

Chapter 1

Sunday 29th September 1991

Dating from pre-English Civil War times, and just inside the Northamptonshire border, the manor house of Sittling Hall was the product of England's finest carpenters. A two storey building, the wooden framed house was a close match for the better-known Aston Hall in the Midlands. Although it attracted a lot of attention, Sittling Hall was primarily known for its extensive deer park and beautiful gardens. Lord Kilton had been wise in opening the estate to visitors and the money it brought in more than adequately paid for the running costs incurred.

At the end of September an annual steam fair was held within the grounds. The event had been staged six years running and regularly attracted thirty odd assorted steam engines, fairground organs, and over a hundred vintage cars, buses and motorcycles. Along with associated stalls and sideshows it filled a large corner of the park. The cars attracted to the show were a comprehensive mixture of British motoring dating back to the turn of the twentieth century and every manufacturer seemed represented by at least one model from its history.

“So you don't mind me taking a picture of you and the car?”

“Not at all,” Paul replied and got out of his 1951 Wolseley Six-Eighty saloon. Despite the fact that the wind was blowing coldly across the exposed rally field and rain was in the air he played along with the reporter. A picture in the local paper was

something to look forward to and the young woman reporter was friendly enough.

“Doesn’t your wife come with you to these things?” the petite redhead asked as she fiddled with her camera.

“Not married,” Paul said in quick reply, standing over her at five feet ten, and noted that she paused long enough to study him further.

“Age?”

Paul almost laughed. Why was it so necessary to know that detail? The age gap between them had to be ten years, so no chance of a date. Anyway, he believed in love at first sight and she just wasn’t his type.

“Twenty seven.”

She made a note and seemed to lose personal interest in him.

“Are you local?” she asked.

“Sawston.”

She did not bother to write it down and placed the notepad in her shoulder bag. At the same time a blonde woman came gliding around the front of the black Wolseley. Although the reporter kept chatting Paul immediately found himself focussing his attention on the newcomer instead. Her appearance looked totally out of place, in the middle of a field, on a damp September afternoon. For a second he thought he knew her, ‘Rebecca,’ then his heart raced as he saw her beautiful face. As he watched she pulled an events programme from a white handbag. It was as if she was searching for his car as she cast an eye over it. Then she checked the number on the windscreen against the one in the entrant’s section before replacing the programme in her bag. Even though she looked so completely out of place in her summer dress, without even a cardigan for warmth, he found her spellbinding. The pale blue and pink floral pattern suited her, but he felt it was much too thin for such a day. However, she showed no signs of discomfort with the wind blowing across the field as it did. Without any conscious feeling of embarrassment he realised he was staring, but could not help the way he suddenly felt in her

presence. She was beautiful, perhaps the most beautiful girl he had ever seen and she seemed to be looking for him. The eye contact between the two of them was fixed as she came closer. The reporter was still chattering away, oblivious to what else was happening. Paul smiled, warmly, as the blonde halted a couple of steps short of him. She was almost as tall as him and as their eyes met he again had the distinct and overwhelming feeling he knew her from somewhere. Yet he could not place her though, which was disturbing, as he felt certain he could never have forgotten such a pretty girl, whatever the circumstances of a previous encounter. As his heart raced away so did his memory, trying to find that time, but it was in vain.

For what seemed like minutes, but was in reality only a few seconds, they longingly gazed into each other's eyes. It seemed she was just waiting for Paul to recognise her and speak. What began to trouble him was the fact he did not know her, yet somehow did, on another level he could not reach. It was hard to put an age to her. She was not some old school friend, that much was obvious. He had known no blondes at either junior or senior school, and girls at the latter had mostly ignored him. There was no way of telling, but she looked between sixteen and thirty years of age. There were no lines on a well-defined, evenly proportioned face and at that moment her mouth was closed, but her full red lips were almost smiling, anticipating his first words. She was beautiful, and he knew she would light up a room if she broke into a broad smile. But it were her eyes that held him totally spellbound. They were a vivid deep blue that sparkled in pools of limitless depth he felt he could drown in. He realised a man would probably agree to do anything for a woman with such captivating eyes, and he was such a man.

The wind still blew sharply across the field, picking at everybody and everything, although it appeared to avoid annoying her. Fleeting she moved her hand across her face, brushing aside a strand of fine hair that had fallen in her vision. It shone a fawn blonde, hanging in long loose curls around her face and down to

the collar of her dress. Despite numerous attempts to place her in his memory though he could not think of where he had met her before. The only thing he was certain of was his first instinctive reaction on seeing her face, 'Rebecca'. The name just seemed to sit so easily with her. Without doubt she was the woman he knew he had been waiting all his life to meet.

Rebecca studied Paul for a few moments longer. Then, as if she had let him search his memory long enough, spoke. The lack of words between them broken by her soft clear voice.

"What a handsome automobile," she said, gesturing to it with a wave of her hand.

He smiled at the quaint description. "That's kind of you to say so."

She cast another glance at it, taking in the well rounded shape.

"What sort of speed will it safely travel at?" she asked, returning her gaze to him.

He shrugged. "Well I've done seventy in her, but it's good for the ton. It's a six-cylinder engine, twenty-two-hundred cc's, and no slouch out on the road."

A concerned look came almost immediately to her face.

"But is it really safe for you to be driving like that? Can you be sure of your safety?"

The strange question, concerning his safety, puzzled Paul.

"As long as you're travelling in a straight line, she's safe enough."

"Why is it only safe in a straight line?"

"It's all to do with handling," he replied, before realising he was possibly talking to someone who knew little or nothing about old cars. He quickly began to explain further. "What I mean is, because of its age, it hasn't the suspension, steering and tyres, you'd find on a modern car. It has no seatbelts or crumple zones to protect you in an accident. You have to take it into consideration when you drive a car as old as this. If you throw it about in the wrong places you'll probably find yourself in a lot of trouble."

He watched Rebecca's face closely as she took the

information in and a concerned expression seemed to be taking place.

‘What on earth can she be thinking?’ he asked himself. The usual thing he found when talking to people who knew nothing about old cars was that they asked two stock questions. ‘What’s it worth? And where did you buy it from?’ She was following a different tack to the norm, although he was not about to complain about being in her company.

“How well will it stop when travelling at high speed?” she added. As she posed the question she studied his face even closer. It felt strange, because it was as if she was not looking at him, but inside him, reading his thoughts rather than hearing his words. As pretty and engaging as she was the thought began to unsettle him in way he had never felt before. This though seemed irrational too as they were just the sort of questions he would gladly field from any fellow enthusiast. He could see she was waiting for a reply.

“Well the brakes are good enough for normal driving. As long as you don’t do anything stupid she won’t bite,” he explained. It felt unwise to tell how the week previous he had, in the wet, had to brake hard at fifty-miles an hour. Thankfully there had been nothing else on the road at the time to get in the way and the car had completed a perfect pirouette, before ending up facing the wrong way. It had been one of those real heart-stopping moments that proved just how fickle an old motor car could be. The little scene passed clearly through his thoughts as he answered and he was surprised to see her blue eyes widen as it flashed across his mind. At that moment he could almost believe she was able to read his thoughts.

She took a step closer.

“And do you ever do anything stupid in this automobile?” she asked, her tone sounding as if she was trying to catch him out at being naughty.

With a little effort he managed to put on a look of mock hurt and indignation.

“Me? No, never.”

Her blue eyes flickered and he knew by the look on her face she disbelieved him and was unconvinced by his carefree attitude.

‘What was this beautiful lady driving at? Why was a complete stranger, or was she, worrying about his welfare in a car he hardly drove compared to his everyday one?’ Regretfully, he could not figure her out when usually he was pretty apt at getting a character right. In his work it was a must to be able to weigh people up on first meeting. He had been up to some daft tricks in his time, but never in the Wolseley. But he could see that both the car and his use of it were somehow making her uptight. Mentally he cursed himself for not seeing the chance earlier. He could offer her a ride out one evening and a meal at a local village pub. In his own time he could show her how it drove and let her take the wheel. The sudden desire to get to know her better was overwhelming. Moreover he also wanted to know if they had met before.

As he was about make the offer she reached out and gently took his hand in hers. The touch was unbelievably warm and tender as he felt her soft skin against his. For a brief moment she held his gaze and he became temporarily lost in her depthless eyes. It was as if she was transmitting pure love and affection in her touch. It simply left him breathless.

“You will please be very careful not to do anything stupid when you drive this car,” she said, moving her face close to the side of his. He could feel the closeness of her cheek against his, a trace of her warm breath as she whispered in his ear. “For me Paul, please.”

Instantly, he was in a daze and reluctantly let go of her hand as she brushed the hair back from her face. At that same moment in time the camera flash went off in front of him, shocking him awake.

“Weren’t you ready?” the girl reporter asked. “Didn’t you hear me say smile?”

“What?” Paul mumbled, looking frantically around. “Where’d she go?”

The reporter was rapidly losing interest. “Who?”

“The blonde woman who was just here talking to me.”

She shook her head and stuffed the camera in her bag.

“You were talking to me and I’m not blonde. I’ll find someone else.”

Without further word she trudged off down the line of cars, leaving Paul in a state of confusion. What had happened to him? For a few brief moments he studied the thinning crowd, but could not spot her. Even in her distinctive summer dress, amongst the wrapped up spectators, Rebecca was not visible. For several long moments he stood, staring, with a growing feeling he had never experienced before, a sense of deep loss. He quickly locked the Wolseley and went on a search of the gardens and rally field. But there was no sign of her. Along the way he stopped and spoke to car owners he knew, but even with such a vivid description no one had any recollection of seeing her. His search became a vain hope and it was as if she had been a figment of his imagination. As a last resort he stood huddled by a tree near the main gate hoping to catch sight of her. Sadly for him though he was the last exhibitor to leave the field, long after the public had gone.