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CIRCLE

PAN BOOKS



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Beautiful, aren't they?' he asked at last.

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

The river spilled into the pool over a stone weir and the waters were limpid. They could look down ten feet and see the shadows of the big trout lying on the gravel bottom. Willows lined the banks and brushed the surface with their trailing fingers. The meadow beyond was a luscious green and the sheep grazing on it were as white as the swans.

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

'I know that. You've told me often enough. What I don't

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know is what makes you so certain this is a girl.' He caressed her stomach. 'Don't you really want to know for certain the gender, instead of just guessing?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Only three small ones.'

'Take them away, please.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'You aren't going to drive my beautiful Ferrari around in the

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London morning traffic, are you? You'd probably give it a ding, same as you did to the Rolls.'

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

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

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

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

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

'Now I know you really love me!'

'You had better believe it, skinny.'

'Compliments! Compliments!' She gave him a beatific smile.



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

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

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

It was three-quarters of a mile from the manor house to the public highway, but the estate road was paved all the way. Where it looped into the approach to the bridge over the River

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Test there was a fine view back to the house. Hazel pulled over for a moment. She could seldom resist the temptation to gloat over what she humbly referred to as 'simply the finest Georgian building in existence'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hector escorted her up to Alan's suite. As soon as he heard her voice, Alan came out of his consulting room to welcome her; a rare show of respect he generally accorded only to royalty.

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He paused in the doorway to admire her. Hazel's loose-fitting maternity gown in soft Sea Island cotton had been especially designed for her. Her eyes sparkled and her skin glowed. Alan bowed over her hand and touched it to his lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

'Mr Cross,' she called across to him. 'Mr Donovan would like to have a few words with you. Please would you go through



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

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

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

'Okay, shoot!' Hector encouraged him.

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

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

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

'Caesarean?' she asked with alarm.

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

'Explain please, Alan,' Hector insisted.

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

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

Hazel pulled a face at him.

'I want you to move up to your town house in Belgravia immediately.' Alan had been a dinner guest there on more than

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one occasion. 'I am going to book Hazel into a private ward in the Portland Maternity Hospital in Great Portland Street for Thursday this week. It's one of the leading establishments in the country. If she goes into spontaneous labour before Thursday you will only be fifteen minutes away from it. If nothing happens by Friday I will give Hazel a little injection and pop goes the weasel, so to speak.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

None of them noticed the motorcycle parked in a loading zone a hundred yards up the street behind them. Both the driver and his pillion passenger wore gloves and helmets with

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darkened perspex visors which hid their faces. As Hazel and Hector reached the parked Rover the motorcyclist jumped on the kick starter and the engine of the powerful Japanese machine under him burred to life. The pillion passenger lifted his booted feet onto the footrests, ready to go. Hector opened the passenger door for Hazel and handed her up into the seat. Then he moved briskly around to the driver's side. He jumped in, started the engine and pulled out into the traffic stream. The motorcyclist waited until there were five vehicles separating them and then he followed. He maintained the separation discreetly. They went around Marble Arch and down to Berkeley Square. When the Rover drew up in front of No. 2 Davies Street the motorcyclist rode on past and turned left at the next road junction. He circled the block and stopped when he had a view of the front of Alfred's Club. He saw at once that the doorman had parked the Rover a little further up the street.



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

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

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

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

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

'As usual, Mario,' Hector agreed seriously. 'To drink, Mrs

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Cross will have a small bottle of Perrier water with a bucket of ice. Please fetch a bottle of the Vosne-Romanée Aux Malconsorts 1993 from my personal wine keep for me.'

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

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

'We try our best to please, sir.'

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

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

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

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

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

From the start Hazel had detested Hector, despite the fact that he had been appointed by her own beloved deceased husband. She knew Hector's record and reputation intimately and

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was repelled by the hard and sometimes brutal tactics he used to defend the company assets and personnel from any threat. He was a soldier and he fought like one. He showed no mercy. He flew in the face of all Hazel's gentler female instincts. At their very first meeting she warned him that she was looking for the slightest excuse to fire him.

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

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

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

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

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

'Do you remember how you taught her to fish?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They had so much to remember and discuss. Both of them had filled their lives with strivings and endeavour. They had both experienced soaring triumphs and shattering disasters, but Hazel's career had been by far the more spectacular. She had started out with little more than guts and determination. At the age of nineteen she had won her first Grand Slam tournament

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on the professional tennis tour. At twenty-one she had married the oil tycoon Henry Bannock and borne him a daughter. Henry had died when Hazel was almost thirty years old and left control of the Bannock Oil conglomerate to her.

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

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

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

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

However, when Hazel's drilling team pierced the impervious

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Their names were Bob and Sheila . . .' she prompted him.

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

'And your little brother, of course,' said Hazel.

'Yes, my little brother, Teddy. He wanted to be a rancher, like our father. He would do anything to please the old man. On the other hand, I wanted to be a warrior like my uncle who had died



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in the war fighting Rommel at El Alamein in the North African desert. The day my father sent me to the Duke of York School for boys in Nairobi was the most devastating experience of my life to that date.'

'You hated it, didn't you?'

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

'You were a rebel.'

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

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

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

She nodded.

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

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

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

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

'The problem was that the Kenyan government, in which the Maasai tribe was poorly represented, had banned the lion

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ceremony of manhood. Lions were now strictly protected throughout the entire territory.'

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

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

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

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

'The lion had not killed and eaten for almost a week and we all waited in an agony of suspense for his hunger to force him to kill again. Then on the sixth evening, as the light was fading, two little naked herdboys came racing back to the village with the glad tidings. As they were bringing the herd down to the waterhole the lion had waylaid them. He had been lying in ambush in the thick grass on the downwind side of the path, and he charged out at the herd from a range of only ten paces or so. Before the cattle had time to scatter he had leapt onto the back of a five-year-old cow that was heavy with calf. He sank his fangs into the base of her neck while he reached around with one great paw and sank his long yellow claws into her snout. Then he heaved back with all the massive strength of

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his forearm against the lock he had on the cow's neck. The neck vertebrae parted with a crack, killing her instantly. She went down nose first as her forelegs collapsed and she somersaulted in a cloud of dust. The lion jumped clear before he was crushed by her fifteen hundred pounds of dead weight.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'The sun came up and showed its upper rim above the hori-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘I rode back to the big old thatched-roof ranch house, but it was afternoon before I reached it. My family were seated at the lunch table on the front stoep. I tethered my horse at the hitching rail and climbed the steps slowly. My euphoria evapo-

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rated as I saw my family's faces. I realized then that I had not bothered to wash. The lion's blood had dried thickly in my hair and on my skin. My face was a mask of dried blood. It had rubbed off on my clothing, and was black on my hands and under my fingernails.

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

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

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

"Yes, sir," I repeated, and suddenly his expression changed.

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

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

"Did you stand or did you break?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I doubt it, sir.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Good Lord, what is the time?'

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

'Why on earth did you not warn us?'

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

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

'Do stop fussing, darling.'

'I won't stop until you give me a kiss.'

'Come and get it, greedy boy.'

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



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

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

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



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

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

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little attention, but he looked ahead to where the Ferrari was dwindling in the distance. Apart from the red machine the narrow road was deserted as far ahead as Hector could see.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ahead of them Hector's Rover disappeared over another rise. When the Mercedes and the motorbike reached the same

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

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

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

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

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

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

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