

2. Friday. What the chef discovered

I might not understand them, but I determined that two of the female species would not outsmart me, at least not today. It was Friday afternoon and I lay completely unfolded on my stomach in the first room at the top of the stairs, directly above Caterina's study at Hornbeam Hall. I had pulled the carpet back and placed ear to glass on the hardwood floor in an attitude of unguarded abandon.

'How's your hornbeam jelly business going, Cat?'

'Excellently, thank you, Merry,' wafted up through the floorboards. 'Quaminus does not suspect a thing.'

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely,'

'I hate all this dishonesty, violet.'

'So do I. But it is what you wanted.'

I repositioned myself, splaying a little wider to catch every word.

'I've changed my mind. I don't want to do this, not after what happened to your mother.'

'We were only nine years old.'

'We should have known better.'

'Fang!' The under- and overtones in that one syllable were frightful to absorb.

'I didn't realise it'd be so horrible. Let me out of it, please.'

'Not this time. It is far too late,' her friend said with deadly emphasis. 'You should not start things you do not intend to finish. You will have to see this through to the end.'

'It's not right.'

'I don't care.'

'My dear young man, what *are* you doing?' asked a vision of shimmering silver-haired

femininity framed in the open door.

I scrambled to my feet ungracefully.

‘The Brigadier always said — ’

‘This is my room, Madame. Please leave at once.’ My manners deserted me, to my utter mortification.

‘I apologise. So often the bathroom in these old houses is the first room at the top of the stairs.’ She hoisted a chartreuse straw handbag over her shoulder, using her free hand to prevent its contents from overflowing onto the floor. A military man in a pewter frame, a monstrous bar of Toblerone and the head of a stuffed giraffe nestled behind her elbow.

Such was my introduction to Bolla Lester-Norman. Gossip comprised the only information I had gleaned so far about the woman. She loved her husband, her food and staying in country houses. Some felt that hosting the widow of a brigadier added respectability to the gathering, a sentiment with which Bolla Lester-Norman heartily agreed. Or so my sister-in-law assured me. A lonely widow activated my bachelor warning system. In response to my perfectly valid concerns about whether the widow was likely to be on the prowl, the unrepentant Clover had merely smiled. Infuriating woman.

‘An understandable mistake, Mrs Lester-Norman,’ I said, regaining my composure.

‘Bolla dear, like the champagne,’ she replied, backing away.

‘Mrs — Bolla — ’

The door closed. I pawed the floor with my foot in frustration like a wounded stallion. The rustlings and murmurings below stopped immediately.

I returned my attention to the overheard conversation. What had happened when the girls were nine years of age? What plans were they incubating? I went to the table and fanned out the handwriting samples. I would begin with Meredith’s.

Hang on. Something was not right. Caterina asked her guests to write out, *The fox-and-bleu-cheese quiche evinced a mighty, purple haze in the kitchen’s jaw*. As Caterina had warned, Meredith’s sample differed from the others. I had never seen such honest and

forthright As and Os. Not a sign of self- or other deceit in them, nor manipulation or prevarication. Where was the motive? The greed, the desperation? What buttons could her old friend push to force the writer of this highly literate hand to contemplate murder?

A rap at the door interrupted me. I longed to be in my study at Linden Park on a Mrs Breech-less day. 'Come in,' I said with no good grace.

A sizable woman entered bearing a tray laden with scones, translucent pink jam, cream and tea things. No makeup masked her middle-aged plainness; in fact she celebrated it by slicking back her greying brown hair into a tortured bun. A low buzzing noise accompanied her. She hummed *Waltzing Matilda* in a rasping monotone. That extraordinary sound was rather unsettling in its disregard for rhythm and pacing.

'Your afternoon tea.' She plunked the tray on top of Meredith's sample. 'Miz Caterina sent me up.'

I moved the paper gently.

'I'm Delleen. Been here for forty-three years I have, since I was a girl.'

I knew the type. She wore felt slippers and a long bibbed apron over a thin cotton-print dress in all seasons and never felt the cold. Mrs Breech's counterpart withdrew a roll of peppermints from her apron pocket, flicked one free with her thumbnail and popped it into her mouth.

'You'll get your sustenance in this house if it kills you. You're to eat the lot.' She pointed to the loaded tray with the peppermints. 'And don't be long about it. There's a lot to do for the party tomorrow night.'

As I watched her backside fill the doorway, I thanked God that my family had been spared its Delleens. They blustered to cover dismal financial need, which made them resent their employers but hobbled them from biting the hand that fed, at least to our faces.

From our side, one dare not object because help was so hard to find, creating an uneasy alliance. I preferred the Bethany Breechs.

'I would like to ask a favour of you,' I ventured. It was a calculated risk, but far better for

her to be on side as soon as possible.

‘What?’ The housekeeper stared with unnerving sternness.

‘Will you be my eyes and ears? Tell me if anyone who should not enters the kitchen or dining room between now and tomorrow night.’

‘That’s spying.’ She smiled for the first time.

‘More like protecting.’

‘Hmph.’ She hummed *Waltzing Matilda*.

‘I understand if you do not want to help, Delleen.’

‘Why should I?’ She sucked the life out of that peppermint, cheeks puffing and contracting. Hornbeam certainly was blessed with strong women.

‘I am worried about Mrs Hungerford.’ I hoped to secure her cooperation by being deliberately vague.

‘Spose I could,’ she said slowly, with an air of great beneficence.

I played along. ‘There. I have done it.’

She stopped humming. ‘Done what?’

‘Confided in you. Not a word to anyone.’

She emitted a sound and a scent simultaneously: a bar of *Waltzing Matilda* and a conspiratorial whiff of peppermint.

‘As you’re confiding in me, I’ll tell you something for free.’ She turned her head quickly from side to side, certain that the walls had ears, and leaned into the room from the doorway.

‘I’ve heard some interesting things.’

‘Such as?’ I asked. It went very much against the grain to gossip with the help.

‘Miz Anthea was never very patient, even as a child, and she hated going away. Threw quite a tantrum she did, when her parents forced her to go away to boarding school. Once she ran away and came home and locked her door and wouldn’t come out for days. Said she’d only leave her home feet first.’

With that the good woman made her triumphant exit.

My concentration had dissipated completely. I stacked the examples of handwriting into

a neat pile with Meredith's on top and reached for Delleen's tea tray. You are the most fortunate of men, I told myself. Fresh scones and homemade rose petal jam. Each woman's scones tasted so different despite the use of identical ingredients.

I got up to stretch, heeding the admonitions of my physiotherapist. A sudden silence on the landing arrested my attention, a cessation of creaking floorboards and comings and goings. I crept to the door and opened it sharply.

No one. For the first time I felt that something sinister was afoot. Perhaps it was merely the late-afternoon chiaroscuro, the flickering of shadows upon shadows.

I did not think so.

From under the bathroom door snaked a trail of incense whose scent I associated with the Hippie Sixties. A tuneless but spirited humming of the Byrds' song *Eight Miles High* accompanied splashing and other sounds of joyful immersion in the moment. Could Bolla contemplate cold-blooded murder or plan the writhing agony of death-by-poison or the slow seeping of extinction by exsanguination? *Keep an open mind*, I heard Mother admonishing me. *One never knows*. Mrs Lester-Norman idolised her late husband. Perhaps a scandal involving honour, money or women would push her over the brink.

I pulled my head back into the room and closed the door, planning to freshen up for my appointment with Caterina in a few minutes' time. My image rippled in the old glass of the dresser mirror as I reached for a comb. My sister-in-law Clover said the way my hair was long and brushed back reminded her of Michael Douglas in *Wall Street* and brought out my sculpted features. In our carefree days long ago, she compared me to a certain classical statue I am too embarrassed to name.

The room smelled solid and oppressive, like my childhood. In the 1840s — that hungry decade — and beyond Colonial builders used cedar everywhere, in furniture, doors, architraves and fireplace surrounds. Carpenters who came to this country found Australian red cedar easy to carve and cut, as the soft wood imitated mahogany. Once smelled never forgotten, we said of its odour. Solid but oppressive. Like the day.

You are a fraud, I accused my reflection. It is wrong. You shouldn't be here. The lovely Caterina had her way with you, and so easily. Not a whimper. You sold out for a scrap of old paper. Without your beliefs, what else is there?

What did I have to lose? Peace of mind? That vanished years ago, the night of the accident. Now I felt as if — no, such thoughts must not be allowed to surface. I made myself smile at my reflection. A smile not a scowl, that first psychologist said after the accident. Force the mind into other grooves and eventually they will become second nature. They call it CBT these days: cognitive behavioural therapy.

I opened the Holland blind and poked my head out the open window. The drone of a ride-on mower unleashed the aroma of freshly mown grass and drew my eyes to the back of the house, where lawns unfolded in crackling sheets. The outbuildings were off to one side. I saw Ted near the shearing shed. He was next on my list, after Caterina.

I watched a white vehicle emerge from the avenue and approach the Hall. The driver of the mobile produce van honked and rolled to a stop outside the kitchen wing. He brought fresh vegetables and fruit to the farmbound and isolated.

Various female members and guests of the household swarmed round, including Anthea, Meredith and Bolla. I understood Delleen's presence, but what could the three female dinner guests purchase here that was not cheaper in town? Perhaps a craving for fruit. One never knew with women. More likely Fitzadam and Roddy had demanded something. I found the scene distinctly unsettling.

But why? What upset me about a seemingly innocuous activity?

Manfred strode from the kitchen, white-coated and head held high. The driver disappeared from view and emerged with a box of green vegetables, which he handed over the counter. Manfred rooted round for moment, nodded and returned to the kitchen.

Anthea, Meredith and Bolla were engrossed in conversation and paid no attention to the chef. Even from my distance vantage point, I saw Delleen glare at the chef's back, hands on hips. The three female guests left. The driver closed up the van and started the engine.

I pulled my head back inside the room. My mind had been affected by the lovely Meredith. A walk through the grounds was just the thing to clear my head. I grabbed my shooting stick, whose handle opened into a seat in times of need, and set off down the stairs, followed by the siren scents of ginger, yeasted wheat and cinnamon that sang from the kitchen wing.

I stopped at the door to Caterina's office and listened for a moment to her twisted rendition of *My blue heaven*. 'Just Teddy and me and Annie makes three ...'

'I trust I am not interrupting,' I said as she answered my knock.

'Not at all.' Caterina gestured me inside, toward a cedar sofa with scrolled arms and carved feet. 'I think you'll find that the most comfortable.'

She resumed her seat at the computer. She was the only person I had ever known whose posture was perfect at the computer. Most of us hunched or slumped. 'I am just doing some cataloguing. You know, birthdays, addresses, that sort of thing, relaxing before the serious work begins for the party. I'll be with you in a moment.'

I examined a large whiteboard which dominated the inner wall. *Blue dinner party*, I read, followed by the date in precise block letters. Categories stacked the left margin like a misaligned spine: timeline (begun six months ago with a call to the pastry chef), menu, music, personnel and guests. Caterina listed all main and mobile telephone numbers. This work of impressive organisation reminded me of black-and-white late-night movies in which overweening military commanders plot destruction with overacting subordinates in front of massive maps of the world.

A drinks trolley stood perfectly centred under the whiteboard, adorned with a cut-glass decanter and various glasses and bottles.

'I do appreciate a brandy,' Caterina said, following my gaze. 'Help yourself.'

'It is too early in the day,' I demurred.

She turned back to the computer and clicked the mouse frenetically. Her concentration was so intense it became something else altogether, a furious obsession that allowed no intrusion. A slate-blue ergonomic office chair held her spine upright.

I fidgeted on the abstractly patterned raspberry-and-lilac upholstery. It was as difficult to settle into as my hostess.

She swivelled towards me with an apologetic smile.

'How is your investigation going?'

'There is really nothing to investigate until, if ... meanwhile, I am acquainting myself with the other guests and studying their handwriting samples. Have you yours ready?' I thumbed my bad hip surreptitiously. It ached at the most inconvenient times.

'Not yet.'

'You did promise.'

'I have been so busy.'

'Caterina, I wonder if you are being entirely truthful with me.'

The glance she darted me brought to mind a horse I once owned. Had no idea what was good for him and intended to remain independent if it killed him.

'You bought a large health insurance policy not long ago. Your medical examination states you are in perfect health.' I mentally thanked my third cousin for the information.

'One does these things,' she said icily. 'You should not pry.'

'That is precisely why you engaged me.'

'Oh, very well. As I said, it is nothing definite. The nature of my emails changed overnight, and not because my provider installed a spam filter. I checked. No one wanted to enlarge any part of my anatomy. Nor did anyone wish to sell me triple-x rated videos, tranquillisers or sexual enhancers. No one wanted to show me a good time. Suddenly the focus changed from life-affirming spam to *memento mori*. Had I written my will? Did I wish to join the Neptune Society or purchase a manual on death-inducing drugs? X-rated snuff videos materialised from cyberspace.'

'Sounds like someone with sophisticated computer knowledge.'

'It is not difficult to open email accounts in different countries.'

'Go on.'

'Images invaded the monitor. First an unhealthy-looking man slumped half on the steering wheel and half out the car door on a busy highway somewhere. Next a man lay on a slab in the morgue. Somehow I knew he had just died in a car accident.' She inclined her chin at the blank monitor, narrowing her eyes. 'I could not delete them quickly enough to stop myself from seeing the images. Then a horrid fascination developed and beckoned me several times a day. It did not register until once I realised that I had not seen any busty blondes all day. Then women began to feature, like the mangled body of a woman by the side of the road, her red blood obliterating the peaceful green grass.'

'All images of road trauma,' I observed. 'Nothing, oh, elsewhere?'

'No, and that is the horror of it, the exquisite psychological torment.'

'Perhaps you can explain the meaning of traffic fatalities in your life.'

She stifled a sob.

'Might this be an end in itself?' I asked.

'My first thought was that someone wanted me to suffer as she had suffered.'

'She?'

'At first I suspected a woman, but a subtler shift in focus has surfaced, as I believe I mentioned before. It seems masculine, as if usurped by someone else.'

'Someone who joined the original stalker. Or stalkers.'

Eyes riveted to the monitor, she mumbled, 'So sinister ... can you not feel it?'

'Who would do such a thing?'

'My sister-in-law is jealous, her husband is greedy, my best friend is restless, her husband is resentful, my husband is unhappy and the English cousin is too gluttonously content to be true.'

I did not want to know where she slotted me. 'There is a motive in there somewhere. Aren't you afraid?'

'To my great surprise, no. My predominant emotion is relief, as I mentioned Monday. I have been expecting this for so long.' Caterina withdrew from a shelf a large, flat book, *The*

Gardens of Russell Page. 'If I live through the weekend, I intend to redo the garden completely. Keep it simple, that is all Ted asks.'

'Caterina, what have gardens to do with potentially fatal mischief?'

'You will see.'

'Your garden is lovely as it is. Do you really need to change it?'

She hesitated, as if tearing a confession from her breast. 'This garden symbolises a new beginning, Quaminus,' she whispered. 'Can one change, really change, from the inside out? I would like to try before it is too late. Get the structure right and fill it with beauty. No weeds or thorns allowed.'

'Life is not always so neat and tidy, far from it,' I said, thinking of my own life. 'Is your jelly business in trouble?'

Caterina's business defied local gossip. She turned hornbeam jelly into a successful cottage industry, using truculent work-for-the-dole recipients to top and tail the pea-sized, carrot-coloured balls. Everyone scoffed when she started, but a pot of Hornbeam Hall jelly had become a coveted export delicacy, popular in European countries with high lamb and venison consumption. I was hoarding a stash she had sent over one Christmas in a Vegemite jar.

'My word no. Quite the opposite, Quaminus.' A smile spread, the first spontaneous emotion I had seen on Caterina's face. 'You are the first to know. An email just arrived from New York. I have cracked the North American market. An acquaintance, actually Manfred's ex-partner, recently opened a restaurant called Nouveau Neueu. He has ordered thirty jars. He intends to dollop hornbeam jelly on top of smoked quail to resemble translucent baby apricots — unless he changes his mind, artistic license, you know. I am just so happy.'

'You have got a lot to live for,' I said.

She nodded. 'I am planting a double hornbeam hedge to separate the farm buildings and activities from the big house, so Ted will be happy. A hedge for my growing business, so to speak.'

‘How will you fund this? A garden designer from England, extensive replanting: not inexpensive.’

‘I did well in a Fitzadam property investment in Hobart no one else would touch. Speculative and risky, but it is enabling me to redo the garden after my heart’s desire.’

‘Fascinating as this discussion may be, you did not invite me here for pastoral discussions.’

‘I suppose I had better be honest with you if I want to see my new garden.’

‘I suppose you had better.’

The mistress of the house swivelled in her ergonomic chair. ‘A thug once told Phillip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* that knowing other people’s business was the worst investment for a man in his circle.’ She twisted her wedding ring three times clockwise, then counterclockwise, as she had done in my study the day she hired me.

‘Caterina, do you intend to end things for the insurance money, possibly with the assistance of your best friend?’ One wished desperately to hear a negative reply. So many façades would crumble otherwise, important ones built to last a lifetime. ‘Perhaps you would like to tell me about Meredith and yourself. I overheard bits of your conversation earlier.’ I loathed myself doubly, for eavesdropping and now lying.

‘We planned to tell you tonight, when it will have gone on long enough.’

‘To what do you refer?’

‘Oh Quaminus, you should see your face.’

‘The truth, Caterina,’ I said in a tone rarely used during optimistic daylight hours.

The pause lengthened.

She glanced back with an expression which drew me up short. I stopped myself from flinching, which I would have done only yesterday.

‘I promise you, Quaminus, I did not buy life insurance with any unseemly intentions.’

She wrestled with internal forces. ‘There is an old will which would turn life here upside down.

It — ’

The door burst open. 'Hi Petal! I'm back!' A wild blond halo framed a remarkable face with liquid blue eyes and long black lashes. 'Does he know — oh!'

'I know everything,' I lied.

She glided over, hugged Caterina and sat on the edge of the desk. 'Oh good, it's out, although the Hawthorne Effect changes everything, Roddy says.' She wore turquoise wool-denim trousers and pumpkin-coloured cotton polo-neck jumper, perfectly appropriate for the time of year. A little Chinese silk jacket the colour of the autumn sky added an unexpected and stylish touch.

Caterina strode to the whiteboard like a general and faced us with hands clasped behind her back. 'You should not interrupt!' she said. 'Mr Quaminus Frye, Mrs Meredith Eastmeadowson.'

'Sorry! A great pleasure to meet the private detective saviour.'

I touched fingertips with the woman of my dreams, an oasis of symmetry and grace and the perfect height for me, around five feet ten. Surely Meredith was not a cyber-stalker. What hold did my client have over this vision of perfection? Something niggled ... Why was her handwriting sample different?

My male warning system was temporarily disarmed. I basked in her scent. Its fried-food stench overlaid with a citrusy and expensive bouquet was not altogether unattractive, particularly when one added the undeniable odour of aestheticism running under the surface.

'The Hawthorne Effect is a scientific principle of observation, is it not?' I asked. What a feeble beginning.

'Yes. Roddy — that's my husband — told me about a woman who did an experiment in the 1930s and found that people behaved differently when they knew they were being observed.'

Watching the two friends together, one felt that Caterina saw Meredith as an errant sheep and herself the shepherdess. For Meredith, Caterina represented ... represented what? Stability? An unshakeable pall? These women befuddled me.

'You'll protect her, won't you Quaminus?' pleaded Meredith.

'Our hostess will not die tomorrow night,' I assured her. 'I am as certain of that as I am of my place on the land.' What I did not say was that a blue-food dinner party honouring Caterina's late mother-in-law worried me greatly. Would blue blood flow?

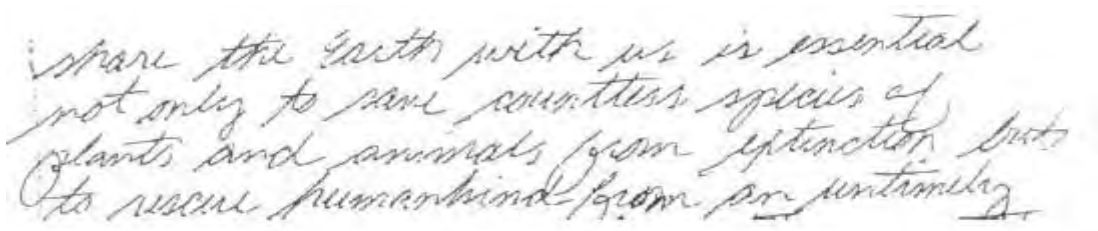
Caterina laid a hand on my forearm, her smile an asymmetrical slash. 'Full confession later, Quaminus, word of honour.'

'Yes, well, I will leave you to it. I want to speak to Ted.' I left unvoiced my need for a break in order to regain my wits.

How *did* women do it?

* * *

The mid-afternoon sun warmed my hip and settled peacefulness on the land, with its fleeting shadows and tweeting birds. I peered back at Hornbeam Hall as I crossed the lawn to the outbuildings, on my way to visit Ted in the shearing shed. What secrets lurked in the lush profusion of the Georgian mansion's round garden with its circular drive? The way it closed and looped back protectively upon itself brought to mind a graphoanalysis lesson about mid-zone letters such as As and Os. Internal hooks and squiggles indicated manipulateness. Empty letters depicted honesty with the self and others. Those closed and looped to the left meant self-deception. We all needed a bit of that to grease our progress through life. Letters closed and looped to the right indicated secretiveness. Double internal loops conveyed intentional deception. No one indicator stood alone; others factors influenced all formations. Manipulateness, evasion, secrecy, honesty: none of the guests' handwriting showed them to the degree that did murderer Ted Bundy's.

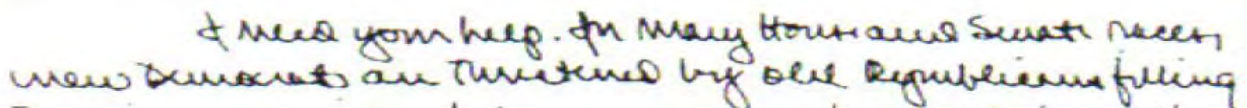


to share the earth with us is essential not only to save countless species of plants and animals from extinction but to rescue humankind from an untimely

Ted Bundy, U.S. serial killer

I passed the end of the *macrocarpa* windbreak just beyond the curve in the road. Two rows of hornbeams, *carpinus fastigata*, flanked the drive. Here in Tasmania's Midlands, cars often stopped at the stone gate in mid-to-late autumn, their occupants gawping at glowing berries orange as a chainsawer's vest.

The long, tapered hornbeam thorns jutted out from the branches like spikes on Parliament's ceremonial mace. The loosely serrated shape of hornbeam leaves contrasted with the rounded exuberance of their mass, the colour of a healthy lawn, as yet unbronzed by a gentle autumn. Leaves were notched like inverted V formations found mostly in Ms, Ns, Rs and sometimes Hs. Graphoanalysis claimed that such formations indicated the investigative mind of one who preferred to learn things on his own and not accept the findings of others.

A handwritten note in blue ink on a white background. The text reads: "I need your help. In many hours and sweat, new Democrats are threatened by old Republicans filling". The handwriting is cursive and somewhat slanted.

Ex U.S. President Bill Clinton

When viewed from this angle, the homestead hardly seemed the setting for beckoning intrigue. What secrets lurked behind its severe windows? What did I really know about Caterina Hungerford?

One always started with the victim. All I knew was that a beautiful woman with her father's fair hair and her mother's Sicilian eyes feared for her life. I drew out Caterina's printed specimen, which I carried in a jacket pocket. I unfolded it and held it far from my face to gather an overall impression. It reminded me of William's Faulkner's handwriting: very small, extreme order, I's and T's precisely dotted and crossed — no scrawl, sprawl or maul, little vitality, crackling intelligence ...

What was that doing there, I wondered again as I had Monday at the desk in my study at home in Linden Park. I needed to examine the rounded middle-zone letters in a cursive writing sample to confirm my suspicions.

I saw the master of the house hunched over a tractor with two farmhands burly and brown as beer casks. My host, Edward Albert Hungerford, was one of the most successful farmers and graziers in the Midlands. He had diversified early into cropping — poppies, peas and potatoes — unlike his father, strictly a sheep man. Ted had gone straight onto the land after a year spent jackarooing, at his father's insistence, on the Mainland cattle station of a family friend. Ted once told me he hoped one of his sons, preferably the elder, would do an agricultural course at university.

Talk of the land meant generations of fathers and sons. An accident of birth excluded Ted's sister Anthea, who'd always yearned for the family property. In her own mind she would be mistress of Hornbeam until her dying day. She had never accepted that her brother finally got round to marrying, and would reject her brother's wife with her last breath.

'Quaminus.'

'Ted.' I shook the outstretched hand, hot and redolent of sheep, the meaty paw of the working farmer.

They say that by the age of fifty people acquire the faces they deserve. I marvelled that Ted's face had reached forty years with nary a wrinkle, save a vertical one that ran down the middle of each cheek from orbital bone to jaw. These two fissures compensated for the paucity of brethren by etching themselves almost deeply enough to require stitches.

'Nice to see you again.' Duty done, we retreated.

We did not share a prolix tradition.

'Yes,' I replied.

Or an effusive one.

'Can we make it later, Quaminus? I have just got to attend to something ...'

'Of course, Ted. Just let me know.' Was my old friend making excuses? I detested that aspect of detecting: becoming suspicious of one's own.

'We're playing billiards after a pizza dinner if you care to join us.' Ted scratched at his crown in a round, tight clawing motion. His hair, which had browned with age, grew close to his head.

'Pizza perhaps, billiards probably not. I have a stack of work to do.' I thought of the handwriting samples on the desk in my room.

I retraced my steps, intending to do some work.

Perhaps the passing of a fleeting shadow was a trick of the light, but I swore I was being followed.

* * *

'There you are, Quaminus dear!' warbled a melodious contralto.

I had just stepped through Hornbeam Hall's six-panelled cedar front door, with sidelights and fanlight of intricately glazed glass. The doorway's deeply splayed side reveals concealed shutters that closed across the aperture and latched with iron bars. The flagged diamond sandstone blocks were cool and hard underfoot. I followed the sound of a voice utterly suited to its surroundings, past a grandfather clock and two chairs to the woman leaving the dining room.

Anthea Hungerford Fitzadam moved to greet me, then paused under a portrait of her mother, the Maman whose memory Caterina was honouring at the weekend's blue-food birthday dinner party. I would never have taken the heavy-boned woman in the portrait for the mother of the finely featured creature smiling a greeting. Anthea was the image of her father, while Ted favoured his mother — a preference she returned with breathtaking disregard for her daughter's feelings. People other than my cleaner Mrs Breech whispered that the old girl still ruled this pile despite fourteen years in the grave.

'Glorious to have you with us,' said my gracious friend. She was wearing tennis whites, which accentuated the fact that she was not beautiful but majestic. This shone in the lift of her chin and the way she rested her long, thin fingers on the hall table, a built-in stone console topped by an inch-thick slab of multi-coloured marble with carved brackets of classical design.

'Wonderful to see you again, Anthea.' I took her hand.

'Ted mentioned you'd be coming. Absolutely redeeming.' I knew just what she meant and started to relax. We came from the same drawer. I recalled her handwriting's tiny lower loops, like mutilated paper clips, which passed beyond mere selectivity into the realm of clannishness.

'Guy's waiting for me on the court. Must dash. I do apologise.'

Some men found her trim fitness irresistible. Some women appreciated the way she wore a tennis outfit, my sister-in-law Clover said.

'No need,' I said.

The princess royal looked daggers at the door to Caterina's office. 'She means well,' Anthea said, leaving a mountain of unspoken 'buts' poised to avalanche our hostess's good name. 'Maman would not have approved.' She glanced up adoringly, as one does at Madonnas in church.

'You must miss her.' I thought of my own departed mother.

Anthea caught her breath. The clouds of this mother-daughter relationship had been rather stormy. A whiff of revisionist history floated past on tufts of cinnamon and apple from the kitchen, to which the dutiful daughter responded. 'Maman was a good cook. She did a lot of that before she married Father and moved here. After that, except at shearing time, she made only scones, which Grandfather adored. It became a sort of ritual.'

'I remember Mother talking about that. Did not she insist they were for the old man only, that no one else was allowed to eat them?'

'Yes, she tried so hard to please.'

'One heard that your grandfather did not approve of your mother and, to punish your brother, threatened to leave Hornbeam Hall to your uncle.'

Anthea rounded on me with a murderous scowl. 'Wherever did you hear such a thing?'

'Oh, family gossip, you know ... '

'Don't believe everything you hear.'

Anthea's reactions unsettled me. I asked her a question to observe her reaction.

'Lovely of your sister-in-law to honour her with a dinner party.'

'A blue theme!'

'Your mother's favourite colour.'

'Not for food!'

'Caterina's a modern girl.'

'That's where breeding shows,' Anthea purred with the athlete's impatient disregard for the artistic.

'Caterina comes from a good family.'

'So she thinks.'

A shriek from the kitchen turned our heads in unison, like two tennis spectators. A female scurried past, 'I knew that boiling vat was dangerous!'

'That's Tina, one of Caterina's berry pickers who also helps out as housemaid and occasional shearer's cook,' Anthea said, adding, 'Extravagant. We did all the food for the shearers in my day. I helped Maman.'

Something made me look back as I hurled past Caterina's office, just in time to see Anthea pause and, with a malicious set to her mouth, tilt the portrait of her mother slightly askew. Whether this mischief was aimed at her mother or her sister-in-law I had no idea, but it made me wonder how well I really knew Anthea Hungerford Fitzadam.

Anthea rushed to inspect the damage when we had crashed through the kitchen door. Wooden workbenches lined two of the long walls. A fireplace dominated a third wall, with metal hobs, crossbars and a separate baking oven. Cauldrons, marble slabs and utensils hung on pegs or rested on benches or shelves.

'What happened, Delleen?' Anthea asked.

'Pride goneth before the fall,' came the reply from the woman kneeling on the flagged floor, mopping up a pool of biscuity-brown liquid. The ammoniac odour she exuded told me she had been cleaning silver. Indignation pulsed from every circular swipe. Delleen's words

matched the rhythm of each arced gesture in a way that said, *These things are sent to try us*. She hummed loudly. It may have been *Waltzing Matilda*. Peppermint wafted through the air.

A broad wooden table sand-scrubbed creamy white dominated the room, piled with the paraphernalia of a pastry artist. On one end huddled Asian condiment dishes filled with icing sugar mixed with water and tinted every shade of blue from robin's egg to royal. Nearby stood tiny bowls of water, palette knives, pastry bags and funnels; also paintbrushes, a square of whiteboard used as a palette and a massive canister of icing sugar with a metal scoop.

A fine-featured man with a weak chin fumed protectively over the centre of the table. The blues in the condiment dishes glinted off his thick, milk-coloured hair. His sugary-smooth face flushed an unhealthy purple, and probably not from high blood pressure.

He shifted positions and revealed his Creation, enthroned on butcher paper.

Anthea sailed toward the pastry chef after reassuring herself about the safety of the family plate. 'Manfred —'

Caterina burst in. 'What happened?'

Manfred's colour calmed from mulberry to tomato to strawberry and hovered at pale peach. 'I feel nauseated,' he moaned.

'It's that Thing,' Delleen said, shooting her eyes at the Creation dead centre on the table.

'Someone's been tampering with Hornbeam Hall,' Manfred Hermayne said ominously.

Caterina paled to whipped egg white. For a moment I thought she would faint.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Sabotage!' Manfred brandished a palette knife, designating a spot on a pastry wall in the rear of the house in his Creation. 'Someone thinks I do not notice such insignificance, but they do not know they are dealing with Manfred.'

I waited for him to pound his chest. He did not. I leaned over his work in progress but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

'Here,' Manfred pointed.

I imitated his actions, bending my body and cocking my head just so. Then I saw it.

'Such a small hole, surely —'

'I did not do this thing.'

'No one came in here who shouldn't have,' Delleen said.

'I do not ruin my own work.'

Caterina's colour returned as she whispered, 'This is dreadful, Quaminus.'

'You find hating person.'

'I will check into it, Manfred,' I promised in my best authoritative voice. Such an act indicated a crime more indiscriminate than selective poisoning.

Was mischief planned for tomorrow evening or was there an innocent explanation?

Mollified, the artiste swirled one of his smallest paintbrushes into a teal sugar mound.

'Monsieur Hermayne is creating a centrepiece, a vista seen from your mother's bedroom window, Anthea,' Caterina explained. Pride and supplication competed in her tone. 'As it would have been in her time.'

'And should remain,' Anthea muttered.

'Look at the tabletop mountain and three pyramid peaks,' Caterina said. 'He has done them as meringue triangles, and just observe those folds.'

'And the way he has graded the colours,' I added.

'A view to die for,' Caterina said.

'To kill for,' Anthea agreed.

'Out! Out! All of you,' the chef erupted. I must create before the mood passes!

Manfred slammed his hand on the table, dispersing us like puffs of powdered sugar. 'And please do your polishing elsewhere,' he ordered Delleen, who glared back with all the venom of a trusted senior domestic worker toward an interloper. 'The stench it gives me an ache. I cannot concentrate properly.'

'I've kept Guy waiting long enough,' Anthea said.

'And I have party preparations to attend to,' Caterina said.

The sisters-in-law reached the door at the same time. Neither yielded.

‘Caterina,’ I said, drawing her away to break the deadlock. ‘A word, please.’

‘Miz Hungerford,’ Delleen said to Caterina. ‘I need to talk to you.’

‘Wait for me in the Egyptian Room, please, Quaminus,’ she said.

Anthea had disappeared through the doorway by the time her sister-in-law finished.

Mission accomplished.

Ruminations consumed me as I ambled down the passageway to the Egyptian Room.

Had Caterina made bad investments she was no longer able to hide from her husband?

Maybe Ted wanted a divorce or she could no longer bear her sister-in-law’s criticisms.

Whatever it was, she had confided if not the entire truth then at least part of it to her best

friend. Were they plotting a nice dose of feminine poison between old chums? Had the

medical examination uncovered a terminal disease my third cousin had neglected to impart

or did our hostess suffer from a fatal allergy? What would the lovely Mrs Eastmeadowson

gain? Perhaps blackmail infiltrated their friendship, although their relationship appeared

unstrained.

I needed expert advice, someone to help me access Caterina’s computer files should

she prove uncooperative or unable. Where to find such a creature? Any investigation would

have to include three-pronged research: personal contacts, the above-mentioned files and

knowledge gleaned by graphoanalysis. Relying upon only one prong would be like flailing

butterfly nets through the air. Telephone calls during the week had resurrected my contact

network, except for the computer expert who was on maternity leave.

These thoughts brought me to an armchair in the Egyptian Room with a good view of

the tennis court. I watched Fitzadam play against his agile wife with energy if not grace. Just

like his handwriting.

Nobody with a body that long and such squat legs could negotiate this game with

agility. No handwriting with H-stems so high and such convoluted Qs could be called fluid.

Ted viewed him as an intruder. Familial hopes of his evanescence faded when Anthea

produced offspring. That Fitzadam did well in business endeared him to no one. Would a doubtful past or less-than-honest dealings lead him to kill another human being? This man would never abdicate the throne for love.

Poetic justice dictated that Anthea Hungerford marry Guy Fitzadam. Houses and property obsessed them both. Fitzadam dreamed of despoiling the land. *If it is empty build on it* was his creed. I knew the type. I had seen them often enough at the races, with their air of temporarily satisfied greed. This reminded me that I was waiting for a friend to ring with the personal details of an old associate of Fitzadam's.

One guest remained about whom I knew nothing. I had neither seen him nor overheard any gossip. What did I know about Dr Roderick Eastmeadowson? He was a scientist who bored his dinner partners senseless with talk of global warming and climate change. Why would he possibly want to kill Caterina? Did her property produce too many carbon dioxide emissions? Were her cows too gassy, farting too much methane? Was it personal or professional? Was Roddy protecting his wife or had he erred ethically on authorship of a paper? Blackmail again.

Despite all this speculation, nothing had happened aside from an alleged hole in a cake. I had little to go on and nothing to do.

Yes, but ...something *smelled* wrong. I was not at all happy about this case. I had a bad feeling, a very bad feeling.

SIDEBAR. Ancestors & Egyptian

Adventures

The Victorian spirit of adventure infected both the Hungerford forebear and my own. The two men put managers in charge of their properties and sailed off into the horizon, my great-great-grandfather for Mesopotamia and Ted's for Egypt via East Africa, where he had arranged to get in some big game hunting. My ancestor was more interested in matters carved by a much smaller sword, the wedge-shaped stylus used for cuneiform inscriptions. He visited Uruk at an exciting time, after the initial mid-nineteenth century excavations but before Sir Leonard Woolley's definitive work in the nineteen-thirties. A tradition had evolved whereby each generation of Fries visited the area. I had been on my way there when Father took sick and I had to come home.

The interest in Mesopotamian forms of applying stylus to tablet struck each generation of Fries differently. My great-grandfather disregarded his father's wishes completely but Grandfather studied the then-new science of archaeology in university and became something of an expert on cuneiform inscriptions and, I believe, even met Agatha Christie when she accompanied her husband, Max Mallowan to Mesopotamia. My father had no literary inclinations whatsoever and spent his time on that obligatory pilgrimage examining sheep and other stock. I had been quite looking forward to immersing myself in the great library with those marvellous old texts.

Should have planned to go there first rather than saving it for last, but we were not to know about Father's heart. What rankled most was that Grandfather's grandfather's favourite piece, a lovely wedge of cuneiform he had appropriated, went with the big house, and my brother Miles had no more interest in such things than had Father.

Two Old Kingdom hunting tapestries in the Egyptian Room separated by a column of boomerangs hung over the white marble fireplace. Across the top, a slate-blue band of white hieroglyphics joined the two tapestries. A pair of black-and-white fourth century BC pottery goblets, after the Goblet of Susa, flanked the mantelpiece. In each corner of the room stood a life-sized *ushabet*, a royal funeral statue. The *ushabti* from King Tutankhamen's tomb represented servants meant to perform tasks demanded by the king in the other world. They embodied aspects of the king himself, prepared to deal with any contingency arising in time and space. All four in this room crossed their arms over their chests.

The makers of the Hungerford *ushabti* had done a fine job. Perhaps they had worked in the Theban necropolis at the time of Rameses IX, whose sculptors had gone on strike until receiving their ration of wheat..

