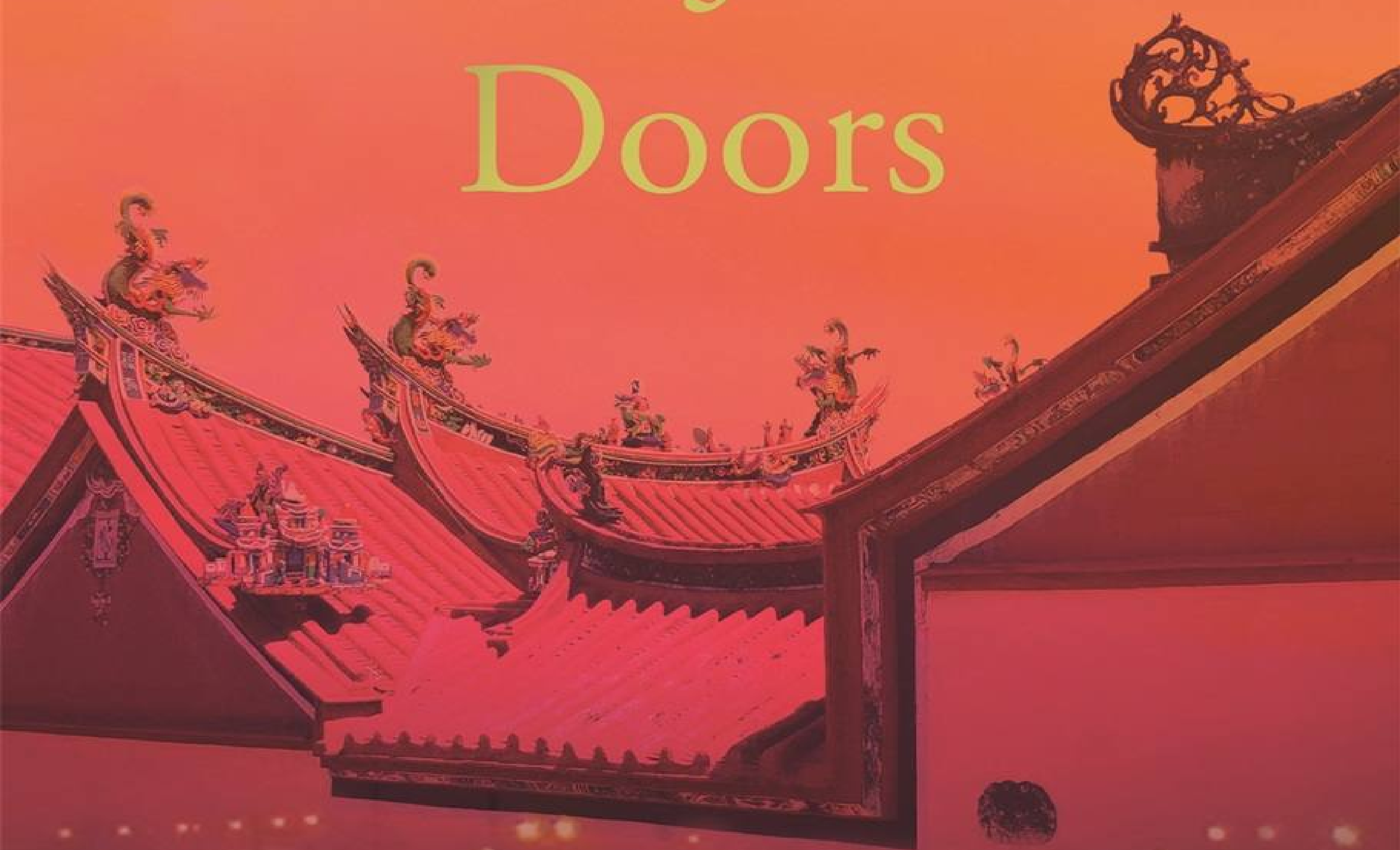
AUTHOR OF THE MAN BOOKER-SHORTLISTED NOVEL
THE GARDEN OF EVENING MISTS

TAN TWAN ENG

The House *of* Doors

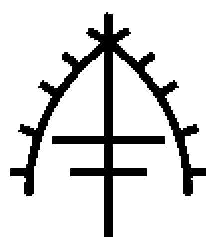


The House *of* Doors

Also by Tan Twan Eng

The Garden of Evening Mists
The Gift of Rain

The House *of* Doors



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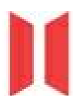

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To A. J. Buys
&
To the memory of my father
Tan Ghin Hai (1937–2013)

‘Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other.’

Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*

Contents

BOOK ONE
- Prologue
- Chapter One
- Chapter Two
- Chapter Three
- Chapter Four
- Chapter Five
- Chapter Six
- Chapter Seven

BOOK TWO
- Chapter Eight
- Chapter Nine
- Chapter Ten
- Chapter Eleven
- Chapter Twelve
- Chapter Thirteen
- Chapter Fourteen
- Chapter Fifteen
- Chapter Sixteen
- Chapter Seventeen
- Chapter Eighteen

BOOK THREE
- Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty
Epilogue
Acknowledgements

BOOK ONE

Prologue

Lesley
Doornfontein, South Africa, 1947

A story, like a bird of the mountain, can carry a name beyond the clouds, beyond even time itself. Willie Maugham said that to me, many years ago.

He has not appeared in my thoughts in a long time, but as I gaze at the mountains from my stoep on this autumn morning I can hear his thin, dry voice, his diction precise, correct, like everything else about him. In my memory I see him again, on his last night in our old house on the other side of the world, the two of us on the verandah behind the house, talking quietly, the full moon a coracle of light adrift above the sea. Everyone else in the house had already retired to bed. When morning came he sailed from Penang, and I never saw him again.

Ten thousand days and nights have drifted down the endless river since that evening. I live on the shores of a different sea now, a sea of silent stone and sand.

Half an hour earlier I was finishing my breakfast on the stoep when I noticed, on the ridge below, a familiar figure pedalling up the steep and dusty dirt road. I followed him with my eyes as he came over the rise and coasted down the short, poplar-lined driveway. Reaching the stoep he dismounted from his bicycle and propped it against its kickstand.

'Goeie more, Mrs Hamlyn,' he called out.

'Morning, Johan.'

He took out a parcel from his saddlebag, came onto the stoep and handed it to me. The parcel was wrapped in heavy brown paper and secured with two loops of twine, but I could tell that it was a book. Robert had been dead nearly six years now, but his post – catalogues and gifts of books from antiquarian booksellers in London, newsletters from his clubs – continued to trickle its way here long after I had informed the senders of his death.

‘It’s not for Mr Hamlyn,’ said Johan. ‘It’s for you.’

‘Oh?’ I patted around my pockets for my reading glasses, put them on and squinted at the name typed on the parcel: Mrs Lesley C. Hamlyn.

For a moment or two I continued to stare at my own name. Except for the monthly letter from my son in London, I couldn’t remember when last I had received any post addressed to me.

Johan pointed to the stamps. ‘Funny-looking bird.’

‘It’s a hornbill,’ I said. The bird’s large, curved beak and heavy, bony quiff gave it a comical appearance. It perched on a branch above the words ‘B.M.A. MALAYA’.

‘Keep them for me?’

I blinked at him. ‘What? Oh. Yes, of course.’ I put the package down on the table. ‘Cup of tea, Johan?’

He shook his head. ‘Full bag of mail today.’ He turned to go, but I stopped him. ‘Wait, Johan.’ I hurried inside the house and returned a moment later with a small paper bag. ‘Some koeksusters for you.’

‘Baie dankie! Yours are the best, even better than Tannie Elsie’s.’

‘You’d better not let her hear that.’

‘Ja, she’s still sore you won best melktert at the kerk basaar. She told my mother you shouldn’t even be allowed to enter the competition.’

Even after twenty-five years there were still some people in the district who saw me as an outsider.

Johan was looking at me, a slightly worried expression on his face. He nodded at the package he had brought me. ‘I hope it’s not bad news?’

I did not answer him. I watched him as he pedalled away and disappeared down the road. Returning to the table, I sat down, drew the parcel towards me and examined it. There was no return address, but the postmarks, smudged like aged tattoos, told me that it had been mailed from Penang sometime in September 1946. The tangle of overlapping addresses by different hands had somehow managed to pick up my wind-blown spoor: the package had been sent to Robert’s old chambers in London, before being forwarded to our solicitor in Cape Town and, almost half a year after it had been posted from Penang, it had found me on this sheep farm fifteen miles outside Beaufort West.

I cut the twine with my fruit knife, inserted its tip into a fold of the wrapping and with two or three brisk strokes filleted the package open. The corner of a book appeared. I peeled away the wrapping until the title revealed itself: *The Casuarina Tree* by W. Somerset Maugham.

There was nothing else in the package – no letter, no note. I turned the book over in my hands. Robert collected first editions, and he had all of Willie Maugham's books – his novels and his short-story anthologies, the plays and the essays. It crossed my mind that this volume in my hands was a first edition too, the colours of the tropical trees and the blue sky on its dustjacket already faded.

The table of contents listed half a dozen stories. I thumbed the pages to the last one. Murmuring the story's opening paragraph under my breath, I found myself instantly transported back to Malaya. I felt a heavy tropical heat smothering me, thick and steamy, and the pungent, salty tang of the mudflats at low tide clogged my nostrils.

I checked the title page, but there was no inscription, nor a signature. Printed underneath the title was the arcane-looking glyph Maugham placed in all of his books. This particular one, however, was slightly different: some unknown hand had drawn a thin, black vertical rectangle around the symbol, enclosing it in the centre. Running from top to bottom was another straight black line, bisecting the frame precisely in the middle.

I frowned, puzzled.

An instant later I saw it, I understood what the lines were telling me. Carefully, as though fearful that any sudden movement would dislodge the rectangle around the symbol, I set the book down on the table. The open page arched slightly in a passing breeze, then flattened out again. I leaned back in my chair, my gaze fastened on the glyph, this anchor embedded in the paper.

Robert and I had uprooted ourselves from Penang at the end of 1922, sailing on a P&O liner to Cape Town. We stayed a pleasant fortnight in a hotel by the sea before taking the train to Beaufort West, a little town three hundred or so miles to the northeast. Bernard, Robert's cousin, was a sheep farmer, and he had built us a modest bungalow on his land. The bungalow, whitewashed and capped with a corrugated tin roof painted a dark green, stood on a high broad ridge. From the deep and shady verandah – I would never get used to the locals calling it a 'stoep', I told myself – we had an unbroken vista of the mountains to the north. These mountains had been formed by the dying ripples of the earth's upheavals an eternity ago, upheavals that had begun far to the south at the very tip of the continent.

It was high summer when we arrived, the sun smiting the earth. Everything was so bleak – the parchment landscape, the faces of the people, even the light itself. How I ached for the monsoon skies of the equator, for the ever-changing tints of its chameleon sea.

A week after we had settled into our new home we were invited to the farmhouse for dinner. The sun was just burrowing into the mountains when we walked the half-mile there from our bungalow. We had to stop a few times along the way for Robert to catch his breath. Bernard Presgrave was thirty-eight, twelve years Robert's junior. Robust and ruddy-faced, he reminded me of Robert when I first married him. His farm was called Doornfontein, the Fountain of Thorns, the kind of inauspicious name that would have set my old amah Ah Peng muttering darkly, 'Asking for trouble only.' But Bernard and his wife Helena, a placid and dull girl from the Cape, appeared to be prospering.

The other guests – farmers and their wives from around the area – were already gathered in the straggly garden behind the farmhouse when we arrived. We joined them in a circle beneath a camelthorn tree, its bare branches spiked with thin white thorns as long as my little finger. The laughter and shrieks of the children playing at the bottom of the garden rang across the evening air. A pair of oil drums, cut open in half, rested on trestles, wood fire lapping away at their insides. Lamb chops and coils of sausages were smoking away on the grill. The farmers were Boers, blunt-faced and blunt-spoken, but affable once we got to know them. The meat of the gossip that evening – and chewed over and over into gristle throughout the district that summer, I would discover – concerned a wealthy middle-aged Englishman and his beautiful young wife who had moved to Beaufort West from London the previous summer.

'His doctor advised him that the air here would be good for her,' said Bernard, keeping one eye on the lamb chops on the grill. 'Graham – the husband – bought a piece of land on Jannie van der Walt's farm and built their new home on it, a great big house. We'll take you out there one of these days to take a gander at it.' Bernard went to the oil drums and flipped the lamb chops over; fat dripped onto the fire, sending clouds of maddened smoke hissing into the air. 'The wife's health improved,' he resumed when he sat down again, 'but one morning, about three weeks ago, she walked out on him. Left him when he was still snoring away in his bed.'

'She took all her jewels,' Helena picked up the tale, 'but she didn't leave a letter for Graham, the poor man, not even a note.'

Bernard chuckled. ‘Knowing Graham, that deplorable lack of manners probably enraged him more than anything else.’

‘Ai, that’s not funny, Bernard,’ his wife said.

‘Coincidentally, our GP in the dorp disappeared that same morning,’ Bernard continued. ‘Left his wife behind. Neither hair nor hide of him has ever been seen again.’

I glanced over to Robert sitting opposite me; our eyes met. ‘Just the sort of tale Willie would have relished,’ he said.

‘Willie?’ asked Bernard.

‘Somerset Maugham,’ said Robert.

‘Who’s he?’ one of the guests asked.

‘A writer,’ Robert said. ‘A very famous one. An old friend, actually. He stayed with us in Penang. He’s promised to visit us here. We’ll introduce you to him when he comes.’

‘I liked some of his stories,’ said Helena. ‘But “Rain”’ – she made a face – ‘I’ll never forget that one.’

‘Is dit ’n lekker spook storie?’ one of the men asked, rubbing his hands together with relish.

‘No,’ replied Helena. ‘It’s about a … a woman.’ Her face flushed; she smoothed the folds of her skirt around her knees. ‘Oh, I’ll lend you the book, Gert – you can read it yourself.’

‘Ag, who has time to read?’

Bernard grinned at me. ‘Did he put you two in his stories?’

Twilight was dissolving the mountains. I pulled my shawl closer around my shoulders. ‘He probably found us,’ I said, giving just the briefest of glances at Robert, ‘to be the most boring married couple he’d ever met.’

Life here for us was not much different from our old one in Penang. Robert and I had our own bedrooms, and every morning we would meet for breakfast on the verandah. Afterwards he would adjourn to his study to work on his memoirs – he had begun writing them shortly after we moved here. There was not much to keep me busy around the house. Liesbet, the wife of one of the Coloured farm workers, cooked and cleaned for us. She was a few years older than me, a fat woman with broad flanks and a round smiling face which reminded me of the Malays in Penang. To fill my days I decided to create a garden in front of the house. The soil was as dry as the powder in my compact, but with the help of Liesbet’s son Pietman, I persevered with it.

In the evenings Robert and I would relax on the verandah with our whisky stengahs and gin pahits and watch another day slip away behind the mountains. And later, before we retired to our bedrooms, I would play my piano for a while. Robert would sit in his armchair, sipping his favourite pu'er tea, his eyes closed as he drifted away to the music.

On the large map pinned up in his study the lower shores of the Great Karoo lie about a hundred and fifty miles to the north of Doornfontein. But there were days when I felt it was much closer, and I was convinced I could sense its timeless silence reaching out from the deepest heart of the desert – its stillness, its infinite emptiness. It called to my mind a story I had once heard: a pair of explorers, husband and wife, had got lost during an expedition across the Gobi Desert. To hide their growing despair and feelings of hopelessness as they wandered deeper and deeper into the desert, they stopped talking to each other. I often wondered which of the two was more oppressive: the silence of the desert, or the silence between the husband and his wife.

The sound of the screen door opening and banging against the wall pulls me back to the present. I lift my eyes from the page and close the book. Liesbet steps out onto the stoep, her white starched apron taut over the prow of her stomach. She only comes in once a week these days, and without fail she'll moan about her painful knees as she cleans the house.

'Another book?' she says, stacking my plate and teacup onto her tray. 'Everywhere in the house, books, books, books.'

'Yes … another book …'

She puts down her tray and peers more closely at me. Offering a watery smile to her, I take the book with me into the house.

In the sitting room I walk past my watercolour paintings of old Penang shophouses to the wall of photographs above the Blüthner piano. I lean back and study the photographs, searching for a particular one I have in mind. I have not looked – really looked – at them in years.

Many of the photographs are of Robert and me with our two sons. A few of them show people who had visited us in Penang: stage actors, MPs, members of the aristocracy, writers, opera singers. I can't even recall their names now; and anyway, they are probably all long dead. Claiming pride of place on this wall of imprisoned time is my wedding portrait. Robert and I are standing on the steps of St George's church in Penang. I

straighten the slight tilt of the silver frame, wiping the thin layer of dust from it with my forefinger.

People around here had expected me to pack up and return to Penang after I buried Robert. There were days when I asked myself why I didn't do it. But – sail home … to what? And to whom? Everyone I had known in Malaya was either dead or had disappeared into distant lands and different lives. And then war had broken out all over the world and the Japanese had invaded Malaya. So I had remained here, a daub of paint worked by time's paintbrush into this vast, eternal landscape.

Below my wedding portrait hangs a photograph of two women, their blouses and frocks and hats quaintly old-fashioned, from another age: Ethel and me, each with a rifle in our hands, the mock-Tudor façade of the Spotted Dog in Kuala Lumpur looming behind us. The photograph had been taken after a shooting competition on the padang. Poor, poor Ethel. My eyes glide to the photograph next to it. I unhook it and study it in the light of the windows. Looking at the four of us – Willie Maugham and Gerald and Robert and myself – lounging in our rattan chairs under the casuarina tree in the garden, my mind loops back to the two weeks in 1921 when the writer and his secretary had stayed with us at Cassowary House.

I put down the photograph. The morning is decanting its light down the slopes of the far mountains. It is the autumn equinox today; here, in the southern bowl of the earth, the portions of day and night are exactly equal. The world is at an equilibrium, but I myself feel unsteady, off-balance.

There is not the slightest stir of wind, and there is no sound, not even the usual petulant bleating of sheep from the valley. The world is so still, so quiescent, that I wonder if it has stopped turning. But then, high above the land, I see a tremor in the air. A pair of raptors, far from their mountain eyrie. For a minute or two I want to believe they are brahminy kites, but of course they cannot be.

My eyes follow the two birds as they drift on the span of their outstretched wings, writing circles over circles on the empty page of sky.

Chapter One

Willie
Penang, 1921

Somerset Maugham woke up choking for air. Violent coughing rocked his body until, finally, blessedly, it subsided, and he could breathe again.

He lay in his bed inside the cocoon of the mosquito netting, waiting for his breathing to return to normal. There was the faintest aftertaste of mud on his tongue. He swallowed once, licking his lips, and the taste disappeared from his mouth.

His body felt waterlogged as he pushed himself up against the headboard. He had been dreaming: a great wave had swept him overboard into a turbulent river; muddy water poured down his gullet, flooding his lungs and weighting him down into the sunless depths. It was at that point that he had jerked awake in a frenzy of apnoeic snorting.

Parting the mosquito netting, he sat up on the edge of the bed, planting his feet on the floorboards. He felt more fatigued than he had been when he went to sleep. He had kicked the Dutch wife onto the floor, and he was certain he had cried out at the instant he awoke; he hoped no one had heard. He cocked his head to one side, listening; there was only the slurring of the waves on the beach.

His room was sparsely furnished: a rattan armchair by the windows, a low bookcase spilling out with old and yellowing novels, an oakwood chest of drawers against one wall and, in the corner, a washstand with a porcelain basin. Taking up half a wall was a teak almeirah, his bags and trunks stacked on top of it.

He touched the framed photograph of his mother on the bedside table, making a minute adjustment to its position, turning her face more towards the windows. Her brown eyes had always looked mournful, even in his memories; this morning they seemed more melancholy than usual. He picked up the Dutch wife from the floor and set it back on his bed before

padding barefoot across the room. He opened the window shutters and leaned out.

The world still lay under a grey ink wash, but at the edges of the sky a pale glow was seeping in. Set in a corner on the first floor of the house, his room had extensive views of the garden below. To his left, about ten yards away, a low wooden fence ran along the bottom of the garden, marking the property from the beach. By the fence grew a tall casuarina tree, a wrought-iron garden bench in its shade. Squinting at the beach, he made out the figure of Lesley Hamlyn. She was standing at the waterline, staring out to sea. A moment later she turned around and started back towards the house. She slipped through the wooden gate and strolled up the lawn, disappearing beneath the verandah roof without looking up at him.

The houseboy had yet to bring Willie his ewer of hot shaving water. He rinsed his face at the basin and picked out a fresh set of clothes from the wardrobe – a long-sleeved white cotton shirt, a pair of khaki slacks, and a cream linen jacket, pressed by the dhobi the previous evening while they were at dinner. He found his shoes lined up outside his bedroom door, polished to an opulent sheen. The Hamlyns' bedrooms were across the wide landing, their doors closed. Halfway down the landing was a living area, jutting out to form the top of the porch, the windows on its three sides overlooking the front lawn and the crescent driveway. Beyond this square space were four more rooms. On his side of the landing were the guest bathroom and, next to it, Gerald's room. Gerald's brogues had also been shined and set down outside his door. Willie proceeded along the landing to the staircase, pausing now and again to study the row of watercolours on the wall. They were paintings of local shophouses, their thin, black lines – architectural in their precision – detailing the elaborate plasterworks of the shopfronts. The meticulousness of the drawings was enlivened by the brushstrokes of vivid colours, artfully capturing the atmosphere of the teeming, cacophonous Asiatic quarters in the towns of the Straits Settlements. Each one of the paintings had a title in the bottom right corner – Moulmein Road; Bangkok Lane; Ah Quee Street; Rope Walk – and all of them, Willie discovered as he squinted at the signature, had been painted by Lesley Hamlyn.

Downstairs, he made his way through the bright, airy house to the verandah at the back, nodding to the houseboys who stood aside for him in the corridors. Robert and Lesley were already at the breakfast table, walled off from each other behind their newspapers. Willie studied them from the

doorway. He remembered Robert as a handsome man, tall and bull-shouldered, so he had been dismayed by the stooped figure who had met him under the porch the previous afternoon, leaning on a gold-headed Malacca cane walking stick and breathing in shallow gasps; the thick head of hair Robert once possessed was gone, the dome of his head now a depilated basilica, with just a narrow fringe of sparse grey hair above his ears. He hadn't recognised his old friend's voice either – the resplendent baritone he used to envy had shrivelled to a querulous, fissured tone.

The Doberman lying at Robert's feet lifted his head and barked as Willie approached the table. Husband and wife lowered their newspapers. 'Don't be rude, Claudius,' Robert said, reaching down to rub the dog's ears. 'Morning, Willie. You're bright and early. Sleep well?'

'Like a … baby,' Willie stammered.

'Help yourself, Willie,' Robert said, nodding his chin at the sideboard.

Willie opened the lids of the chafing dishes. Kippers and bacon and sausages and eggs and toast, as he had expected. There were also plates of cheeses and bowls of local fruit – bananas and mangoes and starfruit. He filled only half his plate and sat down at the table.

'Don't be shy, Willie,' said Robert.

'I still can't get' – Willie's jaw jutted out, struggling to force his next word out – 'get used to the Falstaffian appetites of you people here,' he said, finally overcoming the blockage in his throat that made people regard him with pity and impatience. 'The heaps of food at … every meal … in this … heat …' He turned towards Lesley. 'I saw you … on the … beach.'

'My morning walk,' she said. 'Your secretary – Gerald – is he up yet?'

The hitch in her words was delicate, but Willie caught it. Holding her gaze, he said, 'He's not an … early riser. It won't cause any inconvenience, I trust?'

'Don't be daft, Willie,' Robert replied, and added to Lesley, 'Tell Cookie to set something aside for him every morning, won't you, my dear?'

Robert cut a wedge of Camembert and fed it to the Doberman. The dog wolfed it down, licking its chops. 'Claudius loves his cheese.' Robert grinned as he fed the dog another piece. Lesley's lips, Willie noticed, had disappeared into a thin, taut wire.

'You have a visitor.' He pointed to a monitor lizard emerging from the bottom of the hibiscus hedge. The creature was about three feet long, its thick tail almost the length of its body. It crawled across the lawn with a