

Chapter one

A silver bracelet dangled loosely on Spike Baraclough's wrist, just below his white shirt sleeve. A simple engraving of his name, "Steven", was a personal reminder of the day he came of age.

It swung gently as he posted a rock music CD into the on-board sound system. Music sprayed loudly from quadraphonic speakers secreted around the black leather interior.

This jubilant twenty-one year old was leaving Silverstone Circuit after another successful photo shoot. This time, for Jaguar cars.

Feeling adrenaline surging through his veins, he pushed his foot down hard on the accelerator. The white cosmetic skirt sills almost scrapped the ground when every ounce of power from the two liter Cosworth engine thrust the Sierra in motion. The stylish white plastic wheel trims spun furiously from the rapidly increasing pace.

Driving his white car at speed, Spike erased dust from the earth verges with the wide road hugging tyres. Spike felt this to be a good day, a very good day.

A swift glance at his watch ensured his tight schedule was being adhered to. For his first professional assignment, Spike's mother had proudly presented him with this gift. It was gold rimmed with matching spindly hands, dominated by the unusual asset of a black numberless face. The buckle was always worn on the outside of the wrist to minimize the risk of damage to this expensive timepiece. A wide leather strap concealed a white strip of skin on his otherwise browning body.

Afternoon brought with it a chilling mist, which had swept in unnoticed. Rolling quietly over fields on either side of the road until both became one, engulfing all in its path.

As he hit this wall of white, Spike's speed dropped dramatically.

The thin needle flickered low on the speedometer. Spike pressed one of the many switches

on the cockpit-style dashboard to ignite two blazing spotlights which burned yellow tunnels through the mist.

The dense fog continued to thicken as it swirled across the road.

Where was he? It was almost impossible to depict in which direction the road angled.

Concentrating hard his eyes strained to see.

Microchips beeped as two o'clock arrived.

Although he knew the road well, everything seemed so different in this ever condensing fog.

Peering into nothingness, Spike estimated Nash Breaks to be the next landmark on his journey home.

He approached the crossroads just outside the small hamlet. Two rearing horses suddenly confronted him from the right, their front legs flailing dangerously in the air.

With cat-like reflexes he snatched the wheel in the opposite direction, forcing the four-wheel-drive up onto a hard earth curb. The damp grass verge provided a perfect rink for it to skate across, into a ditch and then, crunch.....

Leaves showered lightly down from the injured oak tree. A lesser thud seemed lost in the incident as the steering wheel connected briefly with Spike's forehead.

Totally stunned, he sat for a moment trying to absorb the facts that had partially wrecked his ultimate possession. Shaking his head to clear a slight visual impairment, Spike remembered the cause of his panic. Looking out at the misshapen bonnet, he began to fume.

Snatching the door handle, he scrambled from the shaped seat, out of the ditch and onto the road.

His grey trainers slipped on and became coated with a film of leaf mulch.

Now the grey mares had calmed, Spike could see that they were shackled to a yellow and black carriage. It sat high in the air on huge springs and large wooden wheels.

Striding closer in order to make his protest, Spike was surprised when the dark-cloaked driver suddenly lashed the reins, against the already unsettled horse-flesh, sending the carriage clattering away.

Spike made an effort to chase, accompanied by a waving fist, but he was no match for the pair of galloping thoroughbreds.

Not to be outwitted, the idea crossed his mind that perhaps the car was still drivable. He walked briskly back towards the crossroads, amusing himself with the thought of giving chase.

Returning to the spot where his car had entered the ditch, Spike was astounded at what he saw. No skid marks, no grazing on the tree, and worst of all No car!!

Panic set his heart pounding. Doubting his own memory he scampered squirrel-like, scouring the hedgerow for his vehicles unplanned resting place. Search as he may, the vehicle just wasn't there.

Spike's feelings and emotions were already mixed and he could now add confusion to the list. Standing in the middle of a dirt track, turning one way then the other, was not the answer to his problem. Buttoning his brown leather jacket and tugging it straight, he set off in the direction of the carriage.

Acres of wild fern and heather carpeted the woodland through which, it seemed, Spike had rambled his way for hours. His aching limbs thought that he had not only walked home to Milton Keynes, but half way to Norwich as well.

Where was the tarmac road which he knew so well? Along with the mist that had long since vanished? He now found himself dodging pot-holes in a muddy dirt track. His periodic scanning for landmarks was fruitless as this forest provided none.

Spike now noticed the watch he proudly wore had sustained a cracked lens during the accident. But why did the hands only read two o'clock? He realized the precious gift had

ceased to function.

Sunshine crept from behind, illuminating the valley which lay across his path.

“Damn!” he cursed, comprehending the Olympus camera he grabbed for at his chest, was in the car with all the other equipment.

What of his great collection? A large black box, which Spike took everywhere, housed a wealth of photographic equipment. Individually packed within a sheet of purpose-made foam rubber were several cameras, a host of different films, flashes and filters. The remainder was an extensive range of lenses. All this was in the boot of his car.

The alarm had not been activated. What of his car? There one minute, gone the next?

These thoughts re-kindled his anger. Not only had he suffered his first motoring mishap but, in the space of sixty seconds, lost his car completely.

Waves of sound reached Spikes ears. He tilted his head to one side in order to locate the direction of the source. An almost carnival atmosphere carried on the breeze.

Forsaking the road which curled off into the valley, he ventured into thick undergrowth on his left in search of a short cut. He soon began to doubt his own judgment as with each step the voices seemed to embrace him.

His grey shoes were now hidden under a field of mud and rotting foliage. Angrily, Spike shook his leg, increasingly eager to free himself from the clogging soil as it weighed heavy on his tired limbs.

An extra loud snap from a twig underfoot, sent a large fallow deer galloping from its nearby hiding place. The male animal, now in its third year of life, sprang nimbly through the dense forest base.

Spike, equally startled, scampered off in the opposite direction. Only after a few steps, when his heart regained the correct pace, did he stop running and understand what he had been afraid of. A smile crossed his face for a moment and he felt quite foolish.

Again, he could hear voices, clearer now. He knew it could not be much further.

Low branches naked of leaves, tugged and pulled at Spike's clothing. An evergreen Holly bush gave some painful stabs as he carved a passage through years of growth.

More pain was in store. A trailing bramble caressed him in a perforating embrace. Spike wriggled and writhed until the thorn bush surrendered its grip, sending him sprawling through the hedge and back onto the road.

The clean white shirt he had put on this morning, now looked ready for the bin, although the tan hide jacket that he wore received only minor scratches.

Sitting in the road, he felt the vibrations of something racing towards him. A glance over his shoulder alerted him to a pair of grey horses about to trample him underfoot. Spike instinctively leapt back into the hedge for refuge. No signs of slowing were shown by the horseman as the coach clattered on. Cringing against the bush roots, Spike felt the two huge wheels rush past his head.

When all was clear, he scrambled to his feet to witness the rear end of a yellow and black coach thundering into a nearby village. Was this the coach he had been searching for? It looked the same, Spike thought. Perhaps it was a taxi company who had hit on a novel idea. He made a brief attempt to tidy himself before following. Brushing down his clothes with his hands did little to dislodge the dirt but did succeed in smearing it more. Shrugging his shoulders and thinking, "What the heck", he set off into the village.

First impressions stick in the mind and Spike knew this was no place he had ever encountered before. Irregular rows of houses edged the main street. Most were framed from thick timbers, patiently decorated with basket weave or herringbone brickwork panels. Others were solid brick with axed arches above square and lead lighted windows. The only prominent features were warped clay tiles which clad the sharply pitched roofs. Occasionally, dotted among the red structures were rustic stone cottages with thick pillowed thatch tops. In awe, Spike

wandered open mouthed at this typical picture postcard material.

The village center housed a small square where rickety market hand-barrows were scattered. Traders busied themselves selling goods from their ill-presented stalls. Some sold fruit and vegetables, most of which appeared well past their sell by date. The majority though seemed to contain nothing more than homemade tat, was Spike's opinion.

Idle dialogue filled Spike's head from the constant bartering going on all around him.

Walking slowly through this unusual shopping precinct, three things were noticeable.

1: The shabbiness of the clothing. Thigh length, flea bitten jackets hung lifelessly from most males. Brown baggy trousers and large brimmed floppy hats gave the appearance of old colonial gardeners.

Women dressed equally drably with hems of their long gowns soiled from constantly dragging along the ground. Spike had not beheld clothes of this type since his local Morris Dancer's Bank Holiday extravaganza back in 1985.

2: Everyone seemed to acknowledge him with a halfhearted bow or curtsy. This gesture, acted out for his honor, continued from all directions as he moved about the market place.

3: There appeared to be an abundance of horse droppings which he felt compelled to maneuver around.

Bartering had ceased for the moment and all eyes were on Spike, viewing him with suspicion. One bold woman stepped from the crowds, took his arm and led him to her small rendered cottage further along the street.

At almost six feet tall, he loomed over the thin, waif-like creature who barely reached the height of his chest. Her head encased in a white frilly cotton bonnet and around her shoulders was draped a black fringed shawl.

"This way, me lord" The woman's voice directed Spike with a witch-like rasp. "Look at

yerself! Wot a mess. Fell from yer 'orse while 'untin' I s'pose?"

Spike hadn't a clue what her babbling meant but it would appear a friendship had been struck. He did not resist being led to a low roadside front door where he was motioned to wait.

Spike lingered under a small thatched canopy as the woman disappeared inside. She returned carrying an old battered tin bowl and an earthenware pitcher.