

I

The news hit the British High Commission in Nairobi at nine-thirty on a Monday morning. Sandy Woodrow took it like a bullet, jaw rigid, chest out, smack through his divided English heart. He was standing. That much he afterwards remembered. He was standing and the internal phone was piping. He was reaching for something, he heard the piping so he checked himself in order to stretch down and fish the receiver off the desk and say, '*Woodrow.*' Or maybe, '*Woodrow here.*' And he certainly barked his name a bit, he had that memory for sure: of his voice sounding like someone else's, and sounding stropy: '*Woodrow here,*' his own perfectly decent name, but without the softening of his nickname Sandy, and snapped out as if he hated it, because the High Commissioner's usual prayer meeting was slated to start in thirty minutes prompt, with Woodrow, as Head of Chancery, playing in-house moderator to a bunch of special-interest prima donnas, each of whom wanted sole possession of the High Commissioner's heart and mind.

In short, just another bloody Monday in late January, the hottest time in the Nairobi year, a time of dust and water shortages and brown grass and sore eyes and heat ripping off the city pavements; and the jacarandas, like everybody else, waiting for the long rains.

Exactly why he was standing was a question he never

resolved. By rights he should have been crouched behind his desk, fingering his keyboard, anxiously reviewing guidance material from London and incomings from neighbouring African Missions. Instead of which he was standing in front of his desk and performing some unidentified vital act – such as straightening the photograph of his wife Gloria and two small sons, perhaps, taken last summer while the family was on home leave. The High Commission stood on a slope, and its continuing subsidence was enough to tilt pictures out of true after a weekend on their own.

Or perhaps he had been squirting mosquito spray at some Kenyan insect from which even diplomats are not immune. There had been a plague of ‘Nairobi eye’ a few months back, flies that when squidged and rubbed accidentally on the skin could give you boils and blisters, and even send you blind. He had been spraying, he heard his phone ring, he put the can down on his desk and grabbed the receiver: also possible, because somewhere in his later memory there was a colour-slide of a red tin of insecticide sitting in the outtray on his desk. So, ‘Woodrow here,’ and the telephone jammed to his ear.

‘Oh, Sandy, it’s Mike Mildren. Good morning. You alone by any chance?’

Shiny, overweight, twenty-four-year-old Mildren, High Commissioner’s private secretary, Essex accent, fresh out from England on his first overseas posting – and known to the junior staff, predictably, as Mildred.

Yes, Woodrow conceded, he was alone. Why?

‘Something’s come up, I’m afraid, Sandy. I wondered if I might pop down a moment actually.’

‘Can’t it wait till after the meeting?’

‘Well, I don’t think it can really – no, it can’t,’ Mildren replied, gathering conviction as he spoke. ‘It’s Tessa Quayle, Sandy.’

A different Woodrow now, hackles up, nerves extended. Tessa. 'What about her?' he said. His tone deliberately incurious, his mind racing in all directions. Oh Tessa. Oh Christ. What have you done now?

'The Nairobi police say she's been killed,' Mildren said, as if he said it every day.

'Utter nonsense,' Woodrow snapped back before he had given himself time to think. 'Don't be ridiculous. Where? When?'

'At Lake Turkana. The eastern shore. This weekend. They're being diplomatic about the details. In her car. An unfortunate accident, according to them,' he added apologetically. 'I had a sense that they were trying to spare our feelings.'

'Whose car?' Woodrow demanded wildly – fighting now, rejecting the whole mad concept – who, how, where and his other thoughts and senses forced down, down, down, and all his secret memories of her furiously edited out, to be replaced by the baked moonscape of Turkana as he recalled it from a field trip six months ago in the unimpeachable company of the military attaché. 'Stay where you are, I'm coming up. And don't talk to anyone else, d'you hear?'

Moving by numbers now, Woodrow replaced the receiver, walked round his desk, picked up his jacket from the back of his chair and pulled it on, sleeve by sleeve. He would not customarily have put on a jacket to go upstairs. Jackets were not mandatory for Monday meetings, let alone for going to the private office for a chat with chubby Mildren. But the professional in Woodrow was telling him he was facing a long journey. Nevertheless on his way upstairs he managed by a sturdy effort of self-will to revert to his first principles whenever a crisis appeared on his horizon, and assure himself, just as he had assured Mildren, that it was a lot of utter nonsense. In support

of which, he summoned up the sensational case of a young Englishwoman who had been hacked to pieces in the African bush ten years ago. It's a sick hoax, of course it is. A replay in somebody's deranged imagination. Some wildcat African policeman stuck out in the desert, half loco on *bangi*, trying to bolster the dismal salary he hasn't been paid for six months.

The newly completed building he was ascending was austere and well designed. He liked its style, perhaps because it corresponded outwardly with his own. With its neatly defined compound, canteen, shop, fuel pump and clean, muted corridors, it gave off a self-sufficient, rugged impression. Woodrow, to all appearances, had the same sterling qualities. At forty, he was happily married to Gloria – or if he wasn't, he assumed he was the only person to know it. He was Head of Chancery and it was a fair bet that, if he played his cards right, he would land his own modest Mission on his next posting, and from there advance by less modest Missions to a knighthood – a prospect to which he himself attached no importance, of course, but it would be nice for Gloria. There was a bit of the soldier about him, but then he was a soldier's son. In his seventeen years in Her Majesty's Foreign Service he had flown the flag in half a dozen overseas British Missions. All the same, dangerous, decaying, plundered, bankrupt, once-British Kenya had stirred him more than most of them, though how much of this was due to Tessa he dared not ask himself.

'All right,' he said aggressively to Mildren, having first closed the door behind him and dropped the latch.

Mildren had a permanent pout. Seated at his desk he looked like a naughty fat boy who has refused to finish up his porridge.

'She was staying at the Oasis,' he said.

'What oasis? Be precise, if you can.'

But Mildren was not as easily rattled as his age and rank might have led Woodrow to believe. He had been keeping a shorthand record, which he now consulted before he spoke. Must be what they teach them these days, thought Woodrow with contempt. How else does an Estuary upstart like Mildren find time to pick up shorthand?

‘There’s a lodge on the eastern shore of Lake Turkana, at the southern end,’ Mildren announced, his eyes on the pad. ‘It’s called the Oasis. Tessa spent the night there and set off next morning in a four-track provided by the Lodge’s owner. She said she wanted to see the birthplace of civilisation two hundred miles north. The Leakey dig.’ He corrected himself. ‘The site of Richard Leakey’s excavation. In the Sibiloi National Park.’

‘Alone?’

‘Wolfgang provided a driver. His body’s in the four-track with hers.’

‘Wolfgang?’

‘The Lodge’s owner. Surname to follow. Everyone calls him Wolfgang. He’s German, apparently. A character. According to the police, the driver’s been brutally murdered.’

‘How?’

‘Decapitated. Missing.’

‘Who’s missing? You said he was in the car with her.’

‘The head’s missing.’

I might have guessed that for myself, mightn’t I? ‘How’s Tessa supposed to have died?’

‘An accident. That’s all they’re saying.’

‘Was she robbed?’

‘Not according to the police.’

The absence of a theft, coupled with the driver’s murder, had Woodrow’s imagination racing. ‘Just give it me exactly as you have it,’ he ordered.

Mildren rested his big cheeks in his palms while he again consulted his shorthand. 'Nine-twenty-nine, incoming from Nairobi police headquarters flying squad asking for the High Commissioner,' he recited. 'I explained that H.E. was in town visiting ministries, due back ten a.m. latest. An efficient-sounding duty officer, name supplied. He said reports were coming in from Lodwar –'

'Lodwar? That's miles from Turkana!'

'It's the nearest police station,' Mildren replied. 'A four-track, property of the Oasis Lodge, Turkana, had been found abandoned on the east side of the lake, short of Allia Bay, on the way to the Leakey site. The bodies were thirty-six hours old at least. One dead white female, death unexplained, one headless African, identified as Noah the driver, married with four children. One Mephisto safari boot, size seven. One blue bush jacket, size XL, bloodstained, found on the floor of the car. The woman in her mid-to-late twenties, dark-haired, one gold ring on third finger of left hand. One gold necklace on the car floor.'

That necklace you're wearing, Woodrow heard himself saying in mock challenge as they danced.

My grandmother gave it to my mother on her wedding day, she answered. *I wear it with everything, even if it's out of sight.*

Even in bed?

Depends.

'Who found them?' Woodrow asked.

'Wolfgang. He radioed the police and informed his office here in Nairobi. Also by radio. The Oasis has no telephone.'

'If the driver was headless, how can they know it was the driver?'

'He had a crushed arm. That's why he took up driving. Wolfgang watched Tessa drive off with Noah on Saturday at

five-thirty, in the company of Arnold Bluhm. That was the last time he saw them alive.'

He was still quoting from notes or if he wasn't he was pretending to. His cheeks were still in his hands and he seemed determined they should stay here, for there was a stubborn rigidity across his shoulders.

'Give me that again,' Woodrow ordered, after a beat.

'Tessa was accompanied by Arnold Bluhm. They checked into the Oasis Lodge together, spent Friday night there and set off in Noah's jeep next morning at five-thirty,' Mildren repeated patiently. 'Bluhm's body wasn't in the four-track and there's no trace of him. Or none reported so far. Lodwar police and the flying squad are on site but Nairobi headquarters want to know if we'll pay for a helicopter.'

'Where are the bodies now?' Woodrow was his soldier-father's son, crisp and practical.

'Not known. The police wanted the Oasis to take charge of them but Wolfgang refused. He said his staff would walk out and so would his guests.' A hesitation. 'She booked in as Tessa Abbott.'

'Abbott?'

'Her maiden name. "Tessa Abbott, care of a PO Box in Nairobi." Ours. We haven't got an Abbott so I ran the name across our records and got Quayle, maiden name Abbott, Tessa. I gather it's the name she uses for her relief work.' He was studying the last page of his notes. 'I've tried to raise the High Commissioner but he's doing the ministries and it's rush hour,' he said. By which he meant: this is President Moi's modern Nairobi, where a local call can take half an hour of listening to *I'm sorry, all lines are busy, please try again later*, repeated tirelessly by a complacent woman in middle age.

Woodrow was already at the door. 'And you've told nobody?'

John le Carré

'Not a soul.'

'Have the police?'

'They say no. But they can't answer for Lodwar and I shouldn't think they can answer for themselves.'

'And Justin's been told nothing as far as you know.'

'Correct.'

'Where is he?'

'In his office, I assume.'

'Keep him there.'

'He came in early. It's what he does when Tessa's on a field trip. Do you want me to cancel the meeting?'

'Wait.'

Aware by now, if he ever doubted it, that he was coping with a Force Twelve scandal as well as a tragedy, Woodrow darted up a back staircase marked *Authorised Staff Only* and entered a glum passage that led to a closed steel door with an eye-hole and a bell-button. A camera scanned him while he pressed the button. The door was opened by a willowy, red-headed woman in jeans and a flowered smock. Sheila, their number two, kiSwahili speaker, he thought automatically.

'Where's Tim?' he asked.

Sheila pressed a buzzer then spoke into a box. 'It's Sandy in a hurry.'

'Hold for figures *one* minute,' cried an expansive male voice.

They held.

'Coast now *totally* clear,' the same voice reported as another door burped open.

Sheila stood back and Woodrow strode past her into the room. Tim Donohue, the six-foot-six Head of Station, was looming in front of his desk. He must have been clearing it, for there was not a paper in sight. Donohue looked even sicker than usual. Woodrow's wife Gloria insisted he was dying.

Sunken, colourless cheeks. Nests of crumbling skin below the drooping yellowed eyes. The straggling moustache clawed downward in comic despair.

'Sandy. Greetings. What can we do you for?' he cried, peering down on Woodrow through his bifocals and grinning his skull's grin.

He comes too close, Woodrow remembered. He overflies your territory and intercepts your signals before you make them. 'Tessa Quayle seems to have been killed somewhere near Lake Turkana,' he said, feeling a vindictive urge to shock. 'There's a place called Oasis Lodge. I need to talk to the owner by radio.'

This is how they're trained, he thought. Rule one: never show your feelings, if you have any. Sheila's freckled features, frozen in pensive rejection. Tim Donohue still grinning his foolish grin – but then the grin hadn't meant anything in the first place.

'Been *what*, old boy? Say again?'

'Killed. Method unknown or the police aren't saying. The driver of her jeep had his head hacked off. That's the story.'

'Killed and robbed?'

'Just killed.'

'Near Lake Turkana.'

'Yes.'

'What the hell was she doing up there?'

'I've no idea. Visiting the Leakey site, allegedly.'

'Does Justin know?'

'Not yet.'

'Anyone else we know involved?'

'One of the things I'm trying to find out.'

Donohue led the way to a soundproofed communications booth that Woodrow had never seen before. Coloured telephones with cavities for code lozenges. A fax machine resting

on what looked like an oil drum. A radio set made of stippled green metal boxes. A home-printed directory lying on top of them. So this is how our spies whisper to each other from inside our buildings, he thought. Overworld or underworld? He never knew. Donohue sat himself at the radio, studied the directory, then fumbled the controls with trembling white fingers while he intoned, 'ZNB 85, ZNB 85 calling TKA 60,' like a hero in a war film. 'TKA 60, do you read me, please? Over. Oasis, do you read me, Oasis? Over.'

A burst of atmospheric was followed by a challenging, 'Oasis here. Loud and clear, Mister. Who are you? Over' – spoken in a raffish German accent.

'Oasis, this is the British High Commission in Nairobi, I'm passing you to Sandy Woodrow. Over.'

Woodrow leaned both hands on Donohue's desk in order to come closer to the microphone.

'This is Woodrow, Head of Chancery. Am I speaking to Wolfgang? Over.'

'Chancellery like Hitler had one?'

'The political section. Over.'

'OK, Mr Chancery, I'm Wolfgang. What's your question? Over.'

'I want you to give me, please, your own description of the woman who checked into your hotel as Miss Tessa Abbott. That's correct, is it? That's what she wrote? Over.'

'Sure. Tessa.'

'What did she look like? Over.'

'Dark hair, no make-up, tall, late twenties, not British. Not for me. South German, Austrian or Italian. I'm a hotelier. I look at people. And beautiful. I'm a man too. Sexy like an animal, how she moves. And clothes like you could blow them off. That sound like your Abbott or somebody else's? Over.'

Donohue's head was a few inches from his own. Sheila was standing at his other side. All three of them were gazing at the microphone.

'Yes. That sounds like Miss Abbott. Can you tell me, please: when did she make the reservation at your hotel, and how? I believe you have an office in Nairobi. Over.'

'She didn't.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Dr Bluhm made the reservation. Two persons, two cabins close to the pool, one night. We've only got one cabin free, I tell him. OK, he'll take it. That's some fellow. Wow. Everybody looks at them. The guests, the staff. One beautiful white woman, one beautiful African doctor. That's a nice sight. Over.'

'How many rooms does a cabin have?' Woodrow asked, feebly hoping to head off the scandal that was staring him in the face.

'One bedroom, two single beds, not too hard, nice and springy. One sitting room. Everybody signs the register here. No funny names, I tell them. People get lost, I got to know who they are. So that's her name, right? Abbott? Over.'

'Her maiden name. Over. The PO Box number she gave is the High Commission.'

'Where's the husband?'

'Here in Nairobi.'

'Oh boy.'

'So when did Bluhm make the reservation? Over.'

'Thursday. Thursday evening. Radios me from Loki. Tells me they expect to leave Friday first light. Loki like Lokichoggio. On the northern border. Capital of the aid agencies working South Sudan. Over.'

'I know where Lokichoggio is. Did they say what they were doing there?'

'Aid stuff. Bluhm's in the aid game, right? That's the only way you get to Loki. Works for some Belgian medical outfit, he told me. Over.'

'So he booked from Loki and they left Loki on Friday morning early. Over.'

'Tells me they expect to reach the west side of the lake around noon. Wants me to fix them a boat to bring them across the lake to the Oasis. "Listen," I tell him. "Lokichogio to Turkana, that's a hairy drive. Best you ride with a food convoy. The hills are lousy with bandits, there's tribes stealing each other's cattle which is normal, except that ten years ago they had spears and today they all got AK47s." He laughs. Says he can handle it. And he can. They make it, no problem. Over.'

'So they check in, then sign the register. Then what? Over.'

'Bluhm tells me they want a jeep and a driver to go up to Leakey's place first light next morning. Don't ask me why he didn't mention it when he booked, I didn't ask him. Maybe they only just decided. Maybe they didn't like to discuss their plans over the radio. "OK," I tell him. "You're lucky. You can have Noah." Bluhm's pleased. She's pleased. They walk in the garden, swim together, sit at the bar together, eat together, tell goodnight to everybody, go to their cabin. In the morning they leave together. I watch them. You want to know what they had for breakfast?'

'Who saw them leave apart from you? Over.'

'Everybody who's awake sees them. Packed lunch, box of water, spare gas, emergency rations, medical supplies. All three of them in the front and Abbott in the middle, like one happy family. This is an oasis, OK? I got twenty guests, mostly they're asleep. I got forty staff, mostly they're awake. I got about a hundred guys I don't need hanging round my car park selling animal skins and walking sticks and hunting knives.'

Everyone who sees Bluhm and Abbott leave waves bye-bye. I wave, the skin sellers wave, Noah waves back, Bluhm and Abbott wave back. They don't smile. They're serious. Like they've got heavy business to do, big decisions, what do I know? What you want me to do, Mr Chancery? Kill the witnesses? Listen, I'm Galileo. Put me in prison, I'll swear she never came to the Oasis. Over.'

For a moment of paralysis Woodrow had no further questions, or perhaps he had too many. I'm in prison already, he thought. My life sentence started five minutes ago. He passed a hand across his eyes and when he removed it he saw Donohue and Sheila watching him with the same blank expressions they had worn when he told them she was dead.

'When did you first get the idea something might have gone wrong? Over,' he asked lamely – 'like, do you live up there all year round? Over. Or, how long have you been running your nice hotel? Over.'

'The four-track has a radio. On a trip with guests, Noah is supposed to call and say he's happy. Noah doesn't call. OK, radios fail, drivers forget. To make a link it's boring. You got to stop the car, get out, set up the aerial. You still hearing me? Over.'

'Loud and clear. Over.'

'Except Noah never forgets. That's why he drives for me. But he doesn't call. Not in the afternoon, not in the evening. OK, I think. Maybe they camped somewhere, gave Noah too much to drink or something. Last thing in the evening before shut-down I radio the rangers up around the Leakey site. No sign. First thing next morning I go to Lodwar to report the loss. It's my jeep, OK? My driver. I'm not allowed to report the loss by radio, I've got to do it in person. It's a hell of a journey but that's the law. The Lodwar police really like helping

citizens in distress. My jeep went missing? Tough shit. It had two of my guests and my driver in it? Then why don't I go look for them? It's a Sunday, they're not expecting to work today. They got to go to church. "Give us some money, lend us a car, maybe we help you," they tell me. I come home, I put a search party together. Over.'

'Consisting of whom?' Woodrow was getting back into his stride.

'Two groups. My own people, two trucks, water, spare fuel, medical supplies, provisions, Scotch in case I need to disinfect something. Over.' A cross-broadcast intervened. Wolfgang told it to get the hell off the air. Surprisingly, it did. 'It's pretty hot up here right now, Mr Chancery. We got a hundred and fifteen Fahrenheit plus jackals and hyenas like you got mice. Over.'

A pause, apparently for Woodrow to speak.

'I'm listening,' Woodrow said.

'The jeep was on its side. Don't ask me why. The doors were closed. Don't ask me why. One window open like five centimetres. Somebody closed the doors and locked them, took away the key. The smell unspeakable, just from the little gap. Hyena scratches all over, big dents where they'd tried to get in. Tracks all round while they went crazy. A good hyena smells blood ten kilometres away. If they'd been able to reach the bodies they'd have cracked them open one bite, got the marrow out the bones. But they didn't. Somebody locked the door on them and left the bit of window open. So they went crazy. So would you. Over.'

Woodrow struggled to get his words together. 'The police say Noah was decapitated. Is that right? Over.'

'Sure. He was a great guy. Family's worried crazy. They got people everywhere looking for his head. If they can't find the

head they can't give him a decent funeral and his spirit will come back to haunt them. Over.'

'What about Miss Abbott? Over –' a vile vision of Tessa without her head.

'Didn't they tell you?'

'No. Over.'

'Throat cut. Over.'

A second vision, this time of her killer's fist as it ripped off her necklace to clear the way for the knife. Wolfgang was explaining what he did next.

'Number one, I tell my boys, leave the doors closed. Nobody's alive in there. Anybody opening the doors is going to have a very bad time. I leave one group to light a fire and keep watch. I drive the other group back to the Oasis. Over.'

'Question. Over.' Woodrow was struggling to hold on.

'What's your question, Mr Chancery? Come in, please. Over.'

'Who opened the jeep? Over.'

'The police. Soon as the police arrived, my boys get the hell out the way. No one likes police. No one likes to be arrested. Not up here. Lodwar police came first, now we've got the flying squad, plus some guys from Moi's personal Gestapo. My boys are locking the till and hiding the silver, except I haven't got any silver. Over.'

Another delay while Woodrow wrestled for rational words.

'Was Bluhm wearing a safari jacket when they set out for Leakey's place? Over.'

'Sure. Old one. More a waistcoat. Blue. Over.'

'Did anyone find a knife at the scene of the murder? Over.'

'No. And it was some knife, believe me. A panga with a Wilkinson blade. Went through Noah like butter. One swing. Same with her. Vump. The woman was stripped naked. Lot of bruising. Did I say that? Over.'

No, you didn't say that, Woodrow told him silently. You omitted her nakedness completely. The bruising also. 'Was there a panga in the four-track when they set out from your Lodge? Over.'

'I never knew an African yet who didn't take his panga on safari, Mr Chancery.'

'Where are the bodies now?'

'Noah, what's left of him, they give him to his tribe. Miss Abbott, the police sent a motor dinghy for her. Had to cut the jeep roof off. Borrowed our cutting equipment. Then strap her to the deck. No room for her downstairs. Over.'

'Why not?' But he was already wishing he hadn't asked.

'Use your imagination, Mr Chancery. You know what happens to corpses in this heat? You want to fly her down to Nairobi, you better cut her up or she won't get into the hold.'

Woodrow had a moment of mental numbness and when he woke from it he heard Wolfgang saying yes, he had met Bluhm once before. So Woodrow must have asked him the question, although he hadn't heard it himself.

'Nine months back. Bear-leading a party of fat-cats in the aid game. World food, world health, world expense accounts. Bastards spent a mountain of money, wanted receipts for twice the amount. I tell them to get fucked. Bluhm liked that. Over.'

'How did he seem to you this time? Over.'

'What's that mean?'

'Was he different in any way? More excitable or strange or anything?'

'What are you talking about, Mr Chancery?'

'I mean – do you think it possible he was *on* something? *High* on something, I mean?' He was floundering. 'Well, like – I don't know – cocaine or something. Over.'

'Sweetheart,' said Wolfgang, and the line went cold.

Woodrow was once more conscious of Donohue's probing stare. Sheila had disappeared. Woodrow had the impression she had gone to do something urgent. But what could that be? Why should Tessa's death require the urgent action of the spies? He felt chilly and wished he had a cardigan, yet the sweat was pouring off him.

'Nothing more we can do for you, old boy?' Donohue asked, with peculiar solicitude, still staring down at him with his sick, shaggy eyes. 'Little glass of something?'

'Thank you. Not at present.'

They knew, Woodrow told himself in fury as he returned downstairs. *They knew before I did that she was dead*. But that's what they want you to believe: we spies know more about everything than you do, and sooner.

'High Commissioner back yet?' he asked, shoving his head round Mildren's door.

'Any minute.'

'Cancel the meeting.'

Woodrow did not head directly for Justin's room. He looked in on Ghita Pearson, Chancery's most junior member, friend and confidante of Tessa. Ghita was darkeyed, fair-haired, Anglo-Indian and wore a caste mark on her forehead. Locally employed, Woodrow rehearsed, but aspires to make the Service her career. A distrustful frown crossed her brow as she saw him close the door behind him.

'Ghita, this one's strictly for you, OK?' She looked at him steadily, waiting. 'Bluhm. Dr Arnold Bluhm. Yes?'

'What about him?'

'Chum of yours.' No response. 'I mean you're friendly with him.'

'He's a contact.' Ghita's duties kept her in daily touch with the relief agencies.

'And a chum of Tessa's, obviously.' Ghita's dark eyes made no comment. 'Do you know other people at Bluhm's outfit?'

'I ring Charlotte from time to time. She's his office. The rest are field people. Why?' The Anglo-Indian lilt to her voice that he had found so alluring. But never again. Never anybody again.

'Bluhm was in Lokichoggio last week. Accompanied.'

A third nod, but a slower one, and a lowering of the eyes.

'I want to know what he was doing there. From Loki he drove across to Turkana. I need to know whether he's made it back to Nairobi yet. Or maybe he returned to Loki. Can you do that without breaking too many eggs?'

'I doubt it.'

'Well, try.' A question occurred to him. In all the months he had known Tessa, it had never presented itself till now. 'Is Bluhm married, d'you know?'

'I would imagine so. Somewhere down the line. They usually are, aren't they?'

They meaning Africans? Or they meaning lovers? All lovers?

'But he hasn't got a wife here? Not in Nairobi. Or not so far as you've heard. Bluhm hasn't.'

'Why?' – softly, in a rush. 'Has something happened to Tessa?'

'It may have done. We're finding out.'

Reaching the door to Justin's room, Woodrow knocked and went in without waiting for an answer. This time he did not lock the door behind him but, hands in pockets, leaned his broad shoulders against it, which for as long as he remained there had the same effect.

Justin was standing with his elegant back to him. His neatly groomed head was turned to the wall and he was studying a graph, one of several ranged around the room, each with

a caption of initials in black, each marked in steps of different colours, rising or descending. The particular graph that held his attention was titled *RELATIVE INFRA-STRUCTURES 2005–2010* and purported, so far as Woodrow could make out from where he stood, to predict the future prosperity of African nations. On the window sill at Justin's left stood a line of pot plants that he was nurturing. Woodrow identified jasmine and balsam, but only because Justin had made gifts of these to Gloria.

'Hi, Sandy,' Justin said, drawing out the *Hi*.

'Hi.'

'I gather we're not assembling this morning. Trouble at mill?'

The famous golden voice, thought Woodrow, noticing every detail as if it were fresh to him. Tarnished by time but guaranteed to enchant, as long as you prefer tone to substance. Why am I despising you when I'm about to change your life? From now until the end of your days there will be before this moment and after it and they will be separate ages for you, just as they are for me. Why don't you take your bloody jacket off? You must be the only fellow left in the Service who goes to his tailor for tropical suits. Then he remembered he was still wearing his own jacket.

'And you're all *well*, I trust?' Justin asked in that same studied drawl of his. 'Gloria not languishing in this awful heat? The boys both flourishing and so forth?'

'We're fine.' A delay, of Woodrow's manufacture. 'And Tessa is up-country,' he suggested. He was giving her one last chance to prove it was all a dreadful mistake.

Justin at once became lavish, which was what he did when Tessa's name was spoken at him. 'Yes, indeed. Her relief work is absolutely non-stop these days.' He was hugging a United

Nations tome to himself, all of three inches thick. Stooping again, he laid it to rest on a side table. 'She'll have saved all Africa by the time we leave, at this rate.'

'What's she gone up-country *for*, actually?' – still clutching at straws – 'I thought she was doing stuff down here in Nairobi. In the slums. Kibera, wasn't it?'

'Indeed she is,' said Justin proudly. 'Night and day, the poor girl. Everything from wiping babies' bottoms to acquainting paralegals with their civil rights, I'm told. Most of her clients are women, of course, which appeals to her. Even if it doesn't appeal quite so much to their menfolk.' His wistful smile, the one that says *if only*. 'Property rights, divorce, physical abuse, marital rape, female circumcision, safe sex. The whole menu, every day. You can see why their husbands get a little touchy, can't you? I would, if I was a marital rapist.'

'So what's she doing up-country?' Woodrow persisted.

'Oh, goodness knows. Ask Doc Arnold,' Justin threw out, too casually. 'Arnold's her guide and philosopher up there.'

This is how he plays it, Woodrow remembered. The cover story that covers all three of them. Arnold Bluhm, MD, her moral tutor, black knight, protector in the aid jungle. Anything but her tolerated lover. 'Up where exactly?' he asked.

'Loki. *Lokichoggio*.' Justin had propped himself on the edge of his desk, perhaps in unconscious imitation of Woodrow's careless posture at the door. 'The World Food Programme people are running a *gender awareness workshop* up there, can you imagine? They fly unaware village women down from South Sudan, give them the crash course in John Stuart Mill and fly them back aware. Arnold and Tessa went up to watch the fun, lucky dogs.'

'Where is she now?'

Justin appeared not to like this question. Perhaps it was the

moment when he realised there was purpose to Woodrow's small talk. Or perhaps – thought Woodrow – he didn't take kindly to being pinned down on the subject of Tessa, when he couldn't pin her down himself.

'On her way back, one assumes. Why?'

'With Arnold?'

'Presumably. He wouldn't just leave her there.'

'Has she been in touch?'

'With me? From Loki? How could she be? They haven't got telephones.'

'I thought she might have used one of the aid agencies' radio links. Isn't that what other people do?'

'Tessa's not other people,' Justin retorted, as a frown collected on his brow. 'She has strong principles. Such as not spending donors' money unnecessarily. What's going on, Sandy?'

Justin scowling now, shoving himself away from the desk and placing himself upright at the centre of the room with his hands behind his back. And Woodrow, observing his studiously handsome face and greying black hair in the sunlight, remembered Tessa's hair, the same colour exactly, but without the age in it, or the restraint. He remembered the first time he saw them together, Tessa and Justin our glamorous newly wedded arrivals, honoured guests of the High Commissioner's welcome-to-Nairobi party. And how, as he had stepped forward to greet them, he had imagined to himself that they were father and daughter, and he was the suitor for her hand.

'So you haven't heard from her since when?' he asked.

'Tuesday when I drove them to the airport. What is this, Sandy? If Arnold's with her she'll be all right. She'll do what she's told.'

'Do you think they could have gone on to Lake Turkana, she and Bluhm – Arnold?'

'If they had transport and felt like it, why not? Tessa loves the wild places, she has a great regard for Richard Leakey, both as an archaeologist and as a decent white African. Surely Leakey's got a clinic up there? Arnold probably had work to do and took her along. Sandy, what is this?' he repeated indignantly.

Delivering the death blow, Woodrow had no option but to observe the effect of his words on Justin's features. And he saw how the last remnants of Justin's departed youth drained out of him as, like some kind of sea creature, his pretty face closed and hardened, leaving only seeming coral.

'We're getting reports of a white woman and an African driver found on the eastern shore of Lake Turkana. Killed,' Woodrow began deliberately, avoiding the word 'murdered'. 'The car and driver were hired from the Oasis Lodge. The Lodge's owner claims to have identified the woman as Tessa. He says she and Bluhm spent the night at the Oasis before setting out for the Richard Leakey site. Bluhm's still missing. They've found her necklace. The one she always wore.'

How do I know that? Why, in God's name, do I choose this moment to parade my intimate knowledge of her necklace?

Woodrow was still watching Justin. The coward in him wanted to look away, but to the soldier's son it would have been like sentencing a man to be executed and not showing up for his hanging. He watched Justin's eyes widen in injured disappointment, as if he had been hit from behind by a friend, then dwindle to almost nothing, as if the same friend had knocked him unconscious. He watched his nicely carved lips part in a spasm of physical pain, then gather themselves into a muscular line of exclusion turned pale by pressure.

'Good of you to tell me, Sandy. Can't have been pleasant.

Does Porter know?’ Porter was the High Commissioner’s improbable first name.

‘Mildren’s chasing him up. They found a Mephisto boot. Size seven. Does that figure?’

Justin was having difficulty coordinating. First he had to wait for the sound of Woodrow’s words to catch up with him. Then he hastened to respond in brisk, hard-won sentences. ‘There’s this shop off Piccadilly. She bought three pairs last home leave. Never seen her splash out like that. Not a spender as a rule. Never had to think about money. So she didn’t. Dress at the Salvation Army shop. Given half a chance.’

‘And some kind of safari tunic. Blue.’

‘Oh she absolutely hated the beastly things,’ Justin retorted, as the power of speech came back to him in a flood. ‘She said if I ever caught her wearing one of those khaki contraptions with pockets on the thighs I should burn it or give it to Mustafa.’

Mustafa, her houseboy, Woodrow remembered. ‘The police say blue.’

‘She *detested* blue’ – now apparently on the verge of losing his temper – ‘she absolutely loathed anything paramilitary.’ The past tense already, Woodrow noticed. ‘She once owned a *green* bush jacket, I grant you. She bought it at Farbelow’s in Stanley Street. I took her, don’t know why. Probably made me. Hated shopping. She put it on and promptly had a fit. “Look at me,” she said. “I’m General Patton in drag.” No, sport, I told her, you’re not General Patton. You’re a very pretty girl wearing a bloody awful green jacket.’

He began packing up his desk. Precisely. Packing to leave. Opening and shutting drawers. Putting his file trays into his steel cupboard and locking it. Absently smoothing back his hair between moves, a tic that Woodrow had always found particularly irritating in him. Gingerly switching off his hated computer

terminal – stabbing at it with his forefinger as if he was afraid it would bite him. Rumour had it that he got Ghita Pearson to switch it on for him every morning. Woodrow watched him give the room a last sightless look round. End of term. End of life. Please leave this space tidy for the next occupant. At the door Justin turned and glanced back at the plants on the window sill, perhaps wondering whether he should bring them with him, or at least give instructions for their maintenance, but he did neither.

Walking Justin along the corridor, Woodrow made to touch his arm, but some kind of revulsion caused him to withdraw his hand before it made contact. All the same he was careful to walk close enough to catch him if he sagged or stumbled in some way, because by now Justin had the air of a well-dressed sleepwalker who had abdicated his sense of destination. They were moving slowly and without much sound, but Ghita must have heard them coming because as they passed her door she opened it and tiptoed alongside Woodrow for a couple of paces while she murmured in his ear, holding back her golden hair so that it didn't brush against him.

'He disappeared. They're searching high and low for him.'

But Justin's hearing was better than either of them could have anticipated. Or perhaps, in the extremity of emotion, his perceptions were abnormally acute.

'You're worrying about Arnold, I expect,' he told Ghita, in the helpful tone of a stranger indicating the way.

The High Commissioner was a hollowed, hyper-intelligent man, an eternal student of something. He had a son who was a merchant banker and a small daughter called Rosie who was severely brain-damaged, and a wife who, when she was in England, was a Justice of the Peace. He adored them all equally and spent his weekends with Rosie strapped to his stomach.

Yet Coleridge himself had somehow remained stranded on the brink of manhood. He wore a young man's braces with baggy Oxford trousers. A matching jacket hung behind the door on a hanger with his name on it: P. Coleridge, Balliol. He stood poised at the centre of his large office, his tousled head tipped angrily to Woodrow as he listened. There were tears in his eyes and on his cheeks.

'*Fuck*,' he announced furiously, as if he had been waiting to get the word off his chest.

'I know,' said Woodrow.

'That poor girl. How old was she? Nothing!'

'Twenty-five.' *How did I know that?* 'About,' he added, for vagueness.

'She looked about eighteen. That poor bugger Justin with his flowers.'

'I know,' Woodrow said again.

'Does Ghita know?'

'Bits.'

'What the hell will he do? He hasn't even got a career. They were all set to throw him out at the end of this tour. If Tessa hadn't lost her baby, they'd have ditched him in the next cull.' Sick of standing in one place, Coleridge swung away to another part of the room. 'Rosie caught a two-pound trout on Saturday,' he blurted accusingly. 'What do you make of *that*?'

Coleridge had this habit of buying time with unannounced diversions.

'Splendid,' Woodrow murmured dutifully.

'Tessa'd have been thrilled to bits. Always said Rosie would make it. And Rosie adored her.'

'I'm sure she did.'

'Wouldn't eat it, mind. We had to keep the sod on life-support all weekend, then bury it in the garden.' A straightening

of the shoulders indicated that they were in business again. 'There's a back story to this, Sandy. A bloody messy one.'

'I'm well aware of that.'

'That shit Pellegrin's already been on the line bleating about limiting the damage' – Sir Bernard Pellegrin, Foreign Office mandarin with special responsibility for Africa and Coleridge's arch-enemy – 'how the hell are we supposed to limit the damage when we don't know what the fucking damage is? Ruined his tennis for him too, I expect.'

'She was with Bluhm for four days and nights before she died,' Woodrow said, glancing at the door to make sure it was still shut. 'If that's damage. They did Loki, then they did Turkana. They shared a cabin and Christ knows what. A whole raft of people saw them together.'

'Thanks. Thanks very much. Just what I wanted to hear.' Plunging his hands deep into his baggy pockets, Coleridge waded round the room. 'Where the fuck is Bluhm, anyway?'

'They're hunting high and low for him, they say. Last seen sitting at Tessa's side in the jeep when they set out for the Leakey site.'

Coleridge stalked to his desk, flopped into his chair and leaned back with his arms splayed. 'So the butler did it,' he declared. 'Bluhm forgot his education, went berserk, topped the two of them, bagged Noah's head as a souvenir, rolled the jeep on its side, locked it and did a runner. Well, wouldn't we all? *Fuck*.'

'You know him as well as I do.'

'No, I don't. I keep clear of him. I don't like film stars in the aid business. Where the hell did he go? Where is he?'

Images were playing in Woodrow's mind. Bluhm the Westerner's African, bearded Apollo of the Nairobi cocktail round, charismatic, witty, beautiful. Bluhm and Tessa side by side,

glad-handing guests while Justin the old debutantes' delight purrs and smiles and pushes out the drinks. Arnold Bluhm MD, sometime hero of the war in Algeria, discoursing from the rostrum of the United Nations lecture hall on medical priorities in disaster situations. Bluhm when the party's nearly over, slumped in a chair and looking lost and empty, with everything worth knowing about him hidden five miles down.

'I couldn't send them home, Sandy,' Coleridge was saying in the sterner voice of a man who has visited his conscience and come back reassured. 'I never saw it as my job to ruin a man's career just because his wife likes to get her leg over. It's the new millennium. People must be allowed to screw up their lives as they see fit.'

'Of course.'

'She was doing a bloody good job out there in the slums, whatever anybody said about her up at the Muthaiga Club. She may have got up the noses of Moi's Boys but Africans who mattered loved her to a man.'

'No question,' Woodrow agreed.

'All right, she was into all that gender crap. So she should be. Give Africa to the women and the place might work.'

Mildren entered without knocking.

'Call from Protocol, sir. Tessa's body's just arrived at the hospital morgue and they're asking for an immediate identification. And the press agencies are screaming for a statement.'

'How the hell did they get her to Nairobi so fast?'

'Flew her,' Woodrow said, recalling Wolfgang's repulsive image of slicing up her body to get it into the hold.

'No statement till she's been identified,' Coleridge snapped.

Woodrow and Justin went there together, crouching on the slatted bench of a High Commission Volkswagen van with

tinted windows. Livingstone drove, with Jackson his massive fellow Kikuyu squeezed beside him on the front seat for added muscle in case they needed it. With the air-conditioning on high the van was still a furnace. The city traffic was at its demented worst. Crammed Matutu minibuses hurtled and honked to either side of them, poured out fumes and hurled up dust and grit. Livingstone negotiated a roundabout and pulled up outside a stone doorway surrounded by chanting, swaying groups of men and women. Mistaking them for demonstrators Woodrow let out an exclamation of anger, then realised they were mourners waiting to collect their bodies. Rusted vans and cars with red cortège ribbons were parked expectantly along the kerb.

‘There is really no need for you to do this, Sandy,’ Justin said.

‘Of course there’s a need,’ said the soldier’s son nobly.

A gaggle of police and medical-looking men in spattered white overalls waited on the doorstep to receive them. Their one aim was to please. An Inspector Muramba presented himself and, smiling delightedly, shook hands with the two distinguished gentlemen from the British High Commission. An Asian in a black suit introduced himself as Surgeon Doctor Banda Singh at their service. Overhead pipes accompanied them down a weeping concrete corridor lined with overflowing dustbins. The pipes supply the refrigerators, thought Woodrow, but the refrigerators don’t work because there’s a power cut and the morgue has no generators. Dr Banda led the way, but Woodrow could have found it on his own. Turn left, you lose the smell. Turn right, it gets stronger. The unfeeling side of him had taken over again. A soldier’s duty is to be here, not to feel. *Duty*. Why did she always make me think of duty? He wondered whether there was some ancient piece of superstition about what happened to aspiring adulterers when they

gazed on the dead bodies of the women they had coveted. Dr Banda was leading them up a short staircase. They emerged in an unventilated reception hall where the stench of death was all-pervading.

A rusting steel door stood closed against them and Banda hammered on it in a commanding manner, leaning back on his heels and rapping four or five times at calculated intervals as if a code were being transmitted. The door creaked open part-way to reveal the haggard, apprehensive heads of three young men. But at the sight of the surgeon doctor they reeled back, enabling him to slither past them, with the result that Woodrow, left standing in the stinking hall, was treated to the hellish vision of his school dormitory given over to the Aids-dead of all ages. Emaciated corpses lay two-a-bed. More corpses lay on the floor between them, some dressed, some naked on their backs or sides. Others had their knees drawn up in futile self-protection and their chins flung back in protest. Over them, in a swaying, muddy mist, hung the flies, snoring on a single note.

And at the centre of the dormitory, parked by itself in the passage between the beds, stood matron's ironing board, on wheels. And on the ironing board, an arctic mass of winding sheet, and two monstrous semi-human feet protruding from it, reminding Woodrow of the duck-feet bedroom slippers he and Gloria had given to their son Harry last Christmas. One distended hand had somehow contrived to remain outside the sheet. Its fingers were coated in black blood and the blood was thickest at the joints. Its fingertips were aquamarine blue. *Use your imagination, Mr Chancery. You know what happens to corpses in this heat?*

'Mr Justin Quayle, please,' Dr Banda Singh called, with the portent of a barker at a royal reception.

'I'm coming with you,' Woodrow muttered and, with Justin at his side, stepped bravely forward in time to see Dr Banda roll back the sheet and reveal Tessa's head, grossly caricatured and bound chin-to-skull in a strip of grimy cloth which had been led round the throat where her necklace had once hung. A drowning man rising to the surface for the last time, Woodrow recklessly took in the rest: her black hair plastered to her skull by some undertaker's comb. Her cheeks puffed out like a cherub's blowing up a wind. Her eyes closed and eyebrows raised and mouth open in lolling disbelief, black blood caked inside as if she'd had all her teeth pulled at the same time. *You?* she is blowing stupidly as they kill her, her mouth formed into an *oo*. *You?* But who does she say it to? Who is she ogling through her stretched white eyelids?

'You know this lady, sir?' Inspector Muramba enquired delicately of Justin.

'Yes. Yes, I do, thank you,' Justin replied, each word carefully weighed before it was delivered. 'It's my wife Tessa. We must fix her funeral, Sandy. She'll want it to be here in Africa as soon as possible. She's an only child. She has no parents. There is no one apart from me who needs to be consulted. Better make it as soon as possible.'

'Well, I suppose that will have to depend a bit on the police,' said Woodrow gruffly and was barely in time to make it to a cracked handbasin where he vomited his heart out while Justin the ever-courteous stood at his shoulder with his arm round him, murmuring condolences.

From the carpeted sanctuary of the Private Office, Mildren slowly read aloud to the blank-voiced young man on the other end of the line:

The Constant Gardener

The High Commission is sad to announce the death by murder of Mrs Tessa Quayle, the wife of Justin Quayle, First Secretary in Chancery. Mrs Quayle died on the shores of Lake Turkana, close to Allia Bay. Her driver Mr Noah Katanga was also killed. Mrs Quayle will be remembered for her devotion to the cause of women's rights in Africa, as well as for her youth and beauty. We wish to express our deep sympathy to Mrs Quayle's husband Justin and her many friends. The High Commission flag will be flown at half-mast until further notice. A book of condolence will be placed in the High Commission reception lobby.

'When will you be running that?'

'I just did,' said the young man.

The Woodrows lived in a suburban house of quarried stone and leaded mock-Tudor windows, one of a colony set in large English gardens in the exclusive hilltop suburb of Muthaiga, a stone's throw from the Muthaiga Club and the British High Commissioner's Residence and the ample residences of ambassadors from countries you may never have heard of till you ride the closely guarded avenues and spot their nameplates planted among warnings in kiSwahili of dangerous dogs. In the wake of the bomb attack on Nairobi's US Embassy, the Foreign Office had supplied all staff of Woodrow's rank and upwards with crash-proof iron front gates and these were conscientiously manned day and night by shifts of exuberant Baluhya and their many friends and relatives. Round the garden's perimeter, the same inspired minds had provided an electrified fence crowned with coils of razor wire and intruder lights that blazed all night. In Muthaiga there is a pecking order about protection, as there is about many other things. The humblest houses have broken bottles on stone walls, the middle-rankers razor wire. But for diplomatic gentry, nothing less than iron gates, electric fences, window sensors and intruder lights will secure their preservation.

The Woodrow house stood three floors high. The two upper floors comprised what the security companies called a

safe haven protected by a folding steel screen on the first landing, to which the Woodrow parents alone had a key. And in the ground-floor guest suite which the Woodrows called the lower ground because of the slope of the hillside there was a screen on the garden side to protect the Woodrows from their servants. There were two rooms to the lower ground, both severe and white-painted and, with their barred windows and steel grilles, distinctly prison-like. But Gloria in anticipation of her guest's arrival had decked them out with roses from the garden and a reading light from Sandy's dressing room, and the staff television set and radio because it would do them good to be without them for a change. It wasn't exactly *five star* even then – she confided to her bosom friend Elena, English wife to a soft-palmed Greek official at the United Nations – but at least the poor man would have his aloneness, which everybody absolutely *had* to have when they lost someone, El, and Gloria herself had been *exactly* the same when Mummy died but then of course Tessa and Justin did have – well, they did have an *unconventional* marriage if one could call it that – though speaking for herself Gloria had never doubted there was real fondness there, at least on Justin's side, though what there was on Tessa's side – frankly, El darling, God alone knows, because none of *us* ever will.

To which Elena, much divorced and worldly wise where Gloria was neither, remarked, 'Well, you just watch your sweet arse, honey. Freshly widowed playboys can be *very* raunchy.'

Gloria Woodrow was one of those exemplary Foreign Service wives who are determined to see the good side of everything. If there wasn't a good side in sight, she would let out a jolly good laugh and say, 'Well, here we all are!' – which was a bugle call to all concerned to band together and shoulder

life's discomforts without complaint. She was a loyal old-girl of the private schools that had produced her and she sent them regular bulletins of her progress, avidly devouring news of her contemporaries. Each Founder's Feast she sent them a witty telegram of congratulation or, these days, a witty e-mail, usually in verse, because she never wanted them to forget that she had won the school poetry prize. She was attractive in a forthright way, and famously loquacious, especially when there wasn't much to say. And she had that tottery, extraordinarily ugly walk that is affected by English women of the royal class.

Yet Gloria Woodrow was not naturally stupid. Eighteen years ago at Edinburgh University she had been rated one of the better brains of her year and it was said of her that if she hadn't been so taken up with Woodrow, she would have landed a decent 2:1 in Politics and Philosophy. However, in the years between, marriage and motherhood and the inconstancies of diplomatic life had replaced whatever ambitions she might have had. Sometimes, to Woodrow's private sadness, she appeared to have deliberately put her intellect to sleep in order to fulfil her wifely role. But he was also grateful to her for this sacrifice, and for the restful way in which she failed to read his inner thoughts, yet pliantly shaped herself to fit his aspirations. 'When I want a life of my own, I'll let you know,' she would assure him when, seized by one of his bouts of guilt or boredom, he pressed her to take a higher degree, read Law, read Medicine – or at least read *something*, for God's sake. 'If you don't like me as I am, that's different,' she would reply, deftly shifting his complaint from the particular to the general. 'Oh but I do, I do, I *love* you as you are!' he would protest, earnestly embracing her. And more or less he believed himself.

Justin became the secret prisoner of the lower ground on the evening of the same black Monday on which the news

of Tessa's death had been brought to him, at the hour when limousines in ambassadorial driveways were starting to champ and stir inside their iron gates before processing towards the evening's mystically elected watering hole. Is it Lumumba Day? Merdeka Day? Bastille Day? Never mind: the national flag will be flying in the garden, the sprinklers will be turned off, the red carpet will be laid out, black servants in white gloves will be hovering, just as they did in the colonial times we all piously disavow. And the appropriate patriotic music will be issuing from the host's marquee.

Woodrow rode with Justin in the black Volkswagen van. From the hospital morgue, Woodrow had escorted him to police headquarters and watched him compose, in his immaculate academic hand, a statement identifying his wife's corpse. From headquarters Woodrow had called ahead to inform Gloria that, traffic permitting, he would be arriving in fifteen minutes with their *special guest* – 'and he'll be keeping his head down, darling, and we've got to make sure it stays that way' – though this did not prevent Gloria from putting through a crash call to Elena, dialling repeatedly till she got her, to discuss menus for dinner – did poor Justin love fish or hate it? she forgot, but she had a feeling he was *faddish* – and God, El, what *on earth* do I talk to him about while Sandy's off manning the fort and I'm stuck with the poor man alone for hours on end? I mean all the *real* subjects are off limits.

'You'll think of something, don't worry, darling,' Elena assured her, not altogether kindly.

But Gloria still found time to give Elena a rundown of the absolutely *harrowing* phone calls she'd taken from the press, and others she'd refused to take, preferring to have Juma, her Wakamba houseboy, say that Mr or Mrs Woodrow are not available to come to the telephone at present – except that

there was this frightfully well-spoken young man from the *Telegraph* whom she would have *adored* to talk to, but Sandy had said no on pain of death.

‘Perhaps he’ll write, darling,’ said Elena consolingly.

The Volkswagen van with tinted windows pulled up in the Woodrow driveway, Woodrow sprang out to check for journalists and immediately afterwards Gloria was treated to her first sight of Justin the widower, the man who had lost his wife and baby son in the space of six months, Justin the deceived husband who would be deceived no longer, Justin of the tailored lightweight suit and soft gaze that were habitual to him, her secret fugitive to be hidden in the lower ground, removing his straw hat as he climbed out of the tailgate with his back to the audience, and thanking everybody – which meant Livingstone the driver, and Jackson the guard, and Juma who was hovering uselessly as per usual – with a distracted bow of his handsome dark head as he moved gracefully along the line of them to the front door. She saw his face first in black shadow, then in the short-lived evening twilight. He advanced on her, and said, ‘Good evening, Gloria, how very good of you to have me,’ in a voice so bravely mustered that she could have wept and later did.

‘We’re just so relieved to be able to do *anything* to help, Justin darling,’ she murmured, kissing him with cautious tenderness.

‘And there’s no word of Arnold, one takes it? Nobody rang while we were on the road?’

‘I’m sorry, dear, not a peep. We’re all on tenterhooks, of course.’ *One takes it*, she thought. I’ll say one does. Like a hero.

Somewhere in the background Woodrow was advising her in a bereaved voice that he needed another hour in the office, sweet, he’d ring, but she barely bothered with him. Who’s *he*

lost? she thought scathingly. She heard car doors clunk and the black Volkswagen drive away but paid it no attention. Her eyes were with Justin, her ward and tragic hero. Justin, she now realised, was as much the victim of this tragedy as Tessa was, because Tessa was dead while Justin had been lumbered with a grief he would have to cart with him to his grave. Already it had greyed his cheeks and changed the way he walked and the things he looked at as he went along. Gloria's cherished herbaceous borders, planted to his specification, passed him by without a glance. So did the rhus and two malus trees he had so sweetly refused to let her pay for. Because it was one of the *marvellous* things about Justin that Gloria had never *really* got used to – this to Elena in a lengthy résumé the same evening – that he was *hugely* knowledgeable about plants and flowers and gardens. And I mean, where on earth did *that* come from, El? His mother probably. Wasn't she half a Dudley? Well, *all* the Dudleys gardened like mad, they'd done it for aeons. Because we're talking classic English *botany* here, El, not what you read in the Sunday papers.

Ushering her treasured guest up the steps to the front door, across the hall and down the servants' stairs to the lower ground, Gloria gave him the tour of the prison cell that would be home to him for the duration of his sentence: the warped plywood wardrobe for hanging up your suits, Justin – why on earth had she never given Ebediah another fifty shillings and told him to paint it? – the worm-eaten chest of drawers for your shirts and socks – why had she never thought to line it?

But it was Justin, as usual, who was doing the apologising. 'I'm afraid I haven't much in the way of clothes to put in them, Gloria. My house is besieged by news hounds and Mustafa must have taken the phone off the hook. Sandy kindly said he'd lend me whatever I need until it's safe to smuggle something round.'

‘Oh Justin, how *stupid* of me,’ Gloria exclaimed, flushing.

But then, either because she didn’t want to leave him, or didn’t know how to, she insisted on showing him the awful old fridge crammed with bottles of drinking water and mixers – why had she never had the rotting rubber replaced? – and the ice *here*, Justin, just run it under the tap to break it up – and the plastic electric kettle that she’d always hated, and the bumble-bee pot from Ilfracombe with Tetley tea bags and a crack in it, and the battered Huntley & Palmer’s tin of sugared biscuits in case he liked a nibble last thing at night, because Sandy always does, although he’s been told to lose weight. And finally – thank God she’d got *something* right – the splendid vase of many-coloured snapdragons that she had raised from seed on his instructions.

‘Well, good, I’ll leave you in peace then,’ she said – until, reaching the door, she realised to her shame that she had still not spoken her words of commiseration. ‘Justin darling –’ she began.

‘Thanks, Gloria, there’s really no need,’ he cut in with surprising firmness.

Deprived of her tender moment, Gloria struggled to recover a tone of practicality. ‘Yes, well, you’ll come up whenever you want, won’t you, dear? Dinner at eight, theoretically. Drinkies before if you feel like it. Just do whatever you wish. Or nothing. *Heaven* knows when Sandy will be back.’ After which she went gratefully upstairs to her bedroom, showered and changed and did her face, then looked in on the boys at their prep. Quelled by the presence of death, they were working diligently, or pretending to.

‘Does he look terrifically sad?’ asked Harry, the younger one.

‘You’ll meet him tomorrow. Just be very polite and serious with him. Mathilda’s making you hamburgers. You’ll eat

them in the playroom, not the kitchen, understood?’ A post-script popped out of her before she had even thought about it: ‘He’s a very courageous fine man, and you’re to treat him with *great* respect.’

Descending to the drawing room she was surprised to find Justin ahead of her. He accepted a hefty whisky and soda, she poured herself a glass of white wine and sat in an arm-chair, actually Sandy’s, but she wasn’t thinking of Sandy. For minutes – she’d no idea how many in real time – neither of them spoke, but the silence was a bond that Gloria felt more keenly the longer it went on. Justin sipped his whisky, and she was relieved to note that he had not caught Sandy’s thoroughly irritating new habit of closing his eyes and pouting as if the whisky had been given him to test. Glass in hand, he moved himself to the french window, looking out into the floodlit garden – twenty 150-watt bulbs hooked up to the house generator, and the blaze of them burning one half of his face.

‘Maybe that’s what everyone thinks,’ he remarked suddenly, resuming a conversation they had not had.

‘What is, dear?’ Gloria asked, not certain she was being addressed, but asking anyway because he clearly needed to talk to someone.

‘That you were loved for being someone you weren’t. That you’re a sort of fraud. A love-thief.’

Gloria had no idea whether this was something everyone thought, but she had no doubts at all that they shouldn’t. ‘Of *course* you’re not a fraud, Justin,’ she said stoutly. ‘You’re one of the most genuine people I know, you always were. Tessa adored you and so she should have done. She was a very lucky young girl indeed.’ As for *love-thief*, she thought – well, no prizes for guessing who did the love-thieving in *that* duo!

Justin did not respond to this glib assurance, or not that

she could see, and for a spell all she heard was the chain reaction of barking dogs – one started, then all the others did, up and down Muthaiga's golden mile.

'You were always *good* to her, Justin, you know you were. You mustn't go castigating yourself for crimes you didn't commit. A lot of people do that when they lose someone, and they're not being fair on themselves. We can't go round treating people as if they were going to drop dead any minute, or we'd never get anywhere. Well, would we? You were loyal to her. Always,' she asserted, thereby incidentally implying that the same could not be said for Tessa. And the implication was not lost on him, she was sure of it: he was on the brink of talking about that wretched Arnold Bluhm when to her vexation she heard the clunk of her husband's latchkey in the door and knew the spell was broken.

'Justin, you poor chap, how's it going?' Woodrow cried, pouring himself an unusually modest glass of wine before crashing onto the sofa. 'No more news, I'm afraid. Good or bad. No clues, no suspects, not as yet. No trace of Arnold. The Belgians are supplying a helicopter, London's coming up with a second. Money, money, curse of us all. Still, he's a Belgian citizen, so why not? How very pretty you're looking, sweet. What's for dins?'

He's been drinking, Gloria thought in disgust. He pretends to work late and he sits there in his office drinking while I make the boys do their homework. She heard a movement from the window and saw to her dismay that Justin had braced himself to take his leave – scared off, no doubt, by her husband's elephantine flat-footedness.

'No food?' Woodrow protested. 'Got to keep your strength up, you know, old boy.'

'You are very kind but I fear I have no appetite. Gloria, thank you again. Sandy, goodnight.'

‘And the Pellegrin sends strong supporting messages from London. Whole Foreign Office struck down with grief, he says. Didn’t want to intrude personally.’

‘Bernard was always very tactful.’

She watched the door close, she heard his footsteps descend the concrete staircase, she saw his empty glass resting on the bamboo table beside the french window, and for a frightening moment she was convinced she would never see him again.

Woodrow bolted his dinner clumsily, not tasting it as usual. Gloria, who like Justin had no appetite, watched him. Juma their houseboy, tiptoeing restlessly between them, watched him too.

‘How we faring?’ Woodrow murmured with a conspiratorial slur, keeping his voice down and pointing at the floor to warn her to do the same.

‘Been fine,’ she said, playing his game. ‘Considering.’ What are you doing down there? she wondered. Are you lying on your bed, flailing yourself in the darkness? Or are you staring through your bars into the garden, talking to her ghost?

‘Anything of any significance come out?’ Woodrow was asking, stumbling a bit on the word significance, but still contriving to keep their conversation allusive on account of Juma.

‘Like what?’

‘About our lover-boy,’ he said and, leering shamefully, jabbed a thumb at her begonias and mouthed *bloom*, at which Juma hurried off to get a jug of water.

For hours Gloria lay awake beside her snoring husband until, fancying she heard a sound from downstairs, she crept to the landing and peered out of the window. The power cut was over. An orange glow from the city lifted to the stars. But no Tessa lurked in the lighted garden, and no Justin either.

She returned to bed to find Harry diagonally asleep with his thumb in his mouth and one arm across his father's chest.

The family rose early as usual, but Justin was ahead of them, dressed in his crushed suit and hovering. He looked flushed, she thought, a little over-busy, too much colour under the brown eyes. The boys shook his hand, gravely as instructed, and Justin meticulously returned their greetings.

'Oh Sandy, yes, good morning,' he said as soon as Woodrow appeared. 'I wondered whether we might have a quick word.'

The two men withdrew to the sun lounge.

'It's about my house,' Justin began, as soon as they were alone.

'House here or house in London, old boy?' Woodrow countered, in a fatuous effort to be cheerful. And Gloria, listening to every word through the serving hatch to the kitchen, could have brained him.

'Here in Nairobi. Her private papers, lawyers' letters. Her family trust material. Documents that are precious to both of us. I can't leave her personal correspondence sitting there for the Kenyan police to plunder at will.'

'So what's the solution, old boy?'

'I'd like to go there. At once.'

So firm! Gloria rhapsodised. So forceful, in spite of everything!

'My dear chap, that's impossible. The hacks would eat you alive.'

'I don't believe that's true, actually. They can try and take my photograph, I suppose. They can shout at me. If I don't reply to them, that's about as far as they can go. Catch them while they're shaving.'

Gloria knew her husband's prevarications inside out. In a

minute he'll call Bernard Pellegrin in London. That's what he always does when he needs to bypass Porter Coleridge and get the answer he wants to hear.

'Look here, tell you what, old boy. Why not write me a list of what you want and I'll pass it to Mustafa somehow and have him bring the stuff here?'

Typical, thought Gloria furiously. *Dither, haver, look for the easy way out every time.*

'Mustafa would have no idea what to select,' she heard Justin reply, as firmly as before. 'And a list would be no good to him at all. Even shopping lists defeat him. I owe it to her, Sandy. It's a debt of honour and I must discharge it. Whether or not you come along.'

Class will out! Gloria applauded silently from her touchline. *Well played, that man!* But even then it did not occur to her, though her mind was opening up in all sorts of unexpected directions, that her husband might have his own reasons for wishing to visit Tessa's house.

The press were not shaving. Justin had that wrong. Or if they were, they were doing it on the grass verges outside Justin's house, where they had been camping all night in hire cars, dumping their garbage in the hydrangea bushes. A couple of African vendors in Uncle Sam pants and top hats had opened a tea stand. Others were cooking maize on charcoal. Lacklustre policemen hung around a beaten-up patrol car, yawning and smoking cigarettes. Their leader, an enormously fat man in a polished brown belt and gold Rolex, was sprawled in the front passenger seat with his eyes shut. It was half past seven in the morning. Low cloud cut off the city. Large blackbirds were changing places on the overhead wires, waiting for their moment to swoop for food.

'Drive past, then stop,' Woodrow the soldier's son ordered from the back of the van.

It was the same arrangement as the day before: Livingstone and Jackson up front, Woodrow and Justin hunkered on the rear seat. The black Volkswagen had CD plates but so had every second vehicle in Muthaiga. An informed eye might have spotted the British prefix to the licence number, but no such eye was present, nobody showed any interest as Livingstone drove sedately past the gates and up the gentle slope. Easing the van to a halt, he put on the handbrake.

'Jackson, get out of the van, walk slowly down the hill to the gates of Mr Quayle's house. What's the name of your gate-keeper?' This to Justin.

'Omari,' Justin said.

'Tell Omari that as the van approaches he is to open the gates at the last minute, and close them as soon as it's through. Stay with him to make sure he does exactly what he's told. Now.'

Born to the part, Jackson clambered out of the van, stretched, fiddled with his belt and finally ambled down the hill to Justin's iron security gates where, under the eye of police and journalists, he took up a place beside Omari.

'All right, back down,' Woodrow ordered Livingstone. 'Very slowly. Take your time.'

Livingstone released the handbrake and, with the engine still running, allowed the van to curl gently backward down the slope until the tailgate was tucked into the opening to Justin's drive. He's turning round, they may have thought. If so, they can't have thought it long, because in the next moment he had slammed down the accelerator and was racing backwards to the gates, scattering astonished journalists to left and right of him. The gates flew open, pulled on one side by Omari and

on the other by Jackson. The van passed through, the gates slammed shut again. Jackson on the house side leaped back into the van while Livingstone kept it rolling all the way to Justin's porch and up the two steps, to rest inches from the front door, which Justin's houseboy Mustafa, with exemplary prescience, flung open from inside while Woodrow bundled Justin ahead of him, then sprang after him into the hall, slamming the front door shut behind them as he went.

The house was in darkness. Out of respect for Tessa or the news hounds, the staff had drawn the curtains. The three men stood in the hall, Justin, Woodrow, Mustafa. Mustafa was weeping silently. Woodrow could make out his crumpled face, the grimace of white teeth, the tears set wide on the cheeks, almost underneath the ears. Justin was holding Mustafa's shoulders, comforting him. Startled by this un-English demonstration of affection on Justin's part, Woodrow was also offended by it. Justin drew Mustafa against him until Mustafa's clenched jaw rested on his shoulder. Woodrow looked away in embarrassment. Down the passage other shadows had appeared from the servants' area: the one-armed illegal Ugandan shamba boy who helped Justin in the garden and whose name Woodrow had never managed to retain, and the illegal South Sudanese refugee called Esmeralda who was always having boy-trouble. Tessa could no more resist a sob-story than she could bow to local regulations. Sometimes her household had resembled a pan-African hostel for disabled down-and-outs. More than once, Woodrow had remonstrated with Justin on the subject but met a blank wall. Only Esmeralda was not weeping. Instead she wore that wooden look that whites mistake for churlishness or indifference. Woodrow knew it was neither. It was familiarity. This is how *real* life is constituted, it said. This is

grief and hatred and people hacked to death. This is the everyday we have known since we were born and you Wazungu have not.

Gently pushing Mustafa away, Justin received Esmeralda in a double handshake during which she laid the side of her braided forehead against his. Woodrow had the sensation of being admitted to a circle of affection he had not dreamed of. Would Juma weep like this if Gloria got her throat cut? Like hell he would. Would Ebediah? Would Gloria's new maid, whatever her name is? Justin pressed the Ugandan outdoor boy against him, fondled his cheek, then turned his back on all of them and with his right hand took a grasp of the handrail on the staircase. Looking for a moment like the old man he soon would be, he began hauling himself upward. Woodrow watched him gain the shadows of the landing and vanish into the bedroom Woodrow had never entered, though he had imagined it in countless furtive ways.

Finding he was alone, Woodrow hovered, feeling threatened, which was how he felt whenever he entered her house: a country boy come to town. If it's a cocktail party, why don't I know these people? Whose cause are we being asked to espouse tonight? Which room will she be in? Where's Bluhm? At her side, most likely. Or in the kitchen, reducing the servants to paroxysms of helpless laughter. Remembering his purpose, Woodrow edged his way along the twilight corridor to the drawing room door. It was unlocked. Blades of morning sunlight thrust their way between the curtains, illuminating the shields and masks and frayed hand-woven throw-rugs made by paraplegics, with which Tessa had succeeded in enlivening her dreary government furnishings. How did she make everything so pretty with this junk? The same brick fireplace as ours, the same boxed-in iron girders masquerading as oak beams of

Merrie England. Everything like ours but smaller, because the Quayles were childless and a rank lower. Then why did Tessa's house always seem to be the real thing, and ours its unimaginative ugly sister?

He reached the middle of the room and stopped, arrested by the power of memory. This is where I stood and lectured her, the contessa's daughter, from beside this pretty inlaid table that she said her mother had loved, while I clutched the back of this flimsy satinwood chair and pontificated like a Victorian father. Tessa standing over there in front of the window, and the sunlight cutting straight through her cotton dress. Did she know that I was talking to a naked silhouette? That just to look at her was to see my dream of her come true, my girl on a beach, my stranger on a train?

'I thought the best thing I could do was call by,' he begins sternly.

'Now why did you think that, Sandy?' she asks.

Eleven in the morning. Chancery meeting over, Justin safely despatched to Kampala, attending some useless three-day conference on Aid & Efficiency. I have come here on official business, but I have parked my car in a side street like a guilty lover calling on a brother officer's beautiful young wife. And God, is she beautiful. And God, is she young. Young in the high, sharp breasts that never move. How can Justin let her out of his sight? Young in the grey, wide-angry eyes, in the smile too wise for her age. Woodrow can't see the smile because she is backlit. But he can hear it in her voice. Her teasing, foxing, classy voice. He can retrieve it in his memory any time. As he can retrieve the line of her waist and thighs in the naked silhouette, the maddening fluidity of her walk, no wonder she and Justin fell for one another – they're from the same thoroughbred stable, twenty years apart.