

ONE

Decisions, decisions. It would be the most important decision of his life, but he was focussed only on the road ahead.

Having just endured a long and fractious meeting with engineers and technicians who didn't understand numbers because they couldn't measure them with their gauges or test them with their meters, there was no way he could drive down the straight and boring A23; he needed something more challenging. The B2117, a narrow country road with plenty of sharp bends and several long straights would do just nicely.

The bike's big Ducati 900cc engine responded with a beautiful deep-throated burbling and a mid-range whine, a superb blend of high-tolerance engineering, top quality components and the finest lubricating oils that money could buy, making the aural experience every bit as pleasurable as the ride itself.

If he was thinking like an engineer, it was because he had spent most of the day with them, although the engineers in his company worked in more microscopic realms than could ever be found in an Italian bike factory, but he was sure the principles employed there were just the same.

In the mirror, a Subaru Impreza was coming up fast. On another day, when he wasn't so tired or preoccupied with the incompetence of a new supplier who couldn't deliver important parts just when they needed them, he might have delivered a quick puff of Ducati exhaust before disappearing into the distance, but today he eased over to the side to let him pass.

The Subaru moved alongside but made no effort to overtake. He mentally shrugged. It wasn't his funeral if a car was coming the other way. He glanced over. The driver was alone, mid-thirties and sporting a baseball cap, dark glasses and a chin that hadn't made friends with a razor for a while. Despite the fading light, his sneering disdain for bikers was obvious and when he indicated he wanted to race with a regal pointing of a finger, he immediately nodded his approval.

Before he could react, the Subaru accelerated forward. He gunned the bike and was soon following close behind, determined not to lose him as there was a long straight after the bend and he knew he could take him there. The Subaru sailed around the tight corner as if on rails but he doggedly hugged its back bumper, the fat tyres of the Ducati almost on their sides. Before the road straightened, he eased the bike upright and wound up the power.

He was right behind the Subaru now and shadowing its rear wing, trying to get a good look at the road ahead, as sections were barely wide enough for two cars, never mind the number of overloaded tractors and lorries that used the road regularly. With a subtle dip of the elbow, he pulled out and surged forward. The speedo was touching ninety-five and when they were level, he looked over and gave the insolent prick his middle finger.

Before his hand had regained a firm grip on the handlebars, the Subaru swung towards him. Bastard! It was only a game! For a split second, he was in two minds: brake or accelerate? Before he could do either, the Subaru made contact with the front wheel and in an instant, the bike shot over the carriageway and into woods at the side of the road.

He crashed through rhododendrons, brambles and holly as if they weren't there. He was trying to grip

the handlebars with all his strength, trying to reach the brake, but the bike was shaking so violently it was impossible to feel anything or see clearly through the wildly, shuddering visor. For an instant, his fingers touched the brake but before he could pull it, the front wheel hit something solid. The bike stopped dead and he shot high into the air.

For a moment he felt weightless, ethereal, the ground racing by in a grainy, green and brown collage. He was falling, falling when suddenly; he slammed head first into the trunk of a 500-year-old hundred oak tree.

