

Crabs Moon – Night Of The Crabs 02

Guy N. Smith

Chapter One

Friday-Shell Island

IREY WALL glanced at the stocky fair-haired man beside her, noted the way he crouched over the steering wheel, a pose that was definitely intended to impress. A show-off. She looked away, told herself that she was the biggest bloody fool on earth. It wasn't too late, though. She could say 'I'm sorry, Keith, but I've changed my mind. Take me back to the camp, please.' But that needed courage, the kind she didn't have right now. He'd convince her otherwise in that same persuasive tone that he had used last night as he had shouted in her ear in an attempt to make himself heard above the grating sound of the cheap dance band as they had smooched around the floor. She even knew what he would say. 'Don't be bloody daft, Ire. We're only going for a ride out to Shell Island, find ourselves a quiet stretch of beach for an hour or two. There's no harm in that, is there? The break from the kids will do you good, and they'll be fine with the Greencoats. They won't even miss you. Christ, you can't stay in the camp all week, which you'd have to do without me because you don't have a car. You'd go bloody crazy stopping in there the whole time, a permanent stink of candyfloss and fish and chips, and those bingo callers never letting up so that you go to sleep repeating numbers to yourselves instead of counting sheep. Hell, you're safe enough with me and nobody will give us a second glance. Then, before you know it, you'll be back with the kids and today'll just be a memory.' Ire sighed, stared at the queue of holiday traffic ahead of them. There was no point in starting an argument with her companion. She didn't have the energy, anyway. It was too damned hot. Whatever will be, will be.

The car slowed to a halt, its engine ticking over. She closed her eyes and her mind went back to last night.

It had seemed so exciting then, just a harmless flirtation. The atmosphere and a couple of gins had made it that way. She'd put her chalet on the patrol rota, told the Greencoats they would find her in the Pearl dance hall if they needed her. The kids were asleep when she'd left and in all probability they would never even know she had been out. Good kids they were, Rodney, six and Louise, four. Irey had had an urge to go out somewhere; maybe a quick drink or some fish and chips would have been a better idea. It was difficult at times like these being a woman. You weren't meant to go out on your own. If you didn't have a man then you either stopped in or else you went out and found yourself one. And when men saw you out on your own they automatically presumed you were looking for one thing. It wasn't bloody well fair. Her fingernails dug into the sweaty palms of her hands. The traffic edged forward a few yards and then stopped again. Irey opened her eyes, closed them again.

Indirectly it was all Alan's fault. What husband and father with any sense of love and responsibility shoved his wife and kids off to a holiday camp so that he could have a fortnight's fishing with his mates from work? Well, Alan fitted the bill: the classic male chauvinist pig. There was gossip, rumours about him back home, but Irey had forced herself to shut her ears to them. She didn't want to know. I don't want to bloody well hear 'erni There were explanations (excuses?). He was out late frequently because he was in the darts team, most of whom were in the fishing club also. Safety in numbers. Ready alibis too. Deep down he loved his family best, just had a funny way of showing it. He was too interested in darts and fishing to worry about other women. Hadn't he admitted to her only the other week that he didn't find sex exciting anymore and that she needn't. He couldn't understand it when she'd burst into tears.

And now this guy Keith. She sneaked another glance at him, felt her skin goosepimple a little in spite of the heat. A real hulk of man, so different from Alan in almost every way. Last night she'd felt her stomach turn, her heart miss a beat when he'd singled her out in the corner of the dance room.

'On your own, sweetheart?' Surprise that seemed genuine. Weren't there dozens of younger girls here on the loose just with one thought in mind? But he'd chosen her.

'I ... I just came in for an hour ... to listen to the music. I can't stop longer because my kids are back at the chalet.'

He bought her a drink, didn't give her the opportunity to refuse. And somehow her life story, her disappointments came spilling out.

'My name's Keith,' he said as he led her on to the floor, held her close to him as somehow they found space amidst the other couples. The lights were right down by now, just a kind of mauve glow. 'I had a wife once but one day I got in from work and found she'd gone off with a contract gardener, a guy who spent the summer months mowing people's lawns and the winter months having it off with his customers' wives. I was real sick, I can tell you. But I got over it. Maybe one day I'll settle down again if I can find the right woman, and if I can find the courage to get married again.'

It was a kind of cue that brought her own fears spilling out. She'd never spoken that way to anybody about Alan before; it all came out in a kind of rush as though suddenly she was desperate to get it out of her system.

Which was why she was here now with Keith, and the Greencoats were looking after Rodney and Louise for the day. Subconsciously last night she had gone out to find herself a man. But it would only be a holiday friendship. She wouldn't let him do anything. A bit of flirtation; the holiday was half over, anyway.

'Seems everybody's got a mind to get out of the camp today,' his hand found its way across to her knee, squeezed it so naturally as though he had known her for years, as though he was her ... husband.

'They're probably all going to Shell Island,' A hint of reluctance, a final resistance although she had resigned herself to her fate. 'It'll probably be so crowded that we won't be able to get on anyway.'

'I doubt it. I'd lay a fiver that this lot's going into Barmouth today. The Radio One Roadshow's there this morning and you know how half this population of conditioned morons will virtually mob their favourite DJ. Me, I wouldn't waste my time listening to their verbal garbage.'

'They're probably just glad to get away from the camp for the day,' her hand seemed to find his of its own accord. 'The trouble is there's just too many camps along this part of the Welsh coast. Butlin's, Pontin's, and now this new one, the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp.'

'What made you go for Blue Ocean?'

'I suppose, I thought it might be something different.'

'Or cheaper.'

'Maybe,' she blushed faintly under her heat flush. 'Or rather, my husband decided. He's paid the bill, you see. I didn't think it was worth arguing about.'

One camp's much the same as another when you're stuck there for a week with the kids. All they think about are funfairs and amusements. I wouldn't've thought a holiday camp was your style, Keith, More like the Costa-something-or-other for you where you can take your pick of the dark-skinned bathing beauties.'

'Not for me,' he let the clutch in again and the car rolled forward another few yards. 'I thought maybe I could lose myself in a camp, better even than a hotel or guest house, with every single thing laid on for you. And, anyway, I was curious about this set-up after what I'd read about it. You got to hand it to this guy, Miles Manning, having the nerve to set up a place like this when every other form of UK holiday entertainment is reporting bookings down each year. I guess it was a kind of challenge, an opportunity for an eccentric multi-millionaire to take on the might of the other two established camps. And there's no getting away from it, the Blue Ocean is fully booked. Yesterday afternoon they even had to close it to day-trippers.'

'And what do you think of the camp, Keith?'

'It's good, no two ways about that,' the car came to a halt again and he pulled the handbrake on. They've got the edge on their competitors at the moment because everything's new. The paint's all fresh and gaudy, it isn't the same old amusement arcade which you got bored in last year. It's a novelty which will reap its reward.'

The traffic began to move yet again, a jerky snaking line that disappeared over the brow of the next hill and you wished you could see further. You wouldn't be satisfied until you were up there yourself and saw at first hand the state of the congestion. Irey felt sleepy. It was a good job she hadn't got the children with her. They would have been bored and squabbling by now.

And it would be the first thing they would tell Alan as soon as they got home. Which started her feeling guilty again. She wasn't cut out for affairs.

Irey Wall woke with a start, almost clawed her way panic-stricken out of that hot sticky slumber, gasped with pain as the hairs on the back of her neck, which had become stuck to the upholstery, were suddenly wrenched free. Guilt and fear, clutching Keith's hand because it still happened to be resting on her bare leg, possibly an inch or two higher than it had been when she had last been aware of it.

They were bumping their way across a type of rough causeway and way to her left were stretches of ominous steel mesh fencing topped with barbed wire. Beyond that were a series of squat buildings with tiny windows. Some planes, small ones, stood on a short tarmac runway.

'Where . . . where are we?' She glanced about her, fearful for one terrible second that her eyes might rest upon the familiar outline of her own husband, his finger pointing accusingly at her. Oh, for Christ's sake, Alan, just keep out of this will you. Go catch yourself a big fish.

'Shell Island.' Keith Baxter sounded weary. 'As I said, the milling millions didn't have it in mind to come here today. Apart from those half-dozen cars in front of us they've all gone on down the road to Barmouth to pay homage to their honey-voiced DJ. There'll be a few campers on the island, doubtless, but I reckon we'll have all the peace we need. And it isn't midday yet.'

Irey automatically turned her head away when a youth selling tickets approached them as they drove into the farmyard with its campers' shop and toilets. God, just suppose she saw somebody she knew! A thousand-to-one chance but you never knew.

Keith swung the car off to the left, followed the tarmac track up a steep bank to where it levelled out. From here they had a view of the island itself, acres of rough grass with surprisingly little litter in spite of the number of gaily coloured tents which dotted the scene. The grass was already turning brown after a month of prolonged sunshine, the snaking narrow tarmacadam creating its own mirages.

'We'll go ...' an escalating whine reached a deafening peak and Irey clutched at her companion in sudden terror. A diving plane, almost as though it was bent on attacking them Kamikazi-style, suddenly turned off at the last moment, arcing its way towards that sinister compound with its shimmering runway which they had passed earlier. They followed its trail of smoke, saw it wheel, check, then land with unerring precision. A smoking silent steel bird that had hunted the skies and now returned to its eyrie.

'That pilot must have been crazy,' she whispered hoarsely. 'He was deliberately trying to scare us. He might have misjudged and killed us and himself.'

'I doubt there's a pilot in there,' he replied. That place you see there is a top ministry research base, guarded day and night. Nobody really knows what they're up to except that they're experimenting with low-flying fighter aircraft to go in under enemy radar. That's the one fly in the ointment here, aircraft back and forth all day long, but eventually you get so used to them that you don't even notice them. I was saying, before we were so rudely interrupted, that if we go to the other end of the island we can find ourselves a nice little place in the dunes. We can bathe, swim, or just get a nice tan.'

'You've been here before, then?'

'I used to come camping here a lot in my younger days. Sometimes it's nice to go over old ground again, remember places as they were when life was fresh and exciting.'

He turned the car off the track, let it bump its way gently across the uneven grass, took a left-hand sweep to avoid some tents. An orange van and a Land Rover were parked side by side a little further on and he eased up alongside them, switched the engine off. Above them, all along the skyline, screening them from Cardigan Bay, was an uneven line of sand-dunes, tall spiky grass growing lushly in spite of the dry weather.

'Well, we're here.' Keith Baxter turned to his companion, his gaze taking in her shapely figure beneath the sweat-stained red T-shirt and the crumpled pleated skirt. Short dark hair and wide blue eyes, a distinctive Welsh characteristic.

'I should've brought a picnic of some sort with us,' she struggled up into a sitting position, smoothing her clothing as she did so. 'I don't know why I never thought of it. This heat addles the brain.'

'I intended taking you for a meal later, anyway,' he got out, walked round the car and opened the door for her. 'For a couple of hours or so let's not be the conventional British holidaymaker with his packaged food. Let's enjoy life. We'll do just anything we feel like doing.'

It was a steep climb up to the summit of the dunes, Keith leading the way, pulling Irey up behind him. Then they were standing surveying the deep blue sea with scarcely a ripple in sight, wide golden sands that led on right up to the rocky north end of the island, maybe thirty people in sight the whole way.

'See,' he laughed, 'we've virtually got the island to ourselves. All the silly buggers have trekked off to see the Radio Roadshow. Let's find ourselves a nice little shady spot somewhere in these dunes.'

There were plenty of shady places, well-used sandy indentations amidst the coarse grass. Irey felt herself becoming tense again. God, Alan would kill her if he got to know she'd been in here with a feller. Her flood of guilt terminated in a lump in her throat as she noticed a small object half-buried in the sand by her foot. There was no mistaking its identity - a used condom. But you came across them everywhere these days, no place was sacred. And it wasn't any of her business.

'This is fine,' Keith was lowering himself down to the ground, pulling her with him. 'It'll be nice to be out of the sun for a while.'

A moment's awkward silence. His hand was on her thigh again but suddenly it was an exciting prospect. He obviously thought something of her or else he wouldn't have brought her here; he could have had his pick of the tarts back at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp if it was sex he was after. And he wasn't getting that. Surely he knew.

His face was close to hers, wafting some masculine odour, a strong aftershave. She closed her eyes, shuddered as his lips found hers, felt a wave of goose-pimples flooding her skin. Damn Alan, this served him right. She hadn't been kissed like this for years.

Irey checked, stiffened, and had to stop herself from pushing Keith's fingers away. He'd got a hand inside her T-shirt and was already making a nipple stiffen. Schoolboy stuff! Fifteen years ago a girl would have been shocked; nowadays she was shocked if it didn't happen.

'I fancy a swim,' he murmured in her ear. 'How about you?'

'I haven't brought a costume with me.'

'You don't need one here. I don't have one, anyway.'

'There was a sign back at the entrance forbidding nude bathing.'

'Sure, but nobody will bother us up this end. Not today, anyway. I noticed one or two on the sands further up had stripped off.'

'I don't really know,' Irey wished she didn't blush so easily. 'I'll have to think about it.' It sounded churlish.

Tell you what, Irey, suppose I go and have a dip first for a few minutes. Then I'll come back and tell you how lovely and cool the water is and that there's nobody about. Then we'll both go in, eh?'

'Oh, all right.' She knew she'd end up going in the sea whatever she said. The idea was exciting. It was just that she needed time to think about it ... to savour the prospect.

Through slitted eyes she watched her companion undress. She had been aware as they kissed that he was aroused but the sudden exposure, the quivering length of solid male flesh took her breath away. Suddenly this whole affair was for real, a muscular lover whose intention was to take her here in the dunes. Infidelity! She cringed, thought about leaping up and running. Don't be bloody crazy, girl! It was a long walk back across the causeway and up to Llanbedr. From there she would have to hitch-hike back to the camp. She tried telling herself that Keith wouldn't do anything she really didn't want. He would just be persuasive like most men were. She only had to say 'no'. It was as easy as that.

She lay there trembling, aware of a moistness between her thighs which wasn't just sweat. Her whole body was crying out for something she needed, something she didn't get very often these days. Nobody would ever know. She wouldn't end up with a baby because she was on the Pill.

So hot and stiff. Just the faint sound of the sea so far away and a thudding like native tom-toms. It took her some time to realise that it was her own heart thumping.

Sudden impetuosity. She sat up, tugged the damp T-shirt free of her body and unclipped her bra in almost the same motion. Eagerly she wriggled out of her crumpled skirt, threw it to one side. Her pants followed it.

She lay back with an audible sigh. Stark naked, God it felt good, like being unshackled after years of

incarceration in some dark dungeon. So relaxing, as though the tension which had been building up inside her had suddenly been released.

She wondered how long Keith would be. She couldn't wait to see his face when he returned and found her like this.

She yawned and her eyes threatened to close.

Keith Baxter padded on to the wet sand and glanced about him. Those other bathers were nowhere to be seen; perhaps they had gone back to their tents or else were sheltering from the sun in the dunes. He glanced down at himself, grinned. It wouldn't do to be seen with an erection like he'd got. Some bloody woman would probably start screaming blue murder and he'd either be thrown off the island or else the police would come. They'd call it flashing and run him in. Even on the bona-fide nudist beaches you weren't supposed to get a hard-on. Nudism wasn't supposed to arouse the sexual urges. But it was different when you had got a half-conquered bird lying in the dunes awaiting your return.

He broke into a canter, the sand becoming very soft now. Hell, the tide was a good way out and still ebbing. He half considered giving up and returning to Irey but he had come too far. Just a quick dip, enough so that he could go back to her, his body glistening with droplets of sea water.

The water was damnably cold in spite of the heat of the day. Baxter gasped aloud, pushed further in. The first few seconds were always the worst. He caught his breath, plunged forward unexpectedly as the ground beneath him shelved sharply. For one moment he was totally submerged, then he was swimming strongly, kicking and splashing, invigorated.

A natural swimmer, he turned on his back, floated, felt the slight pull of the tide. From here he could make out the line of sand-dunes, the ragged silhouette of the long grass against the deep blue sky. So remote, he might have been swimming somewhere off a deserted Pacific island.

But he couldn't get his mind off Irey Wall. The quiet kind, all her sexual urges bottled up inside her until she almost forgot she had them. Almost. He laughed aloud, a guttural flat sound out here at sea. You pulled out the cork and hey presto! - she was transformed into a raving little nympho who couldn't get enough. The kind that became a nuisance sometimes because if you gave it to them good enough they latched on to you like a limpet and swore they weren't ever going back to hubby. But Keith Baxter would be on his bike long before it reached that stage. He laughed again.

A peal of laughter that began in mirth and transcended into a shriek of pain. Something had hold of his left foot, something that gripped and cut sharply!

He felt himself being dragged under, his screams cut off as he swallowed water, kicking out wildly with his free leg, windmilling insanely with his arms.

Out of his depth and then his back grazed the rough shingle of the bottom. He tried to see but the murkiness of the water restricted his vision. His brain screamed logic; he had caught his foot in something, probably the hull of some old motorboat which had been lying just below the surface. It was . . . no, it couldn't be!

A shape, one that moved and shifted for a grip on his other leg, a tiny face embedded in the shell of a huge body, pincers the size of industrial acetylene cutters, securing the hold they sought and closing viciously. Agony ripped up into the man's guts, had him twisting and trying to scream so that he swallowed more water. The foaming sea around him was turning from pink to crimson, a watery hell in which the torment was only just beginning.

Baxter knew his foot was gone; he felt it go, the incision made by those pincers so neat and efficient. A moment of freedom, panicking blindly and striking upwards for the surface. He made it, gulped for air in the blinding sunlight, trying to scream for help at the same time.

The crab, for surely that was what it was in spite of its colossal size, came after him with unbelievable agility. A tearing and ripping, soft flesh this time, crunched to a bloody pulp and then torn out by its roots, sheer agony paralysing the threshing human, his hands clutching at the gaping wound where only a short while previously flesh had swelled-proudly with thoughts of Irey Wall.

Now he was beneath the surface again, convulsed and defeated, no longer trying to escape but offering what was left of his body so that the end might be quick.

That face, so close to his own, so malignant, blazing crustacean hate for a mortal foe. Holding him firmly but gently, swivelling him around in the way a killer cat plays with a half-mutilated captive vole. Look and see before you die!

Not just one face, dozens of them, a ring of hateful countenances in a wide circle just below the surface.

Watching. Waiting. Gloating!

For Christ's sake, kill me!

Click-click-clickety-click. A crab castanets sound, a symphony of death; slow death.

For Baxter everything was suddenly happening in slow motion. He was being held by a bloody stump of a thigh, a floating captor who no longer fought his attackers. The physical agony was slowly being replaced by a numbness as Nature's own anaesthetic relieved his mutilated body. Blood poured relentlessly from his gory wounds, creating again that crimson underwater hell.

It couldn't be happening, of course. Well, not like this. These monstrosities were figments of his tortured mind. He had got caught up in something, his original theory. Sharp rusting steel that had severed his limbs when he had struggled. Of course, he was going to die. It didn't seem so bad once you were faced with it; you spent your whole life being scared of dying but it really wasn't so terrible after all.

A fleeting memory brought a twinge of regret to his brain that was having difficulty functioning. That girl, damn it, he couldn't even remember her name now. He wished he'd stopped in the dunes and screwed her. That had been his big mistake, leaving her there and going for a swim in this God-awful crimson sea. He gave a laugh-at least he meant to even if he didn't manage it-one thing was for sure, he wouldn't be any fucking good to her now!

And for Keith Baxter the awful crimson around him darkened so that he neither saw nor felt anything as the giant crabs closed in on him, ripping his torn body apart with unprecedented fury, then crunching on his remains in a bloody feast where sheer hunger predominated. Then the creatures moved away and the water cleared again.

Chapter Two

Friday Evening -ShellIsland

IREY WALL awoke with a start, clutching at her nakedness in an instinctive action to cover it up until she had worked out exactly why she was lying here with her clothes strewn all about her.

The events of the past few hours flipped back in a staccato-like reconstruction of everything that had happened since she left the camp. Her lover-no, her friend, because nothing had happened between them yet and maybe it wouldn't anyway-had gone for a swim. She didn't know how long he had been gone; it might have been a few minutes or it could have been an hour. There was no way of telling because she wasn't wearing a watch.

Her emotions had cooled with sleep. She felt both guilty and foolish. Thank God he had decided to go for a swim first otherwise she might have let him do things she would have regretted later. She couldn't understand what had come over her. She must've been crazy even agreeing to go out with him for the day. Alan had his faults, and plenty of them, but she would never do a trick like that across him. She'd better get dressed and when Keith came back she would tell him that she'd changed her mind and would he please take her straight back to the camp. She was sorry if she had let him down but . . .

A sudden noise like the snapping of a dry twig had her whirling around, her pulses starting to race instantly. A movement, like a foot being lowered gently on to a clump of dry grass. A faint cough.

Irey's mouth went instantly dry. She tried to tell herself that it was Keith returning but he would have no need for stealth. Unless he was a secret voyeur and hoped to catch her unawares, to study her from a secret vantage point. She had heard about men like that, the sort of things they got up to. She went a clammy cold in spite of the heat.

If Keith Baxter was intent on creeping up on her that was bad enough-but if it was anybody else then that was a thousand times worse! She had to get dressed whoever it was.

Her trembling fingers found a bra strap in the grass, lifted it; dropped it. And at the very second she went to retrieve it she saw the face peering out of the grass at her.

Irey Wall didn't scream. The sound somehow became stuck in her throat, died away in an ignominious gurgle. Her muscles refused to function, became jellified and useless. Only her eyes moved and saw, conveyed sheer terror to her numbed brain.

It certainly wasn't Keith Baxter who crouched there watching her with grey penetrating eyes. It was impossible even to guess at his age; he might have been as old as sixty or he could have been a drop-out in his mid-twenties whose body had aged prematurely. He seemed to be twisted from the waist downwards, with thin wasted legs that were deformed through some disease; perhaps he was a polio victim.

He wore a torn crimson shirt, the tails hanging loosely outside his faded denim trousers. His feet were bare, the toes with their long broken black nails all squashed together as though they were intent on defying their Maker and forming into webbed limbs.

His face, oh God, his face was the most terrifying feature of all, partly screened by creepers of long grey hair which fell forward as though intent on hiding the horrific features from mankind. The eyes were large, bulging from their sockets, set too close together so that surely his vision was impaired. The nose was no more than twin nostrils in the centre, black encrusted minute cavities that bubbled mucus as he breathed. And the mouth-a single slit in which bobbed uneven lines of decayed tooth stumps, a sharp pointed central one seeming to gouge the lip directly above it every time it moved.

'Who ... are you?' Irey marvelled at her own calm, the way she asked a question instead of screaming hysterically.

'Bar-tholo-mew.' The name was strung out as though the other had difficulty in pronouncing it. Perhaps nobody had ever asked him before.

'Bartholomew?'

He nodded. 'S'right. Everybody knows Bartholomew round here. I comes and goes as I please. I sees things that other folks miss. You understand?'

Irey nodded and thought to herself, he's some local nutter. She eased her thighs close together; he'd been staring in between them a few seconds ago. It gave her a feeling of revulsion.

'Where's your man, lady?'

'He's . . . he's around.' At least I hope he is. Try and keep him talking and get dressed at the same time. Maybe he's perfectly harmless but you can never be sure.

'A lot o' young girls gets themselves fucked in these dunes,' he spoke emotionlessly, a kind of recitation.

'Do they now?' She tried to sound haughty. 'Well, for your information, Mr Bartholomew or whatever you call yourself, I was merely stripped off ready to go for a swim. But I've changed my mind. I'm getting dressed and as soon as my husband turns up we're going home. He should be here any second.'

'Don't you get goin' near the water, lady!' Suddenly his lisping voice took on a new note, a low whisper broken only by the sound of loose phlegm in his lungs. 'Whatever you do, don't go down to the sea. Not if you want to stay alive!'

'I ... I beg your pardon.' Little icy ripples spread over her body, closed over her heart. He's mad. Humour him.

'I seen 'em shortly after dawn this mornin', lady,' he leaned closer, his eyes beginning to roll. 'A dozen of 'em, maybe more. I can't say 'cause I can't count if there's more'n a few. But they came up out of the tide, lookin' for food.'

'What came up out of the tide, Bartholomew?' Irey was feverishly trying to fasten the clasp of her bra but it was proving an impossible task. 'Sharks, like Jaws in the film?'

'Crabs!' Bartholomew spat the word out venomously.

'Crabs!' Irey repeated incredulously. 'But every stretch of coastline in Britain has crabs.'

'Not the likes o' these,' there was an expression of terror on his hairy features as he spread his arms wide, stretched to try and extend them even further. 'Big 'uns. Bigger'n sheep. Big as cows.'

Something stopped her from contradicting him. Perhaps it was the look in his eyes or maybe the way his voice died away to an unintelligible wheeze.

'I see,' was all she said and finding her T-shirt, pulled it on.

'I'm keepin' clear o' the tide,' he continued. 'And that ain't easy fer me, 'cause I'm a beachcomber.'

'Have you warned people?'

'Naw,' a contemptuous grunt. 'They wouldn'a listen if I did. They'll find out though when the crabs come ashore again, as surely they will. I'm tellin' you 'cause . . . ' his eyes dropped back down to her thighs, reflecting disappointment because her legs were closed tightly together now, 'cause I like you. At least, I think I do.'

Irey almost lost her balance stepping into her skirt. Her pants could stay wherever they were. 'Well, thank you for your warning, Bartholomew, it was most kind of you. Now, I'll just go and see what's keeping my husband.'

'You do that, lady. And don't you get hangin' about Shell too long because somethin' tells me them big crabs ain't gone too far out to sea.'

Irey was trembling as she stepped out on to the powdery path which ran through the dunes. The sun was well into the western sky and beginning to dip. She hadn't realised it was so late. It was sure to be seven o'clock; she must have been asleep for hours.

From this topmost vantage point she scanned the length of the dunes and the beach below. There were one or two holidaymakers playing ball on the sand, a mongrel dog yapping excitedly amongst them. But nowhere could she see a figure which even remotely resembled Keith Baxter. What the hell had happened to him?

Panic first; the kids back at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp. Rodney and Louise would be wondering where she had got to. She was supposed to collect them at 6.30. Then anger; damn Keith Baxter. He had brought her out here for one reason only. She winced at the thought, the way the crudity leaped to her mind. To fuck her.

Well, for some inexplicable reason he'd gone off naked and with an erection, and hadn't come back. Maybe he'd come across a party of tarts sunning themselves in the dunes! She laughed to herself at the thought.

But there was no getting away from one thing. Keith had brought her here and it was his responsibility to get her safely back again. And if he wasn't prepared to do that then she knew just how she was travelling home. She had watched him hide the car-key under the front wheel. Furthermore, she could drive.

In less than five minutes she was sitting behind the steering wheel of Keith Baxter's car listening to the engine ticking over. One last look around, scanning the dunes in front of her, and then she was slowly reversing back to the tarmac road.

Sod Mr Keith Baxter. And that lunatic Bartholomew with his fantasy about giant crabs. For all she cared the two of them could spend the night together on Shell Island and she didn't give a damn if those bloody crabs ate them!

Irey Wall let in the clutch and the car shot forward down the road. She hoped this day would fade quickly from her memory for it was bordering on the nightmarish. All she wanted right now was to be back at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp.

Chapter Three

Saturday-Shell Island

SATURDAY DAWNED with the same cloudless blue skies and blazing sunshine. Ian Wright and Julie Coles were grateful for the coolness of the open 1949 red MG as it glided along the narrow coast roads. For half an hour they were held up by the congested traffic in Barmouth, then they were clear, almost euphoric as they took the Harlech road along the cliff tops.

Twenty minutes later they were approaching the small village of Llanbedr, a signpost off to the left reading 'Mochras'.

'That's Welsh for Shell Island,' Ian yelled above the roar of the engine, at the same time swinging the sports car over to the left, down a narrow twisting lane. A little further on the tarmac gave way to rough shale, and they could see the tide lapping at the edges of the causeway.

'What's that?' Julie pointed to some buildings which were cordoned off by extensive barbed-wire fencing, like some remnant of a concentration camp from the last war. She shuddered. It was a

forbidding scar on an otherwise natural rugged landscape. An eyesore; it spoiled the environment.

'War Department,' Ian slowed the car to a crawl. 'Uncle Cliff told me all about it when he heard we were coming here. It's a pilotless aircraft base. Those small planes you see standing on the runways are all flown by remote control. All very hush hush. You'd need a WD pass in triplicate to get even as far as the first checkpoint! Uncle Cliff said some lads who were camping on Shell Island went on an exploration trip one night and ran into the guards. They nearly got shot, and then had to undergo an extensive interrogation before they were allowed to leave with severe warnings ringing in their ears.'

'It sounds awfully creepy,' Julie shivered in spite of the warm sunshine. 'I hope we'll be away from here before dark.'

'No need to worry about that place,' Ian saw that the water was spilling across the road ahead of them and reduced his speed to 5 mph; then the MG was bumping and splashing its way up on to Shell Island itself. 'You'll forget it ever exists when you see the real beauty of Shell Island.'

Shell Island was a veritable maze of narrow tarmac roads with ample parking places on the hard grass landscape. Everywhere tents were pitched as campers made the most of this unexpected heat wave. A signpost stated that the South End lay to the left and the North End to the right.

Ian moved to the left, following the sign which guided them to the bathing beaches. Half a mile further on he pulled off the road and brought the car to a halt on the top of a steep rise which afforded them a view of sand-dunes with an extensive golden beach beneath.

'It's marvellous!' Julie breathed in the welcome stiffening breeze which was ruffling her auburn hair. 'All these people camping here yet we've almost got the beach to ourselves. Where is everybody, Ian?'

'They've probably all had their early-morning dip and are sleeping it off.' Ian stretched himself on the warm powdery sand. 'Now, let's have that picnic and then we'll see how warm the water really is.'

Half an hour later, clad in their bathing costumes, they were racing across the wet sand towards the tide, laughing and shouting as they splashed ankle-deep through the white foam.

'It's really warm,' Julie laughed. 'Why don't we go for a nice long swim?'

'Suits me.' Ian glanced down at the front of his bathing costume. Julie always made him like that, damn her, at the most inconvenient of times and often in the most awkward of situations. He wanted to strip right off, to stand naked in front of her with Nature's wilderness as a background. He glanced about him. There wasn't a soul in sight. All the same, somebody back in those dunes might be watching them through a pair of binoculars. He shrugged his shoulders and splashed after Julie Coles. God, what a figure she had! Enough to make any man want her badly, really badly . . .

Julie, the water up to the top half of her bikini, turned back towards him.

'Come on,' she yelled, 'what's keeping you? Race you round the headland. Maybe we can find a quiet cove somewhere ...'

She laughed tantalisingly and with a seductive smile on her freckled features dived backwards and began kicking out with her legs. Yes, he smiled to himself as he struck out after her, maybe there is a quiet little cove just around the headland where we can . . .

He plunged into a crawl, losing sight of his fiancée as his head went under water. He powered on, heading out to sea, trying to judge his distance by his strokes. About a couple of hundred yards and then he would veer to the left, following the coastline, maybe even catching up with Julie.

Julie Coles was a strong swimmer, too, matching Ian for speed, and after ten minutes or so there was still a good fifty yards between them. Of course, he told himself, she had got a good start on him. He increased his efforts, clawing the salt water as he strove to narrow the distance.

Ten minutes or so later he paused, trod water, trying to look around him. Damn this swell, it hindered his range of vision. He couldn't see her and began to feel slightly uneasy. Then he got a brief glimpse of her lithe form still swimming strongly out to sea.

Damn these waves; he caught his breath just in time as one enveloped him. Turn, you idiot. Turn back! We're far enough out to sea as it is.

But still she persevered outwards on a direct course.

'Stupid bitch,' he grunted. 'You're too far out ...'

Another wave hit him; the swell was getting stronger out here. Now he could not see her at all. He began to swim desperately. Catching Julie up was no longer a game. Their very lives might depend upon it!

Occasionally he caught glimpses of her amidst the rising swell. At last! He breathed a sigh of relief; she was turning now, swimming in a wide arc, a course which would eventually take her landwards.

He struck out diagonally, his intention being to intercept her. Relief. Maybe soon they would be lying on the sun-drenched golden sand.

Suddenly his daydreaming was interrupted by a shrill scream, and even as he trod water to look a wave hit him, a forceful wall of water which instantly obscured his vision, left him gasping for breath.

He trod water, looking for her, not seeing her. Christ, suppose she had had a sudden attack of cramp! What bloody fools they were to come this far out.

'Julie!' he yelled, a note of panic creeping into his voice. 'Julie, where are you?'

For the first time in his life he felt completely helpless. How the hell was he going to find her out here?

Suddenly he realised just how shallow the water was even this far out from the shore. As he trod water he was aware that he could just touch the bottom with his feet. He was above some sort of sandbank. Now where the hell had Julie got to?

He stared, looked again. Between the ever-increasing waves he spied a large ripple heading towards him. It just had to be Julie Coles. What a bloody stupid adolescent trick! She had screamed to frighten him and now she was trying to sneak up on him under water!

He rested his feet on the sandy bottom, found he could stand in this particular place. He laughed, an hysterical sound. Julie was OK, it really didn't matter . . .

Then he was staggering back, his own scream of pain and fear muffled suddenly as his head went under. He doubled up in agony, instinctively fighting to free himself from whatever it was that had a hold on his left leg that could only be compared with a pair of garden shears with serrated blades, biting deeper into the bone with every second. He fell full length on to the sea-bed, gulping down mouthfuls of murky, sandy water. He panicked, kicking wildly with his free leg. But there was no escape, that much was quite clear to him. Furthermore, he knew that he was going to die. He guessed, too, that whatever it was that was attacking him had also claimed the life of Julie Coles!

There was a red mist before his eyes. No, it wasn't a mist ... he could taste it ... like that time in his boyhood when he had fallen on the beach and cut his lip. It was blood!

Then he almost felt that he was free. That agonising grip had lessened. He made one last desperate effort to break free, almost made it to the surface before being pulled back instantly by his right leg.

Consciousness began to slip from his fear-crazed mind. He realised only too well what had been the fate of his left leg - it had been amputated! Now his right leg was being severed. Mercifully at that moment he lost consciousness.

The killings had begun.

Chapter Four

Saturday Night - the Ocean Queen

MILES MANNING gazed with a sense of personal triumph across the crowded deck of his private yacht, the Ocean Queen. Couples swayed in time to the music from the crackling tannoy system, their movements accentuated at times by the slight swell that rocked the large craft. Below deck others were drinking cocktails, laughing gaily. A gala night, a flamboyant show of extravaganza that would give the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp that extra bit of publicity, put its rivals in the shade. He laughed softly to himself. Things were working out very, very well.

Miles Manning was tall and well-built, his dress suit seeming awkward and ill-fitting on his huge frame, his tanned complexion causing strangers to ponder over his nationality. Sleek black hair falling to the collar of his jacket and a pencil-line moustache added that touch of aristocracy which he sought to create, an aloofness which commanded the respect of those about him. He was only aboard personally tonight because it was the 'premiere' of what was to be a regular fortnightly party at sea, a kind of 'royal performance', he told himself. It wouldn't do for him to mix regularly with these holidaymakers; it would erode the image he was trying to build. But tonight was something special. He had to launch this money-spinning novelty.

He stood on the bridge, waved demurely towards the dancers and felt a surge of importance. He flicked an inch of cigar ash into the sea breeze, watched the grey dust scatter like a flurry of snowflakes. His eyes narrowed as an expression of disdain flooded his handsome features. Rabble! That's what these people were. Typical rabble who were more suited to fish and chips and beer than the sophisticated etiquette of a cocktail party out at sea. There wasn't an evening dress to be seen amongst them; jeans, open-necked and T-shirts, plimsolls on their feet. They didn't know any better so nobody was likely to complain. But it spoiled the atmosphere Miles Manning was trying to create; casting pearls before swine.

A very small proportion of the camp guests were on board, the lucky ones whose numbers had been drawn out of a hat at the Greencoat Show last Friday evening. It was the only way to do it, but effectively you ended up with a bunch of teenagers plus a sprinkling of the older generation. Still, what the hell did it matter!

'Everything OK, Mr Manning, sir?'

Manning turned, saw the dapper silhouette of his chief camp manager, Ricky Winterbottom; the only other evening dress besides his own on board tonight. A creep, a yes-man, but that was why he had got the job. Superbly efficient, all he lacked was the driving force, the personality which had put Manning at the top of the tree. Winterbottom would always be a cog in any machine, never the flywheel that drove it.

'It's going well,' Manning had to shout to make himself heard above the noise of the music. 'Whatever the shortcomings of this crowd it'll give us the publicity we need. Did you remember to tip those reporters off?'

'I did.' A smug smile. 'They say they'll have a photographer waiting on the jetty around midnight when we beach.'

'Good. And don't let this party go on past 11.30. Tell the barmen to stop serving at 11.15. We can't afford to . . . '

His words were cut off by a reverberating explosion followed by a flash that lit up the night sky. He jerked round, showering cigar ash down the front of his stiff white shirt.

'What the hell was that?'

'I ... don't know. It seemed to come from the shore about a couple of miles down the coastline. It ...'

Beams of white light criss-crossed through the sky, swinging to and fro. Another explosion, followed closely by a third, huge stabs of flame illuminating a ragged coastline approximately where Winterbottom had placed the first one. Crackling reports-sporadic bursts of machine-gun fire!

'That's Shell Island,' Manning hissed. 'The bastards are having some kind of night exercise. They aren't satisfied with annoying you throughout the daylight hours with low-flying aircraft, now they're trying to make sure that nobody gets a good night's sleep. If you ask me, they're trying to drive the holidaymakers

away, keep this part of the coast all to themselves for their silly little war games!

More machine-gun fire came from the island, interspersed with the booms of some heavier artillery. The dancers on the deck had come to a halt, couples clinging to each other, looking around them in bewilderment. Panic might erupt at any moment. The atmosphere was suddenly tense and vibrant.

Miles Manning acted instantaneously. Pushing his manager to one side, he left the bridge in long strides, burst into the small cabin just below where a startled disc jockey had just dropped a pile of 45 singles. Manning ignored him, switched the record off and grabbed the microphone.

'This is Miles Manning speaking, folks,' a powerful voice that exuded confidence, the slight tremor of anger lost in the crackling of the electronics. 'Don't panic. That gunfire is purely a night exercise on Shell Island. There's nothing whatever to worry about. We're not going to let it disturb our party, are we? No, sir! Keep dancing, folks, and let the soldiers get on with their little games.'

He flicked the record back on, wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. He was sweating, and there was a dryness in his mouth. He dropped the remains of his cigar on to the floor, crushing it with his heel. 'Keep those records going,' he barked tersely at the DJ, then went outside again, crossed to the rail and stood staring out towards Shell Island.

The gunfire had not lessened any, if anything it was more intense, a blaze of dazzling light from the sweeping searchlights creating meaningless distant shadows. It was too far away to see what was happening, a mass of indistinguishable moving objects that could have been a fleet of invading tanks.

Manning gripped the rail, wished he knew what the hell was going on over there. Episodes like this could scare people off, send them to the more populated resorts. Tomorrow he would write a personal letter to the Ministry of Defence, threaten to sue the buggers; a carbon copy to his MP. In the meantime . . .

Thank Christ the couples on deck were dancing again. Well, most of 'em, anyway. A few had congregated at the rail watching the distant gigantic firework display. At least he had stopped them from panicking. The fingers stroking his moustache trembled slightly.

'Start closing things down,' he told Winterbottom. 'Nice and gently. A steady trundle back to shore and let's hope that fucking photographer hasn't forgotten to turn up.'

The engines were started, a deep vibration that gave Miles Manning a feeling of an extension of his own power. He had created his own kingdom amidst the acres that were the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp. Now he felt that he had conquered part of the sea. This was only the beginning of the Manning Empire.

The bar was closed and now everybody was up on deck, slow smoochy music that had couples clinging to each other; the swell seemed stronger now so that you could easily have lost your balance. The grand finale, a night to remember. The DJ had put on 'The Last Waltz'.

Suddenly the yacht lurched, a crazy jerk accompanied by a scraping that you felt from below, a shuddering as though the hull had been ripped out. Screams, a group of teenagers collapsing in a heap, an elderly man thrown headlong on the deck. The yacht seemed to be forcing a passage through some obstruction.

'What the fuck!' Manning saved himself by grabbing the bridge rail, cursed again as Ricky Winter-bottom cannoned into him. 'We've hit something, scraped the bottom on a sandbank.'

'There aren't any sandbanks between here and the jetty,' Winterbottom's eyes were wide with fear. 'It's the one completely clear stretch on this part of the coast.'

'Well, we bloody well hit something!' Manning clung tightly to the rail, stared down at the swirl of dark sea flecked with white where the paddles strove to overcome whatever obstacle they had encountered. It was deep here, he didn't know exactly how many fathoms, but Winterbottom had been right in what he had said-there were no sandbanks here. Then what the hell was it?

As he stared the water all around seemed to ripple, gigantic disturbances below the surface as though something was swimming down there. He shivered, felt a sudden pang of fear but threw it off. This was ridiculous, like imagining spooks in your bedroom in the dead of night. Maybe some flotsam had drifted across, the wreckage of some boat lost at sea. There had to be a logical explanation. Whatever it was, it had damned near torn the bottom out of the yacht.

Anyway, the yacht was free of whatever it had got caught on and there didn't seem to be any damage. His sigh of relief was cut short as something struck the underside of the craft seemingly with the force of a torpedo, an impact that threatened to overturn it. The deck was at an angle, people were sliding and falling, loose objects skimming all over the place. Somebody was screaming hysterically. They were going to turn turtle!

Then the yacht had righted itself again. It bobbed, floundered, and the engines which had temporarily faltered picked up once more, this time with an urgency as though the crew wanted to reach the shore in the quickest possible time.

Manning was staring down at the water again. Those ripples were no trick of the imagination for they stretched across the entire radius of the light cast by the yacht, creating their own line of waves in the opposite direction to the flowing tide!

The music had stopped. People were beginning to panic now and Miles Manning knew that nothing he could say would alleviate their fears. Because he didn't have the answers, he didn't know any more than they did. And deep down he was as scared as they were. But, Christ Almighty, he'd fight!

'We'll be beaching in a few minutes,' Ricky Winter-bottom's features were deathly white in the yacht's lights. 'What d'you think happened, sir?'

'How the hell should I know?' Manning checked an impulse to smash his clenched fist into the other's face. 'We hit something ... or, rather, something hit us!' The sooner we get everybody ashore, the better. Then tomorrow we'll get this tub checked over, see if we can find out what it was. If it's anything to do with these fucking stupid games on Shell Island then somebody's going to get sued, that I can promise you. It could just be that they've got a fleet of remote controlled tin-fish out in the bay which they're playing with. I'll bet every dollar I've got that they're responsible for what happened tonight.'

The distant firing was more intense than ever, incessant heavy reports and machine-gun fire reaching the ears of those on the yacht. The battle was at full pitch, the night sky iridescent with the continual orange flashes of on-shore artillery.

The Ocean Queen bumped gently against the wooden jetty which stretched out from the stony beach, a line of arc lamps intermingled with coloured fairylights creating a welcome return for those on board. Mooring ropes were thrown out, a couple of sweater-clad figures securing them, pulling the yacht close in and running out a short gangplank. Passengers crowded the single exit point, their faces white and strained, muttering amongst themselves. In the distance gunfire could still be heard.

'What's going on over on Shell?' Manning was one of the last to leave the yacht, addressing his question to a short bearded man who was still in the process of knotting the mooring rope.

'I dunno but somethin' must be up. That's never a practice battle. Sounds like they've been invaded.'

'That's fucking nonsense,' Manning's tone lacked conviction. 'Where's this press photographer?'

'I ain't seen nobody, boss. Just me and Bill and those few folks there come to meet their friends.'

Miles Manning seethed inwardly. His most important hour so far and the bleedin' press couldn't be bothered to turn out. He looked around; people were hurrying away from the jetty as though they wanted to put as much distance between themselves and the sea as possible. Perhaps it was a good thing the newspapers hadn't turned up. There were a lot of unanswered questions and he meant to put those right as soon as possible. Publicity he wanted but not adverse publicity.

'I want this boat checked over first thing in the morning,' he snapped. 'The bottom caught something out there. Then something hit us. I'd like to know what it was.'

Ricky Winterbottom strode in the wake of his boss back to the camp. Miles Manning was in a rage and that could be dangerous for everybody who happened to be around at the time. Nevertheless, you learned to stick close because Christ help you if he wanted you and you weren't there.

The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp seethed with activity even though it was almost midnight. The night was balmy and crowds lingered in the streets, queuing at the seafood and fish-and-chip stalls. On the central boating lake mallard quacked in protest at this continued nocturnal disturbance. A youth was skimming stones into the water and somebody was yelling for him to pack it in. It could just end in a brawl but Manning had no time for such trivialities. Across the funfair and down by the neon-lighted amusement arcade he made straight for the squat timbered building which bore the large notice in red lettering - SECURITY.

Two men in green uniforms looked up as he entered.

'Ah, Mr Manning,' the older of the two spoke nervously, almost stuttered. 'We've been trying to get you at your office. There's a priority call for you. Colonel Goode, Ministry of Defence.'

Miles Manning pushed his way past the desks, grabbed the telephone receiver which was lying there. 'Manning speaking.'

The others in the room tried to listen without appearing to eavesdrop. A staccato voice at the other end which they could not decipher, just a terse crackling sound. But they saw the way Manning clutched at the desk for support, how that permanent tan of his suddenly seemed to have paled.

'I don't believe it,' he grunted at length. 'This is some kind of hoax. It's some bloody game that lot on Shell are up to, trying to drive everybody out of the area.'

Colonel Goode was obviously at pains to convince him otherwise. And suddenly Miles Manning wasn't cursing and protesting. Unintelligible grunts followed by 'What's the best thing for us to do? We've got something like five thousand people in the camp here. We don't want a mass panic.'

A few minutes later he replaced the receiver and turned towards Ricky Winterbottom and the two security men.

'That firing on Shell Island tonight,' his voice was a hoarse whisper, his features white with strain and shock. 'The island has been attacked, virtually destroyed. There's nothing left of all the WD buildings and equipment, and they won't know until daylight how many lives have been lost.'

'Attacked!' Winterbottom was incredulous. 'By whom?'

'By hundreds of giant crabs as big as fucking cows! I didn't believe it at first but I do now. It sounds crazy but it's true. The Ministry reckon this coastline is crawling with them. That's what hit our boat out there tonight. We went right over the top of them, scraped our hull on their shells. Jesus Christ Almighty, if they'd wanted they could've overturned the Ocean Queen and done to us what they did to Shell. But they were too intent on attacking the shore to worry about us.'

'We'll have to evacuate the camp,' Ricky Winter-bottom felt that he was expected to come up with something. 'Get everybody to safety.'

'That's just what we don't have to do,' Miles Manning slid a King Edward cigar out of his case, took his time unwrapping the cellophane and piercing the end, collecting his dazed thoughts whilst he got it going. 'This is going to be one of the biggest military operations since the last war. Already the army are setting up road-blocks and defences. They expect the crabs to come ashore again in force at any moment. But if we play this right we can turn it to our advantage.'

'If what you say is true there won't be much of the camp left if these crabs come ashore again.'

'I think we're in a very fortunate position,' Manning blew a cloud of smoke up to the ceiling and smiled. His confidence had returned. 'We've got good defences here because when this place was built the sea-wall was strengthened and built right up to keep the high tides back. First thing in the morning I want every casual labourer from road-sweepers and luggage boys to maintenance men down by the jetty sandbagging. Damn it, we can keep the bloody crabs out, no bother. And these folks in the camp will love it because they'll know they're safe. Our man-in-the-street is a ghoul who loves to watch carnage from safety and by God, he's right in the pound seats here! We'll make our name. Whilst everywhere else is being wrecked, the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp will remain invincible. And through it all, the show must go on! We'll give 'em the time of their lives and they'll come back here again and again, year after year.'

'Phew!' Ricky Winterbottom licked his lips, glanced at the two security men. 'And if it doesn't work some five thousand men, women and kids will be caught in the biggest bloody death camp since Belsen. Can't we get 'em out whilst there's still time?'

'It's too late!' Twin red patches appeared on Miles Manning's cheeks, a sure danger sign to those who knew him. 'People never make an orderly exodus. They'll panic and congest the roads and then they will be at the mercy of these crabs, plus the fact they'll be obstructing the army. Right now we don't tell 'em a thing, not until they hear it on their radios tomorrow. Even then they won't realise just how critical the situation is. But we'll have the main gates padlocked and chained just in case. Then I'll explain the situation to 'em, play it down, make it sound like some sort of big game.'

Miles Manning left the security office, noted how the crowds were only just beginning to disperse. Somewhere close by a bingo caller was calling the last house.

He stopped, listened. There was no firing to be heard now. The crabs had come ashore, conquered and returned to their ocean stronghold. He would feel a damned sight happier when that one weak link in the sea-wall down by the jetty was sandbagged. Just a few hours and it would be done. He prayed that the crustaceans held off that long.

A dream, a nightmare. Manning still didn't know whether he believed it or not. But true or false he was determined to turn the situation to his own advantage.

Chapter Five

Early Sunday Morning - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

SHORTLY AFTER daybreak the sandbagging of that part of the sea-wall by the jetty was begun. Two dozen men worked diligently. They did not fully understand the implications of what they were doing, except that a period of full moon was due and that meant higher tides than usual. That had to be the reason for this sudden urgency.

They were used to being called in on unusual jobs at a moment's notice. This American guy Manning was crazy but you'd hate him to guess that you even thought that. What the hell, it was Sunday and that meant double-time; and at the camp the one commodity that never seemed to be in short supply was money.

Irey Wall stirred restlessly in her bed. That slight headache which had plagued her all yesterday was still

there, right behind her eyes so that it hurt her to open them. A quick squint, though, the early-morning sunlight filtering in through a gap in the curtains causing her to groan with discomfort. Oh God, another day to face, wrestling with her conscience, afraid to go round to Keith Baxter's chalet because she knew he wouldn't be there. Nobody had missed him; it was unlikely that they would because anybody could just disappear in this camp and not be noticed unless it was reported. And nobody except herself knew. He had implied that he did not have any family.

Rodney and Louise were talking in the other bedroom, just a hardboard partition so that you could hear every word if you took the trouble to listen. Oh Christ, they were starting a quarrel already and it wasn't 6 a.m. yet! Little bastards! She felt guilty just thinking that; they weren't to know. Children were children wherever they were.

Her mind went back to Friday, flipped on to Saturday because she couldn't bear the memories of Friday any longer. Guilt. Oh God, what had happened to Keith Baxter? His car was still on 'B' car-park where she had left it. He hadn't come back to his chalet. So either something had happened to him or else he had just taken off. People did things like that, she had read about them; just walked off in the clothes they stood up in (and in Keith's case that was precisely nothing unless he had gone back to the sand-dunes for the few garments which he had left there). There was no law against an adult just disappearing. The police made a few enquiries and listed them as 'missing'. The matter usually ended there.

But there was something decidedly odd about this business which didn't make sense. Keith had a reason to come back to her-sex! The strongest human instinct of all. Irey dozed fitfully, heard the radio alarm come on at 7.30. She pulled the sheets up over her head. She didn't want to get up, ever. She couldn't face the world. Far better to remain here like an ostrich with her head beneath the sheets. Those kids had quietened down, probably got bored with arguing and gone back to sleep.

She half dozed; typical non-inspiring Sunday morning radio music, a piano concerto interrupted every so often by a starchy DJ interviewing the bishop of somewhere-or-other. The subject of morals. Extramarital sex. Irey pulled the sheet even further over her head. Oh God, didn't morals figure in anything else other than sex? She knew she had a guilt complex but she didn't have any reason to because she had never done it with any man except Alan. She would have made love with Keith, though. Oh yes, no matter how she tried to kid herself he would have got what he wanted, and from that brief glimpse she'd had when he stripped off she would have enjoyed every second of it. Her spine tingled at the prospect, then her depression came clouding back. She wouldn't be having sex with Keith Baxter because she wouldn't see him again, ever. She didn't know where he'd gone but one thing was certain in her own mind-he wouldn't be coming back because something positively awful had happened to him.

That damned bishop kept harping on the subject of infidelity almost as if he was talking to her, as though he knew. But he couldn't. No way.

An electric organ played a closing hymn. She heaved a sigh of relief, the programme was over. She needn't feel guilty any more. Pips; that meant the news was coming up.

'This is the eight o'clock news read by John Harmer ...'

Irey didn't bloody well care who read the news.

'Massive armed-forces operations are in progress on the Welsh coast. During the night a species of hitherto unknown giant crabs invaded Shell Island and destroyed a Ministry of Defence base there. Casualties are reported to be heavy but no details have yet been released. In the meantime blockades are being set up along the coastline in case the crabs come ashore again. Holidaymakers in the area are urged not to panic as the army have the situation under control. Roads have been closed and people are requested to stay at home. We will be reporting regularly on proceedings and the AA hope to have alternative routes in operation within the next twenty-four hours for those wishing to evacuate the area ...'

Irey sat up, threw the bedclothes back. Giant crabs, it was unbelievable. This whole holiday had to be one big nightmare. She would wake up and find herself back home with Alan and none of this had happened. She tried to will it that way.

But it had happened; it was all so horribly real.

She couldn't bottle Keith's disappearance up inside herself any longer. She would go mad! It was her duty to report what had happened. She was shaking badly as she dressed, pulling on that same crumpled T-shirt, struggling into a pair of faded threadbare jeans which had shrunk again with the last wash. Then she opened the door into the adjoining bedroom and looked in.

Rodney and Louise were fast asleep. She contemplated waking them, dressing them and taking them with her. No, it had its drawbacks. Rodney listened in to every adult conversation, understood more than you gave him credit for. In the past he had repeated things he had heard long afterwards when most children would have forgotten them. She would have to confess to the camp authorities that she had spent a day on Shell Island with Keith Baxter, and Rodney might just go and spout this information out in front of Alan when they got home. It wasn't worth the risk.

She would have to leave them here. She wouldn't be long. In all probability the children would sleep

another hour or so and she would be back by then. Reluctantly she closed the bedroom door and tiptoed out of the chalet, easing the outer door shut quietly behind her.

Her pulses were racing. Maybe she ought to check Keith Baxter's chalet one last time, see if his car was still on the car-park. No, there wasn't time.

She had to stop herself from breaking into a run. There seemed to be an awful lot of people about, huddled in groups, conversing in low tones. They were discussing the crabs, of course; angry and frightened because there was no way they could go home at the moment, fearful lest the camp might be attacked in the same way that Shell Island had been.

She hurried on until eventually she saw the wooden building by the main entrance gate bearing the sign SECURITY. There were crowds of people outside and through the partially open door she could see green-uniformed men behind the counter dealing with enquiries. Suddenly the security office had become the busiest place on the camp.

Irey Wall stood there undecided. She almost turned back but her conscience commanded her to wait. She wouldn't be able to live with herself until she had reported that Keith Baxter was missing.

So she joined the tail-end of the queue.

'Where's Mummy?' Louise came back into the bedroom, an expression of puzzlement on her small features.

'I dunno,' Rodney had already dressed himself, his blue shorts on back to front but that didn't matter. He was struggling to tie the laces of his pumps, a feat he had not yet mastered but being unwilling to admit defeat in front of his small sister he stuffed the ends down the sides of his footwear. 'She's maybe gone to get a paper.'

'How long will she be?'

'I dunno. But we don't have to stay here. We can go down to the beach.'

'I don't want to go to the beach,' Louise's lips puckered defiantly. 'I want Mummy.'

'She might've gone to the beach. C'mon, let's go and see. We can come back if she isn't there.'

'All right.' Reluctantly Louise, barefoot and clad only in a pair of pants, followed her brother outside. The sun was shining brightly; it was going to be another hot day, a day to be spent on the beach building castles and paddling in the rock pools.

The beach was less than two hundred yards from the last line of chalets; you could even ride down on the miniature steam train that started from the recreation park but that wouldn't be running for another couple of hours yet. Rodney skipped on ahead, Louise running behind, trying to keep up with him.

Then Rodney stopped and stared. Where yesterday there had been a sea-wall, three feet high with a gently sloping shale bank down to the rocky foreshore, there now stood a six-foot high wall of hessian sandbags; ugly and formidable.

'Who's built that?' he asked of nobody in particular.

Puzzled, he went forward, saw that the bags were piled like steps on this side, and just as easy to climb.

'We can get over there,' he shouted back to his sister, beginning to mount the bags one at a time. But Louise hung back; she was sure Mummy wouldn't have climbed up there. Adults didn't do those kinds of things.

'You can see the sea from up here,' Rodney had reached the top, adopted a stance like a shipwrecked sailor searching for a sail, shading his eyes. 'And you . . .'

'And you can bloody well get down off there, son!' a gruff voice commanded from the beach on the other side.

Rodney started, looked down and saw a bearded man wearing a red T-shirt and denims shovelling sand into a sack.

'Are you making castles, mister?' the boy leaned over, starting to grin. Grown-ups didn't make sand-castles as a rule so this man had to be what Daddy often referred to as 'ninepence for a shilling'. It meant that he wasn't as grown-up as he made out to be, or something like that.

'Look, boy.' the man reared up. 'I told you to get off there. Now, do as you're told and go play somewhere else, d'you hear? Bugger off!'

'Why?' Curiosity and defiance, like the Richards boys at school showed towards the teachers. Bravado. That man couldn't reach him up here anyway.

'Because if you don't the crabs will get you. Crabs as big as 'orses that eat up little boys like you.'

Rodney started to laugh. This man did not hold any fears for him. 'No, I won't get off. Try and make me.' He began to skip along the top of the sandbag wall. Behind him he could hear Louise starting to cry; she really was a silly baby.

'I'll tan your bloody arse for you.' The man had abandoned his task, was running below Rodney, parallel to him, as though somehow he could drive the child away. His bearded face was dark with fury and he was muttering obscenities, breathing heavily.

Suddenly Rodney leaped, an impetuous action prompted by an infantile thrill of the chase. Airborne, bracing himself for the impact on landing. The patch of sand amidst the rocks was soft and powdery and he landed gently, sprawled, and was up on his feet in an instant. Running again, his pursuer close behind, grunting and breathing heavily like an overweight Hereford bull trying to run down a more agile adversary.

'C'm'ere you little bastard!'

Rodney Wall swerved, embarking upon a circular course that would take him back to the sea-wall,

through the rocks where his own surefootedness would easily outdistance the man on his heels. Euphoric, cheeky, turning once and giving a two-fingered sign which he had learned from the Richards boys at school. Secretly they were his heroes but he'd never let on to his parents.

He was almost at the wall but the other had moved faster than he had thought possible, rough calloused hands reaching out for him. Vice-like fingers closed on the boy's shoulder, spun him round and pulled him back.

'Now I'm going to belt your arse until you scream blue murder, and I'll belt your dad's too if he comes kicking up a fuss!'

Click-click.

A noise like the hammers of a double-barrelled shotgun being cocked. Decisive. Deadly.

The camp workman wheeled and then froze as his gaze rested on the source of the noise. Less than ten yards away stood a huge sand-coloured crab! It was at least four feet high, its waving pincers like heavy-duty steel-cutters. But the most awful feature of all was its face, almost human in its malevolence, tiny red eyes that saw and . . . understood, its expression unmistakable. It was going to kill!

'Jesus God!' the man paled, felt his legs weaken, his numbed brain already conceding defeat and death. To flee or to fight was futile. You just prayed that the end would be quick. Understanding, amidst the fear, that the reports were true, that the small force on Shell Island had died in a frenzy of terrible crustacean carnage.

Clickety-click.

The monster shambled forward in an ungainly sideways movement, slow and lumbering, but you knew you could not outdistance it, Rodney, still in the man's grasp, screamed once, a yell of terror that was beyond his comprehension, a child seeing the bogey which has haunted his dreams throughout the dark hours, that he had never really believed in until NOW!

That scream triggered off one single logical action inside the doomed man. His brain functioned once but

it was enough; he knew he could and had to save the child. Muscles bulged and those ape-like arms shot upwards in a worthy highland caber-toss that had Rodney airborne, spinning, flailing arms and legs, reaching his apex then falling; landing on the top of the sandbag wall with a sickening thud. Lying there winded and hurt, crying; not daring to look back down on the beach, trying to tell himself that neither crab nor man existed.

The man closed his eyes, muttered 'thank God' and then he heard the crab clicking towards him, a sea-monster beside itself with fury because some of its prey had escaped.

An arm first, torn from the socket, bloody sinews trailing like scarlet twine. Snapping. A lunge with the other pincer, a joust that tore the chest apart, gouging in the bloody wound.

Threshing, cutting, a giant mincing machine that crushed and splintered bone, tore the flesh into chunks and strips. Then it bent over its carnage, began to feast in its own revolting way, masticating and slurping, those awful features hidden beneath the scarlet slime.

It was all over in a matter of minutes, the creature turning, shambling and clicking its way back over the rocks, an urgency to return to the deep, seeming to sense that it should not be abroad during the daylight hours, yet its hunger for human flesh after the previous night had driven it on to dry land in search of more. A leader, a king, it had a duty to its kind, one that could not be shirked. It must go back to the sea-bed.

It walked on out into the tide until the waves covered it and it was seen no more.

Rodney, sobbing and trembling, staggered back towards the chalets, oblivious of his sister's presence. He tried to scream for his mother but the words would not come. Eventually they made it back to the chalet but the door had closed on the Yale lock. Tiny fists beat on the cheap woodwork but nobody came in answer to their call.

Finally the two children sank down crying, unheeded by passers-by who had thoughts only for giant crabs.

Overhead a red and white helicopter passed noisily, flying low. A coastguard machine instructed to fly out to sea in an attempt to spot the bodies of two young people reported missing the day before.

The pilot took a circular course out into the Cardigan Bay, an academic exercise really because he knew that he would not find the bodies of Julie Coles and Ian; not after what had happened on Shell Island last night.

Chapter Six

Late Sunday Morning - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

'I STILL get the feeling that this whole business is some kind of spoof.' Gordon Smallwood brushed some flecks of dust off his Greencoat uniform and looked at his reflection in the mirror. His expression said that he didn't get that feeling at all, that he was just saying it for the benefit of the blonde-haired girl who was busily dressing with an urgency that he didn't like. He didn't like it when Jean Ruddington left the camp, particularly so today. He would make every effort to dissuade her.

'If it's a spoof then there's no harm in me going to Barmouth, is there?' she snapped. 'You're just bloody jealous, Gordon. You don't own me, you know. We happen to be a couple of Greencoats working for the same firm at the same camp.'

'I thought our relationship went further than a working one,' he replied. 'Or am I mistaken?'

'It happens to be my Sunday off. Furthermore, my sister happens to be staying in Barmouth with her family on holiday and nobody's going to stop me from visiting them. Not even you!'

The roads are closed, or hadn't you heard?' Sarcasm, fear for her safety. They'd given it out on the radio that if you stayed put you had nothing to fear. Miles Manning had emphasised that point at a special Greencoat meeting in the theatre this morning; a briefing of his troops. Keep the show going, bigger and better than ever. God, why hadn't he cancelled all leave?

'Only to traffic,' she retorted. 'I'm going on my bike.'

He sighed his resignation. She'd go and nobody on earth would stop her, not even Miles Manning himself, and here at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp he was the nearest thing to God you'd find.

'Anyway, we've got to put the Greencoat Show on again tonight,' Gordon's trump card. 'And we're both in it, day off or not.'

'It doesn't start until nine,' she smiled. 'An hour later than the usual Friday performance and I'll be back by then.'

She was going to Barmouth, there was no doubt about that. 'All right,' he squeezed her hand. 'You've won, but for God's sake take care. If I could only get the day off I'd come with you.'

'You can't,' she put the brush and comb back on the dresser. 'Manning might not have cancelled leave but he most certainly won't give any extra.'

'You talk as though you don't want me to go with you, anyway,' his tone was resentful. 'As though you've . . . got something in mind.'

'Don't be silly,' she moved close, touched his hand. 'You know that isn't true.'

He swallowed, his eyes threatening to mist up. In a matter of a few weeks a strong relationship had built up between them. His divorce had come through in the spring and left a bitterness which he was desperately trying to shake off. He still could not believe that Margaret had walked out on him. He'd never suspected a thing, not even the slightest hint that anything was going on between her and Wilf Robinson until the day he came home from work and found her things gone and a note on the table. That was when his whole world had collapsed and even now it wasn't fully repaired. He couldn't be sure about Jean; there were a lot of unanswered questions where she was concerned. He'd caught her out on the odd occasion, ties that seemed pointless and without any motive. But they hurt all the same.

She was a widow. Her husband had been killed in a car accident two years ago, skidding off the road on a patch of black ice. Jean had survived, unhurt except for a few cuts and bruises. After that she'd drifted. She'd mentioned her sister but Gordon didn't even know her name. Then Fate had brought them together, a seasonal job at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp.

She had made the first move towards him, shattered the barrier which he had erected between himself and women, sweetened the bitterness. Two nights after they met he had invited her back to his flatlet for coffee. He'd meant just that-coffee and maybe a record, nothing else. Somebody to talk to, a shoulder to cry on.

It was her hand that had found his on the small settee, her lips that had gone in search of his, her tongue pushing into his mouth. A gradual arousal and then her other hand had sought it out, a sensuous stroking through the thin material of his Greencoat trousers. And he was seduced.

'I haven't had a man for two years now,' she'd murmured. 'Sometimes I get so that I can't stand it any longer.'

That had been the first lie. OK, it was a means to a seduction, an excuse for the near-desperation which she had shown once they were undressed. She had gone to work on him avidly, her lips hungry for pulsing male flesh, a crazy orgasm that had only been the beginning. She had stayed the night and from then onwards she didn't use her own flatlet except to keep a few belongings in.

But she hadn't gone two years without a man. In the heat of successive orgasmic passion she had boasted of other affairs, men who had satisfied her beyond her wildest dreams but had only wanted her for her body. She needed more than that, she told him.

She was like a drug to Gordon Smallwood, turning his previous bitterness into possessiveness. He couldn't bear her out of his sight. But he knew that to try and chain her would be to lose her which was why he knew he had to let her go to Barmouth. Perhaps this sister of hers really was holidaying there. There was no reason to suppose that she didn't exist. Except as a convenient alibi.

'I'll see you tonight then,' he kissed her. 'God, I'll worry all day.'

'Don't.' She extricated herself from him and made for the door. 'I told you I'll be OK.'

She felt his eyes on her all the way across the strip of grass which separated the staff chalets from the main holiday flats, felt his concern for her. Her lips tightened. Damn him, he was getting too much lately, getting the way other men had got in the past . . . before and after John's death. Maybe she ought to try and cool it; she couldn't make up her mind. It had been nice to have a man around again for a while but it was beginning to curb her freedom. The old urge had come back, an insatiable desire for the old days.

The small gate beside the main entrance was open, a security man on duty checking people in and out, a large queue at the Security Office. Everybody wanted, to know facts; when could they use their vehicles again? They couldn't stay here forever and who was going to pay for the enforced extension to their holidays if they couldn't go home?

'There's no buses or transport, miss,' the officer on the gate checked her identity card.

'I don't need any,' she smiled. 'I'm just going for a walk in the hills. You have to get away from this place on your day off otherwise you'd go crazy.'

'You can say that again.' He grinned and let her through.

She stepped out on to the main B-road, drew a deep breath. She had almost expected to be stopped and turned back. She supposed that a state of emergency had been declared and when that happened the authorities could do virtually anything they liked.

The road was deserted. It seemed that the campers had decided that if they couldn't take their cars then they would stay in the camp. She wondered how far the first road-block and checkpoint was. She had told Gordon that she was going to take her bike but she had decided against it. She was a mixture of fatalist and optimist. If she was going to get to Barmouth then she'd get there; if she wasn't then she wouldn't. She needed to see Gerry for a lot of reasons. Most of all she didn't want him coming up to the camp looking for her. Apart from Gordon, Gerry was the one cloud on her horizon.

She had been walking for about a quarter of an hour when she heard the sound of a vehicle coming up behind her, slowing on the bend, still out of sight. She stopped, waited. Curious.

A Land Rover; a long wheelbase camouflaged vehicle trundling up the hill. Jean's arm went out, her thumb went up. The driver slowed, stopped just beyond her.

Inside the open back she saw the soldiers, young squaddies crushed in together, leaning forward and gawping at her. Somebody made a comment and everybody laughed.

'Where to, sweetheart?'

'Barmouth,' she rested a hand on the tailboard.

'I'm going there to ... to see my sister.' As though she had to give an explanation.

'So are we and if your sis is anything like you we'd like to go and see her, too.' More laughter.

Her hopes soared. Fate was indeed looking after her. Willing hands grabbed hold of her, pulled her aboard. With a jerk the driver let in the clutch and they were moving again.

'You've have to sit on our knees, love. We'll hold you tight, make sure you don't fall.'

She grinned. Jubilant kids, that's what they were. It was all very complimentary, though, when you were over thirty. Furthermore, she would be in Barmouth in double-quick time and she wouldn't have to worry

about road-blocks and checkpoints. She'd worry about getting back when it was time, not until.

'We'll make sure the crabs don't get you,' the soldier on whose knee she was sitting was slyly rubbing her bottom.

'Is it ... really true about these monster crabs?' she lurched as the Land Rover took a left-hand bend and another arm came round her waist to steady her, remained there.

'Sure it is, but they won't last long. The only reason they wrecked that WD base was because the defences weren't good enough. Caught everybody by surprise. But you can bet your life that if the fuckers come ashore again they'll get a shock. The heavy stuff's already there waiting for 'em. The locals will be picking up the bits for weeks afterwards.'

Jean Ruddington caught her breath. There seemed to be hands everywhere. Somebody had ventured up beneath her skirt, fingers smoothing the insides of her thighs. There was no subtlety where these eager young recruits were concerned. But she was going to get to Barmouth and that was all that mattered.

'You married?' a freckle-faced soldier asked suddenly. She got the impression that it was his fingers that were trying to do all kinds of inexperienced things to her, things that would have turned her on if they had been done properly.

'No,' she shook her head. 'Not any more.'

'I'll bet you don't go without it, though. Not working up at that camp, anyway.'

Peals of laughter. Jean Ruddington laughed too. 'No, I don't go without it. Say, I suppose you fellers aren't coming back this way later today by any chance?'

A moment's silence. Glances were exchanged between the nine khaki-clad youths on the bench seats of the Land Rover.

'Why?'

'Because I've got to get back later. I'm supposed to be back at camp by eight.'

'It ... could be arranged,' a sly smile appeared on the angular features of a lance-corporal and he rubbed the acne on his chin. 'We've got to go back up to Nefyn with some equipment this evening. You makin' some kind of a deal, sweetheart?'

'I might,' delightful tingling sensations ran up Jean's spine; a kind of fantasy. Most women had them, gang-bangs and that sort of thing. If it really happened she would probably scream blue murder. 'It all depends. But I have to get back to camp one way or another.'

'We'll see you around about seven, then. We'll be down on Marine Parade. The top end.'

'I'll probably see you there then,' she grinned and let the freckle-faced soldier do what he wanted with his fingers beneath her skirt. It was harmless enough. Kids' stuff.

Barmouth lacked its peak of season holiday atmosphere in spite of the blazing sunshine on a stretch of golden beach with a blue sea shimmering in the distance. There wasn't a bather in sight, the sands devoid of colourful deck chairs and windshields, as deserted as it might have been in mid-winter.

Only the promenade was crowded. Ramparts had been hastily erected at strategic points overlooking the bay and the estuary, squads of shirt-sleeved soldiers working to fill sandbags and pile them up above the sea-wall. Uniformed police were there in numbers keeping the sightseers back. The Dolgellau road was still open, one-way traffic only out of Barmouth. A checkpoint ensured that nothing other than military vehicles and personnel came in. The entire operation was highly organised; the authorities were taking no chances. Jean Ruddington hastened away from the parked army Land Rover, smoothing her clothes as she left. Randy little bastards but they had served their purpose!

Ten minutes' walk brought her to a row of tall Victorian houses beyond the town, the majority converted into holiday flats for seasonal letting. Up the uncarpeted stairs on to the second floor, her heart starting to beat more rapidly. She almost turned back.

'Jean!' A dark-skinned man dressed in an open-necked shirt and jeans opened the door at her knock, his Spanish ancestry evident in his features. 'I've been nearly frantic about you after what happened on Shell Island. In fact, I was trying to figure out a way of getting to the camp to find you.'

'You worry too much,' she slipped into his embrace, returned his passionate kiss. 'These soldiers will blast the crabs to hell if they show up again. In the meantime, we can spend a few hours together.'

'You're not ... pregnant?'

'Worrying again,' she laughed. 'No, just a scare. You won't be having to pay maintenance after all.'

'I would have married you,' there was a hurt expression on his handsome features. 'You didn't have to run off like that.'

'I needed time to think. Also I needed a job,' she flung herself into a frayed armchair. 'You knew I'd come back, though, didn't you, Gerry?'

'I hoped you would,' he regarded her thoughtfully. 'But if you hadn't I would have come looking for you. Look, can't you get me a licence so I can work the hot-dog van in the camp?'

'I'll make some enquiries,' she averted her eyes from his. 'The trouble with you is, Gerry, you don't trust me.'

'How can I trust you?'

'Of course, you can,' she stretched out her arms and he sidled into the chair with her. 'D'you know something, I haven't had it for so long that I'm getting desperate. D'you think I'd've gone to all the trouble of dodging army checkpoints to get here if I wasn't faithful to you?'

He laughed softly and his lips went in search of hers.

A Royal Navy destroyer had appeared far out in the bay, dominant and sinister. The watching crowds on the promenade fell into an uneasy silence. Suddenly this whole operation was no longer some kind of game. The tension was mounting like an impending thunderstorm.

And somewhere out in the bay, beneath the sparkling sea, the crab army lurked. They had attacked once and surely they would come again.

Chapter Seven

Sunday Evening - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

IREY WALL was fraught with indecision. Her anxiety turned to fear. The queue did not seem to have moved at all in the past hour. From inside the office came raised voices, a heated discussion; one of many. For the hundredth time that morning somebody was claiming that the camp authorities had no right to impound cars belonging to guests.

Oh God, she couldn't leave the children any longer. She had been away far too long and by now they

were surely awake and frantic. She stepped out of the line of people, almost broke into a run. Pushing her way through the crowd that had gathered in front of the security office; somebody elbowed her angrily but she ignored it.

The intersecting camp streets seemed so hostile, long gaudy avenues, the atmosphere thick with the smell of frying fish and chips. Music which jarred and deafened, bingo callers shouting as though trying to compete with the din, harsh nasal tones that screamed at her personally, accusing. You shouldn't have left your children. Anything could happen to them. It might be too late already?

Oh God, no. Please!

Irey was running now. She cannoned into a group of youths, got the idea that they had obstructed her on purpose. Because the bastards didn't want her to find her children. She cursed them beneath her breath. Identical row upon row of chalets. You could easily miss yours if you didn't check the numbers and suddenly those black and white figures had gone blurred. Slowing, scrutinising each one, waiting for the numbers to steady and assume a definite shape. 16 ... 17 ... 18 ... the next one had to be 19. It was.

Sobbing her relief she turned, mounted the iron staircase that led up to the top-level accommodation. Now she was checking door numbers. 40 ... 41 ... 42. She fumbled for her key, dropped it and it almost fell through the slatted floor of the upper balcony. She retrieved it, her fingers trembling so violently that she had to make several attempts to insert it in the Yale lock. Using all her force she pushed the door open, sent it swinging back on its hinges so that it banged against the wall.

'Rodney . . . Louise . . . '

Rod . . . ney . . . Lou . . . ise . . . Echoes from an empty chalet, mocking her. There's nobody here. They've gone . . . gone . . . gone!

'No!' She stood there momentarily deprived of all mobility as her panic froze her, seeing through the open door into the adjoining bedroom. Empty twin beds, nightclothes strewn on the floor, an atmosphere of awful desolation. Gone!

They've gone. Gone. And (hey won't be coming back!

Checking everywhere, knowing it would be futile. But she had to do something. Her eyes smarted but the tears would not come. She felt physically sick, possibly would have vomited had she not had an empty stomach.

Frustration and despair, dragging the blankets off the bed, telling herself that the children might be hiding under them, playing a juvenile trick on her. She knew she wouldn't find them there, though. Nothing so simple. Her actions were reduced to automaton movements, going back out on to the balustrade, her sore eyes searching the teeming throng of people. But there was no sign of Rodney or Louise.

She had to do something positive or else she would go mad. Walking unsteadily back the way she had come. The obvious thing was to check the Lost Children compound first. Hopes rising but she did not dare to rely on them.

Eventually she found the wire mesh enclosure with the small roundabout, a steam train, a jeep and a very much out of place racehorse, dizzily continuing their daily round of innumerable twenty-yard circuits. There was not a single child aboard.

She clutched at the wire, searched the line of swings and the helter-skelter. An eight-year-old boy was swinging happily as though he hadn't a care in the world. Nobody else, just a red-headed Greencoat reclining on a bench seat idly scanning a newspaper. No indication that the camp was virtually under siege.

There wasn't even any point in asking. Rodney and Louise weren't here. And that was when Irey Wall finally broke down.

Dimly she was aware of somebody approaching her, a hand gently grasping her arm; meaningless words which were intended to comfort. Through her tears she saw a distorted green-uniformed man, possibly in his early thirties; it was difficult to tell and it did not matter anyway.

'My children,' she was trying to talk coherently. 'Rodney and Louise ... six and four . . . they're missing. I ... I can't find them anywhere.'

'Lots of children go missing,' the other smiled. 'But usually not for long. They can't come to any harm on the camp and there's nowhere else they can go. If they're not here then they aren't particularly worried.'

They've probably gone off to either the amusement arcade or the recreation park. Look, I'll come and help you search for them. My name's Gordon Small-wood, by the way.'

'Thank you,' Irey made a determined effort to regain her composure. 'I'm Irey Wall.'

She left her arm linked with his, it seemed the most natural thing to do, let him lead the way. It was right what he had said, Rodney and Louise couldn't have come to any harm. They'd find them soon. She forced herself to believe that.

Louise had followed her brother away from the chalets in search of their mother. The boy seemed numbed, moved jerkily as though brain and body were not coordinating properly. Now the awful shock of what he had been through hit him. He saw again the bearded workman who had thrown him to safety, the giant crab moving in for the kill. Rodney had screamed then but he couldn't scream again. He could not even talk properly. Dazed, he was scarcely aware of his sister's presence. They had to find Mummy and then everything would be all right.

The boating lake. For some reason the mallard which quacked their protest at artificial lighting and human presence half the night had disappeared; every one of them had flown off in search of another sanctuary. The pair of Canada geese which had been there since the spring had gone also.

Just a brackish lake, devoid of all life, with a dozen gaily painted rowing boats moored at the concrete jetty. The water was beginning to smell, a combination of the heat and all the litter which had either been thrown in or had blown off the park. This was one place on the camp where the army of daily sweepers could not go. The pool would have to be dragged sometime, a concerted effort made to clean it. But today nobody was interested in boating pleasures.

Rodney and Louise stood clasping the railings, staring out across the water. There was an island in the middle, possibly half an acre of rock and soil rearing up out of the lake, thickly planted with six-foot-high conifer trees, giving it a forbidding appearance.

'Mummy's not here,' Louise spoke, clutched at her brother's hand. 'Let's go and look somewhere else.'

But Rodney seemed to have gone into a trance, just gazing vacantly at the island. His brain had difficulty in registering what his eyes saw; he saw again that huge crustacean, the way it had shambled and clicked its way out of the rocks, had deliberately ambushed the bearded man. The expression on its awful

features, he would never forget it as long as he lived, indelibly imprinted on his mind.

It was here again now, a powerful creature rising up out of the stinking depths of the stagnant lake, its eyes searching him out, seeing and holding him. You escaped me once, boy, but you won't this time. I'm going to eat you and your little sister!

Louise was screaming, clutching at Rodney, trying to drag him back from the water's edge. He resisted, hypnotised as he saw the full size of the crab. It was bigger than those donkeys in the field next to the amusement arcade.

Click-click-clickety-click.

A raised pincer, waving antennae. The water splashed as it moved, foul vapours escaping into the hot atmosphere. But it wasn't really here, the child told himself. It was still back on the beach; it had to be because it couldn't travel beyond the wall of sandbags. He would see it in a hundred different places, waking and sleeping, would scream in the night for his mother. If only Daddy was here he would . . .

Somewhere somebody was screaming. An adult. Rushing feet, an awareness of a gathering crowd, more shrill yells of fear.

'There's a crab in the boating lake!'

It was true but Rodney Wall was beyond the horror barrier. He was immune to fresh terror, a young boy who saw and moved but was otherwise divorced from happenings around him.

'Somebody get those kids away from the railings!'

The crab was close in to the shore now, a slashing pincer making a metallic clang as it struck the iron fence. Several struts buckled. The pincer swung again, a mighty blow that had to be seen to be believed. Twenty feet of railings was suddenly torn free of the concrete, flew through the air to land with a resounding splash in the water.

And that was when Rodney and Louise felt themselves airborne, being snatched up even as the thing in the water was beginning to climb up on to dry land. For the second time that day they had been saved by a last-minute rescuer.

Gordon Smallwood had both children, one tucked under either arm, turning to run and at the same time yelling to Irey Wall to get clear whilst there was still time.

A crowd had gathered on the edge of the recreation park, a sea of featureless faces. Women were screaming. Ghouls, the same breed that seem to appear from nowhere at the scene of catastrophes, voyeurs of carnage who would disappear when the corpses had been taken away and the blood had seeped into the soil. They revelled in the sight of blood and mutilation so long as it was not their own. Maybe a few were even hoping that the crab would snatch those kids, perhaps the Greencoat and the woman who were trying to rescue them as well. There would be no point in attempting to go to their aid; you couldn't do anything except stand and watch.

Gordon and Irey were running. He heard the click of a lunging pincer but he did not look back. Fleeing towards the crowd, wondering if the crustacean was still in pursuit.

The crab halted ten yards from the lake. Anger blazed in its eyes, something else, too; fear. It saw the towering concrete buildings, this artificial world that had replaced a once-natural foreshore, and it hung back. For the first time in its life it was afraid; and a thousand times more dangerous.

Slowly, awkwardly the creature turned, flattened the remnants of the railings as it ambled back into the water, followed the sloping bed of the lake out towards that central island until the waves it induced slopped over its huge shell. Finally the brackish litter-strewn water seemed to open up and swallow it, only a series of wide V-shaped ripples marking its underwater passage. And finally those, too, petered out and it might have been a feverish nightmare after all. Except that those watching knew that it wasn't.

'It's impossible,' Miles Manning grunted with considerably more conviction than he felt. 'Absolutely impossible. Our defences are impenetrable. We sandbagged the only weak line in the sea-wall along the whole camp shore at daylight this morning.'

'That's as it may be,' the aquiline-featured man seated opposite the holiday-camp owner smiled humourlessly. 'But suppose that crab had come ashore earlier, last night under the cover of darkness.'

Manning nodded. There was no way he could argue against that theory. His stomach muscles knotted and he reached for the cigar box on his desk. This guy, Professor Davenport, was reputed to be one of the finest botanists in the country, if not in the world. Occasionally the millionaire showed respect for another man; this was one of those occasions.

'It's a possibility,' Manning admitted, blowing a cloud of smoke up towards the ceiling, 'And you really think that this missing workman of ours was eaten by a crab? That boy could have been spinning a yarn, made it all up for effect.'

'No,' Davenport shook his head. 'He's had one helluva fright and what we managed to get out of him tallies with everything we know about the crabs so far. They're carnivores, Manning, I personally watched them devour a guy on the beach, a beachcomber fellow by the name of Bartholomew. They caught him out on the sands, ran him down like a pack of hounds on the trail of a fox. There wasn't a shred left of him when they'd feasted. That was what happened to your man, Manning. I . . . I . . . ' Davenport's lower lip quivered, 'my . . . niece is reported missing, her fiancé too. Their car was found parked on Shell Island. They'd gone for a swim. I'm afraid . . . there isn't much hope.'

'I'm . . . sorry,' Manning's expression hardened again. 'But what's going to happen here, Professor? It's the height of the holiday season, I've got a full camp and now there's one of these bastards lying doggo in the boating lake. Can't you depth-charge it, get the swine that way?'

'Unfortunately, no,' the other attempted to relight his pipe, a blackened briar that was seldom out of his mouth. 'We don't think it would work. These crabs have an unbelievable resistance to modern weaponry. However, the Shell Island defences were caught napping but now we're ready for the enemy. The troops surrounding the lake at this moment are all loaded up with armour-piercing bullets. I feel sure that once the thing shows itself it will be blasted to eternity. At least... I hope so.'

'It doesn't make for good business,' Manning snapped, 'Most of the folks staying here would be on their way home if they could get out. The moment the roads are opened again they'll be gone and they won't be coming back. I guess then I'll be staring bankruptcy in the face.'

'It could have the reverse effect,' Davenport smiled through a haze of tobacco smoke. 'Out there beyond the road-blocks traffic jams are building up. It seems half the population of Britain wants to catch a glimpse of the crabs. If your existing customers leave, Manning, I'd virtually guarantee that you'll fill your camp again immediately.'

'I'd like to think so,' Miles Manning grunted. 'In the meantime I intend to keep the shows going, increase the entertainment, try and take folks' minds off the crabs.'

'Best thing you can do. I'm afraid, though, we'll have to set up a precautionary defence system along your sea-wall. I've inspected it and it seems fine but we can't take any chances. There's also an RN destroyer out in the bay. These crabs have got to be annihilated, wiped off the face of the earth.'

'Where d'you reckon they came from?'

'At the moment we're only hazarding guesses. There have been rumours of Soviet underwater nuclear experiments and it could have led to a mutation but we've no proof. If we can kill one of these crabs and have a good look at it then we might be able to come up with something more positive. But in the meantime our two priorities are to stop an invasion of the land and to kill this crab in the lake before it runs amok in the camp. By the way, how's the young boy who saw the crab? It's been hours since I questioned him and he was pretty shocked.'

'He'll be OK,' Miles Manning pushed his chair back, got to his feet, a sign that the meeting was coming to a close. 'I've got one of my Greencoats personally looking after his mother and the two kids, She's more shaken than the boy. I guess those kids had two very close calls.'

'They certainly did,' Cliff Davenport extended a hand. Thanks for your co-operation, Manning. Now I must be getting back to the operational headquarters in Barmouth. It's after ten, now. If you want me you've got my phone number, but I think these troops will take care of the crab in the lake. If they manage to kill it I'll come back tomorrow and do an autopsy.' Miles Manning sat at his desk for a long time after the Professor had left. Maybe these crabs might do him a big favour after all, the biggest holiday draw of all time. But in the meantime the tension in the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp was escalating. There could be all kinds of trouble if mass hysteria erupted. The camp security force and the Greencoats had been briefed but would they be able to cope?

Manning was exhausted but he knew he would not be able to sleep, at least not until the crab in the lake had been exterminated. Warily he went outside. He'd better go down there and see how things were working out.

The full moon in the summer night sky went virtually unnoticed in the glare of artificial light which lit up the camp so that it was almost brighter than it was by day. The bingo halls were noisy, suddenly crowded again as campers sought some form of distraction. The fairground was still open, crazy-waltzers and bumper cars adding that mundane touch of reality which was so vital in this situation. The Greencoat

Show had just finished and crowds were pouring out of the theatre, queuing at the fish and chips and hot-dog bars. Strangely, the seafood stalls were not doing the expected late-evening trade; they hadn't yet thought of blaming it on the crabs.

Searchlights lit up the boating lake. A row of armoured cars were drawn up almost to the line of demolished railings, soldiers engaged upon a variety of duties. But everybody was still waiting and watching. So far there was not a ripple on the dirty water to betray the presence of the lurking crustacean.

Perhaps it wasn't there after all, had somehow escaped unseen and gone back to the sea. Wishful optimistic thinking by holidaymakers who prayed that somehow they could return to their homes.

But it was there all right. It could not be anywhere else. A young rookie fingered his repeating rifle, couldn't help thinking about those poor sods on Shell Island. A shiver ran up and down his spine. Come on, you bastard, show yourself and let's get it over. Kill or be killed.

A lessening of the background noise. The bingo callers were silent, the fairground was closing down for the night. The crowds had mostly drifted away apart from the most ghoulish ones who were determined to sit it out and see some action, for surely something had to happen sooner or later.

The silence was worst of all. The soldier found himself listening, trying to identify sounds. You could hear the sea below, the breakers crashing against the sea-wall as though they were trying to smash it down so that the crab army could shamble ashore and wreak havoc and death. He was just beginning to believe that it was all true after all.

All eyes were on the still black water, seeing ripples that weren't there, shapes that were only shadows cast by moving searchlights.

Everybody was waiting. Just as the main crab army was waiting beneath the waves a few miles down the coast off Barmouth harbour. The full moon had almost reached its zenith; that would be the signal to attack for just as the moon controlled the tides it was the mysterious god of the creatures which inhabited the deep. It would lead them into battle when the hour was nigh.

Chapter Eight

Early Monday Morning - Barmouth

JEAN RUDDJNGTON had fully intended to be back on Marine Parade around six o'clock. A lift with those lusting squaddies was the only way she was going to get back to the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp.

'You don't have to go back,' Gerry was still dressing, his dark skin glistening with perspiration. He would have a shower later, or perhaps he would let the sweat dry on him, its slightly sour smell an erotic reminder of what had happened between them this afternoon.

'I do,' she was adamant. 'I have a job to look after and jobs aren't easy to come by these days. Pm in the Greencoat Show tonight, a special performance to keep the campers happy and try to make 'em forget the crabs.'

'You could stay here with me instead.'

'You don't have a job,' she retorted, suddenly annoyed. 'We'd have a pretty lean time of it making do on your social security. You can't call your hot-dog cart a job.'

'We'd get by. I make a bit at this time of the year.' 'Get-by being the operative word. 'I've got a good job and I intend to keep it. The Blue Ocean wages are way ahead of what the other holiday camps pay.'

'Sure they are ... for the moment,' he sneered, 'but you just wait. Once Manning's got established he'll be just the same as the others. This Blue Ocean is all a bloody stunt. He can't keep it up forever, lavish cocktail parties for free on his yacht out in the bay.'

'Well, I'm going back tonight.' Tight-lipped she turned towards the door. She'd got tired of Gerry once before and now she was bored with him again. He was good for one thing only and when he'd satisfied you there wasn't much else. Animal magnetism. She should have had more sense. Right now she was starting to long for Gordon Smallwood.

'When will I see you again?' He followed her out on to the landing, grasped her wrist so that she almost knocked his arm away. She hated it when men pestered, whined. 'I'll be around.' 'I'll see you back to the camp.' 'No, you won't!' Defiance, anger. 'You're hiding something,' his grip tightened. 'I think you've got a feller up there.'

Angrily she pulled her hand free of him. 'And it's none of your bloody business if I have!'

His handsome features darkened. 'If you're bloody two-timing me I'll. . . '

'You'll nothing. You don't own me. Now don't you dare touch me again.'

His hand came forward but Jean Ruddington was faster; a back-handed slap that caught him full across the face with a report like a pistol shot, had him staggering back. And then she was running down the stairs, almost falling, catching hold of the rail just in time. Down into the hallway, desperation lending speed to her legs as she heard his heavy footsteps coming after her. Fear, because she knew the animal in him, not lust alone but a fury that stemmed from his bloodline.

She pulled open the door, paused to slam it behind her. Ran again, only slowing when she reached the crowd that jammed Marine Parade, squeezing herself in amongst them, worming her way into the very heart of this crushed humanity whose only thoughts were to catch a glimpse of the horrific monster crabs

which had made the headlines, still suspicious that it might be some kind of huge holiday hoax or a Press stunt. If it was then the public had already pandered to it.

Only then did Jean Ruddington remember the soldiers who had promised her a lift back to the camp. A new sense of urgency engulfed her and she began to squeeze through the massed bodies again until she gained the far pavement. Now she was walking swiftly. A glance at her watch; God, it was five past six already. Momentary panic, calming herself with the thought that maybe a few minutes didn't make any difference. On the other hand the armed forces were sticklers for punctuality.

It was 6.15 when she reached the appointed place. Parked vehicles, mostly lorries and armoured trucks, some fearsome looking big guns set up directly on the sea-wall. Just one Land Rover, a short wheelbase hard-top model. Oh God, the squaddies weren't here!

'Can I 'elp you, miss?' a cockney accent, a tall sergeant, the sleeves of his thin khaki shirt rolled up, a rifle slung on his shoulder. His dark eyes narrowed suspiciously; maybe he thought she was going to interfere with the vehicles, steal a souvenir or something.

'Er . . . yes,' she blushed, swallowed. 'I was looking for some soldiers in a ... a big Land Rover with a canvas top. They offered me a 'lift back to the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp.'

'The engineers, you mean,' he shook his head slowly. 'They had to go back to Nefyn with some equipment. It must've been an hour or more ago since they left. There was some urgency, I don't know the details, but the stuff was needed a lot sooner than . . .'

Jean Ruddington wasn't listening. Her stomach churned, she had to hold on to the side of one of the army trucks for support. She was stranded!

'Are you OK, miss?'

'Yes, yes I'm all right,' she tried to smile. 'Only I work at the camp and I have to be back for a show we're putting on. These chaps promised me a ...'

'They'd promise a pretty girl anything,' he laughed. 'I'm sorry but I'm afraid you've missed your lift. There

won't be any more of our vehicles going that way today. The roads are all blocked anyway to civilian traffic. If you've got to go back tonight then there's only one way - shanks!' He laughed; the army was getting fed up with civilians right now.

She turned away, wanted to be sick. If only she had come on her bicycle it wouldn't have been so bad. Her brain reeled. Manning would surely sack her, he was that kind of man. Then she wouldn't have either a job or Gordon Smallwood. What a damned fool she'd been! It was all Gerry's fault, he got you that way so that you'd travel to the ends of the earth just to let him screw you. She had walked out on him now as she had in the past but when the urge got too much for her she would go back again. Fuck me please, Gerry. Do anything you like to me, I don't care how kinky. Live out your fantasies, I'll go along with anything. Please, Gerry.

She really hated herself, began apologising mentally to Gordon as the tears filled her eyes. Pull yourself together, you over-sexed bitch! A determined hard line with herself in an attempt to destroy self-pity. She had to make a decision right now-stay in Barmouth or take the long walk back to the Blue Ocean.

First, there was nowhere to stay in Barmouth apart from Gerry's dingy flat and that was the last place on earth she wanted to go. She didn't have enough money on her to find any digs of her own. So she would have to start walking!

It was a formidable task. Every muscle in her body ached; that was because of the lustful mauling Gerry had given her. At the time it had been out of this world, now it seemed almost repulsive. Erogenous zones still tingled and she could still taste his flesh in her mouth. Christ, she was a compulsive nymphomaniac. She'd only hate him until she got the urge again. And that might be at any time. As good a reason as any to flee Barmouth right away.

The steep hill was almost too much for her. She was breathing heavily and her lungs seemed as though they might collapse. The backs of her legs hurt and every so often she had to pause and rest for a few moments. Oh God, I hate you, Gerry!

Then she saw the first road-block. A red and white wooden council barrier had been stretched across the entire width of the road a quarter of a mile ahead and on either side stood an army truck, mobile sentry boxes. Three soldiers were sitting in the shade of the vehicles, relaxed but alert.

A movement caught her eye. A hundred yards or so from where she stood a lone figure was approaching the checkpoint, travelling in the same direction as herself. Jean squinted, shaded her eyes from the dazzling evening sunlight with her hands. Just a silhouette from this distance but she had the

impression of a youth clad in filthy tattered jeans; probably a hippy. This was hippy country, a land where communes were the rule rather than the exception.

She watched, experienced a sense of uneasiness. Two of the soldiers got to their feet, unslung their rifles. The traveller was talking, gesticulating. An argument over something; one of the figures wearing a camouflaged combat jacket was pointing back the way the other had come. Now the third soldier had risen, moved forward. Another exchange of words and the youth was backing off, shaking a fist, shouting something but the distance was too great to make out the words.

Then he was turning away, a reluctance in his movements, a dragging step, shouting something back at the soldiers. Walking faster now as though he was glad to get away from them.

Jean Ruddington's stomach muscles knotted into a tight ball and a feeling of utter despair flooded over her. The soldiers were turning pedestrians back, they weren't letting anybody through!

She stood there dazed, wanted to sink down on the side of the road and burst into tears. It wasn't fair. Clutching at straws; maybe she could bargain with them. Look, soldier boys, your mates were going to take me home and in return I'd've let them have me. D'you hear, I'd've let 'em all shag me and do anything that took their fancy because that's how bad I want to get back to the camp. And I'll do the same for you guys, right there in the back of the truck. C'mon then, don't you want to fuck me?

A brief hope that died. Somehow she couldn't do it just like that. A girl can sleep around but when it comes to hard-core prostitution, and that's what it amounted to, Jean Ruddington chickened out. Fooling about with squaddies in the back of a Land Rover was different.

She turned away, didn't even want them to notice her standing there watching them. She'd go back to Barmouth, sleep rough in one of the shelters on the sea front. Then tomorrow she'd try again.

Dragging herself along, crying because it helped a little, squeezed some of the despair out of her system. She didn't hear the padded plimsolled footsteps coming up behind her, gave a little cry of surprise when somebody touched her on the arm.

'Hi.' The features were rugged, an unkempt beard hiding the lower half of them, long straggling hair that had not been washed recently. She had been right about the denims, faded and threadbare, sun-tanned flesh showing through them in places. The other could not have been more than twenty, lithe and athletic,

his accent a local singsong one. Almost certainly a hippy. He smiled, his resentment at the checkpoint soldiers forgotten.

'They didn't let you through,' she recovered from her surprise, slowed her step. Suddenly company was very welcome. As long as it wasn't Gerry.

'Bastards!' He spat on the road. 'Said they were pissed off with sightseers trying to infiltrate the coast. I told 'em I was on my way back to the commune, that all I wanted to do was to go home, but they wouldn't listen. I guess I'll go back to Barmouth for the night, maybe think of something else tomorrow. My name's Pete, by the way.'

'I'm Jean,' she answered. 'I wanted to get back to the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp where I work but if they wouldn't let you through then it's a waste of time me trying. I'm on my way back to Barmouth, too. I'm also going to try and think of something else tomorrow.'

'Guess we might as well stick together,' he grinned. 'Till tomorrow, anyway.'

Jean wrinkled her nose as the sea breeze wafted from Pete to herself; he smelled stale as though he slept in his clothes regularly, an odour that was laced with garlic. The average hippy, well-meaning yet lacking an attention to personal detail, but she could overlook that. They were both in the same predicament.

'I done time,' at least he was honest. 'They sent me down for three months on a housebreaking charge. Actually all I did was break into this empty holiday cottage for somewhere to sleep because it was a bitterly cold night. You wouldn't've bet on the owner turning up on a snowy January night. He was English, too.' He spat into the road again. 'Anyway, a couple of my mates from the commune set fire to his cottage a week later so he'd've been better off stopping home in England that night and letting me get some kip. I wouldn't've taken anything. We don't steal . . . nothing that's any good to anybody, anyway.'

She glanced sideways at him, sensed that he was telling the truth. Basic honesty, a code of morals that conventional people wouldn't understand.

'You married?' it was nearly ten minutes before he spoke again, his tone implying more than idle curiosity.

'I'm a widow. My husband was killed in a car accident.'

'Too bad. Boyfriend then?'

'One or two,' a kind of boast that she needed to boost her sagging morale. 'Nobody special though.' A compulsive lie; she never could bring it on herself to admit to the opposite sex that there actually was another man in her life who mattered.

'Then you won't be objecting to my company for a while.' He turned his head, scrutinised her as though he was looking for a reaction.

'I don't mind,' she averted her gaze. 'Not for a while, anyway.'

That's settled then,' he grunted and did not speak again until they found themselves down by the Barmouth harbour,

'I reckon they're making too much of these crabs,' Pete squatted on his haunches by a cafe that bore the name 'Davy Jones' Locker'. The harbour was full of moored sailing boats and motor launches. The ferry which ran numerous daily trips across to Fairbourne bobbed on the waves; it hadn't been used for forty-eight hours now. Crowds; holidaymakers jostling one another in an attempt to see over the troops and police, some youngsters overawed by the presence of heavy artillery. It might have been 1940 with an invasion imminent.

'Well, we can't argue about what happened on Shell Island,' she replied. 'A lot of lives were lost.'

'There's more to it than meets the eye,' he chewed absently at some long hair sprouting just below his lower lip, 'Me, I wouldn't be surprised if it's something the Russians are up to. That's something else they make too much of these days, the Ruskies. If you ask me, folks are a lot better off in the Soviet. Nobody starves, everybody has a roof over their head. You can't ask for more'n that.'

'Except that if you say the wrong thing you're whisked away to Gorky or some such place and never heard of again,' she retorted.

'We'd do well to find us a place before it gets dark,' he ignored her reply. 'Everybody's standing out in the open at the moment. As soon as the sun goes down they'll be looking for shelter. Let's see if there's any room across there.'

There' was a conglomeration of boatsheds, a kind of yard that opened out off Marine Parade along from the lifeboat station. At the moment it was deserted because everybody was thronging the quayside. Pete grasped her hand, pulled her along with him. Nevertheless, she told herself, what he said made sense. They needed some cover for the night and now was the time to claim it.

It was strange that the big boatshed was open and unoccupied. Jean did not understand much about boats but she saw enough to understand that in this place they were either made or repaired, two hulls balanced on strong steel trestles, a line of workbenches with tools littering their surfaces. But it was crazy that the place had been left unguarded, particularly at a time like this.

'Look,' Pete seemed to read her thoughts. 'Somebody's bound to come back and lock up before dark. Let's make ourselves scarce behind that pile of tarpaulins. It won't matter if we're locked in. A kid could break in or out of any of these crappy windows.'

A feeling of guilt and dishonesty assailed Jean Ruddington as they climbed over the stack of tarpaulins and found a spacious area in the corner of the shed, completely hidden from view. They were trespassing, breaking the law; her companion had already served a prison sentence for an almost identical offence. But she didn't have any choice. She was fast getting so she didn't care about anything.

The shadows on the walls lengthened and then they heard approaching footsteps. Somebody was inside the shed. Movements, something scraped noisily, clanged. That was the big sliding entrance door being pulled shut. Something snapped mechanically; a padlock. Then the footsteps again, growing fainter until they faded from earshot altogether. Jean tensed, suddenly wanted to scream hysterically. Claustrophobia. If she had been alone in here she would have scrambled over the tarpaulins to that big corrugated-iron door, kicked and beaten on it with her fists, yelled until someone came and let her out. There was only one reason why she didn't do that now- because she had Pete.

He smelled of BO, breathed dragon-like garlic fumes, maybe even had lice. But, Christ, she wouldn't have been without him. When his outstretched arm came beneath her she rested her head on it and it was the softest, most comfortable pillow she had ever had.

It was getting dark now. The reflection of artificial lights on the wall made strange patterns, sort of comforting because you knew there were thousands of other people out there. If you listened you could hear a hubbub of voices against the noise of the incoming tide. There were soldiers and big guns to protect you; those crabs would be blown to smithereens this time if they showed themselves beyond the tideline.

Jean Ruddington felt comfortable, relaxed after all she had been through. Her eyelids began to droop. Pete's breathing was heavy, rhythmic. She was sure he was already asleep. He would get pins and needles in the arm she was lying on but maybe he wouldn't even notice. His whole life was spent roughing it.

She dozed, perhaps even dropped off to sleep. Then she was waking, her confused brain trying to work out where she was, what was going on. Those lights outside afforded just enough glow for her to make out silhouettes around her. She was still lying on Pete's arm but it was his other one which had awoken her - his free hand had trespassed inside her clothing, had somehow undone the clasp of her bra and his rough fingers were caressing her breasts.

She froze with shock and horror. Shock because her nipples were erect and tingling beautifully so he must have been fondling her for some time; horror because he could have only one thing in mind, with or without her consent! It wouldn't just stop at a sly feel.

She didn't move, just lay there, his fingers continuing to pinch and squeeze gently. She ought to have hated him even touching her so intimately but somehow it was very erotic. I'm like a bitch in season at present, she thought.

'You're enjoying that, aren't you?' He must have sensed that she was awake. 'You don't mind, do you?'

'No.' Her voice was a mere faraway whisper. Once again this was something she didn't have any choice in. Life was getting increasingly like that these days. 'I guess I don't really object.'

'Good. I hoped you wouldn't mind, Jean.'

Brief thoughts; Gerry. Now he could be violent if his anger was aroused. Maybe Pete was the same, only the situation was a much more frightening one. 'Girl found strangled in boatshed. Police are hunting

killer.' Those could be the newspaper headlines in twenty-four hours' time, or rather sub-headlines because the giant crabs were stealing the show. She shuddered. Maybe he would be happy just to play with her breasts; she wouldn't refuse him anything else, it could be dangerous.

A few seconds later that hope was dashed. His hand slid downwards, fumbled with the fastener on her skirt. Something gave and it came undone. She could hear her pulses roaring; maybe if she had been standing up she would have fainted. A waft of garlic acted like smelling salts; his face was close to hers and he was whispering in her ear.

'You're sure you don't mind, Jean.'

'No ... I don't mind, really I don't.' Lifting the lower half of her body up slightly, co-operating so that he could slide her pants down below her knees, easing her thighs apart because that was where his probing fingers were going next. Another shock; she was as moist as she would have been for Gerry or Gordon or any other man she liked. Perhaps she liked Pete but in a different sort of way. Sometimes she did not even understand herself.

He touched her and she jerked, moaned, every nerve in her body trembling violently. Ecstasy and she couldn't hold back. This was suddenly better than anything she had ever experienced before. The roughness of his fingers brought her unbelievable delight, so basic, so primitive-Neanderthal man taking his mate, going to do anything with her that pleased his burning sexual desire. An animal mating . . .

Garlic kisses almost suffocated her as his tongue pushed into her mouth in a frenzied simulation of that which would surely follow. Those hands were pulling at her clothing now, clumsy in their eagerness; something ripped, was pulled from her shuddering body, fingers scraping the bared flesh like the emery paper on a matchbox.

Then he was astride her, a frenzied stag at the rutting stand which has suddenly cornered its hind. She felt him pushing, tried to help but she was too securely pinned down. He found her, a mind-blowing thrust which had her kicking and flaying wildly, clawing at his bare back with her fingernails. Spiralling upwards as though she had suddenly been flung free of him, whirling dizzily, but he was still there, his thigh muscles working like steam pistons as he powered into her, grunting like a wild animal.

She couldn't hold back, she was out of control, orgasmic tidal waves rushing to swamp her, sweeping her along with them.

Divorced from reality, not caring, wishing that it would go on forever and that she did not have to go back, that she could float on in eternal bliss. Dimly she was aware of noises, thundering explosions, blinding flashes that penetrated her state of ultimate passion; people screaming, rushing footsteps, a vibrating thud which shook the whole building.

A gradual awareness that Pete was no longer on top of her, that he was tugging at her with those same strong fingers, trying to pull her to her feet. Shouting, but the words were incomprehensible. She grabbed at him, tried to pull him back on top of her but she did not have the strength.

A stinging slap across her face destroyed instantly those marvellous sensuous feelings, her sobs of pleasure turning to cries of anguish. Then fear! Oh God, the bastard had had what he wanted, now he was going to kill her. 'Girl found strangled in boatshed. Police are hunting the killer.'

She began to struggle but he was holding her too tightly. Oh, what a fool she had been and now it was too late! She kicked, felt her bare foot make contact with his skin. He slapped her again, shook her,

'Pull yourself together, you stupid little fool!' Words that she could now understand; trembling, surrendering to him because it was futile to fight him. He would kill her and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

'We've got to get out of here,' there was panic in his voice, those garlic fumes seeming stronger than ever, again having the effects of smelling salts. 'Listen. The crabs must've come. There's all hell let loose out there!'

Heavy artillery had opened up somewhere close by, interspersed with rapid machine-gun and rifle fire. People were stampeding, a crowd fanned by sheer terror rushing in all directions to get away. And Pete was doing what he had said he would do earlier, frantically struggling with one of those window catches. Suddenly the boatshed was a potential death trap, the two naked humans helplessly imprisoned inside, at the mercy of the giant crabs if the crustaceans should breach the military defences along the quayside and the sea-wall.

At 1.25 a.m. the invasion of Barmouth began. The waning moonlight was in the crabs' favour; their god had not deserted them. A few nights ago they would have been spotted earlier - not that the outcome would have been any different.

The soldiers in the tank on the quayside were the first to become aware that the invasion was taking place.

'Look!' The gunner shook his mate into instant wakefulness. 'They're here!'

It was a matter of seconds to bring the big gun to bear on the nearest crab. The sights were adjusted -and at that range it was impossible to miss.

The gun spat out its shell.

The crab keeled over, fragments of shell flying through the air.

'Got 'im!' the gunner yelled jubilantly. 'Invincible? A load of balls! This'll sort the bastards out!'

As he reloaded and brought his gun to bear on the shambling, advancing crabs a sudden movement distracted him. He paused.

'Shit,' he grunted. 'That bastard's getting up again!'

The creature had indeed struggled into an upright position. Some of its companions were even helping it, pushing it until it had regained its balance. Its eyes glowed venomously and apart from some shards chipped from its shell, it appeared to be all right. Dazed maybe, but very much alive.

'It's impossible,' the corporal gasped incredulously. 'Nothing could withstand that shell-not at that range anyway!'

'Well, it has,' the gunner snapped, taking another sighting. 'See that big sod? The one the size of a fucking horse. Well, let's see what it does to him I'

The quayside shook with the explosion.

The big crab was thrown backwards, yet it did not roll over. For a few seconds it just squatted, bemused; then it advanced again. There must have been a hundred crabs or more following it, an undulating, shambling line. The clicking was deafening, mind-searing, terrible to behold.

The leading crab halted; a large claw waved and came to rest pointing directly at the tank. There was no mistaking its command.

'Shut that hatch!' the gunner yelled. 'They're coming at us!'

The hatch clanged shut and the soldiers inside breathed sighs of relief. The enemy were too close for another shot. They would just have to wait until reinforcements arrived. The corporal lit a cigarette; his hands were shaking.

'They can't get at us in here.' His laugh was strained and hollow inside the confined space. 'Remember the time we broke down, Sarge? They couldn't tow us and had to repair us on the spot. Took 'em two days.'

'Shut up!' The sergeant's nerves were stretched to breaking point. In his mind he could still see those crabs outside; they were living tanks, stronger than anything Man had invented.

The soldiers tensed as they heard a metallic scratching noise, giant claws scraping on steel.

'Come on, you bastards,' the corporal yelled hysterically. 'Try and shift us. This is something that'll beat you!'

'For Christ's sake shut your bloody trap!' The gunner erupted into action, his fist taking the other in the mouth, throwing him backwards so that his head hit the steel wall with a dull clang. His eyes glazed and he slumped back in his seat.

'Stop it,' the sergeant screamed. 'D'you want . . . '

His words died away and he lost his balance as the tank moved, jerked a few yards and stopped. Moved again.

It was impossible; nothing barring a crane could shift the tank. He moved to the hatch, looked out on a scene that was made even more horrific by the light of the waning moon. Dozens of the crustaceans were gathered around the mobile steel fortress. He opened his mouth to shout a warning but no words came. The tank moved yet again-upwards!

'They've . . . they've lifted it up!' He managed a scream, clutched at a stanchion to prevent himself from sliding. He stretched out an arm, roughly tried to shake the unconscious corporal. 'Wake up,' a yell of sheer panic. 'The bastards are carrying us!'

The tank shook and swayed as the crabs crawled beneath it whilst the others lifted it with their huge pincers, somehow got a grip that was the equivalent of several cranes, the shells of those beneath acting as a transporter. Moving, lumbering . . . heading towards the harbour wall!

The sergeant was screaming, slapping his comatose mate frantically but the corporal's head merely lolled from side to side. He was the lucky one, spared those last few torturous moments.

Suddenly they stopped. The tank lurched forward, seemed to be suspended in mid-air for a split second before it hurtled downwards. One mighty splash, creating its own miniature tidal wave that had small crafts moored nearby threatening to capsize, and then it was lost to sight, the black waters closing over it. A bone-jarring thud as it hit the mud on the bed of the harbour and then it was sinking again.

Inside all was silent; the three men were dead.

The armed forces swung into smooth action following the first report of the tank's gun. Hardly had its echoes died away before two truckloads of troops were speeding down Marine Parade. It took them three minutes to reach the harbour; it had taken the crabs less than two to put the tank out of commission.

The driver of the first truck was braking the moment he saw the crabs. They were everywhere; the road was packed with them, a seething shambling mass, their pinpoint red eyes reflecting the beams of his headlights. And they were advancing towards the town!

He started to reverse but his progress was impeded by the second truck; it was difficult to go backwards at any speed. And there was no hope of evading the columns of oncoming crustaceans!

Soldiers spilled out of both trucks, hurling grenades; automatic rifles were brought into action.

The promenade and harbour shuddered with the explosions, and vivid flashes lit the night sky. Smoke billowed out in clouds as a disintegrated sea-front shelter caught fire.

Relentlessly, undeterred, the giant crabs continued on their course of death and destruction. Burning debris lay in their path but the flames went unheeded. They were impervious to fire as well as armour-piercing shells and bullets!

Captain Oliver of the Royal Shropshire Light Infantry holstered his smoking pistol. His features were smoke-blackened and his cap was missing. Christ, the army had failed, that much was obvious and he was not prepared to sacrifice the lives of his men needlessly. He shouted, tried to make himself heard above the din, yelled for them to retreat.

The trucks were abandoned as the soldiers fell back. Behind them lay a stretch of ground on which a resident fairground sprawled, an array of amusement arcades, dodgems and refreshment stalls. They headed towards it, cover from which to make another stand.

Civilians were fleeing in panic, men in dressing gowns and pyjamas hustling their families out of sea-front boarding houses. Women and children were screaming.

Captain Oliver watched as the two heavy transport trucks suffered the same fate as the tank. The crabs lifted them with ease, hurling them over the harbour wall.

The fire was spreading, rows of buildings becoming a blazing inferno. A boat builder's yard with its

numerous lights was briefly illuminated in the smoky orange light, then it, too, was part of the wall of sweeping fire.

A burning beam crashed down on one of the crabs; the creature brushed it aside and continued on its way.

'Not even fire can stop them,' Oliver muttered. 'It's as though they've come from hell itself!'

More soldiers were arriving from the north end of Marine Parade. They set up a mortar and scored a direct hit with the first shot; the scuttling ranks parted but came together again almost immediately. There was not a single casualty!

It was 3.30 a.m. when the monstrous crab leader signalled the retreat with a clicking and waving of his pincers. Unbelievably, like a well-disciplined army, the creatures shambled back towards the harbour and within a matter of minutes they had all returned to the deep.

The Battle of Barmouth was over, the once proud seaside resort left to lick its smoking wounds. Fire engines moved in and the demoralised troops began mopping-up operations. Those whose homes remained intact returned to them.

And everybody wondered when the crabs would return - as surely they would.

Dawn broke and the fire crews were still playing their hoses on smouldering ruins. The blackened skeleton of the fairground scarred Marine Parade. Loud explosions came from the burning boatyard and reminded the fire-fighters of the army's valiant efforts to repel the raiders, asbestos sheets cracking in the inferno that had only been checked an hour or so ago. As if to taunt the watchers a smoking hull shuddered on steel trestles that had withstood the heat, shifted like some Viking longboat that had returned from the past, its pillagers consumed by the fire which they had so often spread in distant lands. A ghostly ship breaking up, collapsing sedately, then disappearing amidst a cloud of ash dust.

'Jesus, it's a good job nobody was trapped in that lot,' a fireman muttered and began playing his hose on the last of the debris.

Chapter Nine

Monday Morning - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

MILES MANNING had joined the waiting soldiers down by the boating lake. He fidgeted impatiently, checked his watch yet again. 1.20 a.m. Surely that fucking crab had to move soon.

'No sign?' he addressed a tall captain standing by one of the vehicles, spoke abruptly, his edginess and tiredness showing in his tone.

'No. But it's in there all right.'

'I still say we could depth-charge it.'

'Mr Manning,' impatient, staring fixedly out across the lake, 'we cannot contemplate underwater explosives here. The charge that would be needed to do sufficient damage to a creature of that size could not be used in such a small area of water. This man-made lake would be ripped apart and we should

create a sudden tidal wave of several million gallons of water which would do untold damage to the camp. We're just going to have to sit this one out.'

Manning grunted, bit the end off a King Edward and struck a match. The Havana cigar tasted sour, his craving for tobacco had been saturated during the last twenty-four hours but he needed something to do. Seldom did Miles Manning come up against a problem which he could not solve himself. Christ, he couldn't stand this much longer.

1.25 a.m. A ripple appeared on the surface, spread out in rings like somebody had tossed a stone into the water. Then another; a definite disturbance.

'Here it comes!'

The tension which had built up to a climax suddenly erupted. Like a behemoth arising from the deep the huge crab surfaced, a monstrous thing that created its own waves, the water foaming white as it moved shorewards with unbelievable speed.

Manning stared, chewed the butt of his cigar to a soggy pulp. It was true after all, these crustaceans were what everybody said they were, bigger than the donkeys in the enclosure, that expression captured in the glare of a searchlight showing a fury that was directed at Man. And if you really studied the awful features you saw something else—the fear of a trapped animal in those tiny red eyes. It was very frightened.

'Fire!'

A deafening report, a single armour-piercing rifle bullet on target. Shell splintered, fragments flying. A whine—a ricochet. The bullet had scored a direct hit and then bounced off!

The crab did not even slow its pace, a paddle-steamer gone berserk, threshing the water around it into a foaming cauldron, heading directly towards the line of parked military vehicles.

More firing; automatic rifles, a fusillade of lead that chipped and scored the sandy-coloured shell, dented the living armour but did not pierce it. Rage on that misshapen crustacean face, a hatred for Man that

could only be satisfied by bloody human flesh.

Just as the Barmouth troops had been forced to desert their trucks and retreat hastily so these soldiers at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp were scattering; backing off, still firing; reloading, firing again. A blaze of gunfire that was proving futile. Demoralising.

The crab reached the side, hauled itself awkwardly up on to the concrete. A pause as though trying to get its bearings, its tiny brain struggling to come to a decision. Another hail of fire jerked it out of its reverie. And that was when the full force of its fury exploded, when it went berserk.

An empty armoured car was its first victim, a fierce onslaught with pincers that crumpled steel and smashed bullet-proof windows. Slashing, venting its fury on an inanimate object, battering the vehicle until it resembled one that had been in a head-on collision with an articulated lorry. A heavy-duty tyre burst, gave the watchers the weird impression that the creature was somehow returning their fire.

The soldiers bunched; concerted fire, fragments of shell and deflected bullets whining their way into the night sky. The captain watched, his mouth dry, a feeling that his bowels might empty themselves at any second. You were trained to give orders in battle but that training had not included warfare against nightmarish invincible creatures such as this. His lip began to bleed where he had bitten it.

Miles Manning had retreated with the soldiers. His tired features were deathly white, his lips a thin bloodless line. Never before had he hated anything as much as he hated that crab and for once he was powerless to exact the vengeance his very being demanded. Fear, not for himself but for the empire which he had built here. The crustacean was still venting its rage on army vehicles but what after that? Would it head for the main camp on a rampage of death and destruction, seeking to appease its appetite with human carnage the way the crabs had done on Shell Island?

Everybody watched. Another truck was overturned, the crab clambered over it in a horrifyingly ungainly fashion, the chassis buckling, more glass shattering. A crowd somewhere beyond the glaring lights was screaming, fleeing in panic.

But the crab's course was a direct one now, one that took it parallel to the main block of chalets. Clumsily it knocked against a seafood stall, sent it tottering over on to its side; it seemed oblivious of its surroundings now, not even troubling to vandalise the wreckage. Now it appeared to have a fixed purpose, one that sent a chill up Manning's spine because there was something so definite about its movement.

It followed the road that ran alongside the shops, its clicking echoing eerily. The crowd had stopped screaming; all eyes were fixed on the shambling beast.

The automatic rifles were silent, their futility only too obvious. Just a powerful searchlight, its blinding white beam monitoring the crab's course, a sinister moving circle of light. A wooden balustrade cracked and splintered, another accident. A parked delivery van was buffeted, dented and pushed to one side; the crab did not slow.

'Where the hell's it going?' Miles Manning voiced his question aloud but nobody answered. Because nobody knew. The possibilities were too fearful to contemplate. Any second it might embark upon some fresh destruction.

And then they knew! Silhouetted beyond the searchlight rose the sea-wall, that sandbagged section rising up like an edifice of children's bricks, an untidy stacked heap of hundredweight bags.

The crab slowed its pace. For one awful second the spectators thought that it was going to turn back but instead it clawed at the bags, somehow got a hold with its pincers, began to pull itself up. A section slid under the weight but somehow did not collapse. The creature clung to its precarious perch, found another. And another. Bags were sliding but they served to make its passage that much easier as it finally gained the summit.

'It's going . . . back to the sea!' Miles Manning voiced what everybody else had suddenly realised. 'By Christ, the bugger's going home!'

One final glimpse of the monster in the dazzling beam of light. It turned, looked back, and there was no mistaking the malevolence in its expression. Possibly there was relief too but it was too far away to discern it.

And then it fell. A vibrating thump as it hit the sand below the wall, followed by a scraping and clicking that was faster, more urgent, than any of its movements so far.

Click . . . clickety-click . . . clickety . . . click . . . a scraping of legs and pincers on a rocky foreshore until finally the only sound to be heard was the pounding of the tide on the beach. As Miles Manning had

said, the crab had gone home, returned to the depths.

Silence. People were everywhere but nobody was speaking, just looking at each other in amazement; and relief.

And then, from far away, they heard bursts of gunfire, explosions. A long way away but the listeners knew only too well what was happening. Somewhere further down the coast the main crab army had come ashore. Another invasion was taking place.

The residents of the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp knew that they had had a reprieve. Tonight the crabs had raided elsewhere. Tomorrow they might come ashore right here, penetrate the camp defences in the same way that that lone crab had done. It was a chilling thought.

'Any news of your girl?' Irey Wall glanced up as Gordon Smallwood came into the flat. He hadn't knocked and somehow she liked it that way. She had never needed a friend so much in her life before. Rodney and Louise were asleep in the adjacent bedroom so she and Gordon could talk freely.

'No.' his features were strained. 'I guess you've heard on the radio what happened in Barmouth last night?'

She nodded. It was awful. If only it could be a mistake like that time in New York when radio listeners tuned in in the middle of H.G. Wells' 'War of the Worlds' and thought that it was all really happening. But the crabs were true enough.

'There's no contact with Barmouth at all,' his voice trembled. 'I guess the phones must be out of action.'

'She's probably OK,' The kind of silly unconvincing thing you were almost expected to say when there was no news of somebody. 'What is it they say? No news is good news.'

'I wish I could be sure of that,' he sat down, sunk his head into his hands. 'If only I knew.'

'Perhaps they'll open the roads soon. She might just be caught up there in the same way that all these people can't get away from the camp.'

'Maybe,' he raised his head and there was a look of determination in his eyes. 'But I'm going to try and find her in the meantime. I don't care how far I have to walk to make detours to get round the road-blocks. I'm going to Barmouth to find her.'

'But suppose she's already on her way back? You could end up with the ridiculous situation of having Jean back at the camp and you trapped in Barmouth.'

'That's a chance I'll have to take,' he stood up. 'You'll be OK now, won't you? I mean, you don't need me around. There are dozens of other Green-coats, you've only got to ask for help if you need it.'

'I'll be OK,' her voice was unsteady. She wanted to say 'Don't go, Gordon' but she had no right to try and influence his decisions. 'By the way . . . What I told you about Keith Baxter . . . '

'The least said, the better,' he took her hand, squeezed it reassuringly. 'If anything's happened to him then it's not your fault. A lot of people have been killed, many whose bodies will never be found. There's no earthly point in you saying anything. There are going to be so many people listed missing after this that the police won't be interested in Mr Baxter. Just try and forget it.'

'I'll try,' she promised and felt her eyes misting up. 'If you must go to Barmouth then take care.'

'I will. I'll see you anon.'

She smiled, didn't even say goodbye. It would have sounded so final. The outer door closed and she listened to his receding footsteps on the balcony. A sudden urge, she had to check herself forcibly. She almost went to the door, yelled after him. 'I didn't make love with Keith Baxter, Gordon. I swear I didn't.'

But Gordon Smallwood wouldn't be interested. Why should he be? He was very much in love with his own woman, otherwise he wouldn't be going to Barmouth.

Miles Manning stood in the window of his office. From here he could see the main gates clearly, hear the shouted protests of the small vociferous crowd which had gathered, five stationary cars with the engines ticking over. Troublemakers. The big guy might well have been a militant in some factory or other, a rabble-rouser. Coarse tones that forced others to listen whether they wanted to or not.

'Get those fucking gates open, d'you bloody well hear?'

Three uniformed policemen had reinforced the camp's security force, a line of navy blue and green standing just inside the big iron gates. Some soldiers had just arrived in a Land Rover from somewhere, had parked it sideways on the other side of the gates. They were disembarking, unslinging their rifles.

'Nobody's leaving the camp,' one of the police officers spoke calmly, 'either in cars or on foot. You wouldn't get far, anyway. The road's blocked either way.'

'You can't bleedin' well do this. We've a right to go if we want to. Now move out of the fucking way and unlock those gates. Otherwise we'll ram 'em.'

Silence for just long enough so that the metallic clang of half a dozen breeches rang out clearly; the soldiers had their rifles at the ready, barrels pointing towards the ground. It would be but a split second's work to bring the weapons up into a firing position.

'Nobody's leaving,' the policeman repeated. 'Now get back to your digs. The roads will be opened as soon as it is safe.'

'And in the meantime we're trapped here so that when the crabs come we'll be caught like rats in a trap,' there was a less confident ring about the big man's voice, almost a whine. His eyes were fixed on the rifles.

'Stay where you are and you will be safe.'

Manning was sweating. He had been afraid of trouble of this kind. At the moment it was only a minority.

Loudmouths like that big guy could influence a helluva lot more and then half a dozen soldiers, a handful of police and the few security guards wouldn't be much good.

Almost everybody on the camp had seen that crab come up out of the lake, seen how it had scaled the sea-wall on its way back to the sea. Of course, the climb was easier from this side because the sandbags weren't stacked sheer, but try telling folks that. Everybody was on the verge of panic; mass hysteria could erupt at any moment; mob rule in a confined area.

He wiped his forehead, expelled his breath slowly as he watched the big man getting back into his car, the others following suit; a convoy in reverse all the way back to the car-park.

Within five minutes the crowd which had gathered had dispersed and the soldiers had gone back whence they had been summoned.

But tomorrow it might not happen that way. The whole camp was nearing breaking point.

Chapter Ten

Monday Afternoon - Barmouth

THE THOMPSON family were holidaying at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp under false pretences. Not that they were breaking the law in any way, simply that they were industriously creating a continental holiday out of an ordinary working family's holiday-camp vacation, a confidence trick purely to cement the status which they were determined to hold on to.

They had gone to great lengths with their deception; in fact, their whole life was a charade even amongst themselves. For instance, Fay was not aware that Arthur was only assistant manager at the huge superstore in Birmingham. A cleverly kept secret that had deceived both Arthur's wife and his acquaintances (the Thompsons did not have any close friends; that would have presented far too many problems), and who was really interested enough to probe into the administration side of shopkeeping anyway? He wore a collar and tie and signed on behalf of the company when the manager was absent, which was a regular occurrence; fortunately Capstick played golf and entertained widely so even the staff had come to regard Arthur as manager. But that was only one small part of the Thompsons' snobbishness.

A legacy had enabled them to move up the social scale even if they were scraping the financial barrel. This unexpected windfall had taken them out of an insignificant housing estate into upper-class suburbia. The mortgage payments were frightening and Fay had had to get a job. She had studied law at college . . . and failed her finals! Nevertheless solicitors needed typists and who was to know exactly what she did at Goodnought and Waybridge's offices? You bustled about with a sheaf of papers in your hand and did your best to look important in front of clients. As long as they didn't see you making the coffee and tapping tentatively on Mr Waybridge's office door you were all right.

And then, of course, there was Benjamin. He had been an accident in a rare moment of passion when Fay had forgotten herself. That in itself was bad enough but there was worse to follow when it was discovered that he had brain damage, not seriously but enough to inflict an embarrassment on the couple. In those days, fifteen years ago, it had not mattered quite so much. Now it was perfectly awful.

They had considered putting him in a home but with the new mortgage that was out of the question. To love such a child was difficult but, as Fay repeatedly told Arthur to satisfy both their consciences, they had tried. Well, hadn't they?

It was virtually impossible to shut him in his room these days when they entertained. If they locked the door he banged on it and shouted in his own inarticulate way which was even worse. Normally he would go and play with his toy cowboys and indians in the shed at the bottom of the garden but somehow he always put in an appearance when there was a party in progress. They could shut him up for a time with

a glass of lemonade and a bowlful of cocktail nibbles but once his appetite and his thirst were satisfied he began making a nuisance of himself. On one occasion he had deliberately put his hand up Mrs Waite-Gardner's skirt (not that he had any sexual feelings, Arthur had gone to great pains to explain to the near-hysterical lady, he was just mischievous).

But Benjie did have sexual desires, that much was becoming only too apparent these last few months. First, Fay had noticed stains on his bedsheets. 'I think he's starting bedwetting again,' she had told Arthur and he had groaned and agreed. They both knew semen stains when they saw them but you didn't admit to recognising such evidence of self-abuse; you looked for a non-sexual explanation.

Then one evening the truth could no longer be hidden; they had to face the true horror of their discovery. Or rather Fay's discovery.

Benjie had been missing for a couple of hours. Arthur had checked the shed but he wasn't there. There was only one other place he could possibly be but it was too early for him to go to bed.

'I'll go and look in his room,' Fay sighed and moved towards the stairs, clicking her tongue in annoyance. 'He might have a migraine. He's getting too many just lately and I'm sure the doctors can do something. They say they can't because they don't want to be bothered.'

From habit she tiptoed across the landing towards Benjie's room and eased the door open gently. And then she threw it wide, clasped a hand over her mouth to stifle a rising scream; almost fainted, she confessed to Arthur afterwards. Oh God, it was awful, disgusting! She'd never forget it as long as she lived. For Benjie was doing to himself what most normal fifteen year olds do, lying stark naked on the coverlet of his bed, shaking and trembling with excitement, eyes closed, the fingers of his right hand a blur of movement, grunting with pleasure.

If only she could have got to him, stopped him before he finally achieved the ultimate of his pleasure. She tried to yell 'Benjie, stop it' but the words would not come. His eyes were still closed and she could hear his laboured, rasping breath, a relaxing of his tense features blending into a half-smile of contentment. Utter revulsion had her stepping back, then anger propelled her forward.

'Benjamin!' It was meant to be stern (she dropped the 'Benjie' when she was annoyed), but all she managed was a squeak, the second more shrill and piping than the first. 'Benjamin!'

He opened his eyes, stared at her in blank amazement. She glared at him, using anger to temporarily drown her inhibitions. Benjamin wasn't even embarrassed! She might as well have interrupted him in the middle of one of his childish war games down in the shed; 'now leave those, Benjie, tea's ready and we don't want it to spoil, do we?'

'Benjamin, what do you think you're doing?'

Seconds later she could have bitten her tongue right off. Of all the stupid questions to ask him! Unashamedly the fingers of his right hand began to move again. He grinned unabashed.

'Stop it. Do you hear me, Benjamin? Stop it this instant!' She moved forward, raised her hand to strike him but checked herself. She couldn't bear the thought of slapping that, or even touching it. 'You wicked boy!' A shrill scream of rage that had Arthur shuffling out of the lounge and heading for the stairs.

'Who . . . who taught you to do ... that!' Fay's accusing pointing finger was shaking uncontrollably.

'Richie Marston,' Benjie's voice was strangely unemotional, almost normal; frightening when you were used to his unintelligible grunts and staccato speech. 'He does it every night in bed. So do the other Marston boys.'

'They'll have the police after them,' she blurted out, felt suddenly incredibly silly, and added, 'or at least, they won't go to heaven if God gets to know.'

'I don't want to go to heaven,' he became sullen. 'It's boring there.'

'It'll make you go blind,' she snapped.

His expression made her feel even more silly. Well, her parents always used to be telling her brother, Sam, that it made people go blind. Then she was aware of Arthur behind her, heard his infuriating habit of clearing his throat. The trouble with him was he wasn't strong enough.

'What's the trouble?' Arthur Thompson was breathing heavily. He always did when he was apprehensive. He cleared his throat again.

'That's the trouble!' She stepped to one side, didn't want to have to go into detail. It was a father's job to deal with matters like this.

Three people stared at one another. Benjie was the only one who seemed calm and unaffected by it all. Arthur still appeared to have some phlegm stuck in his throat. Then he was looking back at Fay again, almost pleading.

'You didn't do things like that when you were a boy, did you, Arthur?' Her glare was fixed on her husband now, almost challenging him to admit that he had.

'Er . . . no. Of course not.' Indecisive, looking down at his feet now as though reminding himself that he must get a new pair of slippers soon. One of his toes was nearly through.

'I wouldn't have married you if you had,' she snapped. 'It's unhealthy. These Marston boys at school have been putting ideas into Benjamin's head. You'll have to have a word with the school about them. I never did anything like that when I was a girl. I wouldn't have dreamed of defiling myself.'

No, you wouldn't, he thought, and you haven't done much else since, just bitch and gripe. Aloud he said, 'Well, I think we'd best go downstairs, Fay.'

'We've had our little say. We'll have to discuss what we're going to do about it.'

He turned away, heard her following him, almost felt her eyes burning into his back. But it would be no good trying to talk it over with her because she would just clam up, refuse to talk about anything 'dirty'. That's your job, Arthur. You're his father.

And suddenly Arthur felt a strange sense of elation. In one aspect, at least, Benjie was normal. And that night when he had had a grope up Mrs Waite-Gardner's skirt he knew his suspicions were right. Their brain-damaged son did have sexual feelings. But they could turn out to be dangerous. Benjie needed watching.

And now they were on the Welsh coast at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp. That agency would see to the despatching of postcards from the south of France; neighbours whom they only passed the time of day with on infrequent occasions would receive one. For Fay it was an obsession. Arthur just went along with her ideas because he didn't have any choice, and always lurking at the back of his mind was the fear that one day she would discover that he was only assistant manager at the superstore.

They had watched the crab's exit from the boating lake out of their flat window, a ringside seat. Benjie had trembled with excitement, his big round eyes bulging in amazement. Then the fingers of both hands had come into action but in a far less sensuous way than they had when Fay had witnessed them that evening a few weeks ago. Forefinger and middle finger were pistol barrels, thumbs hammers that rose and fell to a vocal accompaniment of gunfire noises.

'Pow . . . ka-pow . . . pow ...' Benjie gave a shrill whine that was a fair imitation of whining bullets, spaghetti-western style. 'Pow. . . pow.. . ka-pow. . . '

But the crustacean was invincible. They saw it skirt the kiddies' roundabouts, head for the shops. Two final blasts from Benjie and then it was lost to sight.

'It's . . . awful.' Fay was white and shaking, sinking back down on to the bed. 'Oh, Arthur, whatever are we going to do? We're trapped here in this camp along with thousands of common people. I knew we shouldn't have come here. And suppose those Press photographers who have been hanging around all day caught us in one of their pictures and it got in the papers. People might recognise us. How would we explain that away to the neighbours?'

Arthur sighed. That would indeed be a catastrophe but far worse things might happen-like the giant crabs invading the camp.

'I hit him,' Benjie grunted from the window. 'Didn't you see all those pieces of shell flying off him?'

'That was the soldiers' bullets, stupid boy!' Fay retorted. 'And even they couldn't kill it.'

'They was mine,' Benjie turned, his features suddenly dark with anger and Arthur was quick to intervene.

That stupid cow could easily put the boy in one of his sullen aggressive moods again for no logical reason.

'They were your bullets, Benjie,' Arthur spoke condescendingly. 'I saw them hit the crab. Next time try aiming for its face. There isn't any shell there and you might penetrate it. Take my tip and try it next time.'

Benjie had turned back to the window and was staring outside again. Silent. It was impossible to guess what he was thinking. He might even have forgotten all about the crab.

But he hadn't. In his dreams that night he relived that episode, the huge creature rising up out of the water, bigger, far bigger than before; a hail of bullets chipping its shell but no more. Soldiers falling back. Fleeing. Just himself left there and somewhere his mother's voice. 'Benjamin, come away. D'you hear me, come away before it gets you. It'll eat you.'

Fuck off! Benjie felt no fear. For the crab had halted, regarding him hesitantly. It realised the power of his finger guns, that he wasn't quite the same as other people. He was superior. Now he was shouting, a spate of obscene language which he had learned off the Marston boys, interspersed with a hail of ka-pows and spaghetti whines. Shooting right where his father had advised, smashing his imaginary bullets into that grotesque, almost human, face. Blood! It poured from the open mouth, the eyes were a scarlet film so that the crustacean couldn't see. Blundering and splashing blindly, the water around it foaming crimson, Ka-pow . . . ka-pow ... It rolled over, partially submerged, legs and pincers thrashing. Growing weaker.

Benjie waded out towards it, still heard his mother screaming 'Benjamin, come back at once.' Shut up, you silly bitch.

By the time he reached it the crab was dead. With some difficulty Benjamin Thompson climbed up on to the shell, managed to keep his feet as he raised his pistol fingers aloft in his very own victory salute. Searchlights dazzled him so that he couldn't see but he did not need to . because he could hear the crowds cheering. Everybody on the camp must have turned out, a tumultuous roar that drowned his mother's bitching protests. Benjie the Messiah was acclaimed at last; where the army had failed he had triumphed. His adrenalin was pumping fast, making him feel giddy.

'Benjamin, are you all right?'

Fuck off, you cow! Back to reality, his mother's silhouette framed in the doorway of the partitioned bedroom.

'Uh-huh,' a grunt, annoyance. He hadn't killed the crab. Yet. He must have been shouting in his sleep.

'Well, you get back to sleep and don't you get thinking about crabs. As soon as we can we're going home. And don't get ... doing anything!' The door clicked shut.

Anger. He'd show 'em and when he was hailed victorious he wasn't having her sharing his glory. No way. Already a plan was formulating in his strange mind. He'd get that crab, blast it to smithereens with his powerful finger guns. Ka-pow . . . ka-pow . . .

His euphoria came flooding back and with it came another very pleasant sensation. His hands went under the sheets and within a matter of seconds the giant crab was forgotten. Benjamin Thompson wasn't going back to sleep just yet.

Gordon Smallwood had watched from the crowd as the small cavalcade of militant cars was stopped. A sinking feeling engulfed him and his intestines seemed to flip and become entwined. Those armed soldiers meant business, they would have opened fire if the protesters had tried to crash their way out of the camp. This was military law.

Gordon was dressed in cords and a nylon open-necked shirt. In all probability the camp security men would not have recognised him; even if they had it wouldn't have made any difference. Nobody was being allowed out of the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp, not even on foot!

Depression. He wandered away aimlessly and in due course found himself on the main car-park, walking idly down the avenues of hot standing vehicles, mobile sauna baths if you were stupid enough to sit in one. And it was here that he met the big fellow.

The leader of the attempt to gatecrash an exit was standing by his car, a rusting old Rover blotched with DIY paint patches. Half a dozen other men, the ones who had joined him in the attempt, were standing around, anger and despondency on their features. Silence. As though they were waiting for their leader to speak. But it was Gordon Smallwood who spoke first. 'Nice try,' he remarked, 'but I reckon we don't stand a chance against armed soldiers.'

'You reckon?' the other seemed even bigger now, his bare chest a mass of black hair. You got the impression that he was overweight but when he moved you saw solid muscle ripple. A man not to be trifled with. Arrogant, violent. A troublemaker for the sake of making trouble.

'Well, it seems that way,' Gordon was aware that the man's eyes were boring into him, perhaps trying to recollect where he had seen him before. A Greencoat had to be a spy, set up by the security forces to eke out the trouble spots within the camp. 'I'm pissed off, I can tell you. My girl went to Barmouth yesterday and she hasn't come back. I want to go and look for her.' 'You do, eh?' the stare was even more scrutinising. 'And how are you goin' to manage that?' 'Til work something out.' 'Yeah?'

'I'm working on it.' 'So are we. You goin' to join us?' Gordon caught his breath, didn't reply immediately. Some of the others had moved in closer; he felt himself swallowing, licking his dry lips. 'I'm game for anything that'll get me out of here,' he said.

'Your face looks familiar,' the man stepped forward a pace, thrust out a stubby chin, eyes narrowing until they virtually disappeared into their sockets. 'I've seen you around recently.'

'I'm a Greencoat,' Gordon's stomach churned and knotted again. 'That makes it doubly difficult to get out of here. I hardly dare make a false move.'

'I see. Well, if you're trying to foul us up I wouldn't like to be in your shoes. No reason why you should, though,' the eyes flickered open again and the facial muscles relaxed. 'We're goin' tonight, us here and as many as we can get to join us so there's no reason why you shouldn't ... if you're genuine.'

'Tonight!' Gordon Smallwood's hopes disintegrated. 'But I need to go now, to get to Barmouth before dark.'

'No chance. You'd never make it. And don't go thinkin' these soldier boys wouldn't shoot if they were pushed because they would. That's why me and these here fellas backed down. See? There's only one way you'll get out of here; they're guardin' the road and the sea-wall adjoining the camp, so you need to go east across the fields, and then cut back to the shore once you're past the soldiers. Get me?'

'Travel along the beach! What about the crabs?'

'That's a risk we'll have to take. The tide'll be out and there's a full moon so we'll be keepin' back from the tideline. One thing about those crabs, they make one helluva row and you get plenty o' warnin'. But it's either that or stop in the camp and wait for 'em to come and get us, as they surely will. Me, I'd sooner give the fuckers a run for their money. That goes for these guys here,' he waved a huge oily hand towards the group clustered around them. 'The more the merrier tonight, and the better chance we have of gettin' through. Hell, these bleedin' soldiers won't mow a crowd down, they daren't. All it needs is enough people with the guts to go overland and then along the shore.'

'Like the Great Escape,' Gordon gave a weak laugh.

'Well, I guess I've no option but to go along with you. Count me in. My name's Gordon, by the way.'

'I'm Charlie,' the other grinned, spat in the dust. 'We meet down by the miniature railway at eleven. We can walk along the track until we come to the fields then it's all stations go! We go over the fence together but after that it's every man for himself. We don't go back for the wounded and we don't pick up our dead.' He gave a grating laugh and turned away. 'Meantime, we're goin' to spread the word as directly as we can. See you at eleven, pal.'

Gordon stood and watched them go, wondered how he was going to pass the rest of the day. In the end he decided to go back to Irely.

It was Cliff Davenport on the phone; otherwise Miles Manning wouldn't have taken the call. The camp lines were permanently jammed, relatives trying to obtain news of their dear ones. The queues outside the public telephone boxes around the camp were growing by the minute; soon the coin boxes would be full and then the holidaymakers' only line of communication with the outside world would be gone.

'I hear your crab got away,' Davenport sounded tired as though he hadn't slept during the last twenty-four hours.

'Sure the bastard did,' Manning was tense, his nerves at full stretch. He wasn't used to not being in full command of his own camp. The soldiers hit it but it made it to the sea-wall, got back to the sea.'

'Can you try and get any spare labour you've got to build that part of the wall up some more?' Davenport asked. 'I reckon that's your one weak link.'

'I'll do my best,' Miles Manning fumbled for his cigar box; it was empty. 'There's unrest in the camp.'

A small crowd tried to break out through the main gates. The soldiers had to stop 'em at gunpoint. But there are dozens of other places where they could make it on foot. I reckon some of 'em will try it after dark.'

'If they do then it can't be helped,' Davenport replied. 'The armed forces and police are stretched beyond their limits. God, you ought to see Barmouth! The crabs have wrecked the sea front and some of the debris is still burning. Reinforcements have come in but I'm afraid artillery is no good. I'm working the clock round to try and come up with something more subtle. Christ, they must have an Achilles' heel. Finding it's the problem. The sooner I get a dead crab to work on the better. Anyway, seeing as yours got away there's no point in me coming over. I'll keep in touch, though.'

Manning replaced the receiver, went over to the window. The queues outside the security office now stretched right down to the boating lake. And all so fucking pointless! The same question, 'How long before we can go home?' And there wasn't any answer to that. Tonight some of the more desperate ones would attempt another break-out; and they'd make it. Good riddance to 'em!

He reached for the internal phone, buzzed the entertainment officer's number. Put that Greencoat Show on again tonight. Start the cinemas at 3.30, get three showings in. Increase the bingo prizes. Whatever happened the Blue Ocean Show had to go on. If this was the end of the camp then they would go out in a blaze of extravaganza. Folks would remember Miles Manning long after the crabs were forgotten.

Chapter Eleven

Monday Evening - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

MINUTES SEEMED like hours to Jean Ruddington. Outside the big shed the noise was deafening, gunfire exploding and reverberating so that she thought her ear-drums would burst. Blinding orange light, then the acrid smell of smoke. The place had caught fire!

Jesus, she should have stayed with Gerry. Better to be that creep's sex slave than to roast alive with this crazy hippy who wanted her for just the same reason. She could just make him out struggling with a window. It had jammed and he was using a metal bar. The pane cracked, fell out and smashed. Frenziedly he was knocking out the remaining wicked shards. But he wasn't taking any notice of her, the bastard!

'Hey,' she yelled, gave way to a fit of coughing. 'Give me a lift up.'

He ignored her, swung himself up, cut his hand so that it bled profusely but he seemed unaware of the wound. Squeezing his powerful body through the narrow gap head first. Then suddenly he was gone. She was all alone!

She fought down her second surge of panic. Where that bastard had gone, she could go. And she had to make it fast.

Smoke billowed, almost blinded her. She retched, fumbled blindly for the window and when something sharp scratched the palm of an outstretched hand she knew she had found it. The frame was roughly level with her own head; a hoist up would have made it easier but she knew that she could make it. Desperation aided her efforts and then she was dragging her body through the narrow gap, feeling her skin being scratched by sharp edges, ignoring the discomfort. She let herself go, used her hands to break

her fall; an impact that knocked the breath from her and then she was lying on gravel, trying to get her bearings.

Oh God, this had to be the original Dante's hell! Flames leaping everywhere, the heat scorching her naked body, her eyes streaming so that she could barely see. Again she had to fight to bring herself under control; headlong blind flight that would in all probability prove fatal. Surely there had to be some way through this wall of fire.

There was, a gap of about ten or fifteen yards where the encroaching wall of fire had not yet closed its fiery ranks. Timbers were falling and exploding in showers of sparks as though returning the army's fire.

Jean Ruddington ran, stopped, saw the crabs for the first time. Oh God Almighty, she had to be dreaming! A hallucination, weird shapes cast by the leaping flames? No, they were real all right. And they had halted because they had caught a victim, paused because they could not resist human flesh and blood.

She screamed. At least she thought she did but the sound went unheard in this unholy din. She recognised the struggling naked form for one fleeting instant as it was held aloft in crushing pincers, the crustaceans fighting amongst themselves for their prize; a man whose sheer physical strength was as nothing compared with theirs. The body was held at full stretch by an arm and a leg, the free limbs kicking and flailing wildly. She felt the sinews snap, the members being ripped from their sockets. A third crab shambled forward, snatched and got a hold on the trunk. It was like huge scissors struggling to cut through thick material, finally making it. The body was severed, pulled apart, blood gushing like a burst geyser.

For a few seconds Jean was paralysed. Another burst of flames and she saw the face. It was Pete all right. His head hung on a string of sinew, bobbed like a child's yo-yo, the open dead mouth screaming a last warning at her. 'Run before they get you too!'

She ran. She didn't know how she managed to make her legs work but somehow they responded in their fearful jellified state. That gap, she had to make it before either the crabs or the fire cut off her last hope of escape.

Something bounced and rolled across her path and she almost vomited, hesitated. Pete was looking up at her, screaming again. 'Run!'

His awful death was her salvation. The crabs were preoccupied with their feast of human flesh, even seemingly oblivious to the fire. The heat scorched her nakedness as she leaped, plunged through the billowing smoke and out the other side; knew she had made it, a stalker who had completed a full circuit of Lords or Twickenham and found shelter in the crowd.

She was in a narrow street, one that was full of cool shadows and empty houses. Not a soul in sight. She dropped to her knees, fought to get her breath. But she couldn't stay here; the fire was spreading and the killer crabs were coming. Carry out Pete's last order - run and keep running!

She saw crowds but they took no notice of her, milling shouting throngs that were only interested in self-survival. Her nudity was of no interest to men, only the crabs lusted for her body right now.

Suddenly she knew where she was, got her bearings in the smoky orange gloom. Across the road was Gerry's flat! Indecision, shrinking back into the shadows. Behind her was bloody death and spreading flames, ahead of her a possible refuge. She swallowed, fleetingly remembered what had happened that afternoon, how it had led to her meeting with Pete. She tried to see her own body in the darkness; it was dirty in more ways than one. She smoothed her hands down the flat firm flesh of her stomach, snatched them away. God, she hated herself, and as if to torture her still further she saw Gordon Smallwood in her mind, his expression pleading, forgiving. And then she was crossing the road; the past was dead, the present was hell, and she did not dare think about the future.

The door was open, the empty entrance hall lit by a single electric bulb. She began to drag herself up the stairs, fell once and had to use the rail to haul herself back up. The strength was sapped from her body, she just wanted to lie down and go to sleep forever.

Gerry's door; forbidding, like a prison from which you had escaped and now you'd had enough of running so you'd come back, giving yourself up. Lock me somewhere safe, I promise I won't try and escape again.

She leaned against the door, her hand resting on the knob; listening. No sound from within. That didn't mean a thing. Gerry might be in bed asleep. She thought about knocking or ringing but instead she tried the knob. It turned and the door moved inwards, creaking loudly.

She groped for the switch, found it and flooded the untidy living-room with blinding yellow light. It was obvious to her then that Gerry was not at home. The room was in a state of disarray, a half-finished meal on the table, a stodgy commercial pie and chips that had long gone cold, a chair knocked over. She

knew he wouldn't be in the bedroom but she looked just the same. The bed was just as she had left it earlier, a damp patch on the crumpled sheet bringing back her feelings of guilt. Drawers open, items of clothing strewn across the floor. You didn't have to be a detective to deduce that Gerry had departed in one helluva hurry. Like everybody else he had fled when the crabs had come. She ought to flee, too, get the hell out of here but she didn't have the strength. She didn't want to go anywhere, didn't care whether she lived or died. She had given up.

Her body began to shake uncontrollably with sobs, delayed shock that was determined to make up for being held back for so long. Her legs refused to support her weight any longer; she wilted like a flower in a hot room, buckled and sprawled on the bed, tried to edge away from that damp patch, didn't want to think about what had happened earlier. In some ways that was worse than the crabs because today she had cast off any glimmerings of self-respect that she had left. AH gone, like the inhabitants of this part of town. Gordon again-don't please, Gordon. Keep away, you don't know what I'm like. I deceived you like I've deceived other men in the past. I'm anybody's. I'm just a dirty common whore. Fighting to throw off her self-recrimination. Laughing hysterically, edging back into that damp patch and spreading her legs lewdly, brazenly. I'm anybody's and I don't give a damn. Come on you fellers, I'm lying here waiting for you!

But nobody was interested. The building vibrated with the force of explosions, the continual heavy gunfire almost drowning the screams of the crowds. Almost, but not quite. A noise which she thought was incessant machine-gun fire: clickety-click-click-clickety-click.

In the end exhaustion claimed Jean Ruddington and she drifted into a deep dreamless slumber which even the crabs could not penetrate.

Irey Wall knew that it was futile trying to talk Gordon out of leaving the camp. She had done her best this morning and now it wouldn't be any different. She boiled the kettle, poured two mugs of instant coffee, a subconscious ploy to hold him back just a little while longer. Because she needed him.

'The crabs have virtually destroyed Barmouth,' she switched off the tinny transistor radio, a birthday present that Rodney insisted on taking everywhere and was costing her a fortune in batteries.

'Which means they'll be going in search of a fresh target,' he replied.

'How can you be sure?'

'Well, they didn't come back for a second crack at Shell. If you ask me they're working their way down the coastline. They'll probably turn up in South Wales next.'

'I wish I could be sure of that.' Irey found herself listening, trying to determine whether Rodney and Louise were asleep yet. It seemed that they were. After Gordon was gone she would open their bedroom door, probably spend half the night listening. After recent events they were likely to have terrifying nightmares. This whole business could have done irreparable psychological damage to them. Only time would tell.

'I reckon it'll all be over by this time tomorrow,' Gordon Smallwood consulted his watch; he'd have to be going in ten minutes. 'Well, in these parts anyway. The roads will be opened and everybody will be allowed to go home.'

'Maybe Keith Baxter isn't dead,' her conscience was still plagued by last Friday; it seemed aeons ago but her guilt had not lessened any. 'Perhaps he just wanted to disappear, wanted people to believe that he'd drowned.'

'It's a possibility,' he smiled at her. 'But unless he turns up somewhere that's something we'll never know so why don't we just assume that he'd fixed it all deliberately, a cunning plan. He needed somebody with him who would know he had gone missing, so he took you along.'

'Yes.' Her tone was unconvincing. She saw once again Baxter's powerful naked body, that erection. If he had intended to disappear then he would have taken her first. No man could just walk away in a state like that. 'You know, Gordon, if it wasn't for the kids I'd come with you tonight.'

'Would you?' He stared at her, suddenly wondered if he was blushing. If he was it didn't really matter.

'I'd tag along and nothing would hold me back,' she went on and now it was her features which were flushed. 'In all probability my husband hasn't given a thought to the fact that this camp might be under siege. He's fishing and that's all that matters. Without the kids I wouldn't have much to go home for. I'm . . . I'm sorry,' she stammered, looking away. 'I ... shouldn't be talking like this, with you nearly out of your mind about what might've happened to your girl.'

'It's all right,' he drained his mug, stood up and put it on the draining board. 'Who's to know what the

future holds in store for us. And . . . and I don't even know how Jean really feels about me. It could be just a holiday romance that will all finish when the season closes. You get into situations like that when your marriage has broken up.'

There was a moment of awkward silence. There was so much each of them could have said but time was running out. For everybody.

'I may not be coming back to the camp,' Gordon said. 'I guess I'll have the sack over this anyway. Manning has ordered the Greencoat Show to be put on yet again, but how the hell can you stand on stage and tell a string of dirty jokes that nobody wants to hear anyway? Last night it might've taken folks' minds off the crabs but suddenly it's gone too far. Panic has spread like the plague and it's too late to create diversions.'

'I'll maybe not see you again then,' her voice trembled. 'Look, I'll tell you what . . . ' she turned away, found a scribbling pad and a crayon which Rodney and Louise had left on top of the television. She wrote for a few seconds, her shaking hand producing a scrawl that was just legible. 'Here, take this. That's my address.'

He folded it meticulously, put it in the hip pocket of his jeans. 'Thanks. I'll maybe get in touch.'

And then he was dragging himself away, closing the door behind him as he stepped out on to the balcony. This was something he could not just write finis to, he didn't have the guts. A sudden inexplicable turmoil inside him that almost had him chickening out of the plans he had made. He nearly headed for the theatre but it wouldn't solve anything. He had to know what had become of Jean Ruddington. There were too many loose ends to his life. He shrugged; probably in a week he would have forgotten all about Irey Wall. In a crisis people were thrown together, seemed important to each other. And afterwards . . .

He was hurrying now, afraid that Charlie and the others would already have left. His individuality seemed to have been submerged suddenly. He would go with the masses, follow where they led, let them make his decisions for him. It was one helluva lot easier that way.

Something, an inexplicable uneasy feeling had him slowing, looking behind him; inbuilt human warning systems processing data, coming up with the answers.

Somebody was watching him, more than just a casual observer. Gordon stared into the shadows cast by a block of holiday flats, made out a shape. His spine tingled all the way up to his scalp. The camp was full of people, thousands of them, so why . . .

The silhouette did not move, just watched him. His uneasiness escalated. He moved on, tried to forget it. But those alarms were still screaming at him, jangling his nerves.

A few yards and he pulled up again, looked back. Anger at what he saw because otherwise he would have been afraid. A boy, it must have been the same one who had lurked in the shadows, was following him, stopping, crouching cat-like, now in the full glow of one of the lamp-standards which lined the camp's streets. Watching. Waiting. Something . . . not quite right about him . . .

Gordon swallowed, stepped forward to get a closer look. He'd seen the boy before, squat features with a vacant expression in big wide eyes, short hair bordering on a crew-cut. Powerful.

Ka-pow. . . ka-pow. . . ka-pow... A whine like a bumble-bee honing in on a bed of flowers. Ka-pow. Fingers jerked in a pistol-like fashion, then they were 'holstered'. But those unwavering eyes never shifted from Gordon, never quavered.

'You've been watching me, following me.' Gordon tried to speak angrily but it sounded weak, almost on the verge of an apology. He stepped back, ran his tongue over his dry lips.

Ka-pow, ka-pow. A lightning double draw and then the 'guns' were dropped again.

'All right, you've had your fun, son. Now go and play with your mates. OK?'

No reply, not even a flicker from those watching eyes. Something clicked in Gordon Small wood's memory, a mental jerk like a magic lantern slide falling into place and projecting a picture out of the past. He remembered where he'd seen the other before; down by the boating lake a few days ago before that big crab had somehow infiltrated the brackish water. He'd felt a fleeting sympathy for the boy, the way he had sat between his parents on one of the benches, pointing at the ducks and making quacking noises. The woman, obviously the mother, had spoken sharply and the kid had shut up, lapsed into a sullen silence. One of life's unfortunate accidents but you forgot about it right away because you were one of the lucky ones. Harmless, but a nuisance, like now.

'Stop following me,' Gordon snapped. It was an unfair request, only uttered because his nerves were shot to hell. The kid had a right to go where he liked within the confines of the camp centre. Probably he was playing at detectives, shadowing a suspect, a game that meant a lot to him.

Gordon whirled, walked quickly away. He couldn't afford to waste any more time. Nevertheless his spine was still prickling and he almost broke into a run.

The miniature railway; the shiny facsimile steam-engine was starkly outlined against the night sky, half a dozen passenger trucks coupled behind it. Twenty trips a day, seven days a week from April until October, down to the beach and back. Now it was resting.

Then Gordon saw the others, a huddled crowd on the wooden platform that might have been waiting for the beach train, shapes that moved out of the shadows and became men.

'It's the Greencoat,' Charlie's sarcasm brought grunts from the others. 'Well, if it's a trap we know who to blame.'

Gordon did not reply; this was no time for petty quarrels.

'Let's go,' the big man turned, the others falling in behind him in a strange orderly fashion, following him as he led the way along the single track, stooping in places so that they would not be outlined against the horizon.

Nobody spoke but Gordon felt the tension, the fear, knew that he contributed his own share of it. There could be soldiers or police lying in wait. They might open fire. Or the crabs might get you.

Without warning they were turning off, leaving the track behind, descending a steep shale slope, slipping in places. The ground levelled and there was rough grass beneath their feet, burned brittle by the sun so that it was slippery in places. Behind them the lights of the camp lit up the sky with an artificial illumination, in front of them blackness; the moon would not rise for another hour at least. You followed the man in front of you, bumped into him if he stopped, and prayed that Charlie was still somewhere up front. Then everybody stopped; they had reached the perimeter fence. It seemed to have taken hours to get here.

Nobody spoke but you could hear those ahead of you getting over the wire, a twang as it was released, a ripping sound as a garment became caught on the vicious barbs and was torn free in haste. Gordon's turn; he hurried to catch up with the man in front of him.

No police, no soldiers. So easy. Gradually everybody was relaxing, no longer anticipating a shouted command to halt or maybe a shot fired over their heads. Gordon tried to work out their location. They must be on that long stretch of meadowland which some of the locals referred to as 'the common'. But the party was veering to the right, a course which would take them back down to the shore. From then onwards it would be a long, tiring but straightforward coastal trek all the way to Barmouth.

And then Gordon got that uneasy feeling again, cold ripples running up his spine and spreading up into his scalp. He glanced behind him but it was too dark to see anything; listened, but all he could hear was the crunch of many feet on tinder-dry grass.

It was all in his imagination. That kid wouldn't follow them all the way out here.

Or would he?

Monday Night - The Shore

BENJIE HAD stood and watched Gordon Smallwood hurry away into the darkness which enshrouded the camp. The big bum! That guy was up to something, you could tell by the furtive way he moved. Something was going to happen tonight and Benjie wasn't going to be left out of it. Furthermore, he was going to kill one of those crabs with his guns, show the fucking soldiers how it should be done, show 'em all he wasn't as bloody daft as they thought.

It hadn't been easy getting out of the flat. For some reason his parents had been later going to bed than usual, not much but enough to worry him. He had crouched at his bedroom door listening, waiting until their breathing became regular and heavy. He had grinned to himself in the darkness, wondered if they ever fucked like Richie Marston said his parents did. Benjie couldn't imagine them ever doing anything like that but they must have done once, nearly sixteen years ago, to get him. If they thought wanking was disgusting, then fucking had to be worse. One day, Benjie promised himself, he was going to fuck a woman. It must be real good or else the boys at school wouldn't keep on about it all the time.

He'd crept through his parents' bedroom, let himself out of the flat. There was plenty of nightlife, it only seemed to start after he'd been put to bed. He lingered inside the amusement arcade. The life-sized model of a hard-bitten western gunfighter was irresistible to him. So realistic, you had to look twice beyond the bat-wing doors of the mock saloon entrance to check that it wasn't somebody dressed up. Ten pence in the slot and the Colt Peacemaker came out of its holster and you were ready to take on the gunman. His mouth moved, staccato words coming from a tape somewhere. 'OK, hombre, this is the showdown. Draw when I say "draw".'

Recorded gunfire from somewhere, the gunfighter jerking and stiffening if you hit him, giving you abuse if you didn't. 'You couldn't hit a bull in an entry, smart ass. Now try again, or get outa town!' Of course, to try again cost you another 10p. But Benjie was too clever for that hombre. He preferred his own finger guns to that plastic Peacemaker and on more than one occasion it was his bullets that had stiffened the westerner rather than the electronic beam of the customer's Colt. Benjie could tell even though his own ka-pows were lost in the deafening noise from the arcade. It cost nothing, the only let-down was that nobody gave him credit for beating that bum to the draw and shooting straight as well. It didn't really matter, though, because tonight there was a bigger prize at stake and after he'd shot a crab folks would have to acknowledge him. Even his mother and father.

He decided to play a hunch and follow that guy. His whole life revolved around playing hunches and

more often than not they paid off. He saw through it all when the man he was following joined up with those others down by the railway. They were going crab-hunting, there could not be any other reason for this nocturnal foray! They were probably carrying hidden guns. It made him angry and he almost took off in the opposite direction until another thought struck him. Maybe these guys knew where the crabs were holed up and were going to sort 'em out. A thrill of excitement coursed through Benjie Thompson's veins, had his adrenalin pumping at full bore. In which case, where they went he was going.

He kept well back; they were making enough noise for him to follow quite easily. In the darkness he jabbed with his fingers, mimed the ka-pows. Just practising; soon it would be for real.

Going inland, then turning and heading seawards again. That was more like it. And just showing itself over the tops of the distant mountain peaks, a slice of silvery peel, came the full moon.

And Benjie knew without any doubt that he had been right to follow these men.

Gordon Smallwood was amazed how quickly the moon rose. Within ten minutes that warning silvery glow had given way to a shining orb that was still climbing into the night sky, bathing both countryside and coast in its ethereal glow. Beautiful but sinister.

In front of them lay the shore, a long expanse of wide rocky beach that stretched as far as the next bend in the cliffs, a good mile or so down-shore, and still further beyond that. The tide was way out, as they had calculated it would be. That solved a lot of problems. Only in a few places would they have to make a slight detour inland. The way to Barmouth lay ahead of them.

'So far, so good' Charlie waited whilst they all gathered around him. 'The worst's over but there's a long way to go and we've still got to keep our wits about us. We'll get on to the shore soon, go down to that next chunk of cliff and see what lies beyond there. Play it a stretch at a time, if you get me. Right, follow me.'

Charlie liked giving orders, that much was obvious. He wanted to lead and Gordon was content to let him, dropping back to the rear of the company again. He thought about peeling off, going his own way, but there was no point. Besides, there was safety in numbers. Gordon's thoughts switched back to Irey Wall. Funny, he should have been thinking about Jean Ruddington but you couldn't slip a leash on your thoughts. He didn't want to, anyway. There was something about Irey, something that excited him in an inexplicable way. Just an ordinary housewife out of suburbia with a husband she was tired of, but she stuck with him because of the kids. Maybe she was sexually stifled, one of millions of women who learn to go without it, tell themselves that they don't really want it anyway so that they don't miss it. Many

plunge into extra-marital affairs, a few don't. Like Irey. Yet she had gone with this guy Baxter to Shell Island last Friday. And when a woman accepts a date with a guy she knows what she's letting herself in for unless she's incredibly thick. And Irey was far from that. A pang of jealousy that took Gordon by surprise but he knew in that moment that he cared. Before Baxter disappeared had they . . . ? The very idea threatened to give him an arousal and in that moment he got to know himself just a little bit better. A revelation. The thought of Irey's possible infidelity was erotic. In the same way Jean's was although he hadn't realised it up until now. His ex-wife's too. A bloke screws your wife and you're expected to get uptight about it, but just pause and think for a moment; if no other guy wanted it with her then it wasn't much of a challenge. You could fuck her whenever you pleased and there was no competition. So it got boring and you or she looked for sex outside your own relationship. Crazy and mixed up, you did your best to understand what you were driving at but even a half-revelation was exciting.

They had reached the rocks. Or rather Charlie had, for the line of men was very strung out now. Huge smooth boulders, many of them so clustered together that it was easier to climb over them than to go round them.

Gordon lingered. He still thought about going back to the camp. That way he would still have his job and maybe a chance with Irey. The chances were she would still cling on to this no-good husband of hers and be a fishing-widow for the rest of her life; the easy way out.

With a start Gordon realised he still had that feeling, a creeping sensation that was goosepimpling his skin all over. No, it couldn't be! That crazy kid wouldn't have followed them this far out.

Jesus Christ, the bugger had! Gordon Smallwood froze in a half-turn, mouth dropping open as he saw the boy who had followed him earlier in the camp clambering silently down from the grass field on to the beach, moving with an agility that belied his lumbering physique. Their eyes met and for the second time that night Gordon experienced fear . . . fear of an unknown, inexplicable mind.

Ten yards apart, facing each other, and neither of them spoke. The others hadn't noticed, were carrying on, clambering over those huge boulders.

'What's the idea, boy?' Gordon's voice was a whisper, a harsh unfriendliness seeming to hang in the balmy night air, an echo that refused to die. 'You've no business here.'

Benjie Thompson watched with unblinking eyes, steadily drew his 'guns', trained them on Gordon. No ka-pows or whining slugs, just a threatening gesture. Don't try to stop me, mister, 'cause I got a crab to

kill. Now step aside or ...

A single scream rent the silence. And for Gordon suddenly everything was happening in slow motion, his brain rebelling against what his eyes saw as he whirled around.

Those giant rocks and boulders had come to life!

A crazy incredible sight that had to be the product of a mind fraught with tension and fear. Gordon's first thought was, I've flipped my lid. It was as though the whole beach had suddenly burst into life, monstrous things that reared up, spilling the men who clambered over them, sprouting arms that grabbed and slashed. And clicked like castanets.

Click-click-click.

In that one awful instant realisation dawned on Gordon Smallwood. The crabs . . . Oh, Jesus Christ, those weren't rocks at all, they were the crabs lying doggo on the beach, perfectly camouflaged in the soft moonlight!

He stood there transfixed. It was like a macabre child's shadow show, grotesque silhouettes enacting a horror play-except for the sound effects. Screams that were suddenly cut off amidst a clicking and crunching, flesh being mutilated and masticated in those filthy jaws, a squelching and snapping of bones. One last glimpse of the man called Charlie. A crab far bigger than all the others had got him, was holding him aloft like a playground bully keeping a bag of sweets out of the reach of other children. Taunting. Then at full pincer-stretch the big man's body was crushed, a sickening crunch and the lifeless form dangled. Crabs clicked excitedly then fell back; waiting, so awful in their orderliness. Surely this was their leader, a King Crab which by some freak of nature had outgrown the other mutants and ruled over them by sheer size. And fear.

Suddenly the corpse was tossed, a regal crab's sop to his minions. It seemed suspended in the air for some seconds, pincers raised awaiting its fall. A sudden rush, fighting and squabbling over the prey which their leader had deemed to give them, like hens pecking over a handful of corn. And then Charlie was no more.

It was Benjie who jerked Gordon out of his horrified trance. The boy stalked forward, a hunter moving in on his quarry, finger-guns held at hip level; swaggering.

'Stay where you are,' Gordon leaped to bar his way, arms held wide. This kid was crazy, he was going to walk right into the carnage.

'Get outa my way, mister.' Words that could have come from a life-sized gunfighter model in the amusement arcade speaking. 'Draw, hombre.'

'You're crazy. Those crabs will rip you apart. They're heading for the camp, making a detour overland where nobody will be looking for them. We've got to get back, warn everybody.'

Benjie did not appear to hear, a robot with jerking steps advancing, 'guns' held threateningly now. That wax model had come to life, left the arcade and gone in search of bloody death. He had to be stopped and there was only one way . . .

Gordon Smallwood moved fast, made a grab for Benjie, a desperate lunge as the boy drew level with him. There should have been no problem; a firm hold, dragging him back forcibly if necessary, slapping him down if he struggled.

But Gordon had underestimated the sheer cunning of one whose brain worked differently from his own. Benjie moved fast, a duck and a weave, his finger-guns becoming clenched fists at the same time. A lightning right to Gordon's solar plexus, a left taking him on the point of the jaw as he doubled forward. A kaleidoscope of lights more dazzling than anything the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp could produce in spite of its flamboyancy, red predominant, coming at him like a scarlet tidal wave; then turning to black.

Gordon's recollection was one of waking up with a hangover, a head that throbbed abominably and eyes that wanted to remain closed. Unconsciousness had lasted for perhaps ten seconds, no longer, because as he fought the pain barrier and gasped for breath through lungs that felt as though they had been scalded, he saw Benjie advancing on the crabs.

Gordon Smallwood lay there helpless, forced to watch. Oh Christ, that stupid little bastard was going to take on the whole fucking crustacean army! The boy was advancing on them, a slow deliberate walk, fingers poised threateningly-fearless!

The crabs noticed him for the first time, grisly blood-smearred features staring in what could only be interpreted as crustacean amazement. They, too, watched and waited.

Benjie opened fire.

Ka-pow , . . ka-pow ... his imaginary slugs were shining, ricocheting, his expression that of a lusting killer. The big one, that was the one he wanted, he'd deal with the others afterwards. They were all going to die. Ka-pow . . . ka-pow . . .

But King Crab wanted him, too. That was why the others held back, shambled to one side to make way for their leader for it was a brave creature who aroused his wrath. A steady clicking, the monster and the boy on a course that would end in bloody death when they met.

There was an urgency to Benjie Thompson's make-believe shooting now. Ka-pow, ka-pow, ka-pow . . . Rapid fire but no fear, just disbelief on his face that his target didn't roll over, its armoured shell unscathed by his slugs.

One vicious slash from a huge pincer, sheer brute force from a razor-sharp cutting instrument, found its mark. Gordon felt the bile rise in his throat, started to spew. Benjie's head parted from his body as neatly as though he had been guillotined, rolled and bounced. And as if in a last gesture of defiance the body remained upright-still advancing, a beheaded farmyard cockerel propelled by its nerves. The walking dead.

The headless Benjie staggered to his own mutilation. An upward rip split him open from groin to chest, spraying blood in the manner of a fountain. And then King Crab feasted voraciously, tore at the flesh and crunched the bones, slurping and munching, the other creatures watching him as though it was their duty.

Gordon struggled up on to his knees, forced his reeling brain to work, tried to shrug off shock and horror. Men had died, a boy had been torn apart horribly. Carnage all around. Yet less than two miles away there were thousands of men, women and children who would die if they were not warned. The army with their frail defences and almost useless artillery were expecting the attack to come from the shore but the crabs with unbelievable cunning had outwitted them; they had learned from Shell Island and Barmouth, and in some strange instinctive way were putting that knowledge to their advantage. They would come ashore here, sweep in from the eastern side across the land . . .

Gordon was on his feet, fighting against a wave of dizziness. Oh Jesus, if he passed out now he was done for, and so was everybody else. Irey! Above everything else he had to save her.

Click-click-clickety-click!

The big crab had spotted him, was signalling to the others with waving antennae. Run the man down!

Somehow Gordon broke into a run. There was fifty yards of rock-strewn beach to cover and then he could strike inland. But nobody knew how fast the crabs could move. Well, he would soon find out.

The terrain was uneven, a single slip meant a death that he dared not think about. One glance behind. Oh Jesus Christ, the crabs were coming fast, the beach the equivalent of their ocean-bed terrain; they were familiar with it. His lungs hurt, his vision swam. Pray God he could make it, the bastards were less than fifty yards behind him and gaining on him!

One last stretch of rocks to negotiate, a kind of peninsular that jutted out from the sea-wall. After that he would be OK.

The moonlight glinted on the flat slippery surface. A black shadowy line in front of him, that crevasse which they had had to step over on the outward journey, a fissure, a cleft split by the constant pounding of the incoming tide.

He hesitated, looked back. The big crab was much nearer, maybe thirty yards away, no more. So sure of itself.

For a few seconds time seemed to stand still for Gordon Smallwood. A drowning man's past life is reputed to flash through his brain but for Gordon just a few things sprang back at him. The chances were he wasn't going to make it now; the crabs moved remarkably quickly for their size. He had his regrets, people he would never see again. Irey. There were a lot of things he should have said and hadn't. Why? Because he was bloody scared! The truth hurt. He was afraid of her answer, so tactful and polite-'it's very flattering to know you feel that way, Gordon, but I am married. It wouldn't be fair to either of us, would it?' Of course it bloody well would be, but she'd never see it that way.

And Jean. He should have tackled her outright. You've got another feller, haven't you? Let's put our cards on the table so we both know how we stand. Let's stop playing games. Give it me straight. "You're imagining things, Gordon. You're jealous' And you still wouldn't know where you stood.

That was the difference between the two women. Frankness. Sometimes it was better to be hurt than to go on not knowing.

The crabs were close now, fifteen yards. The big one was in the lead, its bloody features a mask of hate and lust. Merciless, invincible. Gordon tensed every muscle, jumped.

That was when that kaleidoscope of brilliant lights hit him again, a myriad of multi-coloured stars that blurred his vision and impaired his judgement. Despair because he knew he wouldn't make it, braced himself for the bone-jarring fall, prayed that it would knock him unconscious because he did not want to witness his own fate. The crab would do to him what it had done to Charlie and that imbecile kid.

Eyes tightly shut, a sense of vertigo because he knew he was falling. Still falling. Oh God, the ground wasn't that far below him. The bright lights dulled to a deep red; darkening. Impact. Then nothing.

Chapter Thirteen

Early Tuesday Morning - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

EDNA AND Lucy had booked in at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp with one sole object in mind-to find some fellers! Edna was small and dark and not wholly unattractive if a guy wasn't too particular; a 'fill-in' for the evening if there wasn't anything better on offer. Lucy was in total contrast to her friend; even if she had gone on a strict diet nothing would have altered her large bone structure. She could, though, have done something about those blackheads, even to the extent of squeezing a few. But she hadn't given them much thought. She washed her hair once a week but it still straggled like rats' tails around her neck. She smoked heavily and lately had developed the habit of lighting a cigarette and leaving it to smoulder between her thick lips until it had burnt away. She had had a slovenly upbringing and was unlikely to alter her ways now.

Not the most glamorous pair, and any boyfriends they managed to acquire they really had to work on. Back home they had earned themselves the tag of 'scrubbers' but they didn't care about that. Nevertheless, it was nice to be on strange territory.

They had gone to the Oyster Disco on Monday night. Sunday hadn't been much good at the Pearl Dance Hall and they had returned to their flat disappointed. But tonight the dance floor was packed, teenagers mostly who wanted their money's worth. The crabs were spoiling everybody's holiday so to hell with the bastards! In all probability they wouldn't attack the camp. It was like these bomb-scares that happened from time to time; hoaxes. Like the nuclear threat, it wouldn't ever come to anything so why spend your time worrying what you would do if it did? Live for today and sod tomorrow. It was the old fogeys who were panicking and wanting to go home, not the youth of Britain.

Edna and Lucy found a space on the floor and danced with each other, the way they always began an evening. That way you could get a good look round, see if there was anything in the offing.

Jiving, being forced to move in close, Lucy's large breasts threatening to jump out of their bra cups as the beat quickened. Closer still. A thought crossed Edna's mind, brought a grin to her lips. So bloody funny. Lucy's thick lips mimed 'What's the joke?' Edna shook her head; there was too much noise to reply anyway and if she was asked later she would say she had forgotten. So bloody funny. It was like being a lesbian having Lucy brush you with her tits. Repulsive in a way but if you could see the funny side of it, it was hilarious.

Too bloody hot. Lucy wiped her sweating face with a flabby hand and hoped that new brand of deodorant was doing what it was supposed to do. There was nothing like BO for putting chaps off.

Flashing lights; white, red, green and finally all changing to mauve, dimming. Romantic. Sexy. Lucy wished the DJ would slow the tempo, she was getting out of breath. She'd have to lose some weight soon. After the holiday because food was all part of the holiday. Food and . . .

She had a feller, just like that. He'd probably been there some time before she noticed him, just another body in the throng. He grinned at her and she saw that he had some teeth missing. Long hair that straggled like her own. She couldn't make up her mind whether he was trying to grow a beard or he just had not shaved. It didn't really matter anyway. A roll of fat spilled over the waistband of his jeans.

'Hi,' he mimed and Lucy moved away from Edna. Edna could look after herself now; the hunt had begun.

More people were moving on to the floor, a tight crush that had everybody up against everybody else and now Lucy's large bosom was pressed against her partner's chest. He swayed rhythmically, suggestively, jabbed at her with his thighs. She felt something rigid against her, wiggled in response and received another grin. That was what they called 'body language'.

Lucy was having hot flushes and it was not due solely to the stifling smoky atmosphere in here. A quick look round trying to see how Edna was getting on but she couldn't spot her. That was OK; sometimes they split up, other times they made up a foursome.

The beat slowed and Lucy's partner engaged in an ungainly clinch, their feet getting in the way but they weren't interested in feet. She had to stoop to put her face close to his; he was hot and sweaty too. A kiss, her mouth opening to admit his pushing tongue. God, he was pushing hard at her lower down too. Her skin prickled. This one was a dead cert for a good time later on. In the meantime they would just hold on, french-kiss and rub against each other.

'It's hot here.' He had to shout twice in her ear before she got the message, nodded and opened her eyes. 'You fancy goin' someplace else?'

She didn't catch the last bit but she got the gist of his obvious suggestion. 'OK.'

He led her from the floor, their arms around each other, fingers entwined. One last look round for Edna. She wasn't in sight but she could have been anywhere in the crowd. Lucy didn't give a damn, it had taken her three nights to find a chap and she wasn't letting this one go easily.

Outside it was refreshingly cool and she realised just how much she had sweated. Her dress was clinging damply to her capacious body but that wasn't the reason for the moistness between her thighs.

'I'm Johnny,' he grunted.

'I'm Lucy.'

'You got a fiat all to yourself?'

'No,' hesitating. 'My friend's with me ... she might be using it. I don't know.' She wasn't having Edna in on this.

'We could go up to that field where they keep the donkeys.'

'OK.'

Conversation was not a strong point with either of them so they left it to body language in its most primitive form, a kind of slow quickstep in which you kissed all the way; people either got out of your path or else you bumped into them. You didn't even notice them.

Now they were clear of the illuminations. Way behind them searchlights lit up the sea-wall. But the donkey field was in darkness. It was a good place to go. The gate was locked so Johnny climbed over it and with great difficulty gave Lucy a helping hand, a hand that strayed to all sorts of intimate places and brought giggles from her.

'What's that?' She stiffened, heard something moving in the darkness; it speeded up like somebody was beating a drum fast then died away in the distance. 'Whatever is it, Johnny?'

'Donkeys,' he grunted. 'I guess we scared 'em.

Let's move a bit further on 'case anybody comes.'

Her heart was pounding wildly and she felt a bit sick. Probably that was due to eating nothing else but fish and chips since she had arrived at the Blue Ocean. She hoped they didn't go too far away. Still, those crabs would not be found anywhere where there wasn't water. All the same, she was jittery, always slept with a light on, much to Edna's disgust.

'This'll do,' without warning he was pulling her down into the rough dry grass. For Johnny there was no such thing as a subtle approach; if a bird agreed to go into a field with you she knew bloody well what you were after, and once you were there, there was no chickening out.

He began kissing her again, let his hands stray to her breasts, thick fingers struggling to get a button undone. Eventually he managed it, moved on to the next. Fumbling, trying to get her bra undone.

'Here,' Lucy's frustrations came to a peak. 'Let me get it off for you!' Annoyance, her desires so overpowering that she couldn't wait. Impulsively she lifted herself up, dragged her pants down. This guy would be all night messing about on his present showing. Almost as an afterthought she pulled her dress over her head, threw it to one side; the cool night air fanned her over-heated body. But she still could not get rid of that nagging uneasiness. From childhood she had been afraid of the dark; she wondered how far away the donkeys had gone. They were lovely friendly creatures by day but by night anything that moved was eerie.

'What's up?' Johnny's hand was groping for her again, rough fingers scraping on her thighs.

'Nothing. I just wondered . . .'

But Johnny was not listening. His fingers found soft moist flesh, squeezed and then pushed, brought a long-drawn-out 'ooo-oooh' from the girl stretched out beside him. He could not wait much longer. He grabbed her hand, put it where he wanted it. Annoyance because her response was lukewarm.

Lucy couldn't concentrate properly. She was listening again, thought she heard a movement. Those donkeys might come back. Suppose they stampeded, trampled the couple. Or deliberately kicked them. She had heard somewhere that donkeys bit people when they were in a bad mood.

'What the hell's the matter with you?' Johnny was lying full length on top of her now, pushing with his thighs, but her moistness seemed suddenly to have dried up. She gasped because he hurt her, not for any other reason.

'I thought I heard something,' she whispered hoarsely. 'Like what?'

'I dunno. Something moving about.' 'It's probably the donkeys. Just forget about 'em.' He found what he was looking for, penetrated her with sheer force that brought a cry to her lips. Silly bitch, he ought to have gone for the other one, the girl she was dancing with, but it was too late now so he had to make the best of it. He'd been too eager, too hasty.

Lucy's whole body was rigid. Now she didn't want sex any more, just wished he would hurry up and get it over with. They ought to have gone back to the flat where it was nice and comfortable . . . and safe. She began to push with him, tried to pick up his rhythm, hoped that he would not want to play around and prolong it, or maybe try for a second come afterwards. He was breathing heavily, grunting as he knelt in between her voluptuous spread thighs and powered into her. She knew she would not orgasm. It was slipping away from her fast. She found herself listening again. There were a lot of movements out there in the darkness. That grating noise was a grasshopper. Ugh! She might be lying on one, or worse-ants, earwigs, spiders ... Oh God, Johnny, hurry up and come and have done with it!

Seconds later he obliged her. His silhouette above her was a blur of movement, the speed of his thrusting painful now that she had lost the feeling. His whole frame shuddered, convulsed, and as he fell forward his rough hands seized her breasts. She could not hold back her cry of pain and protest, the way he squeezed her tender flesh, the manner in which his teeth bit her neck like a starving vampire. Fighting him, but even her bulk had no chance against the sheer power of his lust. His teeth pinched her flesh; Christ, he'd drawn blood!

New fears; he could be one of these sex killers that you read about in the papers. They killed when they orgasmed, and afterwards they were full of remorse but it was too late then so they got rid of the body. Some were caught, a lot escaped.

'Stop it!' she shrieked.

His movements slowed gradually and his grip on her breasts slackened; not because she had cried out but because his needs were fulfilled. Temporarily anyway.

'What the hell's up with you? You a virgin or sommat?' He spoke angrily, no hint of tenderness in the way his hands stroked her stomach. He made no move to withdraw.

'No,' she was close to tears. 'But you hurt me. You still are.'

His hands were transferred to her shoulders, supporting his full weight. His face was in shadow but she knew his expression was one of anger. Don't kill me, please. Let me go.

'You're a fat slob,' he hissed. 'A real slut, the worst fuck I've ever had.'

'Let me go. Please.' She knew she was going to cry. If she did perhaps he would get off her.

'I'm not finished yet. And .you didn't even come.'

'I couldn't . . . listen!'

'I'm not falling for that one, darling.' All the same there were noises, rustlings as though heavy animals were moving about, beasts bigger than donkeys.

And suddenly a chilling sound broke the uneasy silence, a bestial cry of pain that was cut off almost as soon as it had begun. Then it came again, in unison, much louder, terrified braying, the drumming of hooves. A noise somewhere.

Click-click-clickety-click!

The two humans froze in their posture of intercourse. The sheer terror of the unknown numbed their brains. Creatures galloped wildly, screamed, fell and struggled. And on the faint sea breeze was borne the stench of rotting marine vegetation as though centuries of decaying seaweed had been dragged ashore.

Lucy began to struggle, twisted sideways so that they became disengaged. All around something awful was happening but they were unable to see what it was in the darkness. She clutched at Johnny, sobbed 'Don't leave me, Johnny. Oh please, don't leave me.'

'It's the donkeys,' he muttered. They must be fightin' or sommat. Let's get back.'

Clickety-ctick.

'What's that?' she whispered.

'I dunno, but let's go. If we follow this fence round it's got to bring us back to the gate.'

Then they saw them, tiny twin pinpoints, dozens of them in the enshrouding darkness, like pairs of glowworms, flickering with an unholy red fire like hot cinders from hell. Lucy screamed. Her partner tried to tear himself from her. Fuck it, if she clung to him like that they wouldn't be able to go anywhere.

'They're . . . they're eyes,' she screamed again.

'Donkeys' eyes,' he tried to convince himself, saw that flight was barred on either side of them. There was only one avenue of escape left. 'Get over the fence. They can't follow us there.'

Click-click.

Barbed wire bit deeply into the palms of her hands but she was oblivious to the pain; flesh ripped and shredded as she endeavoured to haul her ungainly bulk up on the wire strands.

And then the giant crabs moved in for the kill! Johnny first. He had almost made the top strand when he felt himself seized by a leg, something razor-sharp that closed and cut, yanked him into the air. A snip and he was suddenly free, falling, landing with full force on his bloodied stump. Even as his lungs filled for a second scream they moved in on him and cut him down. A badly judged pincer blow grazed his face, took an eye out and broke his right arm so that it dangled uselessly. Wild vicious lunges; he never managed that scream because now his throat was torn out leaving a deep werewolf-like gash that spouted blood.

And the killer crabs loved the smell and taste of blood. It sent them crazy with lust. The donkeys had merely whetted their insatiable appetites and now they craved for human meat.

Lucy clung precariously to the fence. In those few seconds the moon had cleared the range of mountains beyond and as if deliberately adding to her terror it cast its silvery glow over the scene. She saw the crabs, the majority of them still feasting on the remnants of the donkeys. This small bunch of a dozen or so, separated from the main lot, had discovered the two humans; Johnny was finished and now they wanted her.

The wire strands sagged; in a last futile gesture of self-survival she pressed herself back against the fence, the barbs digging cruelly into her flesh as though they were trying to prevent her from being dragged down. She was trying to scream; gurgling, crying. Warm acid water trickled down her legs.

The big crab shambled forward, halted a couple of yards from her. His revolting features appeared to crease into a lusting grin. The other crustaceans held back; it would take a brave and foolish crab to try and deprive their master of his rightful prey.

As a cat plays with a mouse so King Crab began to taunt Lucy. Sadistically he stretched out a pincer and she shrank back as far as the tension of the barbed wire would allow; gouging her shoulder blades and buttocks, the blood beginning to run freely. He touched her, scratched a breast, drew a dark red line all the way down her abdomen as though marking her out for mutilation. A clump of coarse hair; somehow he secured a grip, tugged, and the tuft came out by the roots. Lucy screamed with pain, would have fallen had the barbs not been impaled in her flesh, her arms stretched wide as though in crucifixion. She wanted to close her eyes, shut it all out, but some awful compelling force made her watch.

She had abandoned all hope. Afraid of death all her life, she suddenly wanted to die. Kill me, please!

The crab touched her again. It seemed curious concerning the human anatomy, prodding and poking, drawing more blood, perhaps unintentionally with its exploratory probings. Lucy's head fell forward and her eyes closed with sublime unconsciousness.

King Crab seemed to sense that she was no longer participating in this game of blood and pain, that there was no point in further torture. The pincer struck again, venomously this time, disembowelling the girl with a single blow. Entrails spilled from the abdominal gash, swung gently to and fro; a crustacean titbit.

Once more it was a revolting game, the monster crab catching the swinging human offal in its mouth, sucking the slimy warm intestines in the manner of a human eating spaghetti. Noisily. There was no hurry.

Suddenly blinding white light illuminated the field, a powerful hand-lamp swinging in an arc, its beam coming to rest on the hanging mutilated girl. Shouts of horror and disbelief. A shot was fired and the bullet pinged harmlessly off a crab's shell. More shouting, another shot.

King Crab turned slowly, faced his expectant followers. They lusted for human flesh and blood but they would obey him without question for such was the law beneath the ocean where strength ruled supreme.

Disappointment when they saw him turn, begin to shamble back the way they had come, but they did not question his decision. Every one of them knew that they would be returning to this place when it suited their leader. And not until.

Chapter Fourteen

Tuesday Morning-Barmouth

IT WAS full daylight when Jean Ruddington awoke. For some time she lay there on the crumpled bed attempting to recollect her thoughts. The night was gone and she still lived. She moved, winced as her muscles objected. Physically she had been pushed to the limit last night. She was also lucky still to be sane. Mentally, too, she had tottered on the brink.

Her thighs and stomach smarted, scorched but not really burned. Blisters; she winced as she looked down at them, but really no worse than bad sunburn. She was lucky, life itself was a bonus.

With some difficulty she rose to her feet, went across to the window. Jesus, what a sight out there! The harbour area and the lower half of Marine Parade, as far as the end of what had once been the funfair, was reduced to wreckage that still smouldered and smoked. Flashing blue lights everywhere, fire-engines and police. An ambulance was nosing its way through the ever-present crowd of sightseers. But there was no sign of the crabs. They had retreated back to their ocean stronghold, not because they had been driven back but because they had pillaged and were satisfied. For the time being. And meanwhile Barmouth licked its wounds and waited for them to come again.

She turned away, went through to the kitchen in search of coffee. She filled the kettle, put it on to boil, and found a half-filled jar of instant coffee granules and a tin of powdered milk. There was half a stale loaf on the bread board but- she wasn't hungry. It was going to take courage to face food again after what she had witnessed last night.

However, she had to make some plans. First, she could not stay here. In which case she needed clothes. Perhaps there were some of Gerry's clothes still left behind which would suffice for the time being. The thought repulsed her, it was like having his body against her own again.

Anger. Blaming herself. She had got herself into this hell-awful mess simply to get herself screwed by a no-good bastard of a hot-dog peddler-when she could have stayed at the camp and got fucked by a real nice Greencoat. Jesus Christ Almighty, how bloody stupid could you get!

Something was wrong; it took her maybe fifteen seconds to work out what it was-the electric kettle wasn't boiling even though it was plugged in and switched on. That meant that there was no electricity. Because the crabs had pulled the wires down. She reached down a glass, filled it half full of water and drank it. That would have to do for now.

She pulled out the drawers of the dressing-table in the bedroom, tipped the contents on to the floor. That sod could pick them up if he ever came back. Eventually she found a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, both several sizes too big, as she knew they would be. Still, they would not be rubbing against her blistered skin as much as tight-fitting garments; that was one consolation. And the less Gerry's clothes touched her flesh, the better.

Where to now? The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp? She paused. Going back there was like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Gordon? There were dozens of Gordons just as there were dozens of Gerrys. Nice guys and shits. Next time pick a nice guy, baby. Right now she didn't want men at all. Or women. She just wanted to go her own way, unmolested by man ... or beast!

You haven't got a job at the camp now so why go back? That made sense. She wondered if the army were letting pedestrians through in the other direction; it made sense to get rid of the holidaymakers and keep newcomers out. Further up the coast it was different because everybody would just spill into Barmouth and create havoc, get in the army's way.

Her cuts seemed to have congealed. A bit of a mess but when she got out of here she would go and get a tetanus jab. She was a bloody fool not to have had them before but you drifted into a state of apathy, thought nothing would ever happen to you. Most of the holidaymakers here had thought that and they had all had a bloody big shock.

She went downstairs and out into the street. God, what a stink, like somebody had been burning piles of old coats and had thrown a few dead dogs on the smouldering pyre just for good measure; the stench of roasting flesh! If her stomach had not been empty she would have thrown up.

This part of town was practically deserted. Everybody was down at the disaster area. Christ, you had to be sick to want to stand and look at that. Bloody sick!

It was going to be another scorcher. Elevate your eyes so that you missed the wreckage that had once been a sea front and you had an idyllic setting, a golden beach with a shimmering blue sea beyond. Don't look down whatever you do. And try not to think what's out there below the surface of the sea.

The road was starting to climb steeply now, a winding coastal road that led to freedom and sanity-if they let you through! Her tension was returning, something else, too, which she had to think about, eliminate it from her other thoughts before she could recognise it. More than a depression, a sense of foreboding. Your nerves are shot, that's all that's the matter. No, something awful is going to happen to you!

She even considered turning back. Oh shit, grow up, you stupid girl, and stop pandering to childish fears. If you go back down there the chances are that something ghastly will happen to you; those crabs will be back, that's a cert.

Why wasn't anybody else walking this way? Because they're all ghouls gathering at the scene of the carnage, mentally feasting on it. No better than the crabs. Keep going.

A heavy rumbling noise had her pressing herself back against the rough face of the overhanging roadside cliff. A lorry, a heavy six-wheeler with a canvas-covered back, a driver changing down to negotiate the gradient. Her arm almost went out. Don't make a bloody whore of yourself. Haven't you been screwed enough and that's what's got you into all this? By the time the camouflage-painted vehicle drew level with her she wouldn't have accepted a lift if it had been offered. No way.

It passed her and the driver had to slow down again. She had a glimpse of the load in the back; no wonder the truck was making heavy work of the slope. Concrete blocks; they really meant business with these road-blocks, it couldn't be for anything else.

That feeling, she got it again. Like somebody had thrown a shroud over her. Her skin prickled, she shivered. Your nerves are in a real bad way, girl. Delayed shock. She might have to go on Valium like she had for those few months after the car crash. You kept reliving every second of it, every minute detail that had you coming out of your sleep screaming. You heard brakes screeching, the lorry coming at you, closer . . . closer . . . bracing yourself . . .

Oh Jesus God, that lorry was coming right at her!

Seconds became hours, the whole world slowed down, and if Jean Ruddington had not slowed with it she might have been able to leap out of the way. This time it was that army lorry, otherwise it was not much different from the time before. Something had gone terribly wrong, maybe a half-shaft had snapped or the brakes had gone under the extreme weight of the load. A few blocks spilled out over the tailboard, fell under the truck and caused it to buck, almost overturning. But it didn't, it came on backwards, gathering speed!

The driver knew that he had to crash his truck fast. Hard-over to the right and he would have smashed through the roadside wall and gone down an almost vertical cliff into the start of the estuary below; hard-over to the left and he would hit the cliff face. Maybe it wasn't too late, the impact wouldn't be too severe. He had to make a split-second decision in that slow-motion world around him.

He swung the steering wheel hard over to the left! He had not even noticed the girl he had just passed. He had thoughts only for giant crabs.

Jean Ruddington's arms went out in front of her as though suddenly she would be gifted with divine strength sufficient to cushion the crushing impact, gently halt the lorry. It's OK, soldier, but I'm not giving away any favours. I just want to live. But instead I'm going to die!

The driver's door flew open on impact, threw him out into the road, a miraculous ejection as the truck became a concertina, its load of half-hundredweight blocks demolishing the cab as they flew forward and formed their own road-block, a pile of grey rubble that mushroomed dust as though to cloak the horror for which it was responsible.

The driver lay there in the road, watching, numbed. His dazed brain told him that he was alive, unhurt except for a few minor injuries. He was going to be OK, he really was.

And then he saw a rivulet of scarlet fluid trickling out from beneath the wreckage, a sticky mountain stream gushing downhill as though the laws of Nature commanded it to form a tributary flowing into the estuary below.

It took him several seconds to realise that it was blood. And then he fainted.

'Well,' Professor Cliff Davenport stared across the desk of the temporary operational HQ in Barmouth, his tired eyes taking in the lined features of Grisedale, Ministry of Defence Chief, 'what's the latest?'

Grisedale had just replaced the telephone receiver, a simple enough action but to him right then it seemed the most important thing in the world. He stared at the ivory instrument, steeling his nerves in case it rang again. He almost considered taking it off the hook, laying it on the desk, closing his eyes for just five minutes. A cat-nap. Five minutes in thirty-six hours, they would not begrudge him that, surely. But they would, because it would be a breach of duty, even by the most senior official.

'Let's have it then?' Davenport was suddenly eager again, throwing off his tiredness. 'What's happened now?'

'A party of crabs came ashore at the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp. The cunning devils didn't try to breach the sea-wall like we half expected them to. God, the bastards are almost human in their thinking, Cliff! They came ashore about two miles down the coast and travelled by land to the perimeter of the camp! That in itself is bloody amazing, frightening- a distance of two miles, out of water the whole time, which throws a frightening new dimension on the whole crisis! It appears they met up with a bunch of blokes who were trying to escape from the camp by following the shoreline and I don't need to go into details about the outcome, do I?'

'No,' Davenport grimaced, 'but what happened? Did they attack the camp?'

'Yes and no,' the Ministry man pursed his lips. They came to a big field on the outskirts of the camp where the donkeys are kept. They massacred the donkeys and killed an unfortunate courting couple who happened to be busy in the long grass and weren't aware of the crabs' approach. The noise attracted the attention of the soldiers and only a couple of shots were fired-but the crabs turned tail and scarpered back the way they'd come! For heaven's sake why, Cliff? Having come so far, and with the camp virtually at their mercy, why the devil were they driven off by a couple of shots when we know full well that they are capable of overturning Churchill tanks and are invincible to heavy artillery? You tell me that one!'

'I'd say they weren't driven off,' the botanist smiled wryly. 'We both know them better than that, as you've already said. We are now beginning to understand them just a little. I'd say they were testing their capabilities on dry land. This foray was an experiment and maybe they realised by the time they got to the donkey field that they could not stay out of salt water much longer. They had already feasted, both on that party of men and on the donkeys, and for the moment they were reasonably appeased. They took the least line of resistance and retreated.'

'A good point,' Grisedale scribbled on his jotter pad. 'Then see if you can solve this one. We know that there's a big crab, one a whole lot bigger than the rest, the one you nicknamed "King Crab". Well, according to reports, that bugger has been seen in two places at identical times. He led the party that reached the camp!'

'My God!' Davenport stiffened and his features paled. The knuckles of his hands gripping the desk were white. 'The very thing I had hoped wasn't possible! Let's just pray that it's a case of mistaken identity!'

'What the hell d'you mean?'

'Well, we don't know just how big these mutants can grow, do we? Maybe the bulk of these monsters are only half-grown, so far! Suppose there are just one or two that have attained full-size so far. I thought that maybe the big one was a freak, but suppose he isn't and there are more of them, males and females preparing to spawn a fresh batch of horrors whilst this lot continue to grow and rampage along our coastlines. Christ, we might only have touched the tip of the iceberg with what we've seen so far, Grisedale! Let's just hope I'm wrong and somebody's either exaggerated or else made a mistake!'

Grisedale's lips were a thin bloodless line. His mouth had gone suddenly dry and beneath his clothes his skin crawled. Davenport's theory was too terrible to contemplate, and if you gave it too much thought you'd end up in a head farm screaming at them to keep you locked up so that the crabs couldn't get you. 'I'm going back to Llanbedr,' Davenport rose wearily to his feet. 'If you need me call me at the Victoria Hotel. And if you want my advice, you can do with some rest, too.'

Grisedale nodded, watched the other leave the room, closing the door behind him. Cliff Davenport seemed to have aged a decade these last couple of days, he thought. At a glance you'd take him for forty-five. And things had to be bad when they got a guy like Davenport like that.

The Ministry man glanced down at his jotter again, reread the notes he had made during that call from Colonel Matthews. One other point which he had forgotten to mention to Davenport; he clicked his tongue in annoyance. Those bloody fool soldiers had overloaded a truck with concrete blocks and it had gone out of control on the steep hill out of Barmouth. Now they had one bloody big road-block right where they didn't want it!

A girl pedestrian had been killed, her body virtually unrecognisable. Unidentifiable. You had to be hard about death in the present circumstances. An awful lot of people had gone missing permanently since these crabs had gone on the rampage; mangled corpses that you didn't have a hope in hell of identifying.

Ever. Another death would go virtually unnoticed. And there would be more before this business was finished -if it ever was!

Grisedale shut his pad, leaned back in his chair and decided he would close his eyes for a few minutes. Until the telephone rang again. Yes, he'd forgotten to tell Cliff Davenport about the accident but the Professor probably wouldn't be interested anyway. He had enough on his plate as it was. They all had.

Chapter Fifteen

Tuesday Afternoon - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

GORDON SMALLWOOD accepted the fact that there was no way he could escape the advancing crabs. He was going to die just as Charlie and the others had died; he offered a quick prayer (he wasn't normally a religious man but deep down he believed in a Divine Being) that the end would be swift and relatively painless.

He heard them, their legs rattling on the hard rocky surface, the excited clicking of their pincers. Damn it, if that bloody imbecile hadn't hit him he would have made the leap across the cleft; it was no more than a metre wide anyway. Instead he had gone dizzy, stumbled, twisted his ankle and banged his head as he

fell. That stupid fucking kid, he was a menace who should have been kept out of harm's way in a home somewhere. Well, he wouldn't be making a nuisance of himself any longer. And neither would Gordon himself for that matter. He calculated his life expectancy in seconds rather than minutes.

He laughed; irony rather than hysteria. He would have been better off staying in the camp. Something had happened to Jean Ruddington, he knew it. Whatever it was, he would never see her again. If she was still alive then she would not be coming back. He could see through her now, saw a lot of things he had been blinded to earlier. Not love, just infatuation; her body, the way she used and excited you so that you overlooked all her other faults. Maybe she had not always been like that. Before the car accident she might have been different and the death of her husband had changed her personality. Sympathy, not love, that was what he felt for her. Sadness, too, but it would pass. And now he was getting all churned up about Irey and that would hurt, too, when it all exploded in his face. No, it wouldn't, because he would be dead. And so would she when the crabs attacked the camp. Everybody would be dead.

It was pitch dark, what the hell had happened to the moon? He tried to see but it was impossible. Just pitch blackness. The sky must have clouded over. No, it couldn't have because there wasn't any cloud and none was forecast; he had listened to the weather forecast on the radio in Irey's room. The heat was going on, not a sign of rain. Just one area of high pressure after another as far as the met. guys could tell.

He tried to move but he could not. It was as though his body was encased in a strait-jacket. He laughed, a hollow sound. That was it, he was stark raving mad and they had locked him up in a loony bin, strapped him down in a dark room; the crabs existed only in his own mind, a crazy hallucination that for him had become reality. So they had put him away.

Click-click-click-clickety-click.

They were real enough, he could hear them. Close. A scratching sound as if they were trying to excavate the rock. Why the bloody hell didn't they finish him off?

A game, that was what it was, a sadistic game. If he wasn't already crazy then they were going to drive him mad. All around he felt vibrations, solid rock quivering beneath their movements. He could smell them, too. He wrinkled his nose, tried to hold his breath so that he didn't breathe in the foul odour. Like rotting seaweed. In the end he had to draw breath and after a while he did not notice that stench of marine putrefaction any longer.

They were still here. Scratching, a desperation about their activities. Something showered over him and he spat gritty particles out of his mouth. Rock dust and chippings. He could feel it in his eyes also. That

clicking was getting fainter, the vibrations lessening. He strained his ears, picked up a lot of noises, some of which were in his own mind. Why hadn't they killed him like they had killed Charlie and the others? There was no answer to that. Fatigue. His aching body cried out for sleep and his eyes began to close. If he slept it did not matter; perhaps they would kill him then and he would know nothing about it. Strange uneasy dreams, half-reality, like a fevered child running a high temperature. Distant shots.

Animal cries of terror somewhere far away. More clicking, the rock vibrating again; the crabs were back. Then silence, a long silence that went on and on. Finally daylight; soft grey dawn light that woke him gently, had him opening his eyes and struggling to recollect recent events. It took him several minutes to realise just where he was and why he was still alive, why the giant crabs had not killed him.

He was lying in a narrow rock cleft, little wider than his own girth-the one he had attempted to jump! He had obviously fallen in it to a depth of several feet and had lain there just beyond the reach of the crabs' pincers! In the end the crustaceans had given up trying to get at him and had moved on elsewhere-and returned. Oh God, it might be all over at the camp, the Blue Ocean an area of total destruction, mutilated corpses lying buried in the wreckage! Irey!

Now that Gordon could see where he was he could make some constructive efforts to free himself. He was bruised and cut but as far as he could judge no bones were broken. His left ankle was trapped where the miniature crevasse tapered at the bottom but he managed to free it. Pins and needles, sheer agony. He sweated, waited for his circulation to flow again.

There were ample handholds in the rock and very slowly he pulled himself up, peered cautiously over the top. A deserted rocky beach with the tide lapping at the edge of the shore. No sign of the crabs, no evidence of their even having been there. Not a trace of bloody death-they were scavengers supreme, left nothing for the seabirds.

The sun was just coming up over Cader Idris, suffusing the mountains with soft golden light. A flock of gulls were calling noisily. So peaceful you could almost forget; unless your clothing was in tatters and your body a mass of cuts and bruises.

Gordon had to rest for a few moments before he could stand up, let a wave of dizziness pass. Then he set out on the long walk back to the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp.

'You're fired,' Miles Manning grunted, the large cigar between his lips bobbing up and down and showering ash all over the desk in front of him. 'You obviously don't want to work here and we had a lot of trouble finding a stand-in for you at the Greencoat Show last night. So you can get the hell out of here,

Smallwood.'

'That's fine,' Gordon eyed the American steadily. 'I'm only too pleased to go. Perhaps you can give me a pass to get me through the road-blocks.'

For a fleeting second uncertainty flickered in Manning's eyes then it was gone. 'Nobody's leaving the camp. You'll have to hang around like everybody else until the road-blocks are lifted. Collect a week's pay and get your stuff out of your quarters. Get it?'

'I get it,' Gordon sighed. The only thing he wanted right now was a shower, a change of clothes, and a long sleep. 'But I just hope you realise how vulnerable this camp is, Manning. You can build the sea-wall up until it's bigger and stronger than Hadrian's Wall but the crabs will just make a detour and come in overland.'

'You mind your own business,' more ash flew, a miniature snowstorm settling gently on papers and pamphlets. 'We got it all worked out, we can handle 'em. Just don't get interfering or I'll have you handed over to the police.'

'I'll be around,' Gordon made for the door, 'but not a minute longer than I have to because once I can get out of here I don't ever want to set foot in this God-awful place again.'

Miles Manning sat there at his desk staring vacantly at the wall after Gordon Smallwood had left. He bit on his cigar, the butt became soggy so that he had difficulty in lighting it. That jerk knew too much and in all probability he would be spreading stories round the camp that the Blue Ocean was vulnerable by land. Fuck him! But by now everybody probably knew anyway.

AH the same, there was no getting away from the fact that suddenly the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp had one bloody big Achilles' heel. Why the hell had the crabs turned back last night? He would try and get hold of Professor Davenport; if anybody knew the reason that guy would. They were all sitting ducks here. The authorities were playing it down, a day-by-day news bulletin that kept the masses quiet, gave them hope. Maybe tomorrow the roads would be open again and then everybody could go home. Working on a day-at-a-time basis. But it could be weeks, months, and any night they could be attacked, wiped out in a bloody carnage worse than either Shell Island or Barmouth; a death camp far worse than anything the Nazis or the Japs had ever dreamed up.

He picked up the phone, silent relief at hearing a dialling tone. At least something was still working. Annoyance because Davenport was not available at the Barmouth HQ. He replaced the receiver, dialled the Victoria Hotel at Llanbedr.

'I'm sorry, sir, Mr Davenport is in his room. His instructions were that he was not to be disturbed.'

Tell him it's Miles Manning.'

'I'm sorry, sir, but . . . '

'Look, this is a priority call.'

Some hesitation the other end. Manning drummed his fingers impatiently on the desk but he knew the guy would go and wake Davenport. Manning rarely failed to get his own way.

'Davenport speaking.' The voice sounded tired and far away. It might even have been mistaken for a drunken slur.

'You heard about what happened last night.' A terse statement, not a question.

'I heard.' An audible sigh; irritation. 'I don't know any more than you do, Manning.'

'You realise we're wide open landside and those bastards will be back for sure tonight. We're sitting ducks here if the army won't get us out.'

'You really ought to speak to Grisedale, this is his pigeon. My job is to study these mutants and try and find out about them so that we can combat them.'

'I can't get through to Grisedale,' Manning lied; Davenport was the only one with any common sense,

any awareness, amongst the lot of them. 'There's no time to piss about. It's nearly noon already. Why the hell can't they airlift our people out, use helicopters.'

'There are less than twenty helicopters in this whole area,' Davenport snapped. 'Allowing for a maximum load, besides the pilot, of say five, work out how long it would take to empty our camp. Anyway, eight of those choppers are fully employed in coastguard duties and we can't take 'em off that.'

'This lot has really caught you with your pants down,' Manning crushed the remains of his cigar angrily into the ashtray, fumbled another out of the cedarwood box by his elbow. 'There's no time to build a defensive wall, and anyway the area's too big. How about some landmines, anti-tank calibre?'

'No chance. The last thing the Ministry are going to do is plant a network of mines in a holiday resort area. Anyway, if our heaviest artillery can't stop the crabs it's a cert that mines won't either.'

'So we're just going to be left as crab bait?' The holiday-camp owner's hand trembled with fury as he flicked his lighter, moved the flame in towards his cigar.

'We're hoping that the crabs won't attack the camp.'

'You're fucking hoping. So am I.'

'Look, Manning, I've had two hours' sleep in the last thirty-six and you've disturbed those. But let me just tell you this. The moon controls the crabs' movements, at least it does with normal crabs and these big ones only went on the rampage when the moon was nearly full. It's waning now. If the laws of Nature apply to these devils then they'll be losing the urge to venture out of the sea. There's every chance that we won't be troubled again until the next full moon and by that time they might have moved on elsewhere. At least we'll have a chance to get the holiday-makers out of the area and make some preparations.'

'Sure the moon's waning,' Manning grunted, 'but it's still a bloody big silver ball that lights up the whole countryside. Even if your theory's correct then they could still have two or three more nights of activity left.'

'Grisedale's ordered another company of infantry to move into the camp. I happen to know that much.'

The army are stretched but they'll do everything possible. I guess if the crabs do look like breaking through they'll try and get everybody out on to the road and escort 'em on foot inland as far as is necessary. I don't know, I'm only guessing. But look, I need my sleep if I'm going to work the clock round from tonight onwards. Don't worry, the authorities won't leave you in the lurch.'

Like hell they won't, Manning thought as he replaced the receiver and managed to get his cigar going, drawing the rich Havana smoke deep down into his lungs, expelling it slowly through his nostrils. He was sweating and it was not solely due to the heat. A pain in his stomach which at any other time he might have attributed to colic, might even have consulted a doctor in case he had gallstones. But he knew only too well what was causing it, would not have admitted it to anybody but himself. Even so, realisation hurt- Jesus H. Christ, I'm shit scared! But I'm not going to panic. There must be a way out, there has to be.

It took him about thirty seconds to discover that one avenue of escape, a lifeline which would ensure his own safety. Nobody else's, because if he so much as breathed his idea aloud there might be a mutiny in the camp.

He went outside. The pain in his abdomen receded and life was looking good again. The crabs would take the camp, he hated to see it go, but ultimately that was his insurance broker's worry. It could be rebuilt, somewhere where there weren't any crabs as big as cows.

He wandered down towards the beach, mounted those crude sandbag steps as though he was inspecting the defences out of idle curiosity. A patrolling sentry acknowledged him, passed on. Nobody challenged him because he was Miles Manning.

Twenty yards away, bumping gently against the jetty, the Ocean Queen rode the slight swell. She had always looked good but now she was magnificent. Manning smiled his pride, his relief. Had she not ridden unscathed through the crab army that first night? What she had done once she was capable of doing again.

He shaded his eyes, tried to make out a hazy landmass out across Cardigan Bay. He thought he could see an outline, it didn't really matter if it was only a mirage. Across the bay lay the Irish coast. And the Ocean Queen was fully fuelled. At the first sign of the crabs Miles Manning was leaving fast. Alone.

'I'll move into the children's room,' Irely Wall said. There's plenty of room for Louise and me in her bed. You can have mine, Gordon.'

'I'll be OK on the floor in my sleeping bag,' he tried not to show his disappointment. Hell, what had he expected? 'We'll sleep together, Gordon'? It probably had not even occurred to her, she wasn't that kind of girl.

'No, you won't,' she was adamant.

'Look,' he said. 'I need to sleep now. It's already 2.30. If I can get an uninterrupted six hours I'll be OK for tonight and I don't want to be caught in bed if . . . '

Rodney and Louise were playing in their bedroom. He didn't want to alarm them. They must not be frightened; after all there was just a chance that the crabs wouldn't come, that they had sized the camp up last night and had decided that it wasn't worth it. Maybe they would go for somewhere else along the coast. Aberdovey, Towyn, perhaps Harlech.

'I'll take the kids out for an hour or two,' there were dark lines beneath her eyes, more than a suggestion that she had not slept the previous night; she might have been crying as well. 'But please don't go off again, Gordon.'

'I won't,' hopes which he dared not raise. 'But if the worst comes to the worst you're coming with me, the kids as well. It all depends on what happens tonight.'

'Where would we go?'

'I ... don't really know,' he dropped his gaze, could not meet her eyes. 'But I'm working on it. I'll think of something, don't worry.'

'Are we going to the funfair, Mummy?' Louise came running through, followed by Rodney. The boy was strangely quiet; it was no wonder after his terrible experience. All the same it troubled Irey.

'Yes, we're going to the fair and the amusement arcade.'

'I don't want to go on the boats, Mummy,' Louise's pert features were strained. She might burst into tears at any second.

'We're not going anywhere near the boating lake,' Irey smiled but her lower lip trembled. 'Nor the beach.'

'Can we ride on the donkeys, Mummy?'

'We'll see,' Irey paled, wondered how long it would be before the children learned the fate of the donkeys.

As soon as they had gone Gordon stripped to his pants and vest and flung himself full length on the bed. One fleeting thought crossed his mind as exhaustion claimed him. Jean Ruddington was dead. He didn't know how or why he knew, except that she was dead. It would not come as a shock when the news was conveyed to him. Sadness, but life had to go on.

In the same strange inexplicable way he also knew that the crabs -would attack the camp tonight. And that was a far worse prospect. He had to figure out some way to get Irey and the children to safety. First, though, he needed to sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Tuesday Night - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

RICKY WINTERBOTTOM was a worried man and not just because of the crabs. At the moment they were a close number two in his list of headaches; Miles Manning was number one.

Christ, the boss was a real bastard! A string of orders that had virtually caused a Greencoat rebellion -'get the boating lake in action again and get the reserve kiddies' motorbikes off the scrambling track and on to the donkey field. I don't give a shit if it's churned to hell. A Greencoat Show matinee as well as an extra performance tonight, and we want two major feature films showing at the cinemas. The miniature railway can still run as far as the sea-wall and back. Quadruple the bingo prizes and have all callers on stand-by. None of the shops are to close before ten tonight.'

To use the chief's own catch-phrase, 'Jesus H. Christ!'

Winterbottom was in the firing line, the meat in the sandwich between Manning and every level of staff. They wouldn't dare say anything to Miles Manning so they said it all to the camp manager. Security were getting pissed off too; a day-long never-ending queue. Tell folks the crabs changed their mind about attacking us last night so the chances are they'll leave us alone tonight.

Balls! Everybody was on the verge of panic. Two deaths from heart attacks. Stress, but they were crab victims all the same.

'How's it going, Ricky?' Miles Manning wearing a spotless white duck suit appeared in the manager's office. Suave, he might have been a district commissioner in Africa when it was still part of the Empire, enquiring how many natives had died in a recent outbreak of cholera. He didn't give a damn really but he asked just the same. Underneath his veneer he didn't give a shit about the crab victims either. It was the reputation of the Blue Ocean which mattered to him. We kept the entertainment going throughout. In fact most folks forgot all about the crabs.

'We got the shows going, boss,' Winterbottom had an unfortunate habit of scratching his backside when he was nervous. 'Trouble is, the cinemas are empty and there's less than twenty people at the Greencoat Show. Folks are either clustered in groups worrying about what might happen tonight or else they're stopping in their digs. All those extra soldiers turning up didn't help.'

'They might if the crabs show up tonight.'

'They're making everybody as nervous as hell because folks know that however many guns you got, no matter how big and powerful, you might as well use pea-shooters out of the souvenir shops. We had to stop the hiking on the donkey field, by the way. The soldiers have set up their defences there.'

'That's okay,' Miles smiled, blew a perfect smoke ring up towards the ceiling. 'By the way, a thought crossed my mind this afternoon, Ricky. We haven't had a chance to bank the takings since all this began. Having all the cash in the safes under one roof is a risk. A mob on the rampage might raid the office for what they can get.'

'I don't think they'd have much luck. They'd have to know both combinations because no way would they bust in otherwise, not even those anti-tank shells would crack these modern safes. Or the crabs for that matter!' An attempted laugh at his own weak joke.

'Nevertheless, I think we ought to distribute the high-denomination bank notes. Pack twenty-five grand in tens and twenties, and any fifties you might have, into suitcases and I'll transfer them to the safe in my quarters.'

'Christ, boss, there's no need to . . . '

'Pack 'em and I'll take 'em now!' Manning snapped.

Ricky Winterbottom trembled visibly and within seconds his shaking finger was starting to work the combination lock of the big safe. If the boss wanted the notes he could fucking well have 'em. It was all his bleedin' money, anyway.

Gordon Smallwood stirred, stretched, looked at his watch. 5.25.

He had slept deeply and he felt refreshed. Only a hint of stiffness and a few aches remained, nothing worse. He lay there listening; just a faint hubbub, the usual background noise of any holiday camp, fairground music vying with top-twenty records in the amusement arcade. Irey wasn't back yet. She was probably keeping the children out of the way as long as possible so that Gordon could have the benefit of an uninterrupted sleep.

He rose, went into the bathroom. The next few hours were going to be the worst, the whole camp on edge. Maybe there would be more 'break-cuts' or perhaps people would stay put having learned their lesson from what had happened to Charlie and his followers. There was no way of knowing.

He went outside on to the balcony. Some youths were playing cricket on the grass down below. It was a half-hearted game, lacked enthusiasm; they were playing because they could not think of anything else to do, a kind of fatalism that manifested itself in boredom. You had to do something but you didn't really want to, some kind of physical action like a robot.

Gordon closed the door behind him, walked slowly away. He decided to go in search of food, not because he was hungry but, like those kids, it was better than sitting around doing nothing. Lines of washing were strung outside chalets and flats; he passed a score of people but nobody wanted to acknowledge anybody else's presence. Just living for themselves, praying that they would be the lucky ones left alive.

The Cavalier Bar was packed to capacity, the tables crowded, people standing. He pushed his way through the throng, managed to attract a barmaid's attention; a pint of shandy that tasted sour and was lukewarm and a pasty that might have been made of cardboard. Maybe it was his taste, his own biochemistry all mixed up.

One record after another on the juke-box. It was just as well because nobody wanted to sit in silence. Conversation had long flagged. There were only giant crabs to discuss and nobody wanted to talk about them. You had given up trying to work out ways of getting out of here because all avenues of escape had been explored by somebody and had ended in either failure or death. In the end you faced up to the prospect of staying and it wasn't a pleasant one. But you had to accept it.

Some soldiers came into the bar, young squaddies in sweat-stained khaki shirts. Heads turned, somebody muttered 'What the fuck's the use of sendin' the army?' A token gesture by a System that suddenly wasn't working any longer. Man no longer ruled the oceans; soon he would concede defeat on

dry land and that prospect was becoming closer by the hour.

Gordon finished his drink and forced his way back outside. The music from the fairground seemed much louder, perhaps Manning had ordered it to be played at full blast. The bingo houses were less than half-full in spite of the attractive prizes being offered. For once money did not count; you couldn't buy safety.

Irey was back. Rodney and Louise were quarrelling again and she had shut the bedroom door on them. She looked up as Gordon entered.

'How are you feeling?' she managed a brave smile but Gordon could see how frayed her nerves were, those lines beneath her eyes etched deeper.

'I'm OK,' he replied.

'I'll make you some food.'

'Thanks, but I've eaten.'

'You needn't have bothered. I've got to make something for these kids. They can't exist on ice creams and toffee apples.'

An awkward silence. Conversation was drying up just as it had in the Cavalier Bar. He prayed she wouldn't ask him if he had come up with any ideas but she didn't. She guessed he hadn't.

'We went to that adventure playground,' she opened the fridge, reached out a packet of frozen fish fingers and a bag of crinkly chips. 'God, it was a nightmare. The children got bored with the swings after a while and then they started playing in those stupid tunnels. The damned things are so long and just wide enough for an adult to crawl into. Rodney and Louise thought they were wonderful, crawled right into the middle of one and absolutely refused to come out. In the end I had to go into it and drag them out!'

Something clicked in Gordon's brain; his skin prickled, those bruises ached vehemently as though trying to tell him something. A human computer trying to process a mass of data and coming up with the right answer. The playground tunnel . . . that rock cleft on the beach ... his body pressed tightly between the walls, defying the crabs' attempt to reach him.

'That's it!' He snapped his fingers jubilantly. 'By Christ, that's the answer to the question I've been asking myself for the past two hours!'

'What is?' She stared at him blankly. 'What on earth are you talking about, Gordon?'

'We can beat those crabs. You, me and the children. Thank God they went down that tunnel this afternoon and played you up.'

'Are you sure you're OK?' There was an expression of genuine concern on her features.

'I haven't felt better for several days. Let me explain before you lie me down on the bed and dope me with aspirin. I'm only alive because I fell into that rock cleft where the crabs couldn't reach me. Likewise, they wouldn't be able to reach into that play tunnel. We just need to be sure that we're in plenty of time to get in there before they reach us.'

'It sounds too good to be true, but what about everybody else in the camp?'

'Much as I'd like to help them there's only going to be room for one or two in the tunnel. We've got to make sure that we're bang in the middle, as far from both ends as possible. I think our best plan is for you to put the kids to bed right after tea. You'd better try and get some rest as well. The moon will be late rising, sometime about one. So if we make our way up to the adventure playground about 12.30 I reckon we'll have plenty of time to beat the crabs.'

'I'd better get this meal made,' she turned to the working surface, began tearing open the bag of chips.

'I'm sure Rodney and Louise will think it's great fun spending the night in that horrible dank tunnel.'

'Well, even if the crabs don't attack we won't come to any harm,' he said. 'And by the way, I've changed my mind, I think I will have some fish fingers and chips.'

Dusk crept across the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp, its approach scarcely noticeable in the dazzling glare from multi-coloured neon lighting. Music still blared, bingo numbers were called to near-empty halls. Feature films that would have drawn crowds in almost any provincial town or city were shown to sparse audiences. People were no longer gullible enough to fall for diversion tactics.

Families remained in flats and chalets as though the flimsy brickwork offered them protection, apart from one sizeable crowd which had gathered beyond the boating lake from where they had a full view of the donkey field.

Two tanks had arrived during the late afternoon and had been positioned at either corner of the field, their combined arc of fire giving them complete coverage of the area. Soldiers took cover behind a series of riot barriers. A dozen armoured cars faced back towards the camp. The colonel in charge had not overlooked the possibility of a hasty retreat; he had already witnessed the scenes by the harbour at Barmouth.

Searchlights swivelled, their beams criss-crossing backwards and forwards. A rabbit could not have traversed the thick rough grass without being spotted.

The police had considered dispersing the crowd but had decided against it. Whilst the throng waited and watched they were unlikely to cause any trouble. The armaments and flimsy defences gave them a sense of security. Away from this scene of activity their terror would be urging them to seek a diversion. They were better under observation.

11.30. Everybody watched and waited. The night sky beyond the glare of the artificial lights was dark and cloudless, ominous, as though a shroud had been cast over the camp.

Miles Manning stood by the large window of his private quarters, the room in darkness. From here he had an elevated unrestricted view of the donkey field a quarter of a mile away. His breathing was shallow, the way it always was on the rare occasions when he was afraid; outwardly he gave no sign of his fear. Not that it would have mattered, anyway, because he was alone, his instructions to Ricky Winterbottom that he was not to be disturbed.

By the door stood two suitcases. Once Manning glanced back, discerned their squat outline in the shadows; just checking that they were still there. It was a sure sign that his nerves were stretched; suitcases just didn't disappear like that. He had to be sure, though. Twenty-five thousand pounds, mostly in ten- and twenty-pound notes. Where he went, that money went. And as if to satisfy his own conscience he kept telling himself that it was his money anyhow, it was fuck-all to do with anybody else.

His thoughts turned to the Ocean Queen. She was seaworthy and powerful, and he had handled her himself for long periods two or three years ago during a Mediterranean cruise. He knew he could reach the Irish coast in her. After that he would play it as it came. He had hard cash and plenty of it. And money talked.

Staring fixedly at the distant brightly illuminated scene. Soldiers moved to and fro behind the portable steel barriers; they irritated him. Sit down you stupid bastards and keep still! Christ, his nerves were bloody bad.

Another thought; suppose the crabs didn't show up. The money would go back into the safe in Security, the Ocean Queen would continue to bob restlessly at her moorings. What a fucking anti-climax!

Now that his escape route was all mapped out, Miles Manning wasn't worried about the crabs any longer. If they wrecked the camp then the compensation would be adequate, and in addition to that he would have twenty-five grand which the tax inspector would never trace. Another venture elsewhere, maybe a different country.

He glanced at his watch. 12.30. Suddenly he was becoming impatient.

'This is the place,' Gordon Smallwood shone his torch briefly in the darkness of the adventure playground, the yellow beam of light showing a circular concrete pipe, a yard in diameter, sticking out of a high grassy bank like a section of an unfinished drainage system. Ugly, but tonight it looked beautiful.

He knelt down, shone the light inside it, and could just make out the other end. The tunnel was a good twenty yards long; it was adequate. He straightened up, swung the beam round in a semicircle; swings and a helter-skelter, a roundabout that you operated by standing on the edge and propelling it with a foot on the ground in the manner of a scooter. Bu;, most important of all, there was nobody else in sight.

'Well, we've got the place to ourselves,' there was relief in his voice. 'I thought we would but you never know. At least nobody else thought of it. We can wait here for the time being.'

'Mummy, can we go in the tunnel again?' Rodney was fully awake by this time, pulling at Irey's arm.

'No, darling. We're going to stay here for a bit. There's a bench here we can sit on.'

'Why can't we go in the tunnel?'

She almost said 'Because it's dark and smelly in there', just checked herself in time. 'We've got all night. We'll go in the tunnel later. We don't want to do everything at once, do we?'

'Why have we come to the swings in the dark, Mummy?' Louise was always curious about everything. It was encouraging that the child had an enquiring mind but at a time like this it could be exasperating.

'Uncle Gordon and I thought it would be exciting to spend a night out in the open. Like camping,' was all that she could think of on the spur of the moment. 'Now let's sit on this bench for a while and have a rest. Then perhaps in a bit we'll go in the tunnel.'

They retired to the bench; Gordon on the end with Irey close to him, Rodney and Louise reluctantly next to them. After a few minutes the constant excited chattering of the two children died away; they were beginning to feel sleepy again. This nocturnal outing had suddenly become boring.

Suddenly Gordon was aware that Irey's hand was in his, her fingers entwined with his own. His pulses stepped up a gear. He turned his head slightly and in the darkness could just make out the pale outline of her face. Her eyes met his and her fingers squeezed slightly. Oh God, the thing he wanted most of all and it has to be at a time like this. Silence, each of them confused with their own thoughts, the problems that lay ahead; the children, a husband to whom fishing was more important than his wife and children, whether the crabs would come or not . . .

Gordon had made up his mind to kiss Irey. It needed courage. He was not sure how she might respond. Please, Gordon, don't. The children might see us. Any number of excuses because she was conventional and indoctrinated into middle-class respectability. On the other hand . . . There was only one way to find

out and he had to know.

His tips moved closer to hers.

And then the night was shattered by bursts of heavy gunfire.

Chapter Seventeen

Early Wednesday Morning - The Blue Ocean Holiday Camp

1.45. THE SOLDIERS had relaxed a little with the passing of several hours. The tension had eased but vigilance remained constant. They would have plenty of warning of the crabs' approach, several hundred yards in front of them lit up by dazzling artificial lights. Targets that could not be missed; the only nagging doubt was that their shells might not prove effective. The crustaceans had withstood heavy artillery on previous occasions and there was no reason to suppose that tonight would be any different. But what else was there short of nuclear bombs?

And suddenly the crabs were there on the apex of the triangle which the searchlights cast. Watching them, their eyes like a multitude of flashing rubies, scintillating angrily in the blinding glare. Hundreds of them!

The soft meadowland beyond the field had enabled them to approach quietly, the darkness cloaking their advance. And now they were here, arrogantly defying anything that the army could throw at them.

Blinding orange flashes, stabbing flame from the barrels of automatic rifles. Heavy concentrated fire, a hail of leaden death to anything in its path . . . except the monstrous crustaceans!

The crabs came forward in a shambling rush, fanning out into the entire width of the field, line after line of them. And at their head was the creature which Professor Cliff Davenport had dubbed 'King Crab', its pincers seeming to wave the others forward.

Grenades and mortars came into action. A crab on the right of the advancing crustaceans received a direct hit. It roiled over, lay there dazed. Then, with an effort that taxed even its supreme strength to its very limits, it hauled itself up and with sideways lumbering movements tried to catch up with the others. Its features were a slimy scarlet morass but it did not seem to notice.

Colonel Matthews gave the order to retreat. The big gates leading out on to the main Barmouth road had been opened, a security officer was shouting instructions over the tannoy, wondering if he could possibly be heard against the deafening noises of the melee. Those campers who wished could move out on to the road; the soldiers would give them covering fire for as long as they could. Others who did not wish to leave could congregate in the swimming bath or remain in their flats and chalets. 'Hurry please, one or the other, there isn't Y much time. We can't stop the crab advance!'

People were stampeding, screaming and cursing, carrying young children. There was no way the crabs could be halted, you just had to try and get out of their way; it was the only way to stay alive.

Arthur and Fay Thompson had remained in their accommodation ever since they had received news of Benjie's fate; grief interspersed with excuses, consolations.

'He wouldn't have lived a normal life span,' Fay had said, dry-eyed. 'A lot of mongols only live to about thirty or forty.'

'He wasn't a mongol,' Arthur's tone was like a recitation, flat and expressionless, an argument without any vehemence.

'It's much the same thing, though.' A long pause. 'Maybe it was for the best, he couldn't have been happy like that.' Don't you see, Arthur, we're free after fifteen years of hell, living in our own private loony bin? But that was something she would never put into words. Even the worm turned sometimes.

A whole day and half a night sitting in the stifling confinement of those four small walls, not eating or drinking, not even opening a window. Not sleeping. Seeking a kind of repentance that manifested itself in self-exonerations.

Then they heard the crabs attacking, that message over the tannoy, distorted but they got the gist of it. Stay in or flee, the choice is yours.

Fay Thompson stood up, had to hold on to a chair for support. Then shakily she walked across the room. Her husband did not speak until she had opened the door and was stepping over the threshold.

'Where are you going, Fay?' He didn't really care but he would go where she went, not because of any affection but because he had become accustomed to following where she led over the years. Mostly it was only down to the shops, window-gazing in clothing stores.

'Out there,' he barely heard her whisper, heard her feet clacking on the wooden floor of the balcony.

She was walking fast now so that he could barely keep up with her. All around them people were running, shouting. A crowd jammed the road to the left, the one that led up to the main exit. Fay turned right, a lone bowed figure between the deserted buildings.

The firing had stopped. Just the clicking of the oncoming crabs. Then a burst of mortar fire, a blinding flash.

Arthur tried to shout to Fay to turn back, saw how where she was headed; a diagonal course that was

taking her on to that bloody battleground that had once been a donkey field, tearing her clothing on the barbed wire, streamers of pleated skirt trailing behind her.

Only then, when she was a matter of twenty yards from the crabs, did that pent-up grief explode. Tears, her shouting unheard in the noise. 'You devils, you killed my boy. Now put me out of my misery. D'you hear? Kill me!'

Arthur watched in dumbstruck horror as the vile monstrous tide overran her like a mountain avalanche, gigantic boulders that crushed anything in their path, flattened and buried her so that when they had passed all that was left was an unrecognisable mulch that stained the brown grass crimson.

Arthur stood there transfixed, not caring whether he lived or died. But he would live because the crabs were streaming on an unwavering course as though they had a definite destination in mind. One human was of no consequence; they had not even paused to devour what was left of Fay Thompson.

Miles Manning had left his quarters the moment the first shots were fired. Hurrying but trying not to panic, clutching those suitcases to him. They were remarkably light; twenty-five grand didn't weigh much in this age of large denomination notes.

His breathing was so shallow that he had to draw breath consciously, threw his cigar away in a shower of sparks. Just a few hundred yards, cast off the Ocean Queen's moorings and start the engines. Then he could relax.

A sudden pain brought him to a halt, a sharp biting twinge in his chest. For a moment the buildings around him seemed to spin and the gunfire was a million miles away. With an effort he steadied himself, walked forward. There's no rush, the crabs won't be coming this way for some time yet. Take your time.

Indigestion, that's what it was. He ought to have eaten. All he had had this last twenty-four hours was brandy and cigars. Flatulence, that's what his trouble was. Wind. Christ, it was bloody painful!

The sea-wall at last. It must have taken him hours to reach it; staring back behind him but there was still no sign of the crabs, just a God-awful row in the distance, shooting and screaming, a showering of brickwork as though one of those blocks of holiday flats had been demolished.

A silver sea, shimmering gently in the soft moonlight. The Ocean Queen, so majestic as it rode the tide. Another sharp pain as though somebody had jabbed a screwdriver in Miles Manning's torso. He winced, wheezed.

'Hold it there!'

He stiffened, peered into the shadows, saw the sentry with rifle held at the ready, coming up from a sitting position on the sandbags.

'You can't go that way I'm afraid, sir!' The other advanced a step. Just a kid, a raw rookie who had never anticipated having to use his rifle any place except the range. Manning tensed, felt his anger rising and that made his chest hurt even more, damn it! Boys with guns could be dangerous.

'It's me,' his voice was a whisper, a pain-racked croak. 'Miles Manning.'

'I'm sorry, sir, but my orders are to prevent anybody from crossing the sea-wall. Now please turn around and go back to the camp.'

You fucking cheeky kid! This is my camp and I'll go where the hell I please. I bloody own every square inch of it. And that's my boat out there, too.

'Now hurry on back, sir. You heard the announcement over the loudspeaker. You can either go back on to the road or remain in the buildings. There isn't much time, the crabs are already attacking.'

Manning lowered his suitcases to the ground, his breath coming fast, panting like a dog that had been racing about in the heat of the day. Of all the fucking bad luck. But no kid was going to stop him leaving.

'I'm . . . going on to ... my boat.' The effort of speaking, combined with a stirring of that familiar uncontrollable rage, had the dizziness returning; a grey mist that seemed to come in off the bay, tinged with red, blurring his vision so that the soldier was just a silhouette.

'Go back, sir. That's an order!'

Order be fucked! Manning knew what he had to do, the only course open to him if he was to escape from here in the Ocean Queen. He had struck a man only a few weeks ago, a cheeky luggage boy no different from this punk; broken his jaw. Only his money had saved him from an assault charge. Well, this stupid bloody soldier boy was going to have his jaw broken just like that.

Manning's arm went back, his huge fist clenching. A blinding pain, a hammer blow in his chest that had him reeling, sprawling across the two suitcases. The mist was thickening, darkening. That fucking soldier had hit him and by Christ nobody laid a finger on Miles Manning and got away with it! Trying to heave himself back up but he hadn't got the strength. A voice somewhere, urgent, frightened, 'Are you all right, sir?'

Of course I'm not fucking all right, you bastard. You hit me. Oh God, my chest. The pain, I can't stand it! A wheeze that would have been an agonised scream. Then the blackness closed in and the pain receded.

The young soldier stood there, frightened. Frightened because he was alone with death. Killing, mutilation all around him, but this was a thousand times worse, this guy collapsing, clutching at his chest. He considered going for help. There's a man collapsed with a heart attack on the sea-wall. I think he's dead, I can't be sure. Send for an ambulance.

You have to be joking. There's dozens dying all around and dozens more will be killed before the crabs go back into the sea. We can't waste time with heart attacks, Soldier.

So the sentry retreated, went and stood beyond the bend in the sea-wall where he couldn't see the prostrate figure, tried to tell himself that there wasn't a corpse there at all. It was his fears getting the better of him.

Oh Jesus Christ, how long before it got light!

'We'd better get in the tunnel,' Gordon Smallwood said.

Irey jerked into conscious realisation; somewhere not very far away guns and bombs were exploding, harsh reverberant sounds that had the children clinging to her, whimpering with fear. Gordon was helping her, holding Louise and Rodney whilst she dropped on to her hands and knees, saw in the beam of the torch where she had to go. Oh my God, she was sure to get claustrophobia.

Crawling. It smelled, a cloying damp stench like stale urine. A huge section of concrete sewer pipe, that was all it was. Grit and stones had been carried in there by playing children and once she almost cried out when a jagged piece of gravel cut into her knee.

'That'll do,' Gordon's voice echoed, made her jump, 'That's about the middle. Now He there, try and relax.'

'I'm OK,' she called back, turned her head and caught sight of Louise's white scared features. 'Mummy, I want to go home.' 'All right, darling, we shan't be here long.' 'We're down here so the crabs can't get us,' Rodney surmised in an adult tone of voice. 'Otherwise we'd be eaten.'

Oh, belt up, Rodney, the last thing we want is Louise having hysterics. 'We're quite safe, Rodney, so don't either of you get worrying.'

The sounds of battle were muffled, almost like standing in the foyer of a cinema waiting for the first showing to finish so that you could go in for the second. Gunshots, shouting; the concrete pipe vibrating. Vehicles, probably army trucks on the move. Retreating!

They lay and waited, the children in between them. Gordon wished he could think up some kind of game, anything to divert their attention from what was happening outside. But there were very few games designed for such situations.

Then they heard the giant crabs coming. The circular concrete vibrated, trembled violently, and an awful thought crossed Gordon's mind. Suppose the pipe cracked under the pressure of their weight, and tons of soil and rubble buried them alive. He tried to push the fear from his mind, hoped it hadn't occurred to Irey. No, these sewer pipes were manufactured to withstand tremendous weights; what about those beneath motorways and railway lines?

Louise was crying, Rodney was attempting to hold back his tears.

Click-click-clickety-click-click-click. Like an army of hags knitting furiously, French revolutionaries eager for the sight of blood and more blood. Something blocked the faint circle of moonlight at the far end, bone scraped on concrete, scratched furiously in the manner of a terrier attempting to unearth a rabbit in a blocked burrow.

Irey screamed, she could not hold it back, reached behind her and clutched Louise. Rodney clung to her leg, she felt his fingers pinching her skin through her frayed jeans.

'It's all right,' Gordon bellowed, only the magnification of his voice in this narrow space enabling him to be heard. They can't reach us. D'you hear, they can't get at us!'

It was as though the crab had heard him, realised that he spoke the truth, for almost immediately the pincer was withdrawn. It did not try again.

The vibrations, the clicking reached a peak then gradually died away. Gordon listened, tried to form a picture in his mind of what was going on up above. The crustaceans appeared to have embarked upon a definite course as though they were following a preconceived plan. They had come in from the fields, the way he had guessed they would, swung around by the boating lake, across the car-park ... the adventure playground . . . Christ, he saw it now, could have yelled his jubilation aloud-a hit-and-run raid, taking the same direction that that lone crab had done the other night; they were on their way back to the sea!

Waiting, praying that it was all over. They would live. Other thoughts that he scarcely dared to think about. Suddenly everything had become an anti-climax and Gordon Smallwood felt very, very tired.

'Stay here, I'm going to take a peep outside,' he began to edge himself backwards down the tunnel.

'Gordon, be careful!' Irey's anxiety was magnified by the echoes.

'I will,' he replied, 'but I think they've gone. We must make sure though.'

Out of the concrete pipe, seeing the playground around him, swings buckled out of all recognition, the ground ploughed up into deep uneven criss-crossing furrows. He dragged himself up the mound above their hiding place, stood with cramped limbs on the top, a vantage point from which he could see the camp around him.

Oh God, what desecration! The car-park a veritable scrap yard, vehicles piled up in heaps where they had been pushed to one side by the oncoming crabs, others crushed into flat sheet metal. Several were burning, petrol tanks exploding, a frightened crowd gathered on the far side, just watching. Perhaps they, too, found it difficult to believe that they were still alive.

On past the boating lake, the skating rink a mound of rubble where the entire building had been brought down. Shop fronts damaged on the long street where the crab army had crushed together to squeeze through. And there, miraculously, the damage ended. Straight on to the sea-wall by the jetty, completing the demolition job on that section of sandbags which had been started by the lone crab from the boating lake. And on into Cardigan Bay.

You saw the damage and you read the story like you would a book. A few people had died but not many because time was not on the crabs' side. A few nights ago it would have been a different story but now their god, the moon, was not on their side; he imposed restrictions, prevented them from travelling any great distance from the sea, called them back; a call which they could no more deny than the children and rats of Hamelin when they heard the Piper.

'I guess you can come out now,' Gordon yelled to Irey and the children. 'They've gone and I don't think they'll be coming back. At least, not until the next full moon.'

Like Napoleon, and later Hitler, when they had marched their respective troops on Russia, the giant crabs had grossly mistimed their attack on the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp,

'Reckon they'll open the roads soon,' there was a hint of regret in Gordon's voice. It was crazy, you built yourself up to a peak of frustration to get out of the camp but suddenly you didn't want to go. For himself and Irey it could be a parting of the ways. 'It'll maybe take a day or two, though.'

'Yes, I expect so,' somehow her hand found his between the clinging bodies of Rodney and Louise. 'You'll stay with us until they do ... won't you, Gordon?'

His heart seemed to miss a beat; there was no mistaking her tone of hope, fear that he might decide to lodge elsewhere. Or just leave.

'Of course, I will,' he gave her hand an answering squeeze. Maybe this time she wouldn't insist on sleeping with Louise; a lot of things could be a whole lot different from now onwards.

And suddenly, amidst the debris, the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp seemed the most marvellous place on earth.