JAMES McGEE
TRIGGER MEN

A RESCUE MISSION INTO THE HEART OF DARKNESS
TRIGGER MEN

James McGee grew up in Gibraltar, Germany, and Northern Ireland. After periods of employment in banking and the newspaper industries, he spent 10 years as a supervisor with Pan Am Crew Operations followed by 15 years in the bookselling trade, during which time he co-presented book reviews for BBC local radio as well as several independent stations. He resides in Somerset. As well as writing thrillers he is also the creator of the successful Matthew Hawkwood series of novels, set during the Napoleonic Wars.
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Wolf’s Lair

Ratcatcher
Resurrectionist
Rapscallion
Rebellion
The Blooding
JAMES McGEE

TRIGGER MEN
The watchers had been in position for an hour.

It had been a minute after ten o’clock when the Peugeot cruised into the street and slid gently into the kerb. There were no street lights. The suburb, situated to the north of the capital, lay in darkness. There were no pedestrians, no late night revellers returning home or lovers strolling arm in arm, no-one out walking the dog, no-one to interfere.

During the wait the three men had smoked their way through a full pack of cigarettes. Not the cheap local brand but English Players, brought in on the last airlift from Stansted, along with the crates of Black and White whisky, Phillips tape recorders and the new red Mercedes 300 SEL ordered by Major Juma, head of State Security.

The driver withdrew the Browning automatic from his belt, opened the door and eased onto the street. His companions followed suit. They were dressed casually, as if on their way to a party, in gaudy open-neck cotton shirts and dark slacks.

They stood by the car for several seconds, taking stock of their surroundings. A few lit windows indicated that not all the residents had retired to bed. That didn’t worry them.

The bungalow, white-washed under a red corrugated roof, was framed by oleander trees and dense hibiscus bushes. A narrow earthen path joined the veranda to the street. It had not rained for two months and what had been a small square of green lawn had been reduced to a patch of bare brown stubble; a threadbare blanket in need of darning.

Halfway along the path they paused. All three now carried weapons. Two had Brownings while the third hefted a Russian-made Tokarev. One man broke away and headed for the rear of the bungalow. When he had melted into the shadows his companions padded onto the veranda. Two doors barred their entry: an outer mosquito screen - thin mesh on a wooden frame - and the sturdier front door. The driver pressed the bell. Guns held behind their backs, they waited.

David Holt preferred to work at night. It was cooler for one thing and
there was less chance of an interruption. He was seated at the desk in his study when he heard the bell. Raising his head in puzzlement, he placed the fountain pen on the blotting pad next to the stack of writing paper.

Holt was sixty one years old. A pale, slim man with thinning salt and pepper hair and tight-lipped features, his slight figure had never looked in the best of health. He glanced at his watch. Five minutes after eleven. He certainly wasn’t expecting visitors at this late hour.

The bell rang again. Impatiently, he pushed back his chair and walked out of the room and down the passage to the front door. At the third, more insistent, ring he switched on the veranda light and drew the bolts. As the front door swung open the two figures on the veranda sprang into focus. Holt felt the first stab of apprehension when he saw the colour of their skin. He stared at them, noting with relief that the bolt on the screen door was pushed home. Unsmiling, the two men returned his stare.

‘Yes?’ His tone was wary. ‘What is it?’

One of them reached for the handle on the screen and was plainly annoyed at not being able to open the outer door. He increased the pressure and the screen groaned against the hinges as it resisted his efforts.

Holt flared. ‘Stop that! Who are you? What do you want?’

The African with his hand on the door spoke. His English was hard to understand. His intention, however, was clear; he wanted Holt to let them in. Holt was no spring chicken and the men looked young and fit. Holt stayed where he was.

‘If you don’t leave,’ he warned, ‘I’m going to call the police.’

The other man spoke this time. His English was a definite improvement.

‘Let us in, Mister Holt.’

They brought their weapons out from behind their backs and pointed them through the screen.

‘Department of State Security. Open the door.’

Holt’s felt his insides turn over.

The sound of glass breaking at the back of the property made him swing around. As he did so, one of the men placed a foot against the screen and kicked it inwards. The frame splintered and as the door slammed back on its hinges, the two men thrust their way into the hallway, sweeping Holt off his feet, driving him backwards into the lounge. He tried to resist but they were too strong. They threw him onto the sofa just as the third member of the
trio arrived, gun in hand.

The driver stood over him as the others ransacked the room. They rolled back the rugs on the floor, upturned tables and chairs and ripped the doors on the hi-fi cabinet off their hinges. They twisted paintings off the walls and then dragged Holt from the sofa so they could turn over the cushions. Holt watched them in fear and rage.

The Department of State Security was staffed by Southern Sudanese, Nubians and members of the Makesi tribe whose homeland lay to the north near the Sudanese border. Looking at these men, Holt thought that the one who spoke the better English was probably a Makesi. The scars on his cheek implied as much. Three vertical slashes - tribal markings that gave the young men the nick name ‘One Elevens’ in British Army slang. From their colouring, the other two were Sudanese. The latter were recruited from the north-west. Holt knew that truckloads of Sudanese, trained by DOSS, were driven through the bush at dusk across the unmarked border. Once across, the men were dropped in their home territories where they offered their friends work, promising high rewards. The next day the new recruits were brought back over the border to commence their training in the compounds outside the capital, Kendura.

The Makesi approached him, grim faced. Mutilated cushions, broken cassettes, vinyl records and glass splinters littered the floor at his feet. From the other rooms the sound of violent breakage told Holt that the house was being systematically ransacked. They were searching for something. Holt knew what it was.

The Makesi tapped Holt’s cheek with the gun barrel. Holt flinched.

‘Where are the papers?’

Holt looked blank. ‘Papers?’ He was dreadfully aware of the break in his voice.

His tormentor shook his head. ‘Do not play games. We know the lies you have been writing.’

‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about!’ Holt spluttered. ‘Good God! You force your way into my home, assault me, destroy my property! You have no right! The High Commissioner will be informed; you can be sure of that!’

The Makesi drew his arm back and scythed a blow at Holt’s head. The latter tried to turn his face away but the Makesi’s fist caught his cheek. For a brief second the room went dark and as his backside hit the sofa again
he felt the tears welling up.  

He tried to rise but another blow forced him back down. He put a hand to his mouth and felt the loose teeth and the blood from his split lip trickle onto his chin. Fearful, he looked up.

The Makesi wagged his finger. ‘Do not speak. Your government will be informed that you have been involved in subversive activities. You are an enemy of the state, Mister Holt. The penalty will be severe. Your Commissioner cannot help you.’

Holt fought back the sudden urge to vomit. His gaze was transfixed on one of the Sudanese who’d reappeared carrying a cardboard box under his arm. At a sign from the Makesi the contents of the box were emptied onto the floor. Holt stared down with the awful realization that his troubles were only just beginning.

The manuscript - two hundred typewritten pages of foolscap secured in a ring binder - lay on top of an old desk diary and an assortment of bills, letters and receipts. The Makesi picked it up and flicked through the pages. The third man came back. He stood nonchalantly by the door, holding the Tokarev in one hand as he reached into his trousers with the other to scratch idly at his crotch. His face held no expression.

With a grunt of satisfaction the Makesi jerked his head and his companions hauled Holt to his feet where he swayed unsteadily like a sailor trying to find his land legs. His face was chalk-white.

He was moaning as they marched him through the house and down the path to the car. As they bundled him unceremoniously into the back of the Peugeot, Holt was struck with the absurd thought that he’d not finished writing the letter to his daughter. It was, no doubt, somewhere in the ruin that had once been his study.

Anthony Warren, Her Majesty’s Acting High Commissioner in Lugamba, walked into his office and collapsed into his chair. He was a tall, well-groomed man with a narrow face topped by greying swept-back hair. He was fifty-seven years old and this morning he felt every year of his age.

He opened his briefcase and took out the bottle of Aspirin. Gulping a brace of pills he screwed up his face as the taste hit the back of his throat. Closing his eyes he began to massage his throbbing temples, willing the headache to subside.
The door opened.
‘Morning, sir.’
Warren grunted as his aide entered the room. James Henderson was thirty years old, bespectacled, clean shaven and conservatively dressed. He looked every inch the competent secretary, which he was.

Through half closed eyes, Warren studied his aide’s curious gait. Henderson was treading as softly as if he was walking on egg shells and Warren had the distinct impression that it was not out of deference to his current ailment.

‘Out with it,’ he said heavily. ‘The suspense is killing me.’
As if seeking guidance, Henderson stared woodenly over his superior’s shoulders at the portrait of the Monarch. Her Majesty wasn’t much help. She smiled benignly. Henderson took a deep breath.

‘It’s Holt, sir.’
‘Oh, Christ,’ Warren said. ‘What’s the silly sod done now?’

The Acting High Commissioner certainly had a delicate turn of phrase at times, generally reserved for moments of acute stress. Henderson presumed the migraine attack would not be conducive to benevolence. He cleared his throat.

‘He’s been arrested.’
There, he’d said it. He was instantly aware of the look of horror that was creeping over his boss’s face like a returning tide. Henderson began to wish he was somewhere else.

‘What did you say?’ It might have been due to the headache, but Warren had paled visibly.

‘Holt’s been arrested. He was picked up by the President’s goon squad last night at his bungalow. Around eleven o’clock. I’ve only just been informed. Their Foreign Minister phoned a couple of minutes before you arrived.’

Warren’s forehead began to vibrate like a drill. He knew all about David Holt.

Out of the seven hundred souls that made up the British community in Lugamba, Warren had met most of them. He counted a couple of dozen as close friends. The majority were merely acquaintances, people he’d bumped into during forgettable social gatherings, either by accident or through well-meant introductions by colleagues. Not much of a selection. Businessmen mostly: front men for British firms. Their numbers were declining rapidly,
though, and had been for the past few years. The political climate had created an economic wasteland that could no longer support the companies or their executives.

Warren’s last meeting with Holt had been an interesting though brief confrontation; the result of rumours circulating among the ex-pats that Holt was hard at work on a book, the contents of which were unlikely to improve the already strained relations between Lugamba and the United Kingdom.

Warren, as Acting High Commissioner and therefore stuck with the unenviable role of whipping boy, had felt obliged to sound out Holt with a view to discovering just how inflammatory the book was likely to be. He’d called on Holt to discuss the matter.

Prior to the meeting, Warren had gleaned what information he could about Holt to find out what made him tick.

Holt was sixty one years old. He’d been educated at Manchester Grammar and Trinity, Cambridge. Fluent in Polish, he’d chosen journalism as a career and to that end had travelled extensively, particularly through Central Europe. From journalism, he’d turned his hand to teaching. He’d spent a number of years in Turkey and had written a book about his travels there. He’d married a German girl, Marie Konrad, the daughter of an upper class lawyer from Mannheim. They had one child; a daughter. Upon his arrival in Lugamba he’d taken up a post at Manziri University teaching English and later moved to the National Teachers Training College at Lekasu.

Holt liked the country and the people and was unhappy at the thought that one day he might have to return to Britain. This view was not shared by his wife who’d divorced him in and returned to England taking their daughter, Joanna, with her. Holt remained in Lugamba, only returning to London briefly for an operation on an abdominal cancer. On his return to Lugamba he found that his job had been filled and so, to occupy his time, he’d started another book. It was to be part autobiographical and part travel stories. Naturally, much of it dealt with his life in Lugamba.

Holt made no secret of the fact that it was critical of the present regime that had come to power after the coup. In the years following the takeover he’d seen the decline of the things he cherished most in the country, in particular the way of life of the Lugamban people. He saw it daily; in their bodies as they shuffled along the streets and in the blank expressions on their faces. And always the eyes told the story: the oppression and the fear. As though the dead had got up and walked.
Warren was in a difficult position, for what should the diplomatic representative of a country do when one of its subjects is clearly endangering himself and other members of his community through his open criticism of Lugamba’s political elite? Already the relationship between Lugamba and the UK was far from harmonious, especially since the expulsion of the British High Commissioner, when Warren had been appointed to cope as best he could. For the latter, it was like starting the Grand National on a choleric nag that had only three legs. In short he didn’t stand much chance of keeping ahead of the field.

So Warren had called on Holt. He was unprepared for the outcome. Try as he might, Warren could make no headway. Holt had been coldly polite and surprised at the interest shown by Her Majesty’s representative. Curiosity had turned to resentment when Warren had hardened his tone, passing a warning to Holt that the British position was tenuous enough without him adding fuel to the fire. Holt’s reaction had been far from diplomatic. He’d sent Warren away with a flea in both ears. To put it bluntly, the Acting High Commissioner could get stuffed.

Now events had come to a head, though Warren was hardly in a position to say I told you so.

‘Christ! Why the bloody hell couldn’t he keep his mouth shut! He’s been on about that damned book for the past year. Quite frankly I’m amazed they haven’t picked him up sooner. I know my chat - if you could call it that - was tantamount to pissing against the wind but you’d have thought he’d have taken the hint. I mean, he could have kept quiet about the whole thing, sent it to a publisher back home and no one would have been any the wiser. We’re sitting on a knife edge here. One slip on our part - that’s all Mabato needs.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Henderson said, polishing his spectacles with his handkerchief.

‘Ever see Holt at work?’ Warren asked. ‘You only had to pass his house to hear him pounding away on that old Olivetti. When I went to see him he was on his veranda, togged up like Sanders of the bloody river. Obviously thinks he’s Ernest Hemingway. Idiot.’

Warren rubbed his forehead. ‘I knew I should have gone back to the UK when I had the chance. They did offer me that job in Whitehall, you recall?’

Henderson nodded. ‘Yes, sir, but think of the intrigue and back stabbing.’
Warren threw his aide a caustic look; not sure, but assuming the latter was being sarcastic. He could never tell with Henderson. ‘Quite so, but at least the back stabbing would have been metaphorical. Over here it’s for real, which brings us back to the matter in hand. I suppose I can expect a summons from you know who? The last time he sent for me he was still babbling on about that development loan that failed to materialize and the spare parts for those armoured cars we were stupid enough to sell him. Not that he’s paid for them yet, mind you. Not that I dare mention the fact, either. He’s like a ten-year old with a toy car. If a wheel comes off, he pounds the table until mummy rushes in to fix it.’

Warren sighed. ‘All right, you’d better get in touch with Nkuto at their Ministry. Usual stuff: outraged indignation, demand an explanation, don’t take no for an answer. You know the ritual. We might as well go through the motions.’

Henderson said uncomfortably, ‘I don’t think that’ll go down too well, sir.’

‘How’s that?’

‘You’ve already been summoned. As I said, they telephoned before you arrived.’

‘Damn it. In that case, you’d better get the car ready. When and where?’

‘Ten o’clock at the Command Post.’

Warren looked up sharply. ‘Command Post? I thought you said the call came from their Ministry.’

‘I did, but they were relaying a direct order from the President. He wants to see you himself.’ Henderson sounded apologetic, as though it was his fault. ‘There was one thing,’ he continued somewhat hesitantly.

Warren pursed his lips. ‘Go on.’

‘They said not to be late.’ Even second hand the words had a chilling ring.

Warren ran a finger across his brow. His headache had intensified. How was that even possible?

By eleven o’clock he was back in his office and as white as a sheet. Ignoring his aide’s raised eyebrows he walked purposefully to the cabinet behind his desk and reached unerringly for the bottle of Glenfiddich. The hand that lifted
the glass to his lips began to shake.

Henderson had never seen him in this state before so it was with a terrible sense of premonition that he asked Warren what had transpired during the Command Post visit.

It took Warren several tense moments and another drink to reply.‘We have a problem,’ he said slowly. His voice was a whisper as he took a seat. ‘It’s worse than we thought.’

Henderson approached cautiously.

Warren gazed forlornly into his aide’s face. He seemed to have aged ten years and even before he spoke again Henderson knew it was going to be bad news.

‘They’re going to shoot him,’ Warren said. ‘They’re going to execute Holt.’

Henderson froze and then groped his way to a vacant chair. ‘What? They can’t be serious!’

‘Oh, they’re serious all right.’ Warren sighed heavily. ‘Mabato convinced me of that in no uncertain terms. I have no doubt whatsoever that sentence will be carried out unless, that is, HMG agrees to certain conditions.’

Henderson blinked. ‘Conditions? What conditions?’

‘He’ll make them known to us shortly.’

This is madness, Henderson thought to himself. Aloud, he said, ‘How on earth can Mabato even contemplate such action? He’s barmy!’

‘That psychopath’s state of mind has never been in question,’ Warren snapped.

He frowned suddenly and went on, ‘OK, we’ll have to get the bloody ball rolling and do something to retrieve the situation. Get a message off to London.’ He shuddered. ‘God knows what they’ll make of this! We’ll just have to keep whittling away at Mabato in the hope that he gets to see sense, though something tells me this one’s going to be a real bastard!’
It never ceased to amaze Duncan Wood that no matter what time of day he arrived at Number Ten there was always a sea of expectant faces waiting to see who would emerge from the limousine. Day or night, rain or shine, they were always there; usually ready with some inane question shouted at the top of the lungs so that come the evening news or the next day’s edition the by-line would read, ‘When I spoke to the foreign secretary, I asked him...’

As if he was seriously going to yell back at them from across the road like a bloody barrow boy.

It was ten-thirty in the morning and raining. In the grey precincts of St James, faceless civil servants glared wetly at each other from under leaking brollies while along the grimy sills of Whitehall pigeons huddled together in miserable clumps. The city was damp and dismal and looked as if it was sulking.

As Foreign Secretary, Wood had been informed of the developments in Lugamba as soon as the news reached the Ministry. He’d wasted no time in contacting the Prime Minister, William Brooke.

Brooke had been about to meet with a delegation from the National Union of Mineworkers when the call came. The delegation had been far from happy at the sudden postponement and Brooke’s apology hurriedly relayed through a minion, but by the time the members of the NUM had collected their thoughts into one voice of disgruntled protest the foreign secretary was already en route to Downing Street.

The constable on duty nodded as Wood left the shelter of the car and ducked under the umbrella held by his aide. Despite the inclement weather and the desire to gain the warmth of the house Wood found time to turn and wave to the crowd; a smile fixed on his face like the advanced stages of rigor mortis. Bread and circuses...wasn’t that the phrase?

The Prime Minister greeted Wood warmly. Brooke was sixty years old and a product of Leeds Grammar and Oxford. He liked to think of himself as a rough diamond; a Prime Minister with the touch of the common man. He had a tendency to slip into his native northern accent when excited, though he
wasn’t averse to practising this affectation, especially prior to party political broadcasts and radio and television interviews. The voters, he felt, should always look upon their leader as someone they could relate to.

Brooke took Wood along the corridor to the Cabinet Room while directing a secretary to provide fresh coffee. ‘We’ll talk in here,’ he said, opening the door.

As Wood took a seat, Brooke said, ‘Right, once more from the top.’

Wood began with the telephone call from Lugamba. The facts were plain. A British subject was being held by the Lugamban authorities, under sentence of death - unless certain demands were met.

‘Give me a run-down on Holt,’ Brooke said.

Wood gave Brooke a brief biography.

When he’d finished, Brooke grunted, ‘You mentioned a wife and daughter. Where are they?’

‘His ex-wife’s dead. A car crash two years ago. His daughter married a Canadian; a civil engineer, I believe. They live in Calgary.’

Brooke accepted the information. He swore suddenly. ‘The man’s a bloody lunatic!’

‘Mabato?’ Wood raised an eyebrow.

‘Him as well but I was referring to Holt. You’re telling me that he’d already been warned about the consequences of writing this book?’

‘Yes, according to Warren. Mind you, had the manuscript contained less derogatory statements about Mabato’s character, I doubt we’d be having this conversation. Refresh my memory. What did Holt call him?’

‘A mindless dictator, among other things.’

‘Jesus.’ Brooke closed his eyes. Opening them, he said, ‘What about Warren? Not prone to exaggeration by any chance?’

‘By no means.’ Wood shook his head decisively. ‘As I recall, he was one of the legacies we inherited from our friends in the Opposition.’

While Brooke pondered upon that there was a knock on the door. Coffee had arrived.

The secretary retreated and Wood poured himself a cup. ‘Warren was the best man for a particularly unenviable job,’ he said, reaching for the sugar. ‘There was no need to replace him, though as a mark of thanks he was offered a post here at home. It’s common knowledge he turned the offer down in order to remain in Lugamba to protect his business interests, though Christ knows what state they must be in these days. I think we’re fortunate to
have a man of his calibre over there. Hell, when Mabato announced his intention of expelling the Asians, Warren was the first to tell him he was making a big mistake.’

‘It’s a pity the oaf didn’t listen to him,’ grated Brooke. He gazed through the tall windows at the rain beating against the panes. ‘Let’s run through those demands again,’ he sighed.

Wood extracted a manila file from his attaché case and laid it on the table. ‘I’ve extracted the salient points.’ He began to read.

‘Britain must stop all malicious propaganda against the President, the Government and the people of Lugamba mounted in Britain and the international news media.

‘Britain must expel all the Lugamban exiles that are spreading unfounded rumours against Lugamba.

‘Britain must stop fruitless attempts to persuade other countries not to give technical, financial or material assistance to Lugamba, while at the same time trying to persuade potential tourists not to come.

‘Britain should also desist from making baseless reports that Lugamba is in a state of chaos.

‘The British Government must sell Lugamba all the spare parts required for military equipment bought in Britain.

‘Prime Minister Brooke or the Queen must give President Mabato written acceptance of the ultimatum within ten days, otherwise David Holt will be shot.’

Wood looked up. ‘That’s it.’

‘Doesn’t want much, does he?’ Brooke said sarcastically. He stood up and clasped his hands behind his back. ‘I suppose he means it?’

Wood pursed his lips. ‘It could be that, taking the ultimatum into consideration, Mabato wants to wring as much as he can out of our predicament and has no intention of following through with his threat. So there may well be room for negotiation. However, one has to take a look at the man’s track record. Let’s not forget that only a year ago the International Commission of Jurists reported that he’d ushered in a reign of terror worse than anything in recent African history. The Commission thought that between one hundred and two hundred thousand people died in the ten years following his seizure of power. Good Christ, the man’s as unpredictable as gelignite. He’s capable of anything and that includes killing Holt.’

‘I was afraid you’d say that.’ Brooke stole a glance at his watch. ‘I’ve
asked George Dalkieth to join us. Maybe the three of us can come up with a solution. Quite frankly, I’d like to have some answers ready for the House this afternoon. My bones tell me that today’s session’s going to be a bugger.’

‘What time’s he due?’

‘Eleven and if I know George, he’ll be here on the dot.’

As if on cue the door to the Cabinet Room opened and Roger Hamilton, the Prime Minister’s Principal Private Secretary announced Dalkieth’s arrival. Wood rose to his feet in anticipation.

Sir George Dalkieth was Director of Operations SIS. He was a tall, distinguished looking man with a military haircut and piercing eyes. He was immaculately dressed in navy blue pinstripe with a cream shirt, maroon tie and a matching handkerchief in his top pocket. He walked erect, almost a caricature of a Guards officer on dress parade.

‘Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary.’ The voice was refined, almost a drawl.

Brooke and Wood shook hands with Dalkieth who took a seat at the table.

‘Right,’ Brooke said. ‘You’ll take coffee, George?’

‘Thank you, yes.’ Dalkieth helped himself to a cup.

Brooke said, ‘This Lugamba mess. What I need are workable ideas on how to get ourselves out of it. It would seem, however unpalatable, that Mabato has us by the proverbials.’ He turned to Wood. ‘For George’s benefit, you’d better run through the points in that ultimatum again.’

Wood did so and Dalkieth listened without interrupting, his face betraying no emotion. When Wood finished his synopsis, Brooke asked the SIS man for suggestions.

‘Well, firstly, we must assume that Mabato means what he says.’

‘Been there, done that,’ Wood said.

‘Just so long as we know where we stand,’ Dalkieth said.

Wood said, ‘Of course, we don’t give in to him.’

‘So, we let them execute Holt?’ Dalkieth’s voice had a distinct bite.

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Well,’ Dalkieth said, ‘we’ve agreed the threat’s genuine. What do you propose? That we sit here and mull the situation over until Holt is shot? The ostrich syndrome; bury our heads in the sand and hope that if we ignore the problem it will go away.’

‘I didn’t mean that either,’ Wood said tartly.
‘Christ!’ Brooke broke in. ‘Don’t tell us what you didn’t mean, Duncan. Tell us what you do mean. We’re not bloody mind readers!’

Wood said, ‘Why don’t I fly out there and ...’

‘Like hell!’ Brooke exploded. ‘If you think this government’s going to bargain with that maniac you can collect your cards right now! We’re not giving in to blackmail.’

‘Even if it means saving a British subject’s life?’ Wood asked.

Brooke glared at the Foreign Secretary. ‘If you were to fly to Lugamba and the visit resulted in Holt being spared, the way is open for Mabato to use any one of the other seven hundred ex-pats still in the country as hostages for further demands. God! It’d set an appalling precedent. You’re not going and that’s final.’

‘So, stalemate.’ Wood sighed. ‘What next?’

‘Let’s go through the alternatives,’ suggested Brooke, returning to his seat. ‘As I see it, there are three fronts on which we can act: diplomatic, economic and military, in that order.’

‘I’d prefer diplomacy,’ Wood said.

‘So would I. But you’re not going out there.’

‘What about someone else to intervene on our behalf?’ Dalkieth said.

‘It’s a possibility,’ Wood said. ‘There’s a summit conference of the Organization of African Unity due to take place in Kendura. The delegates aren’t likely to look favourably on someone who’s sentenced a man to death for writing a book. There have been reports that Mabato’s canvassing for support to be elected the next Chairman. I don’t think this will help his chances.’

‘I’m sure Holt’s counting on that as a reprieve.’ Dalkieth said drily.

‘Nevertheless, world opinion has surely got to have some effect, I’d have thought.’

‘What about sanctions?’ Brooke asked.

‘I don’t think they’ll help us either,’ answered Wood heavily.

‘Explain.’

‘Coffee’s our best weapon. We could stop importing from Lugamba. The country’s our biggest supplier of coffee beans; about sixteen million pounds’ worth last year. That’s twice as much as Brazil and three times as much as Kenya. Even so, our share’s only seventeen per cent of Lugamba’s total crop. Mabato would have no difficulty finding an alternative buyer. Hell, we account for only about fifteen per cent of Lugamba’s foreign trade.’
That’s hardly a basis for a stranglehold and don’t forget that Mabato’s a Muslim and therefore gets a lot of help from the Middle East; in particular Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The only way I see that the country could be isolated would be for Kenya to close Lugamba’s rail and road outlets to the sea. I can’t see that happening. In any case, we cut off foreign aid before, when he expelled the Asians. That didn’t work. He still owes us twenty-five million for those armoured cars.’

‘Which brings us to our third alternative,’ Brooke said.

Wood shook his head. ‘We’d be using a hammer to crack a nut. We can hardly fly in a task force. Can’t say his neighbours would be too impressed with that, either. If anything they’d be more likely to hinder us. Thanks to the equipment we’ve sold to him – I use the term loosely - Mabato’s pretty well armed, too. He has Scorpion armoured cars, Ferret scout cars, and tanks, most of which are courtesy of HMG. He also has over sixty thousand men in his army, which is probably the only efficient institution left in the whole country. Damn it, he even has a squadron of MiG 15s. It’s just not feasible. Besides, the cost would be astronomical.’

Brooke nodded. He turned to Dalkieth. ‘What about your boys in SIS? Could we send someone in to get him out? One of the Sandbaggers?’

Dalkieth shook his head. ‘The chance of a lone agent succeeding in a rescue would be virtually non-existent. My men aren’t superhuman. We’d need a small team and I don’t have that number of experienced men to hand. I know what you’re thinking. We could use the SAS but if we sent in a squad covertly and they were rumbled, Mabato would have a field day. Notwithstanding the embarrassment of being found out, we have another seven hundred souls over there. Given Mabato’s state of mind, we could initiate a massacre. We can’t risk it.’

‘Dammit, it’s a British life we are talking about here!’ The Prime Minister looked despairingly at Wood for support.

A silence followed. Then Wood said, ‘There might be another way.’

Dalkieth and Brooke waited expectantly.

‘Well?’ Brooke prompted.

‘We could sub-contract.’

Dalkieth sucked in his breath.

‘Sorry?’ Brooke said, ‘I’m not with you.’

‘Look,’ Wood answered. ‘Let’s backtrack. As of now, we’re agreed that we do not give in to blackmail and I’m not going to Lugamba to
negotiate terms for the man’s release. We can’t send a bloody gunboat and economic sanctions would have no effect. Correct?’

Brooke nodded. ‘So?’

‘A cloak and dagger operation could put even more lives at risk. Added to which, in the event of a failed rescue attempt, we’d be forced, almost certainly, to give in to Mabato’s demands. Hell, public opinion would see to that. We’d never live it down. So we need to cover both avenues. In other words, if a rescue attempt did fail we have to be able to deny all knowledge of such a foolhardy venture, enabling us to continue negotiations on a diplomatic level with the possibility of breaking Mabato down bit by bit until he capitulates. On the other hand if a rescue mission was successful, well, problem solved.’ Wood spread his hands.

‘So?’ Brooke said again.

‘So, we need someone to take the risk for us. Someone to take action independently, so that we could condemn it if things went wrong.’

‘Meaning?’

‘We hire someone to do the job for us…surreptitiously.’

The Prime Minister’s eyebrows rose.

‘Let me put it this way,’ Wood countered. ‘There must be somebody who would consider taking on the job and the attendant risks…for a price.’

Brooke stared at him. ‘Are you out of your bloody mind? Of all the lame-brained ideas I’ve heard during my years in politics that has got to be the most lunatic. Have you any idea what you are proposing? Mercenaries? Christ almighty!’

‘I’m merely putting forward a suggestion,’ Wood said calmly.

‘Merely?’

Wood simply shrugged. ‘It worked in the Congo.’

‘Jesus!’ Brooke was appalled. He looked to Dalkieth. ‘You haven’t said much.’

‘I’m speechless,’ Dalkieth said and looked it.

‘All right,’ Wood said, putting up his hands. ‘Forget it. Dumb idea.’

‘That’s the most sensible thing you’ve said all morning,’ Brooke said.

Brooke couldn’t grasp the fact that the conversation had taken this sort of turn. He gathered his dazed wits together into a vague semblance of order and managed to say in a voice that was none too steady, ‘I’ve called a Cabinet meeting for this afternoon, after PMQ. I suggest we have a rethink to
see if we can come up with a solution to the problem. A sensible solution. Also, we’ll have to draft a reply to Mabato. I’ll leave that to you too, Duncan. Have something ready by three will you?’

Wood nodded. ‘As you wish, Prime Minister.’

‘Very good. Oh, and one other thing.’

Wood raised an eyebrow.

‘I’d keep some of your ideas to yourself. You never know, someone might get the wrong end of the stick.’

Later that afternoon Brooke and Wood were together again in Downing Street. This time they were in the Prime Minister’s first floor study. Brooke sat behind his desk. Wood occupied one of the armchairs.

‘Well, that was a bloody disaster,’ Brooke said.

The two politicians had been discussing the Cabinet meeting that had followed their return from the Commons where Brooke had been bombarded mercilessly by a barrage of questions from the Opposition and his own back-benchers. The questions were, needless to say, variations on a theme. What were his plans to secure the release of David Holt?

Brooke, to his chagrin, had been unable to supply answers that pacified save for stressing mechanically that Her Majesty’s Government would never give in to blackmail. All very laudable but of no immediate comfort to Holt who was three thousand miles away with the threat of a bullet in his brain - or worse.

Brooke had left the floor chastened.

‘I wouldn’t like to go through that again,’ he said, knowing full well he’d have to.

The Cabinet meeting hadn’t provided him with any ammunition either. In fact he felt that the meeting had been a complete waste of time and said as much as the meeting adjourned, to the vexation of his ministers.

‘God, I could do with a drink!’ Brooke moved to the cabinet in the corner of the room, ‘Join me?’

Wood shook his head and watched as Brooke poured himself a Haig. The PM walked back to his desk, sat down and stared fixedly at the glass in his hands. After several seconds he looked up, his expression severe. With great deliberation he said quietly, ‘Duncan, what I am about to say is absolutely for your ears alone. If one word of our conversation was to leak
out of this office the consequences could be - in fact would be - disastrous. Not just as far as our political futures are concerned but disastrous for the Party. We’d suffer a blow so damaging we’d never regain credibility. Do I make myself clear?’

Wood felt his stomach muscles tighten with expectation. ‘Of course.’
‘Very well. After that debacle in the House and that apology for a discussion this afternoon I have, despite my initial reaction, given some thought to your suggestion. You know to what I am referring, of course?’

Wood held his breath and nodded, his mind began to race.
‘Let’s suppose, just suppose, mind you, that such a plan was feasible ...’

‘But ...’
Brooke held up a hand. ‘Let me finish. I want you to initiate discreet inquiries. Find out what the prime considerations would be and give me something by this time tomorrow. We can stall Lugamba until then. Can you do it?’

Wood pursed his lips. ‘I’ll see what I can find out. What about Dalkieth?’

Brooke shook his head vehemently. ‘This is between thee and me.’
‘I’m going to be hard pressed on my own. He’ll have the contacts; names I can go on. He’ll be useful. I doubt we can go ahead without him.’
‘I didn’t say we’d go ahead. All I want, at the moment, is information.’ Brooke paused, sighed and then nodded. ‘However, I concede the point. All right, use Dalkieth.’ He looked up. ‘One last thing...’
‘Which is?’
‘This must never be traced back to this office. You understand?’
‘Of course.’
*He must think I was born yesterday!* Wood thought.
‘All tracks must be covered. There will be no loose ends. Dear God! If this were to leak out, especially after the Angolan fiasco!’

Brooke was referring to the recruitment of a British mercenary force by the FNLA - the National Front for the Liberation of Angola - to fight in Angola against the Marxist faction led by Agostinho Neto. What had started as a clandestine recruitment drive had developed rapidly, due to adverse publicity in the British press, into something closely resembling a Sunday school outing for soldiers of fortune. To make matters worse, the action was a failure with fifty British mercenaries killed, two executed, the rest
imprisoned. Despite the latter’s subsequent release after a long incarceration in Sao Paulo gaol, memory of the affair was still fresh. If word did surface that HMG had even considered hiring such men the consequences didn’t bear thinking about.

Wood was tense and thoughtful as he made his way back to his office. As he closed the door behind him he realized with distaste that his palms were damp with sweat. He reached his desk and sat down. Hazy, half formed ideas ran through his mind. He pressed a button on his intercom and when the voice of his secretary answered he told her to hold all calls for the next two hours.

So, where to begin?

First requirement: men who, for a price, would be prepared to risk their lives in order to enter hostile country and snatch a man from gaol. How many men? Where would he find them? How much would it cost?

This is absurd, he thought. The whole idiotic scheme was totally beyond his comprehension. Whatever had possessed him to contemplate such a ridiculous venture? He would have to call Dalkieth, and God only knew what he’d think of the idea.

‘Well, if you ask me,’ Dalkieth drawled, ‘I think the idea’s insane and you, if you’ll pardon my directness, are out of your skull to have thought of it in the first place.’

‘Quite,’ Wood said. ‘If you recall, similar sentiments were expressed earlier today, in no uncertain terms.’

‘You should have taken the hint.’

Wood winced. He’d asked for that. ‘Nevertheless, I’ve been asked to look into the possibility of such a scheme. As you must appreciate, my contacts in this field are somewhat limited, which is why I called you in.’

‘In other words, you want me to do the recruiting.’

‘I want you to get me information. I know I suggested the idea but ...’

‘You don’t want to get your hands dirty.’

‘That’s not it at all,’ Wood said vehemently, aware that Dalkieth had read him like a book.

‘Very well. So, what do you want me to do, exactly?’

‘Find out if anyone’s available and how much it will cost. I want details by tomorrow morning.’
Dalkieth’s eyebrows rose. ‘You’re not serious?’
‘Perfectly serious.’ Wood said evenly.
‘Christ!’ Dalkieth said.
‘And, George …’
Dalkieth sighed. ‘Let me guess. The buck stops with me?’
‘You know how it is,’ Wood said amiably.
Dalkieth rose to his feet. ‘Don’t I just.’ He marched out of the room before Wood could think of a suitable reply. The Foreign Secretary watched Dalkieth depart before flicking the intercom switch. ‘All right, Joan,’ he sighed. ‘I am again available to my public.’
And God help them, he thought.

Registry was housed in a dry, windowless basement behind steel grilles and a taciturn duty officer, an ex-marine sergeant called Willowburn.

Willowburn was impressed and not a little surprised to see Dalkieth. This was tantamount to a visitation from God. As a formality, he acknowledged Dalkieth’s identity card before releasing the lock mechanism to allow the intelligence chief into the vault.

‘I’ll call if I need you,’ Dalkieth said, forestalling any offer of help that might have been forthcoming.

‘Sir.’

Willowburn secured the door, locking them both in the basement and returned to his desk. The vault was lined with rows of gunmetal filing cabinets, corridors of them. When you walked along the line it was like inspecting the troops. There was a comprehensive index system and it took Dalkieth only a matter of minutes to find the file he wanted. The contents covered events in Angola from the time of the left wing military coup to the present day.

Now, he had to find a name.

Circumstances dictated that Dalkieth had to study the file on site. He couldn’t risk signing the documents out of the vault and drawing attention to his interest in them. Willowburn still had his head down. Dalkieth studied the file.

The SIS man concerned himself with the details surrounding the recruitment of mercenaries by representatives of the FNLA acting under the direction of Holden Roberto.
Dalkieth had to admit that the affair had been a sordid and bloody fiasco from the outset but he wasn’t concerned with the ethics, only the men involved. The recruitment had been undertaken by an assortment of individuals with, it appeared to Dalkieth, one overriding consideration: to make as much money as possible.

The recruits had been promised a weekly salary during the term of their contract. The recruiting officers were to receive a bounty for every man they hired. Needless to say, with that sort of inducement the recruiters were not particularly interested in the morals of the men they were taking on. Although, ideally, men with army backgrounds were preferred, men with more nefarious skills were not turned away.

The police and the security services had been aware of the machinations of the mercenary recruitment agencies such as the International Security Organization and the Camberley based outfit, Security Advisory Services, and were naturally interested to learn that the final recruitment drive and briefing would be held at the Tower Hotel in London. Dalkieth’s department had dispatched men to the hotel to cover the meetings.

The mercenaries had been registered at the hotel as members of the Manchester Sporting Club and the briefing had been held in room 324. Dalkieth’s agents, in a brief liaison with Special Branch, had bugged the room.

A transcript of the briefing was included in the file. The meeting had opened with Holden Roberto’s representative, Nick Hall, giving a rundown of the mission followed by questions from the floor. The briefing seemed to be progressing smoothly until an argument erupted between the two main recruiters, Hall and John Banks, ostensibly over who was to accompany the men to Angola. In reality, it had been a struggle for control of the operation’s purse strings.

This sort of argument, in full view of the assembled recruits, had done little to boost morale. It had resulted in some men leaving. If the debacle of the briefing was any indication, the mission was likely to be doomed from the outset. Dalkieth studied the file carefully. He was interested in the characters of the men who’d sensed disaster.

Two of them had subsequently turned up again in the dossier, having changed their minds, and had travelled to Angola with another group some months later. Dalkieth wasn’t interested in them. He wanted the third man. The surveillance at the Tower Hotel had yielded a list of names. He found the
Iain Cameron.

There was an appendix to the Angolan file in the form of dossiers on all the men involved in the briefing. Cameron warranted two pages of typescript and a photograph taken in the hotel lobby. Dalkieth scanned the details.

Cameron was ex-SAS and was not the sort of man Dalkieth would have chosen to meet down a dark alley, or anywhere else for that matter. However, the man’s record was impressive and Dalkieth, reading the dossier, knew he had an ideal candidate for the job he had in mind.

As a member of the SAS, Cameron had been part of an elite force, well versed in clandestine operations. He was highly trained. A specialist in, as the army’s LOM - Land Operations Manual - put it, ‘Intelligence gathering; the ambush and harassment of insurgents; infiltration of sabotage, assassination and demolition parties into insurgent held areas; border surveillance and the training and control of friendly guerrilla forces operating against the common enemy.’

Cameron had left the army after a Dhofari rebel’s knife removed his left eye in a hand-to-hand battle following an SAS reconnaissance mission in the mountains of Oman.

Having been trained and honed into a ruthless killing machine capable of parachuting, blowing bridges, shooting the eye of a sparrow at a thousand yards and killing with his bare hands he’d found it irksome trying to fit into a mundane nine-to-five civilian role. After a variety of jobs including commercial salesman, travel courier, insurance assessor and even garage mechanic, he’d decided to put his SAS skills and contacts to some use. He’d become a freelance mercenary. One of his contacts had been the founder of the SAS, Colonel David Stirling. Stirling had run an organization called ‘Watchguard’ that provided bodyguards for Middle Eastern, Far Eastern and African heads of states who considered themselves prime targets for assassination. He also provided mercenaries - former SAS and Para Regiment officers - for overseas contracts.

The contracts that Cameron accepted took him to a number of countries; one of them Vietnam, where he’d formed part of a small army of British mercenaries. They were organized into killer groups assigned to infiltrate communist territory and harass the enemy in rapid strike sorties. Their objectives were demolition and assassination.
Cameron had also seen action in Kurdistan, fighting on the side of the Kurdish separatists against Iraqi government troops. It was a hard, gruelling campaign and Cameron returned to England after four months. His background as a mercenary made him aware that there was a market for highly trained ex-soldiers and he felt that his own experience could prove invaluable.

Cameron set himself up as a recruiter. To establish exactly how many men he would have available he placed adverts in the classified columns of the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail. The ads read simply, ‘Ex commandos, paratroopers, SAS troopers wanted for interesting work abroad.’ He enclosed his telephone number.

There was an immediate response and within two weeks he had fifteen hundred applicants. As well as British ex-paratroopers and SAS, the list included a variety of nationalities - Germans, Belgians, South Africans, Italians, Rhodesians and French - as well as ex-Foreign Legionnaires and Vietnam vets.

It was plain that Cameron sorted the wheat from the chaff. He wasn’t interested in thugs and bully boys. He wanted intelligent men able to plan strategy and assess tactics as well as fight. He was left with a card index containing the personal and service record of eight hundred men. An elite mercenary job centre.

Cameron did not dispatch operatives for the sole purpose of gaining a hefty recruitment fee like a lanista who sent gladiators into the arena for the glory of the games. Cameron concerned himself with the morality and feasibility of the contracts before he undertook recruitment. The men he used relied on him to sieve the facts, knowing he had their interests at heart. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that Cameron, having attended the Angola briefing, had walked out, refusing to be associated with such a badly organized venture.

Dalkieth’s mind was made up. He decided not to waste any more time. Cameron Security Consultants boasted an office in Sloane Street. Very up-market. The address was in the dossier.

Armed with the information he’d come for, Dalkieth called for Willowburn to let him out of the vault.

Iain Cameron was a broad shouldered man of medium height.
He was tanned with strong chiselled features and black hair cut short. The black leather patch that covered his left eye gave him a piratical look that most women found attractive and Cameron used that fact to his considerable advantage.

His good eye viewed the visitor with interest.

Dalkieth; very presentable in cashmere overcoat and English brogues.

‘Good evening, Mister Cameron. Or is it still Major? I do apologize for calling on you so late.’ He smiled.

A bit smarmy, Cameron thought. In fact more than a bit. ‘I’m a civilian now,’ he said. ‘And you are?’

‘Hobson,’ Dalkieth said slowly. ‘Gerald Hobson.’

Cameron nodded to the visitor’s chair on the other side of his desk.

‘Take a seat, Mister Hobson. How may I help you?’

Dalkieth sat down. ‘I need men.’

‘Oh, yes,’ Cameron said cautiously. ‘For what purpose?’

‘The task I have in mind is covered in your sales brochure; the section dealing with military style operations.’

‘The brochure, as you call it, isn’t available in W.H. Smith,’ Cameron said. ‘May I ask how you got hold of it?’

‘An acquaintance, Dalkieth said.

After the Angola affair Dalkieth had assigned an agent to break into Cameron’s office. The agent had come away with a list of clients and information which outlined the impressive array of talent that Cameron had at his disposal.

Cameron considered the reply and said, ‘So, you’ve read the blurb. What part of the contents are you interested in?’

‘The uplifting of individuals from hostile territory or captivity,’ Dalkieth quoted.

‘I see,’ Cameron said, and waited.

Dalkieth leaned forward. ‘Mr Cameron, I can’t help feeling that we could begin to do business if you were to drop the pretence and stop acting like a nun who’s just been propositioned. The fact is, your organization recruits mercenaries. I wish to avail myself of your services. Let’s not pussyfoot around.’

An uncomfortable silence followed. Finally, Cameron sighed and nodded. ‘All right, Mister Hobson. You tell me what the contract is and I’ll
Dalkieth let go an inner sigh of relief. He’d cleared the first hurdle. ‘I’d like assurances first,’ he said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Your sales brochure’s impressive but it only provides the gloss. I’d like to know the quality of the undercoat. The men you recruit; what calibre are they?’

‘All combat experienced. They’ve seen action in virtually every theatre of war or insurgence: Vietnam, Malaya, Borneo, Cyprus, Nigeria, Rhodesia, Central and South America, Ulster. You name it, they’ve been there.’

Dalkieth nodded. ‘Angola?’

Cameron’s expression hardened. ‘That was a long time ago. Some of them may have gone but not through my efforts. I’m concerned about the men I employ, which is why I turn work down. Angola was a prime example of a cluster fuck. I’ve lost a lot of friends in this business. I minimize risk as much as possible. Sending men to Angola was a futile enterprise. They were ill-equipped in arms and transport, with no effective organization or discipline except for the pathological tendencies of that bastard Georgiou. How he lasted as long as he did amazes me. You can’t lead men by fear. You have to command their respect. If I’d been there I’d have shot the son of a bitch myself. He deserved to die if anyone did. If the recruiters had been more concerned with the men’s welfare than their bloody bounties then perhaps fewer would have died. It was total chaos.’

‘What about the fee?’ Dalkieth asked.

‘It depends on the job. If I send men into a war zone on an unlimited contract they get a weekly salary. For a one-off mission, a lump sum is paid.’

Cameron paused. ‘Which brings us to your proposition, I’m thinking.’

‘I rather think it does,’ agreed Dalkieth.

‘So?’

‘So, I want a small group of men willing to undertake a rescue mission. A snatch and run job.’

‘Where?’

‘East Africa. Lugamba.’

Cameron’s eyebrows rose. ‘Are we talking about Holt?’

‘Can you do it?’

Cameron blew out his cheeks. ‘That’s a hell of a contract.’
‘You’re saying no?’
‘I’m saying I’d have to think about it.’
‘I’d like an answer,’ Dalkieth said.
‘Pressuring me won’t work.’ Cameron fixed Dalkieth with his good eye. ‘What’s your interest in the man?’
Dalkieth had prepared himself for such a question. ‘I’m here on behalf of a group of people who find it appalling that an ignorant dictator should hold the British Government to ransom.’
Dalkieth hoped he’d injected the correct amount of pomposity into his voice. Shades of Colonel Blimp.
Cameron nodded silently. ‘It’d be expensive.’
‘We are not without substantial reserves,’ Dalkieth said with what he prayed sounded like supreme confidence. ‘What sort of sum are we talking about?’
‘In the region of twenty-five thousand sterling per man plus my fee plus expenses, and I’d be thinking in terms of a four man team. You’re looking at a ball park figure of around a hundred and forty to a hundred and fifty thousand.’
Maybe they could raid the tea fund, Dalkieth thought wildly and said, ‘Very well, I’ll relay the information to my associates. When can you give me an answer?’
Cameron shrugged. ‘Why don’t we say this time tomorrow? How will I get in touch with you?’
‘You won’t,’ replied Dalkieth. ‘I’ll contact you. At six.’ He rose. ‘This has been a most illuminating conversation.’
Cameron permitted himself a thin smile. ‘That it has, Mister Hobson. I’ll speak with you soon.’

Duncan Wood, clutching a tumbler of Bell’s and ice, picked up the telephone in his study. It had been ringing for several seconds.
‘Yes?’ His voice was curt. It was an indication of his displeasure at being dragged away from the Mozart concert on the radio. He didn’t get many opportunities to relax in the comfort of his study. His wife was visiting a friend and he had the town house to himself. The red box could wait.
‘We could be in business,’ Dalkieth said. He sounded as though he was in the next room.
'You’ve made contact?’ Wood tensed.
‘An approach has been initiated.’ Dalkieth sounded subdued. ‘I’ll have a decision regarding acceptance this time tomorrow.’
‘Very well,’ Wood said. ‘I take it the individual involved has no idea whom you represent? A stupid question, I know.’
‘Yes,’ Dalkieth said.
‘Yes, what?’ Wood felt his stomach turn over.
‘Yes, it was a stupid question.’
Wood opened his mouth to redeem himself but Dalkieth had already hung up.

David Holt viewed the mess on the tin plate with acute disgust. Cold rice and stringy chicken. At least, it might have been chicken, he wasn’t certain because he hadn’t had the courage to taste it. He sipped some water from the mug. It tasted brackish.

The cell was a rancid box, ten by ten, with a door opening into a dingy corridor. Three stout metal bars at the tiny window interrupted the view out on to the exercise yard of the Lubiri detention centre.

It was Holt’s second night in confinement and from the way things looked it would match his first in discomfort.

After being pushed into the Peugeot, every attempt to reason with his three abductors had met with a stream of abuse. Holt had given up. The thought that he might eventually see someone in authority who could arrange his release had turned to stone the moment he’d seen his destination.

The high mesh fence of Lubiri met his gaze and he sat in fear as the car swept through the gates into the compound. Holt had allowed himself to be escorted into the reception block. To have resisted would have been futile. His escort had left him with two unsmiling warders.

Major Farouk Juma, head of the Department of State Security, had regarded the Englishman with contempt. Rising from his desk and standing before Holt, his eyes, brown lifeless pools, had been on a level with Holt’s chin. His thin face was heavily pockmarked - the legacy of a childhood infection. A pencil moustache traced the outline of his effeminate upper lip. His black greasy hair was cut very short. With his slightly protruding teeth he resembled a bush rat on the verge of hysterics. Holt thought the little Nubian was the most evil looking human he’d ever encountered.
The major was dressed in an open-neck khaki shirt and slacks. The shirt was a size too large. The epaulettes overlapped his narrow shoulders and his thin brown arms hung like twigs from uniformed sleeves rolled above his elbows. A bank of medal ribbons provided three rows of colour above his breast pocket. He carried a swagger stick in his right hand.

He’d smiled malevolently at Holt and the latter had recoiled from the foetid breath. When he tapped Holt on the hip with his cane the Englishman had looked nonplussed, not understanding the intent. Juma’s smile faded and without warning he thrashed Holt’s right thigh, the cane flicking through the air like a whip. Holt yelled and tried to dodge. His arms were grabbed from behind in two vice-like grips and he watched with chilling fascination as the tip of the cane touched the inside of his thigh and traced a line to his groin. He was aware of Juma nodding to the two goons over his shoulder and flinched from the expected blow. Instead, Juma sidestepped and Holt was pushed forward over the desk. He felt hands fumbling at his pockets, hauling out his meagre possessions. They made a pitiful pile on the desk top: a bunch of keys, small change, a pair of nail clippers and a grubby handkerchief. He was dragged upright.

The tears began. ‘Please, what are you going to do with me?’
Juma smiled again and Holt’s stomach crawled.
‘We shoot you, mister.’
‘You can’t!’ Holt whispered, his mind reeling. ‘I want to see the High Commissioner!’
‘You see no one,’ Juma said.
‘You can’t keep me here!’ Holt grew bolder.
‘We keep you here,’ Juma answered. ‘Then we shoot you.’
‘You wouldn’t dare! Even if you’re going to keep me here, you can’t just shoot me. There’ll be a trial.’

Juma looked blank. Then he’d laughed; a wild inane cackle that was taken up by the goons. The awful sounds had echoed around the room. ‘No trial, old man! We bloody shoot you!’

He jerked his head and Holt was frogmarched down the passage. He’d been struck with the realization that, apart from the sound of his own progress, the centre was totally silent. One would have expected to hear the night sounds of people confined; snoring, coughing, talking in their sleep, sobbing even. Nothing. It was like a tomb.

They stopped outside an open door. By the dim light in the passage
Holt had seen the cell was empty. He was thrust through the entrance and as he’d tripped to his knees the door slammed behind him.

He’d been left alone the next day. The dawn light that crept slowly over the compound wall filtered through the bars on his window and found him huddled under a filthy blanket on a bug-infested mattress that he’d found propped against the cell wall. The mattress stank of vomit and urine and other deposits too appalling to contemplate, but it was better than sleeping on the floor.

At first he’d attempted to attract the attention of the guards by hammering on the door. This action had met with total indifference. He’d given up.

Sometime during the day - noon if the position of the sun was anything to go by - Holt’s attention had been attracted by sounds in the next cell. The sound of the door opening and something falling to the floor followed by someone - he presumed a guard - shouting at the top of his voice. Then came the scream; a single cry that stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

It rose again; a racking sob that grew into a wail that slowly increased in volume to reach a shriek of such ferocious intensity that Holt had to cover his ears. He would never have believed that a human being was capable of making such a dreadful sound. It was like a pig being butchered. But the sound that had Holt retching was the last grotesque gurgle from the victim as his agony was cut short by a noise that resembled a ripe pumpkin being struck by a shovel.

Holt had remained huddled on the mattress until the evening, when the tin plate was pushed through the gap at the foot of the cell door. By that time, he hadn’t eaten for twenty four hours.

He picked at the contents on the platter, wrinkling his nose as the smell assailed his nostrils. Someone had to turn up soon, he reflected. What the hell was the Acting High Commissioner bloody doing, for Christ’s sake?

Warren lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. The reply from London in response to his message informing them of Holt’s predicament had hardly inspired confidence. It had been at the worst inadequate, at the best diplomatic. In other words: sit tight, we’re working on it. Not very reassuring.

His tossing and turning served only to wake his wife who wasn’t
pleased at having her slumbers disturbed by her insomniac husband. Despite her imploring, Warren couldn’t drop off. They lay beneath the single sheet like twin bolsters. It was too hot to do anything else.
Seven thirty in the morning. Cameron walked through the sliding doors into the Heathrow terminal and approached the KLM desk.

‘My name’s Cameron. I’ve a reservation on your Amsterdam flight.’

The girl checked her computer screen. ‘Yes, sir. How do you wish to pay?’

Cameron handed over his American Express card.

She handed the card back along with the receipt and ticket and tried to avoid staring at Cameron’s eye patch. He really was quite attractive, she mused. ‘Your flight’s checking in now.’ She smiled readily.

Cameron collected his boarding pass and walked through departure control to the gate. He was dressed casually in slacks, open-neck shirt and a brown leather windcheater. He had one item of hand luggage; a black leather briefcase.

As the aircraft pushed back from the blocks, Cameron settled into his seat. He would be in Amsterdam in a little over an hour.

‘So,’ Brooke said. ‘Dalkieth’s made progress.’

‘He phoned last night,’ Wood said. ‘I’d have let you know earlier but you were at that reception.’

‘Bloody waste of time that was!’ grated Brooke. ‘We had lobster. Bloody stuff never agrees with me.’ He massaged his stomach.

‘You should have told them,’ Wood said.

‘I should have left,’ Brooke muttered. ‘Now, you’ve got something else for me?’

‘Another message from Lugamba. Apparently, Mabato won’t let Warren see Holt. They’re keeping him in the city detention centre. It’s a cross between Broadmoor and Catterick barracks. Not exactly Homes and Gardens.’

‘That’s to be expected. Anything else?’

‘A new missive from Mabato.’
‘Christ! What’s he want now?’
‘He wants me to deliver written acceptance of his demands. That’s the one signed by yourself and Her Majesty’
Brooke appeared pensive. ‘I don’t suppose he’d be satisfied with some coloured beads and a bolt of cloth?’
‘Unlikely,’ Wood said patiently. He assumed the PM was being facetious; he couldn’t always tell. ‘There’s something else, too.’
‘You’re doing this on purpose.’ Brooke sounded peeved.
‘I think this might be to our advantage.’
‘How’s that?’
‘My office had a call from Sir Ruan Kirby.’
‘Who the hell’s he when he’s at home?’
‘He was Mabato’s commanding officer in the 4th King’s African Rifles.’
Brooke perked visibly. ‘Was he now? What did he want?’
‘To offer his services in any way we might see fit. He caught the news on TV and took it upon himself to contact us.’
‘Very enterprising,’ Brooke muttered. ‘Any suggestions?’
‘How about getting the letter written and signed and have Kirby deliver it?’
‘That’s tantamount to accepting the ultimatum.’
‘I didn’t mean that. The letter can simply be a plea for clemency from the Palace and yourself, delivered by Kirby who could add a few sentiments of his own. It seems Mabato had a tremendous affection for the general. Looked upon him as a father figure.’
‘Brings tears to my eyes,’ Brooke said drily. ‘Still it might do the trick. Would Kirby be prepared to go to Lugamba?’
‘He offered his services in any capacity. His very words.’
‘But postman?’
‘Be quicker than using Parcel Force.’
‘Oh, very droll. Well, I’ve informed Her Majesty of the situation, so I’ll broach the subject of the letter. She might go for it. Get hold of this Kirby and warn him he might have to put his money where his mouth is. Now, back to Dalkieth.’
‘He told me he’s made contact. He’s going to let me know this evening if the contract’s likely to be accepted. I presume we may still go through with it?’
‘Let’s just say we keep our options open. You never know, this Kirby chap could save the day.’ Brooke allowed himself a smile. ‘Like the cavalry riding to the rescue.’

‘Quite,’ Wood said. ‘But remember what happened to Custer.’

Thomas Keel fastened the button on his shirt cuff and reached for his jacket. ‘Well, what’s the verdict?’ he asked.

‘As ever, Thomas, considering your age, you’re in remarkable shape.’

Keel frowned. ‘What the hell’s that supposed to mean? I may be the wrong side of forty but I’m hardly in my dotage!’

‘Perhaps I should have rephrased that,’ Doctor Wilhelm Vanderhuik said, smiling at Keel’s pained expression. ‘I meant it is remarkable that you have in fact reached your present age.’ The doctor gazed at his patient with some fondness. Keel was a long-time friend.

Keel shrugged the jacket on. Not quite six foot, evenly tanned with a rangy frame, he was clean shaven with short steel grey hair and a pair of clear, ice-blue eyes that looked as if they’d seen more trouble than they cared to remember.

He showed his teeth in a grin as he addressed the doctor ‘Now I’m not sure if that was an insult or a compliment. Maybe I should just cart my hypochondria elsewhere. Then where would you be?’

‘Examining patients more worthy of my devotion; head hunters in the Amazon Basin for example,’ the doctor responded. His roly-poly body shook as he stroked his goatee beard and winked broadly.

Keel laughed. ‘You’re a rotten liar, Willy. My visits are the highlights of your year. How many times have you told me you wished more people would have regular check-ups? And that’s in spite of your appalling fees!’

‘Ah, but only those involved in similar high risk careers.’

‘Touché,’ Keel said drily. For a brief second the light in his eyes dimmed.

Vanderhuik caught the change of mood. ‘When was your last contract?’

‘Nine months ago,’ Keel answered, recalling the job; escorting a Middle Eastern potentate on an arms buying spree around the munitions
markets of Western Europe - West Germany, Sweden, France and Great Britain; not very exciting, but lucrative. His Highness had been more than generous but when one had spent seventy million dollars on military hardware one could hardly begrudge paying the hired help an extra few thousand.

The contract had lasted four weeks. The prince had returned to his desert and Keel to his bar on the Zeedijk. At least he had that to fall back on, unlike most freelancers who, between contracts, were forced to exist solely on their bounties, haunting the mercenary recruiting stations like moths around a flame. Brussels, Lisbon, Marseilles, Milan and Athens; different countries, different cities, but they were all the same when you didn’t know where the next meal was coming from, or the next job.

‘The trouble with you,’ Vanderhuik said sternly, ‘is that you’re bored.’

Keel’s looked at him. ‘That’s your diagnosis?’

The doctor shrugged. ‘Based on your symptoms? Yes.’

‘And the cure?’

‘I’m afraid that’s up to you.’

Before Keel could respond, the doctor smiled. ‘Now, my friend, if you’ll forgive me, I have other people to see.’

Keel took the hint, sighed and nodded. ‘I’ll leave you to it, then. I’ll be in touch.’

The little doctor smiled. ‘I hope so. Good day, Thomas. Take care.’

Keel strode through the waiting room and out of the building. He walked down the steps on to the street. Vanderhuik watched him depart before calling forward his next patient.

Keel turned right on to the Spui Straat and walked towards the Dam Square. It was mid-morning and Amsterdam was bathed in sunshine. The sightseers were up and out in force. In the square the Nikon set mixed with the combat jacket brigade, clustered around the Dam like unwashed sheep.

Avoiding the milling cyclists he cut across Warmoes Straat and headed towards the canal. Along its banks the morning sunlight filtered through the trees, casting silver reflections on the calm brown surface of the waterway. Houseboats and brightly painted barges hugged the edge of the canal and a loaded tourist launch skimmed along like a large Pyrex water beetle.

Keel was entering the Red Light district; narrow cobbled streets
where sexual favours of every kind could be purchased. The girls sat in armchairs behind their large windows, an open advertisement for an array of carnal pleasures. A welcoming smile, pink tongue flicking over coral lips, fingers tracing a stockinged thigh and taut panties and the window shopper was hooked. The girl would leave her seat to state the price and entice the client inside and a curtain would be drawn across the window like a cab driver engaging his ‘For Hire’ sign. Twenty minutes later the client would emerge to button his overcoat and the girl would open the curtain and resume her pose.

The girls were as different as chalk and cheese. Sultry titian haired beauties that could have been lifted from a Playboy photo set would solicit beside fifteen stone Amazons and leather clad peroxides. All tastes catered for.

Keel knew a few of the girls by name and usually acknowledged their friendly heckles. So far, he’d managed to resist their advances but he was sure the ladies of the Zeedijk had a book going to see who’d bed him first. Maybe one day, he thought, but who would he choose? Marta probably: the face of a goddess, with silky auburn hair and a figure to stop traffic. Her room was next door to Keel’s bar and flanked on the other side by a porno theatre; a poky fifty-seater owned and run by two homosexual brothers, Rennie and Koos Braake. The place specialized in live acts as well as movies.

The theatre was open for business and Marta was in her doorway chatting to one of the brothers. She caught Keel’s eye and grinned over Rennie’s shoulder. Keel returned the greeting as he walked past.

The interior of the Pelican was cool and wrapped in a hum of discreet conversation. The bar was low lit and the atmosphere was comfortable and intimate. A polished oak counter ran along the right hand wall. The main floor area was partitioned into shoulder-high three-sided booths that ensured a degree of privacy for the occupants.

Keel employed a staff of four: one barman - an ex-strip club bouncer called Peter Van Dijk - and three friendly waitresses; Agnes, Brigitta and Marie-Anne. The girls were the reason, Keel was convinced, that he had so many male customers, though Van Dijk’s dark, clean-cut features had many admirers, not least among the hookers on the street. They only admired him from afar. Van Dijk was heavily involved with a petite Lufthansa stewardess.

The bar boasted a mixed clientele. Customers included high-paid executives, elderly matrons, husbands and wives, husbands and mistresses,
ardent cocksmen and ladies of the night. The latter regarded the Pelican as a kind of refuge from, as Marta put it, their daily grind. Keel had strict house rules. No soliciting by the girls. Approaches by prospective clients were difficult to control but the girls were quick to bring it to the attention of the bar staff if they felt they were being pestered. Van Dijk was always there to provide assistance in the form of a hand on the back of the offender’s neck and any customer who had to be ejected was not re-admitted.

A dozen or so customers were present. Most were businessmen enjoying a quiet coffee over the morning paper, taking time off to glance admiringly at the girls’ tight jeans as they served the tables. The majority were regulars and nodded happily to Keel as he strode in. Van Dijk was behind the counter cleaning glasses. As Keel approached, the barman moved his eyes in the direction of a corner booth.

Keel walked to the table where a dark haired man leant back in his seat and returned his gaze over an empty coffee cup.

‘Hello, Thomas,’ Iain Cameron said.

Keel smiled and held out his hand. ‘Good trip?’

Cameron shook hands. ‘Turbulence approaching Schiphol but not too bad.’ His good eye followed Keel as the latter sat down opposite.

‘A drink?’ Keel asked. ‘Something to eat?’

‘Just another coffee.’

Keel caught Brigitte’s eye. She took his order for two coffees and smiled openly at Cameron before moving over to the hot plate at the end of the bar. Cameron watched her go. ‘Wow!’ he said.

Keel grinned. He was used to the effect the girls had on his customers.

Cameron averted his gaze reluctantly and smiled. ‘You’re looking well.’

‘For my age?’ Keel replied automatically.

‘Sorry?’

‘Skip it. Just thinking aloud.’ Keel paused then said, ‘I was surprised to get your call. It’s been a while.’

It had been the sheik’s arms buying spree.

Cameron had given a great deal of thought to the contract offered by the man he knew as Hobson. The job would be extremely hazardous and he would need men with extraordinary cunning and exceptional skills. Cameron realized the mission was virtually suicidal but the predicament of the lone
Englishman held prisoner by a monstrous regime over three thousand miles away had grabbed him in a way he found difficult to explain and he knew instinctively that, providing he found the right men, the contract would be undertaken.

Cameron had decided to go for a four man squad. His time with the SAS provided the reason for this. As the member of an active service unit, he’d seen the practicality of small killer teams and had used the same format to deadly effect in Vietnam. For the Lugamba contract he had such a team in mind and one of the men he wanted was Keel.

Keel had begun his war-faring with D Company, the ‘Pathfinder’ unit of the 2nd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment. He’d spent three years with D Company before transferring to the Battalion’s Special Patrol Company, a unit specializing in deep penetration sorties into enemy held territory. After seeing action in Aden, Borneo, Cyprus and Malaya, it was a natural progression for him to join the Special Air Service and it was in the Oman, while serving with the Regiment, that he and Cameron had met.

They were both on attachment to the Sultanate, assisting the undermanned and poorly armed Omani forces in their fight against the Chinese trained Dhofar Liberation Front led by a former lorry mechanic called Musallim bin Nuffl. The Marxist guerrillas waged a hit and run war from their strongholds within the Republic of South Yemen, the land once known as Aden.

The ageing Sultan of Oman relied heavily on professional mercenaries from Britain, white South Africa and Pakistan to bolster his army and under an agreement with the British Government, British Army officers could volunteer for attachment to the Oman on two-year contracts. The Sultan benefited from the expertise and Britain benefited by being able to use the Omani airfield on the Plain of Salalah as a staging post in its Indian Ocean commitment.

Together, Keel and Cameron trained and led squads of Omani troops and Baluchi mercenaries in strikes against the Marxist rebels in the Qara Mountains. When not leading raids they acted as bodyguards for oil company executives.

It was towards the end of their nine months tour in the southern region that Cameron sustained his injury and Keel accompanied him in the aircraft that flew him north to the medical centre at Bayt al Falaj. Cameron returned to England. Keel remained in Oman.
At the end of his contract Keel had found himself in something of a quandary. His stint in the Oman ran parallel with Britain’s growing inclination to withdraw from bases east of Suez. He’d had no immediate desire to return to the UK but had seen no alternative scope for his talents other than extending his contract with the Sultanate, though, by this time he’d been looking for a change of scenery. He resigned his commission and went freelance.

The Biafran campaign was eighteen months old by the time Keel arrived to join the Federal forces of Major-General Yakubu Gowan. He joined the Third Commando Division under Colonel Benjamin Adenkunle and led raiding parties over the Cross River to strike at the heart of Colonel Ojukwu’s rebel army. The war was bloody, the rebels determined and, in some cases, better equipped than the Federal side.

Keel survived the duration of his contract and was one of a squad of officers who escorted Ojukwu on his eventual flight to Lagos to surrender to the victorious General Gowan.

His next contract involved the smuggling of gold bars from Dubai across the Arabian Sea to India. His partner, a Persian exile called Idrisi, set up the contacts on the Indian mainland and Keel provided the muscle. He made more in ten months than he had in the previous three years and soon he’d accumulated enough in his bank account to purchase the bar in Amsterdam.

Then he met Cameron again, who by now was in the same line of business.

They were nine months in Vietnam attached to the American Special Forces then, when Cameron moved on to Kurdistan, Keel found himself in Rhodesia as a member of the Selous Scouts organizing cross border raids to flush out Zambian guerrillas.

And so it went on; moving from one contract to another, like a Wild West bounty hunter. Chad, Venezuela, Uruguay, Assam, Thailand; the list went on and on. Yet always returning to his bar in Amsterdam during the slack times, which tended to grow more frequent as he got older, until Cameron - who by now was acting as his broker - made contact again.

Like now.

‘You said there might be a job?’ Keel began.

Cameron shrugged. ‘A possibility. I’ll pitch it to you and you can tell me what you think. For obvious reasons I didn’t want to go into details over
the phone. By the way, how’s Joseph?’
   ‘He’s well. He’s out to lunch with our accountant.’
   ‘Good. I hope I’ll get a chance to see him before I leave. I’m booked on the four o’clock flight.’
Keel nodded. ‘So, what’s the contract?’
The coffee arrived. Cameron took his black and unsweetened.
   ‘Someone wants us to get David Holt out of Lugamba.’
   ‘Bloody hell!’
   ‘You’ve read about it, I presume?’
   ‘It’s been covered over here. There was a report on the radio and TV this morning.’
Cameron reached for his briefcase and extracted copies of the Daily Telegraph and The Times. He passed them over. ‘I picked up them up at the airport.’
   Keel said, ‘He was only taken the day before yesterday. Your client moves bloody fast. Who is he?’
   ‘His name’s Hobson and he’s the spokesman for a group that finds it despicable that a semi-literate black should be holding HMG over a barrel. He struck me as a cross between Trevor Howard and Alec Guinness. All dark overcoat and regimental tie.’
   ‘Genuine?’ Keel asked.
   ‘He didn’t flinch at the fee.’
   ‘Maybe he was speechless with shock.’
   ‘I quoted the going rate.’
   ‘Which is?’
   ‘Twenty-five grand per man.’
   ‘Good enough. Why me?’
   ‘I knew you were available,’ Cameron said. ‘This could be a rush job. By all accounts Holt has precious little time left.’
   ‘I think I’m flattered,’ Keel said.
   Cameron said sharply, ‘You know how I work. I could have saved the cost of the air fare and bought a train ticket to Aldershot where I could’ve popped into the bar of the Queen’s Hotel and picked up the first ex-SAS thugs I bumped into. I don’t want thugs. I want professionals. That’s why I came to Amsterdam.’ His good eye flashed.
   Keel held up a hand. ‘OK, point taken. Truth be told, I’m glad you’re here. I’m beginning to stagnate.’
Cameron looked around. ‘This place keeps you busy, surely?’

Keel shrugged. ‘The place runs without me. I’ve a good staff. When Joseph and I are away Peter and the girls are in charge. I’m like the hookers that come in. This place is a refuge. I retire here to lick my wounds and gain my strength. It’s my safety valve.’

‘And Joseph?’

‘No need to ask,’ Keel said. ‘He feels the same. He’ll come too. All I have to do is say where and when.’

Cameron raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘Don’t look at me like that.’ Keel’s eyes were like chips of ice. ‘Joseph’s his own man. He’s one of the bravest men I’ve ever known and he’s saved my life more times than I care to remember. He might be my business partner as well as wing man, but that doesn’t mean he’s taken for granted. When I said he’d come I was stating a fact not a directive.’

‘Did I say anything?’

Keel took a breath and nodded. ‘I’ll need more info if I’m to take the job. What have you got?’

‘I’ve a few things here that should help.’ Cameron reached for his case. ‘A year ago, I was approached by a man who claimed to be a supporter of Hamilton Kemba. He offered me fifty grand to set up Mabato’s assassination. He had it all planned. Even provided me with this dossier on Mabato and his henchmen. It contains photographs, maps and character sketches. Some of the background stuff I’ve added myself.’ He opened the case and passed Keel a buff coloured folder.

‘How come you didn’t accept the job?’

‘Because I don’t run Murder Incorporated. I told him where to go. He damned near got my boot up his arse as well.’

‘But you kept the dossier?’

‘Thought I’d save it for a rainy day.’ Cameron smiled.

‘How up to date is this stuff?’

‘It was current two months back. I’ve been making regular updates. For info on Holt, you’ll have to read the newspapers.’

Keel nodded. ‘Fair enough. You understand my taking this folder doesn’t constitute acceptance. I’ll read and assess and let you know.’

‘I took that as read,’ Cameron said. ‘But bear in mind my client will want an answer soon. I promised him I’d have one by this evening.’

‘Well I’m not going to be rushed. In any case, I’ll have to discuss it
with Joseph. Then, if we accept the job, I’ll need to put a team together; men I’ve worked with before.’

‘Harry Roan and Paul Schiller?’ Cameron said.

Keel shook his head. ‘I don’t think they’re available. Paul’s in Mexico and Harry’s in Mozambique hunting poachers. At least, that’s where they were three months ago.’

‘They moved,’ Cameron said. ‘I knew if you took the job you wouldn’t want to work with anyone else so I made a few phone calls. They’re in the Gulf on a bodyguard contract.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Or they were last night. They should be halfway to London by now, courtesy of Gulf Air. If they’re lucky they’ll be in Amsterdam this evening.’ He grinned at Keel’s expression.

‘You bastard!’ Keel said.

‘I’ve booked two rooms at the Okura.’

‘For whom?’ The query came from behind Cameron’s shoulder.

Cameron looked up into a face that might have been carved in ebony. Joseph Sekka was one of the most striking men Cameron had ever seen. Standing an inch over six feet, his athletic frame exuded an aura of controlled power. Cameron sensed this as he took in the immaculate suit, silk shirt and Italian loafers. He held out his hand and the two men shook.

‘How are you, Iain?’ Sekka’s grip was firm and dry.

‘I’m fine, Joseph. You’re looking fit.’

‘How was the meeting with the accountant?’ Keel asked. ‘I thought it was going to be an extended lunch?’

Sekka shook his head. ‘Not this time but we had a useful discussion. Good news is that we aren’t as broke as we thought we were.’

‘And the loan?’

‘Should be no problem.’

Cameron’s ears pricked up. ‘Loan?’

Sekka sat down next to Keel and waited for his partner to explain.

‘We’re thinking of opening a restaurant,’ Keel said. ‘The Pelican’s been doing very well. We decided it was time to expand. Premises have become available on the Keizersgracht so we’ve been hustling. Hence the meet with the money man. And yes, before you say it, the fee from the contract would come in very handy.’

‘Ah, right,’ Sekka said. ‘Suppose you fill me in.’ His expression remained bland but Cameron detected a brightness in Sekka’s eyes.
Keel said, ‘How’d you like a couple of days in Lugamba?’
Sekka’s reaction was to lift an eyebrow. ‘Holt?’
Keel nodded.
‘Piece of cake,’ Sekka said.
‘We’ll read your dossier,’ Keel said. ‘I want Harry and Paul in on it before I give you a yes or no. Pass that on to your client.’
‘Fair enough.’ Cameron nodded. ‘I’ll contact you tomorrow for your decision.’ He looked at his watch. ‘I might even make an earlier flight.’
‘Not until we’ve taken you to lunch,’ Keel said. ‘Then we can run you to the airport.’ He called over to the barman, ‘Peter, ring De Gouden Eeuw. Table for three. Fifteen minutes.’

As Van Dijk picked up the telephone Keel turned back. ‘We’ll show you our new site while you’re here. I think you’ll be impressed. Mind you, De Gouden Eeuw might not take too kindly to the competition.’ He picked up the dossier and the two newspapers. ‘These go in the safe until we get back.’

The meal over, Sekka returned to the Pelican and Keel drove Cameron to Schiphol, pushing the metallic blue Saab through the afternoon traffic with consummate ease. The Tannoy was announcing Cameron’s flight as they walked into the terminal.

Cameron held out his hand. ‘I’ll be in touch.’
‘Have a safe flight,’ Keel said. He turned abruptly and strode away.
Cameron watched him go, his face thoughtful, before making his way to the KLM desk and the flight to London.

By the time Keel returned to the Pelican Sekka had retrieved the dossier from the safe and was studying it, stretched out on the low sofa in the flat they maintained above the bar. Each man had his own apartment in Amsterdam but they found it convenient to have accommodation on top of the business.

‘You haven’t wasted any time,’ Keel said as he walked into the room.
Sekka had removed his jacket and loosened his tie. He looked as relaxed as a big cat after a kill.
Keel pulled up a chair. ‘So, what have we got?’
‘Well, it isn’t going to be easy.’
‘No change there, then,’ Keel said.
Wordlessly, Sekka passed over the first section of the dossier. It was a summary of Solomon Mabato’s rise to power. It made grim reading.

Born into the Makesi tribe, Mabato had tended goats in his youth, in the arid scrubland that composed Lugamba’s West Nile region. At the age of twenty one, he enlisted in the 4th Battalion of the King’s African Rifles, as a cook. He was a popular recruit and a keen athlete. One of his British officers summed him up as a tremendous chap to have around and such was their enthusiasm that they turned a blind eye to his inability to speak much English. Mabato began his move up through the ranks.

True, he experienced some difficulty in passing the English examination between the ranks of corporal and sergeant and only scraped through by the skin of his teeth. But from then on his superiors tended to overlook his shortcomings in the academic field. He was such a fine soldier, it seemed a pity to hold him back.

He continued to excel at sport, in particular rugby and boxing and went on to become the Lugamban heavyweight champion; a title he never lost. He ran out of challengers.

Ironically, the British could be held ultimately responsible for his rise to power. By the time Mabato was a sergeant-major Lugamba was driving towards independence. As the first step towards Africanizing the regiment it was felt that a small number of Lugamban NCOs should receive a commission. Mabato was among those chosen from the 4th Battalion.

Six months after Lugamba gained independence Mabato was promoted yet again, this time to major, when he became Deputy Commander of the Lugamban Army under a man he detested, Morris Lule. Lule had been commissioned at the same time as Mabato and he was directly responsible to the new president, Hamilton Kemba.

Having gained this lofty position, Mabato’s true character began to emerge. His ruthlessness became apparent. He informed Kemba that he’d uncovered a plot by Lule to overthrow the presidency and assume control of the country. Such were Mabato’s powers of persuasion that Kemba fell for it and gave the Deputy Commander full power to act as he thought fit. Lule and his supporters were arrested and shot before they could protest their innocence. Mabato was now in complete control of the Lugamban Army.

He seemed to be unswervingly loyal to Kemba but the latter had doubts. He’d become aware that Mabato was promoting only Northerners -
men from his own district - and rumours were trickling through to the President that his Army Commander was not the most honest of men.

During this period the Congo was in the throes of civil war and it was well known that Kemba was sympathetic to the rebels fighting the newly formed Congolese government run by Moise Tshombe and his Chief of Staff, Mobuto Sese Seko. Kemba wanted to aid the opposition by providing them with arms and transport. He used Mabato as his link with the dawa-crazed insurgents under their leader, Mulele.

The rebels had no cash with which to purchase arms but they did have truckloads of gold and ivory, seized as they retreated from towns they had controlled. Mabato’s job, as the contact man, was to sell the gold and the ivory and use the profits to buy arms for Mulele and his followers.

In these dealings no records were kept and Mabato did not have to account for what he sold. He began to bank the money for himself and when news of his sudden wealth filtered through to the ears of the Lugamban President, Parliament demanded an inquiry.

There was no inquiry, due chiefly to the fact that four of the ministers who’d supported the charges against Mabato disappeared. There were vague reports of decomposing bodies and graves in the forest but nothing was ever found. It was thought that the Nile crocodiles might know the answer to the riddle but nobody plucked up the courage to ask them why they were smiling. So, the charges against Mabato were dropped through lack of evidence. Kemba began to wonder just how powerful his Army Commander was.

Then came the attempt on Kemba’s life.

The President had been attending an evening meeting of the Lugamban People’s Congress. After the meeting, Kemba and some of his ministers left the conference hall and were waiting outside for their cars to arrive.

A shot rang out. Kemba and company flung themselves to the ground. Even as they dropped in panic, a grenade was lobbed towards them. Miraculously, it failed to explode but the marksman fired again. This time Kemba was hit. The bullet tore through his lip, demolished two teeth in his lower jaw, exited his open mouth and nicked his private secretary in the neck. Incredibly, Kemba wasn’t seriously hurt and he was back in his office within a week.

The would-be assassin was shot as he fled from the scene. He was identified as a Makesi, a member of Mabato’s tribe. Because Mabato had not
been present at the meeting that evening he was suspected by many of being involved in the attempt on Kemba’s life. Again, there was a lack of hard evidence but by now the seeds of doubt had been well and truly sown in Kemba’s mind. He knew he’d have to watch his every step.

Six weeks later, during a meeting of senior army officers, Mabato’s second in command, Brigadier Henry Orayo, quarrelled with Mabato over the subject of army discipline and Mabato’s methods of promotion. Orayo was not a Makesi. Three days after the altercation the brigadier and his wife were discovered in a waterlogged ditch on the outskirts of their home village, their bodies riddled with bullets. The brigadier’s head was almost severed from his body. His wife’s breasts were criss-crossed with knife cuts.

Mabato covered his tracks well. He thwarted all attempts to investigate the crime. Police inquiries pointed towards army personnel but Mabato was able to block every avenue of investigation. Men who were about to be questioned were suddenly transferred to remote units or were given leave in order that they would be out of the country at the right time. No-one was ever convicted.

A year later, there was another attempt on Kemba’s life; a machine gun attack on an official entourage on the road leading to the capital. Kemba was on his way to an early morning cabinet meeting, seated in the rear of his limo. The car was preceded by a police escort, lights flashing. As the convoy passed the Three Moons Hotel on the last leg of the journey to the parliament building there was a sudden burst of machine gun fire. Bullets thudded into Kemba’s Mercedes. The windscreen imploded and the chauffeur’s head blew apart in a cloud of blood and bone fragments. As Kemba threw himself across the back seat bullets smashed the side windows and tore into the upholstery, missing their target by inches.

By the time the escort car had reversed between Kemba’s car and the source of the attack the gunman had disappeared and Kemba was hauling himself out of the wreckage on his hands and knees, a badly shaken man.

After that incident he appeared less often in public and directed his secret police to round up suspects, which they did with enthusiasm. The people began to doubt Kemba’s ability to govern and Kemba doubted his subjects’ loyalty. The overriding question, of course, was whether Mabato had been responsible for the attack.

In the autumn of the same year, Mabato accepted a longstanding invitation to visit Egypt. Kemba saw this as a prime opportunity to
investigate some of Mabato’s activities and to make new army appointments
from men other than Mabato’s supporters. Mabato, however, with a finger in
every pie, had contacts within Kemba’s security service who warned him of
the President’s intentions. He returned to Lugamba unexpectedly, much to
Kemba’s dismay.

Strangely, over the next few months, a kind of impasse descended
and Kemba, lulled into a false sense of security, announced his desire to
attend the forthcoming Commonwealth Conference in Singapore. He was on
his way home, relaxing in first class, two hours out of Bombay, en route to
Nairobi, when the news came through.

Vincent Nsheka, Kemba’s private secretary, was on the flight deck,
chatting to the crew and monitoring the radio when he picked up the report
on the BBC World Service. The BBC quoted a Lugamba Radio
announcement that stated briefly that army officers, under the command of
Major General Solomon Mabato, head of the Lugamban armed forces, had
seized power. Nsheka was not slow in reporting the matter to Kemba and
when the aircraft landed at Nairobi the news was confirmed.

Wisely, Kemba decided not to continue his journey. Instead he and
his party boarded an East African Airways DC-9 and flew to Dar es Salaam.
Julius Nyerere, President of Tanzania, welcomed them and offered the
hospitality of his country. Kemba’s term of exile had begun.

In Lugamba, he was not missed. It was good riddance as far as the
majority of his subjects were concerned. The devious machinations of
Kemba’s secret police were reasons enough for those sentiments.

The people dubbed Mabato ‘The Liberator’.

Until they realized their mistake, but by then it was too late. From the
outset, Mabato announced that his would be only a caretaker administration.
Free elections were promised in a matter of months. A civilian cabinet was
appointed, including some ministers who’d served under Kemba. The future
looked rosy.

Until the slaughter began.

Starting with the Army.

Anyone who was a member of Kemba’s tribe, the Basengi, was
detained and placed in Maboru prison, along with all the officers who’d
survived Mabato’s initial purge. Mabato did not bother with the rigmarole of
a trial. The men were hacked to death and their remains buried in pits in the
bush. Mabato replaced them with members of his own tribe. Now the Army
was totally loyal to the Liberator.

Two months after the coup Mabato issued his Armed Forces Decree which gave the army the powers of search and seizure, placing it above the law. His Detention Decree granted the power of imprisonment without trial and the Robbery Suspects Decree gave his men the power to shoot on sight anyone acting suspiciously; in other words, carte blanche in respect of anything done or omitted to have been done for the purpose of maintaining public order or public security in any part of Lugamba.

Ten thousand were butchered in the first four months.

And the world stood by and watched.

Britain was among the first to officially recognize the new regime. Kemba had always been an outspoken critic of British arms sales to South Africa and HMG hoped that Mabato would be more sympathetic. Such was the British Government’s initial enthusiasm that it promised a ten million pound development loan.

The murders continued. Mabato’s men were now killing by the hundreds and it was becoming impossible to dispose of the bodies in graves. Truckloads of rotting dead were driven to the banks of the Nile where they were thrown over the Kiggala Falls.

The falls were two hundred feet high. Not much was left of a body after it had been smashed, mauled and sliced by the rocks and tumbling water. Whatever was left was disposed of by the huge Nile crocodiles. At first, anyway.

As the number of dead increased, disposal became more difficult, so that decomposing corpses found their way on to the banks of the river where they lay stranded for days while the vultures and crocs ate at leisure.

The reports were horrifying. The entire population - men, women and children - of Kemba’s home village was eliminated in one night. No-one investigated the matter too deeply. No-one dared.

Also, Mabato was annoyed at the fact that the millions promised by Britain had failed to materialize. His reaction was drastic.

Most of Lugamba’s trade, factories, plantations and stores were controlled by Asians, many holding British passports. They were the managers, accountants, doctors, lawyers and technicians. Mabato called them the Jews of East Africa.

He gave the Asian community - fifty thousand souls - ninety days to leave Lugamba. Any that remained after the deadline were to be placed in
detention camps. Forty-five thousand were airlifted out in six weeks. Some went to Canada, some to India and Pakistan. Britain took twenty-five thousand. The rest were put into the camps; dry, dust ridden compounds erected in the remote north eastern region of Lugamba, only fifty miles south of the Sudanese border. In one insane move Mabato had deprived Lugamba of the very people who made the country’s economy function. The refugees had been allowed a one hundred dollar personal allowance. A stop was put on their bank accounts. Their property - houses, stores and cars - was distributed among members of the forces, without whose support Mabato could not maintain his position of power.

Mabato had taken the country on its first steps down the road to economic ruin.

Over the next few years the purges continued, by which time Mabato had replaced his civilian cabinet with military men. Those ministers who escaped death did so by fleeing into Tanzania and Kenya, usually clad only in the clothes they stood in. It was estimated that one hundred thousand people had been killed since the coup.

Then Hamilton Kemba attempted a comeback.

One thousand guerrillas, supporters of the exiled President, invaded Lugamba from Tanzania. It was a farce. The men were badly trained and ill equipped and never stood a chance. They had meant to attack during the early hours of the morning but were delayed crossing the border. By the time they’d sorted themselves into some semblance of order they had lost the element of surprise. It was a massacre. Those that did not die during the first assault were hounded into the bush and killed. More bodies were clumped into the Nile.

In a fit of temper, Mabato accused Britain and Israel of helping to finance the raid. All Israeli personnel and the British envoy were ordered out of the country and, as a direct affront to both countries, Mabato set about wooing the support of the Arab States and Russia and he duly sent men to the Soviet Union and Libya for military training.

Mabato’s rule of terror was enforced by two factions: the Department of State Security and the Search and Seizure Unit, known as SASU. Both outfits were staffed with members of Mabato’s own tribe with a sprinkling of Nubians and Sudanese.

The Department of State Security had been set up by Mabato ostensibly as a military intelligence unit but it was, in effect, an extension of
his unit of bodyguards. The department was under the command of a slim, tight-lipped Nubian, Major Farouk Juma, who was answerable only to Mabato himself.

SASU was an arm of the civil police, formed to deal with armed robbery that had been rife after Mabato’s takeover. Led by another Nubian, Hassan Boma, the members of the unit carried sub-machine guns and were allowed to shoot robbery suspects on sight.

Under the decrees issued by Mabato both terror units were given complete freedom of action and between them were responsible for all the murders committed under the Mabato regime. They had the world’s highest per capita homicide rate.

Amazingly, there were still Britons in the country. They numbered about seven hundred and were composed mostly of doctors, teachers, engineers and missionaries working in some of the isolated villages deep in the bush. Despite numerous attempts by the British Government to get them to leave Lugamba, they and their families were content to remain. After all, for most of them it was the only home they had. It would have been unthinkable for them to pack their bags and take off.

Since the expulsion of the British envoy they’d had no-one to look after their interests other than the hard pressed Anthony Warren who’d been cajoled into the role by the High Commissioner in Kenya. The British Government, however, ensured the safety and well-being of its subjects in a curious way.

Twice a week a Lugamban Airlines’ 707 freighter arrived at Stansted Airport. These trips were known as the Whisky Runs. On arrival at Stansted the aircraft, usually piloted by American ex-servicemen, veterans of the Vietnam War, were loaded up with every sort of luxury goods, ranging from crates of whisky and cartons of cigarettes to portable radios and new cars. The goods were for the officers and men of the sixty thousand strong army; the men who kept Mabato in power. Britain was paying Mabato protection; if not in cash then at least in kind.

There had been assassination attempts but the man appeared indestructible. Standing six and a half feet tall and weighing two hundred and fifty pounds, President Solomon Mabato towered above his countrymen. His very size enhanced his awesome reputation. The man’s reign seemed impregnable.
Keel pursed his lips and laid the papers to one side. Sekka was studying photographs: colour as well as black and white prints of individuals and landmarks, with titles on the reverse side. There were head and shoulder shots of Mabato, Major Juma, Hassan Boma, minor government ministers and officials in Mabato’s corrupt cabinet. Also army officers; many, like Mabato, sporting Makesi tribal scars.

There were photographs of Mabato’s official residence in Kendura, which sat a few yards away from DOSS headquarters, and views of the army barracks, hospital, railway station, parliamentary buildings and airport. There were even some aerial shots of Mabato’s hideaway; a villa in the northern territory, overlooking the village of his birth. There were also maps showing Kendura and Lugamba’s main highways and railway lines. It was an impressive folder.

‘This is good stuff,’ Keel said.
Sekka glanced at his partner. ‘We’re going in?’
‘Didn’t say that,’ Keel countered.
Sekka chuckled softly. ‘Come off it. I can read you like a book. You’ll take the job. I don’t doubt that for a second.’
‘How come you’re so damned sure?’
‘Because you’re bored.’
Keel stared at him.
‘What?’ Sekka asked innocently.
Keel shook his head and smiled. ‘You mean I’m not doing it for the money?’
‘Oh, there is that aspect, but that isn’t the reason. Ever since that nursemaid job with the sheik you’ve been craving a chance like this. You want to get back into the action. These past few months you’ve been like an addict in need of a fix. Cold turkey, my friend. Pure and simple.’
‘Oh, so we’re a bloody psychoanalyst now, are we?’ Keel rasped. ‘I don’t need you to diagnose my afflictions. I had enough of that this morning!’
‘And that’s the other thing,’ Sekka went on, like a dog worrying a turn up. ‘Why a check-up now? Some coincidence the same day you get a call from a recruiter.’
‘You’re clutching at straws,’ Keel said.
‘Tell me I’m wrong.’ Sekka raised an imperious eyebrow.
Keel stared at the carpet between his feet. ‘Dammit! You know you’re not! I am bored. Bored out of my bloody skull!’ He looked up. ‘I suppose that gives you a fair amount of satisfaction?’

Sekka shook his head. ‘Not satisfaction. Relief.’

‘Come again?’

Sekka raised himself to a sitting position. ‘That your symptoms match mine.’

Keel stared at the man across from him. In a subdued voice, he said, ‘We’ve come a long way since Uzuakoli, haven’t we?’

Uzuakoli was a Methodist leper settlement. It lay south of the town of Okigwa and west of the main railway line that joined Port Harcourt on the southern coast of Nigeria to the northern capital of Enugu.

The troops of the 1st Federal Division were pushing south against the rebel positions, heading for Bende, Ojukwu’s headquarters in his fight for an independent Biafra. Keel was leading forays north in an attempt to forge a link between the 1st Division and Adenkunle’s commandos. As Ojukwu’s rebels pulled back from the Federal advances they did so with vigour, plundering villages and towns for food and other provisions.

Sekka’s family were Hausas from the north. Sekka’s father was a doctor at the leper colony. The family was wealthy and had been able to send Sekka to school and on to university. Sekka had left his roots to study in England and had taken a law degree at Cambridge. His family was immensely proud and looked forward to his visits home. He was able to see his parents two or three times each year. His father was a dedicated man and the rebellion had not made a jot of difference to his work. Sekka often assisted him when he was home on leave from his studies.

On this particular occasion, Sekka’s father was visiting an outlying village when he was stopped by a rebel unit. The rebels stole his medical supplies and then castrated him, leaving his mutilated corpse for the buzzards, before escaping south. The remains of his body were found by an advance unit of the 3rd Commando and returned to the hospital. One hour after Sekka saw his father’s corpse he made his way into the bush to the Commando Brigade’s headquarters and joined up. Three days later he was acting as guide to Keel’s reconnaissance group.

Keel honed and shaped Sekka into an integral part of his squad and Sekka, fired by hate and a desire for revenge, became a natural killing machine. Keel came to rely on him more and more and a unique and deadly
partnership developed. In the months leading up to Ojukwu’s surrender Sekka acquitted himself against the rebel forces with a ferocity unmatched in Keel’s experience. It was as if Sekka was regressing to the basic instincts of his tribal ancestors, the warriors of the Hausa.

After the surrender in January and Keel’s exit from the war, Sekka moved north to his family home. They lost touch, until Keel arrived in Rhodesia and joined the Selous Scouts and discovered it was Sekka who was leading them through the bush to pinpoint the Zambian guerrilla bases. Keel had Sekka attached to his own squad on a regular basis and the old team was reactivated. When Keel left for his next contract Sekka went with him.

When Cameron came calling now, the recruiter had the expertise of a two-man team to bounce ideas from.

‘Anyway,’ Sekka said, ‘that’s two out of four. All we have to do now is convince Harry and Paul.’

Keel smiled. ‘Something tells me we won’t have to try too hard.’

Cameron had reached London and was in his office when the telephone rang. The refined voice said, ‘This is Hobson. Do you have an answer?’

‘Yes and no,’ Cameron said. From the silence on the other end of the phone he had the sudden thought that he might be addressing an empty line.

‘Explain.’ The voice carried a noticeable chill.

Cameron said carefully. ‘I’ve outlined our requirements to my associates and they will give me their answer by noon tomorrow.’

‘I wanted an answer now.’

‘You’ll have to wait. They were not prepared to be rushed into a hasty decision.’

‘I could go elsewhere.’

‘No you couldn’t because you still wouldn’t get an answer any earlier. You’ll just have to be patient.’

A pause. ‘Very well. I’ll contact you tomorrow.’ The tone dropped. ‘I don’t suppose you could give me any indication as to what the decision might be, based on your previous dealings with these people.’

‘That,’ Cameron said, ‘is the sixty-four thousand dollar question.’

‘Well?’

‘Well,’ Cameron replied. ‘I think you’d better prepare for a raid on your piggy bank.’
Wood lifted the receiver at the second ring.

‘I’m experiencing a slight delay,’ Dalkieth informed him. ‘We’ll have an answer by noon tomorrow. However, my contact did hint that there’s every indication the contract will be accepted. I suggest you pass the information to He-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed and pencil me in your appointments diary for one o’clock. We could have a spot of lunch.’

‘I’ll pass it on,’ Wood said. He replaced the receiver. His hand, he realized, was shaking, quite violently.

Madness, Wood thought to himself. One reckless suggestion and an idea was hatched: to recruit a mercenary force for the sole purpose of rescuing one old man from the clutches of a power-crazed dictator. Total bloody madness born out of a moment’s aberration and his career was on the line.

A promising career, too. Or at least it had been. Sifted from obscurity on the back benches thanks to the patronage of Prime Minister Brooke who’d seen the potential. A sharp rise through the ranks of junior ministers and already a seat in the Cabinet with at least a fifteen year start on his nearest rival. Not bad for the son of a draughtsman was the thought that often flitted through Wood’s mind.

A rewarding home life as well, with Dorothy and the boys. A family man; loving husband with a devoted wife; doting parent, very much the proud father.

And still on the up. Patience, Dorothy frequently advised. Brooke wouldn’t always be the kingpin. Wood had been groomed for stardom. He had the support of the leader and the party. He was unstoppable.

Unless he did something really stupid.

Even as Dalkieth was relaying the news, at Schiphol KLM were announcing the arrival of their flight 124 from London. Thirty minutes later two men threaded their way through the passport controls. Each carried a canvas holdall and a leather shoulder bag. They were both very tanned and wore lightweight slacks and jackets over cotton shirts. One was blond and very slim. His companion was stocky with thinning black hair and a heavy black moustache speckled with grey.
Leaving the terminal, they approached the taxi rank where the slim man asked in fluent Dutch for them to be taken to the Okura Hotel on Ferd Bolstraat.

The Pelican was filling up. Business was brisk and Van Dijk and the girls were doing their best to serve everyone with minimum fuss and maximum courtesy. Sekka and Keel were circulating, exchanging pleasantries with their regular customers. Keel was chatting to a plump architect and his red haired mistress when Van Dijk approached.

‘There’s a call for you.’

Keel excused himself and walked to the bar where he picked up the telephone. ‘Keel,’ he said sharply.

He was rewarded with a chuckle at the end of the line. ‘Your telephone manner always was abrupt, Thomas.’

Keel relaxed.

‘See you in an hour,’ Paul Schiller said.

Keel caught Sekka’s eye as he replaced the instrument. He could not disguise the pleasure in his voice as he said, ‘They’re here.’
Earlier in the day David Holt, weary, grubby and fearful, was transferred from his cell in Lubiri.

At ten o’clock that morning he was escorted down the unlit passage to the reception block where he was handcuffed and taken outside to a black Range Rover. From Lubiri he was driven to Mengo District Court and left in the cells beneath the building. The cells were full to overflowing with the dregs of humanity. Drunks rubbed shoulders with pickpockets, pimps, whores and murderers. The whores were waif like and soiled and a far cry from the oiled, fleshy girls who used to haunt the lobby of the Three Moons Hotel.

Holt was the only European in custody. As he sat manacled to a sweating guard his ears were assaulted by the wails and screams of the other prisoners. A harsh cry caused him to stare to his left where a burly, hard-faced police sergeant was beating a cowering man across the shoulders with a thin bamboo cane. Blood was running from the victim’s nose. Holt flinched at each blow and looked quickly away.

The trial was a travesty. Gaunt Nubians in casual dress listened in silence as the charge of treason was read out and the manuscript - or at least a copy - was waved in the air. Holt was given no opportunity to speak in his own defence and no counsel was provided. Neither was there a representative from the High Commissioner. Perhaps, Holt thought, they had not been told the trial was taking place.

Holt heard the verdict in silence. Guilty, of course.

He was hustled back down to the cells and taken to the Range Rover parked in the dust outside.

When the vehicle passed the turning to Lubiri, Holt, peering through the windows, experienced a massive jolt of fear. If he’d been standing his legs would surely have collapsed. He turned frantically to the guard who was picking his nose and staring over the driver’s shoulder.

‘Why have we turned off? Where are we going? Where are you taking me?’ His voice had dropped to a tremulous whisper. ‘Please.’
The guard grinned, showing ravaged gums and stubby yellow teeth. ‘Maboru!’

It was said that the DOSS had taken over Maboru because of its distance from the capital. Stuck as it was on a promontory jutting like a thumb into Lake Victoria, three miles from Kendura, the prison was isolated. It meant that President Mabato would not have to suffer the screams of the inmates disturbing his sleep. It was a formidable structure, bounded on three sides by steep, rocky slopes reaching down to the lake. The main entrance was approached by a dusty road that ran at a right angle to the main highway that skirted the northern shore of Lake Victoria, linking Kendura to Nairobi and the port of Mombasa.

Half a dozen guards in army fatigues took Holt to his cell. They removed the handcuffs and his belt. As he gathered his scattered wits the tramp of his escort’s boots receded down the corridor. Holt was left alone with his thoughts.

An hour later he heard voices approaching. He was on his feet, a pathetic figure clutching shirt tails and waistband while trying to maintain some semblance of dignity in the face of his captors.

Perhaps it was someone from the High Commission. Pray to God it was. The door swung open and a man stepped into the cell.

His Excellency Al Haji Field Marshal Dr Solomon Mabato, VC, DSO, MC and President-for-Life, had come to visit.

Mabato presented an awesome figure. Grossly bloated with a head the size of a large melon, he glared at Holt for several seconds. The tribal scars stood out on his cheek like vivid tram lines. He was in uniform; rows of medal ribbons covered his chest. He held a fly switch in one hand and swatted abstractedly around his head as he studied the wretched man before him. Then he smiled. Holt felt his insides shrivel. Still clutching his waistband in clammy hands, he watched mesmerized as Mabato tapped his clenched knuckles with the fly switch.

‘Drop the trousers,’ Mabato said.

Holt responded by gripping his waistband even tighter. This was not the reply Mabato desired. He tapped Holt again. ‘Drop the trousers.’ Sharper this time.

Holt, despite himself, felt his lower lip quiver. The cane tapped his hand again. Slowly Holt let the material slide through his tingling fingers. He was aware of his trousers sliding over his bony hips and down his thighs to
collect in a huddle at his feet. Mabato looked on as though bored with the procedure. Holt, although wearing underpants, cupped his hands together to protect his groin.

Almost inevitably Mabato tapped his hands again. ‘Now these,’ he said.

‘Please ...’ Holt pleaded.

‘Now!’ Mabato hissed.

Holt tucked shaking fingers into the top of his underpants and rolled them down to join his slacks around his ankles. Tears began to trickle down his cheeks.

The switch flicked down to his genitals. Using the end of the cane Mabato touched the tip of Holt’s limp member. Holt’s body jerked at the feel. The cane lifted his penis.

Mabato said, ‘You are afraid. That is good. If you told me that you were not afraid then you would be a liar. Do you know how I deal with liars? I will tell you. When I was fighting the Mau Mau with the King’s African Rifles my officers were very impressed with my skill at making prisoners reveal where they had hidden their weapons. I would put a table in the middle of the room. When the prisoners were brought before me I would order each man to place his manhood on the table. I would say to them “Where are your spears?” They would always answer “We have no spears.”.’ Mabato smiled grotesquely. ‘But my panga was very sharp, Mister Holt. I would hold it high and ask them again and then of course they would tell me. Sometimes I would use the first man in line as an example, you understand?’

The fly switch let Holt’s penis drop. Mabato said, ‘Never lie to me, Mr Holt.’

Mabato turned on his heel and ducked through the doorway. Holt was alone again.

With his trousers and underpants still around his feet he sank back on his haunches and folded his arms about his knees. He began to rock himself backwards and forwards like a small child alone in his nursery after a scolding from his nanny.

Paul Schiller and Harry Roan looked stunned. The Lugamba dossier was on the table before them. They were in the apartment above the Pelican.

‘That’s a hell of a job,’ Roan said, stroking his moustache
thoughtfully. Only the slightest trace of a drawl betrayed his Memphis origins and a boyhood spent largely on his grandfather’s knee, listening with rapt attention to the old man’s tales of the con men and gamblers, heroes and villains who plied their trade on the broad decks and in the plush saloons of the big Dixie paddle steamers that threshed their way up and down the Mississippi River.

Roan was often to recall the old man’s words as he plied his own deadly trade along the creeks and sandbanks of another great river half a world away; the Mekong. When he’d been part of a DELTA recon team, Roan and his unit had used hovercraft to patrol the river and its tributaries.

Roan had met Keel when the latter, along with Iain Cameron, was involved in the operations of the Special Forces Search and Destroy teams in the jungles of Cambodia and Laos. They operated out of Bien Hoa, the United States tactical air base a grenade lob north of Saigon.

They called it the Parrot’s Beak; a twenty-five by thirty mile rectangle of Cambodian territory extending into South Vietnam to the west of Saigon; an area of rough roads and ragged hamlets, bisected by the main highway linking Saigon to the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. Here, around the border region and along the banks of the Mekong, were located Viet Cong sanctuaries, long considered inviolate to US forces. Officially.

It was in this type of country that Roan and Keel and men of the Special Forces units, assisted by Montagnard tribesmen, fought a guerrilla campaign against the NVA. It was brutal and bloody with no quarter given or expected. Any thought of conventional warfare was ignored in the struggle. Roan’s side took the war to the enemy, becoming like the VC: engaging in terror tactics, hit and run strikes, always on the move, living rough off the land, surviving like animals.

Their missions across the border were classified as ‘sterile’. The men were instilled with total light and noise discipline - all moving parts of their rifles taped down and trigger guards removed for ease of firing. Unit members wore manufactured replicas of North Vietnamese uniforms with captured gear and weapons. All of them were without identification. Sometimes they carried cards stating that they were working for military intelligence but on certain forays even these flimsy means of ID were abandoned. If they were killed or captured in compromising localities the US disavowed all knowledge of their actions, sometimes even of their existence. They were maverick units. On their own. Isolated.
Vietnam, someone once said, was a brutal Never- Never Land where boys didn’t have to grow up; they just grew old before their time. Roan had seen many of his buddies grow up rapidly. He’d also seen many of them die. By the end of the war, looking back on it all, he considered that maybe the most worthwhile part of the experience was the fact that he’d lived through it. That and the fact that the skills he’d acquired had no place in civilian life. It was by virtue of the type of service Roan had seen that made it impossible for him to accept the discipline required in regular peacetime soldiering. There was only one solution. Freelance.

He and Keel were ideally matched. Roan’s inherent good nature and his homely accent belied his impressive record in combat. He was an intelligent, quick thinking operative and the bond of friendship had been cemented early.

Paul Schiller studied the maps and photographs and narrowed his eyes as smoke from his thin cheroot rose before his youthful face like mystical vapours.

Schiller had been a member of the West German GSG-9 anti-terrorist squad formed under Ulrich Wegener shortly after the Black September attack on the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. He’d been among the team that had stormed the Lufthansa 737 at Mogadishu and so was experienced in operating within the disciplines of a small unit. He’d put his skill to good effect when, following his resignation from GSG-9, he’d become a mercenary and joined the Rhodesian Light infantry. He’d met up with Keel and Sekka during raids into Mozambique. When Harry Roan joined with them the team was complete. Now, whenever possible, on a contract requiring an active service unit, the four of them worked together, with Cameron as broker.

‘What interests me is the money man,’ Sekka said.

‘Cameron figured on a business cartel with this man Hobson acting as go-between.’ Keel reached for the half empty bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label that stood on the table by his elbow and poured himself two fingers. ‘Iain’s a shrewd operator and I’m inclined to rely on his intuition on this one. Whoever they are, they have funds. Let’s face it, we don’t come cheap.’

‘What’s the rate for this one?’ asked Schiller

‘Twenty-five thousand per man, plus exes.’

‘I’d be less than honest if I didn’t say that I think the contract’s a
bitch,’ Roan said candidly.

Keel addressed Schiller. ‘Any thoughts?’

Schiller shrugged. ‘We’ve had difficult contracts before. The Sorgensen job for one. Now, that one was a bitch.’

Schiller was referring to the time, two years before, when they’d been hired to find and free a Swedish businessman being held by Tupamaros guerrillas in Salto, Uruguay. The job had been tricky and they had been lucky to bring it off.

‘Yeah and I’ve still got the scars to prove it,’ Roan grimaced. He massaged his left arm abstractedly. A puckered weal ran from wrist to elbow. It showed whitely against his tan.

‘Thought you got that running for a bus,’ Sekka said.

Roan grinned.

‘So?’ Keel looked at each of them in turn. ‘We’ve read Cameron’s dossier. He wants an answer. What’ll it be?’

Not that there was ever any doubt.

Dalkieth’s done well,’ Brooke said. ‘Better than I expected in the time available. The problem, of course, is the fee.’

‘The amount?’

‘I was thinking about the source. Where would it come from?’

They were in the Commons, in the Prime Minister’s room behind the Speaker’s chair.

‘Assuming we go through with it,’ Wood said.

‘Assuming,’ Brooke replied.

‘I’ve been considering that,’ Wood answered. ‘I might have a solution.’

Brooke narrowed his eyes. ‘Go on.’

‘I was chatting to Callum St Clair a couple of days ago. He’s one of the under-secretaries at the Treasury. He happened to mention the Merrison Report.’

What that had to do with a mercenary contract fee, Brooke couldn’t begin to guess. The report was the result of a government enquiry into mental health facilities.

‘I’m not with you. The report was published ages ago and the committee disbanded. I don’t see the connection.’
‘Let me finish. St Clair was saying that although the committee was disbanded, the central fund, due to a bureaucratic balls-up, was not liquidated.’ Wood paused and studied the expression on Brooke’s craggy face. ‘I can see you’re way ahead of me.’

‘How much?’ Brooke said slowly.

‘A shade over two hundred thousand,’ Wood replied. ‘Sitting there doing nothing except gathering mildew.’

‘Christ!’ Brooke looked hard at the Foreign Secretary. ‘How would we deal with it?’

‘I believe the word we are looking for is launder. This has got to be a job for Dalkieth. He could use SIS fronts. A transfer here, a transfer there …’

‘I hope this isn’t going to get out of hand.’

‘You want to abort?’

Brooke shook his head. ‘No. We need irons in the fire.’

‘Well, one iron’s ready,’ said Wood.

‘Oh?’

‘I had call from General Kirby this morning. He’s still keen to help out.’

‘Fine,’ Brooke said. ‘Well, this is his big chance.’

Reaching over his desk, Brooke picked up a buff quarto-size envelope. ‘I have here one letter signed by herself and yours truly, delivered by winged messenger this very day. So tell Kirby to pack his jammies. I want him on the next plane to Lugamba. This’ll tell us how keen he is to play diplomat.’

‘I’ll get on it. By the way, there’ll be two of them.’

‘Good God! He’s not taking his bloody wife! This isn’t a holiday!’

‘His aide. A Major Garside. Kirby asked if it would be in order. Garside’s also acquainted with Mabato. A twin-barrelled attack might be more effective.’

‘Very well,’ Brooke sighed. ‘But that’s it. He’s not taking any camp followers. Just the two of them.’

‘There’s a flight out this afternoon. Sabena to Brussels and then a connection to Kendura via Nairobi. They’ll be there first thing tomorrow morning, barring fog at Heathrow or a hi-jacking.’ Wood kept a straight face as he spoke.

‘Don’t tempt fate,’ Brooke said curtly. ‘Things are bad enough as it is. Just keep me posted.’
‘Naturally,’ Wood nodded. He paused at the door. ‘Let’s hope we won’t have to rely on plan B.’
‘Amen to that,’ Brooke said.

Dalkieth was perturbed and said as much to Wood over lunch. By this time he’d been in touch with Cameron and had passed on to the Foreign Secretary the decision to accept the contract.

‘What’s the problem?’ Wood asked brusquely. He concentrated on squeezing lemon juice over his Dover Sole.

‘The problem,’ Dalkieth said icily, ‘is that the contract’s been accepted and now you tell me you’re sending two envoys out to Lugamba to mediate. What the hell am I supposed to tell my link man now? Forget it? Go home?’

‘Look George, if this mission succeeds we won’t need to use these… individuals. I’d rather avoid that if possible.’

‘These men won’t wait indefinitely for Christ’s sake. If they’re to be effective in any way they’re going to have to move soon. How long before we know if we’ll need them?’

‘I think we’ll know twenty four hours after the envoys get to Kendura.’

‘I think we’ll lose valuable time if we wait much longer,’ Dalkieth said. ‘I suggest we give the team the go ahead.’

‘Not while Kirby’s in Lugamba for Christ’s sake!’

Dalkieth seethed at the rebuke. ‘So, what do you suggest?’

‘I suggest you contact your man and come up with a game plan. Something feasible based on the outcome of Kirby’s plea for clemency. If the envoys fail we send the men in.’

Dalkieth admitted to himself that it made sense to at least place the team on standby.

‘Very well,’ Dalkieth said. ‘I’ll pass it on and let you know.’

‘Good.’ Wood speared a sliver of fish. ‘You do that.’ He dabbed his lips with his napkin and eyed Dalkieth warily. ‘About the Merrison fund. Any progress?’

‘What Merrison fund?’ Dalkieth’s face was a picture of innocent inquiry. ‘That’s been liquidated. For quite some time I believe.’

Wood, very wisely, took the hint and decided not to pursue the
matter. What he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. At least, that’s what he thought.

Cameron rested his elbows on the parapet and gazed out over the Serpentine. The water was calm except for the erratic splashing of the rowers in the blue and yellow rowboats. There was a flash of oar as an orange kayak jinked out of the path of one of the rowers, its occupant looking like a hunchback in his bright life jacket. On the bank, weeping willows drooped sad fronds into the water’s edge and ducks waddled backwards and forwards in formation, like ratings on parade. Behind him, au pairs trundled their squalling charges across the bridge in prams. He pushed his hands into the deep pockets of his Burberry and from the corner of his eye studied Dalkieth’s leisurely approach.

‘So much more pleasant than your office, don’t you agree?’ Dalkieth said as he joined Cameron at the parapet. He looked down at the water and watched a laughing youth attempting to retrieve an oar that had dropped over the side of his boat. The lad’s girlfriend was giggling helplessly and splashing him with water as he balanced precariously over the gunwale.

Cameron agreed to the tentative game plan.

The team would fly out to Nairobi and wait for word from Cameron as to whether they should proceed with the rescue. He asked Dalkieth how long they might have to wait.

‘Forty-eight hours maximum.’

Cameron nodded. ‘That’ll give my men time to equip and get into position.’ He added, ‘And the contract will cost you one hundred and fifty thousand. Half up front and the remainder if and when Holt is in Nairobi.’

‘Agreed.’

Cameron stood with his back to the lake as he watched Dalkieth walk away towards Hyde Park Corner. He also saw the lone figure in a leather jacket and faded jeans detach itself from one of the park benches and follow Dalkieth along the path. Cameron grunted in satisfaction and strolled across Rotten Row in the direction of Sloane Street and his office. He wanted to get back there in order to take the telephone call.

But one detail nagged. The man he knew as Hobson had hinted that a diplomatic mission was in progress. Two envoys would be leaving for Lugamba to try and secure Holt’s release. Cameron’s involvement would
hinge on the results of their progress. Interesting that Hobson knew about that when neither the lunchtime editions nor the radio news bulletins had carried so much as a hint of the story. So, how did he know?

Unless he had friends in high places.

Or something ...

In his office, Cameron ignored the first buzz of the telephone.

‘Thought I might have missed you.’ The hushed voice carried the rasp of damaged vocal cords.

‘You didn’t,’ Cameron replied. ‘What have you got for me, Frank?’

A chuckle at the end of the line. ‘That had to be one of the cushiest jobs you ever gave me. He hadn’t a clue he was being tagged.’ There was a brief pause. Cameron heard the click of a lighter and the sound of a man drawing on a cigarette.

‘So?’ Cameron prompted. ‘What else?’

‘I followed him to the underground car park.’

‘And?’

‘He got into his car and buggered off. I couldn’t follow him. I’d no wheels of my own.’ The hoarse voice sounded disgruntled.

‘No matter.’ Cameron reached for a pad and pen. ‘Make and registration?’

‘Rover. Dark blue. Two years old.’

‘Number?’

Cameron wrote down the registration as it was relayed.

The line crackled. The noise was followed by a sudden bout of coughing. Cameron jerked the receiver away from his ear.

Frank found his voice. ‘You there, Mister Cameron?’

‘Hanging on. Good work. I appreciate it.’

‘Anytime. You know where to find me.’

‘You bet. Take care. Oh, and one other thing.’

‘Mister Cameron?’

‘Not a word to anyone. Dead stumm on this one. Got it?’

A sigh. ‘Do me a favour!’

Cameron grinned. ‘I know, Frank. Cheerio. Be good.’

The switchboard operator at New Scotland Yard sounded bored when she asked Cameron which extension he required.

‘CID. Detective Sergeant Macraig.’

‘Hold the line.’
Cameron tapped his fingers on his desk and stared thoughtfully at the number he’d jotted down.

‘Macraig.’ The voice was nasal, carrying the hint of a Scottish burr that had been tempered by years in the south and dealings with a wide cross section of the capital’s murky underworld.

‘Alec? Iain. Fancy a jar?’

‘Best offer I’ve had all day but I’ve an in-tray that looks like the side of Ben Nevis.’

‘I need a favour. What time can you get away?’

‘About a week from Tuesday, but as a special dispensation I can fit you in around eight tonight. Make it the Queen’s Arms and mine’s a pint of Special and a whisky chaser. What’s it about?’

‘Not over the phone.’

‘OK. I’ll see you later. Set ‘em up.’

‘Done,’ Cameron said.

In the VIP lounge in Terminal Two a small group of men waited patiently for the departure of the Sabena flight to Brussels. The group comprised the Sabena Passenger Services manager and the terminal security officer as well as Lt General Ruan Kirby, Major Robert Garside and Gavin Niall from the Foreign Office.

Kirby was a tall man with a receding grey hairline, a weathered face with calm brown eyes and a humorous curve to his lips. Garside was dark and saturnine. They were both dressed in conservative lightweight suits. Garside carried a leather attaché case. Niall looked at his watch. ‘Not long now, gentlemen.’ He glanced at the Sabena manager. ‘Your staff’s been briefed?’

Niall was in his early thirties. His blond hair was parted in the centre and combed back over his ears and collar. He wore a pair of large tortoiseshell framed spectacles and looked like a condescending owl.

The Sabena man - Rawlings, efficient and dapper – nodded. ‘We’re all set. We’ll board you shortly, General; before the other passengers, of course.’

Kirby nodded, anxious to be off.

Niall said, ‘The Sabena people will ensure a smooth connection. You’ll have a fifty-minute transit but should there be a delay blocking on at Brussels, the on-going flight will be held.’
Rawlings confirmed Niall’s prediction and, catching the eye of the gaunt security officer, he announced it was time for the envoys to board the aircraft.

Niall extended his hand. ‘Well, this is it. Have a safe trip, sir, and good luck to you both. We’ll be keeping our fingers crossed.’

They shook hands and the general and his aide turned to leave. Niall hesitated. ‘One last thing, sir.’

Kirby raised an eyebrow and Garside looked on expectantly. Niall’s face remained passive.

‘For Christ’s sake,’ he said. ‘Don’t lose the bloody letter!’

There was the briefest of pauses. Kirby smiled.

‘Don’t you worry. Major Garside has it safe and sound.’ He glanced at Garside. ‘Right Bob?’

Garside’s face dropped. ‘Er - actually, sir, I thought I gave it to you.’

Niall’s insides did a double flip. A brief vision of a future sifting through a billion motor tax application forms in darkest Swansea flashed through his mind. He was aware then of Garside grinning at his discomfort and he flushed in response and swung away angrily. He had the distinct impression that he could still hear Kirby chuckling as he walked back through the terminal towards the spot where Hanson, the ministry chauffeur, had parked the car.

Niall hoped the airline wouldn’t screw things up. They’d used Sabena because the British Airways cabin crews were on a one-day strike and Sabena, in any case, was one of only two airlines - neither of them British - that operated scheduled services to Kendura out of European capitals.

Hanson dropped the Daily Mirror as Niall emerged from the terminal and opened his door.

Niall waved him back. ‘It’s OK, Peter, I’ve got it.’

He opened the rear door and slid into the Jag. Hanson took them down the ramp and into the tunnel, en route to the M4.

By eight-thirty the Queen’s Arms was filling up and there was still no sign of Macraig. Cameron was sitting in the corner nursing a screwdriver with Macraig’s order on the table in front of him. He tried to avoid the barmaid’s eye as she sought to attract his attention by thrusting her chest across the bar.

Most of the early evening punters had pushed off home and the
second string were beginning to saunter in for their tipples; husbands escaping from wives and drunks from reality.

Macraig arrived three minutes past the hour looking harassed but not apologetic. ‘Got held up’ were his only words. It seemed the inspector was having one of his purges.

He was a big man with a florid complexion and a bald head, high domed and freckled like a song thrush’s breast. His hands were huge and heavily mottled and covered with fine red hairs. The forefinger and middle finger of his right hand were stained with nicotine. He sank half the pint and the Scotch before asking Cameron the reason for the meeting.

Cameron flicked a page from a notebook across the table, avoiding the puddles of beer, in which the coasters sat like stepping stones.

‘I’d like you to run a check on this number. Find out who owns the car.’

Macraig stared at him. ‘You’ve got a bloody nerve.’ He picked up the piece of paper. ‘Got me here under false pretences.’

‘I didn’t get you here under any pretence. I told you I had a favour to ask. This is it.’

‘Aye, so you did.’ Macraig looked less than impressed. ‘I don’t suppose you’d like to enlighten me at all? I mean this is a real no-no. You do realize that?’ He peered at the registration number. A corner of the paper grazed a puddle of lager and the ink had begun to run. He blew on it and said, ‘I suppose if I told you to get stuffed you’d only remind me that I owe you one.’

Cameron’s good eye glittered. ‘You’ve got it. You got your stripes because of the tip-off I gave you.’

‘As you never cease to remind me,’ Macraig said heavily.

Macraig was referring to the murder of an underworld gang boss. The contract, carried out on behalf of a rival crime lord, had been the work of two sometime mercenaries who’d needed ready money. Cameron, through contacts in the mercenary hierarchy, had passed the names of the two killers to an ex-army colleague turned policeman - Alec Macraig. The two men had been cornered in a tiny flat in Bayswater. Like rats in a trap the killers had turned and fought, attempting to shoot their way out. Two policemen were wounded before Macraig battered his way in. One of the mercenaries died with a bullet in the throat and the other, confronted with the huge figure of Macraig brandishing his revolver with all the panache of Wyatt Earp at the
OK Corral, surrendered with alacrity. Macraig had inevitably received commendations and a subsequent promotion.

Cameron smiled. ‘Knew I could depend on you.’

‘Yeah, like a fucking crutch,’ Macraig said. He drained the rest of his beer. ‘S’pose you’d like another?’

‘Wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble,’ Cameron said as he held out his glass.

There was quite a crowd in the pub now. Macraig lumbered to his feet and shouldered his way through the scrum towards the bar Cameron noticed that not many people obstructed the big man’s passage. Macraig returned to the table with his hands full and a thumb in his chaser.

He sat down and narrowed his eyes. ‘Got something on then, have you? A contract is it?’

‘Nothing definite,’ Cameron answered guardedly. ‘Just irons in the fire at the moment.’

‘I see and how much difference will it make, knowing who owns the motor?’

‘I can’t answer that,’ Cameron replied truthfully.

Macraig nodded. ‘Aye, well I’ll see what I can find out anyway.’

They stayed in the pub until closing time. By then the bar was virtually empty and Cameron was feeling comfortably mellow.

‘Don’t know about you,’ Macraig said, ‘but I could murder a curry. The Star of Bengal’s just around the corner. What d’you say?’

‘Why not?’ Cameron finished his drink in one swallow and followed Macraig out of the pub.

Schiller had phoned Air France and made reservations on the flight to Paris and the connection to Kendura via Athens and Nairobi. There was no direct flight from Amsterdam and the flight from Brussels to Nairobi was full.

Roan had been wondering where they would pick up their equipment. Keel told them that they would obtain everything they needed from Mendoza in Nairobi. The Portuguese could provide anything - if the price was right.

‘They wouldn’t let me see him,’ James Henderson said angrily, polishing his
spectacles feverishly. He replaced them on his nose and stared at Warren speculatively. ‘They wouldn’t even let me into the bloody gaol.’

‘Bastards!’ Warren muttered. He looked dishevelled, like a man who’d gone without sleep for some time. ‘What time are the dynamic duo arriving?’

‘Zero-nine-forty.’

‘What’s the betting their bloody bags end up in Hong Kong,’ Warren growled. ‘I take it His Excellency’s been informed of their arrival; bearing tidings from the Great White Queen from over the water?’

‘He knows,’ Henderson said.

‘Of course, it’s not that I doubt your competence. I’m under a great deal of strain, you understand.’

‘We all are, sir.’

Warren grimaced. ‘All right, I asked for that. Point taken. Mind you, things could be worse. I could be David Holt.’
Engines screaming like a dying hyena, the Sabena 707 rolled to a halt and a handful of passengers vacated their seats and reached into the overhead lockers for their belongings.

In the first class section, Garside, who had the window seat, remarked, ‘Oh, well, so far, so good.’

Kirby straightened his tie and smoothed his hair. ‘No sign of Himself?’

‘Not yet, though I can see a bunch of people at the bottom of the steps who appear to waiting.’

A stewardess with splendid legs and a fixed smile approached down the aisle. ‘You may disembark, gentlemen.’

‘Thank you, my dear.’ Kirby glanced at Garside. ‘Ready?’

Garside gave him a look.

They walked to the open door. The dozen passengers who’d disembarked before them were already halfway across the tarmac heading for the terminal building.

Most of the airport facilities had been built by the Israelis but since their expulsion they had been ill maintained. Half a mile away three MiG 15 fighters stood like metal ants against a boundary fence; an open indication of Lugamba’s political ties. Fire tenders and fuel tankers were parked haphazardly about. There seemed to be scant evidence of order or discipline. The whole area looked unkempt and run down.

The sky was a cloudless blue. There was no breeze and the air was heavy with kerosene fumes. Kirby, stood at the top of the boarding steps in full dress uniform, could feel the sweat trickling down from his armpits that were already beginning to itch abominably. He felt sure he cut a ludicrous figure and cursed at what appeared to be Mabato’s weak sense of humour at demanding that the envoys should arrive in Lugamba in such flamboyant attire.

Garside muttered, as he emerged into the sunshine. ‘And it’s only
mid-morning!’

Kirby eyed the small cluster of men waiting at the foot of the steps. Still no sign of the President. He felt a stab of concern at this.

One of the men broke away and moved forward as Kirby’s foot hit the tarmac.

‘Good morning. I’m Anthony Warren. I have the misfortune to be the Acting High Commissioner. I don’t have to ask who you are.’

They shook hands and Garside was introduced. The two envoys viewed Warren’s lightweight suit with envy.

Warren lowered his voice conspiratorially. ‘Er…as you may have gathered, His Excellency’s not here. Naturally, he sends his er… regrets and trusts you’ll accept his apology. He has seen fit to delegate Brigadier Epunau to receive you and escort you during the inspection, however.’

At the word ‘inspection’ Kirby and Garside exchanged startled glances.

Warren stepped aside.

Brigadier Lucius Epunau was a short unintelligent looking individual with a double chin and a blank gaze that suggested he was unused to such ceremony, however superficial. His handshake was a limp gesture. Warren then introduced Joshua Nkuto, the Foreign Minister; a grave man dressed in a grey pinstripe suit. He also sported an Eton tie which, Kirby felt, must surely have been purchased second hand. He wore heavy-framed sun glasses. Kirby glimpsed himself in the reflection. It was like being introduced to a zombie; the walking dead.

‘Dear God,’ Garside said suddenly.

Kirby swung round. To his amazement he too found himself staring at a line of men standing rigidly to attention some yards away from the aircraft, like toy soldiers. Mabato had provided a guard of honour.

And a band.

Trumpets, trombones and tubas glinted in the sunshine. The bandmaster, baton raised expectantly, stared back at them.

‘Christ!’ Kirby said, totally thrown by the bizarre spectacle of thirty or so African musicians togged up in what looked suspiciously like Black Watch tartan. ‘They’re wearing kilts!’

Maybe it was a mirage. He closed his eyes and reopened them slowly.

No such luck. They were still there, instruments poised. Warren said
throatily, ‘I take it you’re ready to inspect the guard of honour?’

Kirby nodded wearily and turned to look for the brigadier. He surprised the latter idly scratching his crotch and looked frantically to Warren for some semblance of normality. Garside looked equally stunned but he managed to drag Warren to one side.

‘What the hell is this? The Old Man’s ready to tear somebody’s head off.’ He indicated Epunau. ‘If that guy’s the brigadier, the pope’s Jewish!’

‘Recently promoted,’ Warren said.

‘From what? Corporal?’

‘Close,’ Warren said. ‘Two weeks ago he was Mabato’s driver.’

‘Jesus fucking Christ!’ Garside looked horrified as Epunau jammed a finger in his left ear and wiggled it around experimentally.

‘He doesn’t speak English either,’ Warren said.

‘You do surprise me.’

Kirby looked around for his aide. ‘Get us out of here!’

‘Er…the inspection?’ Warren stuttered. The brigadier was now exploring his other ear.

Joshua Nkuto stepped forward and said in faultless English, ‘Perhaps you would care to follow me, General?’

Kirby composed his features into a mask. ‘Of course.’

It was an Alice in Wonderland situation. As Kirby, accompanied by an unsmiling government minister and a half witted brigadier, approached the guard of honour, the band struck up the tune ‘Tea for Two’.

Maybe it’s all a terrible dream, Garside tried to persuade himself. If I pinch myself, I’ll wake up on the parade ground at Aldershot.

Unfortunately it wasn’t a dream. Both Garside and Kirby finished the inspection in a daze. The brigadier, all pretence at sophistication cast aside like an old coat, stomped off to the terminal followed by Nkuto.

‘We’re being dangled,’ Garside muttered angrily. ‘Puppets on a bloody string.’

‘But of course.’ Warren was surprised that the major had even seen fit to voice such an obvious fact. ‘Mabato’s laying the ground rules. He has us exactly where he wants us and he’s loving every minute.’

‘So, what do we do now?’ Garside asked. ‘Twiddle our thumbs?’

‘All right, Bob,’ Kirby said. ‘Simmer down. Getting steamed up won’t help. Especially in this damned heat. God! I’d forgotten how hot it could be out here.’ Kirby wiped his brow with his handkerchief and then he
wiped the headband of his cap. He turned to Warren. ‘You’re the expert. What do you suggest?’

‘Play it cool. No pun intended. There’s not much else you can do. I don’t have to explain to you the delicacy of the situation.’

‘Quite,’ Garside said icily. ‘But do you think we could get out of the sun. My scalp’s beginning to grill.’

‘God, yes!’ Warren said apologetically. ‘The car’s waiting. We’ll see to your bags of course.’ He pointed to Garside’s attaché case. ‘I presume the Word is in that?’

‘On a tablet of clay,’ Garside said. He’d forgotten he was holding the damned thing. The case had become part of him during the trip; he’d grown that used to carrying it.

‘I suppose Mabato will summon us when he’s ready,’ Kirby said as they walked towards the terminal.

‘Don’t you worry about that,’ Warren answered. ‘It’ll be soon enough. By the way, you’ll both be staying at my place for the duration of your trip. I had the idea it might be more convenient.’

‘I’m sure we’ll be very comfortable,’ Kirby said.

‘Excellent,’ Warren continued. ‘Right, let’s get you out of the midday sun. I’m convinced Coward had this place in mind when he composed the song, despite what everyone else says. Anyway, I should think you’d like to rest up after your flight?’

‘Yes indeed. We didn’t get much sleep on the way down but then I’ve always found it difficult to nod off at thirty-five thousand feet.’

‘Then, let’s go. If anything breaks, I’ll let you know. Until then, there isn’t a lot we can do except await Mabato’s pleasure.’

‘Oh wonderful,’ Garside said, not sounding for a moment as though he meant it.

Macraig was looking distinctly worried. Cameron waited for him to speak. It was lunchtime and they were back in the Queen’s Arms. There was no sign of the over-endowed barmaid, Cameron was happy to note.

‘I’m not sure…’ Macraig began.

‘Well?’

‘Either you gave me the wrong number …’

‘No chance.’
‘…or you’re in trouble. I’m hoping it’s the first alternative.’
Cameron felt the first twinge of apprehension. There was no
mistaking the concern in Macraig’s voice.
‘The registration was correct,’ he said.
Macraig pursed his lips. ‘What are you up to, Iain?’
Cameron stared at him. ‘Don’t hedge. What’s the matter?’
‘You’re the one who’s hedging. I asked you a question.’
‘Look, all I’ve done is ask you to run a registration check. Why the
third degree? You aren’t normally this inquisitive.’
‘This one’s different.’
‘How so?’
Macraig sighed. ‘The car doesn’t belong to an individual.’
‘OK, so what’s the name of the firm?’
‘It’s not a firm.’
‘I’m not with you. You just said…’
Macraig shook his head. ‘I don’t know what game you’re playing, 
mate, but…’
‘For fuck’s sake!’ Cameron snapped.
‘It’s a pool vehicle. It’s used by senior executive officers at the 
Ministry of Defence. Christ, they’d have my balls if they knew I was telling
you this.’
‘What department?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Like hell!’
‘But I can make a guess. I used a contact in Special Branch and I had
the impression I was being blocked. And that worries me.’
‘How did you cover, anyway?’
‘I hinted that the car had been spotted in a tow away zone and told
them that next time they’d have to pay to get it out. I was told to shove it. It
wasn’t so much a hint as a warning. You know what I mean?’
‘So what do you think?’
‘I think,’ Macraig said slowly, ‘that your man’s a spook.’
‘Intelligence!’
Macraig shrugged noncommittally. ‘It’s only an opinion.’
‘Copper’s hunch?’
‘If you like.’
Cameron was silent. His mind raced. This wasn’t what he’d
expected. How was he going to deal with it? He said carefully, ‘If I asked you to try and find out who used the car on a certain date, could you find out?’

‘You’re bloody joking! I’ve been warned off once. These blokes don’t frig around. They play dirty. I don’t intend to become a punch bag on your behalf. Not for all the Scotch in Ardnamurchan!’

Cameron was surprised at Macraig’s vehemence.

The policeman’s eyes narrowed. ‘I’ll ask again. What the hell’s going on?’

‘I don’t know yet.’ Cameron stood up. ‘But don’t let it worry you. I appreciate your help. I’ll be in touch.’

‘You mean that’s it?’

‘Oh, no,’ Cameron said. ‘That’s not it. Not by a long chalk.’

‘So?’

‘So thanks for the drink.’

Macraig watched, stupefied, as Cameron walked out of the pub. The big man waited ten minutes before making his exit. And just what was Cameron up to? The question nagged him as he walked down the street towards an in-tray that still looked like Ben Nevis.

‘What sort of photographs, Mister Cameron?’ Cigarette smoke curled up before Frank’s narrowed eyes. ‘Birds?’

‘Afraid not, old son. We’ll leave that to David Bailey.’

‘So who do I take pictures of?’

‘Me,’ Cameron said.

‘Eh?’ Frank’s jaw dropped.

‘Well, me and someone else actually.’

‘Porn? Don’t know about that, Mister Cameron.’ Frank started to shake his head.

‘Easy, Frank. You’re letting your imagination run riot.’

‘Thank God for that. Wouldn’t have been able to hold the bloody camera still anyway.’

They were seated at a Formica-topped table in a tiny and moderately unhygienic establishment off Leicester Square. A bottle of HP sauce, a sugar dispenser and a red plastic tomato stood between them along with two chipped cups containing scummy tea. Cameron, in donkey jacket, and Frank in his windcheater and jeans were the most respectable looking customers.
For the most part the tables were occupied by grubby little men in gabardine raincoats. Bank messengers or strip club touts taking a lunch hour.

Frank Ketch was a leg-man and sometime-minder. His patch was Soho and the West End clubs. He was in his early thirties; not tall but well-built with hair almost as dark as Cameron’s. He had an olive - almost Latin - complexion which he used to great advantage around the clubs. He was rarely short of female companionship.

His mutilated larynx was the result of a club brawl in which Ketch, in his role of minder cum bouncer, had had a difference of opinion with a brace of football supporters. In the melee a broken chair leg had smashed against his throat. The soccer thugs had been taken away in an ambulance. They had been discharged from the hospital after a week and Ketch figured they’d got off lightly. Ketch was a former marine. He performed odd jobs for a lot of people. Cameron was one of them.

Cameron stared at his tea. It looked rancid. He pushed the cup away with a grimace. ‘I’m going to meet someone and all you have to do is take a few shots of us; preferably without the other person knowing anything about it.’

‘So much for the commissions from Big Jugs Monthly,’ Ketch said.
‘Maybe next time.’ Cameron grinned.
‘What about a camera?’
‘No problem. I’ll supply that. It’ll have a good lens too, so you won’t have to poke it up our noses. All you’ll have to do is point it and press the tit, without being bloody obvious about it. Capiche?’
‘Capiche,’ Frank said.

Keel, Roan and Schiller had arrived in Nairobi, where they’d booked themselves into the Intercontinental on the Uhuru Highway and City Hall Way.

Sekka had travelled on the same Air France flight but as the aircraft continued on to Kendura he’d remained on board. This had been decided before leaving Amsterdam. Sekka would be able to move around more freely than the others - for obvious reasons - and reconnoitre.

It was pointless for all of them to proceed before it was confirmed that the mission was on, anyway. Keel, Roan and Schiller would remain in Nairobi and await word from Cameron in London. If the snatch was on they
would fly in and team up with Sekka. The latter would wait four days. If the others hadn’t sent word in that time he would board a plane and fly back to Kenya, the mission aborted.

While in Nairobi, Keel would have the opportunity to obtain the equipment they needed. It was the best plan they could come up with in the time allowed.

Sekka, in sports shirt and grey slacks, gazed thoughtfully out of the rear windows of the battered Mercedes as he was transported noisily from Kendura airport to the International Hotel in the centre of the city. The driver changed gear erratically and more than once Sekka had to grab the strap above the window to avoid bouncing over the driver’s neck.

There had only been a dozen or so passengers entering the country; nevertheless, the immigration procedure had been slow and the customs officials pedantic to the point of insolence. Not wishing to draw attention to himself, Sekka had endured the protracted examination of his documents. On being asked the reason for his visit, Sekka divulged that he was a freelance journalist doing an article for the Nigeria Star on the preparation for the imminent OAU conference.

Sekka had spotted the security men the second he entered the customs hall. Two of them; standing either side of the double exit doors. Floral shirts, black flared slacks, reflective sun glasses, Kalashnikovs over their shoulders, studying the arriving travellers. Sekka felt the stirring of alarm as he walked towards the doors, suitcase in his hand, but the duo, bored with duty, did not even spare him a second glance as he strode through the exit and into the sunshine beyond.

The taxis were all of the same decrepit appearance. Sekka chose the first one in the rank, out of convenience rather than for its aesthetic quality. A mile from the airport he was beginning to think it had been a bad move.

The highway ran through flat countryside; scrubland that occasionally gave way to arid cultivation, shallow furrows of sun bleached, rock hard soil containing only shrivelled brown shoots, victims of the merciless sun.

The outskirts of Kendura were little more than slum areas made up of tin-roofed wooden boxes, erected beside inadequate drainage ditches that were euphemisms for open plan latrines, all linked by a warren of stinking
alleyways inhabited by flea-infested dogs and urinating children in ragged hand-me-downs. Rotting heaps of garbage were piled everywhere.

The shacks gave way to workers’ flats. At one time this had been the Asian belt; the homes of the prosperous Indian community that had run Lugamba’s shops and industries. Before the purge, the flats had presented a well-kept face to the visitor. Now, with the Asians expelled, the itinerants had moved in. The evidence was a web of broken window panes, cracked paving stones and paint daubed walls. They were now nothing more than high rise hovels and served only to complement the shanty town that sprawled in their shadow.

Beyond the flats the land sloped up to a bushy skyline, broken by the eggshell cracked walls of the old colonial style villas that would, in earlier years, have housed embassies and consulates. Now they were occupied by Mabato’s henchmen. The diplomats - those that remained - had moved into squat, drab cubes hidden behind high walls and railings as protection against riot and demonstration.

The Kendura International Hotel broke into view around a bend in the road and the taxi turned into the forecourt. Once a fine old edifice but now badly run to seed, even in the bright sunshine it looked unkempt, jaded, trying to maintain a semblance of dignity like a fading dowager. There were no commissioners on pavement duty.

Sekka eased himself out of the car and searched his pockets for the fare. He hadn’t had time to change money so he offered American dollars. They disappeared into a pocket in the driver’s shirt with a flourish. Sekka eyed the man speculatively.

‘There might be more where that came from,’ he said.
Blank look.
Sekka shuffled some notes. The man’s face lit up and then his expression turned to one of suspicion.
Sekka smiled. ‘I’d like someone to drive me around. Show me the sights. A couple of hours, maybe.’
This time his offer was rewarded with a smile. ‘Ah, special tour? Sure, Mistah! You gotta deal. I drive you around the city. Tourist eh?’
‘Almost,’ Sekka said.
The driver grinned, showing a gap in his front teeth. ‘OK, I wait. You check in and leave bags.’
Sekka shook his head. ‘Not now, later.’ He looked at his watch. ‘I
need a couple of hours’ sleep. You be here at six o’clock.’

The driver looked more than a little hesitant. Sekka guessed that this was due to the man not wishing to drive around the city after dusk. He allayed the driver’s fears by handing over a substantial tip and the deal was struck.

Two fans in the lobby’s ceiling revolved reluctantly in a valiant effort to alleviate the sticky heat. Sekka had to ring the bell on the reception counter three times to get attention. Eventually a short, sweaty clerk waddled into view, looking faintly surprised that the hotel had a prospective guest.

To the right, in the lounge area, a couple of Middle Eastern looking men – Libyans, Sekka guessed - were gazing vacantly through the large windows on to a sun parched strip of stubble that had once been a neat garden. Now it was merely an apology.

Only a few years ago the lobby would have been filled with milling guests, signing in, ordering valet service, booking cars and airline tickets or organizing trips to the northern game parks. The manager then had been Austrian; Kurt Hildebrandt.

A splendid individual; courteous, efficient and generous in dealing with the whims of each guest; even he had conceded defeat and returned to his home city of Graz, a refugee from Mabato’s oppressive rule, leaving his hotel in the hands of Mabato’s lackeys who’d let the proud and comfortable haven crumble into decay. Without Hildebrandt’s extrovert personality the clientele stayed away in droves.

The receptionist handed over a key. Sekka smiled, picked up his bag and walked to the lift.

The sign above the shop read: Mendoza - Imports and Exports. Keel opened the door and walked into the cool interior. Above his head, twin blades revolved slowly, the noise of their turning almost masking the sound of the traffic in the street outside.

Bright native rugs and animal skins adorned the walls of the emporium along with the heads of gazelle, lion, dik-dik, buffalo and zebra; glass eyes gazed vacantly into space. Open fronted cabinets contained tribal masks, carved dolls, ivory and jade statues and onyx chess sets. Keel detected the whiff of incense as he walked between the tiers of Chinese and Persian rugs and intricately carved tables and screens. Another rack of shelves held
crocodile skin handbags and snakeskin belts coiled like the reptiles they had once been.

A bead curtain at the rear of the shop parted and a smiling Indian stepped out to greet him.

‘A pleasure to see you, sir. What can I do for you? You are looking for something in particular? Jade? Ivory? We have Masai jewellery…’

‘Just Mendoza,’ said Keel.

‘I am sorry, sir. The proprietor is away on business. However, I’m sure I can be of service. We have many fine rugs as you can see. A chess set, perhaps?’ The Indian moved towards one of the open cabinets.

‘What I want,’ Keel said, ‘is Mendoza.’

The Indian’s gaze flickered almost imperceptibly towards the bead curtain but his movement had not gone unnoticed.

‘Nice try,’ Keel continued. ‘Tell him Major Keel is here.’

The Indian hesitated.

‘Now,’ Keel said.

The Indian disappeared to be replaced two minutes later by the proprietor.

Carlos Mendoza was fifty years of age with a sallow complexion and black hair combed back from a widow’s peak. He had a heavy moustache and a gold tooth glinted in his mouth. He had well-manicured hands that were held outstretched to greet his visitor.

‘Major! It’s been a long time.’

‘Nearly eighteen months,’ Keel said.

‘Ah yes,’ Mendoza said. ‘That business in Namibia as I recall. It went well?’

‘Well enough.’

Mendoza digested the answer then said, ‘You caused my assistant some concern.’

‘Sorry about that,’ Keel said. ‘But he was being unhelpful.’

‘He was merely protecting my interests.’ Mendoza smiled, showing a lot of teeth and a speck of gold.

‘Well, you can’t be too careful I suppose, especially in your line of work.’

A light flashed in the brown eyes. ‘So, what can I do for you, my friend?’

‘In private,’ Keel said.
‘As you wish.’
Mendoza led the way into the back of the shop to a small office that held a desk and two chairs and the Indian assistant. Mendoza dismissed the latter and closed the door.
‘I’m on a contract,’ Keel said. ‘A team of four. I need equipment and that includes transport.’
‘I see, and what makes you think I’m still involved in that side line? I have a very profitable enterprise here. I’m a respectable businessman.’
Keel looked at him. ‘And I’m the Emperor of China. Come on, Carlos. If you’d retired, I’d have heard about it. Your name’s still in most of the merc recruiters’ address books. Six months ago you were acting as arms broker for the FAN rebels in Chad. You also supplied a consignment of Russian grenade launchers, automatic rifles and anti-personnel mines to the Tanzanian Freedom Front via your agent in Dar es Salaam. And I presume you’re still selling arms to the Mozambique guerrillas through the import-export agency in Sofala.’
Keel knew that the arms arrived in Dar es Salaam on board Russian freighters from where they were transported by air to Mendoza’s agents.
‘Anything else you want to know, Carlos?’
The tubby Portuguese was silent for several seconds then he said, ‘I see you are as well informed as ever.’
‘In my line of work it pays to be.’
Mendoza nodded. ‘So, what do you require?’
‘Machine pistols, hand guns, spare ammunition, pangas, plastique with timers and detonators. I’ll need packs and shoulder holsters for the hand guns. I want man stoppers. Brownings. Also combat clothing.’
‘Very well. You mentioned transport.’
‘A light aircraft with pilot, big enough to carry five passengers.’
Mendoza raised an eyebrow. ‘When do you want all this?’
‘Within twenty-four hours. Thirty-six at the outside.’
‘That might not be easy. You have not given me much time. The weapons present no problem but the aircraft may take a little longer to arrange.’
‘We don’t have the time,’ Keel said. ‘Who’s in town?’
A shrug. ‘Rolf Stein left for Maputo yesterday. Saul Lafitte is on charter service in the copper belt in Zambia.’
‘No one else?’
Mendoza paused. ‘There is Lassiter.’
‘Lassiter? I thought Lassiter was airlifting supplies to the FNLA?’
Mendoza shook his head. ‘Lassiter is in Nairobi though I have had no contact. That one always was a loner.’
‘Maybe I can do some digging,’ Keel said. ‘See if you can get hold of Stein, though, just in case. Tell him there’ll be a large bonus.’
‘As you wish. You have not told me where you wish to be taken.’
‘I was saving that until last. We’ll want dropping at the mission station at Masambabule.’
Mendoza jumped as if he’d been shot. ‘But that is in Lugamba!’
‘Right first time.’
‘I see,’ Mendoza replied thoughtfully.
‘No you don’t but don’t lose any sleep over it. Get the stuff ready and I’ll let you know if I get hold of Lassiter. We’ll take it from there.’
‘Where can I reach you?’
‘The Intercontinental.’
Mendoza nodded. ‘I will send word.’
‘I’ll count on it.’
The Portuguese blinked. ‘There is one other thing. I recall hearing that Lassiter was seen at Jack Carver’s establishment a few nights ago.’
‘The gaming club?’ Keel looked surprised.
Mendoza said unhappily, ‘I heard there was a scene. Your friend got into a big game and lost some money.’
‘So, maybe some cash would come in useful. See if you can find out where Lassiter’s staying.’
‘I will do what I can.’

Back at the hotel, Keel checked with the reception desk to see if any messages had been left though he thought it unlikely that Cameron would have got in touch so soon. They had been in Nairobi less than a day. There was no message.

He took his room key. As a seasoned air traveller he’d managed to catnap on the plane but he still felt hot and sticky and in need of a shower and a beer.

He was emerging from the shower and reaching for a towel when he heard the knock on the door. He tensed immediately. ‘Who is it?’

The voice was indistinct but he caught the words ‘message for Mr Keel’ and the hair on his nape tingled. Word from Cameron, sooner than
expected. He wrapped the towel around his waist.

He opened the door and the gun was jammed against his stomach, forcing him back into the room. Two men, black-skinned, tall and well built. One in a cream suit, the other in a light tan jacket and brown slacks. Fit, confident, dangerous. The muzzle of the automatic moved up his chest. Keel held his arms away from his body. The weapon was held by Cream Suit. The other visitor closed the door.

‘No fuss, Major.’ The gunman stepped away, keeping the weapon trained on Keel’s belly. ‘Get dressed.’

Keel eyed them carefully. Not a robbery or a mugging. And they’d used his old rank. So who were they?

Standing in the middle of the room wrapped in two square yards of damp towelling wasn’t going to get him any answers. Where the hell were Roan and Schiller? Sleeping, at a guess. No bail out there and he couldn’t take two of them. Not in a bloody towel he couldn’t.

‘Please, get dressed,’ Cream Suit said. His voice was educated, indicating public school and morning prayers. These were not your ordinary heavies.

Keel pulled a shirt from the hanger in the wardrobe and underwear from his holdall. During his dressing Cream Suit’s gaze and the mouth of the gun barrel never wavered.

Keel stood dressed and waiting. Now he felt slightly less vulnerable but they still had the upper hand. For the time being.

‘We will leave quietly. Do not attempt anything. You will not be harmed if you obey my instructions. When we reach the lobby simply hand in your key, walk out of the hotel and get into the white Mercedes parked outside.’

It sounded straightforward. Maybe they’d be lulled. Maybe he could take them in the corridor or the lift. And maybe he wouldn’t because he was curious, wanting to know what they wanted and, more importantly, who they were working for.

The automatic remained hidden during the trip in the lift and the walk through the lobby to the street where the 450SEL waited at the kerb. The driver turned his eyes towards the three men as they left the hotel.

Cream Suit sat in the back with Keel. Tan Jacket joined the driver.

They drove north through the suburbs to where the road curved in a steady gradient through the private estates. Then they turned off.
Tall iron gates blocked their path. On either side, a high, white, stone wall retreated into the foliage. The driver pressed the horn and two men appeared from a gate box. They studied the car through the bars of the gate. Over the driver’s shoulder Keel saw that they cradled Stechkin machine pistols.

The gates swung open and the Mercedes slid through.

The house lay half a mile along the track. It was a two storied villa, framed by bright oleanders and scarlet flamboya trees. They were met by a stocky African in a retainer’s uniform: white jacket and black trousers. He led the way into the house, Cream Suit and Tan Jacket flanking Keel.

The interior was light and cool with rush matting on the floor and cane furniture dotted around the hall. Keel was escorted to the rear of the house into a large comfortable drawing room with French windows opening on to a veranda from which steps led down to a paved terrace and swimming pool. Beyond the pool a vast lawn stretched to where the boundary wall weaved through the edge of the bush. One hundred yards away, to the left, a man was patrolling the perimeter, a sleek Doberman at his heels. He wore a machine pistol over his shoulder.

They went down to the terrace. White stucco tables and chairs sat under large parasols. Sun loungers faced the pool. There was a portable bar and a telephone stood on one of the tables.

A middle-aged black man was sitting under one of the parasols. He was dressed in a dark blue shirt and matching slacks. The clothes were cut very formally and looked almost like a uniform. A cane handled fly whisk lay on the table within easy reach. The man’s face broke into a smile of welcome as he rose to his feet.

‘Major Keel, my dear fellow. Welcome. It is a pleasure to see you again.’

Standing, the speaker was of medium height with deep set eyes under a high forehead, giving an intelligent cast to his features. A small goatee beard enhanced the effect so that the overall description might have fitted a university professor.

‘Good afternoon, Mister President,’ Keel said, shaking hands. ‘I wondered what had become of you.’

For a man living in political exile, Hamilton Kemba appeared to be coping with the ignominy remarkably well. Keel said so.

Kemba shrugged and waved an arm to encompass his surroundings.
‘Trappings. The fact that I have a roof over my head is due entirely to the President of Kenya’s benevolence and I would venture to suggest that his generosity is bounded only by political expediency. In other words, Major, my presence is politely tolerated. However, I admit the roof is a comfortable one.’

‘I thought you were living in Tanzania,’ Keel said.

Kemba nodded. ‘For a while. However, poor Julius. Certain pressures were brought to bear. He became embarrassed. He made approaches to the Kenyan Government on my behalf. I shall be eternally grateful of course. President Nai took me under his wing and you find me thus. But I am forgetting my manners. Allow me to offer you some refreshment.’ He snapped a finger and Tan Jacket moved to the bar.

‘Vodka with fresh lime juice,’ Keel directed. ‘Lots of ice.’

He looked westward. The sun was low over the horizon and sinking fast. The sky was the colour of burnished copper.

‘Let us walk.’ Kemba took his arm. ‘Let us view my domain and discuss matters.’

They walked along the edge of the pool. The water was still; midnight blue flecked with silver.

Keel watched the far-off guard and Doberman disappear around the bottom end of the lawn past the edge of the house. ‘You seem well protected, sir.’

‘Adequate, I would say. Enough to deter an enthusiastic amateur but hardly a threat to a determined group.’

‘Is that likely?’

‘Anything is possible. There are those who would like to see me dead.’

‘Like Mabato, for instance?’

Kemba smiled. ‘But of course. He above all others.’

‘Which pre-supposes he considers you a threat. Are you?’

‘I am an exile from my own country. I want Lugamba back. I want to wrest it from the hands of that madman. Mabato has murdered over a quarter of a million of my countrymen. He has taken Lugamba to the edge of the abyss. He must be stopped.’

‘And you’re the man to do it? You tried before and failed.’

‘You’re referring to the invasion? Not the most professional enterprise, I will admit.’
‘You can say that again. It was a disaster. Your men were badly trained and poorly led. They never stood a chance.’

‘They would have succeeded if you had accepted the contract I offered,’ Kemba pointed out.

‘No they wouldn’t. They were the wrong calibre. Inept and ill equipped. All the training in the world wouldn’t have forged them into the crack fighting unit that was required. I wouldn’t have accepted the contract if you’d trebled the bounty. I remember I told you that at the time.’

‘And I appreciated your candour, as I recall.’

‘A pity you didn’t act on it.’

Kemba made a face. ‘It is enough that I have the deaths of a thousand men on my conscience without you having to remind me of the fact.’

They had reached the perimeter track and had turned to follow the curve of the boundary wall. Back at the pool, Kemba’s bodyguards viewed their progress through watchful eyes.

‘So, why don’t you get to the point,’ Keel said. ‘You didn’t get your goons to drag me here to talk over old times.’

‘Of course not. Though in speaking of old times, I’ve been following your career with some interest since last we met.’

‘I think I’m flattered.’ He remembered he’d said that to Cameron in Amsterdam.

Kemba seemed unconcerned at the slight. ‘Your contracts as a mercenary have been remarkably varied. Your powers of survival are impressive.’

‘Let’s not discount luck,’ Keel said.

Stillness lay in the air. From over the wall creatures of the night twittered, croaked and rustled.

‘You are going into Lugamba, Major. I would like to know the reason why.’

So there it was.

‘You’ve talked with Mendoza.’

An inclination of the head.

Mendoza has a big mouth, thought Keel. Aloud, he said, ‘No deal.’

‘Lugamba is my country. I am entitled…’

‘No,’ Keel said. ‘You’re not. You’re entitled to damn all. Your claim on Lugamba was severed when you were ousted. Mabato, maniac though he may be, controls the country now. Like it or not, that’s a fact.’
They were now close enough to the terrace for Keel’s voice to have carried to the ears of Kemba’s men. They tensed but relaxed at a signal from the deposed ruler.

‘Have you accepted a contract? Is that it?’
‘Didn’t Mendoza tell you?’
‘He admitted only that he was supplying you with equipment.’
‘This is something between me and the client.’

Kemba halted. He turned ‘I will be frank with you, Major. I have already stated that I want Lugamba back. If I can gain an advantage through someone else’s efforts I will do so. Tell me your contract.’

Keel regarded Kemba calmly.
‘I intend to try and rescue David Holt.’
‘That is all?’ Kemba looked surprised.
‘Isn’t it enough?’
‘It is not what I expected.’
‘You thought I might be leading another invasion force?’
‘Something like that,’ Kemba admitted, looking bemused.
‘Sorry to disappoint you.’

They walked back to the terrace. Tan Jacket approached with Keel’s vodka. Kemba accepted iced tonic water. He stared down at the water in the pool. His eyes seemed to plumb its depths. ‘I have a proposition for you.’
‘I don’t think I’m going to like it much.’
‘Then humour me, Major.’

It was now dark. Without warning the lawn was bathed in light as a time switch activated the security screen in the grounds. Keel realized that anyone in the house would have a clear field of fire right up to the perimeter wall.

Kemba said, ‘I will pay you fifty thousand American dollars or the equivalent in any currency you care to name if you undertake to assassinate Mabato while you are there.’

Keel put his glass on the table. ‘No.’
‘Why not?’
‘I’m a soldier, not a professional assassin.’
‘If it is money, I…’
‘The money has nothing to do with it. The offer is very generous.’
‘Then why?’
‘I’ve told you. Furthermore, I’ve already accepted one contract: to
lift David Holt. That’s my sole aim. I will not accept another that may jeopardize the success of the prime objective. My client expects one hundred per cent dedication and he’ll get it.’

Kemba gazed at him. Finally, he nodded. ‘Very well. It appears that once again I must accept your candour. I thank you at least for listening. I had hoped we might come to some agreement.’

Keel said, ‘I’m sorry, sir.’

Kemba smiled ruefully. ‘So am I. But who knows? Perhaps next time?’

‘Perhaps,’ Keel agreed.

Kemba held out his hand suddenly. ‘I wish you luck in your venture. My men will see you return safely to your hotel.’

They shook hands. Keel put down his glass and turned towards the house, escorted by Kemba’s bodyguards. Kemba watched him depart, a half smile on his lips as though he harboured a secret. He took a quiet sip of tonic and waited.

The man moved in silence through the big windows, across the veranda and down the steps. A sixth sense made Kemba swing around and he stared at the figure that blocked the light from the drawing room.

‘You move like a leopard in the night, Qetuka,’ Kemba said.

The man moved closer. ‘Who was he?’

‘A soldier of fortune. A gun for hire. He was under the mistaken impression that I could offer him employment.’ In a sharper tone, Kemba said, ‘He did not see you?’

The man shook his head.

Hamilton Kemba studied the individual before him.

Tall and slim, the Negro’s head was shaven and his clear brown eyes regarded Kemba with something close to arrogance; the look of a man supremely confident in his own ability. Qetuka was a Zulu. He was also an assassin.

Qetuka’s great grandfather had been an inDuna with the iSangqu regiment – The White Tails - and had fought with the impis at Isandhlwana and Rorke’s Drift. The blood of the warrior flowed through his veins.

‘Sit.’ Kemba indicated a seat.

The Zulu sat facing the open windows.

‘You know why you are here,’ Kemba said.

‘I received word that you had a contract for me.’
‘Yes and it is rather special.’
‘All my contracts are special,’ Qetuka said. ‘Whom do you wish me to kill?’

‘Solomon Mabato.’
There was no change of expression as the Zulu said, ‘Very well. My fee will be one hundred thousand American dollars.’
Kemba pursed his lips. ‘A substantial amount.’
‘It is my usual fee. I do not give discounts to deposed heads of state nor do I haggle like a vendor in a market place.’
‘I will pay the amount you ask for. Cash?’
‘Naturally.’
Kemba chuckled. It sounded like small bones cracking. ‘I need not have asked. Half now, half when the job is completed. Agreed?’
‘Agreed.’
‘Excellent. Tell me, how do you propose to carry out the assassination?’

The Zulu rose to his feet, the unwinding smooth and unhurried, like a serpent uncoiling. ‘That is not your concern. You are paying me a great deal of money for my services. Have no fear. The contract will be accomplished. Solomon Mabato will be dead within the week.’

Kemba disguised his impatience. ‘So be it. You must forgive my exuberance. I’ve waited a long time. The first instalment will await your collection in the morning. You will also be given the name of someone who is close to Mabato. Someone whose help could be of use to you.’

‘Very well,’ Qetuka replied, his voice neutral. ‘If there is nothing further ..?’

‘No,’ Kemba said. ‘That is all.’

Kemba was alone, standing by the open windows. A soft breeze carried the scent of jasmine along the veranda.

He was thinking about his conversation with Keel. His ploy of trying to undercut Qetuka’s fee by using the mercenary had failed. A pity. The assassination would still cost him one hundred thousand. But Kemba bad lost nothing in making the approach. Keel might well have accepted the secondary contract. Kemba, however, hadn’t allowed for the mercenary having his own particular code of ethics.
Footsteps on the terrace: the guard with the Doberman on a leash. The guard carried the Stechkin like a baby. The dog eyed Kemba through bright alert eyes, muzzle twitching as it caught his scent.

The man acknowledged Kemba’s greeting with a brief nod and pulled the dog to heel before disappearing into the shadows. Kemba was struck with the observation that the Doberman’s unblinking gaze reminded him of Qetuka’s stone cold features and, despite the warm breeze against his cheek, he felt a chill between his shoulder blades. Involuntarily he shivered and retreated into the villa.
The receptionist handed Keel his key and a message. It was from Mendoza. He’d traced Lassiter.

Roan opened his door at Keel’s first knock. The American’s hair was wet, evidence that he’d been under the shower.

‘Jesus! Where the hell have you been? Paul and I were going to call out the troops. The receptionist said you’d left with a couple of guys. What gives?’ He hauled Keel into the room.

Schiller lay on the bed, hands behind his head, an unlit cheroot stuck between his lips. When Keel entered the German swung his feet to the floor and removed the cheroot from his mouth. ‘You had us worried.’

‘I wasn’t too thrilled myself,’ Keel said.

‘So, where’ve you been for the last three hours?’

‘I went to see Mendoza. We need weapons and an airlift.’

‘Right. So you saw Mendoza and everything’s hunky dory. So, who were the two goons who picked you up when you got back?’ Roan searched Keel’s face closely. ‘Thomas?’

‘Mendoza passed word to Hamilton Kemba that I wanted dropping into Lugamba. Kemba sent two of his boys to escort me to his redoubt. He had a proposition. A profitable supplement to our contract, so to speak.’

‘Kemba? That bastard, Mendoza! I knew he was a liability. What did Kemba want?’ Roan towelled his hair furiously.

‘He wants Mabato dead. He offered fifty thousand dollars for us hit the fat slob.’

Roan stopped towelling.

‘I turned him down before you ask.’

‘You should have raised the ante.’ Roan saw the look on Keel’s face. ‘OK, bad joke. We’ve done enough jobs together for me to know that we never take on secondary contracts.’ The American’s brow furrowed. ‘What are the chances that Mendoza’s spread the word a wee bit further afield? Can’t say as I’ve ever trusted him that much.’

Keel said, ‘I doubt he’s sold us out. He’s the main broker for
weapons and mercenary recruitment in East Africa. Kemba wants Lugamba back and anyone in his position would keep someone like Mendoza on a retainer. He’d be interested in any contract that would pose a threat to Mabato and so give him a toe hold again. And Kemba knows me, don’t forget. It was through Mendoza that he tried to recruit me the last time.’

‘Yeah,’ Roan answered, ‘and turning him down was the wisest thing you ever did. If you hadn’t, your bones would be fertilizer in a Lugamban cane field by now.’

Keel frowned.
‘Something on your mind?’ Schiller asked.
‘He didn’t try hard enough,’ Keel said, brushing a hand over his cropped hair. ‘I wonder why?’
‘Say again?’ Roan tossed his towel aside.
‘Nothing I can put my finger on but he didn’t push it when I said no. It was almost as if he expected me to refuse but he tried anyway. Hell, maybe I’m imagining it.’

Schiller cut into his thoughts. ‘What about Mendoza? Can he supply what we need?’
‘No problem. He was stuck for a pilot as Stein and Lafitte are out of town but he’s come up with an old friend of ours.’
‘Who’s that?’ Schiller asked.
‘Lassiter.’
‘Oh brother,’ Roan said.
‘I heard Lassiter was in Angola.’ Schiller’s brow furrowed.
‘Airlifting, medical supplies to the FNLA.’
‘I heard the same story.’ Keel nodded.
‘The two of you go back aways,’ Roan remarked.
‘Biafra. Lassiter was airlifting casualties from the front line to the field hospitals.’
‘Looks like we’ve got ourselves a pilot, then,’ Roan announced happily.
‘Maybe. Mendoza didn’t make a deal. He’s left that to me. All he’s done is tell me where Lassiter is. That drink’ll have to wait. I’m off to the airfield now. I’ll catch you later.’

‘You want to watch it, Thomas. For a man of your age, all this gadding about is likely to lead to a coronary.’
‘Love you too, Gramps.’
‘Wise-ass,’ Roan said, and grinned.
‘Don’t wait up,’ Keel said. ‘This may take a while.’

The lights were on in the maintenance hangar. The red and white Piper Chieftain crouched in the glare like an anaesthetized patient in an operating theatre, awaiting the arrival of the surgeon. The hangar doors stood ajar, casting a thick beam of light on to the tarmac outside.

In the lee of the building sat a selection of aircraft: Cessnas, Beavers, Commanders and a brace of sleek Lear jets; most of them property of the Intercorp Oil Company.

Inside, a few feet away from the Chieftain’s fin, Lassiter was bent over a tool-cluttered work bench, jaw clamped in concentration. A ruptured fuel line lay across the bench like a dead snake.

Lassiter was naked under a one piece overall that had, eons ago, been snow white. Now, it bore the smears and stains of years of do-it-yourself aircraft maintenance while the arms and legs were as frayed as a cowpoke’s chaps. The pilot’s feet were encased in a scruffy pair of Dunlop Green Flash that looked as though they’d splashed through a million puddles.

Lassiter didn’t hear the stealthy footsteps on the tarmac nor the soft tread of rubber soled shoes as the two men slipped through the open doors.

The first the pilot knew about their presence was when Ferris said casually, ‘Well, now, and aren’t we the complete mechanic?’

Lassiter whipped around, elbow dislodging a heavy spanner. It clattered noisily to the floor, the sound echoing up into the dark corners of the hangar roof.

Ferris, a Brit, tall and thin, almost languid in his movements with a face topped by a tumble of blond curls, broke into a smile of delight at the expression on Lassiter’s face. The second man’s name was Jon Jon. He was a good foot shorter than Ferris. Black, broad, bull-necked and standing squarely on his feet, he eyed the pilot like an expectant mastiff, awaiting the command to attack.

‘What the hell do you want?’ Lassiter addressed Ferris.

Ferris grinned. ‘Mister Carver sent us. He wants the money you owe him.’

‘Mister Carver will have to bloody well wait. I told him that three days ago.’
‘Well, that’s the problem you see,’ Ferris said, ‘because he wants his money now.’

‘What? Are you hard of hearing? I don’t carry that sort of loose change around with me for Christ’s sake! Not six thousand dollars!’

‘Seven thousand,’ Ferris said, smiling pleasantly. ‘Don’t forget the interest.’

‘A thousand dollars in three days! What sort of rate is that?’

‘Very reasonable if you ask me,’ Ferris replied evenly. ‘I mean, Mister Carver did take you at your word when you left the club the other evening. You did say you’d have the money in three days. Strikes me, Mister Carver was more than generous in allowing you to leave his establishment owing him six thousand dollars in the first place. The point being that it is now a few hours away from midnight of the third day and the account still hasn’t been settled. Mister Carver, as you can imagine, is none too happy with this state of affairs.’

‘So, he sent you and Rover there to persuade me to settle up?’

A throaty growl came from Jon Jon’s mouth as he waddled forward. Ferris held out his arm like a policeman on point duty and Jon Jon shuffled to a halt.

‘I bet he can roll over and fetch sticks as well,’ Lassiter said, eyeing the African speculatively.

‘He’s very obedient,’ Ferris agreed. ‘I only have to snap my fingers.’

‘And he’ll snap mine. Yes, I get it.’ Lassiter sighed resignedly. ‘Look, Ferris, I don’t have the money here. Be sensible. I wired my bank for the cash the morning after I left the club, but for some reason it hasn’t arrived. That’s hardly my fault. Blame the bank. They cocked up the bloody transfer, not me.’

Ferris shook his head sadly. ‘Sorry, old thing, but Mister Carver doesn’t see it like that. He feels he’s given you more than ample time to settle up.’

Lassiter held out a hand in a plea. ‘Well, couldn’t you put in a word for me?’

Ferris smiled regretfully. ‘I’m afraid not. That’d be more than my life’s worth.’

‘Sod you, then,’ Lassiter said.

Jon Jon gobbled at the raised voice.

‘I’m going to have difficulty restraining him,’ Ferris said.
‘What are you going to do? Break my legs?’

Ferris’s eyebrows rose. ‘Good heavens, no. If I do that, old thing, you won’t be able to toddle off to the bank to collect Mister Carver’s money now, will you?’

‘What then?’

‘Mister Carver suggested that I might take something as surety until you paid him back.’

‘Really? And what had he in mind? My left arm?’

‘Only as a last resort,’ Ferris said. ‘He was thinking more along the lines of that.’ Ferris pointed a finger at the Chieftain.

‘What? Not bloody likely! That bird’s worth a hell of a lot more than a piddling six thousand dollars!’

‘Seven thousand,’ Ferris said. ‘You’re forgetting the interest.

‘Screw the interest! You’ll take that plane over my dead body.’

‘Don’t tempt me,’ Ferris said calmly.

‘For Christ’s sake!’ Lassiter snapped. ‘The money’s bound to be in the bank tomorrow.’

Ferris shook his head. ‘Thing is, it’s not up to me. It’s Mister Carver. Come on, look, all we do is take the keys, registration papers, log book and certificates. We hang on to those and hand them back when you hand over the seven thousand dollars. In fact, looking at my watch I see that it’s close to midnight, and you know what that means, don’t you?’

‘I give up. You turn into a pumpkin?’

‘Wrong. The seven thousand dollars turns into eight thousand dollars. On account of it’ll mean another day’s interest, you see.’ There was a gurgle of glee at this.

‘You’re off your bloody trolley.’

‘Oh, and I forgot one other thing,’ Ferris went on. ‘If you don’t pay the money in seven days, we keep the aircraft - for good. And don’t say over your dead body because that’s also part of the arrangement. Now, keys and documents, old thing, if you please or I shall be forced to unleash my accomplice.’

Lassiter swung to the work bench and grabbed the first heavy tool that came to hand: a foot long monkey wrench. The pilot held the wrench double-handed and assumed a defensive stance.

‘One move towards me or my aircraft, you bloody fairy, and I’ll lay you out.’
Ferris looked pained. ‘Well, there’s no need to resort to personal abuse.’
‘I’ll show you personal abuse. That dwarf takes another step and I’ll brain him with this.’

Jon Jon, hands hanging by his sides, crabbed to his left. He was grunting to himself. Ferris moved nonchalantly to the right. Lassiter, back to the bench, gripped the wrench in sweaty palms and eyed them warily.

Jon Jon, inevitably, was the first to make a move. Uttering a ferocious squeal, he darted in at a bewildering speed. Lassiter, tensed and half expecting it, was still caught napping. Twisting frantically, the pilot scythed the wrench towards Jon Jon’s skull. If the blow had connected, Jon Jon’s head would have caved in like an egg shell. As it was, caught off balance at the last moment, Lassiter’s swing missed its mark. The wrench glanced off Jon Jon’s shoulder, drawing a roar of anger from the squat attacker.

Ferris chuckled. ‘Now you’ve really annoyed him. Why don’t you just take the easy way out and hand over the keys? That way, nobody will get hurt.’

He approached, arms spread, beseeching. His hand became a blur as he aimed a blow to Lassiter’s head. The wrench curved to connect again and Jon Jon, seeing a gap in the defences, sprang forward. One ham-sized mit grabbed Lassiter’s wrist and the other clamped around the back of the pilot’s neck. Ferris followed through. Ramming his knee between Lassiter’s legs, he reached for the struggling pilot’s other arm and twisted. The wrench bounced off Ferris’s leg and dropped to the floor. Ferris cursed and slammed the back of his free hand against Lassiter’s cheek.

The pilot’s head jerked away. Jon Jon, hand still gripping like a vice, forced Lassiter down until the pilot was kneeling on the hangar’s cement floor. Ferris, confident in Jon Jon’s hold, released his grip and stepped away. He smoothed a hand through his blond curls. He looked more than a little flustered.

Despite the ungainly position, Lassiter, in a last ditch effort, thumped a fist towards Ferris’s stomach. The latter sidestepped and then swung his arm back for the strike.

‘NO!’
The voice cut through the air like a whip.
Ferris spun like a top in the direction of the sound.
Keel stood feet apart, left foot slightly forward.
Jon Jon was shaking Lassiter like a kitten.

‘Tell him to let go.’ Keel’s demand was pitched low.

‘Whoever you are, old thing,’ Ferris said, ‘I suggest you take off. Otherwise you might get hurt.’

‘I doubt that,’ Keel said. ‘Now, I’ve told you once. Tell your man to let go.’

Keel was two yards from Ferris. Ferris, smiling, said, ‘Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you,’ and moved forward.

Keel took half a pace to the side. He seemed to sway momentarily and then he pivoted. Ferris didn’t think it possible that anyone could move that fast. He was still thinking that when Keel’s boot struck him an inch under his ribcage, thumping him backwards in a tottering stagger, breath whooshing out like gas from a cylinder. By the time his backside hit the floor, Keel was facing Jon Jon. He wasn’t even breathing hard. He stood relaxed…waiting.

The African looked puzzled but he hung on to Lassiter. The pilot was still struggling and for Jon Jon it was like grasping a handful of minnows. Muttering a snarl of annoyance, he thought that of the two, Keel undoubtedly held the most threat. Flinging the pilot aside, he lumbered towards his target. Lassiter, released from the vice, fell against the leg of the work bench, forehead taking a glancing blow. A trickle of blood emerged from the cut.

Keel waited.

Which was when Lassiter smashed the wrench down onto Jon Jon’s foot. It was almost comical the way Jon Jon started hopping around. But Lassiter hadn’t finished. The wrench swung again and Jon Jon, clutching his genitals, hit the ground in a bubbling, whimpering heap.

Keel waited.

Lassiter sat back against the work bench allowing Keel to step in and retrieve the tool. He threw it on to the bench and grasped Lassiter’s shoulders. Behind him, Ferris was rising groggily to his feet, his face ashen.

Keel jerked his head at the twitching Jon Jon. ‘Get him out of here.’

Ferris, one hand clutching his stomach, caught Jon Jon under one arm and tried to haul him to his feet. Jon Jon retched noisily.

Lassiter touched the head cut with tentative fingers. Ferris had resorted to half dragging half carrying Jon Jon across the floor to the open doors. Keel watched them. Then he turned and crouched over the pilot. ‘You okay?’

The pilot’s eyes were glazed. Someone was rasping out questions.
Through the blur a face shimmered into view. Stern features, tanned, steel grey hair, ice blue eyes.

The dazed pilot blinked and stared.
Keel grinned. ‘Welcome back. You had me worried for a moment.’
‘Oh, hell!’ Kate Lassiter said. ‘Keel. That’s all I bloody need!’

‘Damn it, you bastard! That bloody stings!’

They were in the Chieftain. Keel was administering iodine from the aircraft’s first aid kit to the cut on Kate Lassiter’s forehead. He was dabbing the antiseptic on with a ball of cotton wool.
‘Keep still!’ Keel ordered.
Kate Lassiter’s green eyes regarded Keel with wry amusement.
‘Anyone ever told you that you’ve a lousy bedside manner?’
He grinned. ‘You never complained before.’
Her eyes flashed. ‘That’s because I was young and foolish.’
He was silent for a few moments as he applied a strip of band aid to cover the cut. ‘You’ll live. I’d better take a look at the bench while I’m here, though. You gave it a nasty knock.’
‘Screw you, too.’
Keel replaced the first aid kit in its locker and gazed intently at her.
Kate Lassiter was beautiful. Of that there was no doubt. Tall and statuesque, her face was equally striking. High cheekbones, straight nose and a generous mouth. Her eyes, set under fine brows, were of emerald intensity. The thick raven hair that usually framed her face in an unruly tumble was drawn back and held at the nape of her neck and served only to emphasize her classic features.

Despite her obvious attractions, few men had penetrated her outer defences. Many of them, if truth be told, were overawed by her looks as well as her intelligence and fierce independence. There had been relationships, usually just physical and a means of assuaging a need, but with two men it had been different: Thomas Keel and, before that, her late husband.

Sam Lassiter had been Chief Warden in the big National Game Reserve in Tanzania; a rock of a man with a heart as big as the country he controlled. Kate was twenty when they met. Sam was twelve years older. They had known each other only ten days but by that time Kate was sure this was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. They were married
in a registry office in Mombasa and their honeymoon was a month long stay on the reserve. From Sam, Kate contracted the disease: a deep love of Africa; the country, the people and the wild animals. She also discovered another love: flying.

When Sam was killed, Kate’s life was shattered.

Lassiter had been after the band of ivory poachers for months. They had been decimating the herds. Word came that a gang of half a dozen men had been spotted carving up an old tusker in an isolated corner of the reserve. Maintaining radio contact with his native rangers on the ground, Lassiter had flown to the area in his Auster, planning to direct the rangers to the scene and grab the poachers red-handed with their haul of ivory.

Sam had been too busy concentrating on his search of the terrain below his wings to see the big Martial eagle as it spiralled up towards him on a thermal. The eagle hadn’t known too much about the collision either. The huge bird slammed into the propeller with the force of an exploding grenade, splattering the windshield with blood and feathers. The single Lycoming, choked with the bird’s mangled remains, seized up and the plane slammed into the side of a djonga, exploding on impact. Lassiter had never stood a chance.

When news of the crash reached Kate it took no time at all for her to commandeer one of the reserve’s other aircraft and fly north to continue the hunt for the poachers.

The rangers on the ground had been drawn to the poachers’ camp by the sight of Kate Lassiter’s plane dive bombing the gang like a Stuka. The poachers had virtually run into the waiting arms of the rangers for safety; anything to get away from the maniac above them.

Offered repatriation to England, Kate refused.

With the insurance money she invested in a second hand Cessna and chartered herself out. It was while she was in Blantyre, awaiting a consignment of medical supplies destined for the mission hospital at Lake Chiuta, that she met Keel.

Keel, on leave from the fighting in Biafra, had spent a fortnight with Kate. It had been a wild, unrelenting affair, both needing the other’s companionship and love with an urgency neither of them had expected. It had been a time for Keel to cleanse himself of the horrors of the war and the first chance Kate Lassiter had of finding the outlet for her pent up emotions and stress caused by Sam’s death.
Keel had returned to complete his contract, never expecting to see Kate again. It had been a brief interlude, nothing more. Until Kate and her aircraft had turned up at the airfield at Uli with drugs, blankets and six cases of Black and White. Kate was no camp follower, Keel knew that. The job had brought her to the front line, not her longing for the grey mercenary. At least that’s what Kate tried to tell herself. Inevitably, they spent time together, brief encounters in between Keel’s hit-and-run missions behind rebel lines and Kate’s mercy flights, ferrying drugs and wounded back and forth from base hospital to field medical units. She was the only woman pilot in the Federal forces and the men treated her as an equal. They also viewed her as Keel’s woman, and therefore untouchable.

Following the surrender of Ojukwu and prior to his gold running activities, Keel returned to Europe. He made no attempt to persuade Kate to go with him. He knew she wouldn’t leave Africa. In a way Keel felt certain she had been grateful that he hadn’t asked and thus hadn’t needed to make a decision.

Keel’s contracts had taken him to many places since then. He’d returned to Africa on several occasions - the jobs in Rhodesia, Chad and Namibia as well as the contract offered by Hamilton Kamba to lead a task force into Lugamba. On every contract he’d spent time with Kate. She hadn’t changed. Still totally self-reliant, cool, sophisticated, even more beautiful and always desirable.

A month prior to his bodyguard contract with the arms buying sheik, he’d heard that Lassiter had been involved in the on-going Angolan conflict, flying out stretcher cases from Sao Salvador to Kinshasa in an old Fokker Friendship.

‘Earth calling Keel,’ Kate Lassiter said.
He jerked his thoughts back to the present. ‘Sorry, miles away.’
‘I could see that.’ She smiled.
He frowned. ‘So what did Goldilocks want?’
Kate loosened her hair and combed a slender hand through the dark waves. Keel found the gesture faintly sensual. She didn’t notice.
‘I owe Jack Carver money. A gaming debt.’
‘How much?’
She told him and Keel winced.
‘Hell, I can pay it back. I’ve wired my bank for the dough but the stupid bastards haven’t sent it through.’
‘I didn’t know you gambled.’

She grinned wryly. ‘I don’t, normally. But I’ve just finished a bitch of a job and decided, unwise as it turned out, to let my hair down. Unfortunately, I chose Carver’s club to do it in. I should have known better, damn it!’

‘Carver’s a roach,’ Keel said. ‘Always has been; always will be. From the days he used to hawk the three card trick round the Mombasa waterfront he hasn’t missed an opportunity to screw something out of someone.’

‘He might be a grade-A flim-flam man but his club’s legit. Private and very selective. His patrons include government ministers and the Police Commissioner. Needless to say, the authorities turn a blind eye to any indiscretions. He’s almost a pillar of society, for God’s sake.’

Kate Lassiter frowned then said, ‘I know that look. You’re plotting something, which brings to my next question. What the hell are you doing here? I don’t see you for eighteen months and then you pop up out of nowhere. What’s going on?’

She rested her palm on his cheek, emerald eyes gazing softly into his. Keel returned her look. ‘I came with a job offer, Kate. I need a pilot.’

‘And here was I hoping it might have been for my looks.’ The flippant remark didn’t disguise the edge to her voice.

‘Low blow,’ Keel said.

Kate smiled. She arose, stroked his shoulder briefly as she moved to the rear of the cabin. A casual gesture but Keel knew it was her way of letting him know she was pleased to see him.

‘I’ve a bottle of Black Label here somewhere.’ There was a break in her voice. So low, Keel almost missed it. She had her back to him, crouched in front of one of the aft lockers. He moved towards her so silently that she was unaware of his closeness until she turned with the half empty bottle and found herself against him. Keel held her shoulders. He could feel her body shaking. Her face lifted to his. The green eyes were moist.

‘Damn it! You always did have the infuriating knack of making me feel inadequate.’

A tear glistened and trickled slowly down her smooth cheek. ‘I’ve missed you, you bastard!’

And her mouth sought his.
Dear Lord, Sekka thought, as he walked from the hotel. He actually looks pleased to see me!

It was dusk and in the half-light the Mercedes looked even more dilapidated. The driver was waiting by the car with a hesitant smile on his face and a gap between his front teeth. His name was Philimon Mkekwe; a name to conjure with.

Sekka got in the back seat. ‘All right, Philimon. Let’s go.’

The taxi moved out of the forecourt. ‘Where to, sir?’

‘Just drive around. I want to see the city.’

It was a curious sensation. The streets appeared to be deserted except for army personnel who carried machine pistols and long riot batons. Occasionally, the car passed a group of youths congregating around some dimly lit doorway, their posture insolent and aggressive.

Most of the store fronts, Sekka noticed, were protected behind wire mesh frames. There were no window displays of the kind seen in European cities, no bright neon lights or pouting mannequins. Just a uniform starkness; facades of dirty panes, peeling paint work, faded posters, creaking signs hanging in the dark shadows. It was a depressing picture.

‘Where are all the people?’ Sekka asked. ‘All I see are soldiers and layabouts.’

The driver shrugged. ‘They stay inside. It is safer.’ He seemed reluctant to talk. Sekka pressed for more information.

‘We have a saying in Lugamba,’ Philimon said. ‘We call it "to put someone in the boot".’ He could see in the rear view mirror that Sekka’s face registered a blank. ‘It means to arrest someone. Notice the other cars in the streets: Datsuns, Peugeots, Toyotas. Most of them belong to SASU. The men from SASU put their victims into the boot of their car when they arrest them. They arrest a great many. Usually for no other reason than because it gives them pleasure. They enjoy seeing the terror on the faces of the people when their Datsun pulls in to the kerb. This is why the people stay indoors. They are afraid.’

They passed a row of squalid shops, windows gaping like caves.

‘What do you live on?’ Sekka was curious.

‘Our wits.’ Philimon answered without a pause. ‘What else?’

‘What do the people eat?’

‘Rice mostly. Some mutton and chicken. Lugamba has very thin
chickens.’ Philimon almost permitted himself a smile.

Sekka believed him. The hotel fare had certainly left a lot to be desired: curried chicken cooked without salt. Also, there had been no soap in his room or, for that matter, hot water.

They turned a bend in the road and Sekka saw the soldiers immediately. They were lounging around a jeep parked against the railings of a high fence. Sekka sensed the driver stiffen. ‘What is it?’

‘The Command Post,’ Philimon said. ‘President Mabato’s city residence.’

Instinctively, Sekka drew back from the window.

At one time the Command Post had been a fine colonial mansion. It sat at the end of a wide gravel drive that stretched away from the huge wrought iron gates. Two pill-boxes flanked the entrance, both buttressed by a wall of sandbags. The defences were hardly subtle. The camouflage fatigues of the sullen troops matched the shading of the jeep. A Soviet Pulemet SGM machine gun was mounted in the rear of the vehicle, its grooved barrel pointing at the road. The soldiers looked bored. They were smoking cigarettes, cupping them in their hands like loafers the world over. They paid the Mercedes only a fleeting glance as it rolled past.

‘The Liberator is not at home,’ Philimon said.

‘How do you know?’

‘If he was, you can be sure they would not be lounging at his gate. We would have been stopped and searched.’

‘And arrested?’

‘Perhaps,’ Philimon admitted uncomfortably.

They drove on, Philimon pointing out the various landmarks. They went past the university, Magula Hospital, the law courts, the police barracks, newspaper offices and the Parliament Buildings. One building stood out above the rest, literally.

The International Conference Centre rose above the road like the side of an ocean liner made of glass. It had been built with Libyan money and Yugoslav labour and it was almost complete. The opening day would coincide with the OAU Conference due to take place in Lugamba in six days’ time. It was well known that Solomon Mabato was campaigning to be elected Chairman for the coming year. The Conference Centre had been built specially and at great expense.

Another building had a more menacing aura. It was the DOSS
headquarters. The three storied block, also built by Yugoslav labour, was a brooding ogre standing behind a brick wall. It sat one hundred yards away from the Lodge, Mabato’s other haunt. There were unconfirmed reports that a tunnel linked the two buildings, providing Mabato with an escape route if the Lodge was ever attacked. On the other side was the building that had previously housed the Israeli Embassy. It was now used by the PLO.

Sekka looked at his watch. They had been out for nearly an hour and he sensed the driver was growing nervous. ‘One last thing,’ he said. ‘I want to see Maboru.’

The car swerved towards the side of the road and pulled up short. Philimon looked like a man whose bones had frozen.

Maboru! His passenger was mad! Philimon told him so.

Nevertheless.

1840 and the Sultan of Muscat, from his stronghold on the island of Zanzibar, dispatched the Berber ivory hunter and slave trader, Hajji Sahain, into the interior to bring back what treasures he could find.

Sahain, warrior and explorer, crossed Lake Victoria by dhow and established his encampment on the north western shore. From this place, raiding parties scoured the country for game, ivory and slaves.

Sahain’s men returned with their hauls, animal and human. The slaves were interned in the camp before being transported across the lake and then across the Serengeti Plain and the Masai Steppe to the coast and the markets of the Sultan.

As his raiding parties criss-crossed the land, always returning with greater treasures, so the settlement grew. Sahain supervised the building of a watchtower and stockade on the promontory overlooking the shore of Lake Victoria and the surrounding marshes.

Every so often the local tribes would attack the stockade in vain attempts to free their brothers and sisters and to drive the raiders back across the Great Water. Sahain strengthened his defences and the stockade grew into a fortress with walls eight feet thick.

Hajji Sahain met his end under the thundering feet of a huge bull elephant that had been protecting its cows and calves from his ivory hunters. What remained of Sahain’s body after the enraged tusker had jammed it into the branches of a baobab tree had been carried back to the watchtower by his weeping men.

As a dreadful mark of respect for their dead leader, the hunters
butchered the inmates of the compound - one hundred and sixty men, women and children. They then departed, transporting Sahain’s body back to Zanzibar, leaving the watchtower as a memorial. To the tribes in the local villages that had been decimated by Sahain’s raiders, the place became known as The Hill of the Dead.

Then came the Europeans - Speke, Grant and the Bakers - and in their wake, the God-botherers, who converted the watchtower into a mission from where they dispensed religion and crude medicines in equal quantities.

Prior to the Great War, fearing the colonial expansion of a warmongering Germany, the British Army commandeered the mission and had converted the building into barracks for the Askaris and their white officers. It was a natural progression for the barracks to then become a prison compound once again, though of a sturdier design than Sahain’s slave enclosure.

As the town of Kendura developed into a city, the prison overlooking Lake Victoria took on an awesome presence. Under Mabato’s rule, the place came to epitomize the depths of human suffering. Parents, in the way that parents have, used it as a threat to their children. If they were naughty they would be taken to the evil place. The people of Kendura had their own gruesome nickname. They called it Maboru, the Makesi word meaning ‘The Sentinel’ - the custodian of life and death.

Sekka watched the prison and felt the skin along his spine tingle. They had driven north from Kendura, along the highway, and then taken a right turn towards the lake. The track led without deviation to the main gates. The moon was full and, when not hidden behind cloud, cast its eye over the high grey walls and the northern shore of the lake that lay beyond.

He was on his own. Philimon had driven less than half a mile down the track before his nerve broke. If Philimon was going anywhere that night it was home to his overweight wife and his underfed offspring. Sekka, sensing the man’s fear, made no attempt to dissuade him. Pressing notes into his driver’s shaking hands, Sekka slid out of the taxi. He had barely shut the door before the vehicle slithered in a wide turn and bumped away down the track, back to the highway.

The trail was bordered by dense bush. Sekka stepped sideways into the enveloping blackness and waited to see if the Merc’s engine had attracted unwanted attention. Around him, the forest was still; unusually so. It was as if Maboru had cast its shadow over the land, stunning the bush into silence.
Two hundred yards away from the gates, Sekka sank to his haunches and studied the place from behind a stand of thorn scrub.

The outer walls were about thirty feet high with a guard tower at each corner. Entrance to the prison was through an archway in the east wall. The heavy wooden doors were set under the arch and the sentries above the entrance had an uninterrupted view of the approach road. There was a glow at the top of each tower - illumination for the guards - and Sekka knew that the towers were equipped with search lights to cover the compound.

The outer walls had no windows and the only way in was via the main gates. Sekka felt his heart sink. The project looked pretty much impossible.

And staring at it wouldn’t help matters. He’d seen enough.

He retraced his steps through the undergrowth and reached the junction with the highway. It was a three mile walk back to Kendura and the hotel.

By keeping off the main thoroughfares, Sekka’s trek into the capital went unnoticed by the SASU and DOSS patrols, though more than once he had to duck into the shadows as a vehicle approached.

He was a block away from the hotel when he heard the footsteps behind him. From the sounds he knew there had to be more than one person. It turned out there were three of them: young men, in cast-off clothes and with hungry looks that reflected feral cunning and a street-wise ambience that could be found in a thousand ghettos from Harlem to Hanoi. One of them stepped out from the alley ahead of him. The other two were the ones who’d been trailing behind. All three had weapons. Two carried pick handles. The third held a thin-bladed knife.

Sekka gauged distances and turned his back to the wall. He didn’t want to give them any more room than he had to. He wanted them where he could see them.

The possibility that they were a scouting party for a larger group crossed his mind but he dismissed that idea. A big gang would surely attract the attention of a security unit. It was more likely that they were a self-contained, three man team on the lookout for easy pickings, roaming the streets and alleyways like jackals; their objective: to cut off strays from the herd. For the moment, they were viewing Sekka with interest, no doubt noting the cut of his clothes and wondering, perhaps, if he was a member of one of Mabato’s goon squads. Sekka returned their gaze evenly.
With his back to the wall, Sekka had already adopted a defensive posture; both legs slightly bent, arms to the front, elbows pulled in tight. His fists were clenched, the thumbs uppermost. In this position, he would be as solid as a rock and able to absorb blows and attacks from almost any angle. So when the attack came, he was ready.

The knife came in low and fast. Sekka’s left forearm rotated downwards to block the strike, turning the man’s hand away and opening his body to present a target. Sekka’s right hand punched hard, delivering the blow in a screwing motion, accelerating the impact force of the fist with the first two knuckles extended, against his attacker’s ribs. The man reeled back and collapsed, the knife slipping from inert fingers.

Sekka resumed his stance and regarded the other two with something close to pity. He waited.

They moved in together, clubs swinging. They expected him to back away. Instead he attacked. His knee lifted and his foot crashed into the man on his left, heel smashing against the kneecap, dislocating the bone and ripping cartilage. The youth shrieked and dropped the pick handle. The third mugger’s momentum carried him forward, the club whipping past Sekka’s head and slamming into the wall. Off balance, the man was immediately vulnerable and Sekka caught him with an elbow strike in the stomach. Straightening, he exhaled slowly and viewed the cripples with distaste. They really hadn’t stood a chance and yet they had been lucky. He could have killed them. Now they would crawl away to some dark place and nurse their wounds and maybe it would be a long time before they ventured out again in search of an easy target.

Sekka stole away, still sticking to the shadows. The whole affair had taken less than two minutes and the last thing he wanted was to draw attention. His victims were unlikely to broadcast their defeat. Nevertheless, Sekka was mildly annoyed that his position could have been compromised. A security patrol could have chanced upon the fracas and that would have been disastrous. Above all, he had to keep a low profile. First rule: never draw attention to yourself.

Back at the hotel, he headed for the bar. The place had all the cosy intimacy of a British Rail buffet. The prices were exorbitant and there was no ice as the hotel’s refrigeration unit was out of order, again.

After a lukewarm beer, Sekka was thankful to regain the isolation of his room.
The stomach pains started that evening.

At first, Holt thought it was indigestion but common sense told him otherwise when the pain persisted, particularly when he was kneeling, head hanging over the bucket in the corner of the cell, retching violently, watched by a totally unsympathetic guard, rifle cradled in the crook of his arm.

The stench in the cell was appalling. Holt closed his eyes as his stomach muscles, already strained to the point of rupture, twisted with the effort of puking the remains of his meal. Hands clasping the rim of the pail like a baby clinging to its mother, Holt was in no fit state to reflect on the position he was in. He was completely drained and began to sweat freely within the foetid confines of the tiny room.

After what seemed like an eternity he forced himself to his feet. He acknowledged it as a major achievement. An acute case of food poisoning was the last thing he needed in his present predicament. He couldn’t maintain the posture, however and he fell forward on to the single ragged blanket that covered his rock hard bunk. As the pain in his belly dulled to an ache, he slipped into unconsciousness. He was unaware of the tread of boots in the passage or the fumbling of hands that lifted his limp, unresisting form off the bunk and carried him out of the cell.
The helicopter was a yellow and black striped Bell Jet Ranger and they boarded it in the western corner of the airport.

It was barely dawn but very warm. Both Kirby and Garside were in dress uniform again and they felt hot and sticky and half asleep. They had been roused at what seemed to have been the dead of night to be told that Mabato had summoned them.

To Johimbu.

Kirby dredged his memory. It was Mabato’s home village. One hundred and fifty odd miles away. Oh, God.

Their pilot, a tall stringy individual, regarded the envoys with cautious interest. He waited until the passengers were strapped in the rear seats before addressing them.

‘Make yourselves comfortable, gents. Sit back and enjoy the view.’ The voice was pure Strine; more Alice Springs and Hall’s Creek than the African bush. ‘I’m Clem Wallace and this walking pustule is Corporal Tembu.’

The pilot jerked his thumb at a squat African in army fatigues who was about to climb into the other crew seat. Tembu was adorned with weapons. He had a hip holster containing a heavy automatic, a sheathed panga at his waist and in his podgy hands he clutched a Kalashnikov automatic rifle.

‘He’s here to protect you,’ Wallace went on. ‘Though from what, I can’t imagine. Besides, it’ll take him half a bloody hour to find the safety catch. Wouldn’t it, you syphilitic little fart?’ He grinned and nodded to Tembu who grinned back at him. ‘As you may have gathered, his command of English ain’t so hot.’

Kirby and Garside exchanged glances. Wallace merely chuckled as he showed them their headsets and started the rotors. The Jet Ranger vibrated and rose from the tarmac. The Australian angled the stick and the Bell dipped and slid around before gaining height over the maintenance sheds and side slipping over the field. With a few curt words to the tower, the aircraft
whisked its way into the sky and turned north.

‘Easy,’ Wallace told them a while later, ‘I do it for the money.’ He’d answered Garside’s obvious question.

They were flying at a height of two thousand feet, having traced the river north for some time before altering on to a course that took them over a harsh expanse of brown plain clotted with thorn trees and criss-crossed by what looked to be dozens of dried river beds. An uninviting land that was, despite its stark features, strangely beautiful in the early light of dawn. The sky to the east was streaked blood red.

‘Hell,’ Wallace explained. ‘They’re paying me five thousand bucks a month. Where else could I earn that sort of money? It ain’t illegal and it sure as hell beats crop spraying and there are a lot of ex-service blokes who’ve been reduced to doing that for a living. Me? I’m single, over twenty-one and no responsibilities. They’ve even thrown in free board. I think my place used to belong to the Minister of Culture before Mabato threw him out.’ He glanced sideways at the corporal who was busy studying the geography. ‘Mind you, I’m not saying that I like the people I work for. Mabato’s a bloody barbarian. I’m not stupid. I know what goes on here. Most of us vets know but we’re banking the cash and just waiting for the day when we’ve put enough by to be able to get the hell out. And I’ll tell you something. When I go, this little bird goes with me.’

Wallace patted the controls of the chopper affectionately.

‘If you think I’d leave her in the hands of those ignorant bastards, you’ve another think coming. Ain’t that a fact, Tembu my old mate?’

The corporal, hearing his name, grinned good-naturedly before resuming his examination of the terrain, the Kalashnikov cradled across his stubby knees.

‘Stupid little prick,’ Wallace said. He gazed ahead through the morning haze. ‘Almost there, folks. Extinguish all smokes, fasten safety belts, the usual crap.’

Garside looked over his shoulder, through the screen. They had lost height and were buzzing along the floor of a dry valley. Ahead, two hills rose like breasts from the plain. In the cleft between them, Garside could make out a collection of huts and thorn-fenced livestock pens. As they dropped closer, the people emerged to stand in small groups to observe the landing.

The helicopter settled, the spinning rotors flicking dust and stones into the faces of the villagers.
Wallace removed his head mike and thrust a hand through his tousled fair hair. ‘Happy landings. If the world had piles, it’d have ‘em here.’

The heat was solid, like a wall. Kirby and Garside, heads thrumming, clambered from the chopper and waited.
‘Streuth!’ Wallace breathed. ‘What a fuckin’ dump!’

There was a commotion among a group of villagers. They broke apart and from their midst strode a short, skinny figure in an ill-fitting uniform.

Major Farouk Juma marched to within a yard of the expectant envoys, threw up a travesty of a salute and through rotting teeth said, ‘Good morning, General. I will take you to His Excellency.’

Juma about turned, giving them no chance to reply. They followed at a brisk pace and hadn’t gone ten yards before they were both soaked in perspiration.

Clem Wallace watched them go then he climbed into the rear of the helicopter. From a locker he removed a portable ice box and lifted from it a blue and silver can of Fosters. He stared at the backs of the two Englishmen as they were swallowed up by a curious throng of natives in various stages of undress and emaciation.

Wallace raised the can to his lips. ‘Good luck, mates,’ he toasted, before taking a gulp of lager and looking around for the corporal. He was probably having it off with one of the women. The man had the morals of a goat.

‘Corporal Tembu!’ Wallace yelled. ‘I hope you get the clap, you little turd!’

The villagers were a sorry looking lot; men sullen, women subdued, children patently undernourished. A few mangy dogs ran and tumbled in the dust between the huts and scrawny bush fowl pecked unenthusiastically at a scattering of corn husks. With downcast eyes, the natives followed the path of the envoys as they walked across the beaten ground to one hut that was slightly larger than the rest. It appeared to be constructed with a framework of staves and a tatty covering of haphazardly strewn hides. The entrance was low. Following Juma’s directions, Kirby and his aide had to stoop almost double in order to enter.

Hampered as he was by his dress sword, Kirby had some difficulty maintaining his balance as he entered the hut and he stumbled forward almost on to his knees. The interior was dark and smelled of unwashed bodies and
goats. Garside, bringing up the rear, collided with Kirby’s backside and cursed violently, all pretence at dignity now destroyed.

At first, Kirby thought it was a trick of the light or maybe the effect of the heat. He blinked in the gloom and digested the sight that met his astonished gaze. Garside groped his way forward and pulled up with a jolt.

Arrows of sunlight pierced the ragged walls of the hut and now that the entrance was unblocked it had become easier to see.

Solomon Mabato sat on a low kaross covered stool in the centre of the hut. He appeared totally unperturbed by the reaction of the two envoys. His head-dress was made from the finest ostrich feathers. A lion’s tooth necklace hung around his thick neck, its lower loop lost in the folds of his vast belly. The shaggy pelt of a male lion lay across his broad back. The front paws reached over his shoulders and were entwined upon his chest. In his hands he held an oval hide shield and a knobkerrie. Like a resurrected Dingane, he surveyed his audience.

Two Nubian bodyguards dressed in army fatigues and festooned with weapons - including the inevitable Kalashnikovs - guarded his back. They regarded the awestruck envoys with undisguised suspicion.

Juma pushed his way to Mabato’s side. The President beamed. ‘My dear friends! Welcome! How good it is to see you after all these years.’

‘It’s a great honour, Excellency.’ Kirby managed the words with some effort. He wondered if he was expected to bow and then thought to hell with it.

Mabato said, ‘I regret I was unable to meet you on your arrival but affairs of state, you know.’ He waved his hand vaguely. ‘You have been looked after well?’

Kirby had a brief vision of Brigadier Epunau excavating his ear and said, ‘Everyone has been very considerate.’

Garside took the opportunity to clear his throat. He was still trying to come to terms with the sight of Mabato clad in a loin cloth and not much else. But at least the fat slob was cool. He could feel the sweat running from his own armpits in rivers.

Kirby said formally, ‘We both know, Excellency, why Major Garside and I are here. Perhaps we could get to the matter in hand? I have the letter…’

‘You will be silent!’ Mabato’s voice was like a rumble of thunder. I did not give you permission to speak! You are no longer my commanding
officer. Or had you forgotten? You are here at my will. Remember that!’

Kirby went rigid with indignation. Garside stiffened. The ball had been played. What the hell was the Old Man going to do now?

Then, suddenly, bizarrely, Mabato was smiling again. ‘Come, you must be in need of refreshment after your journey from Kendura. What did you think of my helicopter, General? Is it not a fine machine? It was donated by my good friend Colonel Gadaffi; a generous ruler and a great Muslim. He has been a source of inspiration to me since I adopted the true faith.’

‘I’m sure he has,’ Kirby said.

‘Please, be seated! Let us not stand on formality. We are old comrades, after all. Sit down, sit down!’

Mabato flapped his hands expansively. It took a second for them to realize that they were being offered the comfort of the hut’s bare mud floor. Mabato watched them impassively as they sank down uncomfortably, hampered by their uniforms and, in Kirby’s case, by his sword.

Mabato laid the shield and knobkerrie aside and clapped imperiously. Incredibly, there sounded the distinct rattle of teacups and the entrance was again blocked as a thin figure entered the hut with a tray balanced precariously in his hands. The tray contained a china teapot, three cups and saucers, sugar basin, milk jug, teaspoons and a pair of silver tongs.

The tray bearer negotiated his way gingerly around the squatting envoys and stood, head bowed, awaiting Mabato’s orders. Garside followed the servant’s progress, senses reeling. As the face of the man came out of the shadows, Garside heard the hiss of astonishment escape Kirby’s lips. Mabato watched their dumbstruck expressions with acute enjoyment.

David Holt, head bowed, hands shaking, was having a job stopping the tray and its contents from rattling. Clad in a freshly pressed khaki shirt and matching shorts, with sandals on his feet, he looked like a man teetering on the verge of collapse.

Kirby swung towards Mabato. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

‘My new house-boy,’ Mabato said casually. ‘He is still learning but I will soon...how do you say it, General? Ah, yes. Lick him into shape. I remember those words when I was a recruit in the 4th Battalion. Now, shall I be mother?’ He chuckled. In the strained atmosphere, the sound was grotesque.

Kirby struggled to his feet, his expression carved in flint. ‘This is monstrous! An outrage! As a representative of Her Majesty’s Government, I
protest most vigorously at this...this inhuman display!'

‘Yes,’ Mabato said evenly. ‘Do you take sugar?’

Christ! Garside thought, as he saw the knuckles on Kirby’s sword hand turn white, the Old Man’s going to hit the bastard! Then he saw that Holt’s expression hadn’t altered. It was vacant as though he was on drugs. Maybe he was, Garside pondered. Or maybe it was just fear.

Garside leaned forward and touched Kirby’s sleeve. ‘Perhaps, sir, we should wait and see what His Excellency has to say. We are here as his guests after all.’

Kirby’s look was venomous. His eyes flamed for a brief second and then he nodded slowly and cleared his throat.

‘Yes. Quite right, quite right. We must respect His Excellency’s hospitality. Forgive me, sir. That outburst was quite uncalled for.’

Mabato nodded slowly, his brutal face blank as he gazed back. He snapped his fingers and Holt shuffled forward. Mabato, ostrich feathers dipping as he performed the task, poured three cups of tea and handed two to the envoys. Kirby, totally frustrated, sat down and accepted the beverage.

‘As you can see, General, Mister Holt is in excellent health,’ Mabato said. ‘In Lugamba we do not mistreat our prisoners. All are well cared for. They have good food, clean cells and clean clothes. The stories the British Press write about the conditions in Lugamba are lies.’ He pointed at Holt. ‘Ask him if he is treated badly.’

Kirby looked at Holt who in turn looked as though he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him.

‘Mister Holt? Do you know why we are here?’ He indicated Garside as he spoke.

No reply.

Kirby frowned. This wasn’t what he’d expected. He tried again.

‘Mister Holt, I am General Kirby and this is Major Garside. We are here to help you. I want to know if you are all right.’

Holt stirred and gazed at Kirby through vacant eyes. Or was there a glimmer of mute appeal?

‘I’m being very well treated.’ The voice was low, barely audible. ‘My cell is clean and the food is quite adequate.’ He paused as though uncertain. ‘I am very sorry for all the trouble I have caused.’

‘There, you see,’ Mabato cut in. ‘Was I not right?’

Kirby said, ‘I would like to speak to Mister Holt alone.’
‘I regret that is not possible.’
‘Why not?’
‘Because I said so.’

Kirby, with a great deal of self-control, held himself in check. Don’t push it.

With a dismissive flick of his wrist, Mabato indicated that Holt’s presence was no longer required. The cowed hostage left the tray at Mabato’s feet and backed out of the hut.

‘There, General. It is as I said.’ Mabato smiled.

Kirby shook his head. ‘Despite your assurances, sir, I am not convinced that Mister Holt is a healthy man. He looked weak and disoriented.’

The President shrugged. ‘He has been in prison, not a rest home. Nevertheless, we have been very lenient with him.’

‘Nevertheless, you intend to execute him?’ countered Kirby harshly.

‘Of course.’ A smile played along the full lips. Garside sucked in his breath.

‘You know, General,’ Mabato said conversationally, ‘I was very sorry to have missed the royal wedding but I did of course send a greeting to my great friend, Queen Elizabeth.’

‘Er…’ Kirby’s eyebrows lifted and he looked at his aide for assistance.

‘I’m sure Her Majesty understood,’ Garside answered gravely. From what he remembered of the event, there had been consternation that Mabato would invite himself to the ceremony after having been deleted from the list of desirables some time before.

The same degree of unease had been voiced during the weeks prior to the last Commonwealth Conference in London. Mabato had announced regally that he would be flying to Heathrow in his own 707, complete with personal aides and two hundred members of the State Dance Troupe. The corridors of power had positively vibrated at that one. In the event, to Whitehall’s relief, Mabato had decided to stay in Lugamba. This had not prevented him from expounding his views to the other Commonwealth leaders from afar. Or, for that matter, any other world leader. He had touched on a variety of subjects, ranging from admiration of Hitler’s Final Solution and his intention of erecting a statue of The Fuhrer in the heart of Kendura to wishing the American president a speedy recovery from a scandal involving a
White House intern.

‘When this Holt affair is over,’ Mabato continued, ‘I will make a state visit to Great Britain and ride through London with the Queen and we will talk of many things.’

Garside could see that Kirby was beginning to flounder at this turn of events. He said hurriedly, ‘We have a letter for you from the Queen. Perhaps she mentions a visit?’

*God forbid.*

Kirby, with the look of a drowning man clutching at a straw, saw his chance and accepted the envelope from his aide. He handed it to Mabato.

‘Ah, yes,’ Mabato said. ‘The letter which begs for the Englishman’s life.’

The reading took a few moments, Mabato’s broad brow furrowing as he concentrated on the text. At least he’s got the bloody thing the right way up, Garside thought.

Mabato looked up. ‘So …’

The envoys waited expectantly.

‘The letter talks of the respect that the people of Lugamba and Great Britain have for one another. This is a very fine sentiment.’

The President held the paper in his fingers and waved it under Kirby’s nose. ‘I will think on this and give you my decision after I have consulted with my ministers.’ He lumbered to his feet, his bodyguards moving to his side. Farouk Juma, who had remained in malevolent attendance throughout the procedures, ducked out of the hut.

‘Make yourselves comfortable, my friends. I will return. I will have my people bring food and drink.’ He paused at the entrance and the hut was immediately darkened. He eyed the envoys speculatively.

‘Do you want me to send you a woman, General?’

Even Garside spluttered at this. Kirby’s mouth opened and closed like a goldfish.

Mabato shrugged and squeezed his huge bulk through the entrance like toothpaste out of a tube. Kirby and Garside regarded each other with bewilderment.

‘He’s a fucking lunatic,’ Garside said eventually.

‘That,’ Kirby said, ‘is a gross understatement.’

Garside shook his head in wonderment. ‘That poor bastard, Holt.’ Kirby nodded thoughtfully. ‘I didn’t like the look of him at all.’
‘So, what do we do?’
Kirby eased his cramped limbs then he removed his sword. ‘I suggest we make ourselves as comfortable as this hovel will allow. Something tells me that we may have quite a long wait.’

Gregori Alexis Burov’s thoughts, as he waited for Mabato, were of a small picturesque wooden dacha sheltering under the pine trees on the shore of the Kuban River a few miles south of his home town of Krasnodar in Eastern Georgia. Even now, standing on the veranda of Mabato’s villa overlooking the muddy Johimbu River, Burov had only to close his eyes to smell the heavy fragrance of the pine forest and the scent of wood smoke.

His brown eyes flickered open and ranged down the slope to the meandering watercourse that disappeared behind a stand of thorn scrub three hundred yards away. There was a sudden movement. A heron flapped lazily over the river to its nest hidden in the reeds on the far bank, a silver flash of sunlight glancing off the scales of the fish impaled on its long bill.

Burov was a short wide-shouldered man in his fifties. His greying hair was receding at the temples and his broad, heavy-jowled face was centred by a crooked nose that he had broken as a youth during a boxing tournament in his early days at Kiev University. His eyes, deep set under dark brows, gazed out at the world with a benign disposition. He looked like everyone’s favourite uncle. He was dressed in a white cotton shirt and cream slacks.

Mabato walked on to the veranda, accompanied by his bodyguards and the shrew-like Juma. The President had changed into an olive-green tunic and trousers.

‘I take it the meeting with the British envoys has taken place?’ Burov inquired.

Mabato towered above the Russian yet in some ways it was the man from Georgia who radiated authority.

Mabato said, ‘Did I not tell you that the British would heed my warning?’

‘They had little choice,’ Burov replied candidly. ‘What did you tell them?’

‘To wait.’

‘I would like to see the letter, Excellency.’ Burov held out his hand.
Mabato passed it over.

The Russian grunted. ‘Platitudes, as I suspected. Are you going to let these empty words influence your decision?’ He looked up and sneered contemptuously. ‘Is there a mention of spares for your armoured cars or a promise that the British press will cease their malicious rumouring? No. They promise you nothing; as I warned you.’

Burov’s eyes burned with a fierce intensity. ‘The British hope to cover their deceit with meaningless rhetoric. Surely you will not allow yourself to be overawed by this diplomatic prose? Excellency, a man of your calibre, your wisdom, deserves much more!’

Burov amazed himself sometimes with the verbal diarrhoea he was forced to emit.

Mabato reflected for a moment. ‘What should I do?’

Burov held up a hand. ‘This is not for me to say, Excellency. The decision must be yours alone.’ He paused for effect. ‘But think on this. Did not my government promise you a loan three months ago in order that new factories and houses could be built? And now that loan has been finalized with, of course, a personal consideration for yourself as a gesture of our respect for your stature as a great statesman and warrior.’

Burov cringed inwardly at this. He went on. ‘And the supply of MiG fighters has proved invaluable in the formation of your air force. Once your pilots are trained, you will have the most experienced operational squadron in East Africa.’

Might as well teach monkeys to fly! He thought as he went on, ‘And even now, your new battle tanks are being off-loaded from a freighter at Mombasa prior to being transported by road to Kendura.’

Mabato’s eyes lit up. ‘That is good. I need those tanks. Soon I will have enough tanks to invade Tanzania and South Africa and destroy my enemies. Tell me, when will they arrive?’

‘By tomorrow evening, providing the Kenyan Government gives them a clear passage as we were promised.’

Mabato’s eyes grew into slits. ‘The Kenyan President knows better than to stand in my way. My wrath would be terrible to see.’

‘You have no cause for alarm,’ Burov pointed out. ‘My own government have placed certain pressures on President Nai. There will be no trouble. Also some of our best technicians will be accompanying the vehicles and the Kenyans know better than to harass Soviet citizens. The tanks will
arrive, never fear. Unlike the British, we do not break our promises.’

‘You’ll have to play it by ear at first, Gregori,’ Nikolai Kolk had advised him on the day he’d been summoned to the grey stone building on Dzerzhinsky Square. A new headquarters complex was located on the outskirts of the city but somehow it didn’t have the same atmosphere. It looked more like a big hotel. Most of the hierarchy maintained some presence here in The Centre.

Showing his pass, Burov had made his way down the green painted corridor to the stairs that would take him up to the offices on the third floor; his footsteps were loud on the uncarpeted parquet.

He was shown into a high ceilinged room. The office was uncluttered. The furniture consisted of a wide desk, four chairs, a bank of filing cabinets and a large squat safe which crouched in one corner. A portrait of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka, hung on one wall. It matched the one that hung in the Chairman’s office further along the passage.

Kolk was a prim, handsome man with thick, wavy black hair. He headed Department Nine of the First Chief Directorate of the KGB. He was responsible for the KGB’s activities throughout the English speaking nations of Africa.

Kolk gazed between the steel bars on the window into the courtyard below, hands clasped behind his back. He was dressed in an expensively-tailored grey suit, white shirt and maroon and blue striped tie. His shoes were highly polished, black Italian moccasins.

‘This Solomon Mabato is a highly unpredictable individual,’ Kolk said.

‘Unpredictable? He’s a bloody maniac!’ exclaimed Burov. ‘He makes Uncle Joseph look like Olga Korbut!’

‘I’ll grant you he has an alarming tendency to over react,’ Kolk admitted thoughtfully. He turned from the window and walked to the desk. Sitting down, he cupped his well-formed hands, placed elbows on the jotter and rested his chin on his knuckles.

‘So, why get further involved?’ Burov asked.

Kolk smiled patiently ‘Expediency, my dear Gregori. A foothold in East Africa would certainly be beneficial to our overseas policy. Already we hold the Horn of Africa, Mozambique, Somalia and Angola. Greater influence in Lugamba with its central position and borders with Tanzania and
Kenya would suit us very well indeed.’

‘We don’t want another Afghanistan,’ Burov said. ‘Look what happened there. We aren’t exactly high in the popularity stakes.’

‘Have no fear of that. With Mabato sending students to Patrice Lumumba University, we’ve a finger in the pie already. Don’t forget, after he lost favour with the British and the Israelis he did jump at our initial and, if I may say so, rather modest offer of economic and military aid. The man’s been teetering long enough. The time has come to remind him where his loyalties lie. Now is the time to move. A more generous development loan from us at this moment would see him in our pockets for good.’

‘What the hell is he going to develop?’ Burov looked incredulously at his superior. ‘His industries have collapsed and his crops have withered to dust.’

‘Frankly, Gregori, I don’t care if he puts the stuff in his Swiss bank account, so long as he’s in our debt. That’s all that’s important at this stage.’

Burov looked sceptical.

‘Gregori, we have great faith in you. The Chairman asked for you personally. You did valuable groundwork in Somalia and Angola. Your experience will be invaluable in paving the way for us in Lugamba. Mabato has very few allies. Use that experience to gain his confidence. Believe me, he is ripe for plucking.’

‘I’m flattered, Comrade Kolk,’ Burov acknowledged the compliment. ‘Please relay my respects to the Chairman. It seems that the decision has been made for me. When do I leave?’

In ten days’ time a Libyan delegation is visiting Lugamba. You’ll accompany the delegation and be introduced to Mabato at the same time. It’ll be up to you to do the rest. I will rely on your judgement.’

Burov dragged his thoughts back to the present. His briefing with Kolk had taken place six months ago. Six months of kowtowing to an overweight, half-witted sadist. However, the ploy had paid dividends in the shape of the MiG fighters on the runway, the balance of Mabato’s numbered account at the Credit Suisse in Geneva and the six T-54 battle tanks that were being off loaded from the Ivan Karasov at Mombasa. Mabato was well and truly in the bag. It wouldn’t be long before Burov was back in Krasnodar, leaving Mabato in the tender care of the Soviet attaches who would be sent in
ostensibly to promote diplomatic relations between Kendura and Moscow while at the same time ensuring that Mabato honoured his side of the loan agreement. This would be achieved by handing the Russians the building that had once housed the West German embassy for use as a consulate and security base from where they could monitor non-Soviet activity in East and Central Africa.

From there it would only be a matter of time before the first detachment of Soviet ground forces arrived, purely in an advisory capacity of course.

Jack Carver lolled back in his leather chair and rested his feet on his desk. He was heavy set with an expensively acquired tan. His brown hair was well groomed and he sported a thick moustache. He was smartly dressed in a cream Cardin suit and gold bracelets adorned each wrist. The overall effect was somewhat ostentatious but, nevertheless, he presented a picture of a well-to-do businessman. Which he was. He was also very dangerous.

The office was all chrome and glass and low-backed sofas. A well-stocked drinks cabinet sat against one wall next to a bank of impressive stereo equipment and video screens. When activated, the screens projected various areas of Carver’s club: restaurant, casino, dance floor and, on occasions, the guest rooms.

‘Right, darling,’ Carver said. ‘Let’s see what you’ve got.’

The girl standing in front of the desk was a blonde and strikingly attractive. She regarded Carver with cool blue eyes. ‘Here?’

‘Sure. Why not?’ Carver smiled. His teeth were very white and even. ‘We’ll have some music.’ He indicated the stereo. ‘Help you to relax maybe?’

The girl shrugged. ‘If you like.’

Carver reached on to the desk and picked up the remote control unit. He pressed a button and the deck clicked into action. The slow, heavy, rhythmic beat of an old Donna Summer song invaded the room. The singer sounded as though she was in the deep throes of ecstasy and rapidly approaching a climax.

‘How’s that?’ Carver asked.

The blonde smiled and nodded. ‘That’s good.’ Her voice had a husky quality that Carver found exciting.
The girl placed her shoulder bag on the sofa behind her and stood with hands on hips, legs slightly akimbo, as she listened to the music. She wore a red calf length dress, slit on one side to mid-thigh. As she posed, the slit widened to reveal creamy skin sheathed in black nylon. Carver felt his pulse quicken.

The girl’s eyes were half closed, her mouth open, agile tongue caressing moist lips as she caught the beat. Then she began to strip.

She was good, very good. Despite having auditioned scores of girls over the years, Carver could see this one was a star in the making.

She eased out of the dress as though shedding a second skin and, clad in flimsy black lace bra, minute panties, garter belt and stockings, turned her back to present Carver with a view of rounded hips and panties tight over the curve of her cheeks. Bending forward, she reached one hand back through her legs, caught the waist of the tiny panties between finger and thumb and teased them down over her firm rear, at the same time allowing her fingers to caress her cleft.

Carver felt himself growing hard as Donna Summer moaned on the stereo and the girl, breasts now free of the constricting bra, stroked her inner thighs and brought herself to fever pitch in time to the singer. A thin sheen of perspiration shone over her undulating body as her breathing began to match the beat from the speakers.

The shrill beep of the telephone jerked Carver out of his erotic trance. At the third beep he used the remote to turn down the music. The blonde, now sprawled on her back with her legs apart, seemed, unaware of the interruption, her breath coming in quick gasps as she stroked and manipulated her sex. Completely drowning in her own fantasy, she arched her splendid back abruptly and a shuddering groan heralded her self-induced climax as Carver lifted the receiver.

Carver, hard eyes still roaming over the glistening, half-naked contours, sat up as he listened. His face clouded and he said sharply, ‘No! Get rid of them!’ He slammed the receiver down.

The blonde was breathing more evenly now though her eyes were still closed. Her perfect breasts, crested with dark brown, erect nipples, rose and fell. Her hand traced one beautiful orb like a lover and she opened her eyes slowly. As if awaking from a deep sleep, she smiled languidly at her audience. ‘Well, do I pass?’

‘With flying colours, sweetheart,’ Carver said with feeling. He
swung his feet off the desk and moved towards her.

The door opened. Keel walked in with Roan and an irate Ferris.

Carver swung. ‘What the fuck?’

‘I’m Keel. This is Roan and you, darling, had better remove your delectable body pronto.’

The girl had half risen at the unexpected entrance. She made no attempt to conceal herself but taking one look at Keel’s ice blue eyes, she evidently thought better about answering back. Casting a quick, nervous glance at Carver standing there with his mouth open and a look of fury on his face, she scrambled for her discarded dress. Breasts jiggling, she shook it over her head, the movement accentuating her sweet curves and flat stomach. Bundling her flimsy undergarments into her bag, she scampered for the door.

Roan whistled in admiration as the blonde disappeared. ‘Nice! I do hope we managed to interrupt something.’ He grinned disarmingly.

‘What the hell is this?’ Carver snarled. He backed against the desk. ‘This is a private club. Ferris, I thought I told you to get rid of them?’

‘He tried,’ Keel said. ‘But he wasn’t too successful. Were you, son?’

Ferris looked very uncomfortable.

Then it dawned on Carver. ‘You,’ he said. ‘You’re the one who had that dust-up with Ferris and Jon Jon. You’re Lassiter’s pal.’

‘Give the man a cigar,’ Keel said. He closed the door. ‘And don’t go near that drawer. It could prove fatal.’

Carver pulled back his hand as if he’d been stung. ‘So, what? You’ve come to scare me off?’

‘No,’ Keel replied. ‘I’ve come to pay you off.’

Ferris began a subtle move away from the two mercenaries, his arm lifting towards his jacket.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Roan said. ‘Just stay still and you won’t get hurt.’

Ferris dropped his arm and Roan smiled.

‘Pay me off?’ Carver chuckled suddenly. ‘Hear that, Ferris? It’s enough to restore one’s faith in human nature.’

Ferris didn’t look too impressed.

‘I believe the amount outstanding on Lassiter’s account is six thousand dollars,’ Keel said.

‘Plus the interest,’ Carver said.

‘Don’t push it. You’ll get six thousand and like it.’
Carver watched in silence as Keel threw a wad of dollar bills on to the desk top.

‘The debt’s paid, Carver,’ said Keel. ‘In full.’

‘Well, pick it up,’ Roan advised. ‘It won’t bite.’

As Carver extended a hand, Keel cut in. ‘One last thing. If either you or any of your goons make any approach to Kate Lassiter again, I will come looking for you. Are we clear?’

‘As crystal,’ Carver replied. His eyes glittered angrily.

‘Good. So long as we understand each other. How about you, Harpo?’

Ferris nodded dumbly.

‘Right. Thank you for your time. No. It’s all right. We can see ourselves out.’ Keel opened the door and he and Roan backed out, leaving Carver and Ferris staring after them.

‘Bastards!’ Ferris hissed. ‘Fucking bastards!’

Carver regarded his subordinate stonily. He realized a low noise was coming from the stereo speakers. Donna was still at it. With a curse of annoyance he flicked the music off.

‘Not exactly effective are we, Ferris? I mean, where the hell were you? Damn it, I pay you to protect my arse and yet they waltzed in like it was a bloody Open Day! You know, I reckon you were let off lightly last night.’

‘He was lucky, that’s all. I could have taken him.’

‘Crap,’ Carver said. ‘He’d have killed you. He reeks of violence. He could have taken you and Jon Jon with one hand tied behind his back. The same would apply to his companion, unless I miss my guess.’

Ferris clenched his fists. ‘So, that’s it? You’re going to let them get away with it?’

Carver pondered the thought. He’d been shaken by this turn of events. His defences had been breached and he didn’t like that. In fact he wasn’t going to stand for it.

‘Did I say that? I’ve my reputation to consider. No. There’ll be payback, and not just with those two but with Lassiter as well.’

Ferris perked up considerably at this.

‘Get hold of Jon Jon and get back to me. And another thing. I didn’t catch the name of that last girl, the energetic one. I want it and her telephone number. Well, what the hell are you waiting for, Ferris? Your fucking pension?’
At noon, Mabato reappeared. The charade was over for he was dressed in tunic and trousers. Kirby and Garside, after three hours of confinement in the sweltering hut, had thrown protocol to the winds. They had taken off their jackets, loosened ties and rolled sleeves up to their elbows. They both had splitting headaches.

‘Ah, General, I hope you have been comfortable in my absence. I am sorry for the delay but as you can imagine, I have been talking with my conscience. I have had many things to think about.’

‘I understand,’ Kirby replied, dabbing his throbbing forehead with a handkerchief that was already damp with sweat. ‘What answer can I take back to my government, Mister President?’

‘You will tell the Queen that I am happy to have received her letter. You will tell your Prime Minister that I will execute the Englishman, David Holt, in four days’ time.’

Warren stared aghast at the two envoys. ‘You’re bloody joking!’

‘Do you see us smiling?’ Garside snapped.

Warren flushed then mumbled sheepishly, ‘No, you’re right. That was a stupid remark. God damn it!’ He rested his head in his hands.

After the glowering Mabato had relayed his decision, Kirby and Garside had wasted no time in returning to the helicopter and flying back to Kendura. They had reported the news to Warren upon their arrival.

‘Didn’t the President listen to anything you had to say?’ Warren asked.

Kirby shook his grey head. ‘He wasn’t interested.’

‘Kept bumbling on about spare parts for his bloody armoured cars and malicious reports in the press,’ cut in Garside. ‘Refused to even consider a reprieve, unless the Foreign Secretary put in a personal appearance.’

‘And that’s out of the question,’ Warren said.

James Henderson, hovering by the desk, said, ‘We’d better get the news off to London, sir. They’ll be expecting word.’

‘There’s nothing you two can think of that would get us out of this mess?’ Warren looked hopefully towards the general and his aide.

‘I think it’s gone too far for that,’ Kirby said. ‘This can only be
resolved at a higher level. It’s way out of our league now. If some solution is to be found, it has to be found soon. Within four days to be exact.’

‘God! I feel so bloody impotent.’ Warren looked up. ‘What are your plans now? You’ll be returning to London as soon as possible I suppose?’

‘As soon as you can arrange a flight.’

‘Henderson?’ Warren addressed his aide.

‘First thing tomorrow morning, sir. Sabena again. We can get you back through Nairobi and Brussels.’

‘Very well,’ Warren said. ‘We’ll make the arrangements. James, let’s get the signal off. I have a feeling the shit is about to hit the fan big time.’

‘Holy Christ!’ Brooke erupted. ‘That’s all we bloody need! I felt damned sure their visit would have done the trick.’

‘Evidently it didn’t,’ Wood said.

‘You know, Duncan, your powers of observation can be quite staggering at times,’ Brooke said testily. ‘Anyway, that puts the ball well and truly in our court. You’ve told Dalkieth?’

Wood nodded. ‘Look, there’s still time for me to fly…’

‘No!’ Brooke’s tone was firm. ‘You will not go to Kendura under duress. How many times do I have to tell you?’

‘So?’

‘So, it doesn’t leave us much choice now, does it?’

‘You mean our last resort?’

Brooke shrugged. ‘We’ve run out of time. We’ve no alternative. Phone Dalkieth. Tell him it’s on. He’s to send them in.’

They met by the Albert Memorial.

‘So, you want them to proceed?’ Cameron said.

Dalkieth nodded. ‘Unleash them. We want Holt out.’

‘I guessed as much.’ Cameron had purchased an evening edition of the Standard. By now the envoys’ mission of mercy was common knowledge and there hadn’t been any delay in the latest news reaching London from Lugamba. The front page carried the disclosure that the pleas of the British envoys had failed. They would be returning home in the morning.

‘How soon can you get word to your team?’ Dalkieth asked.
‘As soon as I get back to the office.’ Cameron glanced over Dalkieth’s shoulder. There was no sign of Frank.

‘Good.’
Cameron said, ‘Once I contact them, they’ll go in. Probably tonight.’

*Where the hell was Frank?*

‘Fine,’ Dalkieth turned away casually and gazed out across Kensington Gardens.

It was a pleasant afternoon. A few couples were strolling arm in arm and office workers were beginning to make their way home. Down Lancaster Walk some youngsters were playing tag. A road sweeper was pushing his yellow cart down the path. The scampering children were using it as a shield.

Dalkieth reached into his inside pocket and extracted an envelope. He held it out. ‘The first instalment. Banker’s draft, as you requested.’

Cameron took the envelope. ‘That’s it then. They’re committed.’

The sound of laughing children carried across the path. The road sweeper was conscientiously retrieving Mars wrappers and orange peel from the grass around the benches, spearing the offending litter with a long pronged stick. He was dropping the rubbish into his cart, head bowed in concentration.

Dalkieth pursed his lips. ‘Let’s hope nothing goes wrong.’

‘They’re the best,’ Cameron said. ‘If they can’t do it, nobody can.’

From the yellow cart, Frank Ketch, in blue overalls, lifted the Pentax and aimed the 80-200mm f4 zoom lens towards the memorial. He took half a dozen exposures before concealing the camera in the top layer of litter and continued his slow, leisurely trundle down the path.

Dalkieth said, ‘We won’t be meeting again until Holt is secure. You will then be paid the balance of the fee.’

‘As you wish. They’ll deposit Holt with the High Commissioner in Nairobi. He’ll fly home from there.’

Cameron watched Frank fade into the distance. All he’d wanted was one clear snap of Hobson. He hoped to God that Ketch had managed that. Anyway, he’d find out soon enough.

After he’d sent the message to Keel.
Lavrenti Shelepin, standing high on the bridge of the freighter, the Ivan Karasov, watched silently as his First Officer supervised the transfer of the last battle tank onto the back of the big transporter parked on the sweltering Mombasa dockside.

The derrick swung the thirty-six ton load up and out of the vast forward hold like a toy and held it over the side of the ship. The T-54 was then winched slowly down until the tracks landed squarely on the back of the MAZ transporter. The tank was secured and the retaining pins on the cradle were released, allowing the derrick to be swung inboard for the last time.

A heavy tarpaulin shrouded the T-54, its edges anchored to the sides of the transporter. All that could be seen of the tank was the bottom section of track and the lower curve of the wheels. Six tanks had been lifted off the ship onto the MAZ support vehicles and their presence on the quay had caused a great deal of comment among the dock workers. The latter had not been permitted to assist with the unloading, the union having been squared by donations from the Soviet freighter’s agents. Half a dozen Russian technicians, as well as the First Officer, had supervised the work and these were the men who would accompany the convoy to its ultimate destination: Kendura.

Shelepin, unshaven, with his cap askew on his head, studied the hectic activity and waited for his subordinate to report. His First Officer, Felix Yazelsky, appeared in the hatchway. ‘All unloaded, Captain. No problems.’

Shelepin turned and nodded, ‘Very good. Secure the hatches and prepare the vessel for departure and don’t forget the crew muster either. I don’t want to find we’re a dozen men short after we cast off.’

The agent and the Lead Technician were awaiting Shelepin’s arrival at the top of the gangway. The agent was a thin, cadaverous Syrian called Habash. The technician - heavy set with short-cropped fair hair - was called Leonid Vakov.

Vakov carried the world weary stamp of a veteran; a hard man
marked by the rigours that military discipline demands. A man used to obeying the whims of his superiors without question. Sergeant Vakov’s present demeanour, however, indicated that his current assignment was a chore he could have done without. Less than a month ago he’d been cooped up in a fly ridden, dust blown compound on the outskirts of Kabul, training Afghan troops in the use of BM-21 rocket launchers and BMD fire support vehicles.

After six months’ gruelling duty in that hell-hole, interspersed with hair-raising convoy duty along the Kotanni Pass and intermittent and often fruitless raids against the Mujahideen strongholds in the Panjshir Valley, Vakov was looking forward to ten days’ well-earned leave, lounging on the beach in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

Until his leave was cancelled, with a vengeance.

A Lead Technician was needed to head a small team of military advisors on a mission in the East African state of Lugamba. Vakov hadn’t even heard of the place let alone Solomon Mabato and he wasn’t relishing the task of training the man’s troops in the workings of the T-54s any more than he’d enjoyed his tour of duty in Kabul. Small wonder that his disposition was far from benign as he stood above the Mombasa dockside and viewed his massive charges with resentment.

‘So, all done,’ Shelepin confirmed. ‘I trust everything is in order?’

Habash nodded fervently, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he spoke. ‘I have briefed Sergeant Vakov on the route and paperwork involved and he has the manifest and transit permits. The convoy will arrive in Kendura tomorrow.’

‘What about the drivers?’ Shelepin asked.

‘Libyans,’ Vakov answered sourly. ‘Provided by Mabato.’

Shelepin addressed the Syrian. ‘You will relay a signal to the effect that the shipment has been landed and the cargo is en route.’

‘It will be done immediately,’ the agent said.

‘So,’ Shelepin said, addressing Vakov, ‘all that remains is to wish you a safe journey.’

‘And a safe voyage to you, Captain,’ Vakov replied.

They shook hands and Shelepin retraced his steps to the bridge. Vakov followed Habash down the gangway to the quay. The Syrian took his leave and Vakov walked along the convoy to the lead transporter. Two men were already on board; the swarthy Libyan driver and Vakov’s fellow
technician. Vakov climbed into the cab and slammed the door.

‘OK, let’s go! We haven’t time to waste and, Valeri Andreyevich,’ he said, addressing the young man seated next to him, ‘keep your eyes on these Libyan bastards. I trust them about as much as I would trust a Bulgarian beet farmer!’

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‘At last,’ Schiller said. ‘The waiting’s over.’

Keel said, ‘You and Harry contact Mendoza and see he has the equipment. I’ll send confirmations to Cameron and Joseph. Then I’ll call Lassiter. We go in tonight.’

Keel felt the tightening deep in his stomach, as if a hand had grabbed his intestines and twisted. This was the spur he’d waited for. The combination of excitement and apprehension was like a jolt of electricity and he felt at once rejuvenated as the adrenalin flowed. He knew that Sekka, on receipt of his message, would feel exactly the same.

Sekka had spent his second day in Kendura walking the streets, getting the feel of the city.

As he walked, he found it difficult to believe that Lugamba had once been known as the Pearl of Africa. Even along the Kendura Road - the capital’s main street - some stores were little more than shells; burnt out and filled with rubble and excrement. About one shop in five had glass still in the frames, protecting a pitiful selection of goods: pairs of cheap plastic shoes, some tins of boot polish or canned produce. A few barefoot vendors were attempting to sell their wares on the dusty pavements. One man’s meagre display consisted of a dozen long playing gramophone records, a selection of straw hats, a box of 1.5 volt Vidor batteries and two dozen puncture repair outfits.

One street consisted almost entirely of shops fronted by iron bars and metal shutters. These, Sekka knew, were the buildings that had once been owned and run by the expelled Asian community. Mabato had handed the businesses over to the officers in his army but once the latter had removed the contents from the stores into their homes the buildings had remained locked.
and barred. In some shops the barriers had been breached by looters. Sekka found the whole scene profoundly depressing.

Philimon had told Sekka that there was a petrol shortage but there seemed to be quite a number of cars and vans on the road. It made Sekka wonder if the majority were driven by DOSS or SASU personnel.

He retraced the route he’d taken with Philimon, past the hospital, university and the newly built conference centre. He wondered at the mentality of a president who, faced with economic disaster and a starving populace, chose to spend millions on a glass and concrete edifice. It was an insult to the desperate inhabitants of the slums that squatted in its shade.

And the squalor that Sekka saw on his walkabout was matched only by the despair and listlessness on the faces of the people. Mabato’s rule had taken its toll.

Beyond the conference centre and in front of the police barracks a large area of concrete parade ground had been cordoned off. The sound of hammer, drill and saw rose above the noise of the traffic and Sekka paused to investigate. The workmen were building some sort of grandstand. Scaffolding littered the ground and in one corner of the square several lorries were parked side by side, their beds piled high with folding chairs.

To one side of the grandstand a rectangular dais was being erected. Clearly, to celebrate the opening of the OAU conference, Mabato had planned some sort of ceremony to enhance his standing in the eyes of his fellow delegates. A parade was the likely bet, probably of a military nature. The dais was to enable Mabato to take the salute.

And Sekka knew the part David Holt would play in the proceedings. If Mabato could make the British Government submit to his demands, he could face the members of the OAU with the certainty of being elected Chairman.

But there again, if the British didn’t back down, what would Mabato do to save face? Sekka had the suspicion that the consequences of that action would be grave indeed.

He was thoughtful when he returned to the hotel.

At the desk he checked with the receptionist.

‘Any messages?’

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The clerk looked attentive. ‘Will there be a reply?’
‘No reply. I’ll take my key.’

He reached his room and gathered his things together. The contract was on. The next stage would be to join Keel and the others at the mission station, thirty miles away through the bush. He had no transport so he’d have to steal a vehicle. The hotel car park was the obvious place to find one. It had been a long time since he’d hot-wired anything. He hoped he still had the knack.

Sekka changed into a pair of grey cord jeans and a black turtle-neck sweater. He put the rest of his clothes into the holdall with his other belongings and checked the room and bathroom to see if he’d forgotten anything. As a last precaution he slipped the ‘Do not disturb’ sign over the doorknob, then he opened the window.

The room was on the first floor at the rear of the hotel but it wasn’t much of a drop. Sekka watched as his holdall hit the ground below. Then, after a swift glance around to make sure there was no one to see him, he climbed out of the window and lowered himself down the wall until he hung by his fingers from the sill. Then he let go. He hit the earth and rolled, letting his legs absorb the shock of landing. He remained frozen for several seconds, senses alert to the sounds of the night: night birds and tree frogs mostly, while somewhere in the clump of bushes at the base of the wall a cicada chirruped noisily.

Retrieving his holdall, he padded towards the car park.

There were only half a dozen vehicles on offer: a couple of Toyotas, a Peugeot estate, two rust-speckled, nondescript hatchbacks and a VW camper. Not very promising but at least there was nobody around to disturb him. He was about to step across to the first car when he heard the sound of a motor and saw the glow of headlights as the vehicle swept into the car park. He melted against the wall.

It was a dark-coloured Range Rover and Sekka knew immediately that he wouldn’t have a better choice. It looked new and in good condition and he had the sneaking suspicion that it might be a DOSS vehicle. That likelihood and the fact that he was going to steal it gave Sekka a feeling of intense pleasure. He watched as the Range Rover was parked, somewhat erratically.

The driver turned off the lights, opened the door and fell out. Realization stirred hope in Sekka’s mind. The man was drunk. So was his passenger. The girl leaned languidly out of the passenger
door, mumbling incoherently. A giggle broke from her lips. With a grunt of annoyance the driver moved to assist, bouncing awkwardly off the bonnet. The girl clasped her arms around the man’s neck and together they meandered unsteadily towards the hotel entrance. Twice the girl stumbled and almost fell, only to be hauled upright by her equally inebriated partner.

Somebody up there likes me, thought Sekka as he watched them go. They hadn’t even locked the doors. Sekka sprinted from hiding.

It took him only seconds to find the leads and start the engine. So, he thought as he drove the Range Rover out of the car park, who needs Hertz?

It was odd driving through deserted streets and between darkened buildings. He knew he’d feel safer once he was out of the city. In the Range Rover he would be able to cover the twenty miles in good time providing he wasn’t stopped. He tried not to think about what might happen if he was flagged down by a patrol, though if this was a DOSS vehicle he would probably be left alone. He’d have to take his chances. He had to reach the mission by midnight to assist Keel’s arrival. And there was also the matter of the priest.

Father Michael Devlin.

Close to seventy years old and as tough as old boots. A boxer in his younger days and still a bit of a bruiser and, if Keel and Sekka were any judges of character, he’d be about the only person in Lugamba who wasn’t terrorized by Mabato and his goons. How could you intimidate someone who’d seen the hell of the Congo or Kenya during the Mau Mau campaign?

Devlin ran the mission station at Masambabule with the assistance of six nuns, all qualified nurses. They provided pastoral and medical care for the outlying villages. Sekka presumed nothing too advanced; broken arms and legs, stomach ailments and probably minor dental care. Anything more serious would necessitate a transfer to the city hospital.

Sekka smiled to himself as he tried to imagine the look on the old man’s face when he arrived out of the night, especially when he revealed to Devlin the reason for his visit. Over the years Keel had kept track of the priest’s whereabouts but it had been a long time since their last meeting. In spite of the motive, Sekka was quite looking forward to the reunion.

The Zulu crossed the Kenyan/Lugamban border that same night. He was driving a black Mazda jeep which he’d daubed with mud so that it blended
into the surrounding terrain. Using an old game trail, he’d avoided the border patrols from both countries. The trail had once been used by ivory poachers during the heyday of their raids into the Lugamban game parks. Since Mabato’s reign the parks had fallen into sad neglect. The staff had long since departed, leaving the herds unprotected. The result being that the elephant population had dwindled from over ten thousand to a few hundred, living mostly in isolated family groups and therefore difficult for the poaching teams to track down. The poachers turned their attention to crocodile skins instead and confined their activities to the shallow tributaries of the Lugopa River and its estuary at the north-west corner of Lake Victoria.

Under the blanket of night Qetuka hoped to cover the distance to Kendura and arrive in the city by dawn. Initially, the going would be difficult and, due to the nature of the country, slow. But he would be off the main highway and therefore out of sight of Mabato’s patrols, barring accidents.

Driving too fast, along a dirt track that dipped and curved like a roller coaster, Qetuka had only himself to blame. Even with headlights on, he hadn’t judged the bend correctly. When the jeep hit the shale, the wheels slid as though on ice. Qetuka spun the wheel in a frenzied effort to turn the rocking vehicle into the direction of the skid. For a second he thought he’d made it, but then in the swathe of the lights he saw the boulder dead ahead. The Mazda whipped broadside across the track and cannoned into the rock. Like a skater rebounding from the rink barrier, the jeep careered away, hubs spinning like tops, and slewed over the edge of the track like a rolling oil drum.

The defile was only fifteen feet deep but to Qetuka, bouncing in his seat as he fought to control the vehicle, the uneven slope seemed endless. The end came abruptly with a resounding crash as the bonnet connected with the opposite slope and the front axle snapped like a rotten twig. Qetuka was thrown forward. His head slammed against the dashboard and he was aware of a violent roaring sound in his brain. It felt as though he was drowning and he was dimly conscious of the hisses of steam erupting from the punctured radiator before he drifted into blissful oblivion.

If Corporal Joshua Besigye had felt the need to relieve himself five minutes earlier his future would have been lengthened considerably. As it was, Besigye’s bladder was close to bursting as he told his companion, Private
Natolo Oketta, to pull over to allow him to attend to the call of nature. The state of the road - cratered and undulating - had not helped matters and it was with some alacrity that the corporal jumped from the vehicle and unbuttoned his fly. With a groan of pleasure he sprayed the vegetation.

Back in the Land Rover, Private Oketta twiddled his thumbs and hoped the corporal wouldn’t be too long. He wanted to get back to the barracks and a beer and, later, the warm pendulous breasts of his girl, Mary Wafula. The fact that Mary was everyone else’s girl didn’t worry Oketta unduly. Mary was a generous soul, as the rest of the barracks would testify, and enjoying her sweet embrace, no matter if it was second hand, had to be a better proposition than performing these useless searches for Lugambans fleeing the less than enticing embrace of Solomon Mabato.

Oketta and Besigye had patrolled this quadrant at least a dozen times over the past few months and so far: nothing. They’d been heading back to base when the corporal felt the need to piss all over the countryside.

The man of the moment was now feeling a great deal more comfortable. He buttoned his fly and prepared to rejoin his vehicle.

Qetuka rose out of the darkness and from a distance of three feet shot Corporal Joshua Besigye in the head. The bullet entered Besigye’s right cheek and blew out the side of his face, shattering his jawbone and sending bits of flesh and bone flicking through the night air. The corporal’s body folded like a rag doll onto the dirt.

Before Oketta had time to blink he found himself looking down the barrel of the Zulu’s automatic. The apparition that confronted the bewildered private was like a scene from a nightmare: a wild man with blood seeping from a cut in his forehead. As he clambered out of the Land Rover he caught sight of his companion’s corpse and moaned with fear and revulsion. His eyes flickered nervously to the man with the gun.

Qetuka wondered what the strange clicking sound was until it dawned on him that it the private’s teeth chattering. He aimed the gun at Oketta’s belly.

‘Strip,’ he ordered.

Oketta’s eyes grew large with alarm.

‘Now!’ Qetuka snapped. The gun in his hand did not waver.

As if performing some strange tribal dance, Oketta hopped and skipped as he divested himself of his uniform. Clad in ragged underwear, he stood shivering with terror by the side of the Land Rover. His hands were
crossed over his concave chest like a young girl hiding her adolescence.

The Zulu nodded. ‘Good. Now, turn around and kneel down.’

Oketta hesitated.

‘Do it!’ Qetuka growled.

The private turned and dropped with the agility of a five year old. Qetuka sighted the automatic on the back of the kneeling man’s skull and squeezed the trigger. His victim fell forward on to his face and lay still. Qetuka didn’t bother to check for a pulse.

The Zulu changed into the private’s uniform and threw his own clothes into the back of the Land Rover. He ran into the darkness and collected his equipment from the hiding place in the scrub. Jumping into the driving seat, Qetuka jammed the Land Rover into gear and let out the clutch. Then he headed west.

From the shelter of the rocks and undergrowth and the tiny holes and crevices in the ground around the crumpled bodies of Oketta and Besigye the ants and scorpions began to emerge.

The guns were German made Heckler and Koch MP5s, twenty-six inches long and weighing six pounds. They could be fitted with either fifteen or thirty-round magazines.

Keel was pleased with the weapons. He hadn’t expected to be that lucky and had thought Mendoza would go for the American Ingram.

‘A good choice,’ he commented to Schiller, whose eyes had lit up when he saw the guns.

Schiller was well acquainted with the model. They had been standard issue with all GSG-9 units and had been used in the rescue at Mogadishu when he went into the 737 with Wegener and the two SAS men, Morrison and Davis. The guns had a low muzzle velocity and were very accurate. The SAS duo had been so impressed with their performance that they recommended the weapon to their colleagues in Hereford.

The weapons and packs were lying on a bench in the hangar. The Chieftain was outside on the apron, submitting to Kate Lassiter’s final checks.

Mendoza had also supplied four thirteen-shot Browning pistols with silencers, double-edged sheath knives with six-inch blades and four razor-sharp pangas in broad scabbards. He’d also provided a quantity of plastic
explosive, detonators, timers, spare mags, even grenades.

And shotguns. Twelve-Bore Creener Remington pump action, with the barrel cut back to the end of the hand grip. A fearsome weapon, perfected by the SAS for close quarter battle.

‘Shit!’ Roan looked aghast. ‘We’ve enough fire power to start World War Three.’

Schiller pointed out, ‘We can’t take all these. They’ll weigh us down.’

‘Personal choice,’ Keel advised. ‘Remington or an H and K. What we don’t need, Mendoza can take back. He’s got us cammo fatigues as well. We can change into them here and leave our own stuff. Joseph’s meeting us at the mission. We’ll take his gear with us. Don’t forget to leave all ID behind. Kate can stash it. You know the drill.’

They changed quickly into the combat wear and divided the equipment into four packs. They’d chosen the Heckler and Koch for themselves and Sekka in preference to the Remington, purely for the sustained fire power. Keel, however, as an afterthought, picked up one of the shotguns and slid it down the side of his pack with a supply of shells. He caught Roan’s eye. ‘I hate letting things go to waste.’

Kate Lassiter returned from the plane.

‘Any problems?’ Keel asked, knowing there wouldn’t be.

‘Everything’s fine. She’s fuelled and ready to go and I’ve filed a flight plan with the tower.’

‘What destination did you give them?’

‘The WHO field research station at Karanga. It’s fifteen miles this side of the border. I often do courier work for them and we’re in luck as I received a message that they need some samples ferrying back to Nairobi for analysis. No one will think it unusual. I’ll just make a small detour, that’s all. It’ll be a straight run west to Masambabule. I’ll drop you off and call in at Karanga on my way back here.’

Keel asked about the drop.

‘The Lugamban border-surveillance teams concentrate on preventing people getting out not in. Air patrols are non-existent. Most of Mabato’s air force is grounded anyway. It looks good on paper but his MiG pilots are still relatively inexperienced. They won’t fly at night. Plus I’ll be going in low and I’ll be in and out before they notice anything. It’ll be a piece of cake.’

‘In that case,’ Keel said, ‘I think we’re ready.’
They hefted the packs and weapons and followed Lassiter to the aircraft. Keel sat up front while Schiller and Roan made themselves comfortable in the cabin. Lassiter spoke to the tower through her head mike, requested clearance and took them down the apron. Minutes later the Chieftain was racing along the tarmac. Lassiter pulled back on the control yoke and the aircraft weaved into the air.

The prints were a lot better than Cameron had expected. Frank had done a good job, notwithstanding the devilish disguise bit. It had cost him a score to borrow the cart and overalls for twenty minutes. For a bet, he’d said. And Cameron had been right. All he’d done was point the bloody thing and hey presto: instant Lichfield.

Cameron had the prints developed in double quick time by a discreet friend who ran a small studio off Frith Street, though he’d had to be patient and wait until two redheads in suspenders and a bare-arsed photographer with a Pentax had completed their own shooting schedule on the king size bed next to the dark room.

‘The things you do for art,’ Cameron said. He ended up with a dozen eight by ten glossies. Dalkieth was easily recognizable.

By the time Cameron got back to his flat he was feeling peckish and it was getting late. He took a piece of fillet steak out of the fridge and ice from the freezer and poured himself two fingers of Smirnoff. Before he’d taken a sip, the telephone rang.

Frank. Slightly breathless, croaking and sounding worried. He was in a call box. Cameron could hear traffic.

‘I’ve been trying your gaff for ages, Mister Cameron. I’ve got something you should see.’

‘I’ve been out and it’s late. Can’t it wait?’

No.’ The answer was swift and decisive.

‘Frank?’

‘I’d rather come round.’ Ketch’s tone dropped to a hoarse whisper.

‘It’s about that photo session.’

As soon as the words were out Cameron felt the familiar icy fingers trace their way across his shoulders. ‘You’d better get over here.’

Before he put the receiver down he knew that Frank had already vacated the kiosk at a rapid rate of knots.
Ketch arrived fifteen minutes later. He looked surprisingly pale. Cameron let him in and waited for an explanation.

‘Sorry, Mister Cameron, but this couldn’t wait. Really it couldn’t.’
Frank unzipped his windcheater. ‘I was in Topknot this afternoon.’
Cameron looked blank. ‘Is that good or bad?’
‘Good for them, bad for me. I was getting my hair cut.’ He ran his fingers through his hair in an agitated gesture. ‘Cost a bloody arm and a leg, what with shampoo and all.’
Cameron surveyed the result. ‘Very nice,’ he said patiently.
‘I’m getting there,’ Ketch said. ‘Don’t rush me. It was while I was waiting to be done. I was reading the magazines.’
‘Is this going to take long, Frank?’ Cameron hoped Ketch wasn’t going to tell the old one about the Titanic going down but one look at the minder’s face told him Frank wasn’t in the mood for old jokes.
‘Like I said, I was reading, the magazines. They’ve got all sorts. Weekend, Reveille, Men Only, if you’re lucky ...’
‘Tick tock, Frank,’ Cameron said pointedly. ‘Tick tock.’
Frank ignored the jibe. From inside his windcheater he took a rolled magazine. ‘They also had this.’ He passed it over.

It was a three month old copy of the West German magazine Stern. On the front a girl in a bikini was pouting at the camera. ‘Thought it was a girlie mag,’ Ketch said.
‘Only it isn’t.’
‘Page seventeen,’ Frank said. ‘Take a look.’
The man in the photograph was certainly Gerald Hobson. Only according to the magazine his name wasn’t Hobson. It was George Dalkieth. Cameron’s command of German was good. He read the text.

According to Stern, George Dalkieth was the current Director of Operations, SIS. Cameron’s palms were suddenly clammy. His forehead throbbed and his eye socket, covered by the patch, began to itch.

It was all there: details of his education at Cambridge - where he’d taken a First in History - and his war record. He’d served in the Middle East and with the partisans in Greece and Yugoslavia, rising to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Intelligence Corps. After the war he’d been swallowed up by the Foreign Office and delegated unspecified duties. Whatever the hell that meant, Cameron thought.

Following tours abroad in Washington and Rome he’d moved back
to the UK and the corridors of Century House under the cover of the
Department of the Environment where he’d eventually taken on the mantle of
Director. The magazine even listed his clubs as the Athenaeum and the Royal
Commonwealth Society. Above all, he was credited with a quick brain and a
remorseless dedication.

Cameron stared at the photograph. In it, Dalkieth was about to enter a
limo. He was being seen away by a short, bespectacled man named as Karl
Heinz Shroeder, head of the West German Intelligence Service, the BND,
following a joint Intelligence Chiefs’ meeting in Bonn.

Sweet Jesus.
‘If I’d known we were dealing with the bogeymen, Mister Cameron...
’ Ketch looked distinctly worried. As well he might. ‘Soon as I saw the
photo I got one of the guys in the salon to translate,’ he said. ‘He’s a Kraut.
Comes from Frankfurt. Been over here two …’

‘Stow it, Frank. I’m trying to think.’ Cameron’s tone was harsh.
‘You didn’t tell him why you were interested? About the snaps you took?’

‘Oh, sure. And after I’d told him I went and stood at the end of
Haymarket and bawled my friggin’ head off, didn’t I? Leave it out!’

Cameron said nothing.

‘What happens now?’ Ketch asked.

Cameron threw the magazine down. ‘You bugger off. You go home
and speak to no-one about this. You don’t even think aloud, old son. Quiet as
the grave, Frankie boy. Or maybe that’s where you’ll end up.’

The minder paled.

Cameron’s good eye burned with a fierce intensity as he laid a hand
on Ketch’s arm. ‘You haven’t seen me either. Got that? You are a man with a
white stick and an Alsatian as far as I’m concerned.’

‘You don’t have to tell me!’ Ketch was already moving.

Cameron saw the leg man out of the flat and closed the door.

It didn’t make sense, he thought. The British Secret Service
recruiting mercenaries? With the Angolan fiasco still fresh in the mind, the
idea was preposterous. The smallest leak that such a venture was under way
would damage the credibility of the government beyond salvage.

What if there was a leak though?

Who else knew that Cameron had handled the contract? Just how
vulnerable was he if the lid was lifted?

And the answer to that question he didn’t like one little bit. And he’d
lost his appetite completely.

Sergeant Abraham Adoko was a worried man. His two-man border patrol was long overdue. Corporal Besigye and Private Oketta should have returned to the field base two hours ago and it had been four hours since their last radio call, announcing a routine patrol. If they had run into any trouble their standing orders were precise. They were to call in reinforcements immediately. There had been no call. Perhaps, thought Adoko, they’d met with an accident or the radio was on the blink.

Adoko knew that if the men didn’t show up he would have to answer to his Company Commander, who just happened to be Solomon Mabato’s second cousin. He didn’t relish that confrontation one little bit for it would not be the fate of his men that would be the talking point; it would be the loss of one military vehicle - the Land Rover.

Sergeant Adoko decided on his course of action. He summoned Corporal Moyo. The corporal was to take one trooper and back track along the route that the returning patrol would take. If they found anything, they were to call in. At once.
The mission building at Masambabule was shaped like a U. The base of the letter housed a small office and reception room. The left wing consisted of the staff’s living quarters and the right wing held the dispensary, surgery and a small twelve-bed ward. To the right of the low building, a tiny whitewashed chapel stood under the branches of a sycamore tree.

The airstrip was a half-mile long stretch of bare earth that ran behind the mission from east to west. The mission and the strip lay at the base of a thorn-scrub crested escarpment that sloped northwards towards a shallow defile that had once held a meandering tributary of the Mvula River.

In the surgery, Father Michael Devlin glared down at his quivering patient with undisguised anger. From the rear of the mission could be heard the low hum of the generator and the light above the examination table flickered briefly as the priest bent forward and said, ‘It’s your own damned fault, Elias. How many times have I told you to lay off the bottle! Jesus! I don’t know why I waste my breath! Christ’s sake, Sister, hold him still! He’s all over the place! And stop blubbing, man, or so help me, I’ll anaesthetize you with my boot!’

Sister Constance turned her eyes heavenward in exasperation and clamped her hands over Elias’s bony shoulders as the latter rolled his eyes dramatically.

The priest held the cotton wool pad over the neck of the bottle and after soaking it in the antiseptic, scrubbed the patient’s forearm, lips clamped in concentration. Elias squirmed.

The gash ran from the inside of the elbow to within an inch of the wrist. It was an ugly cut, made worse by the puckered flesh and strips of flayed skin that oozed blood like a piece of rare steak.

Elias watched with dreadful fascination as Father Devlin threw the used swab into the bin under the table and picked up the hypodermic. To the frightened man the instrument probably looked as long as an assegai. However, despite his angry tone earlier, the priest administered the local anaesthetic with great gentleness.
‘There,’ Devlin said soothingly. ‘It won’t be long now. We’ll soon have you sewn up. Isn’t that right, Sister?’

Elias did not look like a man convinced, although his arm was turning numb and the feeling was not unpleasant. Sister Constance, sensing the change in his condition, eased her hold. The sight of Devlin attempting to thread gut through the eye of the needle, however, proved too much for Elias to bear. He promptly lost consciousness.

The priest snorted. ‘Fainted my eye!’ he muttered in answer to Sister Constance’s observation. ‘Drunken stupor, more like!’

The neatness of stitch left a lot to be desired. Elias’s arm wouldn’t win any applause at a BMA convention but purpose was served. Devlin and his staff performed no more than basic medicine. With the facilities at their disposal they were equipped to do little else, but for the inhabitants of the villages surrounding the mission they were the next best thing to a team of Harley Street surgeons.

Devlin studied his handiwork. ‘Not pretty, but it’ll do the job. Oh, you’re waking up! Good; thought we’d lost you there for a moment.’

His patient blinked and stared at him and then at the bandage wrapped around his arm.

The priest smiled. ‘Right on your way, you can’t hang around here making the place untidy. Off to your wife, now, otherwise she’ll be wondering where you are…or not, as the case may be.’

As Elias sped from the room, Devlin smiled. ‘Right, I’ll leave you to tidy up, Sister, if that’s all right. I’m away to put my feet up.’ He ran a gnarled hand through his untidy silver thatch. ‘It’s been a long day.’

‘Very well, Father.’ The elderly nun stared after the retreating Elias. ‘They’re like children.’ She sighed. ‘I wonder sometimes how they ever got on without us.’

Devlin frowned. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘for a nun you do talk a deal of twaddle! All this righteousness isn’t good for you. It’s like working with Julie Andrews. It isn’t all do, re, mi and drops of golden sun. You’ve been here long enough to know that. These people are motivated by the same vices we are, only to a lesser degree because their horizons are more limited. But it’s all there; avarice, lust, envy, greed, I don’t have to go through the whole list. The fact that Elias had the ill sense to put his arm through a window while attempting to break into the dispensary goes some way towards proving my point; particularly as he was under the influence of alcohol at the time. If you
can call that concoction they drink alcohol. It’ll never catch on in Ballyferriter.’

He smiled suddenly, eyes twinkling. ‘Nevertheless, you can’t help liking them, can you?’

With that, he closed the door behind him, leaving Sister Constance open-mouthed and not a little perplexed. She shook her head. ‘Father Devlin,’ she said softly, ‘you never fail to surprise.’

He was certainly unorthodox.

Sixty-eight years old with a face like a relief map of the Devil’s Causeway. Blue eyes as bright as buttons and a head of silver hair that looked as though it had been trimmed with a pair of blunt pruning shears. In a film he’d have been played by Spencer Tracy with an Irish brogue.

It had been four years ago when Sister Constance and the other nuns arrived in Lugamba. Their brief: to assist the priest in establishing the mission at the foot of the Masambabule escarpment. It had been a new challenge for them all. Sister Constance’s years of nursing service at the hospital run by the nuns of the Order of the Sacred Heart on the outskirts of Brussels had hardly prepared her for the rigours of life in the African bush. The five novices chosen to accompany her had been equally out of their depth. However, with a perseverance born of their vocation, they had come to grips with their new and hostile environment as well as with their new mentor.

Father Devlin was a surprise to them all and initially, it had to be said, a constant source of embarrassment. No timid parish padre but a man deeply committed to the welfare of his flock. A walking enigma was Michael Devlin, with the craggy face and stocky frame of a fairground pugilist and the scarred hands of a lumberjack.

So, he had the unnerving tendency to take the Lord’s name in vain and perhaps he did like the occasional drop of whisky but was that so bad? Sister Constance, her five colleagues and, presumably, the Lord Himself, had come to an agreement. They turned the other cheek.

At first, Devlin told them little about himself save for a brief account of his boyhood in a small village on the Dingle Peninsula in the windswept storm-tossed south-west corner of Ireland.

It was much later that he told them about Changi and the Japanese and Korean interrogators and the pain. But that had been nothing compared to the Mau Mau rebellion and the dreadful atrocities he’d seen in the Congo.
before the liberation of Isangi by Mike Hoare’s mercenary Commando. Then it had been Nigeria and the horrors of Biafra followed by Lugamba and the emergence of the man they called the Liberator.

And yet, despite it all, he’d kept his faith. The reason was simple. He had survived.

‘Father Devlin.’

The priest had almost reached his office when he was addressed. The speaker was one of the other nuns, the youngest member of his nursing staff, Sister Elicia. Pretty and wide eyed, she seemed to treat the priest with awe whenever she spoke to him. She whispered now in hushed, almost reverent tones.

Devlin smiled. ‘I thought you’d have been asleep, Sister. It’s very late.’

‘We have visitors, Father.’

Devlin’s eyebrows rose fractionally.

‘I saw headlights through my window,’ she explained.

‘Did ye now? Well, let’s go and see who it is. Maybe it’s Saint Teresa, come to check up on us.’

Sister Elicia had long ago ceased to be concerned by Father Devlin’s irreverence. He was the most unusual man of God she’d ever known and she often chuckled inwardly at the thought of what her last Mother Superior would say in the unlikely event she ever came face to face with the irascible old Irishman.

The vehicle was a Range Rover. There was one occupant; a tall African. The man approached. He walked softly, Devlin noticed. Like a prowling cat and for a brief moment the priest was reminded of someone. Devlin stared.

‘Dear God! Joseph? Joseph Sekka? I don’t believe it. What the hell are you doing here? Is Thomas with you? My boy, how long’s it been?’

The two men embraced. Watching from the doorway, Sister Elicia found the sight of the visitor and the silver-haired priest holding each other close strangely moving. She couldn’t be sure but was there the trace of a tear in the old man’s eye?

Devlin broke away and turned. He smiled awkwardly and ran a hand through his hair. ‘Sister Elicia, please forgive my rudeness. It is just that Joseph is a friend I’ve not seen for some time.’

‘It’s quite all right, Father. I understand.’ She smiled nervously at
Sekka.

Devlin rubbed his hands together happily. ‘Well, don’t stand out there, Joseph! Let’s go inside! Sister, perhaps you could make some tea?’ He threw Sekka a sly look. ‘Or what about something a little stronger? I’m sure I’ve a drop of the hard stuff somewhere to hand and you can forget that rot about only having it for medicinal purposes, too!’

Sekka said, ‘That can wait, Father. I’m afraid my visit isn’t entirely social. I need your help.’ He looked at his watch. ‘We don’t have much time.’

The priest blinked. ‘I don’t understand.’

Sekka laid an arm on Devlin’s shoulders. ‘Thomas is coming here by plane, tonight. We need the airstrip lit.’

‘What?’

‘I want a string of lights on either side of the runway. We’ve got about thirty minutes.’

The priest stared at him. ‘What the devil’s going on?’

‘I’ll explain later. Right now, we need lamps, torches, anything you have, and we can use the lights of the Range Rover. I see you’ve got a Land Cruiser. We’ll use that as well. And we’ll need help. Where is everybody?’

‘It’s nearly midnight! Where do you think?’

‘Wake them up.’

The old man’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline.

‘Please, Father. It’s important.’

‘About to remonstrate, Devlin saw the look in Sekka’s eyes and turned quickly. ‘Right, Sister, forget the tea. Wake everyone. You’ll find Sister Constance in the surgery. Tell her to join us.’ He growled at her amazement. ‘Don’t just stand there with your mouth open like a goldfish, girl! Hurry!’

Sekka squeezed Devlin’s arm. ‘Thank you. Now, when everyone’s ready, they’re to grab all the lights you have.’

‘We’ve empty paint tins in the store and oil for the generator. We can rig makeshift lamps with rag wicks.’

Sekka smiled. ‘Then let’s get to it.’

The nuns arrived, tousled with sleep, excepting Sister Elicia and Sister Constance. The latter viewed the priest with bewilderment and Sekka with suspicion.

‘Joseph a friend,’ Devlin told them. ‘You are to do exactly as he tells you.’
Under Sekka’s direction they drove the two vehicles out to the strip and spaced the make-do lights along the ground. Then, armed with flickering, oil-soaked brands, he told them to stand by and keep quiet. In silence they waited. The night robes of the women, illuminated by the flames of the torches, gleamed like shrouds. Inevitably, it was Sekka who heard the engines first.

‘Lights!’ he yelled. ‘GO!’

One by one the strip lights came on, followed by the wider beams of the Range Rover and the Land Cruiser. The figures of the nuns looked like wraiths as they ran between the beacons.

‘There!’ Kate Lassiter was peering down through the windscreen when Keel tapped her shoulder and pointed.

‘Going down,’ Kate said. ‘Hold tight. This could be bumpy.’

The aircraft dipped on one wing and the string of lights grew brighter. The Chieftain swooped below the level of the escarpment and bounced on a cross current. The wheels hit the ground and Kate throttled back. The tone of the turbo-charged Lycomings dropped and the run along the strip became an uneven taxi. A yard or two beyond the last pair of lights the aircraft turned in its own length. Caught like a moth in the Range Rover’s beams, the nose bobbed as the undercarriage trundled over the scrub.

Sekka gunned the motor of the Range Rover and drove out to the Chieftain as it came to a halt. The side door lifted and the steps were lowered. Harry Roan appeared in the doorway.

‘Hey, Joseph! How’s it going?’

‘Fine, Harry. Good flight?’

‘Real smooth,’ Roan said. Disappearing into the cabin, he re-emerged with a pack and a machine pistol. He passed them to Sekka who stowed them in the Range Rover. Schiller appeared behind the American similarly laden.

At the side of the airstrip, the mission staff watched the arrival with fascination as a third man stepped from the Chieftain. Tall, dressed like the others, his hair was cut short and by the way he was smiling he was pleased to see Sekka. Standing next to Sister Constance, the priest stiffened abruptly.

More gear was taken from the aircraft and placed in the Range Rover. A fourth person appeared and Sister Constance exclaimed, ‘Why it’s a
The priest observed quietly, ‘Kate Lassiter. I’ll be damned.’
‘You know her, Father?’ Sister Constance asked in surprise.
‘Oh, yes.’ Devlin did not elaborate.
The men were climbing into the Range Rover; except Keel.
‘Thanks for the lift, Kate,’ he said.
Lassiter nodded. ‘Any time.’ She watched the mercenary’s face closely. ‘I’ll be back in twenty-four hours.’
‘Copy that,’ Keel said. He paused. ‘But if we aren’t here by midnight, you head back to Nairobi.’
‘Thomas…”
‘I mean it, Kate. Get out fast.’
She reached out and touched his cheek with her palm. ‘You’d better be here, or you’ll have me to answer to.’
‘Yes, ma’am.’
Her hand formed a fist which she tapped against his chest. A spark deep in her green eyes caught Keel’s senses. He held her clenched hand to his lips and kissed it softly. ‘Safe trip,’ he said.
‘Take care, Thomas. I’ll be coming for you.’ She stepped back into the Chieftain. The steps retracted and the door was secured. Keel walked to the Range Rover and Sekka drove off the strip and parked. The props turned and with a lurch the Chieftain began its run. It rolled over the ground, gathering speed, and lifted into the darkness. Immediately, Sekka ordered the lights along the field to be doused.

Like a large moth, a figure detached itself from the shadows and ran through the headlight beams. ‘Have you no words of greeting, Thomas Keel? You warmongering heathen!’
‘The wrath of God personified,’ Keel said, climbing out of the Range Rover. ‘How are you, Father? How goeth the teachings of the Lord?’
‘The day I convert you will be the day my work is finished.’
Keel smiled. ‘In your dreams.’
‘Ah, but you’re a terrible man!’ The priest’s face softened suddenly and his bright eyes searched Keel’s hard features. He was almost on tiptoe as he lifted his hands to the mercenary’s shoulders. ‘Are you well, my boy?’
‘I’m well, Father.’
Roan and Schiller stepped out of the Range Rover. Schiller was already lighting a cheroot while Harry Roan smiled easily.
‘Who are these men?’ queried Devlin.

‘The one with the moustache and high forehead is Harry Roan and the good looking one trying to smoke himself into an early grave calls himself Paul Schiller. They’re friends of mine. Gentlemen, meet Father Michael Devlin. God’s answer to Rocky Marciano.’

Devlin nodded to each in turn. ‘Any friends of Thomas are welcome here.’

Movement over the priest’s shoulder at the edge of the light. Women in night attire looking at the visitors as though they had arrived from another planet.

Keel returned the perusal, a slight smile playing on his lips as he regarded their study of him. ‘Introductions, Father?’

The nuns looked quite worried.

‘My nursing staff.’

‘Sisters.’ Keel acknowledged them before turning back to the priest. ‘I suggest we get back to the mission.’

Sister Constance ushered the nuns back into the building. ‘That includes you, Sister Elicia.’

She glanced at the priest. He doesn’t know what this is about either, she thought. She supposed they would all find out soon enough.

The priest was aghast. ‘You cannot be serious!’

The four mercenaries and Michael Devlin were in the office, the nuns having retired to their quarters after reassurances from the old man that there was nothing for them to worry about. They were in no danger.

The packs and weapons were stacked in a corner of the room.

‘We’ve accepted a contract to snatch Holt from prison,’ Keel said.

‘We’re going ahead with it.’

‘He’s in Maboru! You’ll never get him out!’

‘We’re going to try, Father. We’re going to try real hard.’

‘But I don’t understand. He’ll be released surely? The British Government will…’

‘Not negotiate with Mabato.’ The grey haired mercenary’s voice was stern. ‘To do so would set a precedent for every two-bit, fanatical dictator to follow.’

‘He’s right,’ Roan cut in. ‘The British won’t give in to Mabato’s
demands and the President sure as hell won’t release Holt. Heck, you know this country; you know Mabato. He’ll execute the guy just for the fun of it, in a matter of days unless we can get him out first. He might not even have that long.’

Devlin shook his head in confusion. ‘But who’s paying you? Who’s behind this?’

‘We were hired through a broker, a man we trust. He’s guaranteed our fee. We suspect he’s acting on behalf of a cartel; colonial diehards.’

‘I came in as an advance party,’ Sekka explained.

Devlin looked at each of them in turn. ‘You’re mad,’ he said finally, shaking his head.

‘He might have a point,’ Roan muttered wryly.

The priest was silent for a moment or two. He looked at the equipment they had brought with them. ‘When are you proposing to attempt this foolish gesture?’

‘In about nineteen hours,’ said Keel. ‘We’ll bring him back here and Kate Lassiter will airlift us out.’

‘It’s nice to be consulted,’ the priest bristled. ‘I’m running a medical mission here, not a transit halt for brigands. Don’t think for one minute that our friendship gives you the right to place my staff at risk.’

Keel advised reluctantly, ‘I had little choice. This strip is ideally situated for our needs. We had precious little time to prepare. An airlift was the only practical solution. Having you here was, I’ll admit, a bonus I couldn’t ignore. Father, we need your help.’

‘You mean you’re taking in your marker?’

Keel’s eyes darkened.

Devlin blanched. ‘I’m sorry, Thomas. That remark was uncalled for. What do you want from me?’

‘We need a place to stay until we make our move.’

‘We’ve a small isolation ward. It’s empty at the moment. You can use that. You’ll not be disturbed. I’ll advise the sisters.’

‘Thank you.’

The door opened suddenly without warning. Sister Elicia, flushed and breathless, in a long white cotton gown buttoned to the neck. Her hair was loose. Her gaze lingered on Schiller for two seconds before she addressed the priest.

‘Father, there are soldiers!’
‘Christ!’ Roan sprang towards the machine pistols and a Browning appeared in Schiller’s hand as if by magic.

The priest sprang to his feet. ‘No violence here! For the love of God!’

‘Grab the gear!’ Keel snarled. ‘Move! Joseph, where’d you park the Range Rover? If they spot that …’

‘It’s in the store, out of sight.’

The young nun stood by the door, doe-eyed, fearful. She caught Schiller’s eye again as he swept pack and weapon off the floor. Incredibly, he smiled at her and for some inexplicable reason she no longer felt afraid.

Devlin pushed her out of the room. ‘I’ll be with you in a second. Go!’ He turned to Keel. ‘Thomas, you and the others follow me!’

They left the office at a run, moving into the corridor. The priest led the way through the building. A door was flung open and in the gloom they saw half a dozen beds shrouded in mosquito netting. The room carried the faint aroma of disinfectant.

‘Into the beds. Pull the nets around you. I’ll try and get rid of our visitors.’

Leaving them, the priest slammed the door behind him and ran back down the passage.

Slinging the packs under the beds, they crawled between the sheets. The mosquito nets hung around them like veils.

The corporal’s name was Moyo. His companion was a tubby, unsavoury individual whose name Devlin didn’t catch. Both soldiers fingered the triggers of their assault rifles. The corporal explained that they were looking for a missing Land Rover and its two occupants; a border surveillance patrol that had failed to maintain radio contact with its base.

‘You think they may be here?’ Father Devlin asked, eyeing the guns speculatively.

‘Perhaps,’ Moyo grunted. His answer carried the veneer of insolence.

Devlin said curtly, ‘This mission was established under the auspices of the Lugamban Government. Neither I nor my staff has any knowledge of the men you seek. I suggest you pursue your enquiries elsewhere, Corporal.’

Behind the priest’s shoulder Sister Elicia felt the stirrings of alarm once more as she caught the corporal’s look. The skin at the base of her neck prickled uncomfortably.

‘We will search,’ Moyo said.
They pushed past her into the office. The sour smell of the fat private was almost overpowering and Sister Elicia wrinkled her nose instinctively. The priest’s eyes flashed her a warning. On no account antagonize them.

Gathered in the corridor, the nuns looked on in silence as Corporal Moyo and his odorous companion examined their rooms one by one. Emerging from the last room, Moyo looked towards the door at the end of the passage. He held his Kalashnikov across his chest and stalked towards it.

‘I wouldn’t go in there, Corporal.’ Devlin, arriving there before him, rested his hand on the door knob. His expression was beseeching.

Moyo ignored the remark. He gripped the priest’s arm and took the hand away.

‘I beg of you.’ The old man’s face was pale.

Without a word, Moyo raised the Kalashnikov, turned the knob and pushed the door open. He strode into the room.

In the second bed, Keel lay on his back and watched the door swing open. In the light from the corridor three figures were silhouetted and through the muslin film he saw the stocky shape of Devlin and two soldiers in army fatigues. Concealed by the single cotton sheet Keel cradled the Remington, his finger curling around the trigger. He knew the others would be tensed like springs.

The taller of the two troopers traversed the room with the barrel of his weapon, his eyes taking in the double row of beds and their barely discernible occupants. Moyo moved to the first bed. Sekka’s eyes were closed and he appeared to be asleep.

A few feet away Keel was acutely aware that a river of perspiration was coursing between his shoulder blades.

Corporal Moyo, the snout of his Kalashnikov pointing at the silent figure in the bed, gripped the crumpled corner of the mosquito net and raised it an inch.

Keel started to uncoil, the Remington becoming an extension of his arm as he prepared to draw back the sheet and let rip.

Suddenly the priest stepped forward and muttered hurriedly in the corporal’s ear. Abruptly, the man swore and dropped the net as though it had been charged with electricity. Recoiling from the bed, he brushed past the priest and melted into the corridor, the second trooper flanking. Father Devlin followed them outside and closed the door.

Keel’s grip on the shotgun relaxed and from the bed across the room
Schiller whispered an obscenity and closed his eyes as relief flowed through his body.

‘Sweet Jesus!’ Roan lifted his net. ‘I thought we’d have to take them out.’

Keel swept back the sheet and swung his legs to the floor. ‘You and me both.’ He clasped the Remington across his knees. ‘I wonder what Devlin said to make him back off. He looked as if he’d come face to face with Old Nick.’

From Sekka’s direction came the unmistakable sound of a chuckle. Keel prodded the bed with the barrel of the shotgun. ‘What the hell are you laughing at?’

Sekka stirred and emerged from the net like a moth from a cocoon, uncocking the Browning in his fist. He was grinning widely.

Schiller held the MP5 nonchalantly. ‘What’s the joke?’

Sekka laughed. ‘He told them we were lepers.’

The silence was broken eventually by Roan’s long exhalation. Keel shook his head.

The door swung open. Sekka whipped into a low crouch, the heavy Browning held in both hands. Keel and the Remington were as one in a smooth synchronized ballet. Roan and Schiller were spinning apart, machine pistols lifting in unison.

Father Devlin cocked an eyebrow and said quietly, ‘You will be relieved to hear they’ve gone.’ He pointed to their firearms. ‘They will not be required. I suggest you stow them in a safe place and return to your beds. I think we’ve all had quite enough excitement for one night. You will not be disturbed.’

‘That was a brilliant ruse, Father,’ Schiller smiled.

‘I’ll second that,’ said Roan. ‘What made you think up that story?’

The priest looked nonplussed. ‘I don’t see why it should sound unusual. This is an isolation unit after all. The last occupants of those beds had Lassa fever.’

He had already left the room and closed the door before anyone could think of a suitable reply.
Qetuka’s progress into and through Kendura was uneventful. No one thought twice about a man in army fatigues driving a military vehicle and he’d kept to the side roads to avoid the possibility of having to explain himself to a genuine patrol.

His first intention was to conceal the Land Rover.

The shops resembled a row of rotting teeth too decayed to repair. The narrow alley ran down one side of the block and opened on to a litter-strewn parade of lock up garages. Qetuka drove the Land Rover through a minefield of broken bottles, mountains of rusting tin cans and walls of splintered packing cases. In the gloom the garage entrance gaped like a cavern. The door was the up-and-over type, suspended on creaking brackets and broken springs.

He reversed in, retrieved his bag and after some effort and noise, managed to pull down the door so the vehicle was hidden. Shouldering his bag, he headed back down the alleyway, picking his way through the rubble, keeping to the shadows.

The woman looked terrified. No doubt she’d thought his tapping on her door was the prelude to a visit by SASU. She regarded Qetuka with undisguised apprehension through the gap above the security chain, gaze flickering quickly over the uniform.

‘I am Qetuka,’ he said.

At the mention of his name she let out a gasp and the door was opened. The Zulu stepped inside.

The woman locked the door and fastened the chain. Qetuka watched her. She was very tall and slim hipped, unlike the majority of Lugamban women. The cotton kaftan she wore did little to hide her figure, the thin material moulding itself to her firm breasts and shapely legs; dancer’s legs. Her eyes were large and her lips full. Her hair was cut short like a man’s and it served to emphasize her graceful neck. Her ebony skin was flawless. She wore no makeup.

Elizabeth Wakholi had been one of the lead dancers with the State
Dance Troupe. The dancers often entertained foreign dignitaries at state functions and Elizabeth, as one of the stars, had also featured in travelogue films produced by the Lugamban Tourist Board. In this role she had come under the eye of Solomon Mabato.

Mabato’s exploits with women were legion for he regarded his sexual prowess as an extension of his power and authority. Many women even made themselves available in order to increase their standing, and it was said that Mabato’s mewling offspring crawled and dribbled their way through every facet of Lugamban society.

Mabato had made his intentions towards her plain from the start. She recalled the first occasion with loathing. It had followed a display by the troupe at a banquet held to honour the arrival of the Libyan delegation. The dancers, men clad only in breech clouts and the women in G strings, their bodies shiny with oil, had gyrated and writhed before the hundred or so guests in the huge ballroom at the President’s residence.

Throughout the routines, Elizabeth had been aware of Mabato’s gaze as he’d followed her every move with undisguised lust. At first she’d felt flattered that the Liberator should pay her such a compliment but then she caught him making an obscene gesture in her direction, to the amusement of his aides, and she felt the first twinge of fear course through her body.

As the dancers made their exit to applause from the guests she had glanced towards Mabato’s table and seen him whisper to one of his companions and nod in her direction. Back in the room that served as a dressing area she knew instinctively that she had been singled out for special attention and was about to receive a summons. The most distressing fact was that she would be unable to refuse.

The director of the troupe had approached her with concern on his face. He’d told her quietly that he was there to present His Excellency’s warm congratulations and to tell her also that the President wished to express his appreciation of her dancing in person.

Fully aware of the stares of the other troupe members, she nodded dully. The expressions of the other dancers varied from envy to sympathy. Conscious of this, she clutched a robe around her and followed the director from the room.

Close to, the President looked even more ferocious with small, pig-like eyes set in a vast round head that sat like a football on a mammoth trunk. He smiled as she entered the ante room. The cowering director had made
hurried introductions before leaving her to her fate.

Conscious of Mabato’s admiring gaze she drew the robe closely to her body and waited for him to speak. Beyond the closed doors she could hear laughter from the dinner guests and the light tinkle of glasses.

Mabato said, ‘The dancing was excellent. I am very pleased.’

Elizabeth remained silent. She did not know if a reply was expected.

‘You are a very beautiful woman,’ Mabato continued. He grinned and tapped his vast buttocks. ‘Not fat here like the others. I like that. You are sleek like an animal.’

He moved towards her, his chest medals clinking in unison as he approached. They were spread across his dress uniform in tiers. Standing close, she became aware of his smell; heavy, like musk. Not pleasant. She was uncomfortably conscious of her nakedness beneath the robe.

‘You are afraid of me,’ he said abruptly.

When she didn’t answer he said, ‘That is not a bad thing, I think.’ Without warning he touched her arm. It was like an electric shock and she flinched.

‘Your body is like fire to my touch.’ A nerve jumped on his mutilated cheek. ‘Take off your robe.’

When she hesitated he said, ‘I want to look at you. Take it off.’ His voice rose. ‘Now!’

With trembling fingers she undid the sash and let the thin garment slip down her shoulders to the floor. Still anointed with oil, her body shone like black marble.

As her magnificent form became exposed Mabato let out a heavy sigh of pleasure, his eyes raking her from head to toe. His gaze flickered over her proud, thrusting breasts and lingered on the tiny G string covering her loins.

As his huge hand reached for her breast she backed away. ‘Stand still.’ he ordered.

Her head jerked up as his fingers brushed her nipples. They were like buds and the brief caress made her gasp. Using both hands Mabato stroked the shining flesh, a look of intense concentration on his face.

Then his hands moved lower to her waist, then lower still and his thick fingers slid under the ties of the G string.

Without warning, he ripped the flimsy triangle away leaving her totally naked. A tiny scrap of material was caught between her thighs. He
removed it from the apex of her long legs with a delicate touch, taking the
opportunity to probe her cleft with his fingers.

Her initial reaction was to press her thighs together.
Mabato slapped her face with his open palm. Her head whipped away
beneath the force of the blow. Tears welled in her eyes.

‘Do not reject me!’ Mabato hissed. ‘I have seen the way you dance,
using your body to excite men.’ His hands had left her thighs and he was
fumbling at his belt. Then she was being pushed back towards a writing desk
that sat in the corner of the room.

Mabato held her with one hand, the other holding his trousers as he
manoeuvred the woman before him. They reached the desk and Mabato
twisted her around until she had her back towards him. His grip was like iron.
A scream rose in her throat but no sound came except a low whimper. With
one hand pushing into the small of her back, Mabato released his trousers and
undergarments in a heap around his ankles.

Her own hands were free. She was scrabbling at the desk top, trying
to get leverage to tear herself away from his terrible embrace. A bottle of ink
fell to the floor and rolled away and her nails raked the blotter as she bucked
but she couldn’t move her legs. With one hand pressing on her back and the
other on her buttocks, he used his knees to force her legs apart. She struggled
but his strength was too much for her and his hands were like two huge
clamps burning their way into her skin. She felt herself being lifted then
something was touching the back of her leg and Mabato was grunting like a
bear. Then came the first clumsy attempt at penetration. She bit her lip, the
blood running inside her mouth as she jerked her head from side to side.
Mabato began to thrust himself at her. The sensation was as if a bar of steel
was forcing its way into her body. Mabato was heaving himself back and
forth, groaning with pleasure.

He had left her afterwards, fastening his trousers almost absently as
he gazed at her bruised body crumpled by the desk.

‘I think I will use you again,’ he said. ‘You have much to learn but
you excite me.’

He picked up the discarded robe and tossed it at her. ‘Get dressed.’
He adjusted his jacket and tie and walked towards the door. As he
reached it he turned. His expression was one of detachment.

‘I will send for you.’
The sound of merriment rose momentarily as he let himself out of the
room and closed the door behind him.

There had been many occasions since that first meeting and all of them just as degrading. Mabato’s appetite was insatiable and his scope for variation seemingly endless.

Elizabeth Wakholi had learned to accept her role with a resignation that disgusted her. She had thought of fleeing more than once but the realization of what Mabato would do to her family prevented her. The last girl who’d rejected his advances had turned up in one of the refrigeration units in the morgue at Magula Hospital, her legs and arms having been cut off and placed in a sack next to her dismembered torso. Her mother, father and two sisters had disappeared from her village, never to be seen again.

Elizabeth Wakholi had two teenage brothers and an invalid mother, so she submitted to Mabato’s demands without question. Two or three times a month, fewer if she was lucky. Mabato had a ready supply of women. He could pick and choose.

But that did not prevent her from plotting.

Because of her place in Mabato’s affections - if it could be called that - she had been a prime target for Hamilton Kemba’s agents. She had been recruited a month after Mabato had taken her to his bed and anywhere else he could think of when the mood took him. Mabato had no propensity for pillow talk but Elizabeth nurtured the hope that someday her sacrifice would pay dividends. Her long suffering patience had been rewarded at last.

Qetuka was here.

‘Are you hungry?’ she asked him. ‘I do not have much food but I can prepare you something.’

He nodded.

She withdrew to the kitchen area. Qetuka reached for his bag and moved to the couch. The rifle was in three sections. It was a Czechoslovakian 7-mm Sahka with a thirty-power horsehair scope, the butt hollowed to hold half a dozen crossed dum-dum bullets capable of blowing a man apart like a ripe pumpkin at five hundred yards. It was a formidable gun. His second firearm was more conventional; a Colt automatic with suppressor; for short range kills.

The Zulu’s last weapon was the most curious and yet gruesome in its simplicity. It was a garotte. The thin cheese wire was concealed in a leather wrist bracelet, with the toggles forming an integral feature of the design. Qetuka could release the weapon in a split second, using one of the toggles as
a weight to flick the wire around the victim’s throat. It was a simple yet cunning device and in the Zulu’s expert hands it was lethal.

She watched him from the doorway, her eyes following every movement as he tested the bolt action of the rifle and the automatic’s slide and magazine.

He looked up.

She asked him if he wanted coffee. Apart from eggs and butter and the soap in the bathroom, it was the only other luxury she possessed. Since the Asians had been expelled the production of coffee had dropped drastically.

‘Please; strong and black.’

She used some of the precious butter to cook the eggs. Qetuka ate them with relish. She poured a drop of condensed milk from a can into her own coffee and studied him over the rim of her cup.

She had been instantly conscious of his grace as he moved into the apartment. His body flowed. He was lithe, honed like a machine. His aura had taken over and she was now the interloper.

Qetuka was aware of her perusal and knew she was afraid of what he represented.

He pushed the plate aside. ‘Thank you.’

She shrugged. ‘A small payment for what you are here to do. When I was told you were coming to kill Mabato I wept with joy.’

He looked at her calmly, noting her beauty. ‘You seem to think I am some sort of messiah. I am not. I am a man sent to do a job.’

‘Man, messiah, avenging angel,’ she said. ‘I will pray for your success.’

Qetuka said, ‘I will need your help.’

‘Ask. I will do whatever you require. I want that butcher dead.’ Her vehemence was startling in its intensity.

So, this was one of Mabato’s bed mates, he thought.

As though she had read his mind she stood and turned and unfastened the kaftan.

From the hollow between her shoulder blades to the curve of her hip, the weals that criss-crossed her skin were like some macabre lattice work. Some of the wounds had healed and formed thin scabs but others, recently inflicted, ran in pink tendrils across her back.

‘You see now,’ she said.
‘He did this to you?’ the Zulu asked softly.
‘He mates like an animal,’ she hissed. ‘He enjoys giving pain, to hear his women scream as he takes them. It is the only way he can achieve a climax. He is incapable of love. If I had the means I would kill him myself.’ She covered herself. ‘When I am taken to him they search me. It is impossible to conceal a weapon anywhere ...’
‘You are taken to him?’ Qetuka looked suddenly thoughtful.
‘A driver collects me and drives me to the Command Post.’
‘The same driver every time?’
‘No. I have had the same man more than once but never at regular intervals.’
‘When you go to the Command Post, do you always use the same room?’
She nodded, curious. ‘Yes. His other women may be taken elsewhere but I do not know about them.’
‘I see.’ He frowned. ‘And when are you to visit him again?’
She shivered. ‘The time comes around too quickly. It will be this afternoon when the driver comes to deliver me to Mabato.’

Leonid Vakov nudged his companion awake. ‘Stir yourself, Valeri Andreyevich. We have arrived.’
Litvinof yawned, ‘I could have slept for a week.’
‘I don’t know how you slept at all,’ Vakov said. ‘Not over those roads! And with these bloody drivers!’
Litvinof sat up and peered through the windscreen. Ahead of them, the lights of the city glowed like fireflies. In the wing mirrors he could see the bright headlights of the other transporters in the convoy. The vehicles were strung out along the highway like a goods train.
‘We’ve made excellent time,’ he commented, looking at his watch.
‘We’d have made even better time if the Kenyans hadn’t detained us at Nairobi. We lost four hours there!’
‘Wait a minute!’ Litvinof said suddenly. He pointed at the road ahead. ‘What’s happening?’
A mile up the highway someone was waving a light to and fro and the two men could make out the dim, squat shapes that were military trucks. The swarthy Libyan driver was also peering ahead. It looked like a road
‘That’s all we need!’ Vakov muttered. ‘Take it easy on the clutch, you imbecile!’

The driver shifted down through the gears. Vakov and his mate stared at the sight ahead. Half a dozen soldiers were strung across the road, blocking the convoy’s advance. Vakov cursed. Litvinof sat tense and expectant.

By now, with the huge MAZ transporter heading towards him like a steam locomotive, the corporal was swinging the signal lamp like a man possessed. He debated whether or not to ditch the lamp and throw himself aside. Behind, his men were beginning to shuffle their feet as the Soviet transporters lumbered out of the darkness with a thunderous roar.

In the event, the first MAZ shuddered to a halt inches from the quivering corporal with a searing hiss of air as the brakes locked. Vakov swung open the door of the cab. Below him, on the tarmac, half a dozen soldiers in army uniforms stared at the huge vehicles and their concealed cargo.

‘Who the hell’s in charge here?’ Vakov glared at the cluster of men. The words, spoken in English, slammed into them.

He was unprepared for the reply.

A stocky figure detached itself from the shadow of a troop carrier and stepped into the patch of light cast by the corporal’s lantern.

‘Ah,’ the stranger said. ‘Comrade Vakov, unless I miss my guess? I trust you had a good journey?’ He smiled broadly and reached up, obviously intent on shaking Vakov’s hand.

Vakov stared back. The man had spoken in Russian.

‘My name is Burov. I am military and economic adviser to the President. Welcome to Lugamba.’

The bodies lay where they had fallen. Besigye on his back with half his head blown away and Oketta face down and almost naked.

And Oketta’s scalp was moving.

Ants. A colony of them scurrying across his neck and into his hair. They were foraging in his skull and weaving trails through his curls like Indian trackers. Something else moved on the corpse’s leg. A scorpion, sting raised, slid down Oketta’s thigh.
Corporal Moyo clicked the flashlight off and stared thoughtfully into the darkness. At least the larger scavengers hadn’t found the bodies yet but it was only a matter of time before a wandering jackal or fox caught the scent of death and came to investigate.

Moyo recognized gunshot wounds when he saw them. He’d seen the aftermath of a SASU assassination squad often enough. What intrigued him was that he should find such a scene out here, miles from anywhere.

The corporal’s companion was crouching over the remains of Besigye. The tubby private turned the body over. Tiny insect feet scampered away. The blood had congealed and dirt and stones and twigs adhered to the ghastly crater in the dead man’s skull. Bone gleamed whitely.

There was no sign of the patrol’s Land Rover.

Moyo looked for tracks with the aid of the flashlight. The ones he found indicated that the Land Rover had been driven west, towards the capital.

Unusual. If the patrol had been killed by Lugambans intent on fleeing for the border the tracks would surely have headed back the other way. And the killings had been professional. The hole in the back of Oketta’s head signified as much. And why strip the body?

Moyo called to his oppo and between them they widened the area of search.

And found the Mazda in the gully.

The wreck carried no identification. The registration plates had been removed. Ideas began to form.

An anonymous vehicle; disabled and abandoned. A border patrol murdered; their Land Rover missing. Logical conclusion: a straight swap. But there was more to it than that; there had to be. Moyo considered the possibilities and none of them made sense. He was out of his depth and knew it. There was only one course of action.

Contact Base.

Keel watched the huge crowned eagle soar overhead like a glider, effortlessly sweeping through the sky as it latched on to successive thermals. It was a stranger out here and more at home in the dense forests than the flat plains. The natives called it the ‘leopard of the air’.

It was mid-morning and the temperature was high. The crest of the
escarpment shimmered above the airstrip. One hundred yards behind his shoulder the white mission buildings shifted in the heat haze like a desert mirage. Inside a wire mesh run six scrawny hens pecked dispiritedly at anything that crawled and in a wicker pen a pair of goats bleated like wailing children as they watched the approach of Sister Elicia with a sack of leftovers from the kitchen.

‘Well, Thomas, should I offer a penny for them?’

Father Devlin stood a yard away, head on one side like an inquisitive blackbird as he regarded the mercenary with bright lit eyes.

‘That’s a trifle generous, old man,’ Keel said. He continued to gaze out over the scrub, his blue eyes narrowed against the sun’s glare.

‘You’re worried about this contract? Second thoughts, perhaps?’

Keel shook his head. ‘We’ve had tougher assignments. I was wondering why I feel the need to undertake the contract at all. All my senses tell me that I should have stayed in Holland to enjoy my retirement. I think it’s a sickness, a virus. A blood lust perhaps, I can’t explain it. I only know it’s like a drug. It takes a hold of you and doesn’t let go.’

He sighed. ‘Maybe it’s a subconscious desire to prove I still have the ability to carry out another job.’ He shrugged. ‘And maybe I’m talking too much.’

‘The trouble with you,’ Devlin said, ‘is that you have something that is unique in your profession.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A conscience,’ Father Devlin said abruptly.

In the shade of a stunted acacia, a puff adder stirred, its doze temporarily disturbed by the slow passage of a dung beetle a hand’s span in front of its broad, arrow shaped head. In the goat pen Sister Elicia was calling the goats to her with promises of sweet, succulent peelings.

‘Why don’t you go back to Amsterdam? Take Kate with you.’

‘You think domesticity’s the answer?’

‘You need roots, Thomas. Someone to go home to. A link with sanity.’

‘House in the suburbs? Car in the garage? I can’t see it, somehow.’

‘Well, use your bloody imagination then! By God, you’re a stubborn man, Thomas Keel!’

To Keel’s amazement the priest turned and stumped off in the direction of the chapel.
Behind him, Sekka stood with arms folded. ‘I was going to ask if you’d like company,’ he said. ‘Now I’m not so sure.’ Keel hadn’t heard him arrive. Sekka moved like a breath of wind; in silence.

‘Not if you’re going to bend my ear too,’ Keel replied, his mouth creasing into a smile.

‘I’ll leave the sermons for those more qualified,’ Sekka said. ‘Glad to hear it, but I think I’ve upset him.’

‘It’s not that he doesn’t care,’ Sekka said. Keel nodded. ‘I know.’ He gazed towards the chapel.

Sekka squatted. ‘So, what’s the plan? How do we get Holt out?’

Keel glanced into the sky, screwing his eyes against the glare. After several seconds he lowered his head and turned. He answered softly.

‘By the dark of the moon.’

Roan was sitting in the first row of the low wooden pews. His eyes were closed. He sensed a presence and looked up. It was the priest.

‘I’m sorry, Mister Roan. I didn’t mean to disturb your prayers.’ Devlin looked faintly embarrassed as though caught with his hands in the biscuit jar.

‘No problem, Father. I wasn’t praying. Just biding my time.’

‘And what better place in which to do so. Mind if I join you?’

‘Take a pew.’

Roan grinned apologetically. He moved over to make room on the bench and the priest sat down. A comfortable silence fell between them.

It was cool in the chapel. The sun’s rays filtered obliquely through the sheltering leaves of the big sycamore, down through the chinks and cracks in the roof, forming narrow shafts of light from floor to rafters, in which tiny specks of dust hung almost motionless, as though suspended in time and space.

‘You’re worried about Thomas aren’t you?’ Roan said gently.

‘My concern is for you all, Mister Roan. You’ve taken on an almost impossible task.’

‘Don’t worry. We can look after ourselves. We’re all professionals.’

Roan caught the expression on Michael Devlin’s face. It was one of resignation tinged with infinite sadness.
‘OK, Father,’ he said. ‘So, we’re mercenaries, soldiers of fortune, dogs of war, call us what you will. We’re members of the second oldest profession in the world. But we enjoy it and we’re good at it. Dammit, it’s all we know!’

‘I’m not passing judgement,’ Devlin said.
Roan’s expression softened. ‘I know. It’s just that I can’t take all this holier than thou crap from people to whom the word mercenary means a group of thugs who kill people for money.’
The priest blanched.
‘Sorry,’ Roan said. ‘I guess that wasn’t the most subtle of phrases, given the circumstances.’
‘Mister Roan, you have a directness that is disconcerting, to say the least.’
Roan smiled. ‘Oh, I’ll not deny there are men who take the promise of a bounty for no more reason than a blood lust but a lot of guys do fight for a principle. Doesn’t matter if it’s anti-communist, anti-fascist or whatever; it’s not always about the money. When I was tracking guerrillas in Mozambique I sure as heck wasn’t in it for the bread because, considering the risks, the pay was lousy. We don’t just provide a gun, we provide experience and discipline. We’ve all had exceptional training.
‘You know Thomas. He was SAS before he turned freelance and I guess I don’t have to tell you how good that makes him. Paul was in the Bundeswehr before he joined the GSG-9 anti-terrorist squad. You remember the Lufthansa hijack to Mogadishu? Paul was a member of the rescue team. Me? I spent three years in Nam with the Special Forces. That’s where Thomas and I met. God, we’ve shared a few contracts since then.’ He chuckled, remembering.
‘And Joseph?’ the old man asked.
‘Ah, now Joseph is a mite different,’ Roan conceded. ‘Until Biafra he had no combat experience. Then he met Thomas. He’s a natural, though. It’s in his blood.’
The priest looked away. He appeared to shiver as if a chill had passed through him.
‘Let me tell you, Father,’ Roan said. ‘Whatever feelings you may have, don’t try to change Thomas, or Joseph, or any of us for that matter. You’d be wasting your time. Trust me.’
Roan frowned. ‘Mind you, my instinct tells me that you might just
have tried already. Am I right?’
   ‘You are also a very perceptive man, Mister Roan.’
   ‘It really wasn’t too difficult,’ Roan replied.
   Devlin’s eyes clouded.
   ‘You’ve known them both a long time; longer than Paul and me. You want to tell me about it?’
   The priest seemed to hold his breath for a second or two as he collected his thoughts.
   Another time, another place.
   Biafra.

The rebels were pulling back before the onslaught of the Federal forces. Gowon’s 1st Federal Division was pushing south, driving Ojukwu’s men into the path of the advance guard of Adenkunle’s 3rd Commando Division in a pincer movement that was squeezing the rebels like toothpaste from a tube. Ojukwu’s men had a clear run to the river and they were looting and murdering as they went.

Then someone mentioned the mission station at Brandt’s Crossing. It lay directly in the rebels’ line of retreat and there wasn’t time left to warn the staff. Ojukwu’s men were ravaging the country like locusts and they weren’t averse to killing innocent men and women who stood in their way. Not that one old priest and a dozen nuns presented much of a threat.

No threat at all; rather like the four Italian priests and six nuns who’d made up the staff of a small mission hospital a few miles west of Bende. The priests had been stripped naked, their rectums pierced with sharpened stakes, their genitals severed. The nuns, Nigerian and Belgian, had been tied to the perimeter fence and raped. Their patients, all from the outlying villages, had been killed in their beds. Over thirty people murdered and mutilated.

Colonel Adenkunle had asked for volunteers and Keel, Sekka and a dozen Federal troopers headed for Brandt’s Crossing in two Bedford trucks to rescue the staff and whoever else might be there. They’d driven during the night, through bush and over terrain that would have defied a Centurion tank, arriving at the river crossing at dawn, ahead of the rebel forces.

The priest turned out to be old, Irish, defiant and adamant. He wasn’t going to leave. Father Michael Devlin had heard that Ojukwu was an honourable man. Their small infirmary held one patient - a two-year old girl
with a broken leg - and it was obvious that the occupants would not be harmed. Keel pointed out that whereas Ojukwu might have all the saving graces, his followers didn’t. They were still arguing when the rebel advance party crested the ridge above the mission and peppered the building with small arms fire, killing two nuns.

Windows exploded and Keel’s men returned fire. The trucks had been parked at the rear. With the Federal troopers covering them, Keel and Sekka ushered the remaining terrified nuns through the building and out of the back door. Father Devlin ran to the infirmary and returned clutching a wide eyed infant, her thin leg encased in plaster from thigh to ankle. They were bundling the women into the first truck as the rebel wave broke from the trees, yelling and shooting as they ran towards the mission. Five fell in the attack, tumbling like skittles as the Federal troopers raked the line.

As the rebels faltered, half of Keel’s force withdrew from their positions and the first Bedford, with the frightened nuns on board, lurched down the bank and began to ford the shallows. It hadn’t reached halfway when the mortars began to rain down. The shrieking salvo smashed into the mission, wiping out half the defenders at a stroke. The building began to burn fiercely.

The truck exploded in midstream. A fearful detonation that blew the vehicle apart, sending a muddy tidal wave crashing against the shore. Ruptured bodies erupted from it like offal.

Father Devlin viewed the devastation with horror. The child in his arms was screaming in fear. Gathering his wits he ran, stumbling, for the surviving truck. Keel and Sekka and the rest of the Federals threw themselves after him. With debris from the shattered mission falling about them, they scrambled aboard and drove the Bedford down to the ford.

Almost across and the wheels were spinning in the mud and the rebels had reached the mission. Keel and the others were firing over the tailboard as Ojukwu’s men ran on to the bank. A trooper on Keel’s right jerked aside, his face a red morass. The wheels caught and they were free and surging through the water. On the ridge the main rebel column appeared across the skyline but by now the truck had gained the opposite bank and was thundering towards the treeline. Then they were free.

They re-crossed the river ten miles upstream before turning back on a heading that would lead them to the Federal lines. It was almost noon when they hit the highway but at least they were able to pick up speed.
Then they hit the mine.

The explosion lifted the truck like a toy, shredding the tyres and splintering the front axle like matchwood. The driver died at the wheel, torn apart as the floor of the cab burst asunder. With a scream of tortured metal the heavy Bedford slammed back on to the tarmac and slewed across the road.

For those in the back it was a helter-skelter ride until the truck came to a halt. Father Devlin, still holding the girl and therefore unable to support himself, bounced against the tailboard with a bone jarring thump. He lay, winded and bruised, the child wailing hysterically. He was dimly aware that Keel was yelling at his men to vacate and then someone took the girl from him and he was being helped from the back of the vehicle.

He heard bullets thump into the Bedford and Keel bellowing, ‘Cover! Cover!’

Sekka and the others were firing their weapons into the brush on the opposite side of the track and Keel was at his shoulder, the whimpering infant in his arms, urging him off the road and into shelter, keeping the bulk of the truck between themselves and the attackers.

There was a shallow ditch at the edge of the road and this bordered a cane field. With the rattle of automatic fire bombarding his senses, Father Devlin paid heed to Keel’s instruction to keep his head down. He didn’t keep down far enough. He felt the punch as the bullet hit his right shoulder, swinging him around and then he lost his footing and slid down into the ditch. He tried to stand, the movement aggravating the wound.

Keel was at his back. ‘Get up, Father. You can’t die here. It’ll be inconvenient.’

Father Devlin forced a smile on to his lips and struggled to his feet. ‘If you think I’m worth the trouble, my son.’

Keel gave the priest’s shoulder a cursory examination. ‘The slug went right through. You’ll live...if you keep moving. Joseph and the others will keep them pinned down until we get clear.’

The child was silent by then, exhausted and staring at the priest with puppy dog eyes. The old man wondered if she’d gone into shock but, as if in answer, the little girl tightened her grip around Keel’s neck and buried her face in the mercenary’s shoulder.

They stumbled over the furrowed ground, away from the scene of the ambush, though the shooting could still be heard beyond the curtain of cane
Keel led the way, his arms about the girl, turning frequently to check that the priest was behind him.

They’d travelled about half a mile through the cane crop and the old man was flagging. It was blisteringly hot and Devlin could feel the energy draining out of his body like sap from a tree. Keel granted him a second to catch his breath before they moved off again.

A hundred yards further on, they broke from the cane belt into waist-high scrub. Then the ground started to dip and Keel led the way down a scree slope into a muddy defile. It was easier going and Devlin guessed that they were close to one of the meandering tributaries. The undergrowth was getting dense and it had begun to get cooler out of the direct glare of the sun. A narrow track led into the trees.

The priest had no idea when Sekka rejoined them. He had three troopers with him - all that remained out of the original rescue squad - and they had held off the ambush party for an hour before the latter had withdrawn, leaving four dead.

The old man collapsed at the side of the path. His throbbing shoulder was severely inflamed and he was feeling the effects of dehydration. It was becoming difficult to focus and his tired legs had refused to support him. He came to as Sekka tipped the water canteen to his swollen lips. The lukewarm liquid trickled down his chin and through the haze of pain he acknowledged Sekka’s Samaritan gesture with a cracked grin. A few feet away Keel was dabbing the child’s face with a damp cloth.

‘The priest is feverish. He needs medical attention. The girl also,’ Sekka said.

‘I know it.’

With the troopers acting as point and flankers they set off again. To Devlin, hunched piggy back on Sekka’s shoulders, the journey - what he could remember of it - was a nightmare. Four hours later they emerged from the forest under a moonlit sky and walked into the arms of one of Adenkunle’s night patrols. From there it was a jeep ride back to the base.

Roan’s face said it all. ‘Jesus!’ he breathed when Devlin had finished.

‘He was certainly looking over our shoulders that night,’ the priest said. ‘They took it in turns to carry me and the girl. Over twelve miles through the bush. How can anyone ever repay men like that?’ Father Devlin
shook his grey head in wonderment.
‘And the girl?’
‘She survived,’ Devlin replied.
‘Paul and I knew none of this,’ Roan said. ‘Now I understand what they mean to you.’
‘I don’t want to see them dead, Mister Roan - Harry.’
Roan gripped the old man’s wrist. ‘Paul and I will look after them. We’ll watch their backs.’
‘And will they watch yours?’
‘You can count on it. It’s what we do. I told you, we’re a team. You know what they say: all for one and one for all.’

Despite his reassurances, Roan saw that the priest wasn’t smiling. Maybe that was an omen.

Schiller was watching Sister Elicia feed the goats. He’d seen the brief altercation between Keel and the priest but hadn’t moved to interfere. He knew Keel well enough for that. Besides, Joseph was with Keel now and Sekka was closest to Keel out of the three of them. They were like brothers, he thought. Probably closer than kin if one did but know, having shared contracts together from the shores of the Caribbean to the deserts of Chad.

Sister Elicia had the feeling she was being observed. She turned. It was the fair one with the nice smile and the calm brown eyes. He was leaning against the fence, looking on with amusement as the goats butted her in their search for food.
‘I’d say their table manners were definitely lacking.’ Opening the gate, he entered the pen. The goats approached, expecting titbits. Schiller stroked their soft necks, patting the kids, talking softly.

Sister Elicia handed him the bucket. ‘Would you like to feed them?’
The goats moved in, bleating loudly, jostling for morsels. Sister Elicia laughed at their antics as Schiller dispensed the contents of the pail.

The girl looked very young in her white working habit and grey headscarf. Her face was a picture of innocence, her complexion as fresh as morning. Blue eyes sparkled with enjoyment as she looked on.
‘When we were very young,’ Schiller said, ‘my sister and I used to spend our summer holidays on my uncle’s farm in Bavaria. Our special chore was to feed the animals. We would feed the pigs and goats and the chickens
and collect eggs just as the sun came up over the mountains, when the ground held the last trace of dew. We never wanted to go home.’

Sister Elicia stared at Schiller for as he spoke his voice faltered. For a second only but it was time enough for her to notice the catch in his voice and the hurt in his eyes. It was as if a shadow, dark and fleeting and evil, had passed over him.

‘What is it?’ she whispered, sensing in him sorrow, a pain that had crawled out of some deep recess.

‘Just a memory,’ Schiller said. ‘That’s all.’ He looked down at her, at the concern on her face. A stray wisp of hair had escaped the scarf and was curling down one cheek. Schiller realized again just how much she reminded him of Anna-Lise. He’d caught the resemblance that first night when he’d arrived with Keel. Now, standing here with her, he was even more conscious of the striking similarity.

Anna-Lise. His sister; slim, graceful, lovely, warm, alive. Until Augsburg.

It had begun with a bomb attack at the headquarters of the US 5th Army Corps in Frankfurt, as retaliation against American involvement in Vietnam. It was the advent of a series of urban guerrilla actions that became known as the Devil’s Harvest. The reapers were Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof. Their terrorist campaign escalated rapidly with more bombings across the country and among their targets had been Augsburg police headquarters.

Anna-Lise Schiller was a secretary in the records division. Eighteen years old, four years younger than her brother, not long out of school. With everything to live for, she died in one senseless act of savagely as the device exploded, shattering walls and windows and what had been, up until the atrocity, a conviction that such wanton barbarism could not possibly occur in a law abiding society.

It was a belief that for many was to be well and truly demolished three months later in an arena shared by an audience of millions; the Olympic village, Munich.

Schiller received the news of his sister’s death while on a military exercise in the Oberpfalzer Wald along the Czechoslovakian border. He would never forget the terrible looks on his parents’ haggard faces as they had stood at the side of the grave and watched the coffin being lowered. If Schiller harboured thoughts of revenge they were of little consequence for
both Baader and Meinhof were caught within weeks of each other, not long after his sister’s funeral.

The murder of the Israeli athletes by the Black September unit, however, provided Schiller with an opportunity for indirect reprisal. Special anti-terrorist squads were set up to combat the threat by both left and right wing factions who advocated reform through violence. Among these was GSG-9. Schiller was a weapons expert in the Bundeswehr and was attached to the new unit as an instructor. At his own insistence and through the personal recommendation of Wegener himself Schiller made the transfer permanent.

Schiller exacted retribution for his sister’s murder when he stormed the Lufthansa jet on the runway at Mogadishu. It was a long time coming but it gave him immense satisfaction. Anna-Lise had at last been avenged. Sister Elicia, of course, knew none of this. She was aware only that a change had come over the fair haired one with the nice smile. What she perceived frightened her.

She retrieved the pail and moved on to her other tasks, leaving Schiller on his own at the side of the goat pen. Schiller watched her run off with a sombre expression on his tanned face. He reached for a cheroot, lit up, and sat smoking it with his back against the fence.

Keel called them together in the isolation ward. ‘Any problems?’ ‘We’re as ready as we’ll ever be,’ Roan said. He held a block of C4 plastic explosive in his hand. It looked like a cube of putty and had the same malleable consistency. ‘Paul?’ Schiller shook his head. He was fitting shells into the magazine of the Browning, a fresh cheroot stuck between his lips.

Keel caught Sekka’s eye and the latter winked. They both understood Schiller’s mood. A workman is only as good as the tools he uses. Weapons were the tools of Schiller’s trade. ‘I’ve spoken with Father Devlin,’ Keel said. ‘He’s brought me up to date with the conditions at Maboru. I didn’t think we’d be that lucky but he’s been inside the place and knows the layout. He was there when they took Holt in.’ ‘He saw him?’ Roan asked. ‘Only briefly. Seems that DOSS lifted a couple of black priests for
questioning. Devlin got wind and demanded their release. Didn’t do any good but he did manage to see Holt. He had to drop the guards a little something to gain access though.’

‘Jesus!’ Roan said. ‘What the hell did he bribe them with?’

‘In this country, you could probably bribe anyone with anything,’ Sekka put in. ‘It was probably drugs from his dispensary.’

‘A priest peddling drugs?’ Roan looked at Sekka in disbelief.

‘You use what you have,’ Sekka said. ‘And a few morphine tablets and a bottle of aspirin are hardly the French Connection.’

‘Christ!’ was Roan’s only comment.

‘What condition was Holt in?’ Schiller took a drag on the cheroot. ‘Is he mobile? Can he walk?’

Keel shook his head. ‘That we’ll have to find out. He was barely conscious when Devlin saw him. He doubts if the poor devil even knew he was there.’

‘They’ve roughed him up then?’ Roan’s voice was hard.

‘Devlin didn’t think so. He figured Holt was just exhausted as well as scared to death.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ Sekka said. ‘He thinks he’s going to die.’

‘He still might,’ Roan said, ‘unless we get to him first.’

‘Well, that’s what we’re here for,’ Keel said.

He stood up. ‘So I suggest we all get some rest. We go in at dusk.’
Duncan Wood’s day had started brightly, rather like the morning weather forecast. There was a clear blue sky and a freshening breeze. The car had collected him at an early hour but, as they swept on to the Embankment, Wood ordered his driver to stop and he climbed out. He walked slowly, gaze fixed on the grey waters of the Thames, his own footsteps echoed by the measured tread of his personal detective a pace or two behind. The Lexus kerb crawled close by.

Wood strolled to the parapet and watched a heavily laden string of barges plough its way down river, Tilbury bound. There was a sense of tranquillity about the scene that prompted him to retain the view for several minutes. It was with a sigh of reluctance that he entered the car again. Engine purring, the Lexus filtered into the stream of traffic and headed towards Westminster.

The telephone call came like a bombshell, followed by several moments of disbelief.

Wood, senses reeling, reached an unsteady hand towards his intercom. ‘I want the PM. I don’t care where he is or what he’s doing. Get him...NOW!’

He still didn’t believe it. He sat staring into space until the intercom squawked, jolting him into action.
‘The Prime Minister on line two, sir.’

He was already grabbing for the receiver.
‘I’m putting the scrambler on,’ Wood said.

Brooke’s voice was gruff. ‘Make it quick, I’ve a meeting with the West German ambassador and ...’
‘We’ve got a problem,’ Wood cut in. ‘A big problem, concerning Holt.’

There was an ominous silence at Brooke’s end. Then: ‘What sort of problem?’
‘I’ve just had a cable from Nairobi. It appears that the President of Kenya has intervened on our behalf. He’s secured Holt’s release.’
Another deathly silence.
Wood thought he’d been cut off. Only the red light on the scrambler indicated the line was still active.
Brooke said eventually, ‘What the hell is going on?’
‘Apparently Mabato was handed an ultimatum by President Nai on behalf of the other members of the OAU. The gist being that if Mabato wanted the position of Chairman for the next twelve months he was to release Holt. It was also mentioned that unless Mabato agreed to this, Kenya would place an embargo on all goods due to transit Kenya for Lugamba. This would affect the passage of military vehicles being unloaded at Mombasa. There has already been a minor confrontation over a convoy of transporters that has recently arrived in Kendura.’
‘And Mabato agreed to this?’ Brooke sounded sceptical.
‘He wants that Chairmanship. He’s gone to a lot of trouble over the conference including the construction of that new centre in Kendura. The last thing he wants is for the OAU to disown him. I must say they’ve come up with a heck of a lever.’
‘And it puts us right in the shit,’ Brooke rasped. He went on slowly, ‘I don’t suppose there’s the remotest possibility of calling off the rescue attempt?’
‘God knows,’ Wood replied unhappily. ‘It may be too late.’
‘Fucking hell!’
‘I’ll get hold of Dalkieth. Maybe he can come up with something.’
‘I bloody well hope so.’ The Prime Minister’s voice dropped several octaves. ‘This mustn’t get out. Any of this. I can’t emphasize that enough. You understand?’
You bastard, Wood thought as he said, ‘Of course, Prime Minister.’
‘Keep me informed,’ Brooke said. ‘Every step of the way.’
The receiver went dead. Wood clicked off the scrambler and touched the intercom again. ‘Joan, get me George Dalkieth. Again, I don’t care where he is.’
It took three minutes. Dalkieth sounded tired or bored. Either way, this would wake him up quicker than a twenty-one gun salute.
‘My office,’ Wood said. ‘Soonest.’

‘Recall them!’ Dalkieth’s voice was like ice splintering. ‘Judas Priest! What
the hell is this?'
       Wood told him.
       ‘Shit!’ Dalkieth said.
       ‘What about the broker, this contact of yours? Can he do anything?’
       ‘It’s too damned late.’
       ‘Find out. Get hold of him.’
       Dalkieth gritted his teeth and moved to the door. ‘I’ll get back to you.’
       ‘With the speed of light,’ Wood prompted. ‘If this leaks out our heads will roll.’
       ‘Not only our heads,’ Dalkieth said grimly. ‘It’ll make Hitler’s night of the long knives look like a bloody whist drive.’

‘Of course I can’t abort!’ Cameron blew up. ‘They’re already in Lugamba! For all I know, they’re running the snatch right now! They’re out of contact. They might as well be on the dark side of the moon!’
       But Cameron was speaking to himself. Dalkieth had hung up. The recruiter slammed the receiver down. What had gone wrong? To contact him at this stage, it had to be something massive.
       Then he thought about something else.

‘If you’ve a suggestion, George, now’s the time to make it.’ There was more than a trace of despair in Wood’s voice. He looked drained.
       Dalkieth looked pensive. He said, ‘I would have thought the solution was obvious.’ His tone was calm.
       Why did the bastard always look so bloody self-assured? Wood thought.
       Dalkieth seemed to be waiting for something; a spark of intuition. Then it came.
       Obvious and drastic.
       ‘We warn Mabato,’ Wood said.
       Dalkieth nodded. ‘It’s the only thing we can do,’ he said. ‘We’ve got to tell him they’re going in. We can redeem the situation.’
       ‘They’re dead men,’ Wood said heavily.
       ‘We knew it was virtually a suicide mission when we set it up.’
‘There’s no need to sound so bloody smug. We both know what Mabato will do to them. It doesn’t bear thinking about.’

‘Nor do the consequences if we don’t warn him. President Nai’s opened the door. Let’s not slam it in his face.’

‘We could be too late,’ Wood pointed out. ‘Maybe they’ve made the snatch already.’

Dalkieth shook his head. ‘I doubt that. Lugamba is only - let me see - three hours ahead of us which means it’s still daylight. They surely wouldn’t go in until dark and besides we’d have heard from Warren by now.’

‘Which means…’ Wood began.

‘We don’t have a second to lose.’

‘I’ll inform the PM and contact Warren,’ Wood said. He shook his head unhappily. ‘You know, I never thought it would come to this: warning Mabato about a plot against him. My God, if it wasn’t so bloody tragic, it’d be funny.’

‘Count your blessings that we got the news in time,’ Dalkieth said. ‘At least there’s no way Mabato will connect us with the rescue bid; not now. Even he wouldn’t believe we’d sacrifice our own men. We’ll be in the clear. All in all, it’s probably the best thing that could have happened. This way there’ll be no loose ends.’

Wood eyed Dalkieth thoughtfully. ‘Tell me, George, I’d really like to know. If it’d been a couple of your Sandbaggers out there, would you still warn Mabato?’

Dalkieth looked at him. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think,’ Wood said darkly, ‘that you are one ruthless bastard.’

‘Coming from you, I take that as a compliment,’ was Dalkieth’s parting shot as he left the room.

A heady trace of aftershave lingered in the air after his departure. Paco Rabanne. Wood wrinkled his nose. ‘Supercilious sod!’ he swore under his breath.

There wasn’t much time left. A matter of hours, maybe even minutes before everything fell apart. As Wood prepared himself to send the warning to Mabato he was now very much aware of one irrefutable fact.

In Lugamba, David Holt’s role in the affair had taken on a new and deadly connotation.

He was no longer a hostage.

He was bait.
Qetuka had been sleeping, conserving energy. He came awake instantly at the touch of the woman’s hand on his shoulder. His arm moved swiftly, steel fingers catching the slim wrist. Elizabeth Wakholi gasped at the speed of the man. The Zulu found himself gazing into frightened brown eyes.

‘It is time,’ she said.

She answered the door at the first rap. The soldier standing on the threshold - Mabato’s messenger boy - eyed her speculatively. She was dressed in a tight, turquoise silk sheath that moulded itself to her full body. The corporal’s eyes travelled from thigh to cleavage, his stare arrested by the low neckline and firm breasts that thrust provocatively against the sheer material. She might just as well have been naked. Elizabeth smoothed her hands over her body and half turned. The movement was openly suggestive and the soldier’s breath escaped in a low moan of admiration. Instinctively he stepped after her, a cunning smile on his face.

Suddenly, something moved at the extreme corner of his field of vision and a small, pebble-like object curved past his face.

The first touch was like the caress of a tear and then the corporal’s throat felt as if it was on fire. His hands shot up to his neck to claw at the garotte that had closed upon his larynx. His right forefinger hooked behind the wire.

Qetuka, a toggle in each hand, brace his knee against the corporal’s spine, arching the man’s back like a bow. A dark bubble burst across the soldier’s neck as the wire severed the trapped finger. An attempted scream becoming a rasping gargle as the garotte sawed through the corporal’s windpipe with the ease of a knife blade cutting through melted butter. Blood welled out of the mutilated throat as the corporal’s body threshed violently. With a final, searing jerk Qetuka broke the soldier’s neck and allowed the body to sink to the floor. He released the tension in the wire and ripped it loose. Wiping it clean, he secured it to his wrist.

Throughout the kill the woman had remained frozen, struck motionless with the speed and ferocity of the strike. Qetuka dragged the corpse across the floor into the tiny bathroom.

He snapped, ‘Don’t just stand there! Collect your things! Hurry!’ He walked back into the room and picked up his holdall. ‘Pack a bag,’ he continued. ‘You won’t be coming back.’
She was confused. ‘Not coming back?’
‘Use your head! Once Mabato is dead, I will be heading back across
the border. I presume you don’t want to remain here?’
‘You mean I can go with you?’
‘Unless you can think of an alternative? What is there to come back
to? Besides, there’s a dead man in your bathroom. You would have great
difficulty explaining that away.’
‘You mean I can stay with you?’
‘Don’t get the wrong idea, woman. Once across the border you will
be on your own. All I’m doing is giving you a chance.’
She stared at him for a moment then, silently, she walked into the
bedroom and began to throw a few items into a plastic shopping bag. Qetuka
waited for her.
She looked around the apartment, seeing the faded rugs, chipped
plaster and the cheap furniture and saw it for what it was: a tiny, squalid bolt
hole. She gazed at the Zulu, her eyes mirroring apprehension. Her chin lifted
and her face showed a new emotion. She smiled hesitantly. ‘I’m ready.’
They walked out of the apartment and as the door closed behind her,
Elizabeth Wakholi knew that from now on there could be no turning back.

Solomon Mabato was like a child with a box of Dinky toys. He’d been to
view the Russian tanks with Burov and he was ecstatic. He’d greeted the
transporter crews and technicians with affection so overpowering it had
positively turned Leonid Vakov’s stomach. Burov had watched the latter
suffer the president’s bear-like embrace with amusement.

‘My friends! My dear friends!’ Mabato was bursting with
camaraderie. ‘They are magnificent! How my enemies will tremble! I will
soon embark on my Prime objective; the overthrow of the white imperialists
in South Africa! With your help, my dear Burov, I will drive them into the
sea! What do you say?’
Burov shuddered inwardly. The man was mad. Nikolai Kolk, safe
behind his desk in The Centre, had much to answer for.

‘Let’s not try to run before we can walk, Excellency,’ Burov said
hurriedly. ‘Better to assess the situation before making any sudden moves.
Perhaps it would be possible to er, mull over the idea with the other members
during the coming conference?’
Burov had a brief, horrendous vision of Mabato sweeping south across the veldt like a mechanized Attila the Hun.

‘I can afford to wait,’ Mabato said magnanimously, ‘until you send me more guns and tanks. Then the South Africans will see that I mean business. They may very well surrender.’ He speculated on that idea for some moments.

Vakov and those technicians who understood English eavesdropped on the exchange with wonderment. Vakov caught Burov’s eye and the latter grabbed at the distraction with relief.

‘My men and I would like to eat, Comrade Burov,’ Vakov said. ‘After which the President might like a demonstration of fire power.’

‘An excellent idea,’ Burov agreed. He put the suggestion to Mabato. To his amazement, the President declined. Despite his evident pleasure and his enthusiastic response to the arrival of the tanks, he had another, more important matter on his mind.

An appointment with a woman.

Qetuka turned the Peugeot off the road and approached the locked gates of the Command Post. Elizabeth Wakholi occupied the rear seat. The Zulu’s weapons were concealed in the holdall stuffed in the well below the front passenger seat.

A squad of troops squatted at the side of the road. A jeep and troop carrier were parked nearby. All the soldiers were armed with automatic weapons. Qetuka wound down the window and awaited the sentry’s approach.

‘What is your business?’ The trooper stared hard at the Zulu before his attention was diverted to the passenger and her neckline.

‘A visitor for His Excellency,’ Qetuka said. He caught the man’s eye and winked.

‘You are not one of the usual drivers.’

‘My first time. Lucky huh?’ Qetuka grinned.

‘Identity papers.’ The sentry snapped his fingers impatiently.

‘Of course.’ Behind Qetuka the woman froze. She felt sure that the guard would sense her panic. Qetuka had no papers. What was he going to do?

She leaned forward over the front seats, giving the sentry the full
benefit of the valley between her breasts. She reached out and touched the outstretched hand.

‘Surely you know me, Corporal?’ She pouted coquettishly. ‘You don’t need to see our papers?’

She stroked his hand before withdrawing her fingers slowly to trace the neckline of the dress pausing in the shadowed cleft that opened invitingly before the sentry’s gaze.

Qetuka had one hand inside his jacket, as though reaching for identification. ‘You are delaying us,’ he said. ‘We’re late as it is. His Excellency does not like to be kept waiting. You wouldn’t like us to tell him that you held us up?’

The sentry withdrew his hand rapidly. ‘We have to be careful. One of our border patrols was ambushed last night and a jeep was stolen. We have orders…’

‘But this is not a jeep,’ Qetuka pointed out. ‘I doubt that your instructions include the harassment of the President’s…friends…intimate friends.’

Elizabeth smiled at the flustered sentry and ran her tongue around her lips.

Abruptly, the trooper stepped away from the car and signalled to the man on the gate. As the wrought iron barrier swung aside Qetuka drove the Peugeot forward into the grounds. Behind him the woman shivered. The Zulu caught the movement in the mirror.

‘You did well,’ he said.

The drive led up from the gates past a dusty brown lawn and swept in a horseshoe curve in front of the house. Two other vehicles were parked outside on the gravel: a dark blue Volvo and a SASU Datsun. More guards flanked the entrance. Heavily armed men in battle fatigues: Mabato’s Praetorian Guard.

Qetuka parked the car and turned in his seat. No one had made a move towards them as they had obviously been cleared by the men at the main gate.

‘Get out,’ he ordered.

The woman opened the rear door and Qetuka reached for his choice of weapon: the Colt. He tucked the gun inside his tunic and vacated the car. Together, the woman and the assassin walked towards the house.

The Zulu studied the sentries. They were of a different calibre to
those on the main gate. No lacklustre loafers these but hard men, fighters, seasoned troops, their stern faces bearing the Makesi tribal scars. They watched Qetuka and the woman approach through unblinking eyes. The Zulu returned their stares brazenly, the Colt burning a hole in his belly under the ill-fitting tunic. He expected the challenge at any moment.

But they made it through the gauntlet and into the lobby with its high white ceiling and revolving fan blades. And more guards. Mabato wasn’t taking any chances. Getting out wouldn’t be easy. But there would be chaos following the killing. He could use that to his advantage.

At the bottom of the sweep of stairs stood a desk manned by a corpulent African in the uniform of a captain. Behind him, sinister in dark glasses with a machine pistol over one shoulder, a DOSS officer stood alert. The aide looked up as the woman walked to the desk.

‘His Excellency is expecting me,’ she said.

The fat captain eyed Qetuka. ‘This is the driver?’

She nodded.

A telephone was at his elbow. He picked up the receiver. ‘The woman is here. Inform him.’ He paused then replied, ‘Yes, of course, immediately.’ A brief nod towards Qetuka. ‘Take her up.’

The Zulu took her elbow and guided her to the stairs. He could feel the tension gripping her.

‘Wait!’ The captain’s voice halted them in their tracks and Qetuka froze, his hand leaving the woman and moving to his belly. He looked over his shoulder. The aide was standing, his expression severe.

‘She has not been searched. Bring her here.’

The Zulu looked on as the man ran his hands over her body. The action was neither gentle nor subtle. Broad fingers kneaded and cupped the full breasts, stroked the rounded hips and taut buttocks. The captain grinned as he thrust his palm between her thighs, enjoying her final indignity. All the time she suffered the pawing in silence. Qetuka didn’t move a muscle.

Satisfied on all counts, the captain jerked his head. ‘Don’t keep His Excellency waiting!’

‘Animal!’ she hissed as he led her away. He could feel her shaking.

‘That was the last time,’ Qetuka said quietly. ‘Remember that.’

They reached the first floor and Mabato’s apartments; his offices and private chambers. Qetuka knew he was close, very close.

She paused outside a door. ‘This is the ante room to the President’s
living quarters. You are supposed to escort me inside and then wait to take me back after Mabato has finished.’ She spoke matter-of-factly and laid a hand on his arm. ‘After I enter his room, wait five minutes. By that time he will be ready.’

Qetuka nodded. ‘Let’s go,’ he said.

He opened the door.

The guards on the main gate gawped in astonishment as the Mercedes slewed off the highway and skidded to a halt, tyres squealing. The front passenger door flew open and the occupant screamed at the sentry to open the gates.

The soldier sprang to attention as he recognized the identity of the man in the car and gabbled an order at his companion by the gate. The car door slammed and the Mercedes surged forward, dust trailing in its wake. It sped up the drive.

The sentry breathed a sigh of relief and rolled his eyes at the gate man. Some people you just didn’t want to get on the wrong side of. Major Juma, the head of DOSS, was definitely one of them. Mabato’s head of State Security instilled cold fear into the hearts and minds of the Lugamban population. No one who valued life ever questioned the Nubian’s actions or impeded his authority. It was hinted that in his presence even Mabato guarded his back. So, what was the hurry? He had arrived like Nemesis.

The Merc stopped below the house and Juma sprinted up the steps into the lobby. ‘The President, where is he?’

The fat captain, startled by the hectic arrival, stumbled to his feet. ‘In his quarters, Major. He…’

‘Alert him! I must see him at once!’

‘He is engaged, Major, and not to be disturbed!’ The aide was highly agitated. He was scared stiff of Juma but the thought of interrupting the President’s pleasure terrified him even more.

‘Imbecile!’ Juma screeched. ‘Follow me!’

‘His Excellency has a woman with him!’ implored the hapless aide. The man was visibly cringing.

Juma paused. He looked ferocious, like a weasel turning on a rabbit. ‘Captain, we have just received word that an attempt is to be made to free the Englishman, probably within a few hours. Do you wish to be held responsible for the delay in this news reaching the President?’
A vehement shake of the head.
‘Cretin!’ Juma spat. ‘We must inform His Excellency at once. These men may already be in the city!’
Juma ran for the stairs.

Qetuka stole a glance at his watch. Five minutes she had said. Time was up.
But he wasn’t alone.
They stood either side of the doors that led into Mabato’s inner sanctum. Grim-faced, Libyan mercenaries - private bodyguards - in olive-green safari jackets and slacks. They each held squat Israeli machine pistols: Uzis.

Qetuka crossed to the window and looked out over the grounds. He could feel their hooded eyes on him. How good were they?
He turned casually, the silenced Colt in his hand. He brought the gun up fast in a two handed grip, sighted and shot the nearest guard in the head. The bullet took the Libyan between the eyes, shattering the skull, and blew brain matter and crimson bone fragments against the flocked wallpaper.
The second guard’s reactions were commendably quicker. He at least managed to aim his Uzi. A burst from the machine pistol scythed past the already moving Zulu’s right shoulder and the window exploded in a thousand pieces. Qetuka’s second and third bullets slammed into the guard’s chest. The man cannoned backwards against the door and slid down the woodwork, the Uzi dangling from lifeless fingers. Even before the sagging corpse had touched the floor, Qetuka sprang for the entrance to Mabato’s apartment and flung himself through the doors.

Solomon Mabato knelt on the bed, his hands grasping Elizabeth Wakholi’s hips as he thrust himself between her thighs. She was leaning forward, supporting herself on her elbows, submitting to the violation without a sound as Mabato grunted and pumped his way to a noisy climax. The tears began to flow as they always did during this act of degradation, her body racked with loathing for the grossness of the man who used her and abused her as though she was some kind of dumb animal.
Satisfied, Mabato eased himself from her body. He was breathing heavily, his eyes glazed with pleasure. He was about to reach forward to turn
her around to face him when the sound of the guard’s machine pistol shattered his concentration.

With surprising agility for a man of his vast bulk, Mabato scrambled to his feet, flesh quivering with the effort, his skin shiny with perspiration. His huge frame wobbled as he reached for his robe. As he belted the sash the doors crashed open and he found himself face to face with a crouching man holding a silenced automatic pistol.

Qetuka swung the Colt around, his aim taking in both the woman sprawled naked on her stomach and Mabato moving sideways to find cover. The Zulu, following his dramatic entrance, was slightly off balance when he fired. The slug tore into Mabato’s upper arm. It passed through muscle and left a ragged exit wound before tumbling into the drapes behind the bed. Mabato spun away and a high pitched shriek of rage pierced his lips as he half fell and half threw himself to the floor.

The Zulu steadied himself and followed the heaving body with the barrel of the Colt. He aligned the silencer on Mabato’s chest and squeezed the trigger.

The blast from the Uzi raked into the room and hit Qetuka in the thigh. Pain and shock exploded through his body and as he fell he knew that his second shot at Mabato had missed the target.

Farouk Juma, the machine pistol in his thin hands, ran into the room and prepared to blow Qetuka into little pieces.

‘NO!’ Mabato bellowed. ‘Do not kill him!’ He clutched his wounded arm. Blood was seeping between his podgy fingers. ‘I want him alive!’

The Zulu was lying on his side, one hand clamped on his thigh, the other clawing for the Colt that lay only inches away. Through pain misted eyes he watched Mabato lumber to his feet. Juma was panting as though he’d run a great distance. The fat aide had been joined by the DOSS agent from the lobby and was blinking owlishly at the carnage. More people were running into the room; some waving automatic rifles like war clubs. No one seemed to notice the woman on the bed, sheet held against her body, staring at Qetuka’s twitching form with horror and the mind numbing realization that the assassination attempt had failed.

Juma picked up the Colt and lashed out at the aide. ‘You allowed this scum to reach His Excellency with this!’

The captain’s face was etched with terror. He stared first at Juma and then at Mabato who was glaring at him with absolute fury.
‘He came with the woman, Excellency. Naturally we searched her thoroughly. Excellency, I swear…’

Mabato’s voice cracked like a whip. ‘Silence! I will deal with you later.’ He walked around to Qetuka and gazed down impassively.

‘Did you really think you could kill Mabato? You fool, I am invincible! You, on the other hand, are a dead man.’

Mabato knelt down and placed his mouth next to the injured man’s face. ‘And know this,’ he said softly. ‘Before you die, you will answer my questions.’ He took the gun from Juma and placed the end of the silencer against the Zulu’s right eye. ‘And you will tell me everything.’ He stood and swung towards the woman.

Walking to the bed, Mabato ripped away the sheet and slapped her face viciously with his open palm. Her head whipped back and hit the pillows. She lay there, legs splayed. Mabato pushed the smooth cylinder of the silencer between her open thighs. Elizabeth felt the pressure of the cold blue steel as it was forced into her, and she began to scream.

Her screams were the last sounds Qetuka heard before the pain in his leg proved too much to bear and he passed beyond the edge of conscious thought into a well of darkness.

Burov’s raised eyebrows emphasized his scepticism. ‘The British? What makes you think the British sent this man? Surely if they wanted to assassinate you they would hardly warn you of a plot to free Holt.’ He felt like adding that the British, if they had engineered the assassination, would probably have succeeded.

Mabato frowned.

They were in the President’s office in the Command Post. Burov had his back to the big bay window and Mabato was seated at his desk, his arm now dressed and in a sling. His broad brow was furrowed in anger, a sign that he was at his most dangerous. Burov knew he would have to tread carefully.

‘I suspect, Excellency,’ he said, ‘that the attempt to kill you was planned by someone closer to home. Ask yourself who is most likely to gain from your death.’ He paused expectantly.

Mabato bared his teeth. ‘Kemba!’ he hissed, as a new calculating light showed in his eyes. ‘Perhaps Kemba is in league with the British.’

Burov said nothing. Was that likely? He wondered. Were the two
events linked? He swallowed inwardly. If this failed assassination attempt was a prelude to an invasion by Kenyan or Tanzanian sympathizers of Hamilton Kemba, his own position and, consequently, the Soviet foothold in Lugamba, was in serious jeopardy. He would have to report back to Kolk at Moscow Centre and wait for instructions.

‘There is one way to find out.’ Mabato said.
‘We interrogate the prisoner?’ Burov said.
Mabato smiled. It was a cruel smile. It made Burov’s skin crawl.
‘Comprehensively,’ Mabato said.

The pain revived him and he began to focus. Not fully aware of his surroundings, he was conscious only of the agony in his left leg. It was dark where he was. Some light came from a single bulb hanging by a thin woven flex above his head but it wasn’t much more than a dim glow. He tried to move, to raise his hands. He couldn’t.

His arms and legs were secured to the table by metal clamps at wrist and ankle. He turned his head. He appeared to be in some kind of cellar. He couldn’t make out much; brick walls and ceiling and what looked like a work bench along one wall on which hung hammers, screwdrivers, chisels, saws, spanners and other handyman paraphernalia. In one gloomy corner, steps ran up into shadow where there was, presumably, a door to the rest of the building.

He wondered how long he’d been unconscious.
A noise by the steps alerted him; voices and footsteps approaching. He tried to turn his head to see. Mabato walked down into the cellar followed by Burov and the emaciated figure of Farouk Juma. They approached the table and examined the prone body. Behind them appeared two armed DOSS guards.

Mabato studied the Zulu for several seconds, his small eyes flickering from head to toe. He held a thin Malacca cane in his hand. He was still wearing the sling.

‘Who sent you?’ he demanded.
Qetuka remained mute.
Mabato whipped the cane down on the wounded leg.
Qetuka’s scream lanced through the cellar and bounced off the walls. His body heaved. Beads of sweat sprang from his brow.
‘The name,’ Mabato said. ‘Give me the name.’ He raised the stick again. Qetuka’s head rocked from side to side.

Mabato’s arm dropped and the man on the table shrieked. Burov winced. Blood welled from the wound, soaking the Zulu’s fatigues.

‘He has courage,’ Burov observed.

Mabato shrugged. He raised the cane for the third time and Juma said, ‘Why not show him the woman?’

Mabato lowered his arm. He nodded. ‘Release him.’

Juma snapped his fingers and the DOSS men unlocked the clamps and lifted Qetuka off the table. Inevitably they were not gentle and his leg flamed. They hauled him into an upright position and dragged him across the uneven floor towards a low archway in one wall. Burov wondered what was in store.

The second room had a similar layout save for the absence of a work bench which had been replaced by a waist-high white cabinet about eight feet in length. In the centre of the room there stood another table. An object lay upon it covered by a red blanket. Burov screwed up his nose at the smell.

Qetuka hung between the two DOSS heavies and looked drunk.

Mabato walked to the table and raised a corner of the blanket. Burov peered closer. Then he drew in breath. It wasn’t a red blanket at all. It was a white sheet, soaked in blood. Pools of it had gathered beneath the table, black in the dim light. Burov felt his gorge rise as Mabato drew back the material.

At first sight it looked like a freshly-butchered side of beef on a slab. Burov swallowed bile as he looked down on the mutilated torso. His mind could hardly cope with the ghastly sight. The woman’s limbs had been severed at shoulder and thigh and switched. Her right arm and leg lay along her left side and vice versa. Burov felt certain he was going to throw up. Nothing could have prepared him for this. Then he noticed something else. There was no head.

Qetuka, supported by the two goons, heaved suddenly and vomited noisily. The stench, mingled with the awful odour of the woman’s remains, was overpowering.

Mabato put down the cane and strode over to the cabinet. He grasped a handle on top and Burov, at that moment, realized what it was: a chest freezer.

The lid now rested against the wall. Mabato reached inside. He straightened. In his hand he held a polythene bag tied at the neck. There was
something in it, round and dark. It was difficult to make out as the polythene was frosting over but Burov knew what it was. The woman’s severed head.

Mabato held the bag out at arm’s length and laughed. Burov thought it was the most terrible sound he’d ever heard. He looked at the prisoner. Qetuka was staring at the grisly trophy. With casual indifference Mabato tossed the head back into the ice box.

‘Now,’ he said, smiling. ‘See how I deal with my enemies.’

Burov was wondering what other delicacies the freezer might stock. It was too ghastly to contemplate, as was the ultimate fate of the wretch Mabato was gloating over.

The prisoner was sagging in the grip of the DOSS agents. His shirt was stained with vomit and his breath was coming in short, sharp gasps. Blood from his wound was trickling down his leg and forming pools on the floor.

Mabato retrieved his cane and used it to lift Qetuka’s chin. ‘Major Juma and I are going to ask you some questions. Pay very close attention. Answer quickly and truthfully’ He nodded to the guards. ‘Bring him.’

They took him back to the table and shackled him once more.

‘Now,’ Mabato said. ‘We will begin.’

Qetuka stared at the roof.

‘Who hired you?’

Nothing. Not a flicker. Burov held his breath.

Mabato sighed and nodded slowly. Juma walked over to the work bench. He scanned the tool racks and made his selection, returning to the table with a hammer and chisel.

‘Who hired you,’ Mabato asked again.

Qetuka remained silent. His eyes were almost closed.

Solomon Mabato raised his eyebrows. Juma placed the blade of the chisel against the knuckle of the little finger of the prisoner’s left hand. Then he struck down with the hammer.

The sound that burst from Qetuka’s lips wasn’t human. It battered the senses as the blade severed the joint. The finger lay on the table top. Blood bubbled from the stump, soaking the wood. Juma placed the tool against the next finger and raised the hammer.

‘The name?’ Mabato said.

The name was hardly more than a gargle, escaping from tight lips pursed in agony, ‘Kemba.’
‘Ah!’ Satisfaction from Mabato. ‘That snivelling whelp! And what value did he put on my life? How much were you to be paid?’

‘One...hundred...thousand...dollars.’

Mabato grunted. ‘Not very flattering, eh, Burov?’ He smiled. Burov’s features remained grim.

‘How many in your group?’ Mabato addressed the man on the table.

Burov moved closer.

The President leaned over the prisoner, his eyes black with rage. The prisoner seemed not to have understood. His face was creased with pain and bore no sign of comprehension.

‘I will ask again. How many of you are there? We know that you are part of a plot to overthrow the legitimate government of Lugamba and we know of the plan to free the Englishman, Holt.’ His voice had risen in tone.

In his pain, Qetuka had bitten through his lip. A bubble of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth as he gasped, ‘I am alone.’

Mabato jerked his head. The Zulu’s body spasmed and another scream rent the air as a second finger was severed.

‘You are the spearhead to an invasion force! Admit it! Who is supporting Kemba? Tanzania? Kenya? The American CIA? The British? Or the Jews? Is it the Jews?’

Burov couldn’t believe that the man could still talk. Any normal human would have lapsed into a state of shock brought on by the leg wound never mind the mutilation which followed. Evidently, the prisoner had incredible reserves of strength and courage. Even Mabato and Juma were looking puzzled. They hadn’t expected this sort of resistance.

‘Perhaps if I questioned him, Excellency?’ Burov said.

Mabato shrugged noncommittally and Juma placed the edge of the chisel over another finger.

Burov said quietly, ‘Tell us how you crossed the border, How did you enter the city?’

‘Last night...my vehicle crashed. I stole ...’

‘The patrol’s Land Rover!’ Juma hissed, raising the hammer.

‘Wait!’ Burov commanded. He was suddenly conscious of a pungent smell and looking down the prone body he saw the damp patch at the prisoner’s crotch as the man’s bladder emptied steadily. Mabato appeared not to have noticed.

Burov’s gruff voice was cajoling. ‘You say you know nothing of a
plot to free the Englishman? You expect us to believe you? The plot to kill His Excellency was surely a prelude to an invasion. If not, then at least a diversion for the escape attempt?'

‘I know nothing of this.’

‘His Excellency does not believe you.’

‘I speak the truth.’

‘My friend,’ Burov urged, ‘you will save yourself a great deal of pain. They will not stop at two fingers. Tell us, is Kemba planning to invade? Is that why he sent you?’

‘He sent me because I am the best. I am Qetuka!’ The voice was growing weaker now but even the suffering couldn’t disguise the pride in the voice.

Burov nodded. ‘I have heard of you. I heard you were good.’

Incredibly Qetuka’s mouth twisted into a grin. ‘I was...not...good enough.’ He coughed and his features contorted once more.

‘You are a brave man, Qetuka. I may save you still, if you give me the information.’

‘I cannot tell that which I do not know.’

‘You make things very difficult, my friend.’

‘For you or for me?’

‘You are the one on the rack,’ Burov said.

Qetuka blinked.

‘I don’t think he knows,’ Burov said.

‘He lies!’ Juma’s voice was shrill.

Burov shook his head. ‘I think not, Excellency. I agree that his pain threshold is remarkably high but whatever else he is, the man is not a fool and I think he would talk to try and save himself.’

Juma said, ‘Perhaps if we cut off something else?’

Without thinking, Burov turned on him. ‘You’re an animal! That man has more guts in his remaining little finger than you have in your entire pox-ridden body!’

Juma’s head rocked back. His eyes widened.

‘Enough!’ Mabato barked. Ignoring Juma’s affronted expression, he nodded at the man on the bench. ‘Deal with that.’ He turned to go and paused. ‘But save me the head.’

They had reached the bottom step when a croak came from behind them. Mabato stopped in his tracks. Qetuka had his head on one side.
Mabato approached the table. ‘Well?’
From cracked lips, framed with blood and vomit, Qetuka said, ‘There was a man with Kemba.’
‘Go on.’
‘Kemba said he was a soldier of fortune. A mercenary.’
‘His name!’ Mabato snapped.
‘I do not know. I only saw him as he was leaving.’
‘Nationality!’ Burov asked sharply.
‘A white man with grey hair. A European.’
‘Or an American.’ Burov mused.
‘You think the Americans would lead an invasion?’ Mabato asked the Russian.
‘I think it unlikely, Excellency. He could just as easily have been British or French. It was purely conjecture on my part.’ Burov drew closer to Qetuka. ‘Do you recall anything else?’
Qetuka sighed noisily. It sounded like a death rattle. No words came. He wasn’t going to last much longer. Burov said so.
Mabato shrugged. He was thinking about something else.
The plot to free David Holt.

‘What news?’ Brooke was speaking to his Foreign Secretary through the scrambler.
‘We’ve informed Mabato that our security services have uncovered a plot to free Holt. In the light of the Kenyans’ initiative we felt it was our duty to inform His Excellency in order to avoid undermining the negotiations for Holt’s legitimate release.’
‘Oh, very diplomatic. One might even say pious. What sort of acknowledgement did we get?’
‘None yet,’ Wood replied. ‘Unless an ominous silence counts.’
‘I see. Well, our next move should get a more positive response.’
‘What did you have in mind?’ Wood felt a warning flutter.
‘I’ve been in touch with the RAF,’ Brooke said. ‘I called Leyton-Grant half an hour ago. It’s all laid on with Transport Command.’
‘What is?’ Wood was floundering.
‘A VC-10 at Northolt. It’s standing by to take you to Lugamba. You’ll refuel at Cyprus. I…’
‘Hold on,’ Wood cut in. ‘I thought we’d decided I wasn’t going!’
‘I’ve changed my mind. I think, on reflection, that it would be a wise
move on our part. After all, we didn’t back down. The donkey work was done
by President Nai. All you have to do is fly in and collect Holt from Mabato’s
clutches and bring him home. Shake hands, smile at the press and Bob’s your
uncle! Look upon it as an opportunity. We might even pick up a few votes
along the way. The government that cares!’
‘What happened to all that Britain-will-never-give-in-to-this-sort-of-
terrorism crap? This is a decided inconsistency, if you ask me.’
‘President Nai will see it as a firm measure of the cooperation
between Kenya and Great Britain,’ Brooke said.
‘Stuff President Nai!’ Wood protested. ‘Our people will see it as a
climb down; a compromise in which we’re going to look like idiots!’
Brooke stared at him. ‘If I remember correctly, you were all for
flying out to Lugamba when this mess started.’
‘Like you, I’m entitled to change my mind.’
‘Oh, touché. Nevertheless, you’re going.’
‘Do I have a choice?’
Silence from Brooke.
‘I suppose that answers my question. When do I leave?’
‘Let me put it this way. If I were you, I’d ring Dorothy and tell her
you won’t be home for dinner.’

Dusk.
‘All stowed,’ Roan advised.
Keel acknowledged the information. He looked at Schiller and
Sekka. ‘Set?’
‘As we’ll ever be,’ Sekka replied.
Schiller lit a cheroot and inhaled. Taking it from his mouth, he
smiled. ‘Say the word, Major.’
They were grouped outside the mission with the priest. Sister Elicia
stood by the door, her eyes on Schiller who appeared to be unaware of her
attention.
Keel addressed Father Devlin, his hand on the priest’s shoulder. ‘You
know what to do?’
‘Don’t worry. I understand.’
‘Kate will come in around midnight. Light the strip and guide her down.’

‘You’ll come straight back to the mission?’ The priest sounded concerned.

‘Not directly. We don’t want to lead Mabato’s men here. We’ll engage them in a few diversionary tactics first.’

Schiller caught Sister Elicia’s eye then. She looked away, a little too quickly. The priest noticed. He regarded Schiller quizzically but any thoughts that might have harboured in his mind remained unvoiced as, at Keel’s command, the four mercenaries climbed into the Range Rover. Schiller drove. He reversed the vehicle in front of the building and steered it on to the track. The Range Rover jolted over the ruts and was outlined briefly at the top of the ridge before it sank from view beyond the darkness. None of the occupants looked back.

The old man and the girl watched them go in silence before turning and walking into the mission.
Kate Lassiter stretched her long legs inside the sleeping bag and wondered what time it was. The clock in her mind told her it was not her planned wake-up time and yet she knew that something had roused her. She squinted at her watch. It was an hour earlier than the time set by her mental alarm.

The noise came again; what sounded like a soft footfall somewhere in the darkened hangar. Easing herself out of the bag, she rose from the cot. She was naked. Shadows dappled her body as she reached for the overall that hung over the back of the chair. Slipping her feet into her trainers, she looked around for a weapon. Picking up the wrench she’d used against Jon Jon, she tip-toed to the office door.

The main hangar doors were closed but the smaller door to the side of them was open, through which a shaft of moonlight intruded. From what she could make out, the building was empty. No one was lurking behind the kerosene drums or hiding under the work bench but something had woken her. It might have been a stray dog - they sometimes got in through the perimeter fence - but a sixth sense told her the intruder, if that’s what she had heard, wasn’t a dog.

And then she saw it; a vague shape passing through the patch of moonlight outside. Like a spectre, it was there one second and gone the next. Or was it her imagination playing tricks?

She ran for the door.

She was ten feet from it when the explosion came.

The blast would have sent her sprawling if the hangar wall hadn’t been in the way, protecting her from the flaming kerosene and pieces of aircraft that struck the outside of the building. Flinging up her arm, she was just in time to see the Chieftain’s starboard propeller catapult over the burning fuselage and spin into the corrugated wall with an ear-splitting crash and a fiery cascade of sparks.

Oblivious to the heat generated by the fireball, she ran outside and stared in horror at the devastation.

It was several minutes before the sirens jolted her out of her trance. A
hand touched her shoulder and she jumped only to find it was Stan Mason, one of the Intercorp mechanics. His craggy face was carved in shock as he gazed at what was left of the aircraft.

‘Christ, Kate! What the hell happened?’ His concern was evident. ‘Are you OK?’

‘I’m all right,’ she replied hollowly.

Mason surveyed the carnage. ‘Jesus!’

Kate saw him suddenly cast an anxious look to his right. The two Intercorp Lear Jets were parked around the corner of the hangar along with half a dozen other aircraft. Like her, they had been protected by the building. If they’d gone up as well the tarmac would have looked like a World War Two airfield after an enemy strafing run.

The fire trucks rolled up and the crews jumped out and went to work, dousing the flames with foam. Wisps of the stuff drifted in the air like sea spume. They had arrived commendably quickly.

Mason took something out of his back pocket and held it out to her: a small hip flask. ‘Here.’

She shook her head. It wouldn’t look good if someone smelled the alcohol on her breath. And she needed a clear head.

‘A hell of a thing,’ Mason muttered. He tilted the flask, his neck muscles jerking as he swallowed.

A slim figure detached itself from the emergency activity and walked towards them.

‘Here comes the Inquisition,’ Mason murmured. The Fire and Safety Officer was called Fisk. He nodded briefly at Mason, raising an eyebrow at the flask. He looked grim.

‘That the remains of your aircraft, Mrs Lassiter?’

Kate nodded silently.

‘How did it happen?’

‘It blew up,’ Mason said.

‘Thank you,’ Fisk said tightly. ‘I was asking Mrs Lassiter.’ He turned to Kate.

She spread her hands, helplessly.

‘There was no warning?’ Fisk said.

Kate shook her head. She stared forlornly at twisted pieces of metal and the foam that covered them.

‘You’re not injured?’
‘No.’
‘That’s something positive, at least. Can you tell me anything?’ Fisk stared at the foam covered fuselage.
Kate shook her head again. ‘Not a damned thing.’ Despite the warmth of the night she hugged herself as though warding off the cold. ‘I’ve an early run in the morning and I was camping out in the office. Couldn’t sleep; got up to go to the loo; opened the office door and bang! By the time I reached the main doors she was a ball of flame. There was damn all I could do.’
Fisk looked thoughtful. ‘You didn’t see or hear anything? Before the explosion, I mean.’
Carver! She thought suddenly . Carver’s behind this, the bastard! She took a breath and shook her head, keeping the anger in check. ‘No, nothing.’
Fisk pursed his lips, hesitated and then said, ‘Any enemies?’
How long have you got?
‘God! No!’ She hoped she sounded genuinely outraged. ‘Whatever makes you say that?’
She wondered then what explosive Carver’s men had used. Whatever it was, it had done the job; quickly, efficiently, spectacularly. Had it been Ferris or Jon Jon she’d heard skulking in the hangar? Ferris probably. He had the technical know-how. Jon Jon was nothing more than a dumb enforcer. Ferris had the brains and the qualifications.
Fisk paused, again choosing his words. ‘The investigation wallahs are bound to ask.’
She was only half listening. Her mind was in turmoil. In less than three hours Keel was expecting her to drop out of the night sky on to the landing strip at Masambabule; and the aircraft he and the team were counting on was now a lump of blackened metal hidden beneath a blanket of fire foam. Without the Chieftain, Keel’s chances of getting Holt out of Lugamba were the wrong side of slim.
‘Damn you, Carver,’ Kate murmured.
‘Sorry?’ Fisk said. ‘I didn’t catch that.’
‘Nothing.’ She shook her head. ‘So, what now? I suppose I can expect a visit from the heavy brigade in the morning?’
Fisk nodded. ‘Count on it. You’ll have a Piper rep padding around as well as the insurance investigators and the rest. It’ll look like a convention
of Bow Street Runners I shouldn’t wonder.’ He smiled; a weak attempt at
levity and then, realizing his mistake, adopted a more sombre attitude.

‘For what it’s worth, Mrs Lassiter, I am deeply sorry. I know what
the aircraft meant to you. If there’s anything I can do, you know where to
reach me.’ He held out his hand. ‘I’ll make sure the area’s safe. I’ll see you
tomorrow. I suggest you get some rest in the meantime, you’ll be in for a
long day.’

You don’t know the half of it, she thought. She forced what she
hoped was a tired smile. ‘I’ll do that, Mr Fisk. Thank you for your concern.
Good night.’

She turned away as he walked back to the tender, skirting the mess
on the apron.

_Now what?_

She needed an aircraft and there was only one place she could
acquire one in the precious little time she had left.

Back in the office she collected her flight bag and charts and let
herself out of the hangar’s rear door.

Stan Mason was in his workshop. His surprise at seeing her was
exceeded only by his disbelief at her urgent request.

‘You want what!?’
‘The Commander.’
‘That’s what I thought you said. You’re not serious?’
‘Dead serious.’
‘What the hell do you want it for? And at this hour?’
‘A mission of mercy.’
‘What’s wrong with the Red Cross?’
‘You’re closer and I don’t have the time and don’t look at me like
that, dammit! Come on, Stan, I’ve more hours under my belt than you’ve had
hot dinners so don’t treat me like a junior cadet! I can fly rings around
anyone else on this field and you know it! I need that aircraft, Stan. I need it
now. Lives depend on it. I wouldn’t ask otherwise.’

Mason stood up. ‘You are serious, aren’t you?’
‘You had better believe it.’

The mechanic stroked his unshaven chin. ‘So, what’s it about? Look,
you want to borrow Intercorp’s run-around. I think I’m entitled to know why.
OK, so it’s not for a joy ride; I gather that. But this isn’t like borrowing a
bloody library book! That’s an expensive piece of kit!’
‘Which your boss uses to fly his secretary down to Malindi for dirty weekends. Well, right this minute my need’s a bloody sight greater than his!’

Her vehemence was startling. Mason was clearly nonplussed.

Kate Lassiter’s green eyes flashed. ‘Stan, it’s important! Please! I need the Commander tanked up and ready to go in thirty minutes. You can name your own price.’

He was silent for several seconds. Then he sighed. ‘I never could resist a plea from a beautiful woman and for your information she’s already fuelled. The boss likes me to be on call for immediate departure. I guess he’s never too sure when his secretary’s going to get the urge.’ He grinned, his face creasing like an old mat.

Her face brightened and she hugged him gratefully. ‘I owe you, Stan. I’ll not forget.’

‘How long will you need her?’

Another glance at the watch and the minutes ticking away. ‘I’ll have her back before dawn.’ Sotto voce she added, ‘God willing.’

‘One thing, Kate,’ Mason said. ‘If the shit hits the fan, you’re on your own. You took it when my back was turned. That’s the only price I ask apart from you being damned sure that you bring her back in one piece. I ...’

He was talking to himself. Lassiter was sprinting towards the tarmac.

‘Bloody women!’ Mason muttered. Reluctantly he broke into a lope and followed her darting figure as she ran towards the small, single-engine, four-seater monoplane that was parked alongside the Lears.

In Maboru they were stacking the dead in preparation for collection by the disposal squads. Holt was watching them from his cell window.

The guards were removing the corpses from the death cells. They looked like rag dolls with lolling heads and loose matchstick limbs - puppets without strings. In the stark glare of the arc lights the scene was grotesque and the heap of human remains grew. Holt had stopped counting after the first score. As the pile in the corner of the compound rose steadily he turned away from the window with the sour taste of vomit in his throat.

In the next cell, the guards were dragging something across the floor and Holt could hear them grunting with the effort. He crouched on the filthy mattress, tears of frustration trickling down his gaunt cheeks.

It was the same procedure every evening. Half an hour or so after
dusk the gory refuse would be taken to the cage in the compound. When the truck arrived the bodies were thrown aboard. Loaded, the truck would then leave and proceed to the observation platform above the Kiggala Falls where the rotting corpses were tossed into the thundering black water. Sometimes the truck would have to make two trips, depending on whether the interrogation teams and the executioners had been particularly enthusiastic during the day. Sometimes the bodies were not whole when they were removed. The stench of the dead reached into every corner of the prison.

Footsteps halted outside the door. Keys rattled in the lock and the heavy door swung open with a crash. Holt felt the flood of fear course through his body as the two guards entered. The thin waif-like figure of Farouk Juma stepped into the cell behind them, a smile on his lips. He jabbed at Holt with his swagger stick. Holt cringed.

‘Get away!’ he shrieked and scrambled along the mattress, seeking the dark corner of the cell, dirty, dishevelled, terrified by the ferocious gleam in Juma’s eyes.

Behind Juma, through the open doorway, Holt’s frightened eyes saw two more guards carry some formless thing down the passage, leaving a thick smear of blood on the floor behind them.

He was grabbed by the arms and hauled off the mattress. Whimpering like a small dog, his gaze settled on the tunic of one of the guards. It was streaked with some yellowish gristle-like substance and scarlet splashes dotted the man’s chest. The sleeves were matted with a dark brown stain and the smell made Holt retch.

Through the bile, he whispered hoarsely, ‘Where are you taking me?’ Juma just smiled.

Holt began to struggle. ‘No! You can’t! For God’s sake! PLEASE!’ He kicked out at the guards but it was a futile exercise.

They dragged him screaming from the cell and his last recollection before he passed out was of the sight that greeted him in the passage. The stone floor was slippery with black, viscous matter. The guards he’d observed earlier were bundling an object into a burlap sack. It wasn’t until the sack toppled over and disgorged the bloody stump of a human arm that Holt’s befuddled brain grasped the reality of the situation. He uttered one piercing ululation of terror and slumped abruptly into the arms of his gaolers. Silently they carried his limp body down the passage towards the disposal point.
Kendura sprawled under a rapidly darkening sky. The slums and corrugated ghettos were painted in shadow though here and there pinpricks of light from cheap oil lamps twinkled weakly through chinks in ragged walls. The centre of the city fared little better. Most of the large buildings remained unlit. The side streets were like empty canals, running forlornly past vermin-infested alleyways and gutted stores. Some areas were slightly better illuminated, like the wide Kendura Avenue that bisected the city and ran alongside the high walls of Mabato’s Command Post, behind which the President’s bodyguards watched and listened.

The truck swung around the corner and moved slowly down the centre of the street like a giant roach on a foraging mission, headlights probing. The truck bore two occupants: the driver and a front seat passenger; brutal, unsmiling men in floral patterned, short sleeved shirts; a DOSS disposal squad en route to Maboru to collect the dead.

They both saw the figure by the roadside at the same time. Caught in the wavering beams, the man beckoned to the truck. Even in the gloom they could see he was dressed like themselves, in shirt and slacks; a member of Mabato’s security force. He waved again before turning to attend to a dark bundle at his feet; a body dressed in army fatigues, huddled as if unconscious or in pain. As the man waved, the headlights reflected on the barrel of the machine pistol he was holding.

The truck slowed and veered towards the kerb. It halted. The doors opened and the driver and his companion stepped down, drawing automatic pistols from shoulder holsters as they approached the gesturing figure.

‘What’s happening here?’ The driver’s voice was rough and uneducated. He regarded the body on the ground without compassion.

The man who’d waved to them answered. ‘A looter. I caught him running out of a store. The bastard tried to kill me so I dealt with him. I was going to leave the body in the rubble when I saw your truck. You can take the pig to the falls with the rest of them.’

The driver spat into the darkness. His companion shrugged. ‘One more won’t make any difference.’

The man holding the machine pistol knelt over the body and tugged at something out of sight. His hand emerged holding a panga. The vicious weapon was nearly two feet long with a broad, flat blade. ‘This is what he attacked me with. He won’t be needing it anymore. Here, give me a hand to
get him into the truck.’

They holstered their guns and moved to assist. The driver stepped over the body and turned it over. His jaw dropped in surprise.

The looter was white!

Keel’s arm shot out. His hand grabbed the driver’s collar, pulling him off-balance and on to his knees.

The second DOSS man was quicker to react. He grabbed for his handgun and moved half a pace backwards.

Sekka swung the panga.

The blade curved through the air and sliced into the cruel face, splitting the broad features into a bloody ravine. The scream died on the man’s lips as his face was ripped apart in one micro-second of bewildering agony. A bright, crimson spray caressed the air as Sekka followed through with the blow, sweeping the blade forward as he pulled it free.

Keel removed his knife from between the driver’s ribs, thrust the body aside and got to his feet.

Two figures ran from the shadows.

Roan stared down Sekka’s victim. ‘You sure as hell didn’t pull any punches.’ He glanced at Keel. ‘You OK?’

Keel nodded. ‘Get them out of sight. You know what to do.’

As he spoke he felt a tap on his shoulder and then his neck. He lifted his face and the third drop struck his face. For a second he remained motionless, absorbing the knowledge of what was happening and realizing that it might prove an invaluable aid to their endeavours.

It had begun to rain.

In the time it took them to dump the bodies behind a pile of refuse, they were soaked to the skin and raindrops were bouncing off the road like bullets. Sekka and Keel, faces streaming, climbed into the Bedford. Schiller and Roan ran through the deluge towards the Range Rover concealed nearby. The noise on the roof of the cab was like one continuous rattle of gunfire. Keel peered out through the windscreen. Without the headlights he couldn’t see fifty feet beyond the bonnet.

The mercenary had no qualms about killing the two DOSS thugs. They had been active members of a unit that dealt in fear and death on an unprecedented scale under the direct orders of Solomon Mabato. If Keel did have any reservations they lay in the certain knowledge that from the moment Sekka swung the panga they were committed irrevocably to their prime
objective: the rescue of David Holt. From now on there could be no turning back. The die had been cast.

The signal from Slattery, Head of Station in Nairobi, reached Dalkieth late in the afternoon. It was little more than an echo of a rumour but something, as Dalkieth’s friends in Grosvenor Square might have put it, was definitely going down. Slattery had received a report, unconfirmed, that Solomon Mabato had been the victim of an assassination attempt. No details as yet. The Lugambans had, not surprisingly, thrown a blanket over the incident, although it appeared that Mabato was still alive and, if his past record was anything to go by, probably exacting vengeance.

There was no word of Holt.

And all this less than two hours after Wood had departed Northolt. He’d likely be indulging in a G and T at thirty thousand feet by now, Dalkieth supposed. Talk about interesting timing.

So, where did that leave HMG?

Dalkieth’s recommendation would be to proceed as planned. After all, whatever the situation in Lugamba, even if Mabato was head hunting, Whitehall was in the clear.

So, why was Dalkieth beset by a niggling degree of unease? Perhaps it was the fear that events were beginning to overlap; gaining momentum like a juggernaut out of control or a tiny spark just before it’s fanned by the wind and whipped into a raging wild fire, destroying all in its path.

Perhaps it was already too late.

For all of them.

On the promontory overlooking the dark, rain lashed northern reaches of Lake Victoria, Maboru squatted in the night like an ogre; grey walls rising out of the headland, menacing in its isolated silence.

The death truck rumbled out of the rain and approached the main gates. Immediately, the lights above the entrance arch sprang into life, lancing through the downpour, holding the vehicle in their beams as it moved forward and slowed to a halt, engine chugging throatily.

An eye-level trap in the left hand gate slid open to reveal suspicious eyes set in a dark face. Sekka looked back through the jerking wipers with
what he hoped was a bored and vacant expression, one hand resting idly on the steering wheel, the other holding the stock of the H & K that lay across his knees.

The bonnet was bathed in light as the guards on the wall directed the beams over the truck. Instinctively, Sekka’s hand gripped the gun tightly though it was unlikely the guards could see anything clearly through the rain.

The trap shut abruptly. There was a pause before the gates split apart with a groan of protest. Sekka let his pent up breath escape in a long sigh of relief. Letting out the clutch, he eased the truck forward through the mud. As he did so, the probing slivers of light jumped the wall to follow the progress of the Bedford as it moved into the compound.

Less than one hundred yards away, behind a wall of dripping foliage at the edge of the track, Harry Roan crouched and watched cautiously as the truck was swallowed up by the prison gates.

Hidden there, with the rain trickling down the back of his neck, clad in fatigues that rendered him invisible against the terrain, Roan might have believed himself back in the jungles of Cambodia or Vietnam. It could have been a recon mission, a search and destroy operation or a night ambush.

Just so long as it wasn’t a repeat of Son Tay.

US military analysts had identified Son Tay, twenty or so miles west of Hanoi, as a prisoner of war camp. Roan and other Special Forces volunteers had been heli-lifted into the camp under the command of Colonel ‘Bull’ Simons to rescue American troops. Upon landing, however, the rescue force had discovered that all the prisoners had been moved weeks before. The camp was long abandoned. So much for Intelligence.

Not again, Roan thought grimly, as he watched the Bedford disappear. That was all they needed. He gritted his teeth, erased the thought from his mind and got to his feet. Gripping his pack, he began weaving his way through the undergrowth towards the prison wall.
Sekka was immediately aware of the smell. Not the sweet, cleansing fragrance of a tropical storm but the overpowering sickly stench of human putrefaction. It hung in the darkness like a shroud.

The gates opened on to a courtyard with the guard post built into the wall to the left of the entrance. Another archway lay ahead. It opened on to the main compound which was divided into two quadrangles by a central run of cells. Sekka knew the layout of the prison from the plans the team had studied in Amsterdam and from the updated information supplied by Father Devlin.

He knew the bodies would be stacked inside a small wire enclosure in the right hand quadrangle. The bulky figure of a prison guard strode out of the guard post. Draped in a waterproofed cape, his face was hidden under a peaked forage cap pulled low over his forehead. He carried a Kalashnikov rifle and he looked wet and very miserable.

He barked an order and the searchlights swivelled to cover the outer walls and the compound. Spot lights strung along the walls of the yard gave some clarity to the scene as the guard approached the truck. Sekka’s finger curled around the trigger of the machine pistol.

‘You are alone?’ The guard’s brutal face stared up at the cab window with suspicion. ‘Where is your companion?’

Sekka grinned and made an obscene gesture. ‘With his woman! Where else would a man with any brains be on a night like this? And you should see her!’ Sekka rolled his eyes. ‘Big and juicy, with tits like melons and thighs that would squeeze you dry!’

Sekka chuckled. ‘I grow hard just thinking about her. I bet she screams while he’s screwing her too! It’s a good job this rain is cooling me down, or I’d have you face up against the wall!’

To Sekka’s intense relief the guard took a step backwards. He eased out the clutch.

‘Wait!’
Sekka froze. The guard was unslinging his rifle. Sekka’s fingers stroked the barrel of the machine pistol on his knee. The guard moved towards the rear of the truck. Rain sluiced through the open window of the cab as Sekka followed the man’s progress in the side mirror. He watched, pulse hammering. He knew the man was going to raise the canvas flap.

The guard reappeared. Sekka relaxed.

The soldier snapped, ‘What are you waiting for? Move! Those pigs are beginning to stink.’ He jerked the Kalashnikov and moved back.

Sekka breathed in deeply, tension ebbing. As the guard retreated he floored the gas pedal.

The headlights probed dimly, the weak beams bounced back from the wall of rain. The ground was now a sea of mud. As Sekka turned the corner he felt the wheels slide. Correcting the skid, he jockeyed the truck towards the enclosure in the vee of the wall.

Bringing the vehicle to a halt, he switched off the engine and viewed the scene through the cab window. Oblivious to the rain, his eyes were drawn inescapably to the bodies. Piled in grotesque abandon, they shone wetly as the torrent poured down over bare backs and twisted limbs. Half a dozen sodden burlap sacks lay at the base of the pile.

A porch ran around the compound’s edge. Huddled underneath its roof, two guards regarded the truck through the rain. They made no move as Sekka opened the cab door and jumped clown. He was drenched in seconds. The thin shirt and slacks, still damp from their previous dousing, stuck to his body like a second skin.

Beneath the Bedford, Keel and Schiller released themselves from the harnesses they had slung underneath the chassis and dropped silently to the ground. They were dressed in their camouflage suits and both wore black cotton ski masks to conceal their features. They carried a machine pistol each as well as a Browning in a shoulder holster and a commando knife in a sheath on their belt. Keel had the Remington strapped across his back. Their waist packs contained spare magazines and, in Keel’s case, grenades and extra shells for the shotgun. By all the rules they were travelling light.

Sekka waded through the mud and lowered the tailboard. He pulled the canopy aside and secured it. ‘Two guards,’ he said softly. ‘Under the porch to your left. No sign of any others. The rain’s keeping them inside.’

‘We hear you.’ Keel’s voice came from below him.

Sekka entered the enclosure.
Sightless eyes followed his approach. He saw fingers curled in claw-like paralysis and tongues swollen and protruding from mouths gaping in rictus. He sucked in his breath, fighting the urge to retch as the smell reached towards him. He walked back to the truck and through gagging lips, yelled through the rain, ‘Hey! You two give me a hand! Move it! Major Juma’s orders!’ He guessed the name would have the desired effect.

With undisguised annoyance they ran into the open, cursing the weather and Sekka’s ancestry. They huddled against the side of the truck, muttering bleakly.

Keel and Schiller struck.

The guards’ feet were pulled from under them and they could do nothing to avoid being jerked off balance. They landed with a thumping squelch and Sekka finished the job with crushing blows from the butt of one of the guards’ dropped rifles.

Keel and Schiller rose from concealment.

The guards on the wall were directing the lights across the enclosure and in the rain and the darkness Keel and Schiller remained undetected in the truck’s shadow.

‘Dump the guards in the back, and start humping the bodies on board. You’ll have to try and manage them on your own while Paul and I grab Holt. Once we bring him out, we’ll slip him and ourselves over the tailboard. You can close up and take us back through the gates.’

Sekka nodded and Keel touched his arm. ‘It has to be done, Joseph. Otherwise, the tower guards will grow suspicious.’

‘You’d better get a move on,’ Sekka said. He turned away quickly.

Keel and Schiller exchanged glances and then they were melting through the flood like ghosts. Sekka moved slowly to the first body and tugged at a stiff arm. The rain on his face masked the tears that threatened to run down his cheeks.

It was dry under the porch and Keel and Schiller were still hidden from the other guards. Their concealment was aided by the rain that was battering down onto the corrugated roof and cascading over the edge of the guttering.

The door opened into a dimly lit passage that ran the length of the building. The cell doors were spaced evenly along the walls. There were no guards. No doubt the men they’d taken out in the compound took it in turns to patrol the corridor. Keel counted off the cells. Holt’s was the third on the
Father Devlin had confirmed this during the briefing with Keel at the mission. The mercenary tapped his companion on the shoulder and they padded towards the cell door. They were conscious of the rancid smells oozing from the walls and floor and more than once the soles of their boots met tacky resistance in the slimy patches on the stones beneath their feet.

Reaching the cell, Keel saw there was an eye-level trap in the door. Schiller guarded his back as he slid it open. He peered into the tiny room. It took a second or two for his eyes to make out details. By the light from the barred window he could see that the cell was about nine feet square and that a mattress lay against one wall. What looked like a bucket stood in one corner; a crude latrine.

The body on the mattress was covered by a thin blanket and Keel could see that the figure was turned towards the wall, knees bent; the attitude of a man huddled for warmth. Holt was evidently asleep despite the sound of the rain outside.

‘He’s there. Let’s get the hell out of here. Our luck can’t last for ever.’

The door was secured by a large bolt. Schiller pulled it back and they froze as metal grated.

No one came and the passage remained silent. Keel let out his breath. ‘OK. Bring him out while I cover you. And take it easy. He won’t be in too good a shape.’

Schiller ran into the cell.

‘Mister Holt!’ Schiller called softly as he crouched down and touched the hunched shoulder. The blanket slid away and the body moved and in those final seconds Schiller knew they had made a terrible mistake.

Qetuka’s throat had been cut and he had bled a great deal judging from the saturated state of the mattress beneath his mutilated body. His arms and legs had been broken in such a way for his corpse to be placed in a sleeping posture. His upper chest was matted with blood and in the ruin that had been his neck the stump of bone that was the top of his spinal column gleamed white.

All this Schiller grasped in the seconds before the grenade that had been rigged beneath the Zulu’s chest exploded as the body was moved.

Schiller died instantly. Within the confines of the cell the force of the blast was catastrophic. The mercenary’s body disintegrated into a creamy web of ragged flesh and bone fragments that splattered every corner of the
tiny room, leaving runnels of gore on the pockmarked brick work.

Keel, guarding the passage, had been protected by the thick stone and the open door behind which he was crouching, though his ear drums felt as if they’d been ruptured. Recovering, he sprang to the entrance of the cell and through the swirling dust saw the tattered remnants of the mattress and bloody remains of the two men. As his brain registered the springing of Mabato’s trap, he turned quickly, wheeling to face the attack he knew would follow.

Two doors at the end of the passage crashed open and a trio of guards emerged at a run. They were in the open before the presence of a survivor hit them. By then it was too late.

Keel squeezed off a burst with the H & K and watched with grim satisfaction as the force of the low velocity slugs ripped the guards apart, sending them twisting and bouncing like grotesque tumblers. As he retreated quickly down the passage, two more guards broke from the cells. Keel dropped as bullets scythed over his head, tearing chunks from the masonry.

He returned fire, bringing them down in a flurry of broken limbs. By the time he reached the door to the compound, the grenade was in his hand. Lobbing it underarm along the length of the passage, he was through the door and under the porch when it detonated. A piercing scream rose above the sound of the detonation, telling him that another guard was maimed or dead.

The compound, still pummelled by the driving rain, was now an open killing ground. Cries of alarm sounded through the deluge and the lights atop the walls punched their beams into the quadrangle.

Sekka sprang into the cab. The engine roared and he floored the clutch. Thrusting his own gun through the window, he fired upwards. Glass exploded and one of the lights blew out. Across the compound, indistinct shapes were fanning out under the downpour. There was no sign of Keel.

‘THOMAS!’ Sekka screamed. Under his feet the truck’s engine was revving like a grand prix contestant.

A black figure erupted from the darkness and Sekka heard Keel yell, ‘GO! GO!’

Mud spurted at Keel’s feet as someone fired down from above. Keel raised his weapon and loosed off another burst. There was a long wail from the wall and a body toppled off the parapet. It had been a lucky hit and the result of a pure reflex action.

Sekka floored the gas pedal. The windscreen exploded and a bullet
slammed through the back of the passenger seat, expending itself in the pile of bodies in the rear.

As the tyres gripped, Keel flung himself forward and grabbed the loose end of the webbing strap that secured the canvas canopy to the metal framework. He felt it burning his hand, rasping through his grip like sandpaper as the truck lurched around. His body twisted and bucked as he was dragged across the mud. Incredibly he was still grasping the H & K in his other hand. He hurled the machine pistol into the back of the truck and made a grab for the edge of the tailgate. A posse of guards ran from the porch and as Keel hauled himself aboard a fusillade of shots shredded the canopy and ricocheted off the back of the lorry. Rising above the tailgate, he hurled a grenade into the rain and watched it explode among the front runners, lifting them off the ground in a bright fireball.

Ahead of the truck, two men ran into the open, firing from the hip. Sekka spun the wheel and felt the bullets pass through the cab. There followed a sickening crunch and a loud screech as the bumper broke the nearest man’s back, catapulting him against the wall. The other guard jumped aside as the Bedford careered through the archway and into the entrance yard.

Roan, wet and uncomfortable, knelt under dripping leaves at the edge of the tree line and listened to the commotion. The rattle of gunfire was flattened by the heavy swathe of rain but it was his signal. He withdrew the transmitter from his pack and pressed the switch.

The charges he’d placed with such precision on the main gates under the cover of the deluge after the truck had entered the prison, detonated immediately. The explosion lifted the gates off their hinges and smashed them into matchwood as the Bedford roared out of the inner compound.

That had always been the plan’s weak point: the getting out.

Two ways in: by force or by stealth; likewise the escape. Knowing that the odds against an undetected exit were colossal, Keel had planned on a random factor: Harry Roan with enough C4 to blow the doors and maybe cause a diversion and maybe give them the edge; a chink through which they could squeeze if the mission fell apart.

As it had done, with a roar that had blown Schiller into oblivion and warned Roan that the world might just end sometime in the next few seconds.

Sekka was driving by instinct. Listening to the devastation being
wrought by Keel from the back of the truck, he knew they didn’t stand a hope in hell of coming through this one.

Guards were tumbling from the guard house, fumbling with their rifles, yelling alarm and watching in horrid fascination as the huge truck roared towards them. When the gates blew apart they were caught in the shockwave and, as though scythed by grape-shot, were sent twirling and stumbling like ninepins. A jagged splinter, as sharp as a javelin, struck one guard between his shoulder blades, punching its way out of his chest, propelling him forward and pinning him in the mud, where he lay squirming like a beetle on a pin.

As the guards reeled, Sekka thumped the accelerator. The heavy vehicle barrelled towards the demolished entrance.

The bullet took Sekka high on the right shoulder and pushed him back against the seat. He yelled as the steering wheel spun from his grasp then he was jolted forward, allowing him to regain his grip. Clenching his teeth against the rain which was driving relentlessly into the open gap that had been the windscreen, he moved up through the gears. He knew the real pain would come later. For the moment he could bear it. Besides, if he couldn’t get them through the front gates, the pain in his shoulder would be the least of their problems.

Keel tore off the ski mask and threw it behind him. It had become clogged with mud as he’d been dragged along. Mud had penetrated his eyes and nostrils and the back of his throat. He spat out mucus and felt air on his face once again. Fighting for balance, he felt the touch of a hand on the side of his face as a flopping limb came adrift from the pile of bodies. He shook it away in disgust.

As they boomed through the yard, more soldiers ran from cover. The Remington bucked in his hands and rubble blew from the prison wall like chaff. He curved a grenade into the melee and saw it explode. The guards cowered then came on. The canvas was flapping like a vulture’s wing. Keel ducked low and felt the breeze of a slug pass an inch from his cheek. Then they bounced again and Keel saw the broken body emerge from beneath the wheels, the blood and mud mingling with the rain.

They went through the outer archway at a battering lurch. The Remington roared again and a second arc light went out. Then, incredibly, they were clear.

Roan watched incredulously as the truck cannoned out of the prison.
As he ran out from the trees to intercept, Sekka saw him and slowed, allowing Keel to grab the American’s outstretched hand and haul him aboard.

‘What the fuck happened?’ Roan stared at Keel in horror.

‘A trap. If you hadn’t blown the gates, we’d still be in there.’ Keel slammed a fist against the tailboard. ‘It was a fucking disaster!’

Roan glanced around the inside of the truck. ‘Where’s Paul?’

‘Dead.’ Keel’s voice was curt. ‘Bastards were waiting for us. No wonder it was so bloody easy. They knew we were going in. They’d rigged a grenade in the cell. Paul went in to get Holt and triggered it. He was blown to bits.’

‘Shit!’ Roan digested the information. His mouth was dry. ‘And Holt? They waste him too?’

‘Looks like it, though I can’t believe they’d kill him like that. My guess is that the bugger on the mattress was probably another inmate once, like these poor bastards.’

‘So where’s Holt?’

The Bedford skidded through a pothole and Keel winced as his elbow collided with the floor. Sekka was driving fast and somewhat erratically. The prison had disappeared around the bend beyond the driving curtain of rain.

‘Presumably somewhere we can’t get to him. We were lucky Mabato’s thugs are incompetent and inexperienced in combat. We had more fire power and expertise than they could cope with in the time span. If they’d been Libyan or Cuban it might have been a different matter. Joseph got us out. He was driving like a maniac. I think my stomach’s still back there somewhere.’

‘What now, then,’ Roan asked as he peered out of the truck, looking for signs of pursuit.

‘Get the hell out. It’s all we can do. There’s no way we can get to Hol now. The Lugambans’ll have everything sewn up as tight as a duck’s arse. We grab the Range Rover and hightail it to the mission. Kate can fly us out.’

‘That’s it?’ Roan’s voice betrayed his disgust. ‘We run for it, tails between our legs? That was a good man we left back in that cesspit! Christ! I’ll have someone’s balls for this!’ Roan’s eyes narrowed. ‘You think Cameron...?’

‘I think...’

The explosion sounded enormous. Keel’s words were lost. The truck
swerved and hammered over the scree as the ground erupted in a gout of orange flame, sending mud flying against the canopy like hailstones.

Roan and Keel were flung against the side of the Bedford as the truck came to a bone jarring halt. As the two men extricated themselves from the tangle of limbs, they heard Sekka scream at them to get out and take cover.

There was a crump away to the right and the ground to their left erupted as they clambered over the tailgate.

The rain had stopped. The forest gleamed. The air was heavy and humid. Sekka blundered into them. He was panting hard. There was a dark stain that wasn’t water high on his right shoulder.

‘Scorpion!’ he warned. ‘On the road!’

‘Your shoulder?’ Keel said.

‘I’m all right. If we make the mission Devlin can take a look. Let’s go.’

There was the throb of an engine on the track and abruptly the thin white beam of a searchlight lanced through the darkness like an arrow, glancing off the trees before pinpointing the truck. Faint voices yelled with excitement as Mabato’s troops caught sight of their quarry.

‘Fuck!’ Roan spat.

They turned and ran, keeping the truck between their backs and the Scorpion. A burst of automatic fire cut through the bushes, raking the truck along its length. The soldiers were too enthusiastic and were shooting wildly.

The mercenaries were seventy yards away when the Bedford’s fuel tank went up. Burning debris and body parts spattered down. Behind them, figures could be seen sprinting towards the flaming vehicle.

They ran.

Keel knew they had to get back to the Range Rover. Without it, they’d never make the mission in time. He looked at his watch. Not good.

They hit the road fifteen minutes later, emerging cautiously from the trees, scanning left and right, senses alert for the brittle cocking of weapons or the crack of a twig underfoot. In the time they’d been running there had been no sign of pursuit. That didn’t mean there wasn’t any. Mabato would have trackers. Once they latched onto the scent it would be impossible to shake them off.

They reached the spot where they’d hidden the Range Rover. It looked undisturbed beneath its covering of foliage. Within seconds they were aboard. With Keel behind the wheel, they reversed out of the bush. They had
one hour to reach the mission and the rendezvous with Kate Lassiter.

Solomon Mabato was almost incoherent with rage. His vast frame shook as he screamed down the telephone. His anger was aimed at a nervous Farouk Juma who was holding the receiver at a distance from his ear. He was in the guard house at Maboru, trying to cut out the noise of the surrounding chaos as the soldiers ran to and fro like termites.

‘Escaped! How could they escape?’ Mabato bellowed.

Juma cringed at the sound of his master’s voice. Better to remain silent and let the President vent his wrath without interruption. In his rage there was no telling what he would do or threaten. If Juma said the wrong thing he could well find himself joining the unfortunate inmates of Maboru on a permanent basis. An enraged Mabato was capable of anything, as had been proved by the way he’d dealt with the assassin.

Mabato’s tone dropped several octaves. ‘You have displeased me, Major. I do not see how an entire guard company could have been outwitted by a handful of foreign terrorists.’

Juma felt it would be unwise at this juncture to mention that there had only been, as far as he could judge, three men. Three! They’d left enough carnage in their wake for a raiding party four times that number.

‘I am holding the commandant for questioning,’ Juma said. ‘Perhaps he can explain why his men were so inadequate.’

Mabato saw through the ruse. ‘I hold you both responsible for this. Do not disappoint me again. The armoured patrol; have they reported in yet?’

‘They caught up with the truck, Excellency. It has been destroyed.’

‘And the terrorists?’

‘They escaped into the bush. The patrol is in pursuit. They cannot get far. They will soon be in open country with nowhere to run.’

‘The incident at Maboru proves that these men do not lack determination. I want them found, alive if possible. I intend to make an example of them. Following public execution their heads will grace the walls of my Command Post.’

‘And if we cannot take them alive, Excellency?’

‘Their heads will suffice.’

‘It shall be done.’

‘And Juma.’ The voice was now like brushed velvet.
The major swallowed. ‘Excellency?’
‘Fail me, Major, and your own head will be forfeit. You understand?’
Juma was about to reply when he realized he was listening to an
empty line. Mabato had hung up.
Juma knew he was in serious trouble. The Scorpion patrol had, so
far, failed to catch the raiders. Perhaps the road blocks he’d established
earlier would have better luck. He hoped so. The short hairs on the back of
his scrawny neck were already beginning to tingle uncomfortably.

They came upon the road block seven miles out of the city. They were
travelling fast, hammering along, headlights ablaze; sacrificing stealth for
speed in a hell-for-leather dash to make the rendezvous point.

Hitting the bend too fast, the Range Rover came off the curve like a
Formula One Ferrari. Keel, pumping the brakes, aimed the bonnet towards
the side of the road to turn them away from the obstruction two hundred
yards away. Illuminated by a cordon of kerosene lamps, the poles, resting
across a zigzag of oil drums, bisected the highway. Weapons glinted in the
half-light over the shoulders of the dark clad figures grouped in the shadow
of a big Soviet BTR Armoured Personnel Carrier parked behind the barrier.

‘Shit!’ Keel wrestled with the spinning wheel as they swerved across
the macadam. Roan and Sekka cocked their machine pistols and braced
themselves against the motion.

The troops manning the road block broke apart. Some ran into the
road and started firing. The rear window of the Range Rover exploded into an
opaque cobweb. Bullets slammed into the chassis.

As the vehicle slewed to one side, Roan extended his body through
the window and hosed off a burst at the soldiers. Inside the Range Rover the
noise was deafening. An answering hail of bullets smashed the rear lights and
punched holes in the side panels as Keel took them over the edge of the
highway. Incredibly none of them had been hit and Roan voiced their
surprise.

‘Lousy fuckin’ shots!’

The soldiers stampeded towards the BTR to give chase. The massive
personnel carrier clattered into life and the NCO herded his men to their
places, at the same time calling to his radio technician.

‘Alert Major Juma! Tell him we are in pursuit of the raiders!’
The BTR rumbled out of the night, troops huddled in the rear, priming their weapons. The exhaust coughed and the vehicle picked up speed.

The Range Rover was bobbing through the scrub, low branches lashing against the windscreen as Keel fought for control. Roan saw the gully ahead in the jumping lights and yelled, ‘Left! Left!’

Keel scraped them past, the tyres scrabbling for a grip on a surface still sticky from the storm. The front nearside wheel struck a rock, jolting them out of their seats with a gut wrenching lurch. Sekka gritted his teeth as pain knifed in his shoulder. He threw a glance out of the rear window. ‘They’re still behind us!’

The BTR was bulldozing its way across the terrain, its upper chassis a bank of lights as its commander tried to follow the fleeing vehicle in front. The Personnel Carrier didn’t have the manoeuvrability of its quarry but what it lacked in agility it made up for with brute force. It was crashing along, mowing everything in its path like a snow plough. But it hadn’t a hope of keeping up. The commander knew that.

The Range Rover churned up a slope as Keel took them into four-wheel drive. They veered between thorn trees like a slalom skier. As they crested the rise Keel stamped on the pedal to gain speed on the flat. ‘How’re we doing?’ he yelled.

‘They’re dropping back!’ Roan said gleefully, knowing the Range Rover had more than twice the speed of the Soviet vehicle, even on the rough. ‘How the hell did they manage to get a road block up so damned fast?’

‘Same way they set the snare in Maboru,’ Sekka replied. ‘We’ve been suckered all the way. The quicker we’re out of here the better. Can we make it?’

‘Let’s find out,’ Keel said. ‘They’ll be watching the roads; that’s for sure. We’ll have to cut to the mission overland. Just hope the springs can take it.’

‘Not to mention my ass,’ Roan muttered with feeling.

The BTR appeared like a battle tank over the rim and shuddered to a halt, engine rumbling like a furnace. The quarry had disappeared into the night, swallowed by the veldt. Cursing heavily, the commander reached for the radio.
Burov ran a stubby finger along the map and the thin red line that represented the highway. ‘They left Maboru and turned north.’ He tapped the map. ‘According to your troop commander, they left the road here, at the road block, and headed north east.’

Mabato muttered darkly, ‘He will be punished for letting them slip through his hands.’

‘But not until you have apprehended the terrorists,’ Burov suggested. ‘You need every man to run them down.’ He stared at the map. ‘I wonder where they’re running to?’

The Kenyan border lay in that direction but it was a long drive. Burov felt a grudging admiration for the raiding party and he had the sneaking suspicion that if these men were as resourceful as he thought they would know that Mabato would have the border buttoned up so tightly a lizard couldn’t slip through. So they had to be making for an alternative destination.

Lake Victoria lay to the south. Burov ruled that out. If the men were intending to escape by boat they’d have gone in the opposite direction. Besides, a boat was too slow unless it was a high speed launch. Burov didn’t think so. So what was left? North? That way was desert and the dry plains that spread beyond the Sudanese foothills. Not practical. No, consider the picture. There had to be an explanation and some sixth sense told him the answer was staring him in the face. If only he could see it.

There were a few isolated hamlets scattered between Kendura and the border. A few spaced along the railway line: way stations and watering holes. He pored over the ordnance survey sheet. What was that? A farm? No, something else. He peered closer. The dot on the map had a name.

Masambabule.

Two tiny symbols by the name. A cross and, unmistakably, the letter A in a circle, designating a mission station and an air-strip. Burov felt his pulse quicken. Why did the name sound familiar? He searched his memory.

Of course.
The priest who visited the prison. He ran the mission. Coincidence? Possibly, Burov thought to himself, but the airstrip; that was the deciding factor. What better way was there for spiriting Holt out of the country? He relayed his suspicions to Mabato.

‘Devlin!’ Mabato hissed angrily. His eyes were like shards of coal. ‘That old man has tried my patience for too long!’ Mabato reached for the telephone. His voice strummed with ill-concealed rage. ‘Get me Juma!’

Juma’s rat-like face split into a malevolent grin as he replaced the handset. He ran out of the guard house, shrieking orders.

‘Alert the Scorpion patrol! They are to proceed immediately to the mission station at Masambabule! I want two mobile units with me now!’ He ran to the first jeep and clambered aboard, joined by four heavily-armed soldiers. The vehicle was already leaping out of the prison as four more troopers split to the remaining jeep. The two vehicles, each with a machine gun sited above the cab, fell into line and headed for the highway.

‘We must have broken them.’ Roan let out a sigh of relief. ‘The BTR’ll never catch us now.’

They were rocketing over the bumpy terrain, brushing past clumps of undergrowth at a ferocious rate. They dived down gullies and raced along dried river beds, Keel’s unerring sense of direction keeping them on course across the moonlit wilderness.

They’d been travelling for some time and made good progress when the engine coughed suddenly. There was an immediate loss of revs. Keel pumped the accelerator as they began to slow down. They managed another hundred yards before coasting to a spluttering halt.

‘Anyone see a Mobil sign?’ Roan asked.

‘We had plenty in the tank,’ Keel said. He got out and walked to the rear of the Range Rover knowing what he would find. He grunted with understanding. ‘It’s been holed. Must have happened at the road block. I guess we were lucky to have made it this far.’

He looked up and studied their surroundings. They were stranded under a stand of spindly acacias. Ahead of them, the ground rose from a rock strewn, dry river valley to a savannah cloaked ridge that stretched across the
horizon.

‘How far?’ Roan got out of the Range Rover, followed by Sekka who was cradling his injured side.

‘A couple of miles maybe; no more than three,’ Keel said. ‘This lady’s had it. We’ll have to trek. How are you, Joseph?’ He gazed at Sekka with concern.

‘I’ll make it.’

‘Atta boy,’ Roan said.

They gathered weapons and packs and taking their bearings from the encircling heights, they moved across the valley’s lower slope and began to climb the ridge.

The Rockwell Commander dropped over the edge of the escarpment, wing dipping as it lined up its approach. The wheels touched and the aircraft hopped and skipped along the ground between the flare lines before slowing to taxi and turn so that it faced back down the landing strip.

Even before the prop had stopped spinning Kate Lassiter knew something was wrong. An awareness coupled with the way the priest was hurrying towards the plane, anguish etched on his face, told her as much. She jumped to the ground, sweeping hair from her cheek. She studied the old man’s seamed features. ‘They’re not here, are they?’

She knew what his answer would be.

Devlin looked tired. ‘Not yet.’

‘Damn it!’ She bit her lip.

Lights were on in the mission. In the dark they looked very welcoming.

‘There’s still time,’ the priest said. Then puzzlement flitted over his face as he stared at the Commander, dappled in shadow over Lassiter’s shoulder. ‘The aircraft, it’s different.’

She nodded. ‘I had a bit of trouble.’

‘Trouble?’

‘Some son of a bitch blew up my Chieftain …’

The priest’s jaw dropped.

‘... into iddy biddy pieces. I had to bust my butt to borrow this rich man’s runabout and I’ve pedalled all the bloody way at zero feet.’

She smiled ruefully. ‘You’d think Thomas would at least have had
the decency to get here on time.’

Devlin saw that her fists were clenched, while her voice betrayed her apprehension at the team’s absence.

‘Sister Elicia’s watching the road,’ Devlin told her. He frowned. ‘I don’t pretend to be an expert, my dear, but even these old eyes of mine can see that that little bird behind you can’t possibly carry six people.’

She sighed. ‘I know but it was the best I could do at short notice. I can take Holt and two of the team. Whoever’s left will have to make their own way to the border.’ She looked at her watch, ‘It’s gone midnight. They should have been here by now.’

‘They’ll make it, Kate,’ the priest said. ‘Thomas knows what he’s doing. Don’t worry.’ He took her arm. ‘We’ll wait inside.’

The old man was just as worried, she saw, despite his attempt to reassure her. Keel was resourceful and, when backed into a corner, extremely dangerous. But he was still mortal. He had set his own deadline and his instructions to her had been precise. If the team hadn’t made the rendezvous by the agreed time she was to leave.

‘Come on, Keel,’ she whispered into the darkness. ‘Where the hell are you?’

It was already fifteen minutes past the hour.

That was when the figure of Sister Elicia appeared, running quickly. She was excited, laughing with relief. ‘They’re here, Father!’

Thank God! Kate thought.

They ran towards the mission and reached the road just as the first jeep swung into sight over the brow of the hill, its headlights trapping them like rabbits. It was swiftly joined by a second, in line behind. They bounced down the track in quick succession.

Sister Elicia, seeing the glow of the fast approaching lights had, sadly, assumed too much. When she saw who was driving, the crestfallen expression on her face said it all.

Kate’s first instinct was to make a run for the Commander but as the jeeps screeched to a halt, disgorging heavily armed soldiers, she knew, with sickening finality, that she wouldn’t have made two yards.

Juma’s search of the mission revealed nothing, to his obvious annoyance. Father Devlin, bristling with rage, watched as, under Juma’s instructions, Sister Constance and the other four nuns were herded out of their rooms. The elderly nun had managed to retrieve her robe and was
nervously tying the sash around her waist. The rest wore only their night dresses and stood together in the moonlight, the fear engraved upon their faces. The soldiers stood around them in a sullen semi-circle.

‘Find what you were looking for, Major?’ Father Devlin did little to hide the contempt in his voice.

Farouk Juma, flanked by his cohorts, swaggered forward. Kate felt the fluttering of alarm in her belly as she watched the diminutive Nubian’s approach. He exuded evil like ectoplasm.

‘My men tell me there is an aircraft on the airstrip,’ he said. ‘Where is the pilot?’

Kate stepped out and Juma raised his eyebrows. ‘A woman?’

‘Don’t look so surprised, Major,’ she countered. ‘It’s all the rage these days.’

If he understood the jibe, Juma chose to ignore it. He said, matter-of-factly, ‘You are here to pick up the terrorists who escaped from Maboru. Where are they?’

She looked at him blankly. ‘Terrorists? Sorry, Major, I’m afraid you’re way off beam. I’m on my way to Nairobi. My aircraft developed engine trouble and I was forced to land here. I was very lucky.’

Her heart was hammering wildly. Keel was still alive!

Juma smiled thinly. ‘I know your purpose here. Please do not try to make me look a fool.’

‘Oh, I wasn’t trying, Major. Believe me.’

The weasel eyes flashed. ‘What is your name?’

‘Katherine Lassiter.’

Devlin shot her a pleading look. Don’t do anything to arouse them.

‘Lass-it-er,’ Juma said. The pronunciation dripped with menace.

‘Your comrades failed in their mission. Their freedom is temporary. As is yours.’

His words made her heart sink. The Lugambans still had Holt and Keel and his team were heading into a trap. And there was nothing she could do about it.

‘You little shit!’ Kate snapped before she could stop herself.

Juma’s cane flicked through the air. She swung her head aside to avoid the blow. The tip of the cane lashed her cheek, sending ribbons of pain through her jaw and splitting the skin. She tasted the warm trickle of blood on her lip. Juma, incensed, raised his cane for another strike.


‘NO!’ The defiant bellow erupted from the priest. He rushed forward and, before anyone could stop him, smashed Juma across the skull with his gnarled fist. Juma’s boots took off and he flew backwards. He hit the ground rump first and the look of shock on his face was matched only by the awestruck expressions on the faces of his men.

‘You bastard!’ Devlin shouted. ‘You malodorous pipsqueak! Get up! I’ll break your bloody neck, so help me, God!’

Juma got to his feet very slowly and shakily. His cap lay several feet away in the dust. He screamed at one of the wide-eyed soldiers who retrieved it and handed it to his twitching superior. For what seemed like minutes the major and the priest glared at each other, faces only inches apart, Devlin breathing heavily, Juma trembling with rage. Devlin knew he was very close to death.

‘You will regret that, Holy Man!’ Juma hissed. The Nubian’s threat was chilling in its ferocity and Kate, nursing her throbbing jaw, knew they had all just run out of time.

The pain in the trooper’s belly had become unbearable. What had started as a dull ache in his gut had gradually developed into raging stomach cramps and a desperate urge to loosen his bowels. He’d held out for as long as possible but the limit of his endurance had been reached and overtaken. Hugging his heaving paunch, he staggered, wheezing with discomfort, into the trees. Propping his Kalashnikov against a log, he loosened his belt and tugged his pants over his plump haunches. With a groan of relief, he squatted.

He was aware of a presence when the hand clamped under his chin, whipping his head back to expose his windpipe. Even as his hands lifted to defend himself the knife swept round and severed the carotid artery and vocal chords. A dark fountain of blood gushed from his torn throat and a gobbling rattle bubbled from between his lips. His legs, fettered by the pants gathered at his ankles, kicked ineffectively in the undergrowth. The body spasmed uncontrollably and the already strained sphincter muscles relaxed. The body collapsed in an untidy sprawl in its own waste.

It had not been a clean kill. Far from it. Roan achieved no satisfaction from the act as he wiped the blade of the knife on his sleeve. It had been necessary in order to achieve an objective.

Sheathing the knife, he picked up the dead man’s panga.
One down and one to go. The second soldier would be more difficult. Roan would have to cross open ground to make the kill. Thirty yards, give or take.

Roan picked up the trooper’s Kalashnikov and forage cap. He pulled the cap low over his forehead and, shouldering the rifle, walked from the trees. The second soldier was temporarily hidden by the Commander’s fuselage. Roan made the first twenty yards undetected. He had ten paces to go when the trooper stepped into the open. Immediately Roan ducked his head and altered his walk. He hunched his shoulders and assumed a heavy waddle, at the same time fumbling with his belt as though fastening his pants. He was holding the panga in his right hand. The guard laughed bawdily, imitating the act of defecation, poking fun at his companion’s discomfort. The grin was wiped off his face as Roan, now only two yards away, looked up and caught his eye. For a second the man was transfixed. Then he unslung his rifle and opened his mouth to yell.

Roan covered the remaining few feet like a striking snake, his arm curving back. The panga slashed down across the man’s face, parting the cheekbone like tissue paper and splitting the jaw into a bloody ruin. The trooper went down like a felled tree, a fearsome gargle dying on his lips as he hit the ground. Roan tugged the panga free and with a second blow finished the job. Running back to the bushes, he collected his gear.

Sekka lay face down in the scrub, a dark shadow on the ground. He was naked from the waist up. The brightly patterned shirt he’d worn during the infiltration of Maboru would have prevented his unseen approach. His target crouched ten feet away, Kalashnikov resting in the fork between two stout branches of a mimosa as he covered the road. In the subdued light the Makesi shifted restlessly, easing his body into a more comfortable position. Using the movement to mask his progress, Sekka wormed forward. He was without weapons for the noise and metallic glint would have betrayed him to a sharp eyed and cautious sentry. This man, however, was neither of those.

Sekka rose out of the night. The trooper, with dreadful awareness, turned his head and died. The heel of Sekka’s left hand crunched into the flared nostrils, forcing bone and cartilage up and back into the brain in a move so fast the Makesi died on his feet as the lethal blow ruptured blood vessels and severed nerve endings. Almost nonchalantly the corpse leaned
back against the bole of the tree and slumped aside. Quickly Sekka removed the cap and fatigues and put them on. He went back to his gear and then ran towards the mission building. As he ran, a steady pulse at his shoulder told him his wound had opened up again.

Juma knew they were out there, somewhere close. He could sense it. He hoped only that his picquets would spot them on the way in and give enough warning. Outside on the veranda a board creaked. Juma stiffened. His men caught the reaction. They were restless and fidgeted impatiently. The priest and the women were under guard in the dispensary. Two soldiers watched over them. The rest of Juma’s men, not counting those outside, were deployed at various points within the mission, poised behind the windows and doors. Juma peered between the slats in the door screen. Outside, the night seemed strangely quiet, eerie in its silence. It was as if the mission and all those within it were poised on the edge of some great abyss.

There was a sudden movement at the edge of the tree line. A figure darted into a patch of moonlight and Juma’s heart beat quickened. The soldier was keeping low as he ran towards the front of the mission, glancing over his shoulder at something or someone behind him. Juma felt a surge of relief.

The sentry had spotted the terrorists. Juma hissed a warning to his men.

The building moved.

Juma felt the boards ripple under his feet a micro-second before the wall imploded. Two of his squad had been crouching by the wall as Keel detonated his one remaining explosive charge. The two Makesi were torn apart as the side of the building burst inwards with a blistering roar, their bodies shredded instantly.

A third trooper wheeled away with a shriek, his eyes gouged by a needle sharp splinter, as Sekka hurled himself through the front entrance screen and raked the corridor with a hammering burst from his H & K.

As the doors flew open under Sekka’s onslaught, Juma had but a second to realize the shadowy figure he’d seen flitting towards the mission had not been one of his own men. He threw himself aside in a frantic effort to avoid the murderous hail from Sekka’s machine pistol. The corridor was filled with smoke and the frightened major lost his sense of direction. That made him all the more terrified as bullets slammed into the wall above his
head.

Sekka twisted to his right and squeezed off another burst as he spotted a target. The trooper literally ran into the spread of bullets. The low velocity slugs impacted like shrapnel, fragmenting the man’s torso and shattering his spine. The corpse was pitched aside. Blood sprayed across the floor.

Juma, having miraculously survived the attack, rolled to his knees. As he lifted his pistol and aimed it at Sekka’s exposed back an awesome apparition thrust itself through the shattered wall. Juma’s brain registered the danger even as Keel fired the Remington from waist height. The heavy shells lifted Juma two feet in the air, removing the left side of his head and shoulder and sending his mutilated body careering backwards in ungainly flight.

Roan had figured on no more than two seconds’ grace when he heard the explosion on the other side of the building. He was waiting by the dispensary door. As he felt the shock wave he moved fast, smashing his boot against the lock. The door crashed back against the wall and Roan went in low.

He yelled, ‘Get down, dammit!’ He was shooting from the hip and was desperately aware of Kate Lassiter throwing herself across the stout body of Sister Constance as his initial shots scythed into the first trooper’s legs, cutting the man down before he could retaliate. The second soldier was already spinning, openmouthed in fear and alarm, Kalashnikov cocked in his hands. Roan dropped, firing as he went down. A line of craters appeared in the wall, the ragged pattern culminating in a final burst over the soldier’s chest, ripping flesh into a bright scarlet blossom. The Makesi slid down the wall, his body smearing the woodwork.

The air was heavy with the smell of cordite as Roan rose to his feet. ‘Everybody out! Now! Move your asses, for Christ’s sake!’ His attention was on the door, expecting reprisal as he gestured wildly at the bewildered group. Two of the nuns were weeping hysterically.

He yelled, ‘Get them out of here, Kate! Do it! Out! Out!’ He didn’t know if Keel and Sekka had managed to neutralize the rest. He had to get the priest and the others out of the building smartish.

But he shouldn’t have turned his back.

He knew it instinctively, recorded the fact in his brain even as he started to react, for the Makesi he’d taken off at the knees had somehow come to life, raising himself by a supreme effort of will. No more than a
fleeting squeeze on the trigger and Roan felt the sledgehammer impact between his shoulder blades, punching him forward where he hung momentarily as though suspended like a puppet on a string before falling what seemed to be a long, long way down. He saw the floor rising to greet him. It was tilting at the same time; a most curious sensation. The H & K slipped from his fingers. He tried to hold on to it but the weapon had a mind of its own. He heard someone shouting his name. It came from far away. Kate Lassiter was running back through the open door, a stricken look on her face. She was lifting his discarded machine pistol and aiming it, her mouth open in a snarl of anger. Then she was firing and the gun was bucking in her hands and spewing bullets across the room.

Through the haze Roan found he was facing the Makesi who’d propped himself against the wall. The Kalashnikov lay at an odd angle over his shattered legs. Lassiter’s shots had cut him in half.

Roan was aware that Kate was bending over him and that there was somebody else at her shoulder; an old man with white hair and a face like a walnut. The priest was holding out his arms as though in supplication and Roan immediately felt at ease. He was going to be all right. The priest must have known it too though by his expression you would hardly have thought so. Roan tried to work out that mystery but couldn’t.

For some reason, it was becoming hard to concentrate and, equally strangely, everything around him was kind of fuzzy at the edges. Come to think of it, he couldn’t feel his legs anymore either; they’d gone to sleep. Kate was whispering something but he was having difficulty hearing her. He tried to lift himself but he was so weary that it was a real effort. Better to rest for a while, he decided wearily. He smiled. When he sagged against Kate Lassiter’s breast the smile was still in place.

He was still smiling when Keel and Sekka burst in through the door.

They buried Roan beneath the shelter of a jacaranda tree and planted rocks upon the grave as protection against scavengers. Hyenas and jackals had scant respect for the dead.

The other bodies lay where they had fallen; strewn in the shambles that had been the mission building. Michael Devlin, stumbling along the ruined corridor, viewed the chaos with horror. His face was pale. He looked about a hundred years old.
‘You have brought death and destruction to this place, Thomas.’ Devlin was trembling with anger.

‘It wasn’t my choosing, Father.’ Keel said. ‘The moment we came over the hill and saw Juma and his thugs the decision was made for us.’

‘But this! This...slaughter, I cannot condone!’

‘I’m not asking you to condone it, nor am I seeking absolution, dammit! How long do you think you’d have held out under their interrogation?’

‘They wouldn’t dare ..!’

‘Wouldn’t dare! They wouldn’t have hesitated! Somehow, Mabato knew we’d come here. How he found out I don’t know, but as soon as the connection was made your position here became forfeit. If we hadn’t intervened, God knows what would have happened. Do you honestly think they’d have given up the wait and gone home? You’re not that naïve, surely?’

‘This was butchery!’

‘It was necessary!’ Keel snapped. ‘Us or them. That’s what it came down to. It’s that simple.’

The priest flinched and Keel wished instantly that he could take back the manner of his reply. He regretted also the fact that he’d involved the priest and his staff in the first place. By his own admission he’d used them. As a means to an end.

And for what? They hadn’t even got Holt out. He was still being held somewhere. Mabato must be laughing himself silly. And Paul Schiller and Harry Roan were dead. Two good men, who hadn’t deserved to die in this bloody country just so that he could prove to himself that he had what it took to carry out one more contract; one last sodding job that had turned into a disaster of epic proportions.

‘What are your plans now?’ Devlin asked.

‘We don’t have a great deal of choice. We get out of Lugamba.’

‘And Holt? He’s still a hostage.’

‘A fact which gives me no pleasure, but I’m being practical. It’d serve no purpose for Joseph and me to remain. The contract’s well and truly blown.’

‘So, all this...this bloodshed...was unnecessary.’

‘I’m not arguing with you. Just get your things together. I want you all ready to leave in fifteen minutes.’

The priest blinked. ‘Leave?’
‘Come the dawn, this place will be swarming with government troops. You don’t want to be around. Joseph and I will escort you to the border in Juma’s vehicle or you can go with Kate. Either way, split yourselves into two groups. We’ll meet Kate and her party in Karanga.’

Sekka winced as Sister Elicia applied the dressing and bandage to his shoulder. She’d helped him remove the camouflage top and had swabbed and cleaned the wound expertly, her initial shock and concern swiftly overtaken by professional skill as she determined the severity of the damage. They were in the small surgery and Sekka watched her as she busied to her task.

He wondered what emotions were going through her mind for he’d been conscious of the stricken look on her face when she realized that Schiller wasn’t with them. He knew there had been some sort of bond between her and Schiller for he’d seen the looks they had exchanged but beyond that awareness he refused to speculate. The girl herself had offered no explanation and he hadn’t considered broaching the subject. Her sorrow had been apparent to all.

The dressing in place, Sekka thanked her and went to find Keel, who was staring at Father Devlin in disbelief.

‘Good God Almighty! What the hell d’you mean, you won’t leave?’

Father Devlin faced the mercenary with his chin up, his gaze calm but full of determination. ‘Simply that. The sisters and I will remain at the mission.’

‘For Christ’s sake...!’

‘We’re needed here. Without the facilities at this mission - meagre though they may be - the villages would receive no help, no medical aid, no welfare of any sort. We’re all they have. Can’t you see that?’

‘All I can see,’ Keel said bluntly, ‘is a stubborn old fool. This is insane! Tell him, Joseph. See if you can ram some sense into his thick Irish skull!’

‘You know what Mabato will do to you, Father,’ Sekka said.

‘He won’t harm us, Joseph. He knows he has nothing to fear. We’re no threat to him.’

‘We’ve had this conversation before,’ Keel said. ‘Brandt’s Crossing, remember? You didn’t think you were in danger there, either. Your memory must be fading along with your reason. Mabato will have your guts, literally.'
He’ll be looking for revenge. Take it from me, you do not want to be around. And what about the sisters? You think their fate’ll cost him any loss of sleep? Are you willing to have that on your conscience?’

‘The decision to stay was unanimous, Thomas,’ Father Devlin said.
‘You cannot mean that!’ Keel stared at him.

But even as the words left his mouth, he knew it was pointless to argue. The priest was obviously adamant and from past experience he knew how stubborn the old man could be.

‘Then I hope to God you know what you’re doing,’ Keel said finally. He shook his head in frustration. ‘Come on, Joseph. We’re wasting our breath.’

Devlin walked with them to the aircraft. The sisters had illuminated the strip. Kate Lassiter was already on board.

‘Go with God,’ Michael Devlin said.

‘I think He’ll be more use to you here, Father,’ Keel replied. He nodded briefly to the six nuns grouped at the edge of the flare path then he climbed into the cabin. Behind him, Sekka gazed at the priest with concern.

‘Take care, Joseph,’ Michael Devlin said warmly.

‘You too, Father.’

The door closed and the priest stepped away. The engine coughed and broke into a steady throb. As he joined the nuns the Commander raced down the strip and disappeared into the dark Sky. Devlin and his staff walked the length of the field and extinguished the lights.

There was much work to be done. Their first duty lay in removing the dead from the mission and preparing them for burial. With a grim countenance, Devlin began to issue orders. They were carrying the bodies outside when the sound of a heavy engine reached their ears and the Scorpion rumbled over the brow of the hill.

David Holt wore a clean white starched shirt and a pair of newly pressed brown slacks. They were a trifle large. He looked more than a little bewildered at the attention he was receiving.

He was in the Command Post.

He’d been taken by car from Maboru to the offices of the Department of State Security. He’d felt sure he was being driven to his death in the DOSS cellars so he was sobbing uncontrollably as they drove through the main
gates and bundled him out of the Peugeot. He was frogmarched into the gaunt building and hustled down dank stairways. The smell of death was all around. They had thrown him into a stinking cell and left him to dwell on his uncertain future.

They had come for him with the dawn, ignoring his questions and his incessant pleading. Eventually he lapsed into silence. Then another car ride and he had stared in confusion as he was taken to the President’s residence. He was even more confused when his escort took him to a huge bedroom with an adjoining bathroom. Fresh clothes were laid out on the bed and he was told to bathe and dress. His filthy prison garb was taken away. They had brought him breakfast; hot rolls, honey and real coffee. He couldn’t believe it and was instantly suspicious. What terrible game was Mabato up to?

Mabato’s aide took him down the long, high-ceilinged corridor and escorted him into the large council chamber.

Solomon Mabato was there and he was smiling. ‘Good morning, Mister Holt! I hope you enjoyed your bathe and breakfast.’

Holt nodded cautiously. He was totally nonplussed. He stared at the other man in the room. He knew him. He’d seen him before though he couldn’t recall where exactly. He racked his brain and tried to remember.

The stranger, sensing his trepidation, walked forward, a welcoming smile on his face. He extended his hand.

‘Hello, Mister Holt. My name’s Duncan Wood. I’ve come to take you home.’
‘Well, I can’t say that I’m sorry it’s over,’ Brooke admitted. He was addressing Dalkieth who had been summoned to Downing Street early that morning.

They were in the conference room and early rays of sunlight were streaming through the windows overlooking the rose garden. Dalkieth examined the creases in his dark grey trousers; immaculate as ever in his Dover Street suit. ‘Indeed,’ he said smoothly.

Dalkieth could see the headlines in his mind. Brooke would come out of it smelling like roses, basking in the glory, taking the credit for securing Holt’s release.

‘They’re flying him out to Nairobi sometime today,’ Brooke said. ‘I just hope the stupid sod realizes how lucky he is. Good to see that all parties appear satisfied at the outcome as well. Mabato’s invitation to the Foreign Secretary to stay on to attend the OAU Conference’s opening ceremony doesn’t hurt either. I thought it prudent that Wood should accept. It would have been churlish to refuse and President Nai might have been offended after all he’s done for us.’

‘Quite,’ Dalkieth said. ‘And what about the team that went to get Holt out?’

‘Routed,’ Brooke replied. ‘We got word to Mabato just in time. He was able to take preventative action.’

‘They’re dead?’

‘I understand two of the team were killed. The others managed to escape. I’ve no doubt they’re well out of the country by this time. Now, how about a coffee?’

Poor bastards! Dalkieth thought to himself. He realized he might have spoken his thoughts aloud for he saw Brooke was throwing him a dark look.

‘Spare me the sympathy, George. They knew the risks. They weren’t boy scouts. And bearing in mind the mess they left behind, particularly at that mission station, they got what they bloody well deserved. Hell, we guessed
there might be people killed in the snatch - some of Mabato’s bully boys, for instance - but a priest and six nuns? What sort of thugs were they? The report we got was that they used the priest and his staff as hostages when they found their escape route blocked.’

Dalkieth remained silent as Brooke continued his tirade. ‘I thought Wood told us these men were professionals? They sound like an off-shoot of the Wild Bunch!’

‘It was a damned fool idea in the first place,’ Dalkieth said. ‘Absolutely irresponsible ...’

‘Don’t lecture me!’ Brooke cut in. ‘If you remember, it was Wood’s brainchild.’

‘You mean the buck stops anywhere but here.’

‘You’d better believe it!’ Brooke growled. ‘Nothing, but nothing, will ever link this office to the recruitment of mercenaries. We’re snow white on this one, George. Bloody Persil bright! Yes?’

‘Affirmative, Prime Minister.’

‘Good, then, just so long as we understand each other. There will be no leaks, no smears of any kind. I’m relying on you. I’ll leave whatever action is required to your own discretion.’

And don’t think I don’t know what that means, Dalkieth thought to himself.

Brooke rose to his feet. ‘Right, then, if there’s nothing else?’ Brooke looked pointedly at his watch. ‘I know you’re a busy man and I’ve a meeting with the Home Secretary in twenty minutes ...’

Dalkieth saw himself out.

The girl’s eyes were half closed as though in pain, her neck muscles taut, head thrown back as she moaned through slightly parted lips. She shuddered and her breathing quickened and emerged in a series of ragged gasps.

A thin sheen of perspiration covered Jack Carver’s heaving body. The girl’s long tanned legs were drawn up over his back, her ankles locked. Carver was grunting, his face buried against the girl’s neck. He was pumping hard, his pelvic bones grinding against hers as she rotated her hips to meet his thrusts. Carver felt her fingernails rake his spine. He lifted his head, taking intense pleasure in the flushed honey brown skin and the whimpering sounds she was making. Her back arched as Carver drove towards his climax. The
girl began to tremble as the tempo of his thrusting increased.

The telephone rang.

Carver was past the point of no return. He bucked violently, matching the girl’s shattering exhalation with his own and collapsed across her thighs. They were both breathing hard, the exertion showing on their perspiring faces. The telephone continued to ring.

‘Fuck!’ Carver reached out and dragged the telephone through the dishevelled sheets. ‘This had better be good!’ he spat into the mouthpiece.

He sat up quickly, his tousled companion gasping as his knee caught her elbow.

‘What?’ His features that only seconds before had been drawn with excitement were now composed in a rigid mask of disbelief and anger. He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and snapped, ‘Get dressed!’

The girl pouted, feigning annoyance.

‘I said get dressed!’ The tone in his voice jerked her into complying.

‘I don’t give a damn!’ he barked into the phone. ‘Get hold of Ferris and tell him to meet me there!’ He slammed down the receiver and jumped off the bed.

‘Jack?’ The girl was sliding into a pair of black panties. ‘What’s happening?’

Carver grabbed his slacks. ‘Some bastard’s torched the club!’

By the time Carver got there it was all over and the destruction was total. The once plush interior with its bars, dining room and gaming tables looked like a disaster zone. The floors, walls and ceilings were charred and dripping with water from the hoses. Not a vestige of the expensive decor or a single stick of furniture was left.

‘It was a professional job, Mister Carver,’ the attendant fire officer admitted. ‘Separate small charges detonated simultaneously in all the rooms; probably coupled to incendiary devices if the initial evidence is any indication. Whoever was responsible knew exactly what they were doing. The adjoining premises haven’t been touched.’

The officer shook his head almost wistfully and it sounded to Carver as if the man’s voice held more than a hint of admiration.

‘I don’t suppose anybody saw anything?’ Carver asked.

The fire officer shrugged. ‘You’d have to ask the police about that. They’re talking with your manager over there.’ He pointed to a small group of men standing next to the fire appliances.
Benny Tainsh watched Carver’s grim-faced approach over the shoulders of the police sergeant with a mixture of relief and apprehension. Carver looked ready to commit murder.

‘What the fuck happened?’ Carver demanded.

Tainsh wasn’t much help. He’d been about to let himself into the club to get the place ready for the evening’s activities when someone had knocked him cold. He hadn’t heard a thing and had woken up behind a row of trash cans in a nearby alley, bound hand and foot, head aching, with six inches of masking tape over his mouth. He’d heard the explosions as he came round and had summoned assistance by kicking over the trash cans to attract attention.

So, where were Ferris and his attendant thug Jon Jon?
Carver fumed.

Of course, the police wanted to know if he had any enemies. As if they didn’t know that for a man in his line of business, enemies were virtually an occupational hazard. But out of those, how many harboured that large a grudge? Answer: a fair few. Carver held a number of prominent markers but blowing up his club would hardly cancel the debt. Where matters of debt were concerned, Jack Carver had a very long memory.

After the police and fire services had left, Carver picked his way gingerly through the charcoaled wreckage. Wet ash squelched underfoot and water dripped from the doused and blackened beams above his head. His features twisted into a cruel grimace. His first task would be to find those responsible and deal with them. A man in his position couldn’t afford to take this act of provocation lying down. Then he stopped dead in his tracks.

Because he knew.
This was a warning. This was retaliation.
For Lassiter’s Chieftain.

A chill crept down his spine as he recalled the promise made by Lassiter’s grey-haired friend when the latter had paid off the pilot’s debt. Perhaps it had been taking matters too far; sending Ferris to destroy the aircraft. Maybe razing the club was just the beginning.

Carver decided that it was time to marshal his forces. He needed Ferris.

Only Ferris wasn’t going to be any help at all. Neither was Jon Jon.
When Carver returned to his apartment he sensed something was wrong as soon as he opened the door and switched on the light. He knew he
wasn’t alone. It couldn’t be the girl. He’d dropped her off at her place, on his way to the club.

Carver closed the door quietly behind him and walked cautiously down the hall, his footsteps cushioned by the deep pile carpet. He paused by the mirrored stand and carefully opened the shallow drawer. The loaded Magnum lay next to a box of shells. Carver picked it up and continued along the passage. The bedroom door was ajar. The bedclothes were still in disarray. Looking at them Carver felt his crotch tingle as the sight brought back memories. She’d been very energetic and very inventive. He dismissed the thoughts from his mind.

The door to the lounge was closed. Carver rested his left hand on the knob and took a deep breath. Then he pushed back the door and went in fast and low, the Magnum tight in his right hand.

Ferris was sitting in a wing-backed cane chair. Jon Jon was to his left on the couch. Carver lowered the gun and straightened.

The hole in Ferris’s forehead, an inch above the bridge of his nose, was neat and round and there wasn’t a great deal of blood. The crater in the back of his skull was a different matter. Carver could have put his fist in it. Jagged bone fragments and brain matter smeared the back of the chair and part of the wall behind. Jon Jon had been dispatched in a similar fashion. His blood was staining the couch cushions. Carver stared at them, appalled. Like the fire at the club, the scene bore all the hallmarks of a professional at work. He thought about Lassiter and her friends. They had hit back with a vengeance.

There was something else. A slim envelope lay on the coffee table. It contained one airline ticket for the next morning’s South African Airways flight to Johannesburg. The name on the coupon was Carver J.

The doorbell rang.

Carver whirled. His knee caught the edge of the chair and he recoiled, horrified, as Ferris’s corpse slid sideways. The blond curls were matted with congealed blood and tissue. Ferris’s eyes were still open. They gazed sightlessly at a point beyond Carver’s left shoulder. The bell rang again; a longer, more insistent buzz. Carver wavered, unsure. Then he composed his features and backed out of the room, closing the lounge door as he did so.

Two men. Africans. In ill-fitting suits. Strangers. Their expressions polite but cautious. One held out a brown leather wallet. A warrant card was
displayed. Police.

‘Yes?’ Carver said.

Maybe it concerned the fire at the club. Maybe they had a lead. Maybe.

‘Mister Carver? CID. We’ve received reports of a disturbance from some of the other residents.’

‘Disturbance?’

God! He was sweating. He could feel beads of perspiration on his brow.

‘Gunshots, Mister Carver,’ the taller of the two said. His companion’s eyes roamed the hallway.

‘Gunshots?’ The word almost sticking in his dry throat.

Why were they staring at him? Only they weren’t staring at him rather than at something in his hand. Sweet Jesus! He was holding the Magnum!

They moved very quickly then, disarming him and propelling him back into the apartment and up against the wall. He was frisked expertly. The policeman put his nose to the gun’s muzzle. He opened the chamber and Carver knew then just how thorough Lassiter’s friends had been. He knew even before they took his arms and led him down the hall. He knew.

The Magnum had been fired twice.

Cameron was perturbed. Almost two days had elapsed since the media had first proclaimed Holt’s release and subsequent passage to Kenya and the recruiter had received no word from Keel or members of his team.

The release had been front page news. Banner headlines and photographs showing a subdued Holt in attendance as Duncan Wood shook hands with a beaming Solomon Mabato; all very stage managed which, naturally, pandered to the hovering pressmen. As Cameron read the text he was all too clearly aware that the rescue attempt had been sold down the river.

But by whom?

Mabato’s security forces had disclosed limited details of the abortive raid on Maboru. The identities of the would-be rescuers or their paymaster had not been revealed but suspicion rested on ex-President Kemba and his aides skulking in Kenyan exile. Mabato’s security advisers were still
investigating.

Items within the report had caught Cameron’s attention. The correspondent had quoted a source close to Mabato as stating that Lugamba had been warned of the rescue attempt by the British Government. The other snippets had been to the effect that two of the raiding party had been killed during the escape and shoot-out at the mission. The slaughter of the priest and six nuns had also filled several paragraphs. Further details would follow as they became known.

The rumour that the British had alerted the Lugambans weighed heavily on Cameron’s mind, particularly in light of his discovery of Hobson’s real identity. The implications were too devastating. Not only had the British sanctioned the recruitment of mercenaries but, following President Nai’s initiative, they had been forced to abort the operation in the only way possible. By alerting Mabato and betraying the very men they had sent in.

Cameron knew full well that if, as he suspected, HMG had indeed been the paymaster his own position was precarious to say the least. There was also the matter of the alleged massacre at Masambabule. Cameron knew Keel well enough to know that the mercenary would never have condoned or been involved with the killing of the priest and the mission staff. He had no idea how the holy man was linked with the rescue but Hobson - or rather Dalkieth - didn’t know Keel and if he believed the reports from Lugamba he’d think that Cameron had sent in murderers not professional soldiers. Which meant that the government would be even more determined to ensure that details of the Holt contract did not become public knowledge and that could well involve neutralizing all loose ends.

Cameron knew he’s just become a loose end.
In Kendura, preparations for the ceremony that would precede the OAU summit were almost complete. The Yugoslav contractors, Energo-Project, had worked around the clock to finish the conference centre and hotel complex in time. Mabato had directed that no effort be spared in getting the job done. The final cost had been some three hundred per cent over budget but he was pleased with the result and unconcerned with the expense.

Bunting fluttered gaily from every lamp standard and in the plaza in front of the conference centre the flags of the attendant states rippled gently in the warm evening breeze. In the main square, workmen were putting the finishing touches to the saluting base and delegates’ rostrum. The highlight of the opening ceremony was to be the parade; a review of Mabato’s armed forces, with the President himself taking the salute. This gave Mabato a splendid opportunity to show off his new acquisitions - the six Soviet T-54 tanks - and impress the delegates.

Following the negotiations for the release of Holt, Mabato, in an unexpected burst of cordiality, had offered Duncan Wood and President Nai the unprecedented honour of standing beside him on the saluting base. Mabato also extended the invitation to his Soviet advisor, Gregori Burov.

Thus all parties, although inherently wary of each other, were looking forward to the celebrations on the morrow with varying degrees of anticipation.

The Commander flew in low, heading west, skimming across the veldt like a bird. It dipped into the ravine and dropped like a swooping hawk before pulling up to float in gently over the valley floor. It taxied and turned, single engine keening as it rolled to a standstill under the full moon. Five minutes elapsed before it took off. As it rose and banked over the ridge two figures crouched together and watched it depart. Like a tiny bat the aircraft crossed the face of the moon and its former passengers collected their packs and
turned towards the head of the valley and the track that would take them into the city and the rendezvous point.

The delegates were leaving the hotel. Mabato’s fleet of gleaming Mercedes was lined up in a convoy ready to transport them to the main square. The temperature was high and Kendura was shimmering in the mid-morning haze. The new conference centre, with its magnificent glass facade, shone like a giant mirror.

Crowds were gathering along the route to be taken by the limousines. A ring of soldiers cordoned the main square and eyed the crowd with suspicion. Sunlight gleamed on the barrels of their Kalashnikov rifles.

The Presidential dais stood to one side of the delegates’ rostrum. Protected by a bright red canopy, it supported seats for Mabato and his guests and a bank of microphones. The delegates would be accommodated in three tiers of tightly packed seats under a sky blue awning. The members of the press gallery had a small adjacent stand all of their own. Men were moving along the rows of empty seats; security teams making sweeps.

Within the crowd, agents of SASU and DOSS stalked in their flowered shirts, machine pistols in their hands, dark sun glasses reflecting the fear in the eyes of those who moved aside to make way for them.

Somewhere in the distance a band began to tune up; a sure sign that festivities were about to commence and, as if on cue, the first of the limousines slid smoothly into view and the crowd around the square began to press forward.

Seated in the back of the Mercedes, Duncan Wood had to admit to himself that he would be glad when the whole charade had faded into memory and he was back home, away from the pollution represented by Mabato and his cronies. This, despite the fact that his visit had presented him with an excellent opportunity to mingle with some of the OAU delegates. His meeting with the Kenyan President had been particularly cordial, bolstered by President Nai’s initiative in securing the release of David Holt who was now in Nairobi, shaken but safe.

Even Mabato was in a good mood for not only had the escape plot been foiled but so too had an assassination attempt.

Wood had been briefed on the latter by Warren who’d filled the gaps in the rather sketchy report the Foreign Secretary had received during his
flight and the brief stopover in Cyprus. Incredible though it appeared, the assassination had been thwarted, quite literally at the last second due to the timing of the message sent by Wood warning Mabato about the rescue bid. There was speculation, too, that both plots were related. Wisely, Wood had ventured no opinion.

The raid on Maboru had, by all accounts, been a debacle. Holt had been spirited away from the prison before the rescue team struck and a trap had been laid. According to the Lugamban security forces, one of the raiders had been killed in the prison. The rest had been pursued through the bush and cornered in the mission at Masambabule.

Facts surrounding the death of the Catholic priest and the nuns were cast in shadow. Mabato insisted they had been murdered by the fleeing mercenaries and no one seemed able or inclined to contradict him.

Except Warren, who did have other ideas and voiced them to Wood. Wood was horrified. ‘You’re telling me that Mabato had them killed! In God’s name, why?’

I would have thought that was obvious,’ Warren had replied testily. ‘They sheltered the rescue team, provided them with a haven. The raiders used the mission’s airstrip. It’s my guess there weren’t fifteen or twenty men as Mabato would have us believe but more likely half a dozen at the most. But they tore Mabato’s men apart and Mabato wouldn’t stand for that. Notwithstanding the fact that they didn’t succeed in getting Holt out of the country, Mabato would want blood. He’d be satisfied with anybody’s.’

‘Dear God! He was an old man; a priest!’

‘In Mabato’s eyes he was a conspirator.’

‘And the nuns his accomplices I suppose?’

Warren had looked directly at Wood, his eyes as sharp as flints. ‘I’d say they were scapegoats. Wouldn’t you?’

The Mercedes slid towards the square. Wood looked back at the conversation with sickening despair. Mabato may well have passed sentence on Father Devlin and the others but the responsibility for their deaths rested elsewhere.

Wood felt tainted.

The British Foreign Secretary considered Burov. The Russian seemed particularly close to Mabato, even to the extent of occupying the President’s right hand at the banquet in the Command Post the previous evening. They had been introduced to each other - Burov by name only; no
rank or title - and the event had not been especially illuminating. Wood made himself a promise to check the man’s credentials with Dalkieth as soon as he returned to London. Everyone and his uncle knew that Mabato had Soviet advisors. Burov couldn’t be anything else but it wouldn’t hurt to delve a bit deeper. In any event, Mabato evidently valued the man’s judgement so Burov would certainly require watching. Then it transpired that the stout Russian would be joining the British Foreign Secretary and President Nai on the saluting dais. Strange bed fellows, indeed.

Leonid Vakov walked past the line of troops and entered the compound. The six T-54s were parked side by side, muzzles aligned. The crews stood alongside them. The T-54s carried four-man crews consisting of commander, driver, gunner and loader. Vakov and his technicians had drilled the Africans mercilessly in the operation of the tanks but Vakov wasn’t overly impressed with the rate of progress. At least Mabato’s soldiers knew how to start, stop and steer the 36-ton monsters. Who knew, within a month they might even be able to hit what they were aiming at. Until such time, however, each crew would comprise three Lugamban troopers from Mabato’s Suicide Battalion and one Soviet technician to act as tank commander.

Vakov reviewed his men and their charges with a jaundiced eye though the teams looked alert and the tanks had been cleaned. Their turrets were already displaying the Corps insignia: the head of a jackal.

The rest of the troops in the parade were beginning to fall into order, running into file under the barked instructions of their NCOs. The band was in position at the head of the column. Vakov and his men would be moving out shortly.

Undoubtedly, the Soviet battle tanks were to be Mabato’s main exhibits for they would lead the British supplied Scorpions. Vakov had been briefed on the significance of this by Burov. The invitation to attend the opening ceremony made to Duncan Wood had not been Mabato’s idea. It had been Burov’s. The Russian had jumped at the chance to show the British Foreign Secretary just where Mabato’s loyalties lay. After all, the incarceration of David Holt and the resulting furore had been a direct result of the lack of British Governmental consideration. To wit: failure to provide spares for military equipment sold by Britain to Lugamba. It would be a blatant act of confrontation and Burov intended to savour the moment to the
The outriders, Mabato’s motorcycle escort, appeared on the horizon to warn of the arrival of the cavalcade. The soldiers around the square shuffled to attention and Mabato’s agents moved through the throng like panthers.

Mabato was in the lead car. As it drew into the kerb an aide vacated the front passenger seat and opened the rear door. Mabato didn’t move until his bodyguards were in place. There were four of them: Nubians in olive-green safari jackets. Their shifting eyes scanned the crowd as their principal alighted.

President Solomon Mabato looked magnificent. His vast bulk was encased in the dress uniform of a Field Marshal, complete with paratrooper wings and campaign medals, including a self-awarded DSO and VC. Only one thing marred the overall effect. His uniform was sky blue. Hermann Goering blue to be precise. He even had an embossed baton. His left arm was no longer in a sling.

Mabato smiled brightly, enjoying the effect his arrival had on the crowd. As he moved away from the Mercedes his bodyguards shifted to protect his flanks and rear. Mabato paused to greet his guests in the other cars. Both Wood and Burov appeared taken aback at the gaudy apparition that faced them. President Nai, on the other hand, seemed unfazed and smiled benignly. Wood adjusted his tie and fell into step with the Kenyan Head of State. Together with Burov they trailed Mabato and his cohorts. Among them was the gaunt figure of Hassan Boma who, since the death of Farouk Juma, had been placed in charge of the Department of State Security. As he was still the head of SASU as well, he was, after Mabato, the most feared man in Lugamba. Looking at him, Wood felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

As Mabato and his guests of honour strolled towards the saluting dais the OAU delegates broke into applause. Mabato acknowledged the ovation with a happy wave of his baton.

They mounted the dais to cheers from the crowd. To Wood it seemed as though the greeting was being orchestrated, as though the people were being prompted by unseen agents. Many faces looked drawn and nervous. The uncomfortable feeling stayed with him as he took his seat on the saluting base. He was seated to one side and a little behind Mabato and Hassan Boma. President Nai sat beside him. Burov was again on Mabato’s right. The Liberator’s bodyguards stood at the back of the dais, their expressions blank.
Vakov’s T-54s were about to join the parade. The crews were on board and awaiting his command. The Scorpion crews were about to follow suit. Vakov waved his arm and with an earth crumbling roar the big diesel engines exploded into life, pumping dense clouds of exhaust into the air.

Vakov walked quickly to the lead tank and climbed aboard. He glanced back along the line and took his place in the turret. Only his upper torso was visible. He rapped instructions to his Lugamban driver and braced himself against the side of the hatch as the ungainly machine lurched into motion. His driver, peering through the observation slit, rammed the vehicle into gear and steered them out of the compound. As the remaining T-54s began to swing ponderously into line behind Vakov, the Scorpion crews moved to their places.

‘Corporal!’

The officer was standing next to a white Peugeot parked unobtrusively alongside the last Scorpion in the line. It carried the unmistakable look of a SASU vehicle. The corporal and his driver paused. The other teams were boarding their tanks. The soldiers blinked nervously. The officer glared at them. ‘Are you deaf? I want you both. Move!’

They approached the car. The officer was holding the front and rear passenger doors open. When they reached the Peugeot they were sheltered in the lee of the Scorpion, hidden from view. The corporal automatically raised his hand in a salute. The tall officer returned the gesture stiffly, as though in pain, features shaded by the peak of his forage cap. He indicated the interior of the Peugeot.

‘Take a look, Corporal. I want an explanation.’

The soldier frowned. ‘Sir?’ He hadn’t a clue what his superior was driving at. He glanced sideways at his crewman, mystified, and moved to the rear door.

An eruption of sound announced that the other crews had started their engines and masked the exclamation of surprise as the corporal peered into the car. He was aware of something moving towards him very fast and of a glint of steel rising into his startled view. An iron hand clamped around his throat, cutting off his air supply, pulled him into the back of the car and the shock and the pain welled through his belly as the blade was rammed under his ribcage. The knife twisted and his body heaved.
The second crewman had time only to see his companion slide from view before Sekka drew the silenced Browning from behind his back and shot the trooper in the heart. The man fell backwards against the car. Quickly, Sekka pushed the corpse into the vehicle and down across the front seats.

Keel wiped the knife blade on the corporal’s tunic and pulled the dead man’s forage cap low over his own forehead. His face was blackened with camouflage cream. Even from a short distance he was as dark as Sekka.

‘Go!’ Keel tugged two rugs from the window shelf and threw them over the bodies. Grabbing his pack, he closed the car doors and followed Sekka towards the waiting Scorpion.

It was getting hotter under the canopy. Wood could feel the sweat trickling under his arms and down the small of his back. He looked enviously at the fan the Kenyan President was wafting in front of his face. Even Burov didn’t seem affected by the humidity. The Russian was lounging comfortably in his seat, clad in a cream suit and a wide brimmed fedora, enjoying the spectacle.

Mabato was also enjoying himself. As the band swirled past in their tartan, to the gurgling wail of the pipes, the President stood at the front of the rostrum to take the salute. His huge body seemed to fill the podium.

The Liberator’s battalions followed the swaying musicians, dressed in fatigues and soft jungle hats. They clomped by the saluting dais, backs ramrod straight, arms swinging as they turned eyes right towards their leader. The crowds were applauding automatically as though they were part of the drill.

The BTR reconnaissance and troop carriers ground over the tarmac in the wake of the infantry, rattling and cranking past the delegates’ grandstand like lethargic armadillos. They were followed by a phalanx of Ferret Scout Cars and Alvis Saracens. Then there was a buzz of interest as the T-54s came into view, rolling in single file.

Wood’s face betrayed no emotion as he watched the Soviet armour trundle past. He caught Burov’s eye and was infuriated to see the Russian smile and incline his head. He looked back at the parade. On the trail of the T-54s, the Scorpions approached.

Sekka estimated they were about two hundred yards from the saluting base. Ahead of them the other Scorpions ranged in line and beyond them he could see the line of Soviet battle tanks. The Scorpions were twenty
yards apart and moving a little under ten miles an hour. Sekka, from his vantage point in the turret, could see the distinctive figure of Mabato, a corpulent blue land-mark under the red awning.

One hundred yards and closing. Sekka looked over his shoulder. In formation behind them were light half-tracks towing field guns. No immediate threat.

Fifty yards. Wordlessly, Sekka dropped into the hull of the tank and closed the hatch.

Burov squinted at Duncan Wood from the shade of his fedora. The British minister’s face was without expression as he watched the tanks roll by but Burov guessed at concealed anger. Then the Russian’s attention was diverted.

The Scorpion was level with the saluting base when Keel hauled the tank around to face the target. The manoeuvre was swift and totally unexpected. Mabato’s jaw dropped open in astonishment, his brain barely registering the danger as the Scorpion pivoted.

Then he realized.

Too late.

Keel screamed the order and Sekka fired. The vehicle recoiled and a tongue of flame belched from the muzzle. Sekka had used a high explosive round, a canister which operated like a shotgun cartridge and which was for use against infantry at close quarters. At a range of barely fifty paces, the effect was devastating.

Wood had risen instantly from his seat when he saw the Scorpion begin to traverse. President Nai, slow to react but sensing something untoward, stopped his fan in mid wave. Burov seemed to move in slow motion. He had glimpsed Sekka’s head and shoulders disappearing into the Scorpion’s hull and when the tank started to slew around, a hint of what was about to happen flashed into his brain like some dreadful hallucination.

He managed to bawl, ‘EXCELLENCY!’ but his warning was lost in the mind numbing explosion as the saluting base blew apart and Mabato disintegrated into crimson fragments. The blast shattered Burov’s eardrums and he was lifted over the back of the dais in a whirling vortex of pain. Miraculously, his body retained life.

Wood felt himself falling into a chasm, dimly aware of the broken body of President Nai being tossed backwards by the force of the explosion, right leg severed at the knee, a long jagged splinter sticking out of his chest
like an arrow. Hassan Boma’s headless trunk cartwheeled like a decapitated puppet, blood cascading.

Wood’s ears rang. He was trying to raise himself when Sekka pumped a second shell into the podium. Wood’s corpse tumbled into the air, his torso ripped asunder by screaming chunks of shrapnel. Mabato’s bodyguards were carved into gruel, their shrieks merging with the dying echo of the Scorpion’s gun.

The crowd broke into a pulsating wave of panic as the first shock wave rippled across the square. Keel knew they were into reaction time by now. The shock of the assault would be fading and the troops would counter attack. He released the smoke canisters from the dischargers on the turret.

Vakov heard the explosion and the screams and swung around. Over the line of tanks he saw the rain of debris and the commotion among the spectators. Delegates in the stand were hurling themselves flat, scrambling for cover with ungainly haste. The second detonation jerked Vakov into action. Somewhere in the chaos behind him was Gregori Burov. What the hell was going on?

‘Reverse, you idiot! Reverse!’ Vakov thundered orders at the top of his voice. He could see the smoke, ejaculated from the Scorpion’s turret, beginning to drift and swirl about the vehicle and the troopers that had cordoned off the main square were running around like ants. He could hear the rattle of small arms fire. The other Scorpions were stalled in a line between his own group of tanks and the matchwood remains of the saluting base.

The T-54 began to reverse with irritating slowness. The turret rotated one hundred and eighty degrees. Vakov watched as the renegade Scorpion jerked into motion.

Keel accelerated and the Scorpion rolled forward, increasing speed. He had to get them out of the square and away from the bottleneck. The smoke was helping. It was curling and billowing in and out of the armoured column in grey tendrils, like a London pea-souper. When the first shell was fired, the crowd behind the saluting base had broken apart like a bursting bubble. Keel headed for the nearest gap and the route that would take them away from the carnage.

Their main worry was the proximity of the other armoured vehicles. A well-placed shot from one of the Soviet battle tanks or the British Scorpions would incapacitate them in a second. They would have to make a
run for it. At a pinch the Scorpion could achieve nearly ninety kilometres an hour.

By the time Vakov’s driver had the T-54 turned about, the Scorpion and half the line of armour had disappeared beyond the smoke screen. Vakov could still hear shooting. It rose above the sound of the stampeding crowds. He slammed his fist against the metal rim of the turret in frustration. Composing himself, he spoke crisply into his radio mike.

‘All unit commanders form up on me! Battle stations! On my command, move out!’

The T-54 began to grind its way back down the line towards the point where the Scorpion had unleashed its attack. The remaining Scorpions were attempting to move out of the way but the inexperience of their crews was only too evident. There was little coordination in their efforts.

Sekka had turned his attention to operating the Scorpion’s 7.62mm machine gun. He was firing at any troopers that broke from the curtain of smoke. The Scorpion was churning past the remains of the saluting dais. A soldier materialized before them, dropped to one knee and took aim with his AK-47. Sekka squeezed the trigger and the crouching figure was sliced in half by the withering hail. Keel took the Scorpion over the body, the tank slowing not a bit as it smashed into the riddled corpse. They had reached the edge of the square. Bouncing into the clear road, the Scorpion picked up speed.

Vakov’s tank burned its way over the tarmac. It was level with the remains of the dais and already the smoke was clearing. Vakov could see the back of the fleeing Scorpion but he couldn’t order his gunner to open fire as the angle was too acute. The corner of the delegates’ rostrum was obstructing his view and there were too many people milling in his sights. He would have to pursue.

Within the debris, hidden by the smoke and mangled platform and chairs, a bruised and bloody figure was stirring. A hand, raw and bleeding, reached out and clawed painfully for support. A battered apparition rose unsteadily to its feet.

Gregori Burov swayed precariously and tried to focus through the haze. His once cream suit was in tatters, torn and stained with the gory remains of those who had perished with Mabato. His face was a mask of flayed skin, blood and grime. Crimson trickles ran from both ears. He couldn’t hear the noise around him but his head was ringing like a peal of
bells. He couldn’t find his feet. He was reeling like a drunk. He opened his mouth but no sound came save a rasping croak. He tripped over a half buried obstacle and dropped to his knees. He was caught in this bizarre genuflection when Vakov’s battle tank broke out of the smoke screen like a tug from a fog bank. Burov looked up in time to see the colossus bearing down on him and he raised his hands and tried to scramble out of the way, his attempt to scream dying in his throat as the heavy track crushed against his quivering body. His hands pushed ineffectually against the terrible weight that bore down with such force upon his chest. His ribs cracked and popped as he sank from sight. The tracks ground over his remains as Vakov turned in pursuit of his prey. The tank commander didn’t even see Burov die. By the time the T-54 had travelled its own length, Burov was no more than a bloody smear on the concrete.

The troops were firing rapidly now, the bullets ricocheting loudly off the Scorpion’s body work. They angled left and thundered over the tarmac. Sekka’s vision was limited. He opened the hatch and eased his head out of the turret. He was holding his machine pistol and was temporarily out of sight of their pursuers. Then the first jeep slid into view, tyres screeching as the driver spun the wheel and put his foot down.

As the accelerating jeep broke from cover, Sekka opened fire. The jeep’s windscreen blew apart, ripping into the faces of the soldiers like flechettes. The driver shrieked and threw up his hands. The jeep veered out of control, plunged over the kerb and barrelled across the pavement. It hit the plate glass window like an express train. The shop front collapsed, showering the occupants of the jeep with more lethal shards as it plummeted into the building where it crashed with bone shuddering finality against the rear wall of the store.

The Scorpion was moving fast but Keel knew that time was running out - they had been incredibly lucky to have made it this far - and they were still more than two blocks from the pickup point.

Vakov’s tank turned the corner in time for the Russian to follow the progress of the Scorpion as it raced up the street. He rapped orders to his gunner. ‘Traverse left!’

In the cramped turret, the gunner was almost sitting in Vakov’s lap. The movement was jerky and Vakov gritted his teeth at the lack of expertise. The muzzle swung and Vakov relayed directions to his gunner again. He yelled the order to fire. The tank recoiled and the stench of cordite filled the
Vakov knew they had fired too soon. The procedure had been hurried and unprofessional and it would take time to reload for the gun had to be fully elevated to give the loader room to extract the spent casing and insert a new shell and then the gun had to be realigned. He was astounded, therefore, to see the shell burst beneath the Scorpion’s rear tracks. The explosion lifted the back of the tank off the ground. Vakov saw that the left track was a mess, the rear wheels having been blown away. The back end of the hull was a concertina of buckled armour plate.

He thumped the T-54’s turret with glee. ‘Again! Fire! Destroy them!’

When the ground erupted beneath them Sekka was all but thrown out of the tank. He could see the Soviet tank commander one hundred and fifty yards away, bellowing into his headset. They were lining up for another shot. He was aware that Keel was extricating himself from the front driving seat, hurrying to vacate the crippled vehicle. Sekka looked back. Already, soldiers were running into the street from behind the shelter of the T-54. Bullets were hitting the sides and rear of the Scorpion and the wall of the building in front of them. He clambered from the turret, keeping the bulk of the Scorpion between his body and the advancing troops.

Somewhere inside the tank, Keel had forsaken cap and goggles. As his head and shoulders emerged, Sekka unleashed a withering hail of covering fire from his machine pistol. He took two grenades from his waist pack, primed them and lobbed them at the soldiers. The front men ran into the explosions, their bodies lifting in a cascade of flame. As the dust cleared, Sekka and Keel staggered away from the stricken vehicle.

A few feet away, a narrow alley ran between two high buildings. They reached the sheltering walls as Vakov’s second shot slammed into the Scorpion and detonated the fuel tank. The Scorpion disappeared in a vivid balloon of flame. An arc of fire curved into the air as a fountain of escaping fuel ignited. Savage lumps of shrapnel sliced outwards, hammering into the surrounding walls, scattering mortar like hail stones.

Keel and Sekka were pitched onto their knees by the shock wave. Regaining their feet, they sprinted down the alley. Behind them, Vakov’s tank trundled forward and Mabato’s troops began their pursuit. Vakov begun to relay orders to his other mobile commanders. Their quarry was now on foot and with his squads spread out he could begin to tighten the noose.

Vakov’s stomach had spasmed with anticipation when the two men
had crawled from the Scorpion’s wreckage. It equalled the moment of incredulity when, through the drifting smoke from the grenade explosions, he’d seen Keel’s grey hair and realized that, despite the dark makeup, one of the assassins was a white man, possibly a European. With a quickening pulse, Vakov began to close the net.

Keel and Sekka broke from the far end of the alley, breathing hard. Glancing over his shoulder, Sekka saw that troops were entering the passage now, their dim shapes zig-zagging from cover to cover. The first soldier was fifty yards away and running fast. Sekka fired from the hip. The soldier spun, his shoulder blown away by the heavy slugs. Before the tumbling body hit the ground Sekka tossed another grenade. Without waiting to see the result, he turned and ran after Keel. They hadn’t made twenty yards before the first of Vakov’s mobile units turned the street corner ahead of them.

Keel wheeled left, his body jinking as he tried to present as small a target as possible. Sekka was hard on his heels as they ducked around the side of the next building.

They pulled up short. More troops had appeared, cutting off their line of retreat. Another Scorpion and a squad of soldiers were heading towards them. Vakov’s men had moved quickly. The trap was closing.

Desperately, Keel looked for an opening, a way out. At the side of the building a wrought iron fire escape led upwards. It was the only chance they were going to get.

‘Go!’ Keel yelled. He pushed Sekka ahead of him and together they pounded up the steps. At the first level, they crouched and fired at the soldiers running towards them. They were moving again as fire was returned. Bullets ricocheted off the metal stanchions and whined away.

The building was an empty office block, six storeys high. At the top of the fire escape a small square platform led onto a wide flat roof, an asphalt plateau broken only by a squat blockhouse that probably housed the ventilation units. Even as they ran out, the first troops were climbing the fire escape below them, their boots ringing on the treads.

They sprinted towards the blockhouse. Gaining its shelter they waited. The leading soldier jumped onto the roof. Keel took him out with one sharp burst. The trooper dropped his weapon and fell back over the edge of the building. His companions seemed in no hurry to share his fate and remained out of sight below the parapet’s rim.

Keel glanced grimly at Sekka. ‘How much ammo are you holding?’
‘Three mags for the H and K, a hand gun and one grenade.’
Keel sighed. His body sagged as he crouched and peered round the wall. There was still no movement from the troops on the fire escape. They seemed to be waiting for something.
‘Reckon this could be the end of the line.’
‘You could be right. What have you got?’
‘Hand gun and two mags.’
‘Outstanding.’
Keel said calmly, ‘Y’know, I didn’t think we’d make it, not in a month full of Sundays.’ He smiled, half to himself. ‘Still, we took that fat bastard with us. That’s some consolation.’
‘Not for Devlin and the rest though,’ Sekka said. He looked beyond the edge of the roof, out over the city. The sun was high and a haze hung over the roof tops. The asphalt surface was almost too hot to touch with the bare hand. For the moment the two mercenaries were in shadow but as the day lengthened the sun would shift to the other side of the blockhouse. But by then they would be dead.
It could only be a matter of moments before Mabato’s men rushed them. Sheer weight of numbers would tell in the end, but they would take some of the soldiers with them.
A figure sprang into view and died as Sekka used his machine pistol. The body crumpled and lay where it had fallen, a pool of blood widening across the roof.
‘They’re going to use grenades,’ Keel advised. ‘Then they’ll hit us in a group. Better get ready, old son.’
But Sekka wasn’t listening to him. He was hearing something else. He spoke one word, ‘Chopper!’
The Bell Jet Ranger was skimming over the city, a yellow and black dragonfly approaching fast, its propeller arc a spinning, gleaming disc as the sun bounced off the blades, the WHUP WHUP of the rotors heralding its arrival as it weaved towards their position, coming in low, barely clearing the tops of the buildings.
Keel jumped to his feet. There was still no movement from the troops. Christ! They must be ready to hit them by now! Surely to God! He stared at the helicopter. The rear doors had been removed for easy access and exit. Gunship rigged.
He yelled and waved his arm, heart pounding now. ‘Come on! Come
Vakov had left the T-54 and was running up the fire escape, the thrill of the chase coursing through his veins. He hadn’t felt this elated since the thrust against Masud’s guerrilla stronghold in the foothills north of Kabul.

By this time, all mobile units had converged on the building and soldiers were beginning to work their way up to the roof floor by floor. There was nowhere the fugitives could hide. An excited NCO informed Vakov that the assassins were cornered. Troops were massing on the last flight of the fire escape prior to launching an assault on the roof. Above the rim, however, the broad stretch of asphalt in front of the blockhouse was an open killing ground. Two men had gone over the top and died. No one had a strong desire to be the third.

But Vakov’s blood was up and he was growing impatient with the NCO’s reluctance to send his men in. They’d be up there all day. Unless ...

Vakov decided to take matters into his own hands. He nudged the platoon commander who was only too willing to defer responsibility. A minute later Vakov was kneeling below the parapet. Beside him half a dozen heavily armed troopers awaited instructions. On his command they would lob in grenades and in the ensuing blitz they would attack the blockhouse. Vakov glanced at expectant faces and raised his hand as a signal.

Then he heard the clatter of the rotor blades. For a second he couldn’t identify the sound. Then it dawned on him just what might be happening up there. With a cry of warning he swept his hand down.

Clem Wallace could see the two mercenaries through his windshield. They were sheltering behind a small bunker type construction. He could also make out the body of the dead trooper and from his side window, in the streets below, tanks, jeeps and armoured cars were milling like bees around a honey pot.

‘Streuth!’ he breathed. He moved the yoke and the helicopter dropped fifty feet. Wallace was in a dilemma. There was nowhere he could put the chopper down on the roof except close to the corpse and that would place him between the mercenaries and their pursuers; an insane proposition. Wallace studied the movements of the soldiers below and considered the
possibilities.

The helicopter was three hundred feet away and whipping down like an angry hornet. Keel watched it fly in while Sekka guarded the roof. Their predicament was obvious. Wallace couldn’t land. The options were limited and they hadn’t any time left. But as he watched, the aircraft pulled up sharply and tracked sideways towards the parapet where it hovered noisily, port skid almost touching the edge of the roof on the opposite side of the building to the fire escape and Vakov’s assault team. Clem Wallace tore his headphones off and bellowed through the open side at Keel and his companion. ‘Come on, Major! Move your fuckin’ arse!’

But they were already running, ducking low into the down draught from the rotors and sprinting towards the edge of the roof. They were five yards out from the cover of the blockhouse when the first grenades rolled across the asphalt and the lead troopers rose into sight and attacked.

The blockhouse absorbed most of the blast from the grenades but even so the shock waves buffeted them as Sekka threw himself into the helicopter.

The bullet hit Keel in the thigh as he leapt for the Jet Ranger’s sill. Wallace was already anticipating his arrival and the chopper was beginning to lift and turn away as the mercenary launched himself forward. As the slug struck him and his leg gave way Keel knew he’d mistimed it. His hand clawed for the edge of the door and his fingers raked along the fuselage. Sekka stared in horror as Keel’s body dropped from view.

But the mercenary wasn’t finished. With catlike reflexes his hand shot out and hooked his good arm around the skid. The soldiers were at the blockhouse. As Keel’s weight was transferred the helicopter yawed violently. With a curse Wallace counteracted the motion.

Sekka was lying across the rear seats. He extended his machine pistol through the open doorway and raked the roof top. From the corner of his eye he saw Keel’s right arm curl around the skid and he screamed at Wallace, ‘NOW!’ Closing his mind to the body hanging beneath the aircraft, he felt for his pack. His hand closed on his last grenade and as Wallace took them up in a fast corkscrew, turning the machine away from the rim, Keel swaying below like a raggedy doll, he hurled it out of the door.

Vakov was up with the soldiers, pounding through the smoke and chaos, dodging the craters in the asphalt. He could see the helicopter now and felt the wash from the blades and the vibrations through the soles of his feet.
Someone was firing at them and the soldiers were yelling loudly and returning shots. From the corner of his eye he saw something small and round curving towards him at head height. Then an unseen hand plucked him into the air and the pain took him. He looked down at the bloody stump where his left leg should have been and then he was soaring high like a bird, up, out and over the edge of the building.

The port windshield starred suddenly as a bullet struck. Wallace swore loudly. More slugs were hitting the fuselage and it would only need one shot to put the rotors out of action and send the helicopter spiralling into the streets below. Sekka was still firing, lips curled in a savage grin as he emptied the clip. The machine pistol bucked and chattered in his hands, spitting death. He couldn’t see Keel now and was unable to tell if the mercenary was hanging on or had relinquished his desperate hold.

Then they were swooping behind another building and out of the angle of fire. Beneath them, Mabato’s men were scrambling through the streets like rats in a maze. Small arms fire rattled faintly but it was ineffective and the tanks and armoured cars couldn’t traverse and raise their guns fast enough.

They were clear.

Keel knew he couldn’t hang on much longer. His grip on the strut was slipping and his leg was growing numb. He’d also been hit again, on his right side, low under the ribs. He had no idea how badly he was hurt. He’d felt the bullet thump into his leg with all the force of a mule kick but he’d been unaware of the second wound until he looked down and saw the blood on his jacket. He sensed movement above him in the doorway. Sekka was there, yelling at him. He couldn’t hear the words above the beat of the blades but he presumed that Sekka was urging him to hang on. He didn’t think he could.

He realized that Sekka wanted him to reach up. Joseph was leaning out of the door, arm outstretched, his mouth framing the instruction. Keel had dropped his automatic when he was hit. He now had both aims wrapped around the skid. He tightened his hold on the metal strut with his right hand and felt immediately the warm slow trickle of blood on his stomach. His shoulder felt as though it was being twisted from its socket as he released his left hand from the skid. The noise from the rotors was becoming hypnotic; a heavy, deadening throb that jarred every nerve as he fought to stay conscious.

Sekka could see that Keel was in trouble, with eyes almost closed
and teeth gritted. He needed assistance and fast. Sekka gripped the edge of
the doorway and eased himself out of the cabin until his boots rested on the
skid an inch front Keel’s hand. Wallace was battling to keep the chopper on
an even trim. They were still flying over the city but ahead of them were the
suburbs and the first traces of bush and open savannah.

Keel felt his hand touched. He curled his fingers around Sekka’s arm
and hung for a brief moment like a trapeze artist. Steeling himself for the
final effort, he released his hold on the skid. His body grazed the strut as
Sekka dragged him up, enabling him to grab the sill of the doorway with his
free hand. Altering his leverage, Sekka pushed Keel into the cabin. The
mercenary’s body folded across the seats as Sekka pulled himself back into
the aircraft. A sharp pain in his shoulder told him that his own wound had
opened up but he ignored the distraction as he examined Keel.

‘Thomas?’ Sekka began to undo Keel’s jacket. He was working fast
and perspiration was pouring down his face following his exertions a few
hectic moments before.

Keel grunted as Sekka pulled the material away from the wound.
‘Will I live?’

‘You’d bloody better, after all I’ve just been through to get you in
here.’

Sekka’s probing fingers moved gently around to Keel’s back and he
gave a low sigh of relief when he felt the edges of an exit wound. ‘Through
and through. Probably nicked a rib though. You’ve lost blood.’

He found the chopper’s first aid kit and applied dressings to staunch
the bleeding before turning his attention to Keel’s leg. He shook his head in
wonderment. ‘Well, it missed the artery but how bad it is inside I can’t tell.
All I can do is clean it up.’

Keel nodded. ‘Best get a move on then.’ He winced as the chopper
bounced on a thermal. The effort of raising their voices above the noise of the
engine was intense.

Sekka strapped gauze pads to Keel’s thigh with a length of bandage.
He handed over two tablets. ‘Morphine. Take them.’

‘Sorry I was late, Major!’ Clem Wallace yelled above the clatter of
the rotors. He twisted in his seat. ‘How bad?’

‘No sweat,’ Sekka found the rear headsets. ‘How far to go?’

Wallace looked out over the terrain. The land was rising into a spread
of low hills, purple crested. They were flying fast, no more than two hundred
feet above the ground. ‘We’ll be over the rendezvous point in fifteen minutes.’

‘What about Mabato’s fighters? His MiG squadron can still catch us.’

‘Mabato’s air force couldn’t scramble this side of Christmas,’ Wallace said emphatically. ‘They’re a bunch of tossers!’

‘Solves that problem, then,’ Keel muttered.

Wallace went on, ‘I guessed you wouldn’t make the pickup point. I was monitoring the ground units on the radio so I knew they’d hit the Scorpion. I thought I’d track in and see if I could pick you up on the run. Didn’t think I’d be that lucky. I could hear they had you holed up somewhere, the way they were zeroing in. Christ! There was so much bloody radio traffic it was like the commentary on the Melbourne Cup!’

He grinned suddenly. ‘Didn’t believe it when I got the brief from Kemba’s agent. Thomas Keel, as I live and breathe! I thought he must have got it wrong. I never figured you two for an assassination team.’

Sekka had removed his tunic. He was examining the wound in his shoulder. It had stopped weeping but the flesh felt tight and tender. ‘It was payment of a debt.’

‘To Kemba?’ Wallace looked puzzled.

Sekka held a dressing to his skin and eased back in the seat. ‘No.’ He didn’t elaborate.

Wallace raised an eyebrow. The Jet Ranger was hugging the wooded contours of a narrow valley. The Australian exclaimed suddenly, ‘Jesus! You guys hit the bloody prison! You were the mad buggers who tried to snatch Holt! Streuth!’ He shook his head and chuckled gleefully. ‘Y’know, Major, I haven’t felt this high since I was in Nam, flying gunships and zapping Charlie. I used to think I’d come a long way since those days, airlifting you Special Forces squads out of Bien Hoa. Remember?’

‘I remember, Clem,’ Keel said. He smiled wearily and eased his injured leg into a more comfortable position. Sekka was staring clown at the ground that was flashing below them like a brown and green patchwork quilt. There was an occasional glint of muddy pewter as they swept low over meandering creeks.

‘How long have you been Kemba’s man?’ Sekka asked.

‘Whoa, I’m strictly freelance,’ Wallace said. ‘Though I’ve passed information to his agents once in a while.’

The pilot shrugged. ‘It was bloody inevitable that Kemba had
Mabato’s card marked. I reckoned a while ago that the Liberator’s days were numbered. If Kemba was to stage a comeback you could bet your bottom dollar that anyone who grafted for Mabato would be in the little black book. I just took out some insurance. Lucky for you I did.’

‘We’re much obliged,’ Keel said.

‘Please, Major.’ Wallace sounded offended. ‘Don’t embarrass me by presuming that I’m doing this for anything other than the lure of the greenback.’ He smiled. ‘Well, OK, maybe it is for old times’ sake. Now, grab your gear. We’re going down. Our taxi’s waiting.’

The strip was a sun-scorched stretch of beaten roadway carved out of the bush like a giant scar. An aircraft was parked at the edge of the treeline and almost hidden; a DC-3 in camouflage markings. As Wallace touched down a figure left the Dak and ran across to the helicopter.

Kate Lassiter.

‘Dammit!’ she cried. ‘Can’t you ever be on time?’

Then she saw the blood and bandages. ‘Oh, God!’

Wallace switched off. The rotors flicked around slowly and stopped. The swirls of dust abated.

‘He’s OK, Kate. He’ll make it.’ Sekka reassured her as Wallace ran to help him lift Keel out of the helicopter. The grey haired mercenary grimaced suddenly as his thigh brushed the side of the machine. Pain was etched into his face and trickles of perspiration traced pale patterns in the dark makeup that still partially concealed his normally tanned features.

‘Hello, Lassiter,’ Keel said. ‘As you can see, we had a spot of bother.’ He regarded her calmly.

His gaze seemed to steady her. Wordlessly she took his hand and lifted it gently to her cheek. She felt her fingers gripped in acknowledgement. A smile flickered at the corner of his mouth. He turned to Wallace.

‘OK, Clem. You know what to do. Joseph, make sure all our stuff is out of the chopper. Quick as you can. We don’t know how much time we have. Get to it.’

As he spoke the twin engines of the Dakota clattered into life and the aircraft rolled out from the trees and trundled towards the end of the narrow strip. By the time the DC-3 had lined up for take-off, Sekka had retrieved what remained of their weapons. With Lassiter’s help he assisted Keel across the clearing.

Wallace watched them go, Keel hobbling, before jumping into the
cabin of the Jet Ranger, rummaging and emerging with a can of kerosene. Opening the nozzle he doused the inside of the chopper with the fuel, splashing it liberally over the seats and instruments. He climbed out and sloshed more kerosene over the fuselage. Finally he backed away from the machine with the upturned can in his hands until a thin river of fuel ran across the ground. When the can was empty he hurled it into the cabin of the chopper.

He stood for a second, staring sadly at the Jet Ranger. A look of affection flitted across his face before he gave a resigned shrug. ‘This,’ he muttered to himself, ‘is going to break my heart.’

He bent down and took the Zippo lighter from his pocket. One flick and the fuse was alight. The flame danced and raced along the kerosene trail towards the chopper. Wallace turned away and began to run.

The fire spread over the helicopter like a pestilence, enveloping the bright fuselage with bewildering speed. Wallace was still sprinting for the Dak as the tanks blew up with an impressive boom and the Jet Ranger disappeared under a billow of flame and a mushroom of black smoke.

The others had already reached the Dakota and were on board. The undercarriage jolted and the Dak began to move. The engines increased their pitch as Wallace ran up and hauled himself through the door. He was sweating and panting hard.

‘Nice of you bastards to hang around,’ he gasped as Sekka secured the door behind him. ‘Thought I might have to catch the bloody bus!’ He added as an afterthought, ‘Or walk home!’

The Dak’s bay had been stripped long ago to accommodate the maximum amount of freight. It was empty apart from its human cargo. Keel sat on the floor, his back propped against the port bulkhead. He looked very tired. Kate Lassiter crouched over him, her face tense and watchful.

‘Don’t you dare tell me it only hurts when you laugh,’ she warned. ‘If you do I’ll brain you!’ She examined his dressings as she spoke.

‘It hurts when I do anything, love,’ Keel said. His eyes were half closed.

The Dakota picked up speed as it bounced along the strip. The engines were roaring and the air frame seemed on the verge of popping its rivets. Sekka sat down and put his arm around the wounded mercenary’s shoulders, bracing them both against the switchback ride as the old aircraft battled to take off. Lassiter supported Keel’s other side. Across the bay Clem
Wallace gritted his teeth.

‘Lift her up, Lafitte! Lift her up!’ Kate clenched her fists in taut anticipation, willing the Dakota to rise.

Then, with a lurch, they were airborne and banking. Sekka let out a whoop of relief.

Wallace swore under his breath. ‘About bloody time!’

On the strip beneath the retracting wheels the remains of the Jet Ranger continued to burn. Fifteen minutes later they were flying at six thousand feet and heading east on auto-pilot.

The curtain concealing the flight deck slid aside and a figure stepped into the bay. He was a lean and tanned man, dressed in a grubby brown leather windcheater, faded Levis and a baseball cap. He sank to his haunches by the weary group and remarked casually, ‘See you’ve been in the wars again, Major.’

The words, pitched loud above the hypnotic throb of the engines, were spoken in a lazy Texan drawl. A wedge of gum moved against one cheek.

‘You know me, Saul.’ Keel managed a weak smile. ‘Anything for sympathy.’

Saul Lafitte nodded in wry amusement. Smartass limey, he thought.

Lafitte had been, until three days ago, on charter work in Zambia. The contract had ended and the Texan, at a loose end, had flown back to Nairobi on the off chance that Mendoza might have a consignment to move. Lafitte wasn’t bothered about the legitimacy or the contents. He’d done enough work for Mendoza not to allow minor inconveniences like borders and embargoes stand in the way of making a fast buck. Ethics, whatever they might be, never even entered into it. His three years with Air America, the CIA financed airline, had spawned that point of view. Hell, he’d flown opium out of the Golden Triangle, dropped guns and ammo to Laotian anti-communist guerrillas over the Plain of Jars and smuggled South African Special Forces into Namibia. The greasy, gold-toothed Portuguese was small change. Pin money.

As it happened, Mendoza did have need of his services. An airlift.

It was Keel’s game plan, Mendoza’s contacts, Kemba’s money. Keel knew they’d require an escape route.

Mendoza was the only person he could think of who could arrange one at such late notice.
The freighter was the Zanzibar Queen, five thousand tons, registered in Liberia. She was berthed in the Somali port of Mogadishu, awaiting a cargo of what was, ostensibly, agricultural machine tools. In reality the crates in her hold contained Soviet weaponry. Grenade launchers, Kalashnikovs, SGT-43s and anti-personnel mines. Destination: Maputo, Mozambique and, eventually, the guerrilla bases and training camps along the eastern borders.

Rolf Stein was operating out of Maputo. He would be waiting to fly them south to Durban. From there, with documents supplied by Mendoza’s agents, they could take a scheduled flight to Johannesburg and on to London and Amsterdam. With luck.

Mendoza had relayed a message to his contact in Mogadishu to brief the freighter’s captain. The ship would be taking on passengers. This would entail the Zanzibar Queen making an unscheduled stop to pick them up; off the coast at Chisimaio, two hundred and fifty miles south of Mogadishu. Chisimaio had an airfield. Six hundred miles from Kendura.

The Jet Ranger didn’t have the range and even if it had the damned machine was too easily recognizable. Lassiter’s Chieftain was hors de combat and the Intercorp Commander was out of the question; Kate Lassiter owed Stan Mason that much. In any case, they couldn’t go back to Kenya. They’d just killed its President and Kemba didn’t want to be implicated any more than was necessary.

So along came Lafitte, fresh from his contract in the Copper Belt, with his old lady: one temperamental DC-3 with more miles on the clock than anyone cared to imagine. Willing to do anything if the price was right.

‘How far behind are the opposition?’ Lafitte asked.

‘Light years by now,’ Keel said. ‘We left them running around with their arses hanging out.’ He grunted with pain and pressed a hand against the pad on his stomach.

‘You’re sure you’re OK? We’ve got another three hours to go and I ain’t risking a direct course across country. I’m making a dog leg. North along the border and then east over the Elemo Hills towards Lake Rudolf. It’ll be a straight run then down across the Sardindida Plain to the Somali border and on into Chisimaio. We’re less likely to be picked up if I keep that far north.’

The Texan glanced anxiously at Kate Lassiter and Sekka who were still supporting Keel’s shoulders. Clem Wallace appeared to have drifted into sleep.
‘Just put the hammer down, Saul,’ Kate Lassiter said.
Lafitte got to his feet. ‘You got it. I understand Mendoza has a doctor standing by when we land but if it gets too bad that he can’t take it there’s more morphine in the first aid kit. It’s in the locker. He pointed. ‘I’ve also got coffee and grog in a thermos up front. Help yourselves. There are blankets with the first aid kit. It might get cold.’
Wallace opened one eye. ‘Don’t suppose you got a beer?’
Lafitte grinned. ‘Tusker suit you?’
Wallace’s eyes widened. ‘Ripper! Lead on, mate!’ He raised himself and followed Lafitte up to the flight deck.
‘I don’t think that’ll compensate for burning the chopper.’ Sekka chuckled. ‘D’you?’
‘Kemba’s been very generous,’ Keel replied. ‘Clem’ll get over it.’ He looked thoughtfully at Kate Lassiter. ‘I guess you could probably get yourself another Chieftain too.’
Tears glistened in her green eyes.
‘Damn you!’ Her voice shook.
‘Now what have I done?’
‘You have the nerve to ask? Why on earth you can’t get yourself a steady job - nine to five with luncheon vouchers - is beyond me. It’d save me a deal of heartache, not to mention sleepless nights and the exorbitant cost of aviation fuel! I can’t be expected to go gallivanting all over the bloody veldt at your beck and call indefinitely! I must have flown more mercy missions on your behalf than the Berlin Airlift! Enough’s enough!’
‘What the hell’s she on about?’ Keel appealed to Sekka. ‘If I didn’t know any better, I’d say the lady’s going soft.’
‘Oh, boy!’ Sekka looked at Kate. ‘I can’t believe he’s that dumb; can you?’
Keel grinned then winced as pain spasmed through his belly. ‘Didn’t think you cared.’
‘Always the joker,’ she said. ‘Well, this macho image doesn’t fool me! Let me tell you something. From now on, you’re stuck with me. I’m grounding myself. Somebody’s got to look after you. I’m not sure your buddy here’s doing such a good job!’
‘I’d swear,’ Sekka said, ‘that I’ve just been insulted.’
Keel didn’t respond.
Kate Lassiter was holding the mercenary’s hand. The ice blue eyes
were closed. The Dakota hit an air pocket. Keel’s weight shifted and he sagged against Sekka. The Hausa’s hand cupped Keel’s head and drew it down to his chest. His touch was gentle. He eased his own exhausted body back against the bulkhead. He remained in that position, barely awake, as the DC-3 droned east towards the border and sanctuary.
In his first floor study, Brooke was very nearly spitting with rage.

News of the events in Kendura had ripped through the corridors of Whitehall with the ferocity of a tornado. Brooke had wasted no time in summoning Dalkieth.

‘Jesus fucking Christ! According to Warren, the bloody square looked like a Chicago stockyard! What the hell sort of animals did you recruit?’

‘We don’t know for certain they are the ones who carried out the attack,’ Dalkieth said carefully. ‘The assassination may well have been an independent action.’

‘Dear God, you don’t believe that any more than I do! Look, I’ll shed no tears for Mabato or, for that matter, his Soviet bed mate - what was his name? Barovski?’

‘Burov,’ Dalkieth corrected. ‘Gregori Alexis. He was KGB. One of Nikolai Kolk’s boys and Nikolai is First Chief Directorate with connections all the way to the top.’

‘Well, whoever. This is fast becoming Pandora’s box. If word gets out about our contribution, it’ll make Watergate look like open day with the fucking Brownies!’

‘I say again, Prime Minister. The two events may not be connected.’

‘The fuck they’re not! The facts speak for themselves. We know that a white man, possibly European, maybe even British, was involved in the killings. He was seen after the attack in the square. As far as we can gather only two men took part in the hit, not counting Mabato’s personal pilot who aided their escape from Kendura, and we were almost sure that members of the original rescue team survived. I think it’s reasonable to assume, therefore, that this was a revenge attack for the death of their comrades.’

Dalkieth nodded reluctantly. ‘All right, I’ll admit it is a possibility.’

Brooke grunted, took a deep breath and then asked, ‘Do we have any idea on the whereabouts of the hit squad?’

Dalkieth shook his head. ‘They’ve vanished. They obviously had an
escape route well mapped out.’
  ‘They had help.’
  ‘Evidently.’
Brooke looked thoughtful. ‘Kemba?’
  ‘He had everything to gain from Mabato’s death.’
  ‘But not from Nai’s or Wood’s, although I doubt they were the main
target. Not that Kemba will ever talk. Christ, what a God-awful shambles!’
Brooke pursed his lips. ‘I want us waterproofed, George. I want this
closed up as tight as a virgin’s fanny. All traces erased and I mean erased. By
every means at your disposal.’
Dalkieth asked quietly, ‘Does that include terminal sanction?’
Brooke’s voice carried heavy menace. ‘Whatever it takes. Do it.’
Dalkieth remained silent for several moments before he rose to his
feet. ‘Will that be all, Prime Minister?’
Brooke’s expression could have been carved out of granite.
  ‘Isn’t that enough?’

Noon.
Dalkieth initiated contact, using a call box. The number he dialled
was unlisted. He pushed the coins into the slot and waited for the time lapse
as the answering machine was activated. A low buzz told him that the tape
was ready to receive his message.
  ‘Trip-wire,’ he said, slowly and distinctly. Then he hung up.
By six that same evening he was at home in his flat in Eaton Square.
Dalkieth was a bachelor and the apartment reflected this status. It was
spacious and uncluttered yet still retained a comfortable elegance. The lounge
held a long, low sofa and several snug armchairs. A number of signed
watercolours hung on the walls.
Dalkieth let the telephone ring three times before he picked up the
receiver. He said nothing.
  ‘This is Grail.’ The voice was soft and well-modulated.
  ‘Thank you for returning my call,’ Dalkieth said.
  ‘A pleasure. It’s been a while. I thought you’d forgotten all about
me.’ The tone was mocking, slightly reproving.
  ‘Not at all,’ Dalkieth said. ‘It’s just that I haven’t had a need for your
particular talents.’
‘I’m back in demand. I’m flattered.’
‘It’s short notice,’ Dalkieth went on.
‘Which will be reflected in the fee.’
‘I understand.’
‘So, details?’
Dalkieth gave them.
When he’d finished, the voice said, ‘I don’t foresee any difficulty.’
‘Then I’ll await confirmation.’
‘I’ll be in touch.’

The line went dead. Dalkieth replaced the receiver and moved to a tray of drinks. He poured himself a hefty tumbler of Canadian Club and added ice. The smooth taste did little to alleviate the uneasy feeling that was gnawing its way through his stomach.

Brooke had likened it to the opening of Pandora’s box. Dalkieth had the distinct feeling that with the introduction of Grail to the plot he might just have unleashed something even more potentially devastating.

Two days after the event, the killings were still front page news with most of the dailies carrying the opinion that the assassination conspiracy had been hatched by Hamilton Kemba as a bloody prelude to his return to power in Lugamba. Kemba, needless to say, was vigorously denying the allegations. As if he would admit anyway to a scheme that had encompassed the slaughter of the British Foreign Secretary and the Kenyan Head of State. The latter having granted Kemba sanctuary from Mabato’s thugs following his enforced exile from Lugamba and his subsequent departure from Tanzania.

And of the assassins there had been no word, no trace. They had vanished into thin air.

Cameron had been combing the news columns and media reports for any clue that would tell him that it had been Keel’s handiwork. Despite not finding one he remained convinced that the mercenary had been responsible.

But why no contact?

Whatever the reasons, the ramifications were obvious and Cameron’s sole intention was to go to ground as quickly and as effectively as he could. He had made preparations. His briefcase held three passports - British, Swiss and Irish - as well as currency and airline tickets. The Aer Lingus flight to Dublin left at four o’clock and he planned to be on it. In Eire he could
connect to any flight routing direct to the continent, arriving on a different passport and under a different name than the one he’d used leaving Heathrow. He had contacts in Berne and Zurich and an account with the Grande Banque de Geneve. It was a way out.

He collected his things into a small leather holdall, picked up the briefcase and locked the door of the flat behind him. It was a fine afternoon; warm with a clear blue sky. He walked to the kerb and pitched the luggage into the back seat of the BMW.

The car exploded when he turned the ignition key. Windows in the street shattered as the saloon erupted in a searing ball of flame that sent the bonnet hurtling through the air to crash against the stone pillars flanking the entrance to Cameron’s flat. The tyres melted instantaneously. Ribbons of burning petrol spread out over the road and pavement. Cameron metamorphosed into a black, charcoaled husk that disintegrated as the BMW continued to burn furiously.

No one else was injured by the explosion. Somewhere a dog began to bark loudly and as people emerged cautiously into the street, open mouthed in disbelief, the sound of a police siren could be heard approaching from a distance.

‘Hardly subtle,’ admitted Dalkieth. ‘But certainly effective.’

‘Satisfaction guaranteed,’ Grail said. ‘I trust you’ll show your appreciation in the usual way?’

‘Your account has already been credited.’

‘Thank you.’ Grail said smoothly. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve anything else in the offing? While you have me, so to speak.’ The words held a trace of humour that Dalkieth found chilling.

‘Not at the moment but you never know. I’ll keep in touch.’

‘Do that,’ Grail said silkily. ‘You know where to reach me.’
Dear Sir,

Please find enclosed sealed documents relating to the estate of our client lain Michael Cameron, late of Cameron Security Consultants, 101a Sloane Street. We are forwarding them to you under instructions issued by our client prior to his death on May 16th. The instructions given to this practice by Mr Cameron were quite precise. In the event of his death the testament was to be despatched to your office without delay. We are required to advise you that identical packages have been delivered to the following: The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent, The Daily Mail and The Daily Express. A copy has also been passed to Detective Sergeant Alec Macraig of the Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard.

I would be most grateful if you would kindly acknowledge receipt of the aforementioned, either in writing or by telephone. I would also advise you that neither my partners nor myself have any knowledge of the contents of the testament enclosed.

Yours faithfully,

Lawrence Hillyard

The Legacy.
Before Grail.
They were back in the snack bar. The tables appeared not to have been cleaned since their last visit. The spout of the plastic tomato was clogged with sauce and sugar lay scattered on the Formica in tiny brown lumps.

‘Just in case, Frank,’ Cameron said as he handed the package to the minder.

‘In case of what?’

‘My demise. Violent or otherwise.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’ Ketch took one look at Cameron’s drawn face and realized he wasn’t.

‘I want you to get yourself a safe deposit box,’ Cameron said. ‘Put this in it. I want it secure. Use any bank. Your choice.’

‘Then?’

‘You wait.’ Cameron smiled. Crow’s feet appeared at the corner of his good eye.

‘For what?’

The place was, surprisingly, beginning to fill up. Ketch kept his voice low. The rasp in his throat seemed more pronounced than ever. He eyed the envelope speculatively.

‘You’ll figure it out,’ Cameron said.

Ketch had missed the radio bulletin. He’d been propping up the bar in the Pilgrim, contemplating a lager and an apology for a pork pie that went a long way to prove that British Rail didn’t have the monopoly on welded crusts. He had an hour to spare before his next job; collecting a high rolling Texan stud player from the Tower Hotel and taking him to a house in Hampstead to a game where if you asked what the stakes were, you couldn’t afford to play.

A punter strolled into the public bar with a copy of the Standard under his arm and ordered a light and bitter. He’d laid the paper down to forage for change and there it was on the counter in black and white. By the time the man had paid for his drink his paper and Ketch had disappeared. Rapidly. The doors were still squeaking on their hinges. Ketch had abandoned both the lager and the pork pie. The Audi was parked around the corner. Ketch sat in it, feeling ill.

‘I’ll probably go away for a while,’ Cameron had said.

He hadn’t got very far. About fifteen feet from his front door, all
The photograph, under the headline ‘BOMB OUTRAGE KILLS SPECIAL FORCES HERO’, showed the remains of Cameron’s BMW; a twisted tangle of metal at the side of the road, cordoned by police cones and white ribbon. There followed a brief, lurid and somewhat inaccurate assessment of Cameron’s activities. It was an incomplete biography.

Ketch made the bank thirty minutes before closing time and signed out the contents of the safe deposit box; one manila envelope plus instructions. The Texan stud player would have to make his own arrangements. Ketch had an errand to run.

The money was with the instructions. Ketch counted it out. A thousand quid to cover his expenses.

Including return air fare to Amsterdam - Club class.

Cameron had felt he owed it to Keel. The mercenary had a right to know who’d set him up and why. That’s if he and Sekka ever made it back to the bar on the Zeedijk.

The manila envelope was similar to the others he’d lodged with his solicitor; its contents were the same. The dossier was comprehensive; names, dates, a record of conversations, even the Rover’s registration number and a copy of the credit advice stating that the sum of one hundred and twenty thousand US dollars had been credited to Cameron’s account in Geneva. Plus photographs of course; damning evidence.

Everything, in fact, except the identity of the team.

He had to give Keel a chance; an edge.

With the resources available to him it was conceivable that Dalkieth could instigate a successful trace but that would take time and Cameron fully intended that Dalkieth and his associates were hung out to dry long before they caught up with Keel and his associates.

Hence the legacy, with the sting in the tail.

Maybe the press would act on the information and release the sordid details and maybe they’d be shackled by a ‘D’ notice. Cameron would have no way of knowing. But Keel, if he had survived, would have a weapon with which to protect himself and counter attack should it prove necessary.

And there was always Macraig. He’d wanted to know what Cameron was into. Now he would find out. And Macraig on a murder trail wouldn’t care a damn whose toes he trod on. He’d be like a bloodhound following a spoor and with his gift for tenacity the spoor would lead him back to Dalkieth.
and possibly beyond. They’d have to prise him off the scent with a crowbar.

And Cameron knew that Frank Ketch was the only person he could trust to get the dossier to Keel in Amsterdam. The minder would be his courier.

By the time the aircraft rolled onto its stand at Schiphol it was early evening. The sky was the colour of slate and a thin drizzle was drifting over the aprons and runways. Ketch had no luggage to collect from the baggage claims area for he had travelled with only his passport and an overnight bag containing the envelope. The customs officer spared him little more than a cursory glance as he made his way through the barrier and into the terminal. Despite this, the hands clutching the straps of his bag were clammy and he was suffering from the uncomfortable urge to turn and look behind him. Dispelling the desire to break into a run, he walked quickly through the concourse towards the sign marked Uitgang and looked into the rain for the taxi rank.

‘Where to?’ The driver asked in English.

Ketch gave him the address of the Pelican bar.

‘No problem,’ the driver said as he steered the car into the traffic. He caught Ketch’s eye in the mirror. ‘You in Amsterdam for business or pleasure?’

Ketch thought about the envelope, burning a hole in his bag. He didn’t know what was in it. Neither did he want to know. But you didn’t have to be a genius to know the contents probably had something to do with the way Cameron had met his end. He looked in the mirror and saw that the taxi driver was looking at him as if awaiting his answer.

Ketch found his voice.

‘Business,’ he said. ‘Strictly business.’

THE END
Oh, and before you go…

If you’ve made it this far - and didn’t just skip to the end, as some very strange people are wont to do – I just wanted to take this opportunity to say thank you! Penning a novel is many things: mostly a labour of love when it’s going well and a pain in the arse when you’re staring at a blank screen wondering what the heck the next sentence is gonna be. The process from conception to finished article has been compared to child birth, save for a novelist there’s usually a lot more screaming involved. A joke, ladies; please don’t write in…

Any road, against all the odds, *Trigger Men* did make it onto the bookshelves – well, your e-reader, at any rate - and I hope you’ve enjoyed the ride. If you did, I’d be hugely grateful if you could post a review to that effect on Amazon. At this stage in the proceedings, I need all the help I can get..!

Best wishes,

James McGee
CROW’S WAR

Cynical and world-weary, Crow’s a pilot and a drifter. His skills honed flying helicopter gunships, he’s now earning a precarious living, ferrying relief supplies to refugee camps along the length of Pakistan’s north-west frontier.

Until the arrival of a local resistance leader, with a very lucrative job offer. All Crow has to do is airlift a critically ill Mujahideen field commander to hospital in Peshawar. Nothing to it, save for one slight snag. The pick-up point lies across the Durand Line, deep in Afghanistan.

And there’s a war on.

But there’s no denying the money’s good and so, against his better judgement, Crow accepts the contract.

The flight in proves remarkably easy; too easy, in fact. So when an unexpected welcoming committee turns his helicopter into a heap of charred metal, Crow finds his exit plan severely compromised. The only way out is on foot. Beset on all sides by bandits, Afghan warlords, heroin smugglers and Soviet Special Forces, Crow makes his run for the border.

And that’s just the beginning…
May 1945. As the Russians tighten their stranglehold on Berlin, Doenitz's last surviving U-boat takes on board a top secret cargo, slips its moorings and heads for the deep waters of the North Atlantic. Destination: South America.

Five decades later, Michael Logan, former marine turned smuggler, faces a grim future in a Turkish jail. Until fate intervenes in the shape of his one-time partner, the irrepressible Harry Donovan, with a job offer; helping a wealthy industrialist search for his father - the Kriegsmarine's most decorated U-boat ace - reported missing at the end of the war, along with a fortune in gold bullion.

And as the hunt begins, like wolves drawn to the scent of blood, the scavengers start to converge. But lured by what? The Reichsbank's stolen reserves or something else: a darker legacy which, if delivered into the wrong hands, could re-ignite the flames of hatred thought to have been extinguished beneath the ashes of a war-torn city many years before.

A remote Greek island holds the key but it is only in the aftermath of a violent and bloody confrontation that the island’s chilling secret is revealed and the last, great mystery of World War Two is finally laid to rest.

‘Brilliantly gripping thriller…’
Manchester Evening News
PRAISE FOR THE HAWKWOOD SERIES

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Publishers Weekly

‘Atmospheric and well-researched…try it!’
Daily Mirror

‘A gripping historical thriller’
The Guardian

‘Fraught with tension’
Lancashire Lifestyle

‘Ratcatcher…my book of the year’
Tainted Archive

‘Electrifying historical thriller’
Good Book Guide

‘Ratcatcher…one of those awesome summer reads’
The Back Row

‘Rapscallion…one of the best books I’ve read in a long time’
Coventry Telegraph

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HistoricalNovels.info
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‘Love the way he weaves a story through a history lesson. His hero is the 1800’s version of Jack Reacher’
Avidrdr, Amazon.com