

EXTRACT: SAXON'S BANE

THE STAG IN the road would change everything.

Inside Kate's BMW, the sound system thumped out the kind of music that made Fergus feel invincible. Its tribal rhythm tightened the tension, and probably encouraged Kate to squeeze a little more out of the accelerator. She was nodding her head in time with the beat, flexing her fingers around the steering wheel, and holding the car tight to the turns as they climbed. Beside her, Fergus checked his watch, again, and made a mental calculation of their chances of being on time. Maybe. Just maybe, with luck, and if this ancient back road over the Downs didn't have flooded fords or flocks of sheep or any other obstacles that didn't appear on maps.

On the high ground the road straightened, and Kate floored the pedal so that the rain ran horizontally along the windows in the slipstream. Where they crested a watershed and grazed the clouds, ancient burial mounds lay humped in the bracken, half-seen through the mists.

Fergus's attention snapped back inside the car as it swerved.

"Keep your eyes on the bloody road, will you?" Fergus heard the tension in his voice. Kate was prodding the GPS, searching for routes. Wobbles at this speed were alarming.

"Then you work the sodding thing, you're the techie." Her voice was quite deep, with a purr-or-snarl kind of quality, and that had been a snarl.

Fergus tapped at the satnav screen, unruffled. He and Kate scrapped the way people can only scrap if they are confident with each other, as if the barbs were a form of verbal grooming. They were the best, him and Kate. Choreographed, professional, hungry, top guns in the sales league and determined to stay there. She did the pitch; he talked technology. Hearts and minds, vision and practicality, between them they had it covered. Fergus expanded the range until a cross-roads and the icon of a village started dropping into view, stepping down in minute increments.

Allingley.

A sudden gust of wind punched the car, making him lift his eyes as Kate briefly fought for control.

"Hey, slow down, for fuck's sake!"

Ahead of them a bend was approaching fast as the road dropped towards the woodland at the rim of a valley. Fergus could see a litter of freshly fallen leaves tumbling over the tarmac where the woods began, on a road scarcely wide enough for two cars to pass.

"Scared, huh?" Kate glanced across at him, smiling her challenge as she ignored the road and pulled the car round the first dropping curve into the valley, burning rubber in a blast of performance motoring.

"Shiiit!" Their final words together were screamed in harmony; teamwork to the last.

The mind can do a lot of thinking in its final moments. Some strange corner of Fergus's brain had time to know that the stag in the middle of the road was magnificent. Shaggy-maned and bearing its antlers with all the poise of a medieval jousting helm, the beast had been staring downhill with its nose into the wind as if the last gust had carried the sound of a distant call. At the first thump and shudder of the brakes it turned its head towards them, and did not move. It merely glared at them over its shoulder so that the grizzled, moisture-matted pelt folded into its neck like the stole of an ancient king.

That same part of Fergus's mind, the bit that wasn't panicking and bracing his body for impact, wondered at the infinitesimal detail of the scene. A light fog snorting from a greying muzzle.

Foliage, crystal sharp in the autumn patchwork of yellow-and-black, leaf-and-bark. The vibrations in a raindrop on the windscreen as the ABS juddered beneath them and they side-slipped over wet leaves with almost no check to their speed. On the edge of his vision the antlers turned to watch them glide past, but Fergus's focus had switched from the stag to the edge of the road and the drop beyond.

His first reaction was panic. The second was rejection. This isn't happening, this isn't real. But the verge still punched them nose-up into the air in a detonation of wheels and suspension, making the CD skip as they launched. Reality was a momentary hiccup in a digital scream. Weightless behind a whining engine, Fergus stared horrified at the canopy of an oak tree that loomed in front of them as the nose of the car started to drop. He sensed Kate's arms pushing away from the wheel as if to force herself backwards through her seat, but he didn't see her face. His eyes were locked on the trunk of the oak, a massive pillar of the woods that rushed at the centre of the bonnet. It filled the windscreen beyond wipers that counted them down to oblivion with their metronome beat. Three, two, one...

His final reaction was acceptance. Just before they hit, Fergus knew that the moment was real, that this was the instant of his extinction. And with that knowledge came three heartbeats of calm in which a great sadness dragged him downwards, a sadness so profound it was beyond weeping.