sat up, then swung his legs to the floor. The cool of the early morning was invigorating to his naked body. He never slept in pyjamas. That was akin to going to bed in a suit, in his opinion.

Slowly he dressed, then went downstairs and made some coffee. Somehow this morning everything seemed different. It was hard to define. An enthusiasm, but for what? There was nothing that needed to be done urgently. Except to instruct the disconnection of the telephone, of course. That must be treated as a priority. His train of thought led to Lee Hammerton. An unsolved mystery, vague recollections of a photograph in an old magazine. He had a feeling that there was a deeper reason behind her telephone call. In that case it was something that he would never learn. Stern was right in what he had said. One got through wives like sets of tyres. A harsh comparison, but it was true.

He admired Lee Hammerton for what she was doing. An awful lot of people would not take kindly to an unsponsored team, especially one owned by a female. She probably wouldn't even make her mark at Riverside. Seamark would qualify somehow; a combination of cash and a top driver. They wouldn't chance it with Martin. They had the money to lure the best. Another Mark Slade, another puppet.

Nothing would have pleased Slade more than to learn that this Hammerton girl's car had finished ahead of Seamark's. Just wishful thinking, though, there was no way. Slade wouldn't drive for her, not at any price. He had made his decision, and he wasn't going back on it. He couldn't. His ability had gone with his nerve. It wouldn't be fair to either her or to himself. There would be nothing more that Seamark and Stern would like better than to see him come in last at Riverside in the Hammerton car. Sheer degradation. It had always been his intention, even in the early days, to quit if he ever got to the very top. Go out on the crest of the wave, take his title with him. Too many tried to carry on. It was hard getting to the peak, but a damned sight harder staying there. Slade's was a sort of compromise, a near-miss. People would forget him. They wouldn't remember him for his decline, the crumbling of a fallen idol. He wondered if Yvonne still thought about him. She was bound to, but in a neutral sort of way. 'A guy I once

knew. Was married to.'

Slade went outside. He had not wished to succumb to nostalgia. The air was cold in his lungs, like an iced drink swigged too hastily.

He decided to make a start on the garden. Maybe there was a sickle in the shed, or even a pair of shears with which he could attack that bed of nettles beyond the soft fruit.

Tractors were humming in the distance. He paused halfway down the narrow path, just standing listening. A symphony, a rural orchestra. Yet . . . something spoiled the harmony. An engine. Powerful. Some distance away, but coming closer all the time. Louder. Faster. No tractor, certainly.

He altered course, and stood at the small gate in the uncut hawthorn hedge. From here he had a view of the valley below, the lanes, twisting, narrowing.

A car. In the clear atmosphere he could see it plainly although it was still a mile or so away. An Alfa Romeo. Nothing remarkable about that except that it seemed so out of place up here. A Range Rover belonging to one of the wealthier lowland farmers, perhaps visiting a less fortunate relative in the hills, would not have aroused Slade's curiosity.

Yet, it wasn't just the car. It was the way it was being driven. Recklessly, with no regard for bends nor the possibility of an oncoming vehicle. Shining red metal, power of another sort. Wealth, too.

A couple of farmworkers paused in their task of loading stocks of corn onto a decrepit trailer, and stared after the speeding vehicle with a curious intentness. An intruder.

Closer now, lost to sight for a brief moment where the road dipped down into a hollow, then it was on the last straight stretch which led directly towards Crossways. Slade watched, a sudden premonition creeping over him. Judging by that reckless hill-climb the driver should be accelerating now, taking advantage of a stretch of unrestricted vision, perhaps touching sixty or seventy, then using the gears to slow down on the approach to the crossroads.

Instead the Alfa Romeo was slowing right down. The wheels came to a standstill directly opposite the gate in the hedge, and for the first time Mark Slade was afforded a view of the driver. A woman.

Her searching glance flicked over his place, took it all in, a fleeting expression of amazement, then alighted on himself. They looked at each other in silence. Recognition was mutual, instantaneous, even though they had never met before. Photographs in magazines. His frequently. Hers once only.

Dark hair, immaculately groomed in spite of her fast driving, features that were almost perfection. Freckles in spite of the darkness of her complexion. He noted a quality of determination, endurance, in her shapely figure, effortless, unthinking adjustment to every movement as she emerged gracefully from the car, allowing the door to swing shut quietly behind her. A firm, tapering chin, an air of habitual alertness, a part of everything that comprised Lee Hammerton. She walked towards him, her posture relaxed and almost lazy, yet with a quiet confidence that did not go unnoticed.

A sudden chill ran through Mark Slade's body, and it had nothing whatever to do with the cold mountain air. For once he realised that he was at a disadvantage, a situation which had seldom occurred throughout his illustrious career, something which he had also sensed during their telephone conversation.

A tight-fitting dark blue sweater displayed her bosom far more provocatively than a low-cut dress could

have done. Levis showed off her shapely hips.

Only the rickety gate separated them. She extended a hand, long slim fingers: 'Mark Slade.' The same husky voice, cultured, pregnant with confidence. Her grip was firm.

'Lee Hammerton.' Slade's voice seemed to come from afar, a slight tremor of nervousness in it which he hoped she had not noticed. If she did, she gave no sign. 'You shouldn't have come here.'

'Shouldn't I?' Eyebrows raised, half mocking him. 'Visitors barred, are they? I'm surprised you haven't started digging a moat around your mountain refuge. A drawbridge permanently raised.'

'I'm sorry,' he apologised instinctively, sensing that he had to. 'It's just that . . . well, I told you last night you were wasting your time. I've quit racing. For good. That's final. There's no question of going back.'

'You're jumping to conclusions.' She laughed softly as he dragged the gate back and stood to one side. 'I accept your decision, regrettable as it may be. Nevertheless, I've driven hard and fast up from Hertfordshire without a stop. I hope I haven't disturbed your plans for the day.'

'I had no plans,' he replied. Those nettles could wait.

She followed him into the house.

'I could use some coffee.' She seated herself on the sofa, leaning back, her legs stretched out in front of her.

'Sure.' He switched on the kettle. 'I've only dried milk to offer you. I usually drink my coffee black.'

'So do I.' She watched his every movement.

He placed a steaming cup on the table by her elbow.

'As I've already said,' he forced an unnatural hardness into his tone, 'I've quit racing and I'm not going back. By the way, I take it you've met my ex-wife, Yvonne.'

A statement, not a question, so sudden that she could not hide the flicker of admission in her eyes. So he had been right, after all.

She nodded. He was pleased she did not attempt a clumsy lie. Had she done so everything that he had admired about her during the five minutes or so in which they had known each other would have crumbled. He sighed with silent relief. It was replaced by curiosity on his part. He waited patiently for her to speak.

'That's one of the reasons why I've come all the way up here to see you.' She looked at him closely, all her confidence seeming to have evaporated.

'I'm hoping that perhaps we shall be able to help each other. All I ask is that you hear me out, Mark. Please.'

He nodded. He could feel his heart pounding wildly. He wondered if she could hear it.

'Go ahead.'

But he reminded himself that he wasn't going back to the circuits. No way.

CHAPTER FOUR

'I'M SORRY I had to use your wife to find you/ Lee Hammer-ton dropped her gaze, a mixture of guilt and embarrassment flooding briefly over her. 'But it was the only way. I hope you'll understand.'

'Of course.' Slade felt equally uncomfortable, his powerful frame tensing as though an electric current surged through it. 'I'd have done the same in your position. How is Yvonne?'

The question was abrupt, his usual lazy drawling tone disappearing instantly, his body responding with a rigid-ness, eyes boring into the girl who was seated opposite to him, so much more than just a casual enquiry.

'She's all right.'

'Just all right?'

Lee Hammerton dropped her gaze again, staring into her mug of coffee as though it was the most important object in the whole world to her.

'I've never met her before. I called round in person. Thought it was better than phoning. We ... talked. But I don't really know her. One can't expect to get to know somebody in half-an-hour, can one?'

'No, but . . . I have a feeling that there's something you haven't told me. Maybe something she hinted at, an impression she gave you . . . perhaps something she said.'

'You're being a bit unfair.' She did not lift her gaze, and Mark Slade was fully aware that her confidence had drained temporarily from her.

'And so are you.' He pressed home the advantage which he sensed he had gained over her. 'You used Yvonne to find me, and all I ask in return. . . '

'Oh, all right.' Her eyes met his again, conceding defeat yet not graciously, her features hardening, the embarrassment gone, her confidence restored, but there was something else in her attitude which he was unable to define. 'She's had second thoughts . . . but I don't think she'll come back.'

'I see.' Slade's fingers trembled, the coffee almost spilling. 'But that wasn't what you came all the way here to tell me.'

'No,' she smiled, 'but Yvonne hoped you might help me out. She's glad you've packed in racing, but when I told her that I wasn't trying to lure you back to the circuits she said that you were the one to advise me.'

'Go on,' he said. 'Let's hear it, but I'm making no promises.'

Slade had to force himself to concentrate. He could not get Yvonne out of his mind. He tried to tell himself that there was no chance of a reunion. One never refitted worn tyres. But it was himself that was worn out, not Yvonne.

'Someone is going to great lengths to try and stop me competing at Riverside.' Lee's words filtered through to his bemused brain like sunlight penetrating the foliage of a dense wood.

'Are they?' It was a stupid question. Far better had he remained silent. Once again he experienced that feeling that he was pandering to her. She took her time, sipping her coffee, relaxed again. He knew that he would help her. He would do anything . . . except drive for her.

'I've been warned off twice now,' she said. 'Telephone calls.'

'I used to get dozens. Hoaxes, mostly.'

'This is no hoax.'

'How do you know?'

'I just know. Call it female intuition if you like. But I know that whoever it is they mean business, and I've blown my last chance to back down, not that I ever would chicken out. But I need someone around that I can rely on, Mark. Someone to turn to. Yvonne said that you were that man.'

Slade sighed. She was using Yvonne effectively, but not for one moment did he doubt that she was telling the truth. In a way he would be helping both of them. He liked the idea, and maybe afterwards, after Riverside. . .

'Any idea who's behind these threats?' Slade forced himself back to the current situation.

'Seamark Cruises,' she sighed. 'I've no proof, but it's them all right.'

'Don't you think you're jumping to conclusions? They can't regard you as a serious threat, an unsponsored team, run-of-the-mill drivers.'

'No, but I don't think that's their main reason for trying to scare me off.'

'What is it, then?'

'My father and Seamark were enemies, and that's putting it mildly. Twenty years ago they started up a business together. Catamaran Cruises. My father put up most of the money. After a year it looked doomed to failure. Seamark wanted to sell up. My father believed that if they held on long enough they would pull through. They couldn't agree, so Dad paid Seamark out. Two years later my father had ridden through stormy waters and come out all right. Seamark wanted to buy back his shares, but Dad said that he wasn't accepting rats back on a ship they'd deserted, and then found out it wasn't sinking after all. So

Seamark started up on his own. Damn it all, the world's big enough for more than one catamaran company, but Seamark didn't see it that way. There were several attempts at sabotage, and it seemed that every foreign port was against us. Seamark was growing fat and powerful, a huge spider at the centre of a web which was spreading all the time. There were big pay-offs to customs' officials, so Dad said. Then Seamark branched out into cruise-liners. He didn't bother with catamarans any more . . . except ours! One was gutted by fire at San Remo. A passenger died, and it made the headlines in a big way. The Italian authorities made out that our fire precautions were to blame. Fortunately, Dad had ploughed most of his capital into industry, and although Seamark virtually finished us at sea, we were fast overhauling him in other fields. One would have thought that Seamark would have been satisfied, having driven us onto dry land. But not Seamark. Unfortunately, both he and my father had a passion for Formula One motor-racing. Maybe if one of them had developed other interests the Hammerton-Seamark war would have faded into obscurity. Instead the battleground was transferred to the circuits. On and off them, in fact. They framed my brother, Justin, before he was . . . killed!

'You've no proof.'

'There's one helluva lot of things I know, but can't prove. I don't need to. I don't want to go to the police. In their eyes we're a family of drug addicts, smugglers, peddlers. . . '

That's nonsense. Just because they found a cache of heroin in Justin's car. . . '

'You don't realise what it meant, Mark. Twice our place was raided by the drugs squad. They'd had a tip-off, an anonymous phone call, and because Justin had a conviction they believed there was no smoke without fire. Our greatest fear was another "plant". It would have been only too easy. Now their main concern seems to be frightening me off the circuits.'

'It's crazy. If they feel that way about you then they've only got to beat you at Riverside, or at Daytona, and it's all fair and square. Don't forget I was a Seamark driver.'

That's another reason I'd appreciate your help. You know how they work, the kind of tricks they're likely to try and pull.'

Mark Slade shook his head. 'Not really,' he said. 'I was just a driver, first and foremost concerned with winning. They played it straight with me.'

'Because you were good, possibly the best around, they had no reason to try anything else. They considered you were capable of winning the IROC for them, so they had no worries. Now that you've quit and their drivers are much the same as all the others taking part they're having to resort to other means.'

'But, as I said before, you're no real threat. Lee. They can buy the best. I'm not the only one.'

'I can find the cash for a top man, too, and they know it.'

'It still doesn't figure. OK, so your old man and Seamark were at each other's throats, and to some extent the fires of hatred are still smouldering, but I say Seamark's best bet is to come in ahead of you in either the heats or at Daytona itself.'

'Yet they're threatening me.'

'If it is them.'

'It is. Chris Fogg says so.'

'Does he, now? Well, in all the time I was driving for Seamark I never heard any mention of the Hammerton rivalry.'

'Because you were too damned straight for them, Mark. You drove, and you won regularly. You were doing what you were paid to do. They had no reason to try and involve you in their intrigue.'

'Maybe, but it doesn't ring true. Not to me, at any rate.'

'I've still been threatened, though.'

'I've been threatened on more than one occasion. There's an element of cranks who get their kicks out of hoaxes like that. I learned to ignore them after a time.'

'This guy said there wouldn't be another warning. He said that if I went to Riverside I wouldn't come back to England alive. That's why I need you, Mark. Yvonne said you'd help me.'

Slade was silent. Yvonne was figuring in it, in a roundabout sort of way. It was the kind of thing she would have said. 'Mark will help. He's your man.' Lee Hammerton would not have lied about something like that. In effect, it was a call for help from Yvonne. She was asking him through this beautiful dark-haired girl who sat opposite him, awaiting his decision. He wondered if there was an ulterior motive.

Slade's brain was functioning slowly. Too slowly. His ability for fast reactions and snap decisions seemed to have deserted him completely. Yesterday it would not have mattered. He would happily have resigned himself to a placid existence where time stood still and everything happened in slow motion. He was just beginning to adapt, too. A new way of life had been in the offing, and suddenly an Alfa Romeo had roared in to shatter it all into a thousand fragments. He thought of Yvonne, Lee, Seamark, and Stern. And he did not want to make a decision either way. Only one thing was certain in his mind. He would never drive on the circuits again.

'I'd better get us something to eat.' He stood up, and turned to look out of the small latticed windows, noticing that a line of black clouds was forming beyond the distant mountain peaks to the west. They were looming up on his own horizon, the tranquillity of the last few days being wafted away by the cold winds of change. Nothing remained constant; you did not control your own destiny.

'You haven't given me an answer.'

'No, because right now I haven't got one. I need time to think.'

'I'm not particularly hungry.'

'Neither am I, but we still have to eat.'

'Turn me down, and I'll be on my way. You can forget that I ever drifted into your seclusion. Yvonne said you might.'

'Let's eat first. I'm afraid it's all out of cans. I'm going to make a study of horticulture then everything will be fresh from the garden. It'll take time, but I'll do it.'

She smiled softly, but he knew that she was not mocking him. Perhaps she understood. Mark Slade wished that he did.

They ate in silence. Corned beef, baked beans, Italian tomatoes, followed by coffee, a half-empty packet of biscuits standing upright on the table between them as though it had been placed there to act as a deliberate barrier. Both of them studied the colourful outer wrapping, the special offer coupon. One could obtain a model Chevy with that and 75p. Everybody, it seemed, was geared up for Daytona next February, taking their cut in any conceivable way. Slade decided that those custard creams had a bitter tang about them.

He cleared the dishes away, and washed them in the sink. Once again it was something to do, another means of stalling. Lee Hammerton made no move to help him, as though she sensed that her presence in the tiny kitchen would be an intrusion or maybe she just never did menial chores.

The afternoon sun was obscured by the advancing formation of black cloud. Slade could no longer hear the tractors outside. These hill-farmers accepted the fact that the brief spell of fine weather was over. What was done was done. The rest would have to wait. There was no way of fighting the inevitable. Only fools showed resistance.

The first heavy spots of rain spattered against the window panes. The atmosphere had become much colder, no longer that crisp invigorating air which inspired one to undertake menial tasks with enthusiasm, but instead a penetrating damp which sapped one's morale.

Slade went back into the adjoining living-room, and resumed his seat opposite Lee Hammerton. She was making a study of the pattern on the faded carpet left behind by the previous owner, tracing the faded diamond shapes with her toe, round one way, back the other. She did not look up. She was waiting for him to speak first.

He said: 'It's started to rain,' felt incredibly stupid, and lapsed into silence again. He had spent many such hours with Yvonne, wasted hours when they just sat there without speaking. Why? Only now did he understand fully the barrier between them which had doomed their marriage from the start. Yvonne had never pleaded with him to quit racing until the very end. She had bottled it all up inside herself, wanting the decision to come from him. And he hadn't had the guts to make it. That was what he had lacked all along. Guts. He had conned himself until now, and still he was conning everybody, most of all Lee Hammerton. Anything but the truth. He wished that he could have mustered the courage to say 'I quit racing because I lost my nerve'. But he knew that he would never admit that to anybody, neither to Lee nor Yvonne. 'I've made my pile. I've had enough. That's why I'm quitting'.

All lies.

'It's getting late,' she said at last, looking at her watch with an unnecessary flourish. 'Tour o'clock.'

'Too late to go back to Hertfordshire today.' He seized upon yet another opportunity to stall.

'Meaning me, or both of us?'

He hesitated. She had put the onus on him now, and he had to answer her.

'Too late whichever way you look at it.' He grasped for one final straw, suddenly realising that not only did he not want to go, but he did not relish the thought of her leaving, either, and the claustrophobic loneliness surging softly back to envelop him. Subconsciously he saw her as a final link with Yvonne, and

he did not want to sever it.

'You've got to make up your mind sometime, Mark. One way or the other I'd like to know.'

'I told you I'd never race again.'

'I'm not asking you to come to me as a driver.'

'There's nothing else I'm any good at. That's why I'm up here, trying to make something out of nothing. Starting all over again.'

'I'm just asking you for help. I'd feel much easier if ... if you were just around. Have you ever heard of ... of the Hammerton Curse?'

'No.' He stiffened, wondering if she were deliberately resorting to melodrama when every other ploy seemed to have failed. 'You'll be telling me next that Seamark Cruises have hired a witch-doctor to work on you.'

'It's nothing to joke about,' she snapped, her eyes narrowing. 'Sure, I thought that way once when I first heard it. I don't any more. My ancestor, Jasper Hammerton, was accidentally beheaded by a careless farm worker with a scythe. His son was killed shortly afterwards in a riding accident. Edwina, Jasper's daughter who got herself pregnant by the groom and died in childbirth, put a curse on the family; a cycle of doom that has come round again -Justin killed at Le Mans, Dad . . . crushed in a straw-baler! There's just me left now, as Edwina was. That's what frightens me, Mark, more than Seamark does. I need you around, Mark.'

'Why don't you hire yourself a private detective?' His words lacked conviction.

'I'm trying to. You. I'm not asking you to come down to Hertfordshire for nothing. I can afford to pay you well.'

'I don't need money.'

'Oh, to hell with your excuses, Mark!' It was the first time that he had sensed anger within her, her dark eyes narrowed, her knuckles bloodless where she gripped the arms of the chair. 'You've given me nothing but double-talk and excuses the whole time. If I didn't know otherwise I'd say you were scared of something. Life, itself, maybe. You've run up here to hide.'

He turned away, aware that he was trembling. His heart pounded, and he found it difficult to breathe easily. She was more than just angry; she was terrified to a state of desperation by the curse of an eighteenth-century wench who had died in childbirth.

'A man has a right to shape his life to suit himself. I've chosen this way. I wish I'd done it years ago.'

'And then you'd still have Yvonne?'

His whole body tautened, but he felt no anger towards Lee Hammerton. All the same, he was unable to turn around and face her. Her intuition was uncanny.

'There's no need to bring my wife into this.' He spoke slowly, uncertainly.

I'm not bringing her into it. I merely mention something which is apparent to me. I may be wrong. Nevertheless, we did talk for quite a time, and she confided a lot in me. I hate to say this, but she isn't your wife. You're divorced now, or had you forgotten?

'No.' His voice was low, subdued. 'I hadn't forgotten. I heard she had . . . somebody else. A banker.'

'Philip. I don't know his other name.'

'Are they . . . going to marry?'

'I presume so. She didn't say. He spends quite a lot of time away at conferences.'

'Like I did.'

'Only there's a difference. She doesn't have to sit there worrying about whether she'll see him alive again. She knows he'll come back all in one piece. She's never known security before. I guess it must be quite a novelty.'

'And suppose I accept your offer?' He found his gaze drawn irresistibly towards that biscuit packet again, staring at the picture of the Chevy Camaro as though hypnotised by it. He cursed it beneath his breath.

'I'd like you to come to the States with the team. Maybe I'm wrong, and nothing will happen, but I just feel that a guy who knows the circuits like you do would be able to spot trouble before it happened. And, anyway, wouldn't you like to play a small part in winning against Seamark Cruises?'

'I don't give a damn for Seamark now,' he snapped.

'Or Yvonne?'

He felt like telling her to mind her own goddamned business. Instead, he turned and looked at her, and there was a faint smile hovering around the corners of his mouth.

'You worked this out between you, didn't you?'

'No.' She looked him in the face, and her gaze did not waver. "But at least she'd feel easier knowing that you weren't going to kill yourself on the track, or else dying of boredom like a hermit.'

'It's too late to travel down today.' He dropped back into the chair. 'You'd better pull your car into the garage. Mine's parked on the track at the back. Then we can get off to an early start in the morning.'

She fumbled in the pockets of her Levis and pulled out a small bunch of keys. A quick movement of her hand, and the jangling car-keys had landed in his lap.

'Thanks.' Her eyes sparkled momentarily, and then became misty.

Slade stood up.

'So you're hiring a chauffeur and general handyman as well as a private eye,' he laughed.

'I'll drive down tomorrow,' Lee Hammerton said, 'but right now I feel physically and mentally drained.'

It was raining hard as Mark Slade drove the Alfa Romeo into the small garage. The way the car surged forward, even over that distance of a few yards, brought back everything he was trying to forget. With a sigh of relief he switched off the engine, and clambered out.

Another thought struck him as he went back into the house, and with it came an arousal in his loins. Situations had a habit of repeating themselves. Lee Hammerton reminded him of Zoe. There was no resemblance, neither physically nor in their personalities. She was just another woman on hand to satisfy a man's needs. In one way Lee was coming between himself and Yvonne. In another she was bringing them closer together. It was crazy, but it did not alter the fact that there was only one bed in Crossways.

Night came swiftly on the wings of the storm. This time it was Lee who prepared some food and made coffee. Slade watched her through the open door, noting her inexperience in household chores, so different from Yvonne. He thought about the night which lay ahead, and it worried him.

'We'd better get an early night.' Lee glanced at her watch, and then fixed her eyes unwaveringly on him.

'Sure.' He dropped his gaze, and hoped that she did not notice the trembling of his lower lip. The bedroom's all yours. I'm used to the couch. Often sleep on it when I can't be bothered to go upstairs to bed.'

'If that's the way you want it,' she smiled and stood up, 'that's fine by me. There's one thing you should know, though.'

'What's that?'

'I have a lover.'

'You surprise me.'

'No doubt you'll meet him tomorrow.'

'I'll look forward to it.'

He was grateful when the door closed behind her. The wave of depression hit him with unexpectedness. Automatically he reached for the Valium tablets, shook one out, and swallowed it without water. Even then he could not force himself to face reality. He was conning himself again, but there was no getting away from the fact that Lee Hammerton had hit him where it hurt most. And he was still prepared to go down to Hertfordshire. Simply because Yvonne cared; or at least that was what he tried to tell himself.

Slade switched on the radio. Just background music, loud enough to screen a telephone conversation from anyone who might be listening in the room above.

He did not hurry simply because he was obeying instincts rather than acting logically. He studied the picture of the Chevy Camaro on the biscuit wrapper, and then turned his attention to the framed photograph of Yvonne on the Welsh-dresser.

He picked up the receiver, the forefinger of his right hand resting on the dial, hesitating even though he knew the number off by heart. Indecision flooded over him. It would have been far easier not to make that call, but in his mind he knew that he had to.

He paused, for the first time giving some thought to what he was going to say. Thought you'd like to

know I've taken the job as private eye and bodyguard to the Hammerton team. No, I'm not going back to the circuits. I'll be in the States until February. Maybe I'll see you when I get back. Got a nice little place up here. Panoramic scenery, whitewashed walls, ivy over the porch. So peaceful.' It all sounded so crummy, definitely not Mark Slade style. He scrapped that one, and without further deliberation began to dial. He'd play it as it came, say whatever entered his head. That had always been his way.

He heard the call ringing out at the other end, a steady monotonous 'brrr-brrr'. On and on. Perhaps Yvonne had retired to bed, or else gone out. Slade was in no hurry. He hung on. A couple of minutes later he tensed as the steady purring cut out.

'Philip Baldock speaking.'

An icy chill flooded over Mark Slade at the sound of that cultured male voice, the air of quiet confidence, the solidarity, respectability.

'Who is that speaking?' A slight note of puzzlement, irritation.

'I'm sorry,' Slade muttered. 'Must have dialled the wrong number. Sorry to have troubled you.'

He replaced the receiver, switched off the transistor, and stretched himself out on the couch, still looking at that photograph. For the first time he really hated that banker, and he knew it was illogical. He hated somebody else, too ... the unknown lover of the girl who lay in bed directly above him. Also he hated Seamark and Stern.

Bitterness was fast taking over Mark Slade, destroying the peace for which he had striven these past few weeks. As he turned off the light he was glad that he had accepted Lee Hammerton's offer.

Somewhere, sometime, somebody was going to have to pay the price for what they had all done to him. And this opportunity was as good as any to start his campaign of vengeance.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HAMMERTON estate in Hertfordshire comprised some five hundred acres. The majority of the land was leased to tenant farmers, but as the Alfa Romeo, with Lee at the wheel, sped down the tree-lined avenue which led to the large Georgian mansion, Slade caught a glimpse of the circuit. It rested in a hollow to the right of the house, an oval-shaped tarmac track that encompassed perhaps twenty acres of otherwise useless scrubland. A steep bank rose at the rear where it joined a belt of thick Corsican pines which appeared to overshadow the whole area, a stark contrast of the work of Nature and the efforts of mankind^ the former seeming to frown disapprovingly over the latter.

That's it.' Lee had noticed the direction of her companion's glance. The Hammerton private circuit, a surface that matches both Riverside and Daytona. All that's lacking is the glamour.'

Slade said nothing. He checked a reply, and instead turned his attention towards the large half-timbered residence. A magnificence that was spoiled by signs of neglect. Moss grew liberally on the roof and parapets, some tiles were missing, and weeds sprouted over the terrace drive. It reminded him of the Hammerton Curse - a place like this, brooding over grounds that were a wilderness, had you believing in it. He shivered involuntarily.

'We've been too busy with racing since my father died.' She seemed to read his thoughts. 'I've asked John Clyde my general manager, to get the contractors in to give the place a face-lift ... to try to bury the past.'

They climbed out of the car, and Slade followed Lee in the direction of one of the side entrances. There had been no rain here, and the sun cast its autumnal warmth over the landscape. Wood-pigeons cooed softly in the tall trees, but there was no other sign of life. The Hammerton place had a distinct air of desolation about it, an atmosphere that was almost . . . evil!

'I expect everybody's in the sheds with the cars,' Lee said as she opened a door and stepped into a long gloomy corridor. 'I'll show you to your room, and then we'll go down and I'll introduce you to the Hammerton team.'

Slade's room, on the first floor, overlooked the circuit. The furnishings were luxurious, but Lee noted his eyes taking in a layer of dust on an ornately carved dressing-table.

'Staff are a problem here,' she muttered somewhat apologetically, 'so John Clyde tells me. We have to manage as best we can. In fact, some of the rooms on the second floor are never used at all. That's the trouble with motor-racing, so much else gets overlooked.'

Slade gazed appreciatively around him. Two wardrobes, a large dressing-table, and a double bed offered him more than basic requirements. His feet sank into the thick carpet, and he wondered idly what famous names had stayed in that very same room over the years. Possibly even royalty in days long gone; floors that had been trodden by the infamous Jasper Hammerton in those far-off days of feudal supremacy over a peasant population.

This'll do fine for me,' he said.

'Make yourself at home,' Lee replied, moving across to the bow-window, and gazing down onto the black oval ribbon in the hollow below. 'You'll be here for some time. We don't leave for America until after Christmas, and. . . '

She whirled round, suddenly aware that they were no longer alone in the room. A tall man stood just inside the open door, the lush carpeting having rendered his approach virtually inaudible.

'Oh, John!' She recovered from her surprise. 'You gave me quite a shock.'

Slade looked at the newcomer, tall and straight, dark hair with a few flecks of grey in it brushed straight back from his receding forehead. Pale blue eyes and a thin pencil moustache gave him a debonair appearance, accentuated by an expensively tailored suit, the jacket of which was unbuttoned, hands thrust deep into trouser pockets.

'This is John Clyde.' Lee Hammerton regained her composure. 'John, Mark Slade. He'll be with us from now until we return from America.'

The two men regarded each other steadily, but it was Slade who stepped forward with outstretched hand, the other almost reluctant to disturb his relaxed, almost arrogant posture.

'Well, well, this is a surprise!' Slade had the feeling that Clyde was mocking him. 'Mark Slade, the Mark Slade.'

There was nothing to be learned from those clear blue eyes. The thin lips alone formed into a token smile, the long slim fingers held, but did not squeeze, the outstretched hand.

Clyde looked questioningly at Lee, as though demanding an explanation and at the same time reprimanding her for not having advised him of Slade's visit beforehand.

'Mark will be staying here in an ... advisory capacity, John.' Lee's voice was low, almost condescending, and once again Slade had the impression that her air of self-confidence was little more than a front that masked the loneliness and uncertainty of an orphaned millionairess. 'I thought it might be as well to have him around in view of recent events.'

'I'm sure Mr Slade has been threatened himself on numerous occasions.' Clyde extricated himself from the handshake and stepped back. 'Nevertheless, I hope he will enjoy his stay.'

Slade felt uncomfortable, almost embarrassed, as though he had been caught trespassing. The other's attitude annoyed him, too, the constant use of the third person like a surgeon discussing a forthcoming operation without direct reference to the patient.

'I was concerned when you didn't return last night.' Clyde turned to Lee. 'There are some letters to be signed, and.. .'

'They can wait,' Lee snapped, as though determined to exert her authority. 'I am free to come and go as I please, John. I'll pop into the office later and sign them. And, also, perhaps you'd chase the contractors up before this place falls to bits.'

John Clyde withdrew, nodding to them both yet conceding nothing. Lee closed the door with a long sigh that was supposed to be one of annoyance, but Slade detected something much deeper, something which he could not explain fully. The girl had her inheritance, but she had not the power which her father had wielded. Underneath her facade she was very frightened.

'John Clyde is a bit of a nuisance at times.' She walked across to the window and looked out again. 'Nevertheless, he's invaluable, and I couldn't do without him. He's managed both the estate and the team for the past ten years. Even Dad pandered to him at times. I guess he just considers he's responsible for me. To him I'm still the fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who used to go and watch the mechanics working on the cars.'

Slade made a simple mathematical calculation. Lee Hammerton was twenty-five. She looked younger by three or four years. He decided that she was covering up a lot of things in her endeavour to make the top flight and carry on where Craig Hammerton had left off. She needed help much more than she was prepared to admit.

'Td better introduce you to the lads.' She turned back to him, and he saw that her brief moment of

indecision was gone. She was in command again, outwardly, anyway.

The sheds where the cars were garaged and maintained had once been stables adjoining the house itself. Little structural alteration had been necessary for their new purpose, the close proximity of the circuit adding to their advantage.

Slade followed in Lee's footsteps, her lithe form a perfect co-ordination of every muscle as she walked, her bearing proof of her upbringing, posture learned at a finishing-school in Paris. Once again he experienced an amusement, followed by something else as he remembered her admission to having a lover. It was only natural, he decided. Her ambition in life was opposed to marriage, yet she had the same bodily desires as every other woman. She had to have somebody to satisfy them. Mark Slade found himself wishing that he could have been that man.

They reached the first stable, and with surprisingly little effort Lee Hammerton dragged the door back, the runners moving easily and quietly. They stepped inside.

The shed was large, two interior walls having been knocked down in order to convert the three small stables into one spacious room. Slade was surprised at the neatness of it all, rows of Dexion shelving with equipment and spare parts laid out in an organised fashion in complete contrast to the Seamark workshops. Four cars occupied the centre of the rough concrete floor, all Chevys, three in various stages of rebuilding, the fourth a squat solid chunk of metallic power, a combination of ugliness and beauty, glinting in the light of an overhead bulb.

Four overall-clad figures were bent over it, their concentration such that they had not even noticed the entrance of Mark Slade and Lee Hammerton. Grubby white clothing, grease and oil stained, merging them into uniformity, green lettering emblazoned across their shoulders - HAMMERTON.

'Boys, I want you to meet Mark Slade.'

Four heads jerked round at Lee's words, bodies straightening and turning in unison, eyes squinting in an effort to adjust to the gloom beyond the bright circle of light. Curiosity, amazement, searching looks, instant recognition in only one case . . . Chris Fogg.

The ex-Seamark man regarded Slade steadily. Wiry of build with sharp aquiline features, jet-black greasy hair falling below his neckline, Fogg might have been mistaken for an Arab at first glance, until he spoke, his Cockney accent tinged with surprise.

'Well, this is a turn up for the books.' He laughed as though to reassure himself. 'Heard you'd become a hermit, mate, livin' in a cave out in the sticks.'

'Something like that,' Slade replied evenly, his gaze sweeping over the others as Lee introduced each one with an informal gesture.

'Frank Wylie.' The chief mechanic's build belied his height, overall buttons strained, a ruddy complexion that could have been caused by exposure to the elements but was more likely due to high blood-pressure. Broad features that were spoiled by thin lips already forming into a mirthless smile that denoted frequent sarcasm, a man who enforced his position by belittling others.

'Billy Wagstaffe.' Short and sinewy, a ready smile. Young, too young, Slade decided. The grin denoted a genuineness, also a naivety. A hard worker, but one who would never make the top grade, a scapegoat when things went wrong. A whipping boy for the likes of Wylie.

'Steve Kilby.' Self-assured, good-looking, long blond hair styled to conform with the fashion that the media and public demanded. Clean cut features, deep blue eyes that shone with recklessness and a zest for dangerous living, a muscular body that even the shapeless creased suit of overalls could not hide, easy moving like a beast of prey, a suppleness that would react instantly to any situation. He had the nerve, Slade decided, and the rest would come with experience. But not for a year or two yet. The kind of man women fell for; the sort who took advantage of anything that came his way.

'Pleased to meet you.' Mark nodded, smiling, wondering what each of them was thinking. They resented his presence, his name. Perhaps not Billy Wagstaffe, but certainly the others. It was only natural.

'Mark will be with us until we get back from the States.' Lee sensed their automatic rejection of a near-champion brought into their midst. 'In view of these recent threats I thought it would be as well to have somebody around to keep an eye on things. The rest of you will concentrate on winning.'

'That's it.' Kilby broke the uneasy atmosphere, patting the crimson bonnet of the completed Chevy. 'You won't get much better than that. She did a hundred-and-sixty last week. Reckon we can better that now. We'll find out tomorrow, anyway.'

Slade moved closer to the car. Outwardly there was little to distinguish it from any of the Seamark Chevys except for the 'HAMMERTON' on the windshield and sides. Yet he knew that it was beneath the bonnet where it counted most, the individual tuning of specifications determining whether or not the machine stood a chance, a factor that was second only to the man behind the wheel . . . , and luck!

Slade walked around the car. Low on the ground, six inches clearance at the most, perfectly balanced, heavy tyres that would be reduced to smouldering rubber after a couple of laps. He wondered how fast Wylie and Wagstaffe could make the change. That was another vital point. So many things controlled the narrow margin between winning and losing. He was curious to view the engine, but on no account would he lift the bonnet without being invited to do so.

'Satisfied?' Wylie's sarcasm was materialising quickly.

'Can't say,' Slade countered quickly. 'Never did judge books by their covers.'

There was no invitation to inspect the engine. Slade bent and examined the tyres as though the idea had never even occurred to him.

'She handles a treat,' Kilby said. 'Fancy trying a couple of laps in the morning?'

Mark Slade stiffened. His fists clenched, and he could feel the dampness on his palms, followed by a tingling feeling up and down his spine, stomach muscles contracting, a rising nausea. He sensed a taunt, a deliberate challenge. But Kilby could not possibly know.

'That's not my job.' He scarcely recognised his own voice. 'I'm not here to drive.'

He wondered why he was here. He cursed himself for being a fool, at the same time consoling himself that it was because of Yvonne. Like a once-victorious gladiator he had stepped back into the arena instead of accepting his freedom. He had left, and then returned without realising it. Like some evil force had lured him here for its own purpose.

'I'd like you to test it,' Lee added.

Slade conducted a minute unseeing examination of the treads, his brain spinning, refusing to supply an instant excuse.

He told Kilby again. "You're the driver. You've got to handle her at Riverside."

'I'd like to watch her first,' the blond driver replied.

It was as though there was a sudden conspiracy against Mark Slade. He wanted to scream out 'Christ, no! Not for anything. I've lost my bloody nerve.' Instead he said, 'We'll have to see.'

The bonnet was being opened. He was being forced to look, mentally drawing back as a condemned man might upon viewing the gallows. Wylie was talking, explaining the modifications, pointing here and there with an oily finger, showing off his skill, lacing it with sarcasm as he sensed himself in the role of master, a near-champion his pupil.

Slade stood there, but he neither saw nor heard. Instead he remembered Crossways, the soothing drone of tractors, the haven which had somehow been wrested from his grasp. Christ, he was a bloody fool.

The bonnet was closed again. The others stood around in a circle, looking at him, awaiting his verdict.

He nodded.

'Seems OK.' He did not know whether it was or not. 'The proof will be in the testing.'

Damn it, he'd put the onus on himself again.

'Individual components are built and installed under each driver's supervision so that the components rather than the cars become each mechanic's metier.' Kilby might have been reciting some verse learned parrot-fashion. 'Each car is tested and balanced at each circuit, the aim being to achieve an optimum lap-time with a minimum change in technique from car to car. . . '

Slade turned to Lee.

'We'd better leave these guys to finish off,' he said.

She nodded, and he followed her out, pausing to close the door behind them. The late afternoon sun was already obscured by dark clouds as though the rainfall had followed them down from Crossways and had caught up with them at last. Even as they walked back to the house the first few heavy spots began to fall.

'Damn!' Lee held out her hands, looking skywards. 'This'll grease the circuits up for testing. . . '

'It might rain at Riverside, too,' Slade replied. 'Best to test on a wet surface. You don't have any fears about dry ones then.'

Fears . . . fears . . . fears. . . Realisation of his words closed in on him. Hell, he wasn't going to drive on any circuit again. Ever. How much longer would he have to keep on telling himself that?

'I'd like you to do a couple of laps in the car.' Lee Hammerton followed him back to his room.

'I'm no test-driver.'

'You were within a fraction of winning an IROC.'

That was last February. I haven't driven for months. I'm right out of touch.'

'Oh, I don't want you to try and get it up beyond one-hundred-and-sixty.' She walked into his room and across to the window, staring down at the glistening black tarmac in the hollow, the rain now falling steadily. 'Just a nice steady couple of laps. Say around the ton.'

There's no point. That wouldn't prove anything.'

I'm not asking you to prove anything. It's just . . . well, I'm sort of superstitious. I know it sounds silly, but . . . but I'd feel a lot happier at Riverside if I knew that the Mark Slade had driven our car once. Sort of okayed it, if you know what I mean.'

That's your mechanics' job.' Christ, her superstitions were getting the better of her; she was as jumpy as hell.

'Maybe, but I'd still like you to try it out for me. Christen it. Please, Mark.'

Suddenly her arms were around his neck, pulling his face down to her upturned pouted lips. His brain whirled madly, incapable of absorbing everything that had happened since his arrival. An invitation, a pressing one, to drive again, and now this!

Everything inside him seemed to snap like a hawser that has undergone a tremendous strain, breaking up, strand by strand until finally it was totally severed. No longer was he capable of fighting against anything. Their lips met, she dictating the kiss, brushing lightly against him at first then crushing her mouth against his, her tongue pushing and forcing a penetration, her fingernails digging into his back through his nylon shirt.

His arms came up, encircled her, held her tightly to him, and then, somehow, they were sprawling on the coverlet of the double bed, still embracing, kissing passionately, a storm of emotion matching that of the elements outside.

Slade did not care about anything any more. Except Lee. He had wanted to sleep with her on the previous night. She had wanted him to. He had rejected her, sent her upstairs to an empty bed. She was giving him a second chance, crushing her body against his, groaning aloud with pleasure as she sensed his hardness stabbing at her.

Then, just as suddenly as she had thrown herself at him, she broke away, struggling to extricate herself from his hold.

'I'm sorry.' She turned her head away, her voice husky. 'I shouldn't have done that, Mark. Please forgive me. Please try and forget that it ever happened.'

Slade supported himself on an elbow, looking up at her.

'It should have happened last night.' he said. 'So why not now?'

'Because . . . because. . . ' Still she would not look into his face. 'Because I mustn't. I asked you down

here for a reason, and it wasn't to make love to me.'

'Because of your lover, you mean.' He sensed the cruelty in his own voice, regretting it but unable to avoid it. She had deliberately set man against man, driver against driver, in a contest for her own pleasure.

For some moments she did not answer him.

'I don't have a lover any more,' she breathed at last.

'Oh.' Slade raised an eyebrow. 'Since when?'

'I told him it was all over between us before I set off for Crossways,' she said. 'I didn't expect to find him here when I got back. He's still around, though, waiting, hoping. Still prepared to work for me. That's devotion by anybody's standards.'

'To drive for you?'

She started. 'Was it that obvious?'

'I guessed it was Kilby.'

Slade had not guessed. Until now. A wild guess. More of a process of elimination. Five men were on the premises with her, day and night. Kilby was the obvious choice. None of the others fitted because they weren't Lee Hammerton's type.

'A woman gets lonely on her own. She has to have a man.'

'Was that what you wanted me for?'

'Nor She answered him with such vehemence that he knew she was speaking the truth. 'I asked you to come here because of the threats, the Hammerton Curse. A trouble-shooter, nothing more.'

That isn't the way it's turning out now.'

'I didn't want it to be like this. Not yet, anyway. I'd have slept with you last night, though. Just once, because I needed to.'

'I phoned Yvonne after you'd gone to bed,' Slade admitted. 'Her lover answered the phone.'

'So you've changed your mind about her now?'

'I don't know. I'll see what the situation is like when we get back from America.'

'You want her back badly, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Suppose she doesn't want you?'

Then I guess I'll have to manage without her.'

'And you'll deny yourself a woman for the next five months?'

I ... don't know. You don't seem to know, either. First you want me then you don't.'

'I'm sorry.' She flung herself back down beside him, but made no move to embrace him again. 'I don't understand myself half the time. All my life I've had one lover after another. Nothing serious. Not on my part, anyway. Some of them didn't see it that way, though. Steve doesn't appear to bear me any resentment. I know John Clyde does, though. He was bitter towards Steve Kilby. . . '

'So you've had Clyde as a lover, too?'

'Only for a short time. You couldn't really say he was a lover. I never let him do anything. We came pretty close a couple of times, but I suppose I couldn't have thought anything of him or else I would have slept with him. It was as though there was some kind of barrier between us. It happened after Dad died. I'd got nobody. John ran the place. Everything revolved around him. Life would have been very easy if I'd married him. He asked me at least a dozen times, but I always said "no". I guess he's still hoping I'll change my mind. He's changed lately, though. I can sense the bitterness, a kind of hopelessness but still hoping, if you know what I mean. He'll stick around just like Steve Kilby will.'

Mark Slade nodded. He did not understand Lee Hammerton, though. His thoughts turned to Yvonne, and the five months that lay ahead. Maybe then he would be forced to write 'finis'. He would go back to Crossways. A hermit? Less than forty-eight hours ago he had resigned himself to just that. Then this lovely dark-haired girl had driven in and turned his new life upside down. Now he was Mark Slade - trouble-shooter. It was crazy. There was always the chance that she had set it all up, that there had been no threats, and she just wanted Mark Slade, almost an IROC winner; the Hammerton Curse had come in handy for her purpose. If so, he had fallen right into the trap, and the mesh was closing tightly over him. Five months and he probably wouldn't want Yvonne back. His thoughts turned to the test-drive on the morrow, and he closed his eyes, beads of sweat starting to form on his brow. No way could he drive again. One did not retrieve lost nerve like stooping down to pick up a dropped handkerchief.

Her warm sweet breath fanned his face, and he felt her nearness, an arm draped around him, a hand resting on his thigh, the beginning of yet another arousal.

'I'm sorry, Mark.'

'About what?'

'Messing you about.'

'I was messed about long before you showed up. Sometimes a man reaches a point of no return yet refuses to admit it even to himself.'

'I could help you return.'

'To what?'

'Whatever you wanted?'

'It isn't driving. No way.'

'All right. But you can't take it out on yourself for the rest of your life. We've got five months ahead of us, during which we're going to see each other practically every day. It won't be easy. Not for me, anyway.'

'And when that five months is up?'

'If you want to go back to her I won't try to stop you. I promise.'

His hand found hers, guiding her fingers onto the hardness which was thrusting upwards with renewed zest inside his trousers. She squeezed and rubbed. He moaned softly, closing his eyes.

'Mark?'

'What?'

'Will you promise me one small favour?'

'It depends. I have a habit of breaking my word. I can't even rely on myself.'

'Will you test the Chevy for me tomorrow? Just a couple of laps.'

He stiffened, and began to sweat again.

Her fingers moved nimbly. He heard his zip run, then tensed for a different reason as her sensitive fingertips began to caress his naked, pulsing flesh.

'Just a couple of laps. No more.'

His fear was being swamped by a sensation far greater, a tidal wave of passion and lust that had been trapped somewhere within him for far too long. The fingers of her other hand were undoing his shirt buttons, fumbling with his waistband. He eased himself up so that she could slide the garments from his eager body. Now she was starting to take off her own clothes. He saw the firmness of her breasts, the shapeliness of her thighs with the mysterious dark "V" in between. She was naked, embracing him again.

Just a couple of laps. No more. No need to drive fast. No need ever to drive again afterwards. . .

Slade looked up at her as she sat astride him. Her dark eyes were still asking, pleading. And that flicker of fear was still there!

'All right.' His voice was no more than a whisper. 'Just a couple of laps.'

Then the warmth of her love swallowed him up, claiming him, their bargain forgotten temporarily as their mutual needs demanded satisfaction.

CHAPTER SIX

LEE HAMMERTON was astride a horse. She couldn't see it because it was pitch dark but she could sense the power of the animal beneath her, the way it tensed its mighty muscles as though it were even now preparing to throw her.

She tried to scream but no sound came. She clutched at the flimsy reins with sweaty hands, felt them starting to slip from her grasp. Her terror was escalating. She didn't know how she came to be in the saddle, no recollections of mounting or even where she was. Just blackness all around, a clip taken from some movie so you didn't know what had gone before but you were terrified of what was to come.

A whirlpool of sensations as she felt the horse starting to rear, neighing wildly as though it were in terrible pain and sought to take revenge on its rider. The sound vibrated in her brain. She was yelling but the words had got lost somewhere. There's something under the saddle. A thorn. Just like they did to . . .'

But you're Edwina. You're going to die, battered and broken by flailing hooves like your brother was, the bastard child in your womb destroyed because it never should have been conceived!

'I'm not Edwina. I'm Lee.'

'It is no matter. The Curse shall claim the Hammertons of each generation. You will all die!

Suddenly Lee felt herself airborne, a human cannonball fired into the air; spinning, her stomach seeming to rise up so that hot bile stifled her scream, aware of the maddened plunging mount below waiting to pulp her with its hooves when she fell.

Falling; a rush of icy air, bracing herself for the inevitable impact. It didn't come. Still falling, faster and faster. Oh God, she'd been tossed to an unbelievable height.

Finally that sickening bone-jarring thud as she landed, rolling over and over, finally coming to rest on her back and staring up into that awful equine countenance, eyes that burned like coals in the darkness with an insatiable hate, cavernous mouth wide and flecked with foam. Hooves aloft, waiting. Savouring her destruction.

You will all die!

She managed to close her eyes but could not shut out that awful bestial expression. And this time she also managed a long piercing scream, tried to cover her head with her arms in a futile attempt to protect it from the inevitable skull-shattering blows.

She prayed that it would be quick, wanted to die. Something struck her but it was a sharp stinging slap across her face, bringing a cry of pain from her lips. Her eyes dropped open and she stared in disbelief.

It was no longer dark; the glare from the lamp on the bedside table hurt her eyes but she did not close them. The face that looked down upon her was neither equine nor angry; it was human and the expression was one of concern.

'You've had a nightmare.' Mark Slade relaxed his grip on her wrists. 'Take it easy, everything's OK.'

'I know.' Lee Hammerton nodded, tried to smile. 'But it was a bad one this time.' She groped for him, pulled him down to her. 'Hold me close, Mark.' She closed her eyes, flinched as she remembered Edwina Hammerton's adultery and the price the long-dead girl had had to pay for it. And the wheel of ill-fortune was gaining momentum fast.

It had stopped raining by the time Mark Slade and Lee Hammerton left the house and walked in the direction of the circuit the following morning. The sky was still overcast, and the day promised to be damp and dismal.

Lee's hand rested in his, but once they came in sight of the tarmac track she withdrew it almost as though she feared that either Clyde or Kilby would learn of her relationship with the ex-Seamark driver.

Slade was aware of the dampness inside his shirt. He was grateful to Lee for having spent the whole night with him for a variety of reasons. Now he must face stark reality. For once he could not go back on his word. Somehow he had to force himself behind that wheel. He owed it to her; somebody had to beat the legendary curse. Two laps. No more. His last bow, away from the glamour in a place so remote that his fans would never know anything about it.

The Chevy Camaro was already on the Hammerton circuit, four overall-clad figures clustered around it. Slade recognised the members of the team. Only John Clyde was absent.

'I would've thought your manager would have wanted to see how the test goes,' he commented to Lee.

'He'll be along in a minute,' she replied, and turning round nodded back the way they had come. 'Here he comes now. We have a local woman who comes in daily. She cooks the main meal, and does a bit of cleaning if she has time. I expect John wanted a word with her first.'

Clyde was walking quickly, and caught them up as they descended the grassy bank leading down to the tarmac below. He grunted a greeting, falling into step with them, obviously unwilling to engage in trivial conversation. Slade was glad. The last thing he wanted to do was to talk. He was sweating freely now, his shirt and trousers clinging to his body, a fear beginning to creep over him which wasn't wholly due to the prospect of sitting behind the wheel again. Lee had had a bad time last night.

The Chevy looked much smaller now that it was out in the open, but his knowledge of the machine was such that he was already experiencing the unleashing of its power, the shuddering vibration, the squeal of tortured rubber, the smell of burned oil and . . . the claustrophobic fear of being trapped helplessly in that hurtling metal coffin, sudden death and instant cremation being the penalty for one slight error of judgement. Suddenly the Hammerton Curse seemed more than an age-old rumour. By driving for Lee, Slade was putting himself at its mercy.

'She's rarin' to go.' Wylie stepped back, glancing from Kilby to Slade as though questioning which of them was going to test the car.

'Looks good.' Kilby stared at the Chevy, shaking his head from side to side as though unable to believe that at last their project was finished. 'We'll soon see how good she really is, though.'

Slade hesitated, his breathing so shallow that he had to exert conscious effort to work his lungs, the way he always was before a race. Only now it was a thousand times worse in this quiet hollow, his only spectators the towering fir trees above. Everything was deathly still, six pairs of eyes focused upon him, watching, waiting. Almost as though they knew his secret.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, subconsciously aware that sweat was oozing from every pore in his body. He was trembling, too.

Kilby handed him goggles, rubber-framed flexible ones with unbreakable glass; they would cause less distortion of vision in fine weather than a visor. Slade put them on. Billy Wagstaffe passed him a pair of gloves. He pulled them on slowly, taking his time, flexing his fingers. Stalling. Several hundred operations of the gear-lever would be necessary even on a small circuit such as the Hammerton one. He knew, too, how he would grip that wheel, how his stomach would churn.

Wylie was talking. Technicalities. Slade was not listening. He did not need to. He knew exactly what to expect, but it did not lessen the mounting fear within him. His instincts were yelling to him to back out, to get away from this place, back to Crossways. His pride urged him to stay. You've conned 'em all so far. You've still got some conning to do. Just this once.

'Start her up, and let's listen to her.' His voice seemed to come from far away, totally unrecognisable.

Wylie half-hesitated, then leaned over into the Chevy. Seconds later the engine roared into life, dropped to a steady tick-over, and the chief mechanic straightened up, his natural resentment at obeying an expected request only too obvious.

Mark Slade reached his peak of terror and passed it. He was a robot now, numbed in mind and body, yet still capable of driving that car. Two laps. His final farewell. The others stood back, but he did not glance at them as he slid into the crimson Chevy Camaro. He had to think of other things whilst the rest of him functioned as an automaton. Three minutes and it would all be over.

He could see Clyde; the manager had a stop-watch in his hand. It was crazy. They didn't have to time him, he would only be cruising. All part of the conditioning process, Slade's fears told him. You try to escape. A woman lures you back. They show you a car, trick you into getting behind the wheel. You're trapped. You've lost your nerve. Anything could go wrong, and if it does you'll panic. This place, the people and everything connected with it is cursed.

Slade forced himself to throw the gear-stick and as the car shot forward he was shouting, his words lost in the deafening roar, heard only by the hobgoblin of fear perched on his shoulder.

'Damn it! I'm as good as they come. The best around. Second at Daytona.'

Hurling black tarmac, the acrid stench of scorching rubber and burnt oil, the scenery a blur. Unrecognisable. Keep your eyes on the track. You're in the lead. A multitude of faces, every one of them a ghoul, scenting death, hoping. Damn 'em all. I'll live. I'll live! Daytona again. Another chance. Elation drowned fear. A complete lap. One down, one to go, and still alive. The speedometer and rev-counter responded. 120m.p.h., 125 ... 130. . .

Slade sensed that something was wrong before he was physically aware of it. Nothing that he could pinpoint, more like a gleeful cackle from the hobgoblin of fear, a warning of impending doom. He was easing up, down to 100m.p.h. before catastrophe struck.

He no longer had control of the Chevy. The steering wheel spun uselessly in his hands like a kiddies' roundabout car at the funfair. His reflexes took over where his brain ceased to function.

The bend loomed up before him, and he knew that he couldn't take it. The wheels were on an erratic,

crazy course, only the shape of the car preventing it from overturning immediately, zig-zagging and swerving towards the steep bank below the firs.

He hunched his body in the way that fallen jockeys do, hoping that the flailing hooves would miss. There was nothing Slade could do. Many would have prayed. He did not. He was a fatalist. He would come out of it either alive or dead. The choice was not his.

The front wheels hit the bank with a shuddering jolt. His head went back, the impact lessened by the crash-helmet, and a floating sensation engulfed him. The Chevy was airborne, twisting, roaring its wounded anger as though trying to defy the gravitational pull, winning, hesitating, falling back, losing. A brief thought, one that went as quickly as it came, a human body crushed beyond recognition in a straw-baler. Oh God!

Another jarring thud. Slade's forehead struck something solid, and again his protective headgear saved him from a fractured skull. Dazed and shaken he was scarcely aware of what was happening. The Chevy rolled, slid, then embarked upon a series of backward somersaults. Slade knew that it had jumped the bank, maybe cleared fifteen or twenty yards, and now it was bent on returning to the circuit before it came to a standstill, a heap of crumpled metal, suicidal in its own way, as though willing an inferno to destroy its self-inflicted injuries.

Over and over, screaming metal, that gremlin's maniacal laughter ringing in the driver's ears. Slade cursed aloud. He was still alive and, even more amazing, still conscious.

The car hit the tarmac, bounced once, then lay still on its side, wisps of smoke trickling skywards. The fuse was lit. Any second it would go up, a sheet of blinding flame. Then nothing. Cremation. Slade lay there dazed, remembered what had happened to Justin Hammerton. Now it was his own turn. The Curse. . .

He forced every muscle in his body to respond to his confused brain. Somehow he managed to heave himself upwards, crouching, securing a hold with his hands, using his biceps in the manner of one practising pull-ups on a horizontal-bar in the gymnasium. Something caught at his feet, but he kicked himself free. A red haze shimmered before his eyes, and darkness threatened to close in. Merciful, but fatal. Rest a minute. Eyes closed. Breathe deeply. Try again.

Choking smoke. Oh Jesus, this was the way Justin went, starting to panic. He held on to that last breath. His eyes streamed as though ammonia had been squirted into them. He was balanced precariously on some kind of narrow ledge. The blackness threatened to return, and with it came a sensation of vertigo. Heat, too. Any second. . .

There was a screaming in his brain, logic attempting to overcome blind panic. Roll now before it's too late. Which way? He was perched on a pinnacle, only two choices open to him. Roll the wrong way and you're back in your coffin. The other, and you'll hit the tarmac.

He tried to open his eyes, but he could not see. Thick black smoke was billowing up all around him. He rolled away from the heat, and his body thudded onto solid tarmac.

He was still conscious, immobile, unseeing. Only his hearing remained. Voices. Shouting. Lee Hammerton screaming - for her nightmare was becoming reality.

Strong hands seized him, dragged him. He felt the hard surface beneath him grazing his legs. The voices were much fainter now. The blackness yawned like a huge abyss inviting him to plunge into its soothing

oblivion. A blinding orange flash seared his sightless eyeballs, the explosion tore at his ear-drums. The hands dragging him released him, and he fell forward.

It was then that the hovering blackness closed in and claimed him.

Slade had no idea how long he had been unconscious or where he was. Cool linen soothed his body, and after a time he mustered sufficient courage to open his eyes.

He was in a darkened room. The curtains were drawn, and the light which filtered through the chinks made him wince and turn his head away. He tested every limb, and discovered to his amazement that he could still move both arms and legs. His neck was stiff, his head ached abominably, but he could see through those smarting eyes. He was alive. It was a miracle.

It came as a surprise to discover that he was not alone in the room. A slight movement in the darkest corner attracted his attention, and squinting through narrowed eyelids he discerned a shapely female figure straightening up from the chair where she had been sitting.

'Mark,' Lee Hammerton breathed a long sigh of relief, 'how are you feeling?'

'Rough.' He forced a grin, tried to sit up, but flopped back onto the pillows. 'Where the hell am I?'

'My room.' She squatted beside him on the bed, and her hand found his. *I thought you might as well stay here. What happened? The car seemed to go out of control. Did you black out or something?'

'No. . . ' He paused, trying to recollect those hellish seconds before the crash. 'No, I didn't black out. Something went wrong. Tracking, I'd say, at a rough guess.'

'Impossible,' she snapped. 'Frank Wylie went over everything last night in his final check before testing. It couldn't have been.'

'Well it was,' he replied, 'and judging by the way it went without warning I'd say it'd been fixed by somebody who knew their business. I've experienced tracking trouble before, and I've always had enough warning to enable me to stop. There was none this time. One moment everything was fine, the next I was hell-bent on a course for disaster. We'll soon tell, though, as soon as I can get down there and have a look at the wreck.'

'No chance.' Her face was strained. 'How you got out of that alive, I'll never know. I couldn't believe it when I saw you scrambling out of that heap of buckled scrap. It was already on fire before you got clear. It exploded as we were dragging you away. The blast knocked us all flat. Thank God nobody else was hurt apart from a few scratches and bruises.'

'I think the police should examine what's left, even if it is only a charred shell,' Sladesaid. 'It isn't just a case of sabotage. It's attempted murder!'

'No!' She gripped his hand. 'Not the police, under any circumstances. That's why I hired you. I don't want anything to do with the law. We're already labelled as drug-smugglers in their eyes. And anyway . . . they can't fight the Hammerton Curse. Nobody can.'

'If I'd been killed you'd've had the cops here whether you liked it or not.'

'Well you weren't killed. Thank God.' She bent over and kissed him. 'We'd never prove anything against

Seamark, anyway. They're too clever to leave clues behind. But I don't think it was them. I believe it was something far more insidious.'

'And what if it wasn't Seamark?'

'Then it's pointless trying to investigate.'

'But suppose it was aimed directly at me. Chances are I'll be killed next time. The warning is plain enough - get out, Slade, before it happens again. Next time you might not be so lucky. Don't forget Seamark have a score to settle with me as well. And other people, too, if you stop to think about it.'

'Oh, rubbish!' She stood up. 'Now who the hell would want to do a thing like that to you except Seamark Cruises?'

'Quite a few guys,' he grinned, 'but in a place like this we can narrow it down a bit. A jealous lover, a ruthless driver in fear of losing his place in the big team, perhaps a "plant" from a rival team, or maybe just a plain mechanic who doesn't fancy working under me.'

'That's ridiculous,' she snapped. 'In other words you're saying that it could have been any one of the five guys who comprise my team.'

'It's a possibility. Kilby wants to drive at Riverside. Fogg was, until recently, a Seamark man, too. Your chief mechanic-made it plain he didn't like me around.'

'OK then, let's begin with a process of elimination.' Lee Hammerton spoke indignantly. 'First, neither Kilby nor John Clyde know that we slept together last night. Fogg's on the level, I swear it. He hates Seamark Cruises. Wylie might not like you, but he's dead straight. Wagstaffe is only a boy.'

You're naive underneath your bluff, Slade thought, but did not voice it. Kilby or Clyde could easily have found out where Lee Hammerton spent the previous night. A driver with an attempt at the top flight within his grasp might resort to anything if he saw his opportunity being jeopardised. There was every possibility that Fogg was the Seamark undercover man. He had never demonstrated a show of morality before, so why now? Why come to Hammerton when there were bigger and better jobs around for a skilled man, even driving? He had tested for Seamark Cruises. Wylie was deep, nasty and sarcastic. Wagstaffe was the sort of youth who would be easily led, particularly where a substantial bribe was concerned. It could have been any one of them. All of them, in fact. There was no way of knowing . . . yet. Or it could have been none of them.

'I take it you didn't call a doctor?' he asked.

'No.' She shook her head, and sat down on the bed again. 'If you hadn't regained consciousness soon I would have phoned for one. John Clyde examined you. He studied medicine in his younger days, but didn't get his degree. He said there was nothing broken. Just concussion.'

'You collect failures, don't you?' he smiled wryly.

'John was unlucky,' she replied, bitterness creeping into her voice. 'He nearly made the grade.'

'Like me,' Slade answered. 'I nearly made it, but not quite. I failed once, so I opted out.'

'You've got a chip on your shoulder,' she said. 'I'd give anything to know why you really got out.'

'How long was I unconscious?' he asked quickly, fighting against a sudden desire to confess to the world at large that Mark Slade had lost his nerve.

'A couple of hours. You'd better stop where you are tilt morning, anyway.'

'You don't encourage doctors, either. Maybe you're the one with the chip on your shoulder. Perhaps you've just got it in for the mythical System, and you're trying to prove something by qualifying at Riverside.'

'I owe it to both my father and my brother. Anyway, the fact remains that my number one car has been written off. We start work gutting and rebuilding the number two tomorrow. There's time . . . just!'

'And suppose our mysterious enemies sabotage number two? There won't be time to start from scratch again then.'

'So we'd better make sure that nothing untoward befalls number two. That's what I hired you for.'

'And so far I haven't made a very good job of my post as trouble-shooter, have I? I even crashed your car on a test-circuit.'

'It wasn't your fault, and you damned well know it. I take it you'll stay on ... won't you, Mark?'

He did not reply at once.

'You won't . . . leave, will you?' The uncertainty was back in her voice.

'No,' he sighed. 'I guess not. All the same, I must be crazy. If someone's after my blood I'm setting myself up as a sitting duck.'

'You're doing it for Yvonne.'

That's emotional blackmail.'

'Well you are, aren't you?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Who, then?'

He struggled up onto an elbow, his face upturned towards hers. Their lips met, lightly at first, then crushed together, tongues probing and entwining until they both fell back on the bed.

'Thanks, Mark,' she sighed. 'I hoped that was how you felt.'

'Only until we get back from the States.'

'So you're just on hire, then?'

'Can't say. I don't even know myself. But until we either make it or fail in the IROC grids we've got to keep our wits about us. Whoever fixed that tracking is sure to try again. And next time I may not be so

lucky. I want you to know . . . just in case.'

'Pray God it doesn't happen again.' She winced as guilt flooded over her; she had no right to involve anybody in the Hammerton past.

'What security precautions do you take at night. I presume the cars are locked up?' Slade asked.

'Oh, sure.'

'Who has the key?'

'It hangs in the hall.'

'So anybody could help themselves.'

'Anybody in the team, certainly. Sometimes Wylie and Fogg work in the evenings. The cars have to be accessible for work at all times.'

'Well, in future I'll keep the key,' Slade said. 'If they want to work on the cars at night then I'll be around. I'll also sleep in the sheds. Perhaps you'd fix me up with a camp-bed.'

'Is it really necessary?' Her tone was one of disappointment.

'It is. Vital, in fact. I don't think it matters tonight, but once work is commenced on number two I'm not going to let it out of my sight.'

'Why not draw up a rota? They could all take turns.'

'Just me, sweetheart. I don't trust anybody except you.'

'All right, have it your own way.'

'I take it your family had some guns, sporting or otherwise?'

'My father and brother shot regularly. There's a Gallyon sidelock in the gun-room. My father also had a Browning •380 automatic. I should have handed it in to the police really, but as he didn't have a firearms certificate for it. . . '

'And as you hate the sight of a policeman,' Slade grinned, 'you naturally did not. In that case, I'd like to borrow it. I presume there's some ammunition around?'

'There's a full box. Unopened, in fact. I'll get it for you in the morning.'

'Thanks.'

'I'm sorry you'll be sleeping with the cars.'

'So am I.'

'Maybe I could fix us up with a double camp-bed.'

'No chance,' he said. 'I don't want you around if trouble blows. Likewise, I'd be obliged if you would lock yourself in your room at night.'

'Would you like me to wear a chastity-belt? You can keep the key of that, too, if you like.'

'A few suits of armour might not come amiss,' he murmured, 'or bullet-proof vests. Trouble is, we don't know whether the enemy is within or without. It's no good raising the drawbridge if the attacking force is already hidden in your own dungeons.'

Marcus Seamark regarded the man seated on the opposite side of his desk without speaking. The chairman of Seamark Cruises chewed steadily on the long dead cigar, the butt a pulp of Havana tobacco that would have been impossible to draw upon. The bulky, red-faced man with the totally bald pink head smoked cigars incessantly, exclusively those of best Cuban quality. He only chewed them when uncontrollable rage seethed within him. Proof of his current mood was only too evident in the heavy glass ashtray where two more half-smoked ones lay, their ends mutilated and soggy.

Stern attempted to hide his fear. Tall and thin, sallow-faced, he might have been mistaken for a solicitor's clerk in more conventional clothing. Yet even those men, the epitome of humility and respectability, did not wear suits tailored in Savile Row. Normally suave and ruthless, Stern licked cracked and dried lips, and drummed on his knee with the fingers of his left hand. He knew that he was the scapegoat. The fall guy. Seamark paid handsomely for success. He also rewarded failure in his own way. And in Seamark's eyes Stern had failed.

'The blueprint - ' Seamark's small deep-sunken eyes mirrored the fire which burned inside his huge frame - 'where is it?'

'I don't know.' Stern spread his hands wide, swallowing hard so that his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. 'It was kept in the workshops. It's just . . . gone.'

'What d'you mean, gone' Seamark's voice sunk almost to an inaudible whisper. 'Why wasn't it kept in the safe?'

There . . . there was no need. . . '

'Of course there was need, especially now that it's been stolen.'

The mechanics were working from it.'

'No, they weren't. They want to now, and it can't be found. Wasn't even missed. How long's it been gone?'

'It . . . I saw it myself a fortnight ago.'

'A fortnight!'

'It was kept in a drawer. Nobody was interested. . . '

'The hell they weren't, so they took the trouble to steal it! Why wasn't it photocopied?'

Stern swallowed again, the action becoming increasingly harder because of the dryness of his throat.

'It was Fogg's job to see to that. He worked on the design along with Dyson.'

'It was your responsibility. You are team manager, Stern. You carry the can. I don't tolerate balls-ups of this nature, especially of this importance. The blueprint was left lying around like yesterday's paper, it wasn't photocopied although, even if it had been, the loss of the original would have been serious enough.'

'Dyson's attempting to re-draw it. He's working on a reconstruction.'

'From memory, of course?'

Stern nodded.

'Togg has been gone a fortnight,' Seamark mused, 'which, in itself, is more than just a coincidence. Neither can it be a coincidence that Mark Slade has also thrown in his lot with Hammerton.'

Stern waited, then relief surged over him as the other dropped the dead cigar into the ashtray, selected another from the cedar-wood box by his elbow, pierced it, and held the match with a steady hand. Seamark only smoked when his anger was gone. The period of chewing was over.

'We need it back without delay.' The fat man's voice was guttural with a rage that had cooled. 'Phone me tomorrow, and make sure the news is good. It should not be too difficult. After all, Hammerton are not Seamark, are they? I don't need to tell you whom to send, but remember, you carry the can, Stern. I won't tolerate losing Slade and the blueprint. Both have the means whereby victory can be gained at Daytona. Far rather that both were destroyed than that we compete against them.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

NEITHER WYLIE nor Chris Fogg looked up as Slade entered the workshop on the following morning. Both were examining the second gutted Chevy Camaro. The charred remains of the first one were piled in the far corner.

Only Billy Wagstaffe appeared to notice Mark Slade's arrival.

'Mornin', Mr Slade.' He straightened up, grinning, pushing his protective goggles up onto his forehead. 'How're you feelin' this morning?'

'A bit stiff,' Slade turned his attention to the other two mechanics, 'but apart from that I'm all right.'

Wyiiie turned round, his dark goggles hiding the expression in his eyes, only his lips forming into a token

smile which held no welcome.

'Going to give this one a test-drive when we've got it ready, Slade?' he leered, patting the basic chassis of the number two Camaro.

'Maybe,' Slade spoke slowly, sensing a disadvantage in not being able to read the other's eyes, 'and maybe not. I'd like to have a look at what's left of number one first, though.'

'Help yourself.' Wylie waved a hand in the direction of the remnants of the test-drive crash, and then turned back to his work.

Mark Slade walked across to the pile of blackened and twisted metal. It bore little resemblance to the car which he had driven on the previous day. Already some of the few serviceable parts had been removed for installation in the new Chevy. He rummaged through the wreckage for a few minutes, then stood back, a puzzled expression on his face.

'Where's the tracking gone?' he asked, his voice low, his gaze focused unwaveringly on Wylie and Fogg.

'Should be there.' the chief mechanic answered him without looking up. 'We haven't used it.'

'Well, it isn't.'

'Search me.'

*It's got to be somewhere. Why should anybody take it if it wasn't any good?'

'Don't ask me.'

That's just what I am doing.'

'And I've already told you I haven't any bloody idea what's happened to it.'

'It's been removed. Cut away with a hacksaw. That's the only way it could be got out of there.'

'Valuable is it? A collector's item?'

Slade tensed, his fists clenched. Somehow he held himself in check.

'I want to look at it,' he said softly.

'You're welcome to look around, but I can't help you any further. We've got work to do, and time is short.'

'Were the cars locked up last night?' Slade asked.

'Couldn't say.' Wylie picked up an acetylene torch, and Slade was forced to turn his head away. His eyes were still sore from the smoke which had poured into them during those few seconds when his life had hung in the balance.

The sliding-door opened smoothly, and Steve Kilby stepped inside. He nodded to Mark Slade.

'That tracking's missing from the number one car,' Slade said. 'Any ideas?'

'Not a clue.' The blond driver shrugged his shoulders. 'Important is it?'

To me it is. I want to know if anybody worked on the wreckage between the time of the crash yesterday, and this morning, apart from these two mechanics.'

'Nobody as far as I know,' Kilby replied. The key was in its usual place in the house. If anybody wanted it, it was there for the taking.'

'So I gather.' Mark Slade raised his voice so that the mechanics busy on the replacement car could hear him also. 'Well, from now onwards I am keeping the key. I shall be sleeping in here with the cars, so if anybody wants to work on them they won't be hindered. It shouldn't make any difference to anybody.'

The acetylene torch was switched off. Wylie laid it down, and looked at Slade, the dark lenses screening his eyes, but that did little to disguise the resentment which exuded from him even before he spoke.

'And who the bloody hell d'you think you are?' he snarled. 'I'm the chief mechanic here. Kilby's driving at Riverside. What he says, goes. Nobody else is going to bugger us about. The key's kept in the house.'

'If you don't like it, you can go and get your cards.' Slade's voice was quiet, yet its impact was like a whiplash. 'Miss Hammerton's orders. Somebody's trying to stop us from competing at Riverside, and I'm here to see that they don't succeed. From now onwards you'll do as I say, and it won't interfere with the work in any way. Got it?'

Four pairs of eyes were fixed on Slade. Surprise. Resentment. Certainly animosity from Wylie. He could not be sure about Kilby. Clyde wouldn't like it, either.

'If anybody wants to get out, now's the time.' Slade looked at each of them in turn. 'Well?'

'I'm driving at Riverside.' Kilby's reply was a challenge in itself.

'I know,' Slade said. 'And it's my job to see that you get there in one piece.'

'Just don't hinder the work.' Wylie turned away abruptly, switching on his welding gear, concealing his hatred behind a barrier of dazzling light. Fogg and Wagstaffe pulled their goggles down again.

Mark Slade left the workshop, and made his way back towards the house. The gloves were off now. Everybody knew how they stood. But that did not solve the mystery of the missing track-rod. There was no doubt in his mind now that the car had been sabotaged. Someone had deliberately tried to kill him, and that person had returned sometime during the night to remove all evidence of his crime. Seamark Cruises? Well, from now onwards, Mark Slade vowed, security was going to be much tighter. If they made a second attempt they wouldn't find it quite so easy as they had done on the previous occasion.

Lee Hammerton was in her late father's study. Mark Slade entered, closing the door behind him, his gaze sweeping over the shelves of dusty calf-bound volumes on the far wall, the ornately carved desk, the mahogany gun-cupboard. Lee herself, and finally coming to rest on the blue-black •380 automatic pistol which she held in her hand.

She smiled, and held it out towards him, butt foremost.

'This do?' There was uncertainty bordering on fear in her voice. 'Bullets don't stop spooks though.' She attempted a laugh but it failed.

He took it from her and examined it, weighing it in his hand, one and a half pounds of solid streamlined death, seven inches in length, an international police weapon as well as being adaptable to any other purpose. The cold steel was strangely soothing, giving him a sensation of equality against the odds which he faced. John Browning's Belgium Model 1910 was the choice of many. Craig Hammerton had obviously given some thought to its purchase. Maybe he knew one day he might need it.

'Hope I don't have to use it.' He checked the unopened box of ammunition on the desk, breaking the seal to ensure that the carton was full.

'I hope you don't, too.' She moved close to him, taking the pistol and laying it on the desk. She slipped her arms around him. 'I don't like this business at all, Mark.' She shuddered. Her head ached and her pulses were drumming like the hooves of a horse, a crazed beast of death.

'Neither do I,' he smiled at her, 'and I don't think even you guessed that the going would get so rough when you hired me. The name of Mark Slade won't frighten 'em off, that's certain. We'll just have to hope that they won't be so keen on getting in the way of hot lead from a Browning •380. Otherwise, you'd better get ready to call the police in.'

'No,' she said. 'Not that. We'll make it.'

'By the way, the tracking has been removed from the wrecked Chevy.'

'My God!' Her fingernails dug into him. 'How?'

'It has the makings of an inside job. Someone was evidently busy in the workshop during the night. Any chance of an outsider getting the key from the hall?'

'They'd have to know where it was kept. The doors are all locked at night.'

'A lock is no obstacle to a trained housebreaker. Where do the team sleep?'

'The west wing. They wouldn't necessarily hear anything. But you surely don't think. . . '

'That there's a link man?' he concluded. 'Well, it's a possibility that cannot be overlooked at this stage. One thing we've got to remember is that we're not up against a bit of skulduggery and burglary. Whoever fixed your car intended to kill me. He would have done so if I'd been going flat out as he no doubt assumed I would be. It was only the fact that I was cruising at between thirty and forty miles-per-hour below maximum speed that I'm here now.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Well, as I've already told you I'm not going to be very far away from those cars, and I'm going to check the rebuilding, stage by stage. Wylie and Fogg won't like that, but I can't take any chances. I think the car will be the primary target. If they sabotage this one we're really lumbered. That's why I'm going to mooch about the grounds a bit after dark. I could be a sitting duck in the workshop. And I'll take charge of the key from this moment on. The mechanics will probably want to work until ten or eleven each night. They'll have to, in fact, if we're going to meet the deadline. I'll lock the shed up then, whether I'm inside or outside. In the meantime I'll turn in and get some rest. I'll need all the sleep I can get.'

'I'll be around if you want me.' She kissed him and disengaged herself.

Slade went upstairs to his room. His head was throbbing again, and he doubted very much whether he would sleep much.

Lee Hammerton remained in the study, reclining in the leather upholstered swivel chair, eyes closed, her thoughts centred on Slade. She was uneasy, a kind of premonition that something was going to happen. She wondered if either her father or her brother had felt this way. Or her fated ancestors.

She started as the door swung open, moving noiselessly on its well-oiled hinges, expelling her breath in a loud sigh of relief as she recognised the tail debonair figure of John Clyde.

'Sorry if I startled you.' He moved into the room, leaving the door open behind him. 'I thought I'd better have a word with you. Slade's been throwing his weight-around in the workshop. The mechanics don't like it, and neither do I, for that matter. The last thing we want is an atmosphere of friction if we're going to get that car ready in time.'

'Well, they'll have to put up with it,' she snapped. 'He's acting on my orders.'

'He's been telling them he's taking charge of the key, and that he'll be sleeping in there at nights.'

'That's right.'

'Damn it, he's making a melodrama out of the whole thing. Just because he crashed. . . '

'He didn't crash. The car was fixed. Sabotaged. Now somebody's nicked the tracking, making sure that not the slightest trace was left of their crime. Somebody took the key from the hall, and got in the workshop last night, John! How do we explain that except by admitting that somebody's after our blood?'

'The hell they did!' Clyde stroked his angular jaw, and leaned up against the desk. 'Seamark Cruises aren't pulling any punches. Or maybe it isn't them at all. Justin was killed through no apparent mechanical fault. . . '

'You don't need to remind me, John.' Lee Hammerton paled. 'So were my ancestors, Jasper Hammerton and his son. I keep trying to tell myself that it's Seamark behind it all but too many unexplained things have been happening lately.'

'I think you made a mistake by bringing Mark Slade here.' Clyde became sullen. 'If he was going to drive for us, then fair enough. But all he seems to be doing at the moment is attracting trouble and alienating the men.'

'We need him, John. We haven't got time to keep looking over our shoulders. After all, we don't want to involve the police, do we?'

'No.' Clyde stepped back towards the open door. 'But apart from a couple of telephone threats nothing happened until Slade arrived. Maybe there's a link. . . ' The manager's lower lip curled in a leer.

'Meaning?'

'Well, somebody removed that tracking. It was Slade who crashed the car. We've only his word for what happened.'

'You're being ridiculous, John.' Lee Hammerton's voice carried a note of anger. 'I'd take his word for anything, no matter what. And he's in charge of security precautions. Please remember that. You've enough to do with all the arrangements for Riverside, and, we hope, Daytona. There's an awful lot wants doing to this place as well. The sooner those contractors move in, the better I'll like it. God, I'd like to sell up, move somewhere else, shake the Hammerton dust off my heels.'

'I phoned them this morning.' He half-turned in the doorway. 'They can't make it before the spring at the earliest.'

'Well get on to somebody else.'

'I've shopped around. There's no chance of getting anybody any earlier.'

Lee was seething with anger as she listened to the receding footsteps of her general manager. John Clyde was invaluable, yet at times he could be exceedingly exasperating. All the same, she needed him. Almost as much as she needed Mark Slade. But for a different reason.

She rose and went outside. The rain clouds of the previous day had disappeared, leaving in their wake a blue sky, and sunlight which glinted on the rich brown foliage of autumn. Dead leaves rustled beneath her feet in the freshening breeze.

She turned easterly, away from the house, heading in the opposite direction to the circuit. For once she wanted to divorce herself from the atmosphere of motor-racing. The giant chestnut trees in the horseshoe-shaped wood dominated the scene, the remaining leaves a mixture of yellow, golden, and dark brown as they prepared to surrender to the encroaching winter. Only the tall pines never seemed to alter, their greenery defying the severest weather, one or two bent and twisted into grotesque shapes, one in particular bearing evidence of its stamina, struck by lightning at some time and then, whilst still struggling to survive, it had been almost uprooted by a freak gale. Yet, it still lived, a crippled veteran soldier refusing to lie down and die. In a way it reminded her of Mark Slade, never knowing when it was beaten.

A fit of nostalgia assailed her as she took the winding path beneath the tall trees. Nobody had come here regularly since her father and Justin had shot this very covert. Somewhere a cock pheasant shouted as though declaring the place a sanctuary, mocking her, reminding her of happier times.

She made a detour to avoid a wall of cruel briars, treading a narrow track which led through some rhododendrons and silver birch, finally arriving back on the main ride. Wood-pigeons clattered noisily out of the branches above, alarmed at this intrusion of their daily tranquillity.

Suddenly she stopped, listening. Footsteps. Somebody was following her, walking quickly, heedless of clinging brambles and obstructing bracken.

Fear gripped her. Never before had she encountered anybody upon these infrequent solitary rambles. There was a disturbing urgency about the other's movements as though whoever it was had followed her stealthily into the heart of the wood, and now there was no further need for furtive progress. She was trapped. Ahead of her lay the remainder of the wood, outside of which was an expanse of grassland with no human habitation in sight. Behind. . .

Her instinct was to run, but her reasoning told her that it was futile. She turned and stood with her back to the knotted trunk of a century-old oak tree, trembling, not so much as a broken bough with which to defend herself. The foolishness of wandering alone in the grounds had not even occurred to her. Now it was too late. She thought of Mark Slade, asleep in his bed, and wished vainly that he could have been with her.

Her pursuer was close now, barely ten yards away, crashing through the undergrowth, breathing heavily, only a bend in the path obscuring him from her vision.

Then she saw him, and the sight of those off-white, grease-stained overalls brought a gasp of relief to her lips, and a weakness to her legs so that they almost refused to support her weight.

'Steve Kilby!' Her cry was strangled, her fingernails digging into the bark of the tree.

'Lee.' He was breathless after the distance he had covered, in spite of his fitness. His face was flushed, hair awry, eyes darting from side to side as though he feared either pursuit or a hidden watcher. There was a desperation about him which she had never seen before. 'Lee, I've got to talk to you.'

'Well, you could have spoken to me in the house without scaring me half to death out here.' She was fast recovering from her brief ordeal, and now anger was flooding over her. 'What the hell's up with you, Steve?'

'I want to know what's going on,' he gulped, his chest heaving.

'What on earth d'you mean?'

'This Slade guy. OK, I can accept orders, even from him, but there's something between you two. You're sleeping together!'

'And who told you that?'

Kilby's gaze dropped to the carpet of leaves on which both of them stood.

'I heard,' he said.

'Who from?'

'Does it really matter?'

'Yes, it does. I own this place, and I'm damned if I'm going to stand for all and sundry poking their noses into my business.'

'All right, all right.' He drew the back of his hand across his forehead. 'It was John Clyde who told me.'

'How the hell does he know?'

'I've no idea, but you know Clyde as well as I do, snooping about the place at all times, missing nothing.'

'What if we did spend the night together? It's got nothing to do with anybody else. Even you.'

Kilby bit his lip, and Lee sensed a lessening of his aggression.

'OK, so I'm just peeved about it. Can you blame me?'

'I told you we were through, Steve, as far as that's concerned, anyway.'

'Because of Slade?'

'No.'

'You'd never met him before, and yet within three days you're sleeping with him.'

'Correction, I spent one night with him. From now on he'll be sleeping with the cars.'

'And who's going to drive at Riverside?'

'You are, Steve.'

'I'll believe it when I'm at the wheel. I've been kicked out of your bed so I'm fully expecting to be booted out of the driving seat.'

'You needn't worry about that. Slade doesn't want to drive in an IROC.'

'So he says.'

'I know him. He won't. I had to chivvy him into doing that test-lap. You want to think yourself lucky, Steve. If you'd been driving, you'd've been killed because you'd've been going much faster. Mark Slade's determined to make the break. He's here as trouble-shooter, that's all. And God knows, we need him.'

'And as your lover,' Kilby added.

'That remains to be seen.'

'I just want to know how I stand.'

'As you always have. Number one driver to the Hammerton team. If you want to quit I won't stop you, but I hope you won't.'

Steve Kilby shuffled his feet in the dead leaves, looking down at them.

'I'm staying,' he said. 'Just keep Slade off my back, that's all I ask.'

'He's in charge of security precautions - ' her dark eyes bored into his - 'and your job is to qualify at Riverside, maybe win at Daytona. That's the way it is. No compromises.'

He nodded, and without further comment turned and retraced his steps, walking slowly, deep in thought.

Lee Hammerton waited a few minutes before she followed him. She was badly shaken. It might not have been Kilby who had followed her into the wood.

The night was dark and starless, unbroken black cloud moving in from the west. The wind had strengthened since dusk, and when it dropped Slade knew that it would rain. He was grateful for the

thickness of the polo-neck sweater, its charcoal grey blending with the shadows, and rendering him almost invisible. The weight of the automatic in his hip-pocket was comforting, and crouching in the bushes, from where he could see the lighted window of the workshop, he sensed a distinct advantage. It was almost like laying an ambush. Providing that the enemy was human! He shook off a shudder. He must not let his imagination run riot.

The automatic was fully loaded, and there were spare cartridges in his other pocket. He wondered whether he would use the weapon, and, if so, how discriminately. No man can lightly consider the prospect of killing a fellow human, even a murderer. Warning shots, maybe. He did not know; he would not until it came to the crunch.

He knew that Frank Wylie was in there alone working on the second Chevy. Slade had looked in earlier and told him he would lock up later.

'I'll be around,' Slade had said. 'Put the light out when you've finished.'

Wylie had just nodded. Not even sarcasm. It went deeper than that now. Resentment certainly, possibly hatred.

Slade changed position, seeking refuge from the wind behind the trunk of a lone elm. From here he could still see the lighted window, occasionally the chief mechanic as he crossed behind it.

Slade made a mental note to go into town the following morning and buy some more substantial footwear. Sneakers were not ideal for outdoor vigils on an autumn night. His thoughts moved on to Fogg and Wagstaffe. He wondered why they were not assisting Wylie. As far as he knew neither had left the house. They were staying in their rooms rather than doing a stint of overtime. Another case of resentment, but against whom, himself or Wylie? The present attitude of the Hammerton team was not conducive to winning an International Race of Champions. Maybe it was ail his own fault. Kilby, too, where was he? Had Slade been in the driver's position he would have been constantly at Wylie's side, supervising, learning, noting the way every IROC specification was built into that engine. It was the only way to win. A driver had to regard his car as a wife, living with it, sleeping with it, trying to understand the way it responded to his every touch. Kilby's was a luke-warm relationship.

Slade told himself that it was none of his business. It wasn't his job to win an IROC for Lee Hammerton. He just had to get her there and back safely. All the same he could not stop himself from thinking about her, the beginning of an arousal which he fought to dispel. Erotic dreams had been the downfall of more than one sentry over the years, altering the whole course of battles.

Then he stiffened. The night was black, but something to his left was even blacker, darker than the shadows cast across the chipped forecourt in front of the house. A bush swaying in the wind? There were no bushes in that direction, only a crumbling ornamental wall.

Slade's eyes narrowed, trying to penetrate the gloom. He wondered if Craig Hammerton had ever used infra-red binoculars. If so, he would borrow them tomorrow.

A break in the cloud formation, so slight that it permitted barely a couple of seconds of faint starlight, but it was enough for Slade. There was somebody crouching along that wall, creeping steadily in the direction of the workshop.

Slade was already moving forward, keeping to the edge of the bushes, testing each step before he put his full weight on the ground, scuffling dead twigs aside with his toe, knowing that any sound he made would

be carried on the wind to the intruder.

His hand rested on the butt of the automatic still in his pocket. The night surged back again, darker than ever, the wind lashing spots of rain onto his unprotected head. He could no longer see the intruder, but he knew he was there.

Instinctively Slade was circling, taking a course that would bring him up to that wall. He would follow it along, come up behind the man, and then. . .

Slade never got round to working out what he would do when he closed in on the other. He was still ten yards from the furthest end of the wall when a crushing weight descended on his back, throwing him onto the cracked paving slabs, powerful arms pinioning his own, his face grazed by the rough surface. Temporarily dazed, he tasted blood, and then his reflexes took over.

His assailant was large and powerful, pulling Slade's arms behind his back, kneeling on his legs, Strength like that could snap a man's neck once the arms were pinioned, freeing the initial hold and leaving a hand spare for the coup de grace.

Slade relaxed every nerve in his body, a deliberate feint. His attacker grunted in surprise, leaning forward. It was at that moment that Mark Slade tensed and powered backwards, using every muscle above the waist, his head catapulting upwards. A sharp crack as bone met bone, the crushing of a nose, the relaxing of the hold, and a sharp cry of pain.

Slade scrambled to his knees, rolling over again as a wild blow caught him on the shoulder. As he fell he kicked out, and had the satisfaction of feeling the toe of a sneaker sink deeply into a fleshy area within that patch of darkest shadow. The other fell back and lay still.

Slade dropped into a crouch as heavy footsteps came towards him. The man by the wall was coming to the aid of his colleague.

'Get the bastard!' A nasal croak from the one on the ground who was now struggling up into a sitting position.

Then Slade remembered his gun. His hand dropped to his hip-pocket, closed over the serrated butt, and for a brief second he did not know whether he was capable of drawing a gun on another man.

A stab of flame showed in the darkness. A slug whined viciously a foot or so to the right of his body, followed almost immediately by a crashing report. Heavier than a •380. Probably a •45.

Slade pulled his pistol clear of the pocket in one fast coordinated movement, thumb pushing forward the safety catch, finger squeezing the trigger. Two reports, almost instantaneous, both men firing wildly, blindly; angrily.

Another bullet sang its heavy message of death above his head. The gunman had fired at the answering flash. Slade held his fire. It would have been all too easy to shoot the man on the ground, but the ex-driver would probably have paid the supreme penalty a split second later. He waited, not moving.

'Where are you, Fred?'

'Ere. The bleeder's broke me nose.'

'Keep still. I'll get him.'

Slade was tempted to shoot in the direction of the second thug's voice but he could not be sure whether the man was standing up or crouching. He would not get a second chance. A bullet would answer the flash of his gun if he missed. He waited.

Lights came on in the house at the rear of the two attackers, silhouetting them plainly, easy targets from where Mark Slade crouched. And they could not see him. He raised his pistol, supporting his right wrist with his left hand, taking a bead, holding his breath. Pistol practice in the Forces had never been as easy as this. Squeeze. He chickened out of the second pressure.

He let his breath out in a gush, and lowered his weapon. Murder wasn't his line. He couldn't do it.

Both men were on their feet now, glancing in the direction of the house where people were appearing in the lighted doorway. Slade recognised Clyde, with Fogg and Wagstaffe close behind him. Lee was peering over their shoulders. Only Steve Kilby was missing.

The workshop door was pulled back, too, and Frank Wylie was standing in the open, shielding his eyes in an effort to see what was happening.

Clyde was running forward, the others following. Slade brought up his gun again, and he knew full well that if either of the silhouetted gunmen attempted to shoot, he would gun them down. He would murder to prevent murder.

'Come on, Fred, don't let's 'ang around.'

The larger of the two was clasping his hands to his face as he broke into an ungainly run after the other. Slade stood watching until the night had swallowed them up, the wind and driving rain masking all sounds of their retreat. He slipped his gun back into his pocket. Maybe he could have stopped them, but only by either shooting them down or else risking a gun battle in which stray bullets would rake the surrounding area. And Lee Hammerton was amongst the advancing party.

'What's happening?' John Clyde came to a halt only a couple of yards from Slade, head thrust forward, cautious, apprehensive.

'Couple of guys tried to shoot me.' Slade walked towards the others. 'They missed.'

'Are you all right, Mark?' Lee rushed forward, pushing ahead of her manager.

'Right enough.' Slade wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and tasted blood again. They've gone, and there's no point in trying to follow them. Anyway, we're all getting soaked so let's go back inside. There'll be nothing more doing out here tonight.'

'Where's Kilby?' Mark Slade asked as Lee bathed his grazed face in the bathroom.

'He went into town earlier.' She found some sticking plaster and taped a strip over a cut on the bridge of his nose. As she worked she told him of her meeting in the woods with her ex-lover.

'He hates my guts.' Slade winced at the stinging sensation of TCP lotion. 'But that doesn't excuse his absence. His job is in the workshop with Wylie, twenty-four hours a day if necessary. Fogg and Wagstaffe, too.'

'They'll knuckle down to it,' Lee said. 'Just let this little rebellion blow itself out. I don't want to antagonise them further. Anyway, what d'you reckon those thugs had in mind tonight?'

'Well, they were heading for the sheds. And they were armed. One can only conclude that it was a full-scale onslaught to put us out of business.'

'And they were most certainly outsiders.' Lee cut another strip of adhesive plaster.

They were,' Slade admitted. 'A couple of tame gorillas obeying orders. But who sent 'em? It's the guys behind it I want. Lee. Those two have been sent packing, but I'll warrant there are plenty more where they came from. We can't afford to relax for one minute. One consolation, at least the enemy is tangible.'

Lee Hammerton did not reply. For her the night hid a thousand inexplicable terrors which it was impossible to explain to Mark Slade.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SLADE WAS in town shortly after nine o'clock on the following morning. He parked Lee Hammerton's Alfa Romeo close to the busy shopping precinct, and then set about purchasing his various needs without delay.

He did not like being away from the Hammerton estate. Subconsciously he experienced a feeling of guilt over his absence. Logically, he had to admit to himself, there was little chance of their enemies attempting anything in broad daylight. Yet, it was the unknown factor which worried him, the feeling that they had a spy, a saboteur, in their midst. There was always the possibility, also, that there were two separate forces working against them. They were not even certain that the nocturnal gunmen had been sent by Seamark Cruises. It was a strong possibility, but there was no proof. The most worrying of all recent happenings, as far as Slade was concerned, was the overnight removal of the tracking from the wrecked Chevy Camaro. Either it was a deliberate attempt to kill him by a member of the Hammerton team, and most of them held a personal grudge against him, or else it was a diabolically clever and daring plot by a rival team, Seamark Cruises heading the list of suspects. A third alternative was a combination of the two, a saboteur in the pay of the opposition who worked with Hammerton and knew their every move.

Slade bought a pair of thick rubber-soled outdoor shoes incorporating both solidity and stealth, a navy blue anorak which would provide excellent camouflage during the nocturnal hours, and returned to the parked car. He felt strangely naked without the comforting weight of the automatic pistol in his hip-pocket, but it would have served no purpose and been extremely unwise to have carried it in a public place. The last thing he wanted was to invite the attention of the law.

The traffic was heavy in that small market town, a newly installed one-way system creating additional confusion amongst motorists, and it was fully twenty minutes before he was on the country road again heading back the way he had come.

He maintained a steady thirty-five m.p.h. There were no other vehicles in sight, but he was reluctant to increase his foot pressure on the accelerator. Every nerve in his body was rigid, and at each bend he slowed perceptibly. The old fears were back again, a slow climbing tenseness bringing with it the memories of the crash on the Hammerton circuit, the uncontrollable zig-zag course, the impact, the heat and the smoke, evil elfin laughter mocking him inside his own brain.

Now it was a thousand times more vivid, the purring of the engine bringing it all home to him. Crawling round bends - sweating.

He noticed a car approaching from behind, seeing it first in the offside wing-mirror, then watching it in the driving mirror. A beige Hillman Avenger, characterless, a fellow shopper, perhaps a company representative. There was nothing to distinguish it from a thousand other cars on the road. Except the way it hung back.

Slade had dropped to thirty m.p.h., and only then did the sweating ease up. He wiped his clammy hands on his trousers, and focused his attention on the car at his rear.

It could easily have overtaken him. He could see the two men in the front seats, hunched shapes behind the green sun-visor. Faceless. Somehow . . . sinister.

The Avenger increased its speed on a stretch of straight road, and now it was barely twenty yards behind him. There was ample space and opportunity for the driver to overtake the slow-moving Alfa Romeo, but still it maintained its steady course.

It was only then that realisation dawned upon Mark Slade that he was being followed. He sensed it, and began to sweat again. He knew that he could have out-distanced the Avenger in a matter of minutes. That would have been all too easy, but it would not have served any purpose. The men would come again, probably under cover of darkness. He wished that he had put the automatic in the car. Unarmed and helpless, his only weapon was speed, something which he feared almost as much as another attack.

A movement from the vehicle behind caught his eye in the mirror. The man in the passenger seat had the window down, and was leaning out, arm extended, a snub-nosed blue-black object clenched in his fist. A pistol, aimed at the Alfa Romeo!

Slade ducked, accelerating at the same instant, not hearing the shot, only the shattering of his rear window, followed by something ploughing into the fascia and the splintering of glass as the speedometer disintegrated.

The car responded immediately, but as it built up speed the Alfa Romeo was swerving crazily. Slade wrenched on the wheel, having to use sheer force to prevent the vehicle from plunging into the hedge on the opposite side of the road, bringing it back, nearside wheels on the soft grass verge, slewing again, fighting desperately for control.

He knew that the second shot had hit the rear offside tyre. Two more slugs whistled through the smashed window, ripping into the upholstery, one jarring his body as it lodged in the back of the driver's seat.

The Alfa Romeo skidded sideways again, and Slade knew that he could control it no more. The front

wheels struck the verge and bounced upwards, a slow-motion replay of the disastrous last ride of Lee Hammerton's number one Chevy Camaro.

It embarked upon a downhill course, bumping its way down a steep grassy bank, miraculously not overturning, tearing its way through a straggling hawthorn hedge, ripping the obstructing stools out of their roots, then came to a halt, still upright, in a field of growing swedes.

Mark Slade was out of the car in an instant, glancing behind him, seeing the Avenger parked on the roadway, two men emerging, a thickset one and a smaller, thinner one. Both had automatics.

Slade ran, away from the road, taking an erratic course, falling and stumbling through the closely-sown slippery swedes, in danger of spraining an ankle at any second.

Two more shots rang out, resonant reports which echoed in the quiet of the countryside, whining slugs cutting through the foliage around his feet. Desperation spurred him to even greater efforts. He knew that with every yard he put between himself and his attackers the better were his chances of escaping unscathed. A .45 is inaccurate at a range in excess of twenty yards unless in the hands of a skilled marksman, and these men were shooting wildly. Only an unlucky bullet would bring him down. But luck, it seemed these days, was not a plentiful commodity in the Hammerton camp.

He bounded on, slipped, picked himself up, and wished that he had changed out of his sneakers into his new shoes which would have given him a better foothold.

He glanced behind him as he ran. The men were through the hedge and into the field, stopping to reload which gave him an advantage of several yards. He had no alternative but to keep on running.

The field was a large one, possibly fifteen acres, sloping gently upwards to where a long narrow wood stood on the horizon some two hundred yards away. It was his only chance. Perhaps he could lose his pursuers in there if a bullet did not cut him down before he reached it.

They continued to follow him, but now they were not shooting, almost as though they were confident of running him down, a pack of hounds knowing the exact course which their quarry will take, aware that it will be a simple matter to run the fleeing fox to earth in a blind covert.

Slade was breathing heavily by the time he reached the wood. One last look behind him revealed that his pursuers were about eighty yards away, picking their way carefully through the thickly sown swedes, not hurrying. He pushed on into the wood. The rides were well looked after, trimmed and levelled by heavy machinery, the undergrowth on either side dense and straggling, flattened in places where teams of beaters had forced their way through on shooting days.

An unpleasant aroma assailed his nostrils, reminiscent of decaying flesh as though some wounded animal had crawled in here to die. Subconsciously he noted that it came from masses of fungi, black with flies, a variety known as Stinkhorn which grows in dank woodlands. It gave off a stench like decomposing corpses and he shuddered uncontrollably.

Instinctively he was making a detour, determined to get away from the main ride, brambles clutching viciously at his trousers, ripping through the material, tearing the skin. As he paused to extricate himself from a length of pernicious briar he heard the two men entering the wood. They made no attempt at stealth. It was unnecessary. Guns at the ready they would brush out every square inch until they flushed their prey.

Slade realised the importance of silence on his own part. Perhaps he had made a mistake by seeking sanctuary in this covert, and his best chance would have been to run the gauntlet of fire in the open, relying on his own fitness to enable him to out-distance his pursuers. It was too late now. Any further progress would reveal his position for it was impossible to move quietly amidst clinging brambles and dying bracken. There was no chance of moving swiftly.

He dropped to his knees, and then gently eased his body down onto the ground, lying full length. He could hear his heart pounding wildly like some form of jungle telegraph. Bracken and briars shielded him . . . temporarily.

The gunmen were systematic in their search. They did not plunge immediately upon the course he had taken. Instead, they retreated to the furthest point of the wood, broke off branches with which to beat down the undergrowth, and began to advance slowly, fifteen yards or so apart, their step measured, automatics at the ready.

Slade tried to work out a plan, and gave it up. He was as helpless as though he had been trapped in the car when it had left the road. One man, perhaps, he could have surprised and overpowered. But not two, spaced as they were, always within sight of each other. He cursed himself for having left his own automatic behind. Shots out here would go unnoticed; they were all part of the rural scene. Nobody would pay the slightest attention to them.

He raised his head slightly, and experienced a surge of relief. The searchers had passed by, the nearest one, the big fellow, some twenty yards away.

But Slade's exultation was little more than a temporary reprieve. They were sweeping round again in a circle which would bring them up on his side of the wood. Pheasants clattered in alarm, striking up through the branches and gliding down to the swede field below, surprised no doubt that no charges of shot followed their escape.

Mark Slade pressed himself flat, his face against the soft ground. He had virtually resigned himself to death as surely as if he faced a firing-squad. Another five yards and they would spot him. They would gun him down where he lay. Five seconds of life left. His thoughts turned to Yvonne, and Lee Hammerton. There were an awful lot of things he would have liked to clear up, unsaid words which would never be spoken. Now it was too late.

He could hear the heavy asthmatic breathing of the large man. A metallic click, the safety catch of the -45 being pushed forward. Slade closed his eyes tightly. He would not hear the report. You never heard the one that got you, he'd read somewhere. One split second of pain, and then oblivion. Easy. Nothing to be frightened of really. He braced himself, holding his breath.

A shattering report, deafening, echoing. Crazy. He should not have heard it, nor the echoes. Neither did he feel anything. He did not move. Perhaps the first shot had missed. He prepared himself for the second, amazed that he was not afraid of dying after all.

Two shots. Almost simultaneous, one close, the other some distance away. Acrid fumes that had him choking even as he opened his eyes and turned his head.

'Don't move. Keep right there or I'll blast you to hell!'

Slade's expression was one of blank astonishment. His brain was incapable of coping with the situation. The big gunman lay face downwards only a yard or so away, a hole the size of a hub-plate in his left side,

the wound jagged and deep, the fawn mackintosh splattered with crimson.

A sound to Slade's left attracted his attention. The second man was running, stumbling, clutching at trees for support, face and clothing bloodied; staggering, somehow managing to keep going.

A third man, a total stranger, dominated the scene. Tall, well over six feet, he was clad in a suit of loose-fitting plus-fours, thick knee-length stockings accentuating the bagginess of the trousers. His features were clean cut and weather beaten, a floppy pork-pie hat casting a shadow over the upper part of his face.

Slade's attention, though, was focused on the long-barrelled shotgun, the wisps of smoke trickling from the muzzle, noting the expertise with which two spent cases were flipped from the breech, and replaced by live cartridges, all in the same movement. A gunman, but of a different kind. A gamekeeper!

'You guys came to the wrong place.' The gamekeeper's voice was loaded with menace, the gun barrels trained unwaveringly on Mark Slade. 'Poachin's one thing, but when somebody comes to my woods with forty-fives they gotta be taught a lesson, 'specially when they gets ideas about shootin' at me. This one's 'ad it. T'other won't get far. Now, I reckon you'd better get to your feet, mister. Move slowly. Nothin' sudden. Then we'll take a walk back to my place, and fetch the cops in to clean this little lot up. Self-defence, that's what it was. I gotta right to defend meself, now ain't I?' Confidence starting to drain with the awful realisation of what he had done.

Slade detected a slight change of attitude in the other. This man had killed ruthlessly in the heat of battle, and now he was beginning to give some thought to the consequences.

'I'm not with them,' Slade said as he began to walk ahead of the keeper. "They were going to kill me.'

'Birds of a feather,' the other grunted. 'None of you woulda been up 'ere if you'd been up to any good. Still, the police'll sort it out. Now, walk a bit quicker, and keep your 'ands where I can see 'em.'

It was a full twenty minutes before they came in sight of the gamekeeper's cottage, a small stone building situated beneath a grassy knoll, surrounded by kennels housing barking dogs, and rows of empty pens which had contained pheasant poults throughout the summer months.

A youth, wearing a red and blue checked shirt and mauve jeans, came towards them. The facial resemblance between father and son was only too obvious to Slade.

'You got one of 'em, then, Dad.' The younger man welcomed any form of excitement which broke the monotony of daily game keeping duties.

'Aye, and there's a couple more up in the Coldharbour Wood.' The gamekeeper did not go into details. 'Take this, and watch this feller carefully. Keep 'im 'ere, and don't let 'im get too close. Any trouble ... in the legs. They ain't just ordinary poachers. I'll phone the police.'

The youth seized the offered twelve-bore eagerly, snapping back the hammers, and Slade experienced a sense of acute uneasiness. He did not like the way the barrels were trained on his chest, nor the manner in which those adolescent hands trembled with nervous excitement.

'Take it easy, kid.' He spoke softly, hoping to reassure the other. 'I'm not going anywhere, and that gun might go off if you're not careful.'

'It'll bloody well go off if you're not careful!' The gamekeeper's son spat with contempt, some of the spittle landing on the barrels of the gun. 'Just stand still, and maybe you'll be all right.'

Slade tried to relax. He could hear the gamekeeper talking inside the house, but he could not discern the words. He did not need to. He knew only too well what was being said.

Five minutes later, much to Mark Slade's relief, the gamekeeper came back outside, and took the gun from his son.

'Cops'll be here in a few minutes.' He spoke gruffly. 'Ambulance as well. In the meantime, we just wait. Out here.'

Within ten minutes both police and ambulance had arrived, a cream and red Austin Westminster crime car, containing four uniformed officers, and a Volvo saloon with a detective-inspector and two CID men in plain-clothes.

After a brief consultation with the gamekeeper, the youth was instructed to lead all but the senior officer and a detective up to Coldharbour Wood. The ambulance followed in the wake of the Volvo, bumping over the rough bridle path which led up from the keeper's cottage.

The detective-inspector, a thickset, pallid, humourless individual, motioned to Slade and the gamekeeper to step inside the cottage. The interior was sparsely furnished, the daylight restricted by the small windows, the quarried floor uncarpeted. Slade wondered where the gamekeeper's wife was. Perhaps he was a widower or else divorced. The place certainly showed the absence of female household organisation.

'Your face seems familiar, sir.' The CID inspector scrutinised Slade closely, his brow furrowed as though trying to recollect photographs from criminal files.

'Slade.' The ex-driver winced, wondering if he would ever be able to slip into obscurity. It would certainly take time. 'Mark Slade'

'Not . . . the Mark Slade?'

*I guess there's only one. Unfortunately.'

'Ah, yes, of course, sir. You've changed somewhat since I last saw you on telly, but I'd recognise you anywhere. That beard you're growing had me fooled for a moment.'

The detective-constable produced a notepad and ballpoint pen, every movement swift, an exaggerated alertness designed to lower the morale of those whom he interviewed. A young man, no more than twenty-two or three, his uniform already discarded, and eager for further promotion.

'Now, sir.' The inspector turned to the gamekeeper. 'Perhaps you would care to give us a statement first. If we could just have your name. . . '

'Walter Jackson.' The guardian of the fields and coverts responded with a new sense of self-importance. 'I was out lookin' at me traps when I 'card some shots from down by the road. I says to meself, them's poachers, Walter, and as I went to investigate, the pheasants started gettin' up out o' Coldharbour Wood. So I says to meself, Walter, the buggers are in there after your pheasants.'

'I went into the wood, moving quiet, like, and all of a sudden I saw them two blokes. . . '

'Which two?'

'The two that are in the wood now, sir. They both 'ad guns. Pistols. The one, the big feller, saw me, and turned and 'ad a crack at me. Christ, I felt the wind from that slug past me cheek, so I give 'im a barrel there and then. 'E dropped, and 'is mate was just takin' a bead on me so I give it 'im, too.'

'I see.' The inspector glanced at the constable who was writing furiously. 'And how does Mr Slade figure in this?'

'E was with 'em.' The gamekeeper turned towards Slade with a gloating expression on his face. 'Lysin' in the bracken 'e was, 'oping I wouldn't see 'im. But I spotted 'im, and that's why 'e's 'ere now.'

'Had he got a gun?'

'Didn't appear to 'ave,' Jackson answered with a note of disappointment. 'Could 'ave 'id it or throwed it away, though.'

'I see.' The officer regarded Slade steadily. 'Perhaps you can explain your presence in the wood, Mr Slade.'

'There's nothing much to it.' Slade was grateful that he had not been carrying the •380 after all. 'I'm working with the Hammerton team now, and I was just on my way back there from town when this Hillman Avenger came up behind me and started shooting. They burst both my rear tyres, and I went off the road and into a field of swedes. The men were still shooting at me, so I made a run for it. I thought I'd dodge 'em in that wood, but it was soon clear that I hadn't much chance of getting away. Then Mr Jackson appeared on the scene, and there was a bit of a shoot-out. One fellow was killed, and the other got away, but he was hit badly.'

'Hmm.' The CID man seated himself on the corner of the scrubbed table, and began to fill a blackened briar pipe with long stranded tobacco from a polythene pouch. 'And why did these men attack you, Mr Slade?'

'I've no idea.'

'You've cut yourself. There's sticking plaster on your face.'

'I took a knock in the workshops.'

'Have you any idea who these men are?'

'Not a clue. I've never seen 'em before.'

They were interrupted by the sound of vehicles. The police had returned already, Jackson's son following the plain-clothes officer who came in to make his report.

'Nasty mess up there, sir. I've cordoned it off, and left Wilson up there, sir. A nasty job. No sign of the second fellow.'

'Check the road, Banks. A Hillman Avenger you said, Mr Slade. What colour? Registration number?'

'Beige. I didn't get the number.'

'A pity. Nevertheless, Banks, get down there and see if the car's gone. Mr Slade's car will have to be checked by the forensic experts so nothing must be moved.'

The inspector made a telephone call to his office. His tone was abrupt, authoritative, as he asked for more men to be sent out.

'Any chance of me going back to the Hammerton place?' Slade asked. 'I've told you all I know, and I don't reckon I can do much more by staying here.'

'Hmm.' The other was determined to make a major concession of his agreement to Slade's request. 'I suppose not, but, of course, we shall have to interview you again. Also, there will be an inquest, so I hope you're not thinking of going anywhere in the near future.'

'I'm not going anywhere, and right now I don't even have a car to get me back to the Hammerton place. The one in the field, incidentally, is Miss Hammerton's. I was using it.'

'I'll get someone to run you back, but you'll have to hang around until Banks returns.'

Sergeant Banks returned within a quarter of an hour, tight-lipped, shaking his head as he entered the cottage.

'No sign of the car, sir. The Avenger, I mean. Not a trace. Not even a tyre track. The Alfa Romeo has undoubtedly got some slugs embedded in it. One looks to have lodged in the back of the driver's seat.'

'I see.' The inspector lit his pipe for the third time. 'Well, we can't do much more until the experts have gone over everything. In the meantime, Banks, perhaps you'd take Mr Slade back to the Hammerton place.'

'My God!' Lee Hammerton buried her face in her hands as Slade concluded his story in the study. 'It's not safe to go outside. They deliberately tried to murder you in broad daylight.'

'That much is only too plain.' Slade's expression was grim. 'Either they got a tip-off that I'd gone into town, or else they were watching this place, saw me leave, followed me, and struck on the way back.'

'Look, Mark.' Lee rested her hand in his. 'I can't ask you to stay on any longer. We're up against something far bigger than I even dreamed of when I asked for your help. Three days and you've escaped death three times, out there on the track, the gunmen in the night, and now this. Look, why don't you just go back to Crossways, and forget that the Hammerton team ever existed? I had no right to ask you to come here. The old curse has come back with a vengeance!'

'It's got nothing to do with the Hammerton Curse, you, or Yvonne now.' His voice trembled and his lips were compressed into a thin bloodless line. 'These bastards have crashed me twice, not to mention shooting at me. And somebody's going to have to pay for that. I let a man escape because I didn't know whether or not I could gun anybody down, or if I did, whether I'd be able to live with myself afterwards. I know now. God help the next guy who gives me a chance to put a •380 slug in his skull!'

'Maybe they'll ease up a bit now that they've failed to kill you.'

'I hope to Christ they don't.' He squeezed her hand until she almost cried out, such was the intensity of his grip. 'Anyway, now you've got the cops horning in on it, whether you like it or not.'

'How much do we tell them?'

'Enough, but not too much. Don't forget they may well question the team. We can't hide the fact that the first Chevy crashed, but we can leave them to draw their own conclusions from that. I'm also certain in my own mind that the two guys who tried to rub me out in that wood were the same two who came here in the night. A desperate last throw, maybe, before reporting back to their boss.'

'Seamark?'

'I'd go along with you there, but I'm not satisfied that it's quite as straightforward as it seems, even if they have got one of their own mob planted in here. I get the feeling that this whole thing's too deep for just Seamark. Don't ask me why. It's just a hunch, but I intend to stick around and find out. As for those two thugs, one's copped it, and the other won't be taking much interest in things for a while. They might have wrecked one of our cars, but we're also taking toll of their ranks even if we did have to rope in a trigger-happy gamekeeper to help us unwittingly. Now, I could do with something to eat, and some shut-eye before I get any more interruptions from either cops or robbers.'

CHAPTER NINE

MARK SLADE was awakened from a heavy slumber by Lee Hammerton in the late afternoon.

'The police are here.' She leaned over him, their lips touching. 'They've interviewed me, and everybody else as well. They've been pretty helpful really, and they also seem to think that somebody is out to stop us getting to the States. I've dropped the name Seamark Cruises to them with a loud clang, and they're going to make a few enquiries.'

'And good luck to 'em if they can find anything out,' Slade grinned wryly. 'Seamark is a past-master at covering up.'

'They want to see you again.' 'I'll be right down.' She waited whilst he dressed, and then accompanied him downstairs.

Detective-Inspector King and his assistant, the CID constable who had taken Slade's statement earlier that day, were in the study. They nodded, but neither smiled.

'You didn't tell me you'd had a brush with a couple of thugs recently.' King's tone was reproaching. 'Neither did you mention that you had crashed on a test-drive. . .'

'It wasn't a test-drive,' Slade snapped. 'I was merely getting the feel of the car over a couple of laps. . . '

'Which you didn't finish. A fault with the tracking, and very conveniently for somebody that tracking has disappeared.'

There may be no connection.'

'We think there is. Also, we've identified the dead man.'

That's interesting. Anybody we know?'

It depends in which social circles you mix. His real name is Fred Hine. In London's East End he's known as "The Snipe". Served a five-year stretch for manslaughter. The line between murder and manslaughter is so fine these days that it's an even bet which side one lands on. A "hired gun", in melodramatic terms. Not very clever, and not a particularly good marksman, either. We wanted to question him about another shooting, but I guess it's too late for that now. He had a partner, a tall thin guy known as "Benny the Leg". According to Walter Jackson's description of the second man in Coldharbour Wood it was Benny, all right. I'd give anything to know just where he's gone to ground. We picked up the Hillman Avenger in Colney Heath. It was reported stolen in Hertford yesterday. The driver's seat was saturated with blood, so Benny has the choice of either dying in hiding, or else seeking medical attention and being picked up. We'll just have to wait and see. By the way, Mr Slade, you were, until recently, Seamark Cruises' number one driver.'

That's right.'

Tell me - ' the inspector paused to light his pipe yet again, - 'why did you leave a successful team, and, if you'll forgive me for saying so, join an almost unknown one?'

The implication, the suspicion, was not lost on Slade.

I'd finished with Seamark before I came here. I quit driving.'

'Yet you're still driving.'

I'm not here as a driver.'

"You were at the wheel of Miss Hammerton's car when it crashed.'

'You've got it all wrong, Inspector.' Irritation was creeping into Mark Slade's voice. 'I was merely doing a very casual couple of laps, or almost, because she asked me to. I have no intention of ever driving a racing car again.'

'Then why have you joined the Hammerton team?'

I'm here in an advisory capacity. Temporarily. After we get back from the States I'll be leaving.'

I see.' King picked up his hat, and dropped his stubborn pipe into the pocket of the raincoat draped over his arm. 'Well, I'll be getting back to the station. You'll be required to attend the inquest, Mr Slade, and we'll let you know how our enquiries go. If only we could get our hands on Benny the Leg whilst he's still alive. We'd soon find out whose pay he's in. In fact, an awful lot might be cleared up.'

Lee stood in the window with Mark Slade and watched the police car disappear from view down the drive.

'Who told King about the missing tracking?' Slade murmured.

'It could have been any one of the boys. He interviewed them separately.'

'And he's already suspecting me of having some deep involvement with Seamark Cruises.'

'Oh, don't be ridiculous, Mark.'

'He's suspicious, all right. It figures, I suppose, especially to a non-racing person. In his eyes I could have done a first class stunt-job, written your car off, faked a fight with those two thugs, and whilst gaining your confidence and admiration, wrecked the whole Hammerton set-up.'

'And I need your help more than ever now.' Her voice was husky. 'The last thing I wanted was the police hanging around. I know the Hammerton name is still on their records. Oh God, Mark, this whole business is getting under my skin. The family cycle of evil has come round again!'

'I'll go and see how work is progressing on the car.' He walked towards the door. Time's running out for everybody.' His flesh goosepimpled right up into the nape of his neck. For the first time Mark Slade was beginning to believe in the Hammerton Curse.

Shotgun wounds are generally more horrific in appearance than in reality, except in instances where the victim has received a charge at close range. At a distance of fifty yards the spread of pellets is greater than the penetration of the tiny spherical balls. Often they lodge in the skin, cause superficial bleeding and intense discomfort, but are seldom fatal except in the absence of medical attention when lead poisoning is liable to set in after three or four days.

Benny the Leg, even with his limited intelligence, knew that he was not going to die immediately. He was weak through loss of blood, and shotgun pellets were lodged in his anatomy from his shoulder blades down to his ankles. He was gasping for breath when he reached the Avenger on the road, and as he fell into the driving seat he grunted with pain, instinctively hunching himself forward so that there was less pressure on his wounds.

He drove fast, eager to be away from the area, heading towards Colney Heath, for it was there that he and "The Snipe" had been instructed to report after their bid to kill Mark Slade.

After a journey that seemed an eternity of blinding pain, he parked the car in a side street and sat still for a while. It was less than ten minutes' walk to his destination, but to have driven there in a stolen car would have brought the wrath of the man whom he knew as Mr Patterson upon his head.

Benny the Leg was well aware that he was only too conspicuous in his blood-soaked clothing. To have ventured forth would doubtless have invited the attention of passers by, and then the law.

At one stage he was almost on the verge of panic.

Darkness was several hours away, and every minute that he remained where he was he risked discovery. The seat upon which he sat was saturated with blood. It dripped steadily onto the uncarpeted floor.

Then the tartan blanket on the back seat, the one which he and The Snipe had used as they sat out a long nocturnal vigil, gave him an idea. Perhaps if he carried it clumsily, untidily draped over one shoulder, one end trailing on the ground, screening his back, he could make the short journey undetected.

His whole body seemed to be on fire. He felt dizzy, and as he struggled and squelched his way out of the car he almost fainted. He glanced up and down the street again. There was nobody about. The blanket thrown over his right shoulder, he lurched off up the pavement. His confidence rose, his step became swifter for a short time, then slowed as the pain intensified with each movement of his thin shot-spattered legs.

It seemed an eternity before he saw the house, recognising it instantly by the way it stood back from those on either side of it, residential, respectable to all outward appearances. Probably Mr Patterson was a well-known public figure in this small community.

Benny the Leg slouched up the narrow gravelled drive, stumbled, almost fell in the extensive porch, and finally located and pressed the bell with a long, blood-caked forefinger.

He leaned against the wall, eyes closed, knowing that he must fight off oblivion for another minute or two. After that it would not matter. Mr Patterson would look after him. Benny could even delay reporting their failure in his present predicament.

His senses reeled. He heard footsteps approaching from somewhere inside the building, then a bolt being withdrawn, and the door opened.

Benny had only seen Mr Patterson once before, and on that occasion it had occurred to him that this vulture-like man had the bearing of a prosecuting solicitor, eyes that missed nothing, narrowed and darting, a quick sharp tongue with a ready answer and counter-answer. Benny had been the recipient of such treatment in a court of law on more than one occasion, and he knew that he was no match for Patterson.

Patterson did not speak. He saw and understood at a glance, noting the fallen bloodied blanket which told its own story. He stood back, motioning for Benny to enter the wooden-tiled hall, another gesture directing him towards a closed door at the far end.

Benny tried to speak, but an unintelligible gurgle rasped and died in his throat. His feet slid on the polished surface, and only a supporting hand of surprising strength prevented him from falling. It maintained its grip, leading him up to that door, the other hand opening it.

Darkness lay beyond. Total blackness without even a glimmer of light. It offered tranquillity, a haven of peace into which a wounded wild animal could crawl to lick its wounds.

The guiding hand was now pushing, shoving. Benny fell forward, anticipated a floor beneath him, but instead found himself falling, bouncing, sliding, falling again. Steps, round and uneven, sloped steeply downwards with no supporting handrail, only smooth brickwork on either side. Down, down, twisting, every bone in his body jarred, the smarting wounds bringing him excruciating pain. An intended scream was little more than a gurgle of frothing bloody spittle, cut short by a jagged uneven surface that dug and cut into his body, mounds that shifted beneath him, miniature avalanches, choking dust that made his eyes smart, clogged his lungs and nostrils.

The brief shaft of light from the open doorway above vanished, the click of the lock having an air of finality about it.

Benny the Leg realised that he was in a coal-cellar. He did not know why Patterson had imprisoned him there. He did not care. All he wanted to do was to sleep. He welcomed the drowsiness, his resistance ebbing from him, his pain-crazed brain unable to differentiate between sleep and death. He did not care, anyway.

The long fingers of the man known as Patterson trembled as he dialled the number. He, too, was only a link in the chain, but in every instance he was the first to experience the buffeting from the controlling mechanism before passing it on down to those below him. The full force of it was always spent on him.

He was gulping and swallowing the moment those only too familiar thick nasal tones answered him, his confused brain seeking an avenue of escape, a means by which the blame could be laid upon another of the big man's minions. He considered blaming the man lying in the coal-cellar below, then changed his mind. He, himself, carried the can. The boss had already made that clear. He could only cringe and apologise for yet another failure.

Fogg and Wagstaffe were alone in the workshop when Slade entered. There was no sign of either Wylie or Kilby. Slade stood just inside the doorway watching the two mechanics at work. Their backs were towards him, and such was their similarity of build that it was difficult to identify them individually until Fogg turned round. 'Oh.' His expression clouded. 'It's you.' 'Yes,' Slade said. 'It's me. Where are Wylie and Kilby?' 'No idea.' Fogg turned back to his work. 'Didn't ask.' Slade walked across to the car, and stood looking down at the half-built Chevy, noting its rugged streamlined appearance even in the early stages of construction.

'Where are the other two?' This time his question was addressed to the younger man.

'Tea-break.' Wagstaffe grinned. He was not the type to harbour grudges.

'Like to check the trackin'?' Fogg's invitation was muttered, scarcely audible, yet it held an echo of the chief mechanic's sarcasm.

'I've told you before,' Slade snarled, 'if you don't like taking orders from me you can get out. Now!'

'All right, all right. Just don't keep getting on my back.'

'I want to check the tyre stock. You guys concentrate on the car. I know, as well as you do, how much importance is placed on tyres. Since I've been here nobody's mentioned them.'

'We've got it in hand. Goodyears. They came this morning.'

Slade moved across to the tyre racks on the far wall, and began to rip away the corrugated wrappings. Fogg and Wagstaffe were ignoring him, the former regarding this attention to detail as superfluous, something which was left to the mechanics, consultation with the driver being a mere formality. Riverside was ten weeks away, and Slade was already concerning himself with something that could have waited until a few days before their departure for the States, Fogg decided.

Mark Slade had a fetish about tyres. He had never revealed it before, perhaps not himself wholly aware of the reverence which he paid them. At Seamark Cruises there had been no need for more than a cursory surveillance. Stern was a tyre fanatic, knew everything there was to know about them. There was no chance of the wrong tyres being fitted at any time. Here it was different. Slade lacked faith, and also feared a deliberate error, perhaps Kilby suffering the fate at Riverside which had been intended for

himself by some unknown person on the Hammerton circuit. He was taking no chances.

He embarked upon a close scrutiny of the tyres. All Goodyears. Reliable, the carcass material made from nylon, different cord gauges according to the type of racing, the cords sealed by a rubber coating designed to stop them rubbing together and causing excessive heat. The tread compounds were composed of both synthetic and natural rubber, carbon black, oils and resins. A science in itself, years of research terminating in the near-perfect tyre, the difference between winning and losing, living or dying.

Slade noted the cross-ply construction, vital to Formula One racing, totally efficient, more so even than radials, crucial in areas of speed where the driver's reaction had to be instantaneous, telling him a whole lot more than any set of dials and instruments. In their initial use these tyres would reach optimum temperature and then undergo a slight change in structure, hardening so that they began at the softest working operational level, reached their peak, and then exceeded it. Pressures generally were around 16 psi when the tyres were hot, somewhere between 250-260°F. It was necessary for them to be recording temperatures above 200°F before working properly. Tyres running over 250°F in the pits were running hot.

Facts and figures that would remain with Mark Slade throughout his life, even if he never drove again. It was like swimming: once one learned to swim one never forgot.

And that was not all. Tyres were not omnipotent on the circuit. The weather was the deciding factor. He checked to ensure that there were tyres for both dry and wet circuits. Slade recalled the FI in the mid-sixties when he was still a mechanic in the pits. He wondered if they would ever succeed in manufacturing a compromise tyre. It was a possibility. Before the advent of slicks and low profiles, cars went much slower in the wet. All drivers demand the ultimate, and that could only be achieved when the tyre companies made optimum tyres for both wet and dry surfaces. Two different tyres might not seem to be the answer to the majority of drivers. The ultimate was in achieving the quickest car/tyre combination.

There were so many things that could go wrong with a tyre. Maybe that was the seed of fear within Slade that had germinated, and bloomed, the knowledge that however good he was there was nothing he could do about a faulty tyre. The tread might grain, or shred finely on the outer surface, caused by the compound not being strong enough in shear, and that usually happened on abrasive surfaces. Or when the car was over-steering. They might blister, too, something which generally occurred when the tyres were way over their optimum operating temperature.

Wide tyres, Slade murmured his approval, designed to cope with the amount of power produced by racing cars, and also the stopping power demanded. He remembered cars which had been run with tyres which were too wide at both front and rear, and either were likely to become bogged down. A tyre-limiting regulation would have been fatuous. Tyres had evolved according to the regulations of the cars. Tyres were built according to a line of chassis which displayed common traits.

Slade knew that even these tyres, the most up-to-date, designed especially for Formula One racing, would not last a full 250-mile race. As many as three sets might be necessary. The tyres, the Chevy Camaro, Kilby, Wylie, Fogg and Wagstaffe, not to mention John Clyde, all had to play their part to the fullest. Even then it might not be enough. Slade carried the full responsibility, keeping the saboteurs at bay. His was the overall responsibility.

He sighed. Partly satisfaction, partly frustration. The tyres were AI. Even Seamark would not have better. Yet the knowledge that they might never make Riverside worried him. It wasn't so much the Seamark threat, the skulduggery, but rather the inexplicable happenings such as his first crash, and then the removal of the tracking, a kind of personal poltergeist that was forever present. Something he could not

fight against. The Hammerton Curse!

He glanced across at Fogg. The arrogance, the sarcasm, were foreign to the mechanic's nature. They were a cover-up for something. Slade knew only too well what it was like to put on a front, wear a false personality. He had done it himself for years, longer than he had realised. It was the subconscious masking of fear. And Slade realised at that moment that Chris Fogg was afraid!

The two men's eyes met. Fogg was the first to drop his gaze, and Slade walked out into the late afternoon sunshine. He wondered about a lot of things. Soon it would be night again. A meal, a change of clothes, and then the long vigil would begin once more.

That night the sky was clear, the stars shone brightly, and the grass crunched beneath Slade's feet as he left the house. There would be a heavy frost before morning.

He looked through the window into the workshop. They were all there. Fogg, Wylie, Wagstaffe, Steve Kilby, and John Clyde. Clyde was talking, the others listening. Slade could not hear the words, but he knew they concerned tyres by the way the team manager was gesticulating towards the racks of tyres from which some of the outer wrappings had been torn away.

Mark Slade moved away. The automatic bumped against his hip, but it was small comfort for the long cold hours which lay in front of him. He decided to patrol the area in the immediate vicinity of the house and outbuildings, making a wide circle which would take him parallel to the road in one place, eventually bringing him back to the workshop. It was a night for keeping on the move.

He took his time, and it was fully an hour before he reached the road, standing back in a clump of silver birch trees watching a stream of passing cars, partially mesmerised by their headlights. Traffic was exceptionally heavy tonight, every driver having a particular destination in mind, caring not for the problems of others.

Slade saw an MGB overtaking dangerously, cutting in between two lorries, pulling out again and narrowly missing an oncoming truck. Even as a spectator on a freezing night he felt the beads of sweat beginning to form on his forehead. Crazy bastard, he thought. He tried to understand the mentality of the driver of that sports car. Maybe he was playing at Formula One, living out his fantasies. In all probability one day he would kill himself, and somebody else as well. Nobody would know the real reason. It troubled Slade's conscience. The driver could have been emulating somebody, maybe himself. That's what comes of being in the top flight, he decided. You never know how many deaths you've got on your conscience. You're responsible. The sooner they forget you the better. Let them identify with somebody else.

He was moving away from the road when he heard the scream, one sharp electrifying yell of terror that seemed to hang in the night air, something far more sinister about it than any burst of firing.

He broke into a run. The scream had come from the direction of the house. No cars were parked on the road so whoever it was had come from the opposite direction, across country. He was aware of the pounding of his pulses, the way his stomach knotted into a ball. His legs threatened to buckle under him but he kept running.

It took Slade less than five minutes to reach the rear of the house. He stopped in amazement at the scene which greeted him. He saw the Hammerton team clustered outside the workshop, bathed in the light from the window and the open door. A huddled body was lying on the ground.

'What's happened?'

Four heads turned at Slade's approach, four faces portraying shock and horror. The man on the ground was lying face downwards. It was impossible to recognise him. Slade began a process of elimination, glancing from one to the other, conducting his own mute roll-call. Wylie . . . Clyde . . . Kilby . . . Fogg. . .

He thought. Oh, God, it has to be Waggy!

'It's Wagstaffe.' Clyde straightened up, his features strained, visibly trembling. The bastards bludgeoned him. Lee's phoning for an ambulance.'

Slade knelt beside the prostrate junior mechanic. A cursory glance told him that the other was dead. He'd seen death too many times to be mistaken. But nothing so horribly brutal, as cold-blooded as this!

Something warm and sticky touched his hand where he supported himself on the ground. A dark thick stream was oozing out from under the fallen man, forming a pool in a slight hollow where the concrete was uneven.

The skull was battered to a bloody pulp of flesh and splintered bone, the features totally unrecognisable. Slade felt the bile rising in his throat, thought he would throw up there and then. Behind him he heard Clyde's whisper "God, it's as though the poor devil's been trampled to death by a horsed

Mark Slade's flesh went cold. Sure enough, if you could steel yourself to look closely without vomiting you could discern the shape of the wounds in the battered head - hoof-marks as though a horse had reared and plunged, an evil heavily-shod beast bent in destruction. In those seconds Slade remembered Lee Hammerton's dream, the manner in which one of her ancestors had died two centuries ago. In truth the cycle of evil had returned.

'Anybody see anything?' Slade asked.

'We were all inside the workshop,' Clyde said. 'Waggy went out to go back to his room. We heard him scream. Never saw anything.'

'You were out there.' Wylie spoke slowly, the implication only too clear. 'If anybody saw anything it'd be you.'

'I just heard the scream.' Slade stood up. 'Somebody cover him up until the ambulance gets here.'

He hurried across to the house. As he entered he heard Lee's voice in the study, followed by the sound of the receiver being replaced.

'Mark!' Her face was white, and she was lying back in the chair as Slade entered. 'They've got. . .'

'I know.' He closed the door, leaned against it.

'Is he . . . ?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Oh, God!'

Slade pulled the automatic from his pocket, and dropped it onto the desk. 'I think it'd be best if you put this back where it came from for the time being,' he sighed. 'Wylie's already making it known that I was out there somewhere when Waggy was killed.'

She dropped the pistol into the drawer, and asked, 'Why Waggy? He never did anybody any harm. They wouldn't gain anything by killing him.'

'Ever noticed the similarity in build between Fogg and Wagstaffe?'

'Now you come to mention it ... yes, but I see no significance.'

'Except that from a distance, especially to an ambusher who would only see his intended victim silhouetted against the light from the workshop, it would be exceedingly difficult to distinguish between the two men, even if you knew them both.'

"Then you think. . . *

'I don't know. It's only an idea. But if Fogg is a Seamark plant then why should they decide to murder him? This whole business is becoming too damned complicated. Is the IROC really the motive for everything that's happened so far?'

'We'd better withdraw,' she said, 'before somebody else gets killed. I should have done it earlier.'

*No. We're going to the States at any cost now. We owe it to Waggy, Lee, as well as to your father and Justin. D'you think they'd've backed down?'

'I guess you're right, Mark.'

Then they heard the approaching police cars and the ambulance. Slade decided to leave it to the police to explain to Lee Hammerton how Waggy had died. It was something he didn't want to have to put into words.

PART TWO RIVERSIDE AND DAYTONA

CHAPTER TEN

SLADE WAS only too well aware that the police were likely to be around for some considerable time. Detective-Inspector King struggled again to light his stubborn pipe as he interviewed the ex-driver in the study, the same plain-clothes constable writing copiously as they talked.

'And you say you were in the grounds after dark when Wagstaffe was killed, Mr Slade?'

'That's right.'

'It seems rather a strange occupation, wandering about in the grounds after dark, doesn't it?'

'Like I told you, I'm here to keep an eye on things. I didn't figure I'd do any good stopping in the workshop.'

'And you didn't do much good where you were, either.' King's eyes were boring into Slade's; humourless, searching for some flicker of uncertainty. 'And where exactly were you when you heard him scream?'

'Down by the road. I thought that maybe anybody with designs on the Hammerton team or its cars' would come from that direction. Apparently, they didn't. They came across country. Maybe you'll be able to find some footmarks in the soft earth as soon as it gets light. Or should I say . . . hoof marks.'

'My men have everything in hand.' King replied curtly. 'Why d'you think the killer picked on the young mechanic? What would anybody stand to gain by murdering Wagstaffe?'

'I think they mistook him for somebody else,' Slade said. 'Or rather, something did!'

'Who?'

'Fogg.'

'And why should anybody want to kill Fogg?'

'That I can't tell you. Except that he's an ex-Seamark man.'

'And so are you, Mr Slade.'

'Maybe they would've liked to have killed me, too, but it just happened I wasn't around.'

'Your accusations are loaded against Seamark Cruises. I think you are allowing old prejudices to cloud your reasoning. I have questioned both Seamark himself, and his manager, Stern. They have absolutely no motive for trying to stop the Hammerton team competing. Indeed, from what I have seen, they are a very professional set-up and have no cause to fear any competition either here or in the States.'

'We don't know, do we?' Slade's voice was terse. They are professional, certainly. I drove for 'em. I know. But we don't know what their engines are like. Specifications vary from year to year, always improving, always going one better than the previous IROC. Last year's winner would not qualify this time if his specifications hadn't been improved upon. An advance of two or three miles-per-hour can make all the difference.'

That still doesn't explain why they should resort to sabotage and murder.' King was becoming impatient. 'I am satisfied that in no way are they connected with recent happenings.'

The detective-inspector stood up. 'Well, I don't think you can help us much more at the moment. I shall be glad, though, if you will make yourself available for questioning at any time. My men will be on the

premises until further notice.'

Slade went back up to his room. Lee Hammerton was already there, lying stretched out on the bed, hands behind her head, staring at the ceiling.

'It's true.' Her voice trembled, was scarcely audible. 'The police have told me how . . . how Waggy died, his skull crushed by a horse's hooves ... an animal that isn't flesh and blood . . . sent to destroy us.'

'That's ridiculous,' Slade snapped. 'And I don't think even Detective-Inspector King believes in phantom horses. I certainly don't. It's some kind of trick perpetrated by Seemark, a dual motive - to scare hell out of you and also to kill Fogg . . . except that they got Waggy by mistake. If Waggy had been trampled by a horse we'd've certainly heard the drumming of its hooves. I would probably have seen it because I was out there in the grounds.'

'But you didn't see it because it was some kind of spirit.' Lee Hammerton's tone was escalating into the beginnings of hysteria. 'None of us are safe, day or night.'

'I'll just have to increase my vigilance.' He hoped his own fear didn't show. Lee was right in what she said, they would surely have heard or seen a horse but they hadn't. And there were no horses kept within a considerable radius of the Hammerton place.

'We can't go on, Mark,' she said without looking at him. 'I've been giving it some thought. It wouldn't be fair. Not just to you and me, but to the rest of the team. No man's life is worth winning an IROC.'

'OK, so we back out now. You've let your father and Justin down. Waggy's died for nothing. D'you think they'd have wanted us to chicken out?'

'You always have an answer,' she sighed, 'but I'm making it quite clear to everybody that if anybody wants to quit I won't try and persuade him otherwise.'

'Have you told that to John Clyde?'

'Yes.'

'And what's he say?'

'The same as you.' She bit her lower lip. 'Virtually word for word.'

'OK then, it's up to the rest of the team. If anybody wants to quit, they can. Otherwise we go on as before. I haven't been very much use to you, have I?'

'It's not your fault. Nobody could have done any better. By the way, there's something I want you to have. . . '

She fumbled in the pockets of her jeans, and withdrew a thin golden chain with a disc attached to it, the light glinting on it as it swung to and fro like a pendulum, scintillating, hypnotising.

Mark Slade took it from her, examining it. A St Christopher, the kind worn by a host of drivers, something he had never had. He wasn't superstitious. Maybe that was the reason.

Lee Hammerton began unbuttoning his shirt, took the pendant from him, draped it around his neck, and

secured the clasp. Their lips met.

'I want to keep you safe,' she said. 'It was Justin's. He wasn't wearing it the day he was killed.'

Thanks,' he murmured, 'but just don't get any ideas about me driving.'

'I never gave it a thought.' Her hand found his, squeezing it lightly. This inspector seems to be making an issue over the fact that you were out in the grounds somewhere when Waggy was killed.'

'By the way - ' Slade lowered his voice 'I want to search Chris Fogg's room at the first available opportunity. Perhaps you'd give me cover tomorrow, make sure I'm uninterrupted.'

'And whatever d'you hope to find?' There was astonishment on her face.

'I don't know till I find it. Maybe nothing. But if someone meant to kill him, then they did it for a very good reason. If I don't find anything then we'll be no worse off. I want to ask him a few questions, too, but that can wait for the time being.'

'Just let me know when you're ready.' Her arms went around his neck, pulling him close. 'I'll see nobody bothers you. Oh Mark, I'm scared to hell. I just wish I could sell up, forget this place and the IROC as well.'

It was mid-afternoon, the following day, when Mark Slade made his way into that wing of the house where the team had their quarters. A check beforehand had revealed that Fogg, Wylie, Kilby, and John Clyde were all fully occupied in the workshop. Police were in evidence everywhere, and now that Wagstaffe's body had been removed they were concentrating their efforts upon searching the grounds, using trained dogs to help them in their quest for some piece of evidence, however slight, which might lead them to the nocturnal killer.

Slade turned the handle of Chris Fogg's door. It was unlocked, and he stepped inside, closing it behind him.

This wing had been added a long time after the house was built, and lacked much of the original charm. A square featureless room confronted the ex-driver. The furniture was basic. A single bed, wardrobe, bedside table, and well-worn carpeting. He noted with some satisfaction that neither draws nor wardrobe had locks. If there was anything to be found he would find it.

He was wearing driving-gloves, allowing sensitivity whilst at the same time ensuring that no fingerprints would be left behind in the room. There was always the chance that Detective-Inspect or King would check all the quarters for fingerprints, and Slade could well have found himself faced with an awkward situation had his own been discovered in there.

The room had an air of untidiness about it, something which was only to be expected in a bachelor dwelling. Several pairs of jeans, shoes and sweaters lay on and around the unmade bed. A lurid, tattered novel was open on the bedside table.

Slade began his systematic search. The wardrobe was crammed with more clothing, only a suit being privileged with a coat-hanger. He removed the items, searched every pocket, and returned them in the same order. There was nothing of interest to be found. Mostly the contents of the pockets were grubby handkerchiefs, half-empty boxes of matches, and crumpled cigarettes, some of which had been stubbed out and never relit.

Slade sighed. Fogg had not altered in his habits since leaving Seamark. Untidy, lazy in everything that was not applicable to motor-racing. Whatever his shortcomings, though, the mechanic left nothing to chance where cars were concerned. They were his life, nothing else mattered.

The drawers were filled with motoring magazines which, unlike the novel, were preserved in almost mint condition, and sorted numerically. Slade began to flick through them one by one placing each issue on top of the previous one so that they could be replaced in the order in which he had found them. It took him well over half-an-hour to complete his task, scrutinising every page, finding nothing, not even a pencilled note on the pages.

He returned them to the drawers, checked some linen, again without result, and sighed aloud. Maybe he had made a mistake and Fogg was on the level. There was nowhere else to search. It was all too easy. Then his gaze alighted on the carpet.

He knelt, rolled it back from one end, lifted the underlay, checked the floorboards, all to no avail. An inspection of the other half involved the moving of both chest-of-drawers and bed. Almost half-heartedly he set about the task. If he was not thorough he would never rest easy. All the same, it seemed such a waste of time and effort, and also he had overstayed the time limit he had given Lee Hammerton. He had not bargained on having to check those magazines individually.

Suddenly he stiffened, staring with almost disbelief at the object which was revealed by the rolling back of the carpet, a large white envelope lying in stark contrast against the dark floorboards.

He knelt down and picked it up. It was unsealed, the flap tucked inside. His breathing quickened and his fingers trembled slightly as he withdrew the contents, a large square of paper folded several times, approximately thirty inches by thirty inches when spread out on the crumpled bed sheets.

Slade's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. He had no difficulty recognising the plan of the engine at first glance, identical to that of the one in the workshop down below. The specifications. Modifications. Only with a difference! Complicated, yet simplicity itself to anyone who understood the intricacies of IROC cars and engines. The blueprint showed the engine and bearings lined with a substance which was unfamiliar to Mark Slade, marked with a code, 2GYT72S. Something, undoubtedly, he decided, which was friction-free and lighter than oil. Maybe undetectable during a final engine inspection. Certainly not illegal. Also a distinct advantage if nobody else was using it. The valve springs, too, had a similar code marked alongside them. 2GYT72W. The 'S' and the 'W' denoted liquid and solid respectively. Liquid lubrication, solid valves, both constructed of the same weight-saving substance. Ingenious.

He wondered whether Chris Fogg was capable of evolving such unique and advanced technicalities. The man was clever. Maybe he had picked the idea up from somewhere, and was still working on it, endeavouring to attain perfection. Or, more likely, he had stolen an almost-completed blueprint.

Slade folded up the engine plane and replaced it in the envelope. A host of questions hammered at his brain. A car modified on those lines had a ninety-nine per cent chance of qualifying at Riverside, certainly of getting a good place in the final itself. And, yet, why was Chris Fogg concealing such information from the Hammerton team? If he were a Seamark plant then the last thing his employers would wish was this blueprint falling into the hands of any rivals. So why was Fogg secreting it in his room? Because he had stolen the blueprint from Seamark Cruises; there could be no other possible explanation.

Mark Slade deliberated upon his next course of action. He could remove the blueprint, copy it, instruct the Hammerton team to work on it. There was only one snag. The substance. Possibly plastic, but there

were a score or more variations. He did not know what the code represented. If Fogg had not revealed it so far, he would not be likely to do so once he knew how Slade had obtained it.

Reluctantly Slade placed the envelope back on the floorboards, rolled the carpet over it, and pushed back the furniture, taking care that the castors rested in their previous indentations.

He left the room, and hardly had he closed the door behind him than he heard footsteps coming up the stairs, a slow measured tread. In about five seconds whoever it was would appear on the landing in full view of himself. He knew it was not Fogg. The step was too heavy. One of the other members of the team? Police?

Silently, moving on the balls of his feet, keeping to the strip of frayed carpeting which ran down the length of the corridor, he crossed to a door that stood ajar. A toilet. He entered, and pushed the bolt home, leaning up against the wall, sweating, listening.

The newcomer made no effort at stealth. Slade heard heavy soled boots on bare floorboards, and for a second he feared that the other might be intent upon visiting the toilet in which case he would probably wait, upon finding it engaged, and sooner or later Slade would have to emerge and be recognised. Slade could furnish an explanation for his presence in this part of the building, but it would not be believed. He had his own quarters and toilet, and there was no reason for him to be here.

Thus it was with considerable relief that Mark Slade heard the footsteps pause some distance away, then a door open and close. Curiosity surged over him. The man had gone into Chris Fogg's room! Yet, it was not the mechanic. Of that he was certain; the tread was too heavy.

Slade knew also that he had to leave whilst he had the opportunity. He could not risk discovery. He would watch from a vantage point elsewhere in the house, and discover the identity of the intruder when he followed from the team's quarters.

Swiftly, again following the length of carpet, he reached the stairs and descended. Not a sound came from Fogg's room. It would have been foolhardy to have remained behind listening. He hurried down to the spacious hall. Opposite him was the study. It would have been a simple matter to remain hidden in there whilst still being able to observe the flight of stairs leading to the west wing.

'Ah, Mr Slade, just the man I'm looking for!'

Slade cursed under his breath as the study door opened, and Detective-Inspector King stood framed in the doorway, those shrewd eyes settling on him.

'I'd like a word with you, Mr Slade.'

Mark Slade had no option other than to step inside the room, groaning inwardly as he watched the other close the heavy oak door, shutting out the view of the wide staircase opposite.

'Sit down, Mr Slade.'

Slade lowered himself into one of the leather-upholstered chairs opposite the desk, fighting to hide the frustration and impatience which he felt.

'You seem to have an obsession with Seamark Cruises, Mr Slade.' King spoke bluntly, a veiled reprimand. 'I don't think you would have made a very good detective. You are apt to allow your feelings

to over-run your logic. I am satisfied that Seamark Cruises are not involved in this business.'

'Then you've come up with an alternative?'

'Not yet, but we're hopeful. The moment we lay our hands on Benny the Leg a lot of things will come to light.'

'He's probably dead by now.'

'More likely he's lying up somewhere. He'll have to come out sooner or later, though. We don't know how badly he was wounded. Shotgun wounds are often superficial, especially at ranges over fifty yards.'

Mark Slade stiffened. His ears had detected the sound of footsteps, heavy measured ones, descending the staircase from the west wing.

'As I was saying, Mr Slade. . . '

But Slade was not listening. He was on his feet, eager to open that door now that the unexpected short interview was apparently at an end, still trying not to appear too eager to be out in the hall.

' . . . we'll get him, though, Mr Slade. I'm confident that there will be one or two arrests before the week is out.'

King was between Slade and the door, turning the handle, easing it open slowly, too slowly, an inch at a time. Slade caught a glimpse of a soiled white suit of overalls through the gap but his restricted vision did not enable him to recognise the wearer. Slow scraping footsteps across the tiled floor, followed by the opening and closing of the outer door.

Too late. Mark Slade groaned silently to himself. His chance was gone. Whoever it was would be back in the workshop by now. He was certain of only one thing - that it was a member of the Hammerton team who had trespassed in Fogg's room. The question was, which one of them had it been!

He did not bother going back to the workshop. Instead, he made his way upstairs to his own room, knowing that he would find Lee Hammerton there.

She looked up as he entered, consternation on her face.

'God, I was worried about you.' She moved quickly to his side. 'I was keeping watch from the study when that damned copper came back and said he wanted to use the room for interviewing. I had no option other than to come up here.'

He told her briefly what had happened.

'I'd give anything to know who was poking about in Fogg's room,' Slade muttered. 'It could be the key to this whole business. Does whoever it was know about the existence of this blueprint, and, more to the point, has he now found it and taken it?'

'But what's Fogg doing with it, anyway?'

'I'd say he nicked it from Seamark Cruises before he left,' Slade mused. 'Nevertheless, I've got to know if the intruder found it, and there's only one way to find that out.'

'You're not going back up there?'

'It's a chance I've got to take.'

'I can't keep a look-out for you with that damned inspector still in the study.'

'We'll have to trust to luck.'

'I'll come with you.'

He thought hard for a moment, then said, 'Well, I suppose there's no harm in it. Come on, let's hope they don't decide to take a tea-break in the workshop and Fogg has cause to come back to his room.'

They hesitated outside Chris Fogg's room. Slade whispered, 'You stop out here in the corridor. Give me warning if you hear anybody coming up the stairs.'

She nodded her assent, and he turned the handle. The door opened, and he entered, then pulled up in amazement.

'My God!' he muttered.

The room, untidy before, was now in total chaos. Clothing and magazines were strewn everywhere, and the bed had been pulled into the centre of the room. The carpet was rolled back, displaying bare boards. Nothing more. The envelope had gone.

'What is it?' Lee Hammerton stepped inside. 'Oh, Christ, I see what you mean!'

'Damnation!' Slade wrung his hands together in frustration and disappointment. 'I could have had the bloody thing for the taking. Instead I put it back, and now somebody's stepped in and nicked it.'

'What the hell's going on in here?'

Mark Slade and Lee Hammerton whirled round. In their surprise they had relaxed their vigilance. They had not heard the approach of the man in greasy overalls and thick-soled rubber pumps who stood framed in the doorway, his face a mask of fury.

'Just what the bloody hell's the meaning of this?' Chris Fogg snarled.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MEANING of this - ' Mark Slade regarded Chris Fogg coldly - 'is that the blueprint which you nicked from Seamark Cruises has been whipped from under our noses by somebody else, about ten minutes ago.'

Fogg's arms dropped to his sides, and his dark complexion paled. He leaned against the doorpost, and muttered, 'Oh, Christ!'

'Suppose you tell us all about it,' Slade said, 'then maybe we can help each other.'

'No!' The other seemed to recover with surprising swiftness after his initial shock. 'I think you owe me an explanation. What's the idea of ... this?' He spread his arms, indicating the strewn room.

'A blueprint.' Slade stroked his beard, eyeing the other as he spoke, confident, taking his time. 'A blueprint of a Chevy engine, but with certain modifications that could be instrumental in winning a race.'

'So you found it.' The mechanic searched the pockets of his overalls, produced a half-smoked cigarette, and lit it. 'OK, then, what have you done with it?'

'Nothing,' Slade said. 'I put it back under the carpet where I found it. That was about twenty minutes ago. During that time someone else has been up here, taken your room apart, and eventually found what he was looking for.'

'Who?'

'There are only three possibilities. Wylie, Kilby or Clyde. I heard whoever it was come upstairs, and I hid in the loo to avoid detection. I was hoping to identify him when he came downstairs, but unfortunately I was collared by the CID bloke. I caught a glimpse of the thief, or rather part of his overalls, as he passed the study door. I couldn't identify him, but he was definitely wearing Hammerton overalls.'

'But, that's crazy. It can't be!' Chris Fogg looked at Slade and Lee Hammerton in total bewilderment. 'All three of them were in the workshop with me the whole time. None of them left!'

'You're sure?'

'Absolutely. I've just left them now.'

'Then who could it have been?' Lee addressed her question to Slade.

'Where do you keep the overalls?' His voice was low, his eyes narrowed.

'They hang in one of the outhouses, the one opposite the workshop. Every so often the dirtiest are collected for laundry.'

'So it would be possible for a stranger to help himself?'

'Well, yes . . . I suppose so, so long as he kept a lookout to make sure that nobody was about. . . '

'Which is precisely what he did,' Slade breathed. 'Walked right in here dressed like a mechanic, found the blueprint, and walked right out again with it.'

'But how would he know where to look?' Lee asked, disbelief on her face. 'It doesn't make sense.'

'He'd know all right.' Slade's gaze was focused on Fogg. 'If somebody steals something from you, the first place you look if you want it back is on their premises. In this case Chris's quarters.'

'Meanin'?' Defiance returned to Chris Fogg, his body tensing, jaw jutting arrogantly.

'Meaning you stole it from Seamark Cruises, and they wanted it back . . . badly,' Slade replied. 'They have just carried out their most daring coup in broad daylight, with this place crawling with cops. And they've succeeded!'

Fogg was silent for a moment, and then, much to the amazement of the other two, he burst out laughing.

'What's so damned funny?' Mark Slade snapped.

The blueprint.' Chris Fogg leaned back against the doorpost. 'They've got it, but a lot of good it'll do 'em.'

'Why?'

'Because it's the original, the experimental one.' The mechanic searched the pockets of his overall once more, finally producing a grubby folded piece of paper which he held aloft with a show of jubilation. 'This is the one they should've had.'

'You'd better explain,' Slade sighed, shaking his head. 'At the moment I'm lost, and there are an awful lot of things I'd like cleared up. Better close that door, just in case there are other Seamark spies crouching on the stairs, disguised in Hammerton overalls!'

Fogg stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

That blueprint,' he began, 'the original one, I mean. The basic idea was mine, and if I'd had any sense I'd've kept my mouth shut about it, and offered it to somebody else. Instead, I discussed it with Stern. He asked me to work on it with Dyson. From Seamark Cruises' point of view the project was completed as far as the drawing-board was concerned. All that remained was for it to be tested.'

'So you quit, and took it with you?'

'Well, it was mine. They weren't going to pay me a penny for it. I was under contract as an employee, and my wages covered any work that I might do for them. I let 'em think it was completed. In fact, I'd've saved myself and everybody else one helluva lot of trouble if I'd just copied the blueprint and left it where it was. Dyson isn't clever enough to work out by himself the necessary adjustment needed in order to co-ordinate a liquid and solid substance. That was the difficult part, the combination of an engine and bearing lining in conjunction with valve springs. One thou' out, and you might as well enter an ordinary road car at Riverside.'

'Plastic?'

'Yeah. Weight-saving as well as friction-free. Well, almost. As near as makes no difference.'

'And Seamark didn't photocopy the blueprint?'

'No. That was Stern's fault. I guess Seamark's kicked his arse until it's black and blue for that. They were

worried after you left, Mark. Martin'll never make the grade, not at IROC level, anyway. I reckon they started to panic. They'd sooner have you dead than competing against them. Likewise, they don't want my engine and valve modifications used against them. With me dead they probably figured it might mean my process being overlooked if I hadn't already passed it on, and, anyway, this blueprint, even the finished one, wouldn't be any good without me. Maybe now that they've got the original they'll cut out the rough-stuff and concentrate on working on their cars. Until they find out they're wasting their time!"

'If we went to the police with this we could put Seamark and Stern away for a very long time,' Slade said. 'They'd be so busy answering charges of murder, attempted murder, sabotage, felony, and a host of others that they'd never make it in time for the IROC.'

'No! If you bring the cops in on this you'll get no cooperation from me. I'll swear blind that I never worked on a blueprint for Seamark Cruises, and they won't contradict that.'

'It's Lee's word and mine against yours, Chris.'

'Maybe, but try me and see. If you start a legal wrangle you won't get to the States either. Another thing, Seamark Cruises are a worldwide organisation. They'd get you one way or another. I'm just hoping that now that they think they've got the blueprint they'll ease up on us. I should've let 'em get it before. Only trouble was I hadn't finished working on it. Didn't know if I could improve on the existing formula. Anyway, that wouldn't have stopped 'em trying to rub you out, Mark. Even with a friction-free engine they don't want to drive against you.'

'They seem to have overlooked one crucial factor.' Slade glanced at Lee as he spoke. 'I'm not driving in any IROC for either Seamark or Hammerton.'

'They'll never believe you can give up racing,' Fogg said. 'As long as you're drawing breath, and not working for them, you're a threat to them. Marcus Seamark wants to win at Daytona, it's his lifelong ambition.'

'There's something else.' Slade regarded Fogg steadily. 'You, as a run-of-the-mill test-driver/mechanic, have invented something which is revolutionary. You could've made a fortune on a drawing-board. What the hell are you doing in the workshop wearing a suit of oily overalls?'

'Maybe I've got the technology,' Fogg answered, 'but that's not the way I want it. I messed about drawing up that blueprint just to see if it worked. It's still got to be proved in practice. Even if it revolutionised Formula One racing it wouldn't give me a grain of satisfaction unless I was at the wheel of the winning car.'

'So you want to drive?' Lee muttered.

'That's all I ever wanted to do. I reckon with practice and experience I could make it eventually. Nobody's got time to persevere with a learner, not at this level, anyway. They want the finished product. Maybe I'd do better starting all over again elsewhere. I don't know. It's a long process. So I settled for the pits, serving in heaven rather than reigning in hell, I suppose.'

'I see,' Lee Hammerton sighed, 'and what happens to the completed blueprint now?'

Fogg was silent for a moment, staring at the folded sheet of paper in his hands, contemplating, battling with logic, conscience, and a host of other emotions.

'Well!' Slade spoke sharply. 'What's going to happen to it, then? We've every right to know whilst you're employed here. At the moment you're the bait for every gunman and thug in the area, and other people are getting hurt as well. Waggy wouldn't have died if it hadn't been for your bloody invention.'

Fogg lapsed into a sullen silence, then said, 'I haven't made my mind up about the blueprint. The original will screw Seamark up for sure, although they'll probably find that out during testing. Then they'll probably be out for my blood again.'

'Maybe Dyson will be able to solve the problem.'

'Not a chance. Crossword puzzles are about his limit.'

'What about a driver?'

They'll get somebody. Make no mistake about that. They'll buy the best that's going. They won't risk Martin.'

'We still want to know what you're going to do about that blueprint, Chris.'

'Maybe I ought to burn it. Forget all about it.'

'Goon then. Put your cigarette to it, and let's all watch it go up in smoke.'

Fogg hesitated. Finally he shook his head, and said, 'No, I reckon not. I guess I'd like to see it play its part in Seamark's downfall. For Waggy's sake, if for no other reason.'

'You'll be paid for it,' Lee broke in.

'It hasn't been tested yet. I guess I can't make any deals until it's been proved, but I'll help with the modifications to the engine. One thing, though. It won't help me to become a driver will it, even if Hammerton wins at Daytona?'

Lee and Slade looked at each other, both thinking of a blond-haired driver who might just make it, particularly with a friction-free engine to assist him.

'Kilby drives in both the grids and the finals.' Lee Hammerton spoke slowly, uncertainly. 'I can't go back on my word over that.'

'And if he wins he'll be a world champion.' There was bitterness in Fogg's voice. 'You won't be able to replace him then. Nobody in their right mind replaces an IROC winner. I can't win. No way. That's how it's been all along.'

'You'll be the guy who won it from the drawing-board.'

That's not the way I want it.'

'I shall need more than one top driver, Chris. Win at Daytona and we're really in the top flight. There'll be the Belgian GP, also the Japanese, coming up afterwards. Steve can't manage everything. The name Hammerton will expand, cars entered everywhere. I'll see you get your chance.'

'All right.' He nodded reluctantly. 'I'll take you at your word. I can see trouble brewing with Wylie,

though. He won't like my idea one little bit. He's a nasty bastard.'

'One other thing.' Slade's eyes bored into Chris Fogg. That crash of mine whilst I was lapping. The tracking had been sabotaged. Any ideas?'

'No.' The reply was instantaneous, frank. That one really has me puzzled. Seamark couldn't have known you were going to drive, Mark. None of us did, not even Kilby thought you'd take the wheel at the last minute. There wouldn't have been any logic in anybody sabotaging the car. I wouldn't have had time to modify the engine. All I can think of is the existing hatred Seamark had for Craig Hammerton. Just spite.'

'Doesn't add up,' Slade muttered. 'There's only one thing I can think of.'

'What's that?'

'Somebody in the team did it, then removed the evidence?'

'It looks that way.'

'But who, and why?'

Nobody answered the question, each one conjuring up a vision of a blond-haired driver on the fringe of greatness, and a rugged, impatient, sarcastic chief mechanic. Selfish motives, petty by comparison with those of Seamark Cruises - but were they big enough to commit murder for? And did a centuries-old curse have the power to use these people to fulfil its own evil?

'I'll make a start on the engine modifications.' Fogg pulled the door open, and stepped out into the corridor.

'We'll all go down and talk it over.' Lee glanced at Slade, and he sensed that she needed his support once again.

He nodded, and wondered absently how she would cope if he returned to Crossways. He came to the conclusion that she wouldn't.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOVEMBER. THE summer drought was little more than a memory amidst the incessant heavy rain. The police were no longer to be seen around the Hammerton estate, apart from infrequent visits by Detective-Inspector King. The CID man refused to admit defeat even though the killer of Billy Wagstaffe had never been apprehended, and Benny the Leg appeared to have vanished like an autumnal mist in the

warm rays of morning sunlight.

'We're still following up a number of leads,' he told Lee Hammerton curtly on one of his visits. 'Of course, I can't say more at this stage, but we're hopeful of having some good news for you before long.'

Lee Hammerton continued to hope until her faith in the law finally ran out. Mark Slade resumed his constant nocturnal vigilance, the •380 permanently residing in his hip-pocket, but it seemed as though Seamark had called off his pack. Always, though, there was the feeling that one night they would strike again, and Slade wasn't taking any chances. He knew that the price for one moment of laxity could be instant death. You had the feeling that in the background the latent forces of evil were gathering for a final terrible assault.

'It's the inside man who worries me,' he told Lee one afternoon as they lay together in the warmth of her bed. 'We can build a bastion to protect us from Seamark, and all the time there's an undetected cancer in our midst.'

'Well, things have been pretty quiet lately.' She groaned aloud with contentment as he rolled back on top of her, crushing her naked body beneath his own. 'And tomorrow we test the car. Once this idea of Fogg's had been proved we can concentrate all our efforts on Riverside. But I can't get the feeling out of my system that something is going to happen before long!'

Soon they were shuddering together, clutching desperately at each other, making up for all the lonely nights that had gone before, and those that would surely follow.

Mark Slade knew that he was dreaming. Subconsciously he was aware of the closeness of Lee's naked body, the comfort of the luxurious quilt against his own bare skin. But somewhere a horse was cantering, breaking into a gallop, its hooves striking hard stone with an increasing momentum. And it was very close'

Reluctantly he forced himself out of a deep slumber, clawed his way up to a sitting position, the chill air bringing back reality with a harshness. He could not remember what the dream had been about; one of those that fades frustratingly with waking. He'd been horse riding somewhere, galloping blindly along in total darkness clinging desperately to the mane of a half-wild steed, expecting any moment to be flung from the saddle as the beast stepped into a pothole and lost its footing. Being pursued. Sheer madness, but it was only a dream. He was safe in bed with Lee. Oh God, he could still hear those hoofbeats'

He tensed, felt Lee rousing herself, clutching at his arm.

'Mark . . . there's somebody outside . . . riding!'

There could be no doubt about it; on the wide drive below the bedroom window a horse was being ridden in circles, speeding up; now it was neighing in pain as though its flanks were being raked by cruel spurs. Rearing, snorting, being brought back under control because its rider was more than its match.

Slade swung himself out of bed, knew he'd have to take a look, felt his legs trembling as he padded across to the window, heard Lee Hammerton following him; instinctively on his guard, peering out cautiously so that he did not present an easy target to some gunman lurking in the bushes opposite.

'Oh my God!' Lee caught her breath, thought for one awful moment that she was going to faint. She clutched at Mark, aware that he too was tensing at the awful scene which confronted them. 'Mark . . . it's the accursed Hammerton horseman, the family harbinger of doom.'

Mark stared, tried to tell himself that it was a continuation of his dream, a spectral pursuer on horseback finally having run them down. The horse had swung round to face them, prancing, eyes rolling wildly, its jet-black coat foam-flecked. But it was not at the animal that Mark and Lee stared but at its rider, a hunched figure starkly outlined in the faint starlight, long flowing garments that belonged to a bygone age, a broad-brimmed hat that bathed the features in shadow but you sensed the hideousness of that face without actually seeing it. You felt the power that emanated from the horseman, an evil force that hit you like an invisible ray, chilling the flesh and goosepimpling the skin.

Seconds that seemed an eternity, everything suddenly in slow-motion; a raised hand and an extended forefinger. Pointing, singling out the watchers above in what could only be interpreted as a grim warning.

Mark Slade felt himself flinching, wanting to look away but it was as though the other had hypnotised him, a mounted Ancient Mariner demanding the attention of his audience. Then the horse was wheeling again, turning into shadows that rendered it a dark indistinguishable shape, swallowing it up. A plunging of hooves again, dying away until only the echoes of its departure lingered on the still night air, vibrating.

That . . . that was how Waggy died!' Lee Hammerton whispered hoarsely, still straining her eyes into the shadows which seemed to have moved forward as though the dark night was determined to screen its own kind.

'I ... I don't believe it,' Slade muttered, but knew that he could not dispute the evidence of his own eyes. Out there he had seen the Hammerton Curse for himself, and witnessed only a short time ago the evidence of its vengeance, a body pulped by pounding death-dealing hooves. Jasper Hammerton's son had died that way, too!

And now the spectral murderer had returned to deliver its final warning. Somebody was going to die; the cycle of ancient death was not yet complete.

'But we're still going to Riverside and on to Daytona.' Slade pulled himself together, knew that for Lee's sake he had to fight. They would not be spared by withdrawing from the IROC.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE NUMBER two Chevy Camaro had all the magnificence of its predecessor, identical in appearance, yet beneath its bonnet lurked an untried power, a sleeping monster awaiting the moment of wakefulness when it would unleash its fury.

Slade sensed its potential in the same way that a particular horse attracts the attention of a jockey. Nothing that one could put one's finger on, he decided, just something you feel. He stood back,

watching, not listening to the last minute instructions which Wylie, Fogg and John Clyde were giving to Steve Kilby. Lee had an arm draped around her driver's shoulders. Slade experienced a pang of jealousy, tried to fight it off, but could not. It was her rightful place out there with Kilby. They kissed, a brief peck, but it hurt Slade deeply. Damn it, I'm only the hired trouble-shooter, he tried to convince himself, she means nothing to me. But he knew that he lied to himself, and that made it worse. Slade was the one person whom Slade could not deceive.

He forced his mind back to the test. Testing had always been an integral part of racing involvement. If you were honest with yourself you knew whether you stood a chance, whether it was worth going on. The grids and finals were but a formality in which the human element decided. Nerve came into its own then, and once again Slade was reminded that he had lost his. His memory went back to Riverside in the days when he was still in the pits, an up-and-coming twenty-four year-old, BRM and Honda running compound tests there. The Tyre War' . . . Goodyear, Firestone, and Dunlop spending fortunes evaluating tyres with their leading teams, and as a result those teams had flourished. Drivers were paid to test their cars, a situation that was entirely novel, and not even the might of the 1954-55 Mercedes team was able to match the hundreds of miles that were being squeezed into tyre-tests in the sixties. It was then that the importance of tyres as a function of vehicle performance was first acknowledged, and that racing drivers, seeking an added advantage, realised that they had to be more than just fast drivers. They had to work in close conjunction with the tyre companies in a quest for information and statistics. They had to know what their cars were doing every inch of the way, and why they performed as they did.

That was testing. It was no different now. Not all of the current Formula One teams could afford to test on such a scale. Mostly it was done how Hammerton were doing it now, on a private circuit, every one of those present knowing that everything depended upon timing and performance.

Slade tried to divorce himself from the proceedings. This was none of his concern. His business concerned the pistol in his pocket, a state of vigilance at all times. What happened on the track was of no interest to him. In the end he gave up and admitted to himself that it was. He cared as much as any of them. It was just that he would not have taken Kilby's place. Just watching was causing him to sweat. He felt everything that went on inside Steve Kilby. The tension, the surge forward, the gathering of speed, deafening, suffocating, rubber and oil fumes searing the lungs, everything a blur, eyes glued on the track, going into a bend, coming out of it. Faster. Faster still. Wary of bunching cars even though there were none, reliving the old fears. 165 m.p.h. It had to go faster. Slade could see that speedometer and rev-counter as surely as though he had been in the driving seat, a long association with fast speeds registering in his brain with far more accuracy than any precision-made gauge could have done. Still faster. 170 m.p.h. The limit. It would go no further. It was just a question of being able to hold it there, and still stay on the circuit.

Round again. Still holding, easing only on the bends, but picking up more quickly each time. Kilby had the feel of the Chevy now. Three laps. Four. Slade did not know how many the driver had been instructed to complete.

Five. Back onto the straight, coming in towards the starting and finishing point. Clyde was flagging. Kilby was slowing. It was all over.

Slade did not converge on the stationary Chevy with the rest of them. He did not need to hear Kilby and Clyde tell each other that success was theirs. Fogg's success. Most of all, though, he did not want to witness that congratulatory kiss between Lee and Kilby.

He walked on back to the house. He wondered absently if Seamark Cruises had finished testing yet.

'It can't be!' Stern's features were twisted with rage as he surveyed the blackened 5.7 litre engine. 'Friction-free! The bearings are right down to the copper on less than three laps!'

'Well, you can see for yourself.' The lanky, dark-haired driver, goggles pushed up onto his forehead, tossed his helmet nonchalantly onto a nearby bench, watched it roll and bounce to the floor, but made no effort to retrieve it.

The stupid bastard who thought this one up ought to be crucified.'

'What went wrong?' Stern addressed the plump, tousle-haired Dyson. 'You worked from the original blueprint.'

'Absolutely.' Dyson was more than puzzled. He was afraid and his fear went further than the team manager. Seamark would have to be told, and the ruthless owner of Seamark Cruises did not tolerate failure. And always there had to be a scapegoat.

'Then the whole fucking thing was a white elephant!' Stern snarled. 'Something Fogg dreamed up. Fine in theory, disastrous in practice.'

'If it'd been possible, it would've been done before.' Rickson, the South African driver, removed his gloves, tossed them in the direction of his protective headgear. 'I could've told you that you were wasting your time. The sooner that engine's restored to normal specifications, the better. You won't beat a hundred and sixty-five m.p.h., I can tell you that, and I've driven Chevys as much as anybody.'

Stern checked his retort. Rickson was the best that money could buy. Better even than Slade. Above all, the South African, less than a week out of Johannesburg, had the streak of ruthlessness so vital to Seamark Cruises in its quest for world supremacy. The new idea had failed. It didn't really matter. Money had lured the best driver into their team. It would also be instrumental in securing first placing at Daytona. Riverside was but a stepping stone. Money won IROCs. You got what you paid for, and Seamark paid plenty.

Stern decided that he was glad that the plastic substitute had proved a failure. It would be likewise with Hammer-ton. Fogg and Slade between them would not be able to contrive a victory.

He told Seamark so, and also filled him in on the fate of Benny the Leg. Too much time, effort, and money had been wasted on something which had turned out to be worthless.

Seamark did not agree. His vendetta against Craig Hammerton's daughter was not yet at an end. It would be continued on the other side of the Atlantic. He ordered the man known as Mr Patterson to vacate the house in Colney Heath, and to prepare for their journey to California.

10TH JANUARY. Riverside, California, the most famous oval circuit in the world.

Mark Slade left the airfield in a taxi, together with Lee Hammerton. The Chevy still had to be unloaded from the DCS, and transported to the circuit. John Clyde would supervise that. Slade felt hesitant about letting the car out of his sight, but likewise he wanted to see Lee safely installed in her hotel. His responsibilities were divided between his two charges. In England he had been able to watch over both at the same time. Here in the States it was going to be much more difficult. He thought about Seamark Cruises again. They had flown in two or three days ago. Maybe Hammerton should have arrived earlier. Clyde saw to all the arrangements. It was too late now, anyway. He tried to push all thoughts of disaster out of his mind; he hoped that they had left all that behind in England.

The hotel room was large and luxurious, a curtained alcove containing both bath and shower. Air conditioning maintained a steady 65°F, and there was both radio and television beside the bed.

Lee strolled to the window and grimaced when she looked out onto a towering block of flats.

'I feel like a prisoner,' she said. 'Couldn't you stay with me for just one night, Mark?'

'No.' He spoke emphatically, but was unable to disguise the reluctance in his half-smile. 'I'm not leaving the car. We don't have another to fall back on if anything happens to this one. Most teams have three or four. Seamark probably have more. Hammerton . . . just one solitary Chevy.'

'I know.' She sat down on the edge of the bed. 'John Clyde budgets our motor-racing strictly. In Dad's day we always had more than one car. John says we've got to win something before we pour more capital into the racing side. I guess he knows best. He's a qualified chartered accountant. By the way, there's " . . . something you should know. . . '

'Yes?'

'John . . . asked me again to marry him. Just before we left England. I thought he'd abandoned the idea long ago, but it seems he's still hoping. It was the way he asked me, though. Sort of . . . well, almost pleading. I couldn't help but feel sorry for him.'

'And what did you tell him?' Slade was surprised at the note of urgency in his own voice, the way he tensed. Lee noticed it, and laughed.

'Oh, oh, my jealous Mark.' She reached up for him, pulling him down beside her. 'I told him no, of course. You didn't think I'd tell him any different, did you?'

'I suppose not . . . but, well I'm going to walk right out of your life when we get back to England, and at least John Clyde has something to offer you. A partnership, a husband who is your manager, runs everything, knows the ropes. . . '

'Don't be silly.' She rolled backwards, taking him with her, her long slim fingers starting to undo the buttons of his shirt. 'Are you really going to walk out just like that, Mark?'

Those were the terms.' He stiffened as her hands travelled even further down his body. 'A kind of verbal contract. It finishes after Daytona. Riverside, if we don't qualify. At least, it's supposed to.'

'I'm offering you an extension.' She undid his waistband, and slid a hand inside and downwards until she located that which she sought. 'You don't have to leave, Mark. If you do it'll only be to make a martyr of yourself. That's what you were doing up there in your seclusion. You were forcing yourself to make the break. You don't have to do it all over again, do you?'

He did not reply. In no way could he put his feelings into words. He did not understand them himself.

'Well?' She lifted herself up so that he could tug her jeans free of her body. 'What are you going to do after Daytona, Mark?'

'I can't answer that one because I just don't know,' he murmured. 'I live from day to day. If I stay, it could make things difficult for you. Kilby and Clyde may decide to opt out. Wylie certainly will. You could find yourself without a team.'

That's something I'll chance. I'd be prepared to ... to make your stay . . . permanent.'

'I wouldn't advise it.' He dropped his gaze as he spoke, taking in the whole of her nakedness, and a lot more besides. 'Mark Slade isn't very good at permanent relationships.'

'You can't judge yourself by one failure.' She groaned softly, clutched at him, eyes closed, head back. 'I'd risk it, even if it does blow up in my face.'

'I'll give you a definite answer after we taxi down onto English soil,' he promised. Before his rising passion pushed all else from his mind Mark Slade wondered if he could ever face being at yet another crossroads in his life. Once it had been Yvonne or motor-racing. Now it was Lee Hammerton or ... nothing! Maybe the road back to loneliness was the easiest.

Slade watched Kilby doing some practice laps on the following morning. The circuit was dry, conditions ideal. Kilby handled the car well, but did not exceed 150 m.p.h. at any one stage. Most of the others were touching 160 m.p.h., but Clyde and Slade had agreed that it would be unwise to attract attention to the Hammerton car. The moment of truth would come when it really mattered. And, anyway, it was too late to make any drastic changes.

The cars were only identifiable by their markings, the drivers themselves hidden beneath the anonymity of protective headgear and goggles, individuals in their respective performances alone. Slade recognised Rickson only too well, the arrogant style in which the Seamark driver made a Grand Prix out of every practice 2.547-mile lap. Slade clocked him once with his own stop-watch. 165 m.p.h. It was good, but unless Rickson could muster some hidden reserve Slade reckoned that Kilby would run out ahead of him. He knew, too, that statistics were not to be relied upon. It was nerve that would count on the day. And there was always the unexpected.

Slade wandered amongst the spectators. With two days still to go the carnival atmosphere was already beginning. Caravans, caravanettes, and tents formed a colourful, if untidy, array. Red-hatted IROC Race-Queens mingled with the crowds. It was all business. Big business. If you wanted a woman there were plenty to be had. Slade didn't.

He returned to the pits. Fogg and Wylie were renewing a set of tyres. Kilby stood watching them. He nodded curtly to Slade, and poured himself another coke.

'Spurning the luxury of Hotel life are you?' There was no humour in the driver's smile, just bitterness and

biting, thinly veiled sarcasm.

'My job is to stay with the car,' Slade retorted, and wondered if Kilby knew about the previous afternoon. He probably guessed, anyway.

Clyde had already returned to the hotel. The thought of the team manager's presence so close to Lee made Slade feel uneasy. Back home it hadn't seemed to matter. He wondered in which hotel the Seamark team were staying. No doubt Seamark had booked them in at the best in town. By comparison Hammerton were small fry, almost amateurs, small-budget competitors. It was out on the circuit where it counted, though. If you lost, you faded into obscurity. If you won, you really made it in a big way. Even the Hammerton fortune could not stand many failures, Slade decided. Unsponsored teams rarely bounced back. They had to qualify.

The pits were noisy throughout the nocturnal hours. Mechanics worked ceaselessly rectifying small faults which had shown up during practice.

Slade reclined on a camp-bed, but sleep eluded him. This was a side of racing that was unfamiliar to him. On previous visits to Riverside, the town itself had played a large part in his life. The women. Now it was the town which claimed his woman whilst he was imprisoned by a new environment. He could not get Yvonne off his mind. Futile hopes. One always wanted the unattainable, rejecting the attainable. Lee wanted him. In a way he wanted her. Only Yvonne could make the final decision. He had to speak to her, just once more. After that he would make his choice.

He dozed towards dawn, and then was awoken by the roar of powerful 5.7 litre engines as the practice laps began again. Some time later Fogg and Wylie arrived, and through partially closed eyelids he watched them tinkering with the engine.

Kilby came in about an hour later.

'Enjoyed your night?' he leered at Slade.

Slade did not reply. This was no time to create additional friction amongst the team. Everybody was on edge. It would get worse. Pre-race tension was something in which even the most experienced drivers and mechanics got caught up. Even trouble-shooters, it appeared, were not exempt.

The Seamark team were keeping very much to themselves. Slade concluded that they were confident of qualifying. They would be content with a placing in the first nine. Only in Florida, the following month, would they go ruthlessly for the number one spot. Any trouble that was brewing would erupt there. Here it would be settled out on the circuit.

He went outside. Another day had begun.

Lee Hammerton retired to her hotel room early on the second night. She had left John Clyde in the bar down below; he was drinking too heavily for her liking. She anticipated another proposal, and the embarrassment of having to refuse him yet again. Just when she needed him most he seemed to have changed.

She locked her door in accordance with Slade's instructions, and switched on the television. A local network was showing Riverside; the big countdown. A bald-headed man was arguing that stock-car and Indianapolis drivers were better than the Grand Prix men. A fierce debate followed, Americans versus the Europeans. Two Riverside competitors were interviewed. They agreed about the near equality of the

Camaros, and supported the changes to the method of gridding drivers and cars. Hitherto, everyone used to qualify for the first race over two flying laps in one of the two qualifying cars, then they would reverse the finishing order, following each race, to form the subsequent grid. At the same time the last-placed and the first-placed would exchange cars, and so on through the field. That had been in Craig Hammerton's day. Now each man drew for his position at every race with two-lap qualifying runs taking place at each new venue, so that only for the second Riverside race did the field reverse itself. Thus the equality was probably closer to any type of motoring event than ever before, although it was argued by others that the IROC did not produce a true world motor-racing champion.

The current drivers faced two rounds on a road course, and two on an oval. The road-racers felt that they were at a slight disadvantage at Daytona. These men also argued that the stock-car drivers had an advantage in the bulky Camaros.

The argument raged. The stock-car drivers claimed that they had never been consistently successful in the IROC, and that Chevy Camaros did not handle like their NASCAR machines.

The interviewer concluded that for the IROC to maintain its reputation it was necessary for more, road-racers to take part, and that past competitions had shown that the Americans were every bit as good as the Europeans.

Lee switched off. She still had a lot to learn. She paid too much attention to the glamour, and she was glad that the television authorities had not asked her to appear on any local network. She would have asked Mark Slade to go along in her place. He understood the finer aspects of Formula One; maybe one day he would teach her. One day. . .

Her train of thought was interrupted by a knock on the door. Uncertainty flooded over her.

'Who is it?' She could scarcely manage a whisper. She remembered John Clyde when she had left him. Had he needed the alcohol-inspired courage to come up with yet another proposal of marriage?

'It's me. Steve.'

Relief. She crossed the room and unlocked the door, the fair-haired driver stepping inside at once. He smiled. His breath fanned her face, and there were no alcoholic fumes.

'What's the matter?' He flung himself into an armchair without being invited to do so. 'You're as white as death.'

'I ... I thought it was somebody else.'

'Slade?'

'No.' Annoyance replaced fear.

'Clyde?'

She did not answer, and he laughed.

'Trouble with you, Lee, is that you've got too many boyfriends around.'

'Shut up!' She faced him, arms akimbo, dark eyes flashing angrily. 'If you've come here on legitimate

business then. . .*

'I have.' He placed his fingertips together, and regarded her steadily. 'Our business.'

'I thought I told you. . . '

'You did. But now I'm going to have my say. You need me, Lee.'

'I need you to drive my car!'

'That's only half of it. Everything rests on me out there. I can either make you or break you.'

'What d'you mean?'

'You're running this team on a shoestring. Agreed, you're the Hammerton millionairess, but you're small fry compared with some of the sponsored teams out here. Seamark, for instance. Nevertheless, without me you're jacked-up.'

'I don't know what you're getting at,' she snapped, 'but you're not indispensable, Steve. Fogg can drive, and Mark Slade came second in the finals last year.'

He laughed again, a hollow sound, and crossed his legs in a deliberately relaxed posture. Arrogance exuded from him.

'Fogg's no driver. Another two or three years, with practice, maybe. Slade won't drive for you.'

'He would if I asked him.'

'No-o-o-o.' A smug smile, leering, taunting. 'Slade won't drive again. He's kidded all of you along, but it takes another driver to spot what his trouble is. It stands out a mile. I recognised it the day he crashed on the circuit back home. And I reckon that's why he crashed. He removed the tracking afterwards . . . so that nobody would discover that there was nothing wrong with it! He put that story round about sabotage as cover for himself.'

'Go on.' She did not want to hear the explanation, but she felt compelled to listen.

'He's lost his nerve. He didn't want to drive that day, but he had to prove himself in your eyes. He tried to get away with a steady cruising speed, but the very fact of being in a car again panicked him. You saw what happened. Take it from me, not even you could get him out there on Saturday.'

'You're lying.'

'Try me and see.'

'Why are you telling me all this?'

'Like I said, I want to know how I stand. And it'd better be good. Even Fogg couldn't win for you in spite of his friction-free invention.'

'It's all over between us, Steve.'

'If it is, then you haven't got a driver.'

'You said you'd stay and drive for me. I gave you the option to quit.'

That was back home. Out here it's different. This is Riverside, the golden Californian circuit where dreams are either made or broken. I'm calling the tune.'

That's . . . blackmail?

'Now that's a word I don't like. Shall we call it a bargain to our mutual interest?'

'What d'you want me to do?'

'Nothing any different from what we used to do, Lee. Only . . . more permanent!'

She lowered herself onto the edge of the bed. She was trembling violently, and nausea welled up inside her.

'You don't need Slade,' he went on. 'He's brought you nothing but bad luck ever since he came on the scene. Without dragging him and Fogg into the team you wouldn't have hotted up this feud with Seamark. Get rid of them, and Sea-mark. 'I'll leave you alone.'

'John Clyde's asked me to marry him.' She did not know why she said it. Perhaps it was an attempt to build a frail barrier between herself and this ex-lover. Maybe just to create a diversion, protect herself as well as Mark Slade.

Steve Kilby laughed again, longer and louder this time.

'He's twenty years older than you. Fancy yourself as an old man's darling?'

'He's invaluable.'

'So am I. Now, let's talk business. Get Clyde and Slade off my back. I'll even make a sporting offer. If I don't win the IROC I'll walk right out, and you'll never set eyes on me again. On the other hand, if I win it. . . '

'You're a bastard!'

'People have called me a lot worse than that. You forced the issue in the first place. Remember the night you seduced me?'

She turned her head away.

'You told me a lot of things then,' he said. 'A lot of promises. I'm just making sure you keep 'em.'

'You'd better win at Daytona then, Steve.' She looked up at him.

'In the meantime,' he gestured towards the bed, 'a little payment on account.'

She watched him undress as though transfixed, every inch of that superb body so familiar to her. She made no move to resist as he helped her off with her clothes, his kisses hot and passionate, hers cold and

unresponsive. He did not appear to notice.

They rolled into bed, and he switched off the light.

Neither of them heard the stealthy footsteps moving away from the door, down the corridor towards the elevator, nor the heavy breathing of one who fought to control a mounting rage within himself. A man with the thought of murder uppermost in his mind!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SATURDAY.

Everybody seemed to be up and about earlier than usual. Slade was awakened just as dawn was breaking, and busied himself with a final check of the car before the others arrived. He nodded his approval, and made his way out to one of the breakfast-stalls as Wylie arrived.

Slade was surprised at his own nervousness, eating a hamburger and drinking coffee only because he knew that he had to. Even in his current role he could not escape the atmosphere of the Big Day. He bought some cigarettes. It was a long time since he had last smoked, but suddenly he felt the craving for tobacco. The smoke tasted sour, but, nevertheless, he inhaled it with relish.

Shortly before ten o'clock he checked out, and made his way back to the hotel. There were four hours to go before the race, and he needed to see Lee.

The door of her room was locked, and it was some moments before she answered his knock. At first glance he knew that something was wrong. Her hair was unbrushed and straggling, eyes red-rimmed, dark lines below them, her complexion deathly white.

'What the hell's wrong?' he snapped.

'Nothing.' She turned her head away. 'I didn't sleep. Pre-race nerves. I get 'em, too, you know.'

He knew that she was lying. Also that she was very frightened.

'You've had another threat, haven't you?'

'No.'

'Then something's happened.'

'I tell you it's just nerves.'

He fell silent. Whatever the trouble was, she wasn't going to confide in him. That worried and hurt him.

'OK, so it's nerves.' He lit another cigarette. 'Maybe I'd better stop here and watch the race with you on closed-circuit TV.'

'No, Mark. I'd rather you remained in the pits.'

'Very well. I'll stop with you tonight. Chris can sleep with the car for a change.'

'I'd rather you stayed with the car.'

'Look - ' he drew on his cigarette, and slowly exhaled twin streams of smoke from his nostrils - 'something's wrong. That's why I'm around. So why are you keeping it to yourself?'

'I told you it's nothing, Mark. And I'd feel a lot happier if you would stop with the car twenty-four hours a day, at least until we know whether or not we've qualified. If we qualify, then I can't take any chances until after Daytona. Otherwise we go back to England.'

'All right.' He knew that in no way could he force her to tell him what was troubling her. 'I'll be down at the circuit if you want me. And keep your door locked.'

He turned to go, hesitating, willing her to kiss him, but she had turned back to the mirror and was brushing her silky dark hair.

He took the elevator down to the ground floor. Suddenly dark clouds were piling up on his horizon again, and he told himself there was only one place for him - Crossways. He had been a fool to let a woman sway his decision to shut himself away.

By two o'clock tension was running at fever-pitch in the pits. Even the most experienced drivers, men who came back year after year, were snapping and snarling orders at their mechanics, and there would be no let-up until the flag went down for the start of the race. Then concentration would take over, anxiety of a different kind.

An argument developed in the Hammerton pit. Slade could not get the gist of it over the roar of engines as the cars prepared for their warming-up laps. Kilby had made some remark to Wylie, and the latter's temper flared. John Clyde intervened, his features dark with anger, mouthing insults which were lost in the noise. All lip-reading, but fists were clenched, raised. Fogg stepped in between Wylie and Clyde. Slade eased himself off his seat. They could not afford an exchange of blows at this stage.

Then, just as quickly as it had begun, the quarrel died. Shouted words were replaced by sullen looks, and Kilby eased the Chevy out of the pits.

Slade went outside, and watched the lap, glad to get away from the atmosphere inside. He saw Kilby complete a circuit, Fogg and Wylie walking towards him as he returned, fearing lest some minor trouble might have arisen. But Kilby scarcely allowed the wheels to roll to a halt before he was easing forward towards the grid. Everything was all right.

Slade heaved a sigh of relief and heard the hooter blaring its five-minute warning. He glanced up at the minutes board, checked the second hand on his wrist-watch. The hooting sounded again. Three minutes

to go.

One minute. He hoped that Kilby had already started his countdown, for the official minute was not always sixty seconds. Mechanics were moving away from the cars. Silence. All engines switched off, an eternity crammed into a few seconds.

Drivers gazed at the track ahead, stared into the crowd, looked back at the pits, every one of them a loner. The less-experienced bit nails, stroked chins, clasped hands behind their heads. Some yawned, mostly the top professionals, not because of tiredness nor for effect, but because the trained body knew how to prepare itself for the task ahead by taking in extra oxygen.

Engines were started. All switches were checked to ensure that they were in an on position, drivers noting the forty-five seconds left, adjusting goggles. Thirty seconds. Gears engaged; watches consulted again. Five seconds. The starter's flag was raised, engine revs increased and were maintained at around 6000.

The flag fell, the Chevys surged forward, and the pre-race tension had evaporated.

Slade's eyes narrowed, and for some two or three seconds he lost sight of the Hammerton car amongst the sixty competitors. Then he picked Kilby out. But it was Slade who was sitting behind that wheel, only his body remaining in the pits as he projected himself into that hurtling crimson car, watching the track, the other cars, checking the tachometer so that he did not over-rev before changing up, 300 revs held in reserve, aware that the instrument did not register a true reading.

Sweating. All else forgotten. Bunching. Allowing a safety margin, taking the inside at the first bend, guarding against being overtaken in this position, watching those coming up on the outside.

Now spreading out. A breathing space, driving consistently, alert for any inexperienced competitors who might spin, reflexes anticipating evasive action before there was even a hint of trouble. Driving on the right, overtaking on the left, using the slip-stream of other cars to gain a little more speed.

One lap completed. 1.42 minutes. The friction-free engine modification was paying off. Ten seconds short of the Riverside record and another sixty laps to go. One helluva longtime.

Slade was aware that John Clyde was at his side, but neither acknowledged the other's presence. Everything else was forgotten except for that one car out there, and the other fifty-nine which might foul it up.

One hour. A dozen or more had dropped out. The rest were thinning, a natural seeding process. Seamark were up front, twenty other famous names setting the pace. Only one outsider now. Hammerton.

Slade gripped a hand-rail. It was a steering wheel. His hands were clammy, his clothes clinging damply to his body. Clyde had gone back to the pits, but Slade was not aware of it.

Slade's nerve had gone, but still he drove, blindly, instinctively, following an impossible course, defying everything.

Fifty-nine laps. Two to go. Down to fifteen cars. Now back to the grids. Hypnotised. Dazed. Still in with a chance. Impossible.

A reversal of placings. Kilby was going to make it!

It was all over. Slade clung to that hand-rail. He wanted to go back to the pits. He could not move. Deafening applause, people trooping back to their caravans and tents.

Slade stayed where he was, trembling violently. The impact of it all hit him. Seamark versus Hammerton at Daytona. The dream was alive. A nightmare for himself.

No way could he go back to the Hammerton team just yet. Neither could he face Lee. This time he would be unable to hide his secret. Anybody who saw him would guess. He was glad that he had altered his image. People passed him without recognising him.

He fell in behind a group of hippies who were heading for the exit. Riverside City was a refuge for a lot of people right now. He lit a cigarette, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. It no longer tasted bitter. He needed more, and more. . . Another craving took hold of him.

Eventually he found a bar. It was crowded, and he merged with the drinkers. After a time he wondered why he had not sought solace in whisky before. It blurred the past and the present, veiled the future. The race was a distant memory. He didn't know whether or not Kilby had won. Probably not. The method of gridding was confusing. He couldn't be sure. A dream, that was all it was. So was Lee Hammerton, but in a different way.

Some time later he wondered if he could find her hotel. He decided to try. He was surprised to discover that it was night when he stepped out into the street, holding onto a wall for support, the bright neon lighting dazzling him. He vomited.

He could not find the hotel. He could not remember its name. His head throbbed, and he needed to sleep. Anywhere. Sleep. Oblivion.

A poorly lit subway offered a refuge from the blinding artificial light. Several slumbering bodies lay in the shadows. His foot caught against one and he fell. He tried to rise, but could not; there was no reason to.

He closed his eyes and slept.

It was midday Sunday when Mark Slade stirred. Everything came back to him . . . slowly. The race. Hammerton had qualified. He groaned. His head still throbbed, but now he could remember the name of the hotel.

The subway was deserted; the hoboes had left to go about their business of daily existence. He climbed up into the street above, the bright sunlight making him squint, shielding his eyes until his vision adjusted.

He needed another cigarette, and fumbled through his pockets. Not even a crumpled empty packet remained.

Nothing at all. The subway dwellers had searched him thoroughly.

The city was crowded, mostly tourists completing their weekend now that the race was over. Many would make the 3500-mile trek to Florida.

Slade wanted to forget a lot of things, particularly the race and the whisky. It was a long time since he had been drunk, but never quite to that extent.

It took him twenty minutes to find the hotel, twice taking wrong turns and having to ask passers-by. Then he saw the tall building, grotesque in appearance, rising tall and straight above the new city.

Crowds thronged the entrance. He began to push his way through them, then came to an abrupt halt with two stoic-faced, uniformed policemen barring his way.

'Hold it. Get back. Nobody goes inside.' Words that were being repeated automatically at intervals, unbuttoned holsters displaying something more positive with which to enforce the verbal barricade if necessary.

Two white patrol cars and a navy-blue van were drawn up to the kerbside in front of the entrance. The crowd was growing. A blaring siren announced the arrival of further federal reinforcements.

Slade's hangover disappeared instantly as fear began to creep back, goosepimpling his spine, tightening his stomach muscles. Something had happened in there, and he had to find out what it was. He moved forward.

'Get back there.' The nearest policeman produced a truncheon from somewhere, and looked as though he wanted an excuse to use it.

'I've got to go in there,' Slade said.

'Nobody goes in ... or out. Not until the chief says so. Now . . . back!'

'My name's Mark Slade.'

'And mine's Jesus Christ.'

Slade stepped back, looking about him. Dozens of pairs of eyes were focused on him. This was one moment when he wished that somebody would step forward and say 'hey, that's Mark Slade'. Nobody did. The old image was already dead.

The foyer doors swung open, and two white-coated figures banged their way clumsily into the street, balancing a stretcher precariously between them. A blanket hid the still form which lay on it.

Slade stepped forward again instinctively, but that same policeman seemed to have anticipated such a move.

'You lookin' for a split cranium, feller?'

The truncheon was raised, and Slade halted.

'Who is it?'

'Piss off before we run you in.' The second officer strode across. 'Now scatter, all of you. . . '

'Hold it!'

Everybody stopped, including the officers. A tall sanguine-faced man stepped out from the lobby. A uniform would have been superfluous. His worn grey suit, crumpled and creased as though he slept in it

regularly, labelled him as 'Homicide'. Somewhere he had a badge and ID card; he seldom had to use either.

'What's the matter with this bum?' He spoke to the first policeman in clipped tones.

'Says he's gotta go in there, Chief.'

'And has he?' Now it was Slade who was being addressed in third person federal jargon: 'ADW, mister. That's what it's all about. If you got anythin' constructive to offer, spit it out. If not, get the hell out of here.'

'My name's Mark Slade.' Slade's eyes followed the stretcher which was being bundled unceremoniously into the back of the mortuary van. 'I'm with the Hammerton team. . . '

'Then you'd better come inside. Sergeant - ' a thick-set uniformed officer appeared instantly in the hotel doorway - 'take this guy up to Captain Ferris. Room 217.'

Room 217 was an apartment suite on the third floor, off the corridor adjacent to Lee Hammerton's room. It was crowded. A policeman guarded the doorway, and it was clear to Slade that nobody went in or out unless authorised to do so.

On the way up in the elevator he had attempted to question his companion about the body on the stretcher, but the only answers had been unintelligible grunts. He gave up before they reached the third floor.

Somehow he had managed to contain the frustration which was threatening to explode into blind panic. That huddled lifeless shape. Yet there were five hundred people staying in this hotel. A 500-1 chance of it being. . .

Relief flooded over Mark Slade when he saw Lee Hammerton on the opposite side of the room amidst a sea of unfamiliar faces. Staff and guests from this floor had all been herded in here. This was interrogation federal-style. A gun on the door, more down below. You told them all you knew. They told you nothing. And if your story didn't fit. . .

'Mark!' Lee Hammerton rushed across the room, an expression of abject despair transforming into one of relief. 'Mark! Where on earth have you been? We were worried sick about you. John Clyde said he hadn't seen you since after the race yesterday, and. . . '

'Would somebody mind telling me what's going on?' Slade was aware that everybody was looking at them, a sudden hush having fallen over the entire room.

'It's murder, Mark.' Lee's voice trembled, little more than a whisper punctuated by strangled sobs. 'Somebody's ... oh, God, it's too horrible to think about . . . Steve Kilby's. . . '

'Steve Kilby's what!' He slipped an arm about her, pulling her close, cursing everybody silently for not having the good manners to look away or to resume their conversations.

'He'd dead, Mark! Somebody's murdered Stevel Or ... something'. His head was all crushed, . . like Waggy's . . . as though a horse had. . . '

Slade felt that he should have said 'oh God!' or 'how terrible'. Instead he just stood there saying nothing,

his reactions, everything deserting him. He wasn't religious. He hadn't been inside a church for years, but silently he offered up thanks that it hadn't been Lee.

'They're interrogating everybody,' Lee went on, oblivious to her audience. 'Everybody off this floor, and all our team. They wanted to know where you were. They're circulating your description right now to all city patrols. Where have you been, Mark?'

'I got drunk,' he said, and did not believe it himself. Somewhere in the room there was a titter of female laughter.

'You mean you just took off and celebrated our qualifying all on your own?'

'Something like that. How'd it happen, and when?'

They found him this morning. One of the staff went to serve coffee in his room before breakfast. He was . . . I'm glad I didn't see it. They said ... he was unrecognisable. His head had been beaten in so that . . . Oh Cod, Mark, the Curse has followed us to the States . . . I can't stand any moreV She was on the verge of hysteria.

Slade drew a deep breath, and tried to steady himself.

'And all because we qualified for the finals,' he muttered. 'Seamark didn't waste any time. It has to be them; there can't be any other explanation!'

'Where were you last night, Mark?'

'I ... don't know.' He hesitated. 'Some subway. I doubt whether I could find it again. I was blotto. There were some hoboos dossing down there. They must've frisked me while I was still spark out. Took my cigarettes and loose change.'

'Is . . . is that . . . the truth, Mark?' Her eyes were wide and pleading, her lips pressed against his ear so that nobody else in the room could hear.

'Yes,' he nodded, and attempted to smile. 'It's the truth.'

'Then that's good enough for me.' Her sigh of relief was audible. 'I just hope you can convince the police. I know what they're thinking, guilty until proved innocent.'

'I'll have a damned good try,' he said.

'They've interviewed Fogg and Wylie.' She steered him back towards the window. 'Both have gone back to the pits to pack the car up ready for the trip to Daytona. I told them to stop with it all the time. John Clyde's in the next room with this Captain Ferris. . . '

An adjoining door opened, and John Clyde stepped back into the room. Slade could see beyond him, the temporary interrogation quarters, uniformed officers, one plain-clothes man, typified by a square jaw and close-cropped hair. He was jacketless, a gleaming badge pinned to his blue shirt, sleeves rolled up. Captain Luke Ferris, Riverside Police Department, Homicide Division.

'Send this Slade guy in next.' The harsh nasal tones reached Mark Slade before the wiry sergeant had a chance to jerk a thumb doorwards.

'So you're Slade.' A statement not a question.

Slade nodded, hearing the door close behind him, sensing policemen moving to his side, then stiffening as trained hands patted his pockets, and checked for anything that might have been concealed beneath either trousers or shirt.

Ferris indicated a chair. One was always at a disadvantage when seated.

'We've been looking for you, Slade. What were your movements between 1700 hours yesterday and 1200 hours today?'

Slade looked across into a pair of expressionless grey eyes. They seemed to bore into him. Lie-detectors.

'I left the race-track after the end of the race.' He spoke slowly, confidently, determined not to be harassed. 'I was feeling pretty washed-up.'

'Why? You won.'

'I know. I guess it was the tension of. . . '

'You're a driver. You weren't even driving this time. And yet you got all bugged up into a state?'

'It's worse when you don't drive. You don't work off the tension.'

'Where'd you go?'

'I came back into the city.'

'Why not back to the pits?'

'I needed to cool off.'

'Where'd you go?'

'A bar.'

'What bar?'

'I've no idea. Just a bar. A sleazy one. Maybe I could find it again. I don't know.'

Ferris exchanged glances with the officers standing behind Slade. His expression said 'we got a lyin' punk here, and he ain't too smart, neither'. Slade hoped that he appeared unruffled. Inside him a turmoil raged. He could have done with a cigarette and some more whisky. Nobody offered him either.

'OK.' Ferris leaned back in his chair, a relaxed posture designed for the benefit of those whom he questioned. 'You went to this bar. You don't know what it was called, or whether you could find it again. What then?'

'I started drinking. Heavily. Whisky.'

'What time did you leave?'

'It was dark when I left.'

'Whattime!'

'I don't know.'

'You gotta watch.'

'I didn't look at it. I didn't need to. I was drunk.'

'You . . . was . . . drunk.' Ferris dwelt on the words, then snapped. 'Where'd you go when you left the bar?'

'I just wandered around. Like I told you, I was drunk. My head ached, and I needed to sleep. There were some hoboes dosed down in a subway. I slept there, and when I awoke it was midday. They had stolen my cigarettes and loose money. . . '

'But didn't take your watch?'

Slade stared at his wrist-watch. Christ, it would have been that much easier if they had taken that, too. Perhaps they were frightened of waking him.

'No, apparently they didn't take my watch,' he said.

'Of course they fucking didn't.' Ferris leaned across the table towards Slade, his jaw thrust out, smiling with all the vindictiveness he could muster. 'Because you're still wearing it.'

Just as suddenly the Homicide captain relaxed back in his chair, his slow drawl taking over from the staccato verbal attack.

'And when you woke up, and discovered that they hadn't stolen your watch because you were still wearing it, what did you do then?'

'I came straight here.'

'Why?'

'I guess it was the obvious place to come.'

'But you're not booked in here. The rest of your team are. Why not you?'

'My job is security. The car.'

'So you boozed in some mythical bar and spent the night in an equally mythical subway. That's security?' A mirthless sarcastic smile.

'I told you I was all washed-up. I came here to see Miss Hammerton.'

'Listen, Slade.' Ferris drummed on the table with a bony forefinger. 'A guy was rubbed out here. ADW. That means assault with a deadly weapon. I don't go for this crap about phantom horses splitting a guy's skull with their hooves. This is Riverside, my division. There ain't no horses in the city limits and there ain't no spooks. Evidence shows that Kilby was murdered between two and three am. Whilst you were sleeping off your booze in some subway! We'll need your dabs, Slade. Also we've got a few points to iron out. I guess we'd better do that down at police headquarters.'

Lee Hammerton clutched at John Clyde's arm as the adjoining door opened again, and Mark Slade emerged, a police officer on either side of him. Captain Ferris bringing up the rear.

Down below the police cordon broke up. The excitement was over for the day. A press photographer photographed Slade as he was hustled into the waiting patrol car, the kind of photograph that was all too common these days. His editor might or might not use it; it all depended on the ensuing police statement.

6.30 pm.

Lee Hammerton and John Clyde looked up in surprise as a weary Mark Slade walked into the former's hotel room.

'Oh, thank God they've let you go, Mark.' Lee embraced him, and he noticed the dampness of her cheeks, the black rings round her eyes which seemed to have sunk back into their sockets.

'A kind of parole, I guess.' Slade threw himself full-length onto the bed. 'Our very own Detective-Inspector King could learn a thing or two about interrogation from these guys. They talk you round in ever-decreasing circles and then go all the way back again. They said they'll want to see me again. No doubt they've got a tail on me.'

'What are they doing about Seamark?' Clyde passed Slade a cigarette.

'They'll question Stern.' Slade sighed, 'but, as we all know, that's been tried before without success.'

'And in the meantime we all hang around here.'

'I guess it'll only be a week or so at the most. It's almost a month until the finals. We can practise on the circuit here.'

'You're forgetting one thing, Mark.' Lee dropped her gaze to the carpet. 'Even if we go to Daytona, we don't have a driver. I've been talking it over with John and contrary to what I said earlier I'm determined to race at Daytona.'

Slade closed his eyes. He was trying to think of something to say. In the end he said, 'I guess we'll have to rely on Chris Fogg. At least we have engine advantage.'

'You know that's not the answer, Mark.' Lee Hammerton's tone was a mixture of reproach and pleading. 'There's only one answer. I want you to drive for me at Daytona.'

He sighed, closed his eyes again, and murmured. 'The deal was that I didn't drive. That was agreed, the only reason I came along.'

'We didn't figure on this happening, though.'

'It was always on the cards that any one of us might get injured or killed.'

'Oh, Mark, please.' She gave way to desperation. 'Please say you'll drive at Daytona.'

He shook his head, eyes still closed, afraid to open them and look at her, remembering everything that had gone on inside him on the previous day.

'No,' he said. 'That's just the one thing I can't do for you. Lee. Not even if it means pulling out of Daytona!'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THERE WAS silence in the hotel room for some moments. At last it was John Clyde who spoke.

'I'd better get down to the race-track.' He moved towards the door. 'If you want me, you know where to find me.'

It was some time after the team manager had gone before Lee spoke again.

'There's something I've got to tell you, Mark.' She looked at him, willing his eyes to open and meet her own. 'Steve Kilby was blackmailing me.'

'The devil he was!' Slade sat bolt upright. 'And how long had that been going on?'

'A couple of days.'

'Since that time you looked all shot up, and told me you'd sooner I slept with the car than you?'

She nodded. 'He didn't give me any choice. Said he'd blow it for me if I didn't play it his way. A permanent relationship in which you didn't figure, nor anybody else. Just him and me.'

'And you were willing to go along with him?'

'I was stalling, Mark. When I watched the race on telly I found myself praying that he wouldn't qualify.'

'And yet he didn't spend last night with you?'

'No. I guess he thought he had me all sewn up, anyway, and one night was neither here nor there. He was blinded by the sudden rise to fame. Everybody down in the bar wanted to buy him a drink. He just basked in the glory, and the last I saw of him he was pretty well stoned. I guess he never even heard . . .

whatever it was came into his room, and . . . and. . . '

'Ferris won't accept anything except an ADW.'

'You haven't answered my question, Mark,' She spoke nervously, twisting her fingers together. 'I need you to drive for me. Just this once.'

'I've already told you no,' he said. 'You take after your father. He never took no for an answer.'

'I think I know why you're fighting shy of the circuit.'

'Do you?'

'Kilby told me something else. About you.'

'Kilby knew nothing about me.'

'He said he could tell. That any racing driver who worked alongside another could tell what was going on in that guy's mind.'

'And what did he reckon was going on in my mind?' Slade licked his lips.

'He said you 'd lost your nerve.'

Slade stiffened, and closed his eyes again, the impact of her words jarring him like a physical blow. His breathing became so shallow that he thought it was going to stop altogether.

'Well?' She sat down beside him, her hand seeking his, finding it, squeezing it gently. "Have you lost your nerve, Mark? If so, I'd rather you told me. I'd understand ... it . . . wouldn't make any difference between us. But I'd rather know.'

'I guess Kilby was shrewder than I gave him credit for.' Slade sighed, but still did not open his eyes. 'I'd've conned 'em all if it hadn't been for you. Lee. You tempted me back. The atmosphere yesterday. I didn't believe it could do that to me. I was out there, driving the Chevy, my nerve gone, and still driving. Afterwards I was a mental and physical wreck. That's why I went and got drunk. That and . . . and the fact that you virtually gave me the brush-off.'

'I'm sorry.' She leaned over and kissed him, her face wet and salty against his. 'Oh, God, I'm sorry, Mark. I never guessed what I was doing to you. If only you'd said, I'd have understood.'

'I tried to get out before it was too late. Even I don't know why I came back.'

'Kilby said . . . that you crashed on my circuit because you panicked. That it was you who removed the tracking so that nobody would ever know that there wasn't anything wrong with it.'

'That's a lie.' He spoke sharply, and opened his eyes, meeting her gaze. That car was sabotaged. The fact that my nerve had gone had nothing to do with it.'

'I believe you,' she said. 'But it seems that Seamark have beaten us in the end. I only wish this Captain Ferris could pin Steve's murder on them. I'd feel a whole lot easier ... it would stop me thinking about. . . '

'Not much chance of that.' Slade smiled wanly. 'Seamark Cruises are a big organisation. They'd probably got it all worked out beforehand that if Hammerton did qualify then Kilby had to be removed from the racing scene. That means, as far as they're concerned, there's only me left. I'm their biggest threat. The last thing they'd guess is that my nerve has gone. Maybe they were looking for me, too, last night. Maybe my drunken spree saved me from getting my head staved in as well.'

'I'm glad you told me, Mark.' She stretched out alongside him, her head nestling against his shoulder. 'I've got to pull out of Daytona now. I can't ask you to drive, I can't let you take the risk. The sooner Seamark know, the sooner they'll let us alone. Maybe I'll sell up altogether and that way put an end to the curse of my ancestors.'

'No.' He spoke slowly, gazing directly up at the ceiling above. 'It's too late to pull out now. If you do that then Kilby will have died for nothing. Even if he did try to blackmail you, his life will have been wasted. Billy Wagstaffe's, too. Then there's your father and Justin to think of. If there's such a thing as life after death, and they can see you now, they'll be proud of Hammerton. In the finals at Daytona, and with a chance of pulling off an IROC.'

'But I don't have a driver, Mark. Maybe I could persuade Chris. Or try it myself. I have test-lapped. Perhaps with the engine advantage even I might get a placing.'

'Don't be stupid,' he said harshly. 'You wouldn't stand an earthly. Nor would Chris. I guess there's only one thing for it. I'll drive.'

'No!' She sat up, looking down at him, gratitude and fear mingling in her expression. 'I won't let you, Mark. As soon as the police agree to let us fly home, we'll make tracks. I'll get John Clyde to make arrangements for the return flight.'

'No, you won't.' There was a firmness about him now, a hint of the former IROC driver emerging from the enshrouding uncertainty and fear. 'I meant what I said. I'll drive. For one helluva lot of reasons.'

'You can't. You've lost your nerve. We both know it. Even watching the race yesterday shacked you.'

'I mean it. It won't be easy. I can't even promise that I won't back out at the last minute, but God, I'll do everything I can to make it. It'll be my last race, though. My final bow. I'll need a lot of help. Promise me that you'll help me to make the break afterwards. A complete break. And that means going back to my place in the hills as soon as we get back to England, trying to readjust all over again. You'll have to face the music for me, make it plain to everybody, the press especially, that Mark Slade won't drive again . . . ever!'

'If that's the way you want it.' Her cheeks were wet again. 'But I'm not asking you to do it now, Mark. You're volunteering.'

'It's my choice.' He lay back, trembling slightly, relieved by having made a decision, and uncertain because he was unsure of being able to keep his promise. 'First thing I'm going to do is to buy a razor, and get rid of this face fungus.'

'I like beards.' She ran her fingers through the growth of hair on his face.

'It'll always grow again - ' he grinned suddenly - 'but if I'm going to be out there at Daytona then folks are going to see the real Mark Slade again. One last glimpse. Hair a bit shorter than it used to be, but I guess

that won't matter. I'll reconstruct the old image, and then destroy it completely afterwards.'

'I'll inform John Clyde.' She swung herself off the bed, and made for the door, not trusting herself to look back. She knew that she had to take her gratitude with her out of that room. Mark Slade would not thank her for it. She realised only too well that Lee Hammerton was not the sole reason for his decision to make one final brief comeback.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ON TUESDAY morning Slade steeled himself to try a practice lap on the Riverside circuit. There was no sign of the other eight qualifying teams for the finals. They had already left for Florida. Hammerton had no option other than to remain behind.

The Riverside police were constantly present, watching, questioning. Seamark, as Mark Slade had predicted, had provided the necessary alibis for every one of their team. They were in the clear as far as Captain Ferris was concerned.

Ferris hinted that he was treating the murder as a case of homicide by persons unknown, not necessarily connected with the Hammerton team. Slade was questioned again, but this time it appeared to be no more than a formality. There were always threats where national sporting events were concerned, sometimes by cranks, other times by political factions seeking to create an atmosphere of mayhem and murder. There were known extremist groups active in California. It could have been one of them.

Slade forced himself to drive. He vomited beforehand in the toilets, sweated profusely at speeds of over 100 m.p.h., and endured nightmares as he tossed restlessly on his camp-bed during the nocturnal hours. But in no way was he backing down now. It was self-inflicted torture, and he knew it would get worse as the days went by.

A week later the Hammerton team arrived at Daytona. There was still a fortnight remaining until the finals of the IROC, but already the atmosphere was warming up. Riverside was big-time; Daytona was bigger. The ultimate. A 24-hour race on a 3.8-mile circuit, 626 laps amounting to 2378.8 miles. Two banked curves, killers if you didn't take them right.

Slade sweated just looking at this oval infield circuit, the very same course he had once tried to forget, attempting to obliterate it from his memory. Now he was back. Nothing had changed. Only himself. It was here his nerve had finally cracked. He needed it back, badly. He knew that was an impossibility. But he had to drive all the same.

They booked in at their hotel. Four rooms: Lee Hammerton, Frank Wylie, Chris Fogg and John Clyde. As at Riverside, Slade would stay with the car. They could not afford to take any chances.

Now the tension was rising to a crescendo. Slade could sense it, not only in himself, but in all those around him, drivers and mechanics alike. The gaily painted caravans and tents around the track now created a macabre setting, a facade that seemed to hide a brooding evil. This time the climax would not be over in a matter of an hour and a half. It was a full span of twenty-four hours which they faced, beginning in daylight, continuing through the blackness of night, and then terminating in a gruelling finish amongst those cars which were left. Not all of the nine would still be out there when dawn broke. That was what worried Slade most. Those hours of darkness would be hell. Claustrophobic, trapped alone in the car with his worst fears mingled a thousand times, that same hobgoblin taunting him again, a familiar of the legendary Hammerton Curse.

As Mark Slade entered Lee Hammerton's hotel room one morning, less than a week before the race, he knew without any doubt that her terror was back in full force; a deathly pale complexion, eyes red-rimmed after a sleepless night, hands that shook.

'I dreamed again.' She closed her eyes and shuddered. 'I was watching a race, a horse race. I couldn't see the riders' faces but I knew that amongst them was Jasper Hammer-ton. His mount slipped, fell . . . threw him under the hooves of the following horses. . . Oh God, Mark, they did to him what something did to Waggy and Steve . . . and then I saw his face. It wasn't Jasper. It was your

'It's just a dream.' Mark felt beads of cold sweat starting to break out on his forehead. Things have been playing on your mind, naturally. We've got to try and forget them, both of us, and concentrate on winning at Daytona.'

'But ... we don't really have a chance, do we? I mean, we're the rank outsiders, one car, a skeleton team, not even a reserve driver. . . '

'Which is why we're going to win.' He kissed her dark silky hair. 'We have the advantage of a friction-free engine. I have as much experience as any of those other drivers.'

'But . . . your nerve?'

'Sometimes there are factors which can overcome even a lost nerve. Temporarily, of course.'

'Such as?'

'Such as hatred for the bastards who crashed me, tried to shoot me up, murdered Waggy and Steve Kilby. I'm boiling to get back at 'em now. And I can hit 'em hardest by depriving 'em of a World Championship.'

'D'you think they had inside information at any time, the plant you talked about?'

'They could have done. Maybe they still have.'

'But there's only five of us left.'

'There's still a possibility.' His expression was grim, his body taut. 'Maybe we'll know better after the race. Right now, though, I'm going to have a few words with somebody.'

'Who?'

'Stern.'

'Oh, my God. D'you have to get involved with them?'

'I guess we are already. I just want to let him know that we're not scared of Seamark Cruises. They're booked in at a hotel down the street. I checked on them.'

'Be careful, Mark.'

'I intend to be.' He kissed her, stood up, and strode towards the door. 'In fact, I'm looking forward to this meeting. There's a number of things I've got to get out of my system before I can race again!'

Stern was alone in his hotel room. His eyes narrowed with suspicion and surprise when he answered the door to Slade's knock, but he quickly recovered his suave composure.

'Well, if it isn't Mark Slade.' He stepped back, holding the door open for the other to enter. 'Come for his old job back but too late, I'm afraid. Rickson's our number one driver, but we can always use an extra reserve.'

'You've got it all wrong.' Slade ignored the offer of a seat. 'I wouldn't work for Seamark Cruises again in any capacity.'

'Just a social call then.' Stern gave a hollow laugh. 'Called to wish us well. The Italians and the French are our most dangerous rivals, but I reckon we can pip them.'

'No, I didn't come for that either.' Slade's voice was quiet, only the veins standing out on his neck and forehead betraying the anger which seethed inside him. 'About your threats. . . '

Threats?' Stern's eyes widened. Amazement. Superb acting.

This time you won't get away with it, Stern. Two murders. Wagstaffe and Kilby. Maybe the cops'll get something on you. Maybe they won't. Just pull your horns in. You might not be so lucky next time. Especially with me.'

'You're crazy, the Hammerton team is cursed, everybody knows that.' Stern glanced about him nervously, noting that Slade barred his way to the door. There was a bell-push by the bed. He wondered if he could make it. Physically, he was no match for this powerfully built man who faced him. He backed away a step. That's slander.'

'But there are only the two of us, Stern,' Slade hissed. 'Your word against mine. This is just a friendly warning. Call your murderers off. We'll settle this out there on the circuit.'

'It was never meant to be settled any other way.'

'Oh, no? I don't take kindly to people who sabotage my car, even when I'm only test-lapping, nor to thugs who try to gun me down. What've you done with that guy the gamekeeper wounded? Benny the Leg, I think he's known as. I suppose one day they'll find his body in the Thames, or lying in some disused quarry.'

'I'll call the police.' Stern took a step towards the bell-push but it was only a token movement. He checked, licked his lips nervously.

'Please yourself.' Slade turned back to the door, his fingers resting on the handle. 'I intend to be around for a long time to come. But if anything else happens to any of the Hammerton team, the car, or any attempt is made on myself, then I'll really come gunning . . . for you.'

'Get out!' Stern was trembling visibly.

'I'm on my way.' Slade paused with the door half open. 'Just remember, though. Cool it, Stern. And tell Seamark, too. This vendetta of his against the Hammerton family concerns me, now. I'm the front man.'

A few minutes later the Seamark team manager was frantically dialling a call. The engaged tone caused him to slam the receiver down with a force that threatened to shatter the entire telephone. He gave way to a fit of cursing.

He left the hotel and hailed a cab. Seamark was staying in an hotel on the other side of town, and he had to be informed of the confrontation without delay.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE DAY of the IROC finals dawned dull and grey. There had been no rain for five days, but the weather experts predicted showers within the next twenty-four hours. Rain on a track which had been dry hitherto spelled out hazardous conditions for the drivers. Oil slicks would form on the surface from leaks during practice laps with no time for them to wash away.

Slade was giving the Chevy a final check when Fogg and Wylie arrived, followed a few minutes later by John Clyde. The latter's face was strained as though he had not slept, the movement of every limb an effort.

Fogg produced an old blackboard, the improvised signalling board which they had used at Riverside, edged with fluorescent paint.

'Don't signal from the pits,' Slade told him. 'I might have difficulty in picking you out. Stand fifty yards or so away from the others. I'm not particularly interested in lap-times, not at the start, anyway. I must know my position, though, and how many seconds I'm behind the car in front, and ahead of the one behind. Mark it clearly. If it starts to rain it'll be difficult to see the board through the spray.'

Fogg nodded.

'Likewise I'll signal to you,' Slade continued, 'if I need to come into the pits on the next time round.'

Slade had already placed the basic tools and parts in readiness: plugs and spanners, wire, tape, and screwdrivers. These were things he liked to supervise himself, knowing that it could turn a retirement into a placing.

'Lee informs me that she will be watching the race on television in her room,' Clyde grunted. 'It seems rather hard that she can't be here, in her rightful place.'

'I told her to stay put,' Slade snapped. 'And to keep her door locked. We can't afford to take any chances.'

'I would have thought that if Seamark were going to try any tricks they'd be directed against either you or the car.' Clyde showed his resentment towards a matter which he obviously considered should have been left to his judgement as team manager.

'Seamark are likely to try anything,' Slade replied. 'We must guard against any eventuality.'

Slade went out on one last practice lap, cruising at a steady 120 m.p.h. He sweated. His mouth was dry even with chewing gum. Just a few more hours. An eternity; the worst part. He wanted something to do, something to occupy his mind. It wasn't easy. Everything that had to be done was done; all that was left was the waiting.

Crowds were pouring in. The main stands were already packed to capacity. Coffee and liquor stalls were busy, and the best places had long been taken by the caravanners and campers.

Slade stood surveying the milling scene from the pits. Twenty-four hours of deafening noise lay ahead, choking fumes, no chance for even the most bored spectator, who had been persuaded to come along against his or her will, to sleep. The excitement was mounting. Some were not there just for the thrills of racing. Secretly they hoped for the sight of blood, a spectacular crash, a blazing inferno. It was always the way, and Slade hoped that he would not be the one to oblige these race-track ghouls.

The craving for tobacco and whisky had left him. In a way this was not as bad as Riverside, he decided. There, although he had projected himself into the Hammerton car, he was relying on Kilby. It wasn't the same as having to take full responsibility. Whatever happened this time it would be his own doing.

Almost mechanically he went through the procedure leading up to the three o'clock deadline. It was as though some numbing force was rendering him insensible to everything around him, yet allowing his reactions to function normally. A high-speed robot. He wondered how long it would last. All he asked was twenty-four hours. After that it didn't matter.

Now they were at the grids, Wylie and Fogg still checking. The hooter. The five-minute warning. One minute! Slade had lost all sense of time. Wylie was saying something. The driver saw the chief mechanic's lips move, the words lost in the roar of nine engines revving up. Slade didn't know what Wylie was saying. It didn't matter, it was too late now.

Mechanics moved away from the cars, and Slade felt the loneliness of the racing driver. He stared at the track ahead, found himself yawning. That was a good sign. Somehow his body had remembered to relax itself.

He checked all the switches. Engaged gear, consulted his watch. The starter's flag was raised. Revs at 5900.

The flag fell, and the cars surged away, accelerating, changing up. Nothing had altered for Mark Slade. It might have been a continuation of last year, a race that had never ended. Trembling, sweating.

He saw the Seamark car setting the pace, bright yellow, hugging the inside. Behind it was the blue Italian, then the red Swiss. He was fourth. He checked on those behind. All bunching. There was a very long way to go; positions did not matter at this stage. It was consistency that counted.

The pace car led the way for well over a lap. The Italian was closing the gap, the Swiss dropping back. The blue car, riding high on the banking, took the lead, but by the end of the next lap the fastest cars were lapping the slowest. In anything less than an IROC, lapping slower cars at Daytona was a hazard, but this time there was no amateur element to impede the professionals.

Time and again positions changed, cars riding the banking only to find their path obstructed by others, dropping back, fighting a wheel-to-wheel duel, being forced to take to the grass or to bump their way clear.

By lap eighteen Slade was lying second, the Swiss now in the lead. The Seamark car was level with him, Rickson using the Hammerton slip-stream to slight advantage. The Italian had fallen back along with Parbello, an American-sponsored team.

By lap twenty-five the Italian had crawled into the pits, the engine cutting out, the fuel pick-up system refusing to take the last gallons, but eventually he rejoined the race in eighth place.

Now Slade was sandwiched between Seamark and the Swiss, and at one stage was lucky to escape without contact. The IROC continued. There was to be no let-up.

After the first refuelling stop. Seamark took the leading position again, Slade and the Italian close behind. It was then that the Swiss swerved on the banking, side-skidded the retaining wall, and had to drop out with crumpled bodywork, the suspension upright and drive-shaft bent. Now there were only eight cars left. It was conceivable that more would go before the half-way stage. Slade hoped that he would not be amongst them. He tried not to think about it.

Positions altered little during the next hour, and then the American overshot the pits, and it was discovered that he had been overcome by exhaust fumes. An inspection by the mechanics revealed that the exhaust pipes had cracked, and it was half-an-hour before the car was back on the circuit.

Seamark led. Slade was a close second, and now he had a double fight on his hands. It seemed as though the gathering dusk was bringing back his fears. No longer were the multi-coloured spectators' caravans and tents a gaudy background to inspire him. Colours merged into an indistinguishable grey, turning to black. It was as though there was nobody out there at all, just eight speeding cars in an empty void, reminiscent of a space flight when the radio communications have broken down. Emptiness. Death spreading its mantle.

Slade saw the accident. It must have been the Italian, he concluded, the engine blowing up, trailing smoke and oil across the circuit. He was glad he was ahead of it.

Impact! One of the other cars had been unable to avoid it. He did not know the severity of the crash, but either driver would have been lucky to escape without multiple injuries.

Six left. And Hammerton and Seamark were still setting the pace.

The darkness was illuminated only by the lights from the spectators caravans, coffee and liquor stalls. There were some who wanted to sleep but nobody would tonight.

Slade experienced the first twinges of panic. Fear is one thing. Panic is another. He felt the urge to swing into the side, clamber out of the car, vault the fence, and lose himself in the faceless crowd. Even the thought caused him to ease up momentarily on the accelerator and lose ground. Seconds later he was back to full-throttle, making it up again, knowing that Lee Hammerton would be watching closely on her television set. She would have noticed the lapse. It would worry her.

He stemmed the panic by turning his thoughts to Lee. If he won, what then? A permanent relationship. That entailed a host of things. Marriage? Everything depended upon Yvonne. She would make his decision for him, one way or the other.

Another refuelling stop. Wylie was alone in the Hammerton pit. That meant that Chris Fogg was taking his break. There was no sign of John Clyde. Possibly the team manager was conferring with the stewards over something.

Slade gave Wylie a hand with changing the wheels. Neither of them spoke.

Slade did not ask about the accident. He tried to forget that it had happened. Curiosity would not help him. His business was driving. For Lee. For Yvonne. For himself. Just this one last time.

After five hours he was leading the field from Seamark. Yet his feeling of euphoria, the smell of success at the highest level, was overshadowed by something else; his body was tense and sweating and that cackling gremlin laughter had taken on another meaning. Slade's hands were clammy, his mouth dry.

He could not get away from the foreboding which was building up fast like dark storm clouds on his horizon. He recalled the Hammerton Curse, shuddered.

Something was going to happen before this night was ended!

Chris Fogg experienced relief at being away from the pits. Whereas usually he rested during those brief periods of off-duty, tonight he could not. He always experienced restlessness during races but tonight it was more than that; a creeping terror that almost had him leaving, walking away from here, boarding a train that would take him . . . anywhere. Anywhere so long as it wasn't Daytona.

He wandered aimlessly amongst the tents and caravans, the glow of a thousand independent lights illuminating the whole scene like some bizarre rock festival. He threaded his way amongst those who slept out in the open. A drunk hiccupped and sat up, made him jump.

Fogg glanced up, saw that the sky was overcast, hiding the stars. In all probability it would rain before dawn and that wouldn't help anybody, certainly not Slade. He wondered what went on inside Slade's mind - fear certainly. He tried to hide it but when you'd mixed with drivers in the big-time you got to recognise it. Like a man haunted by something he couldn't shake off. The Hammerton Curse . . . Chris Fogg felt little shivers running up and down his spine. In the beginning he had laughed at the legend. Now, suddenly, it was becoming very real. He found himself glancing round, instinctively cringing away from the furtive figures in the shadows, a voice somewhere inside him screaming at him to run. And keep on running.

Other doubts, suspicions crowded his mind. Of course there was something between Lee Hammerton and Slade. And Kilby had been involved as well. Who had murdered Kilby? Seamark or ... Fogg felt his

pulses start to race. Slade didn't seem the type, if there was a type!

You couldn't get away from the roar and smell of the cars. From where he was he could not see the circuit as a line of caravans blocked his view. He hesitated, contemplated joining the throng of spectators. No, he didn't want to watch. All he wanted to do was to get away from Daytona.

A movement attracted his attention, had him peering into the shadows. People were milling, jostling for better viewpoints of the race. There was no reason to pay particular attention to any of them except that.

..

Fogg stared, his first thought that he must have been jumping to conclusions. A mingled sensation of shock and surprise as he recognised the hurrying shape, logically trying to tell himself that he must be mistaken. But he knew he was not. The other was moving with a purposefulness, weaving his way between tents and sleeping bodies as though he had some definite destination in mind. No hesitation, yet there was a furtiveness in the way he glanced around him, had Fogg pressing himself back into the shadow of a nearby caravan.

Chris Fogg did not understand why but he found himself following, moving fast in case he lost the other in the crowds. He had no reason to follow; there was nothing to prevent him from quickening his step, joining up with the man in front. Except that intuition told him that something was wrong - that tingling in his spine travelling right the way up and spreading out into his scalp.

A slight incline, then a grassy bank. Some half-dozen caravans were parked on a knoll, seemingly precariously perched; early arrivals who had probably been there a week or more in order to secure a prominent viewpoint of the IROC, their position superior even to some of the main stands, facing the first bend where cars momentarily slowed, superstar drivers clearly visible on every lap, those who watched paying homage in their own way.

Fogg held back, puzzled. Lights showed in every van except the end one which was in total darkness. The occupants could have been sleeping, exhausted by the incessant roar of Chevy engines and the squealing of tortured tyre rubber.

He felt the first few spots of rain on his head, icy cold in spite of the night being mild, and shivered again. The man in front was now climbing that hillock, a desperation in his movements. Once he looked back but the mechanic was hidden in the shadow of a tent.

And in that instant Chris Fogg knew, felt his abdomen tightening into a ball, wanted to spew up his fear. Everything figured, the last piece of the jigsaw; the red-herrings which had fooled both Detective-Inspector King and Captain Ferris . . . and Slade, were suddenly ripped apart. This was the one whom Mark Slade had called 'the sleeper'.

God, Slade! The reason, the plan were all too clear. If only Mark had been here now. But he wasn't. He was out there dicing with death, totally unaware of this new menace; defenceless. Another killing, another mystery, and everybody would blame the Hammerton Curse. The final coup was at hand!

Fogg saw the man whom he had followed fumble a key out of his pocket and unlock the caravan door. No lights came on - he would not need any!

It was starting to rain hard as the mechanic made a run for the slope, slipping and falling in his urgency, clawing at tussocks of coarse grass to check his slide, struggling up again. It seemed an eternity before he reached the caravan, leaning against it, trying to listen, but the roar of the cars below drowned every

sound except one!

That scream of mortal terror had Chris Fogg cringing, wanting to run into the night, not wanting to see or know what was happening in there! But his legs refused to move, instantly jellified so that they no longer supported the weight of his body, had him cowering on his knees, listening because there was no way he could shut those awful noises out. A loud report; it might have been a backfire, blanketed by the ensuing noises.

The cars were like a background symphony now, an eerie whining that no longer dominated. There was a horse somewhere. Christ, it was impossible but you heard its neighing, enraged equine shrieks, the pounding of hooves. God, you could smell its sweat and excreta!

One last shriek of fear that was cut off by a series of dull sickening blows. Fogg's hands were clasped to his eyes in case he should find himself compelled to watch. In his mind he saw horse and rider, the latter thrown to the ground and at the mercy of his plunging mount, an irate beast that flailed the air with plunging hooves, crashing them down with unbelievable ferocity, pounding that body again and again until it was an unrecognisable crimson morass, only then backing off and snorting its triumph, eyes glowing redly in the darkness, foaming at the mouth.

The sound of the cars was back louder than before: the screaming that of the tyres as they took the bends, the stench the fumes from their exhausts, the pounding noises from the watchers.

Full daylight. It had been raining hard for some time because Chris Fogg's overalls were saturated and clinging to his chilled body. The IROC would be in its closing stages now; he should have been back at the pits hours ago. Maybe it was already too late to go back.

The caravan door was swinging loosely in the slight breeze. Fogg tried to look away but he couldn't. His hands hovered across his eyes but something seemed to prevent his fingers from shutting out the scene within that caravan.

Oh, Jesus God it was awful! Blood splattered the walls, crimson rivulets running down and forming a pool on the floor, starting to congeal. Smashed and splintered fittings made a pathetic attempt to hide that pulped bloody form and failed. The skull, almost cleaved in two, the mouth a twisted cavity frozen into that last scream of sheer terror, eyes bulging like inflated bubbles that would surely burst at any second; dead, but reflecting the ultimate in mortal terror.

Chris Fogg was retching, unable to drag himself away. Those devastating wounds . . . he'd seen them before. On Waggy . . . Kilby. Crescent-shaped imprints that embedded themselves in the flesh like branding-irons, the marks of a crazed horse that had taken its revenge and stamped away into the darkness]

He noted other things, subconsciously at first, then more positively. The open window overlooking the circuit, the twisted barrel of the high-powered rifle lying beneath it, the wooden stock smashed to matchwood, the telescopic sight battered almost out of recognition. A box of shells was scattered amongst the wreckage.

Chris Fogg experienced a sensation of relief. Whatever had happened in there it meant that Mark Slade would live, that the sniper's slug would never find its mark.

The mechanic found himself staring into those bloody features again, meeting the dead orbs with an expression of contempt and revulsion. A vengeance that was beyond his own comprehension. An

inexplicable terrible force had materialised and destroyed John Clyde!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IT WAS after midnight when yet another car limped into the pits. An American team, a stock-car driver who cursed his luck fluently. The trouble was first diagnosed as a broken alternator, but then it was discovered the intermediate gear between the crankshaft and the camshaft was broken.

Now there were five.

Seamark took the lead again with Hammerton close behind on the flat. Slade was now using the slip-stream to gain the necessary advantage. It was raining heavily and all five cars were forced to reduce speed.

Rickson was tense. Every driver underwent a certain amount of tension but something was disturbing his concentration. He could not afford to let that happen, tried to dismiss it. Slade was too close for his liking, he had to throw him off. Fuck this rain.

And in that instant he saw the face. It couldn't be there, it was impossible! The features were squashed against the windshield, a heavily jowled face that glared at him with sheer malevolence, thick lips mouthing obscenities. Long greying hair streamed in the wind, the neck was cuffed in some kind of scarlet material like a hunting coat. Eyes bulged with hypnotic hate.

Rickson tried to scream but it was as though every human function was frozen into immobility. Oh Jesus, the bastard was trying to get at him, blocking his vision. The car was veering to the left and all he could do was to stare into that face, could not even brace himself for the inevitable impact.

Flames everywhere, fire devouring him even whilst life still coursed through his broken body. Oh God, this was hell for sure, that guy in the red hunting garb standing amidst the inferno, leering as he watched, was Satan himself. Jesus, the bastard really hated him!

Suddenly the pain was fading, the flames weren't burning him up any more; quite cool and refreshing, in fact. It was going darker, too. Maybe he'd be able to sleep and when he woke up he'd find that there hadn't been a crash after all. Daytona, like everything else, had been just a nightmare.

Slade winced as he saw Rickson suddenly veer to the left and hit the barriers. He heard the muffled roar of the explosion, the car instantly bursting into flames. He forced himself not to look, not to think about it. And then he realised that he was no longer terrified. Just afraid. There was a difference.

The bleak dawn came. Slade moved into the pits for refuelling and another wheel change. Wylie attended

to him. Again there was no sign of either Fogg or Clyde; it was strange but he had no time to ponder over their absence. He had to concentrate on winning. Now that Seamark were out of it he should make it.

From midday onwards the result was a mere formality and only the unexpected could have robbed Mark Slade of his World Championship.

He smiled to himself as he eased away from the finishing line and into the pits, taking his time, co-operating with reporters and press photographers, looking for John Clyde and seeing instead Lee Hammerton walking towards him. She was smiling but she was also pale and shaken.

And in the background he saw the police.

'But why?' Lee Hammerton asked for the hundredth time as she and Mark Slade drove away from the airport. Slade was in the passenger seat; he had had his share of driving for the present. Fogg and Wylie would arrive back in England the following day with the Chevy.

'Well, I'm certain Clyde had no connections with Seamark.' Slade glanced at her, saw that she was still pale and upset. 'Maybe we'll come up with something when we search his office. This whole business is a kaleidoscope of motives and red-herrings. Clyde wanted Kilby out of the way because of you. That was one reason he wanted to kill me, too. He'd undoubtedly fixed the tracking on the first Chevy and then removed the evidence. Seamark's attempts at sabotage were an ideal cover for his own activities. Seamark was trying to settle an old score against both you and me and win the IROC into the bargain. Once I was dead Clyde reckoned that the way to you would be free of all obstacles.'

'But why go to all the trouble of hiring a caravan at Daytona in a fictitious name and trying to shoot you in the midst of an IROC? Why didn't he just waylay you beforehand and . . .', she blanched, 'stave your head in with that awful horse's hoof club like he did Waggy's and Steve's? And, oh God, I told you the Hammerton Curse was still alive! Unless somebody managed to take that club from his room, pound him to death with it and then return it, it can only be the Curse which killed him!'

The police at Daytona are still baffled.' Slade tried to pass it off casually. 'Maybe Seamark worked something a bit too slick for us all after Rickson's number came up. Getting away with murder is easier in the States and maybe Clyde realised this. He was getting desperate by then . . . as though time was running out for him.'

'But I'd never have married him. I turned him down on several occasions lately, as you know.'

'Yes, but Steve Kilby and myself were still around then.

With us out of the way there was always the chance that you'd change your mind. He was a handsome bastard and would have been invaluable to you once you were entirely on your own.'

'I'll never be able to thank you enough, Mark.' Her eyes misted over.

'Chris Fogg was the hero of the hour. He's pretty shaken up but he'll be OK. I guess we'll never really know what happened in that caravan that night. Perhaps it's better not to know. If it was the Hammerton Curse at work then this time it was on our side.'

'You won the IROC, though. Hammerton are now firmly on the map. I'm only sorry we didn't manage to pin anything on Seamark. He was as much the villain of the piece as Clyde was. I wonder if we've heard

the last of him.'

'He'll certainly be too busy licking his wounds to bother about either you or me for a long time to come.' Slade smiled. 'I was intrigued by that gun of John Clyde's. He must've picked it up somewhere in Daytona. A Luger artillery model as used by the German Infantry and Paratroops in both World Wars. A 9mm, fitted with a wooden shoulder-stock, drum magazine, and an infra-red telescopic-sight. Deadly. And he didn't even need a silencer with all the din that was going on. He'd picked his spot. Perfect. If he hadn't hit me first time, he could have tried another twenty, and nobody would've been any the wiser. And who would have suspected the Hammerton team manager of sniping his own driver?'

'But there's still a lot unexplained.' Lee turned off the main road, bumping down the rough drive which led to the Hammerton estate. 'I suppose I'll have to chase these contractors up myself if we're ever going to get this place looking shipshape again.'

'I think we'll have a damned good search of Clyde's office,' Slade said as the car came to a halt in front of the house. 'First, though, we'll get unpacked.'

It was early evening before they eventually began a systematic search of the estate office, a small untidy extension on the end of the west wing.

'This place was always his sanctum,' Lee muttered as they foraged amongst the shelves and filing-cabinets. 'Even in Dad's day it was a kind of holy of holies. Nobody except John Clyde really knew what was going on. Dad left everything to him. John paid all the bills, and merely submitted a balance sheet after March 31st.'

'And March 31st isn't too far away right now, is it?' Slade smiled wryly.

'Meaning?'

'I don't know yet, but he was in an awful hurry over something, wasn't he? And judging from the general disorder of this place it's no wonder that nobody else knew what was going on. Nevertheless, let's persevere. Let's get all the accounts books . . . if we can find them!'

Three hours later they were still poring over a number of ledgers and examining a file of unpaid bills. Cheque book stubs showed cash withdrawals far beyond the weekly wage bills.

Lee Hammerton's face was white, and the fingers which turned the pages were unsteady.

'Look at these bank statements,' She held up a loose-leaf file. 'There have been large withdrawals from the deposit account, too. And these interest dividends . . . there's hardly any capital left. He's been selling the shares, and at the worst possible time, too. We're on the verge of bankruptcy!'

'Were,' Slade corrected her, 'before we won the IROC. The prize-money and everything else it entails will rectify all this.'

'But . . . but why didn't he wait until after the race, and if you'd won . . . ?'

'It would still have had to come out. The balance sheet this time would have been his undoing. Things had gone too far even to pull the wool over your eyes. Unless . . .

'Unless what?'

'Unless he became your husband before the deception was discovered'^

"You mean. . . '

'Exactly. A wife cannot prosecute her husband. It was his only way, whether I won or not.'

'I'd never have married him, Mark.'

'Maybe not, but he obviously wasn't giving up. I guess we'd better let Detective-Inspector King have a look at these books.'

'But there's tonight first/ She slipped an arm around him. The bed won't be aired, but maybe between us we can generate enough warmth. . . '

The weeks passed. March merged into April, and then May loomed ahead. The Chevy was clocking a regular 170 m.p.h. on each test on the Hammerton circuit now, driven by Chris Fogg. Work had also commenced on the other two cars, building them up to the required specifications. Four extra mechanics had been taken on.

Lee Hammerton gazed down from the window of her bedroom at the untidy array of cement-mixers, ladders, trucks and other impedimenta which littered the forecourt.

'Well, it's certainly a relief to get the contractors in at last.' she sighed, and Mark Slade, lying naked on the bed, studied her shapely figure through the near-transparent negligee. He told himself that he could do a lot worse. However, unfinished business robbed him of the peace of mind which he might otherwise have enjoyed. All his life he had seemed to be dodging issues. There was a certain telephone call which he had to make sometime. He should have made it on their return from the United States at the end of February. Two months, and it still lay in his mental pending file.

'I guess you're pretty well set-up now.' he said. 'Your father would have been proud of you.'

'Am I?' she turned to face him, a quizzical, almost pleading expression on her face. 'We've won the IROC, but that's all. Apart from the mechanical side, Hammerton are slowly grinding to a standstill. I don't have a manager, and nor do I have a regular number one driver.'

'You haven't really done much about getting either.' He dropped his gaze as he spoke.

'And you haven't told me what your plans are.'

'I made it clear I was finishing with driving after Daytona.'

'You said that last time.'

'I came back for a special reason, though. What better time to finish than on the crest of the wave, a world champion?'

'But you got your nerve back.'

'No, not really. I dispelled a few fears about certain aspects of driving, but I'm not going back to the circuits again. As it stands. I really don't know whether I've regained my nerve or not. I'd sooner it stayed

that way, not really knowing.'

'You can manage the team for me.'

'I never was much good at organising.'

'But your experience would be invaluable to me. I could bring in a manager, and you could stay on in an advisory position.'

'Like before?' He grinned. 'You don't need a trouble-shooter now, Lee.'

'Seamark are still around. I'm real competition now, not just Craig Hammerton's daughter. They won't be satisfied with second placings.'

'Well - ' he reached for his shirt and trousers - 'if they trouble you, you can always give me a ring. I think maybe I won't get that phone disconnected after all.'

'You're . . . you're really going back to Crossways?'

'Well.' He concentrated on buttoning his shirt, and tucking it into his trousers. 'There's a lot needs to be done to my place, too. There were some nettles I was about to scythe down when you arrived and stopped me. I guess they'll have a pretty good growth on them by now.'

'Mark.' She came back and sat on the bed beside him, her hand resting on his arm. 'Why don't you just stick around? You don't have to do anything to justify your existence. I'd like that.'

'Tell you what.' He kissed her, and stood up. 'I'll just go downstairs and make a phone call. Then I'll give you a decision, one way or the other. How's that?'

'All right. Don't be too long about it, though.'

She lay back on the bed, listening to his footsteps receding down the stairs, the opening and closing of the study door. She heard him dialling, then after a time the sound of his muffled voice, the words inaudible to her.

In the end she gave up trying to eavesdrop. Mark Slade would come back in due course and tell her whether he was staying or leaving. This time his decision would be final. No way would she change his mind. But she knew in her own heart he would be staying; he still had something to prove to himself.

She thought about Yvonne again, and started to get dressed.