

## Prologue

**Traffic was light** but steady through the *Schwarzwald* at two a.m. Headlights cut the black ribbon of the Autobahn at a steady speed of two hundred and forty kilometers; flashing each time they approached other vehicles that moved quickly out of the path.

Maurice Vivant drove the Lamborghini Gallardo on instinct, his body an extension of the controls, his conscious mind barely aware of the wheel in his hands or the pedals beneath his feet, leaving him free to review and strategize. He recalled every detail of the previous night's meeting in Frankfurt, every word, every nuance...each twitch, smile, blink. The adrenalin rush from utilizing his ability to control and persuade was still with him – the intoxication of winning. This was no ordinary meeting. The stakes were greater than money and power.

In the back of his mind, a problem nagged at him: a friend who might not be a true friend. Someone who had given in to greed. It was a problem he needed to deal with. He pushed the thought aside, not letting it interfere with his high, his *joie de vivre*.

He thought ahead to his upcoming meeting in Nice, examining the personality of the man he would meet there, a man of power and sharp intellect possibly greater than his own. Friend, business associate, sometimes partner, often competitor, his strongest opponent.

Maurice rehearsed his conversation with his rival. He visualized the two of them roaming the gardens, the rooms of his beloved villa, looking out over the city,

over the blue waters of the Mediterranean. They would meet in Maurice's territory, giving him the advantage. He let himself feel the pull, the charisma of this man, allowed admiration of his opponent's keen mind to surface. Whenever the two of them competed, it challenged all of his abilities, created tension and excitement.

But the goal of this meeting was to convince the man not to oppose him, but to join him in winning this important race. It would take all his powers of persuasion to accomplish the goal. If he succeeded in winning him over, could he be trusted? Yes, he would not have chosen the man if he didn't believe he could.

A dark Mercedes blocked Maurice's path in the high-speed lane, drawing his attention back to the road. He swerved into the slower lane, pulling ahead and around. The other car picked up speed, moved to his right, matching pace. Maurice peered at the Mercedes but couldn't see the driver through the tinted windows. He imagined the driver as his opponent, taunting him. Maurice stepped hard on the gas and the Lamborghini leaped ahead. When the lights faded in the rear view mirror, he dropped back to the original two-forty.

Maurice lived as he drove, flashing his lights, his power, at those who dared to travel the path at lower speeds. His rival was the only one who still challenged, overtaking and passing him at times. They could accomplish the impossible by joining forces.

But, at the moment, it was still an intense competition. Maurice knew the way to survive this race was constant vigilance. He needed to keep the challenger in sight at all times, know his position, never allow a surprise attack to come from around a curve. Maurice was certain he would win this one, alone or together with his friend.

Lights approached from behind, snapping him out of his reverie. He had crossed the border into Switzerland, slowing to accommodate the curves through the Alps. He increased speed to stay ahead of the oncoming lights, but they

continued to gain. Allowing the other car to overtake him, he played with the driver on the mountain bends to see what he was made of, forcing him to stay in the oncoming traffic lane as they moved into a series of sharp turns. The view of approaching cars would be obstructed for several miles. He glanced at the vehicle to his left, recognizing the Mercedes that had raced him on the Autobahn.

Adrenaline pumping, he concentrated on the road and watched for the flicker of approaching lights. A glow appeared on the roadway, warning of a car around the bend. The Mercedes swerved into his lane, bumping the side of the Lamborghini. In the oncoming lights, Maurice caught a glimpse of the other driver, grinning at him, as the heavy Mercedes pushed the lighter car sideways. In the shock of recognition, he lost control. His car jumped to the right, front tire exploding as it dropped off the edge of the pavement.

He pulled hard on the wheel, but the gravel held the blown-out tire. Still speeding forward, the Lamborghini crashed through the guardrail and flew over the embankment, spewing gravel and vegetation as it launched into air. Time suspended for Maurice. The thrill of flying down the mountain into the black night consumed him, and he laughed out loud at this last challenge.