The Clouds Beneath the Sun

Mackenzie Ford

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MACKENZIE FORD

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This book is a novel.
The plot has been invented,
the characters are fictional.
But it is inspired by a true incident.

The Kenya/Tanganyika Border, September, 1961

The Apology

The Land Rover juddered to a halt. Natalie Nelson jolted her head on the side window and was shaken awake. 'What's the matter, Mutevu? Why are you stopping? Watch out for that termite mound! Have we got a flat tyre? What's wrong?'

Natalie was weary – no, she was drained, exhausted, *spent* and this delay was too much. She'd been travelling without sleep now for more than twenty-three hours, since she had left Cambridge some time yesterday, and she was anxious, longing, desperate to reach Kihara camp. However primitive the beds might be, however much a relic of Empire, however scratchy the horse-hair mattresses, she'd be asleep in no time – just try stopping her. A two-hour train ride from Cambridge to London; two hours across London to Heathrow; two hours *at* Heathrow, waiting; thirteen hours in the air, including a two-hour stopover in Cairo; two hours at Nairobi International and more waiting; and then two hours in the smallest, noisiest, bone-shaking single-engined contraption she had ever seen, which had dropped her out of the sky at the red-clay Kihara airstrip not forty-five minutes ago. Twice already she had nodded off in the Land Rover and that took some doing when you were driving over the corrugated volcanic ash that the Serengeti boasted in places.

'Elephants,' muttered Mutevu Ndekei.

Natalie frowned. For as far as the eye could see, all around them, smooth bone-coloured rocks caught the African sun, making the landscape resemble a vast graveyard where ungainly dinosaurs had met their end. Here and there clumps of flat-topped acacia trees threw patches of shade across the

shimmering gold-green of the savannah grass that swayed in the breeze. Gazelles grazed in the distance, now and then raising their heads to look for trouble.

But right in front of the car, near a massive fig tree, was a small herd of elephants.

She frowned again. 'Yes, I can see that but . . . they're not dangerous are they, elephants? Why don't we just drive round them?'

This was Natalie's first dig as a fully fledged member of an archaeological team – she had just turned twenty-eight and her Ph.D. was barely six months old. But she had worked in South Africa as a student and so was not a complete novice in the bush.

'One of them is flat on the ground – he or she may be dead.'

They both watched as the other elephants moved in closer to the animal that had fallen.

'I don't understand, Mutevu. What does it matter if—?'

'*Shsh*. Elephants can sometimes be difficult if an animal dies,' he whispered, pointing to a large she-elephant looping her trunk around a tree and pulling at the branches.

Mutevu, who had been the only person at the strip to meet Natalie – the rest of the team were in Kihara Gorge, excavating – was as soft-spoken as he was huge, a strapping six-foot-three Maasai, black as night, with tribal cut-marks gouged out of his cheeks. He had told her his main job was as camp cook, but he also helped out with the driving.

His enormous fingers found the diminutive ignition key and killed the engine.

'Elephants seem to understand death – not as much as humans do: they don't bury their dead in graves, nothing so elaborate – but they're not like other animals, either, who show no signs of loss.'

Now Mutevu pointed at an old male elephant standing by the fallen animal.

'They appear to have a form of grief and will remain by a dead body for days on end, almost as if they are offering comfort

or holding ready to help if the fallen animal should move or show signs of life.'

They both watched in silence as most of the herd stood still, stopped eating and just looked on as the large female this time broke off an entire tree branch, thick with leaves, and carried it in her trunk towards the collapsed beast. Then she dropped the branch on the elephant, so that the creature was partially covered.

'That's amazing,' said Natalie under her breath.

'Are they burying the animal or covering it, to keep it warm? No one knows,' said Mutevu softly. 'But it's clearly an emotional time, and to drive through or near a herd when they are in this mood can be dangerous. We'll just wait.'

Natalie reached for her camera.

For the best part of an hour they watched as the elephants completed what Natalie had to concede looked very like a ritual. Four or five other animals followed the lead of the she-elephant and tore off branches of trees and covered the dead elephant. Then, one by one, they moved off, leaving just the solitary male still standing by the corpse.

The only sound was the wind, gently rocking the Land Rover.

When the main herd had all but disappeared across the plain, and the old male was left by itself, Mutevu's fingers reached for the ignition key. He switched on the engine and the Land Rover rolled forward.

Natalie's mind was in a whirl. If elephants experienced grief, did they have any conception of an afterlife? Did that mean they had the rudiments of religion?

She rubbed her eyes with her fingers. She was too tired to face that kind of question just now. But it was the kind of question Natalie liked, the kind of question she had come to Africa for. As an expert on extinct forms of life, she was hoping to make her fair share of discoveries in the coming months. The excavation Natalie was about to join was the most prestigious in her chosen field, and the invitation to become part of the team was a big

feather in her cap. So long as she didn't make a fool of herself, and published one or two good papers, a fellowship of her college was now a distinct possibility.

Mutevu slowed the Land Rover to negotiate some dried ruts where a herd of something had churned up the ground. He stretched out his arm and pointed: 'Bat-eared foxes.'

Natalie yawned, smothered it with her hand and grinned sheepishly. She looked to where Mutevu was indicating, but she couldn't see anything. Though she had worked in South Africa, her 'bush eyes' were very underdeveloped. The foxes' camouflage was just too good for her.

Mutevu accelerated as they cleared the ruts. The sun was high now and hardly any shadows could be seen across the plain. Natalie marvelled at the landscape: the shimmering grass, the lush greens of the fig and acacia trees, the rust-red rocks, the wide sky. This was one of the reasons she had chosen Africa; it was so far – and so different in every way – from Cambridge.

Cambridge. She'd had to get away and the invitation to Kihara couldn't have come at a better time. Until recently she'd never have imagined she would ever want to escape the university but then she had never imagined Dominic would do what he had done, and in the way that he had done it.

She was beyond tears now, but the skin on her throat still broke out in a sweat when she thought of . . . It had been this way since, since that day four – no, five – months ago, when he had told her he was going on a long tour and that, well, he didn't want to see her again. Just like that, a '*guillotine*' as her mother would have said, drawing a finger across her throat: a bolt from the blue.

Natalie hadn't suspected that anything so dramatic, so final, so *terminal*, was in the wind when Dominic had suggested coming up to Cambridge from London for the day. It had happened scores of times before. But, she supposed, she had been naïve. In her experience some people were born naïve, just as some people were born knowing and others were born wise. It wasn't true in

her case, however, that she was born naïve. She knew now that she had had a very naïve upbringing.

'That's the gorge there,' said Mutevu, pointing.

Natalie lifted her drowsy head and nodded. A great red-brown quartzite gash slashed through the plain ahead of them and off to their right. She'd heard so much about Kihara Gorge and the great discoveries throwing light on early mankind that had been found there. Soon she would be part of this landscape herself.

She yawned again, returning to her thoughts, unable to stop herself despite the sheer grandeur of the surroundings. She had met some very different women at Cambridge when she arrived there as an undergraduate; they were far more sophisticated and even cynical but before too much of it rubbed off on her she had fallen for Dominic. She knew she was physically attractive to men but when she arrived at university she was totally inexperienced. However, because of her father's involvement with church music, as the organist at Gainsborough Cathedral in Lincolnshire, and because her mother taught music as well as French and still sang in the choir there, Natalie had been much more knowledgeable than her undergraduate contemporaries about composers, opera and musical theory. That, as much as her looks, had set her apart at the lunch where Dominic had been the guest of honour. Someone had fallen ill and withdrawn from the dinner being given for him after his cello recital in King's College Chapel a day later, and he had himself invited her to make up the numbers.

All her upbringing had warned her against becoming involved with a married man – a fact which Dominic had made no attempt to conceal. But – she could admit it now, when she was all alone, many months afterwards and thousands of miles away in Africa – she had been just a little bored with herself as a Lincolnshire provincial and had thought that a risqué affair with a man who was becoming famous would complete her Cambridge education. She had secretly envied some of the more

sophisticated women she had met at university, who were much more casual in their liaisons than she was, who lived with men without marrying them – a growing trend that disconcerted Natalie and shocked her parents – women who seemed to know all manner of clever and fascinating older souls in London, in the theatre, in journalism or the new world of television.

To begin with, several of these women had surprised her, telling her she was 'mad' to fall for 'someone like Dominic', whatever that meant. But, as time went by, and the affair had lasted more than a term, she had become the object of envy on the part of these very women who, it turned out, were not as enamoured with their own lifestyles as it appeared.

Mutevu slowed the Land Rover as they came to the lip of the gorge, and changed gears as the vehicle began to slither down the slope. There seemed to be thorn bushes everywhere and Natalie pulled in her elbows where they stuck out of the window, to stop her skin being scored.

Dominic had been impressed when Natalie got a first and, when she had stayed on in Cambridge to work for her doctorate, when most of her undergraduate friends disappeared to London, her relationship with him had been a source of nourishment in what was for her, for a year or so, a more solitary existence. Her parents, pleased by her exam results and by the fact that she was staying on in Cambridge to complete her Ph.D., had probed gently about any 'relationships' she might have. But it had taken her nearly two years to admit to her affair with Dominic and the revelation that he was married had devastated her mother, who hadn't really adjusted by the time she died.

The Land Rover crested the lip of the gorge on the south side and the camp came into view: a constellation of tents in various shades of dark green, surrounded by a huge fence of spiky thorns. Mutevu drove in through an opening in the fence and reversed the vehicle into a space reserved between two large, flat-topped acacia trees. He killed the engine again.

'No one will be back from the gorge for another hour or so – lunch is late here, about two. You've been allocated that tent there, at the far end of the row. I'll help you with your—'

Suddenly he let out a loud gasp and shouted, 'Leopards! Not *again*! That's the second time this month. They come for the goats when everybody else is in the gorge, working.'

He blasted the horn, and, seeing and smelling the Land Rover, the leopards – there were two of them – began to slink away, edging along the row of tents and scampering out of the entrance.

Mutevu watched them go. 'Leopards are rare, Miss Natalie. I bet you haven't seen one that close before – eh?'

Getting no reply, he looked across to the passenger seat and smiled.

She had seen nothing, nothing at all. She was fast asleep.

Shadows cast by the hurricane lamps played across the refectory table. The tang from the flames hung in everyone's nostrils. The refectory tent was open down one side, where it gave on to the nearby campfire, around which chairs were arranged in a rough circle. After dinner, some of the team liked to sit chatting. At night temperatures cooled in the bush.

Mutevu Ndekei, now back in his chief role as the camp cook, shuffled around the table holding a large serving plate with strips of roast kudu, the local deer. His white T-shirt stretched tightly across his massive chest and he shuffled because he was wearing a pair of green rubber wellington boots given to him by a British archaeologist years before. Mutevu was very proud of them, was never seen without them – he cooked better with his boots on, he said – but they were slightly too big for him. He leaned forward so that Natalie Nelson could take her share of meat. As she helped herself, she listened to Eleanor Deacon. As did everyone else.

A white Kenyan by birth, Eleanor Deacon was probably the most well-known palaeontologist in the world. She had been

excavating in and around the Kihara Gorge for nearly forty years, first with her husband Jock and, since his death six years ago, leading the digs herself, though her sons Christopher and Jack were following in their parents' footsteps. Thin, tall and bony, Eleanor Deacon's silver – almost white – hair, brushed back as always in a chignon, gave her a remarkably sophisticated air, especially stuck out here in the bush. But she was formidable too, and ran her excavations with an iron rod, which she used on herself as much as on others. She wore no jewellery but tonight she was dressed in a crisp white shirt above khaki trousers, with a bright yellow scarf tied around her throat. A pair of gold-rimmed half-moon spectacles glittered on her nose. Natalie thought the director looked more French than Kenyan.

Eleanor sat at the end of the long table, where she was always served last. She took a few strips of kudu then leaned back so that Mutevu could withdraw the serving plate. Leaning forward again, she picked up her knife and tapped her champagne glass with it. The chatter around the table died.

She smiled at all the others, one by one, and held up some envelopes. 'Post. Russell, there's one for you, one for Kees and *three* for Richard.' She handed them around. 'Nothing for you, Arnold, I'm afraid.'

'None of my wives missing me? Oh dear.' He made a face, before grinning.

Natalie was sitting next to Arnold Pryce, a botanist, and had already learned that he had been married four times. And as often divorced. Though small and round, he was in his way a bit of a dandy. Tonight he was wearing a cravat at his throat, with a college design on it: shields and unicorns. She was also aware of some pungent aftershave.

Beyond him was Kees van Schelde, a Dutch geologist, probably in his twenties, and Jonas Jefferson, a specialist in human anatomy and the camp doctor. So far as Natalie could see, he was more or less Eleanor's age.

Christopher Deacon, Eleanor's son, sat at the far end of the table. Among other things, Natalie had learned that he was the excavation's photographer.

'As I think you all know, Natalie Nelson – who picked up the post for us in Nairobi – is the latest addition to our team.' Eleanor nodded to Natalie. 'Natalie is a zoologist, a specialist on extinct forms of life, who did her Ph.D. under Frank Whittard. I expect she's going to flake out at any minute because she came directly from Cambridge in one day, but I want to welcome her formally to Kihara and to tell her that her timing couldn't be better . . . because I also want to offer a toast to Daniel.' She raised her glass. 'Daniel, what *would* we do without you – Daniel, the lion of the gorge!'

Around the table, glasses were raised.

'Daniel!' they chorused. Someone did an imitation of a lion's roar and they all laughed.

For his part, Daniel Mutumbu didn't touch his drink. He was the only black palaeontologist on the team and didn't really like champagne, or alcohol in general come to that. But he smiled back at them.

Eleanor turned to Natalie. 'Normally, my dear, alcohol isn't allowed here in Kihara.' She smiled. 'But I suppose everyone knows I keep a few bottles of champagne handy for when we have something to celebrate – and we certainly have something to celebrate tonight.'

She waited for the hubbub to die down. Two bottles between ten didn't go very far but it was enough to loosen tongues.

'Daniel and Richard here – Richard Sutton, who you will get to know and Russell, Russell North . . . well, they made a discovery in the gorge today, an important discovery, a *spectacular* discovery – at least, we think it is. They found a knee-joint, a tibia and a femur: two leg bones of a hominid at a level which indicates that this early form of mankind walked upright here, right here in Kihara, two million years ago. Early man left the trees and raised himself up on two legs in this very gorge.'

'Yesss,' hissed Richard Sutton. He was thin, spare, fair-haired, handsome, Natalie thought. From what had been said earlier, as dinner was beginning, she knew he was a New Yorker, a full professor at Columbia University.

Mutevu Ndekei had reached Eleanor's place the second time round, with the vegetables. As she took some potatoes, she addressed herself to Richard Sutton and Russell North. North was Australian, Natalie had learned, though he lived in America too, as an associate professor at Berkeley in California.

'We'll check tomorrow,' Eleanor went on, 'but I agree the bones you found are hominid, human-like. On the small side, but you'd expect that. We'll confirm the level of excavation tomorrow. I take it you photographed everything, and marked the site?' She sliced her potato.

Richard coloured. 'Of course we did, Eleanor. We're not novices, for Christ's sake.'

'Watch your language, Richard, please. I was just making sure you had everything covered. If this is as important as you say it is – and the champagne tonight means I think I agree with you – we are going to come under intense scrutiny from other colleagues. Our methods must be above suspicion. Don't be so jumpy.'

Richard was draining his champagne glass and he wiped his lips with his napkin before replying. He shook his head. 'Don't worry, Eleanor. We made a sensational discovery, at the two million level. There's no doubt about the date, the excavation itself was clean and neat, everything has been properly recorded and photographed. We fenced off the site with thorny acacia branches. We can build a proper fence tomorrow. Relax.' And he launched himself on his dinner.

Eleanor nodded, watching him eat: his precise movements, his sharp features. One of the reasons she had selected Sutton for the dig was because he was a thorough, rigorous scientist, utterly competent, whose capacity for work matched her own. A New

Yorker by birth, Sutton's father, she knew, was a Manhattan lawyer, the right-hand man to a real estate millionaire, who had not been entirely happy when his son had shown academic leanings. But, since he had, Richard Sutton Senior had done everything he could to ensure Richard Junior was the best palaeontologist in the business, providing his son with the finest education money could buy and then supporting important excavations financially so long as his son was part of the team. This did not make the Suttons friends with everyone, but most digs were so inadequately funded that many directors were only too happy to have Richard Junior along, if that meant the books would be balanced. And in any case, he did not really need his father's support any more; Richard Junior was an excellent excavator with a good mind. As Eleanor knew, he already had several discoveries under his belt, including a hominid skull dating to 150,000 years ago, and a species of extinct hippopotamus.

'The way that tibia and femur fit together strongly suggests an upright gait – are we agreed?' Eleanor set about her own dinner.

'That's the point,' said Russell North. 'It's a knee-joint like that which makes shopping and bowling possible.'

Eleanor grinned. She liked North. Whereas Sutton, though ferociously efficient, was a shade on the automatic side, North was a warm human soul with a sharp sense of humour. He had a temper, she knew, and he could be awkward – direct in the Australian way – but mostly he was fun on a dig, again with a number of discoveries to his name. And besides, no one was perfect. He was destined, she felt sure, for great things. He was a year or two younger than Sutton.

'The way the two bones fit together,' North went on, 'implies that some form of hominid was walking upright two million years ago. That is much earlier than we thought, much earlier than anyone thought, much earlier than the textbooks say. Richard and I have discussed it and we think we should write a paper on this and rush it to *Nature*.' *Nature* was the weekly science magazine,

published in London, where most major scientific discoveries were announced.

Eleanor nodded. She reached for the water jug and filled her own glass. Then she fixed her gaze on Natalie Nelson. 'Natalie, let's hear from you. You've just arrived; you have a fresh mind. How does the discovery strike you?'

Since the Nelson woman had arrived only that day, Eleanor had yet to form an opinion of her. The newly minted Dr. Nelson came highly recommended. Her specialism was a very useful expertise to have on a dig like the one Eleanor ran, but the director had not anticipated Dr. Nelson being so attractive. She was tall, almost as tall as Eleanor herself, had close-cropped dark hair which curled forward under her ears, a longish face with cheekbones that stood out and cast their own shadows, long tapered fingers and what the women's magazines, the last time she had looked, called a 'full figure'. Eleanor Deacon had already taken on board that both Russell North and her son Christopher had been immediately drawn to the newcomer and she hated that sort of emotion in the confined quarters of an excavation. Romance on a dig was not unknown: her own late husband had made a speciality of it, so she knew at first hand that it could make life very difficult.

Natalie swallowed some water. After a few hours' sleep she had unpacked, showered and changed into a blue shirt with khaki trousers. She wore no ring or necklace but had on a man's watch. Her eyes were as dark as the night outside the refectory tent.

'I'm sorry to be a wet blanket,' she said, setting down her glass. 'But I think you would be unwise to publish until you can check the tibia and femur you have found against a set of modern bones. If your dating is right they're two million years old, but you can't be certain they prove bipedalism without a close comparison and, well, you have probably thought of it, but if you get such a simple thing wrong . . . it could be embarrassing.'

'No!' breathed Sutton. 'No – I won't have that!' He slapped the

table and looked hard at Eleanor. 'How many digs has Natalie been on, how many hominid bones has Dr Nelson seen close up, in the field?' He paused. 'Very few, very few if any, that's my bet. This is her first day here, for pity's sake. What does *she* know? This creature was bipedal. It's a straightforward piece of anatomy. *I feel it*! I've been excavating in Africa for ten years. *Nature*, here we come!' He thrust his chin forward and glared hard at Natalie, staring her down, his lower lip stuck out beyond his upper lip, daring her to contradict him.

Natalie coloured. As he had reminded everyone, she was the least experienced of those present. But she still thought he was being *méchant*, as the French said: cruel.

Eleanor came to her defence. 'Don't be such a bully, Richard. Natalie is right. We have to be careful.'

'But that means delay,' complained North, putting his knife and fork together. 'Richard and I are here only until Christmas. After that we disperse, back to the States to teach. It will take much longer to write this paper when Richard is back in New York, I'm in California and you are still here in Kenya, Eleanor.'

'I agree, Russell.' Eleanor smiled. She paused as a great barking of baboons broke out nearby. But it quietened down as quickly as it had started. She laid her hands on the table, palms down. 'But we are scientists, not journalists with a deadline to meet. Of course we need modern bones, to make the comparison Natalie suggests. I don't know why none of us thought of it – perhaps the champagne has gone to our heads, clouding our minds. Natalie, coming from the outside world, has brought us some fresh air.'

She sat back and transferred her gaze from Natalie to Richard, to Russell. 'I understand your sense of urgency – both of you – but you must curb it. Richard, what would your father think if you published prematurely and then got egg on your face – egg that might be plastered all over the *New York Times*?'

Sutton said nothing but he worried at his watch on his wrist. Eleanor's barb had hit home.