

# ONE

1970  
Tanzania, East Africa

Essie leaned back in her chair, a mug of black tea resting on her knee. She gazed out through the open front of the tent. In the early morning light the rocky plain below the camp was painted in smudgy tones of brown and grey. Away in the distance she could see the silver gleam of the lake. Rising up behind it was Ol Doinyo Lengai. A wreath of cloud drifted across the summit, hiding the cap of strange white lava that looked like snow.

From overhead Essie heard weaverbirds calling between the thorn trees. The air was cool and still. She tried to draw it inside her, so that she would feel it there later on, when the sun blazed from a sheer blue sky and a hot wind blew in from the north-east.

‘That’s the last of the marmalade.’

On the other side of the dining table Essie’s mother-in-law was scraping out a jar with a teaspoon. Her actions were slow and precise. She could have been removing specks of earth from a fragment of fossilised bone. A faint frown marked her brow as she worked.

‘There’s no more, you know.’ Julia spoke in her usual matter-of-fact tone, even though Essie knew that marmalade was one of the few luxuries she cherished, along with Scotch whisky and cigarettes.

Essie passed over a glass dish of dark-gold local honey. Julia shook her head, preferring to spread her slice of bread with the meagre amount of marmalade she'd collected. As she began to eat, she reached across to a wooden tray piled with stones at the far end of the table. She picked out a large grey pebble – water worn, with one end broken off. She stroked the edge with her finger. Essie guessed she wanted to make some comment about it, but was waiting for her son to reappear.

Ian was over in the Administration Hut where the radio was set up. He was expecting to talk to the Head Ranger at Serengeti. The call had been arranged last night, but there'd been no clue as to what it was about. It was rare, these days, for anyone to need to get in touch with the Lawrences. Since the Ranger's office sometimes acted as a local contact for other authorities, including the Department of Antiquities, they all felt a bit uneasy.

A sudden nudge at Essie's elbow made her spill her tea. She gasped as the hot water soaked through her shorts. Reaching behind her, she pushed away the muzzle of a young gazelle. 'No, Tommy!'

The animal took two steps backwards, then stood still, head lowered, staring reproachfully at her. With his eyes so dark and shiny he always looked to be on the brink of tears. Relenting, Essie called him back and scratched his ear. The sun glanced off the silver buckle on his blue collar.

'He's getting horns,' Julia stated. 'He'll be impossible to manage.'

Essie said nothing. She knew Julia was tense because of the radio call. And this was on top of the fact that she had never approved of Tommy being at the camp. He'd been found six months ago by one of the local workers, abandoned by his mother only weeks after his birth. When Tommy had been brought to the Work Hut, Julia had instructed the worker to put the hungry animal out of its misery.

‘No, wait,’ Essie had intervened. The baby looked so frightened, his cry almost silent as if his voice had run out. ‘Let’s keep him. I’ll take care of him.’

‘That’s not a good idea,’ Julia had said firmly. ‘You might think you’re being kind, but you’re not. It’s very hard to rehabilitate a wild animal that’s become tame. He’ll never belong anywhere.’

She’d gone on to talk about the cost of milk powder and other practical issues. Then she’d started on her more serious concern. By rescuing the creature Essie would be interfering in a natural process – survival of the fittest.

Julia had looked to her son for support, but Ian had surprised both women by taking Essie’s side. ‘I don’t see what harm it can do. One little gazelle.’

Essie had fallen in love with Tommy. She often buried her face in his fur, breathing his smell. She felt a rush of affection when she saw him sitting in the shade with his legs folded away so neatly, and she smiled at the sight of his tail flicking constantly from side to side. Now, Tommy was half-grown and grazing independently, but he was showing no sign of wanting to return to the wild. Instead, he still liked to stay as close to Essie as possible. He would sidle into the tent and stand – like he was now – right at her side.

Avoiding Julia’s gaze, Essie tore off a hunk of bread and fed it to Tommy, watching the quaint sideways movement of his jaws as he chewed.

‘You’ll have to let him go in the end,’ Julia said.

Essie took a breath. ‘I know that.’ There was a short silence. Essie noticed a smear of marmalade on Julia’s chin. She found herself rubbing her own chin as if that could remove it.

Into the quiet came the sounds of footsteps – brittle leaves and twigs being crushed. Essie looked up to see Ian striding over.

There was a focused look on his face, as if his thoughts were racing.

‘Is it good or bad?’ Essie couldn’t help asking. On the other side of the table Julia waited quietly for a report. Her stillness felt like a reproof – a reminder that her daughter-in-law hadn’t yet spent enough time at the Gorge to learn how to take each day, month, year as it came.

Ian let the quiet stretch out for a few seconds, then he grinned. ‘Guess who I’ve been talking to.’

Julia watched him, saying nothing.

‘Frank Marlow,’ Ian announced.

Julia’s eyes widened. ‘You mean – Frank Marlow himself?’

Ian nodded. ‘I could hardly believe it.’

Essie had heard the name Marlow but couldn’t place it, so she just raised her eyebrows to show she was impressed.

‘He’s staying at the Lodge,’ Ian continued. ‘Yesterday he flew to Olduvai to see their museum. Leakey took him round all their sites – showed him what they are working on.’ A shadow of dismay crept into Ian’s voice. The Leakeys were another family of archaeologists who worked in a gorge about half a day’s drive away. A year ago they’d managed to secure funding for a museum at their research base. It had been a real coup – and it was hard not to feel envious of them. The moment passed, though, and Ian’s smile returned. ‘Now he’s coming to Magadi.’

‘He wants to see what we’re doing!’ Julia clasped her hands together like someone offering a prayer of thanks.

‘Not exactly,’ Ian said. ‘He wants to bring his wife here. It’s a surprise. For their wedding anniversary.’

Julia mouthed his last words as if they made no sense. At Magadi Camp, Christmas was celebrated and birthdays warranted a cake,

if the ingredients could be found. But wedding anniversaries were barely mentioned. Ian and Essie's had come around four times; they'd married within a year of her arrival at Magadi. Essie always wished they could go away somewhere together to mark the occasion – perhaps to Serengeti. But the date occurred in January, during the intense digging season of the Short Dry when no time could be spared.

Ian cleared his throat. 'He wants to have sundowners served at the Steps.'

Julia's lips parted, but she didn't speak. Essie could see her struggling to come to terms with the famous archaeological site being used as nothing more than a romantic backdrop. She was annoyed enough by sightseeing planes that flew low over Magadi Gorge so that tourists could peer at the Steps on their way to view the volcano.

'He's asked as a favour,' Ian continued.

Julia drew in a breath as if preparing to be brave. 'So we have to say yes.'

'Who exactly is he?'

 Essie asked carefully. If she let the conversation run on any longer, it would only get harder to admit her ignorance.

'A Canadian millionaire. He made his money in mining. The Marlow Trust funds private archaeological research all over the world.' As he spoke, Ian looked in the direction of the Steps site – down on the plains, out of view behind a rocky outcrop. 'Frank's going to bring everything with him from the Lodge. Glasses. Folding table and chairs. And food as well. Trays of canapés. We don't have to provide anything.'

'That's just as well,' said Julia dryly.

Essie imagined the Marlows at the Steps, sipping champagne and nibbling caviar on crackers as they gazed out over the lines

of footprints that had been captured in stone nearly four million years ago. Preserved beneath layers of ash and lava, the impressions were made on a muddy plain by the first of our ancestors to walk on two legs. The footprints of the Australopithecines – a species that was part-ape, part-human – led across the plain in the direction of the volcano. There was a man, followed by a woman and a child walking side by side, the distance between them regular as if they might even have been holding hands. The connection with deep history and long-lost people would be almost tangible. The visitors were lucky with their timing: the flamingos had recently arrived in Magadi for the breeding season. Essie had got out of bed to watch them fly over the Gorge, on their way to the salt lake where they, themselves, had been hatched. The birds made the journey from other regions of the Rift Valley, travelling during the course of a single night, lit by a full moon. Now there were tens of thousands of them milling around the lake. Along with the pyramid of the volcano, they would provide a stunning backdrop to the Steps. Essie pictured pink birds, pink sky, pink lake, even pink desert roses growing nearby. It would be unforgettable.

‘When are they arriving?’ Julia asked.

‘The day after tomorrow.’

‘Where shall we put them up?’ She glanced towards her personal tent, and then at the one Essie shared with Ian. ‘Yours is the biggest.’

‘Frank has his own plane. His idea was to fly in and fly out. Get back to Serengeti before dark.’

‘But there won’t be time to show him around,’ Julia protested.

Ian lifted his chin. ‘I convinced him to come earlier in the day. I promised him a flint-knapping demonstration.’ He turned to Essie. ‘I told him we have Arthur Holland’s daughter here.’

‘He’s heard of Dad?’ Essie was surprised. Professor Holland, along with his unique collection of stone tools, was known in academic circles but he was hardly a household name like the Lawrences were.

Ian nodded. ‘He actually mentioned the Tasmanian flints. Marlow’s not just a rich sponsor. He’s an amateur archaeologist. He knows who’s who.’

Essie swallowed. She liked the idea of being useful, but didn’t want to feel responsible if the man was unimpressed by her knapping skills. Flint could be unpredictable in the way it broke. Striking a worked edge could destroy a nearly completed tool. She didn’t want to end up with a failure. She’d be letting down the Lawrences and her father, both at the same time.

‘We can lead on from that to a tour of the dig,’ Ian continued. ‘We have to be careful, though. I’ve heard he doesn’t like to be asked directly for money.’

‘Of course, we wouldn’t beg anyway,’ Julia said. But there was a note of doubt in her voice. So far, the large-scale excavations that had been funded by the Steps’ success had failed to produce any significant finds at Magadi. In one of the sites there were some promising undisturbed living floors – buried surfaces containing evidence of occupation – but after an initial discovery of a hominid tooth nothing more had turned up. Grants had petered out and funds were alarmingly low.

Essie’s eyes strayed to the empty marmalade jar. Running out of a treasured luxury might not matter, but there were lots of other empty things here at Magadi Camp. Petrol drums, kerosene tins, whole shelves in the storeroom. Even the Indian ink they used to mark numbers on specimens was running out. If nothing changed, they’d soon have to start cutting the already reduced number of

local staff. Then the excavation sites and the camp would be almost empty as well.

‘There’s just one more thing,’ Ian looked cautiously at his mother. ‘Marlow wants to create a sense of celebration, for the occasion. He’d like us to dress up.’

Julia looked blank. ‘What in?’

‘Evening wear.’

‘He can’t be serious,’ Julia responded. ‘This is a working camp, not a sideshow!’

‘I said we would,’ Ian stated.

‘We could wear our town clothes,’ Julia suggested.

‘That’s not what he wants.’

Essie knew better than to join in a debate between mother and son. While she waited to hear the outcome, she looked down at the three dogs that had slunk in to lie under the table. The mingled bodies formed a patchwork, with the stark black-and-white spotted hides of the two Dalmatians, Rudie and Meg, set against the tawny coat of a hound that belonged in the staff camp.

‘I haven’t got anything suitable, anyway,’ Julia said.

‘There’s that dress you wore in London.’ Ian pointed to a framed black-and-white photograph perched on top of the bookcase in the rear of the tent. The picture had been taken at a royal reception held to mark the discovery of the Steps. It showed a much younger Julia shaking hands with the newly crowned Queen, both women wearing elbow-length white gloves. There was a glimpse of Julia’s dress – an elaborate gown in a pale tone, embellished with lace. When Essie had first seen the image she hadn’t recognised her tough, no-nonsense mother-in-law. The person in the picture looked elegant and fragile – vulnerable, somehow. Julia would hate to know it, but she reminded Essie of a gazelle.

Ian turned to Essie. 'What can we do about you?'

Essie didn't reply straightaway. The fact was, she had a silk evening dress that would suit the occasion perfectly. It was hidden away in her suitcase along with the winter clothes she'd been wearing when she left England. Her father had advised her to pack a formal gown when she'd set off to work in Tanzania. 'White people in Africa love to dress up,' he'd told her. He'd made two expeditions there himself, so he knew what Essie should expect. In the five years she'd spent at Magadi Gorge, however, there had been hardly any trips away from the remote camp – and definitely no dinner parties or dances in Arusha. So Essie had never revealed the dress to her husband. Now, as Ian and Julia waited, she tried to think how to answer without giving away the fact that she'd envisaged a different life here. Ian and Julia might think there was another, frivolous, side to her. On the other hand, she didn't want to be a problem.

'I've got a dress somewhere,' she said vaguely.

'Good,' Ian responded. Essie expected more questions but he turned his attention to the field notebook he'd removed from his pocket. After a brief pause, he spoke again. 'We'll have to stop the digging and concentrate on getting ready.'

Julia raised her eyebrows. Magadi ran on a strict schedule. The local staff as well as the Lawrences worked every day except Sundays. Even during the rainy season, the teams achieved whatever they could.

'There's a lot to do.' Ian swung one arm, taking in their immediate surroundings, and then gestured towards the open doorway with its view to the rest of the camp.

Essie scanned the tent, her gaze passing over the sideboard with the gramophone player; the neat stacks of books, their dust jackets

faded in the harsh sun; the Persian carpet that was well worn but swept clean. Kefa worked hard to keep the place presentable. The effort he put into polishing silver, waxing furniture and laundering linen sometimes felt to Essie like a reproach to the Lawrences with their shrinking resources. Even though his official title was 'houseboy', the man was in his sixties. He had been employed by the family, on and off, ever since Julia and her husband, William, first came here, nearly forty years ago. Kefa liked to place on the top of the magazine pile an old *National Geographic* from 1956 with William on the cover, standing proudly at the Steps. The photograph was taken only four years before his death. The magazine had come to symbolise everything the man had achieved. It had to be dusted daily to maintain the glossy shine.

'The place isn't too bad,' Essie ventured.

'It has to look busier,' Ian explained. 'We need to get things out of the store. Fossil eggs. The giraffe skull. Snake skins. Anything interesting. And I want a few of the guest tents erected, nets hung and beds made up, in case we end up giving a tour. We want it to appear as if they've caught us in a slow moment, but we're expecting company.' Ian paced back and forth, making small detours to avoid Tommy, who kept standing in his path.

Essie smiled at her husband. He looked more wide-awake and alive than she'd seen him in years. Then she felt a twist of anxiety. Was he getting carried away? What if Frank Marlow and his wife came here to enjoy their romantic interlude, and then just flew away, never to be heard from again?

On the other side of the table Julia had turned around to peer at a map of Magadi that was pinned on a noticeboard. A grid had been drawn in red pen, dividing the Gorge, and the smaller gullies – called *korongos* in Swahili – into zones.

‘We could begin work somewhere completely new,’ she said. For someone so practical, she seemed to be getting ahead of herself too.

Ian nodded, following her gaze. ‘A fresh start.’

With Tommy dogging his steps, Ian came back to the table. He stood behind Essie, placing his hands on her shoulders. His thumb rested on her neck. The touch sent a warm current through her body. She leaned back against him, feeling the hard mould of his muscles through his shirt. Perhaps their luck really was about to change. There would be more times like this – carefree and bright. Suddenly, Tommy’s bony head butted in from the side. Sitting up straight, she pushed him away. She glanced across to Julia, waiting for a critical look.

But the other woman hadn’t been watching. She was staring out towards the volcano. The flush of excitement had vanished from her face, but her usual calm expression had not returned. In her eyes was a look of fierce longing. The lines around her mouth and across her brow were drawn tight as if she was in pain. Essie felt uncomfortable, looking on. It was as though Julia’s mask had been torn away.

The emotion was too raw to be connected with the Lawrences’ quest to solve the puzzle of the human family tree. Essie guessed Julia was thinking about something that was even closer to her heart: the child she had lost.

Ian’s little brother, Robbie, had gone missing when he was only four years old. Julia had been doing fieldwork over in the foothills of the mountain. The two boys were playing near her when they’d wandered off and become lost. Their absence had not been noticed for some time, with Julia and her assistant both focused on their work. After a frantic search Ian was located, but

he'd become separated from his brother. No sign of Robbie had ever been found. It had taken months after Essie became close to Ian for him to talk about the tragedy. Even then the story had come out in small painful pieces, not all of which made sense. Julia kept up a wall of silence on the topic, as if it gave her a place to hide. The Africans in the camp hardly ever talked about Robbie. If they did, they never used his name. He was *mtoto wa siri*. The hidden child. Visitors to Magadi understood not to mention the lost boy, even though the case was well known; the fruitless search had been covered in newspapers, here in Tanzania and abroad. More than thirty years had passed since Robbie's disappearance, yet his presence – absence – still haunted Magadi Gorge, like the echo of a cry that had never been heard.

Essie understood why Julia would be thinking of Robbie now. Perhaps Ian was too. A grant from the Marlow Trust would mean the Lawrences could continue to live and work here. But if this bid failed, they might well have to leave, cutting off their last link with Robbie. It would also be the end of an extraordinary era. The Lawrences had been researching in the Gorge since the 1930s – during the dry season only, at first; then full-time. After the interruption of the Second World War they'd returned here again. Where the Marlows' visit was concerned, the stakes were high.

As if aware of being observed, Julia turned around. As she did so, Essie saw her take possession of herself again. Feature by feature, like an artist correcting a faulty painting, she rearranged her face. When she spoke, her voice was almost bright.

'Where shall we begin?'

Ian went to sit next to Julia. Frowning with concentration, he ran one hand back through his hair, leaving it standing up in dark tufts. He looked across the table. Caught in the brightening sunlight,

his eyes were a piercing blue. 'I'll start with the landing strip. You two deal with things here.'

Julia watched her son intently as he spoke. It seemed to complete her recovery. Essie saw a look of renewed excitement pass between the two. She presumed they were thinking of the days when Magadi Camp was at its peak – when William was alive, with Julia working at his side, and Ian a young graduate already making his own name in their field. At that time, Essie was still a schoolgirl in England, looking forward to university. The thought made her feel like a newcomer all over again. Though it was childish, she wanted to push her way in, like Tommy. She gazed down once more at the dogs under the table. Rudie had moved closer to her chair. Essie watched his spotted chest rising and falling. He'd already begun to pant, his long pink tongue draping onto the worn threads of the rug. The day was fast warming up. A first trickle of sweat moved slowly down her back.

Essie tied up the mosquito net neatly and straightened the pillows. She smoothed the sheets and tucked them in – Ian slept badly and his tossing and turning always left the bed rumped by morning. Next, she picked up items of clothing and dropped them in the laundry basket. She could have let Kefa deal with the tent, but she still felt it was an invasion of her and Ian's privacy having him do this, regardless of what Julia thought.

Essie had already spent several hours in the Work Hut this morning, helping Julia rearrange the tables and lay out collections of specimens – careful not to separate items that belonged together or to dislodge anything that was in the process of being assembled. Julia was now preparing a 'typical day's find' on a tray. Frank Marlow

was very knowledgeable about archaeology, but Julia pointed out that his wife might be completely ignorant, for all they knew. She might be completely uninterested too, Essie thought. But she didn't say this – Julia would find it hard to imagine that anyone could fail to be fascinated by the topic.

Ian was down on the plains, supervising the clearing of bushes that had grown up on the landing strip. The place hadn't been used in years. The Lawrences could no longer afford to fly supplies in to Magadi. Instead they radioed their orders to Arusha and the items were sent to Olduvai Camp on one of the Leakey's regular chartered flights. From there, they were collected by Land Rover. None of the Lawrences took part in the pickups. Their friendship with the Leakeys – which had led to the gift of the two Dalmatian puppies some years ago – had been neglected. Ian pretended the Lawrences were too busy to make the trip to Olduvai, but Essie knew he found the contrast between the camps too humiliating.

After kicking a pair of old sandals out of sight under the bed, Essie crossed to the cupboard. She took out Ian's cream linen suit and his matching shirt. A faint smell of mould clung to them, but she could see no sign of any green-black blemishes. She hung the garments up to air from one of the tent cross-poles, then she took down her suitcase and laid it on the sisal matting. After working open the corroded locks, she lifted the lid. The smell of musty wool and lavender rose up. She stroked her grey jumper with its coloured band of Fair Isle knitting – the one she'd worn since she was a teenager, out collecting with her father. A wave of longing washed over her.

The two had spent so much time together, especially once the family moved from Tasmania to England. Essie had been seven at the time. At first, Arthur had had no choice but to take his young

daughter with him on field trips when her mother wasn't well, or if Essie didn't want to spend the day shopping. There was no one else to look after her. But soon the pair had become a team. They were able to communicate without words, one passing over a tool the other needed, or lending a second pair of hands. They even liked the same cheese-and-tomato sandwiches for their picnics. Essie wished she could make a visit home. Or just talk to Arthur on the phone. He was not in good health and she worried about him, living by himself, relying on a part-time housekeeper for support. He wanted Essie to be here at Magadi – he was proud that she'd married into the Lawrence family and was pursuing her career in Tanzania – but she knew he was lonely without her company. Corresponding by mail was frustrating; the time between sending and receiving was so long that news was always out of date. (Reports on world events were slow to filter through, as well; last year, when Neil Armstrong became the first person to set foot on the moon, the Lawrences didn't know about it for months.) Even if the postal service had been more efficient, letters were still a poor replacement for being able to see someone and hug them or even just hear their voice.

Reaching into the corner of the case, Essie's hand hovered over the bundle of orange silk. Letting herself give in to the lure of memories, she closed her eyes. She was back in the kitchen at home, going through her packing list. Her father was nodding as she read out each item. There was a look of anticipation on his face as if he was the one who would be travelling. The next item on the list was the formal dress.

'You don't need to buy a new one,' Arthur said. 'Heaven knows there are enough to choose from here.' A wry smile offset the bitter edge to his voice. 'Come on.'

Essie followed him into the guest room at the end of the hallway. She avoided looking in the direction of the bed – it was too smooth, with just a satin coverlet on the bare mattress. Her eyes skimmed past an empty dressing table balled with dust.

Arthur walked stiffly beside her, crossing to a huge antique wardrobe. It seemed to be crouched there, set on bulbous carved wooden legs that ended in lion's feet. Both doors creaked faintly as he opened them, letting out the smell of new fabric and cardboard shopping bags.

Essie took in the array of dresses – bright cotton prints, pastel chiffons, midnight-blue satin, black lace. It was a jumbled collection revealing no sense of one person's taste, as if Essie's mother had been hunting desperately to find her own style. Most of the garments looked as though they'd barely been used. Some even had their shop labels still attached. Essie scanned the options quickly, choosing by colour and length. She took out an orange silk dress.

'I'll take this,' she said to Arthur. 'It'll fold up to nothing.'

It was one of the new gowns – unworn but for the brief touch of skin on fabric in the changing room at Harrods.

Arthur checked the label. 'Made in France. Fifty-five pounds.' He shook his head helplessly. 'I remember when your mother bought this. It was for a faculty Christmas dinner. When the time came around, of course, I went on my own.'

'At least it'll go to some use now,' Essie said, managing a bright voice.

She hadn't thought, then, that it would be another five years before she had any need for the gown. Luckily, she hadn't changed size. The spare weight she'd once carried had simply turned into muscle.

She held up the dress, shaking it out. The skirt billowed, then fell

into soft folds. Here in the tent, far from that room in Cambridge, it seemed to have been set free to become beautiful. Even the dim, green-tinged light of the tent could not dull the glowing orange. When Essie hung it up beside Ian's suit she could imagine how they would both look, all dressed up. She pictured them standing near the Steps, chatting and laughing with their guests. The thought brought a smile to her lips. But then she reminded herself how important the occasion was. How wealthy the Marlows were. How hard it would be to ensure she didn't make the wrong remark at the wrong time, while avoiding being a bore by saying nothing at all.

Essie now wished she could leave the sundowner party to Julia and Ian. Perhaps she could make some kind of excuse – pretend to be unwell. After all, she knew how that was done; for a good part of her life she'd watched the performance played out over and over again. She knew every small detail. How a footstep became heavy and slow. A chair was dragged, not lifted. Then came the crackle of an aspirin packet. Deep breaths that didn't seem to help. A quick lie down in a dimmed bedroom. A headache that grew worse, not better . . .

But Essie was never ill. She never complained or avoided hard tasks. That was why she was good at fieldwork, and why she'd fitted in so well with the Lawrences here at Magadi Gorge. She lifted her head. This was no time to lose her nerve. Crossing to a chest of drawers, she removed a black silk purse. Unzipping the top, she took out a lipstick and mascara, an eye shadow and a powder compact in a tarnished gold case. She carried them over to where a mirror was propped up on an old tea chest, forming a makeshift dressing table. There she laid the items out like instruments ready for surgery. The lipstick, she knew, had broken off; the top was stuck inside the lid. The powder cake had fractured into

small pieces. The mascara was half dried out. It would be wise to have a practice run.

She wiped the sweat from her face and smoothed back her hair. Then she rubbed the broken stub of the lipstick over her lips, painting them a deep orange red. She paused to pick off a few dried clumps. She went on to shade her eyelids, darken her lashes and powder her nose and forehead. When she was done, she stared at her reflection. She used to wear make-up for parties when she was at university. But that seemed so long ago – and in such a different world. Standing here in the tent, Essie's face was side-lit, accentuating her features. Her cheekbones appeared more striking, her eyes deeply set. Her sun-bleached hair looked almost white. The make-up added to the effect. The person facing her was like a stranger. Ian and Julia would barely recognise her. Whether that was a good or bad thing, she could not decide.

Essie hung back, letting Ian approach the pool. It was late in the day, but the sun was still hot on her shoulders; the mud beneath her feet felt warm. Reeds tickled her bare calves and a fly buzzed around her head. She eyed the water longingly. Her face had been washed recently – she'd returned to the tent twice during the afternoon to make sure every trace of the make-up was gone – but the rest of her was sticky with sweat.

The pool was one of a whole chain of spring-fed waterholes on the plains below Ol Doinyo Lengai. They looked like miniature versions of the vast Lake Magadi. Some were hot, or so caustic with salt that even a splash on your skin would burn. Others were tepid and brackish. A few were fresh and cold. It all depended on the source of the water.

The Lawrences called their favourite pool the Swimming Bath. It was deep and wide and fringed with soft reeds. The water was a perfect temperature, with no hint of salt. It was an ideal place for a swim – just as long as you knew how to make sure it was safe.

One of the hazards of living close to an active volcano was that carbon dioxide sometimes bubbled up from the ponds. Heavier than oxygen, the odourless, colourless gas accumulated just above water level – right where a swimmer drew their breath. As they took in the oxygen-free air, they would become confused; instead of escaping they stayed where they were and suffocated. The edges of ponds where the gas erupted frequently were strewn with bleached animal bones. Plants growing nearby were sickly yellow or dead. The Africans described such ponds as *mahali pa hewa mbaya* – places of bad air.

It was rare to detect a cloud of gas at the Swimming Bath. In five years of coming here Essie had never seen it happen. But one of the graves at the edge of the camp – simply marked with the name of William's favourite dog, Badger – proved that it was possible. Badger had decided to take a nap in a sheltered hollow not far from where Essie stood, and had never moved again.

Essie watched Ian flick open the top of a silver cigarette lighter, producing a small blue-yellow flame. Bending down, he moved the lighter across the surface of the pool. Essie followed the action, wondering if this would be the day that the tiny light would dwindle and die. But as usual it burned steady and bright.

Ian snapped shut the lighter and tossed it back onto his towel. Even that small movement seemed to contain more energy than usual. Essie knew he was happy with all that had been achieved today. It was he who had suggested they go for a swim, rather than just wash at the camp.

Coming here to the Swimming Bath gave her and Ian some precious time on their own. Julia preferred to visit a small spring closer to the camp if she wanted a dip. Essie didn't know if she kept her distance in order to give her son and his wife some privacy, or if she felt uncomfortable being at close quarters when they were all half-undressed. It had been different back when there were other Europeans at the camp, two years ago. Julia had happily joined the groups of visitors and volunteers that came here. But ever since the three Lawrences had found themselves alone, aside from the African staff, every dynamic between them had become more intense.

Ian removed his watch, laying it carefully on his towel. It was a Rolex that had belonged to his father – a gift from the manufacturers in recognition of the achievements at Magadi Gorge. The face was cracked, the time hard to read, but the heirloom was still Ian's most precious possession.

Ian adjusted his swimming trunks and then plunged into the pool, sending waves lapping to the edge, ruffling the reeds. He sighed with pleasure as he floated on his back. His body was part brown, part white, the boundaries marked by his work clothes: an open-necked shirt, shorts and long socks. Essie watched him for a moment, then waded in to join him.

'I wonder how the Leakeys are doing,' Ian said happily. It was a standing joke. Residents of Olduvai Camp relied for water on a single muddy spring shared with a colony of hippos. Their laundry was stained red-brown and personal washing was limited to sponge baths. The boundless supply of fresh water was the one luxury the Lawrences enjoyed that those at the Leakeys' camp envied.

'Poor things,' Essie said. 'It can't have been easy, scrubbing up for a visit from Mr Marlow.' She laughed as she pushed herself

away from the edge, ducking underwater, her hair streaming out behind her. She surfaced near Ian, wiping the water from her face.

The two stood shoulder-deep in the blue-green pool. Ian put his hands on Essie's hips, running them down over the edge of her costume onto her thighs. Then he pulled her closer, cradling her breasts against his chest. Their legs entwined, skin gliding over skin, cloaked in water that felt like silk. Essie looked into his eyes as he slid his hands between her legs. A shiver of desire ran through her. She wished they could go straight back to the camp and disappear into the tent, without questions being asked. It was a safe time of the month for her. They wouldn't have to be too careful.

Ian kissed her gently. She tasted salty sweat, still lingering on his mouth. After a brief time he pulled away, scanning their surroundings. Essie followed his gaze. The only living beings in view were waterbirds skulking in the reeds, but she knew as well as he did that at any time a human shape could emerge without warning from the background. The Maasai didn't really accept the boundaries of the Archaeological Reserve – herders often trespassed here. It was important that the Lawrences, as the people in charge of Magadi, protected their reputation. In African society public displays of affection were not acceptable. Kissing was thought completely bizarre.

'Come on,' Ian said. 'Let's swim. We have to get back for supper on time.' He smiled. 'I told Baraka we were celebrating. He's going to use the last of the Christmas hamper.'

Essie looked at him in surprise. They always kept some imported treats to celebrate the end of the Long Dry – and that was still many months away. The cook would disapprove of the break with tradition; he had been working for the Lawrences even longer than Kefa. Essie pictured him taking down the tins that were displayed

on the top shelf of the bookcase in the Dining Tent. If he really opened them all tonight, they'd be having smoked fillets of herring for entrée followed by a main course of Virginia ham and asparagus. Afterwards there would be plum pudding. Assuming the description on the tin was accurate, it would be laced with brandy and dotted with plump cherries. If the Maasai women had brought fresh eggs and milk today, there would be custard too. The meal would be a welcome change from boiled rice and bean stew. But even as Essie's mouth was watering, she felt uneasy again. An African proverb came to her – *Don't make the cradle skin before the baby is born* – the local version of not counting chickens before they hatch. It was out of character for Ian not to be more cautious. He was a scientist, after all; trained to take things step by step. And he was so used to disappointment now that he normally didn't believe in anything until the proof was in front of him.

It just showed, Essie thought, as she breaststroked across the pool, that when you wanted something badly enough, your judgement could not be trusted.