

4. Saturday evening. Eating the Blue Moon

A floral, lavish scent coaxed me to foggy consciousness.

‘Sorry to disturb you, Quaminus, but the party is about to begin,’ said Caterina. Her severely tailored silk evening dress shone plum-silver in some lights and peacock-blue in others.

I was not too ill to notice that she looked particularly lovely. ‘Have I been unconscious all day?’ I asked, struggling to a sitting position.

‘Not quite. You were seen wandering about downstairs.’

I had no memory of that. I had meant to stake out the dining room. Perhaps my subconscious took over my body.

‘How do you feel, Quaminus? I have rung the doctor three times.’

If I wanted to continue detecting, which I seriously doubted, I would have to do something about my stamina. ‘I have got a pounding headache.’ I touched the base of my scalp and winced.

‘First the alleged attack on Manfred’s Creation. Now this. We should ring the police,’ I said.

‘I would prefer they were not involved, at least not yet,’ she replied.

I did not blame her. I doubted they would welcome my participation. They tended to ask inconvenient questions which one had to answer, and truthfully.

Caterina sat on the bed. ‘Here, I have brought you some paracetamol.’

I nodded my gratitude and swallowed the two white tablets without water.

'I had another reason for coming: to give you this.' She held out that Colonial land grant. 'I will just put here it on the bedside table.' She leaned forward and placed it precisely.

I did not lift a finger to prevent it. Another moral hammer blow, or was the hammering in my head? In future broodings, that would always be my excuse.

I sank back into the pillows with what I called my exhaustion unto the grave.

'You need not come down if you are unwell, Quaminus.' She bit her lip.

'I have been feeling a bit superfluous but am determined to protect you,' I said. My head pounded in what was called a diffuse headache. I wished to fortify myself with a hot toddy but had to forego the grog this evening.

Waves of Caterina's exotic fragrance wafted my way every time she moved.

'That scent.'

"Magnolia Nights." She tapped her foot nervously on the floor.

'Not one I know.' I struggled to sit up. It was vital that I rally myself.

'Ted and I visited Meredith and Roddy in New Orleans a few years ago. He'd accepted a one-year fellowship at the Tulane School of Tropical Medicine.'

'Odd choice for a paleoclimatologist. I would envisage him in Alaska somewhere.' My interest in Roddy quickened as the permutations for poisonous death tumbled forth. Not to mention voodoo.

'Not really. He went over to argue about mosquitoes. They had just lost their second baby, stillborn like the first, and needed a radical change. We hoped Meredith might explore jazz and the blues.' She paused. 'Please, Quaminus, you simply must find the person who despoiled Manfred's creation.'

'Who would do it? And why?'

'I have no idea. In addition to myself, only Anthea had unrestricted access to the kitchen, and she would have been more subtle.'

Unless caught in the act. Anthea had been near the kitchen, but Manfred and possibly Delleen had been present. Hadn't they? My head throbbed so badly I set

aside this puzzle. For now. 'You mentioned a will yesterday, Caterina, before Meredith burst into your study.'

'I was present during Maman's last illness. She told me about the will. I actually possessed it for two days before it disappeared.'

'What were its contents?'

'I will tell you later, Quaminus. I must attend to my guests,' she said, rising.

'I must know, Caterina.' Something in my tone made her resume her seat beside me.

'I shall inform you at dinner,' she whispered. 'All I will say is that it would turn things upside down in the Hungerford Empire.'

She was toying with me. 'This is totally unacceptable, Caterina. You have got to give me a little more.'

She sighed. 'Very well, then. Its provisions would send Ted and our branch of the family onto the streets. Is that enough?'

'Until this attack I thought, despite your denial, that you wanted to kill yourself for the insurance money and blame one of the guests, possibly Anthea, bearing in mind I have not yet met Roddy.'

My hostess blinked.

'Either that or a hoax I have not yet unravelled, something including Meredith. I based my conclusions on overall behaviour and handwriting samples.'

'Which were stolen.'

'The copies, not the originals.'

She rose and sought the door, then glanced back over her shoulder. 'Forgive me.'

'For what, Caterina?' Surely she did not intend to reveal my two secrets.

'I cannot control myself any longer.' She crossed her arms and cupped opposite elbows. 'Tonight I shall celebrate, as a snail discards its shell. I am ready for something different, whatever that may be. I just hope I do not die first.'

'That is not funny, Caterina.'

'I am not a humorous person, Quaminus. I just wanted someone — you — to know. It must change one, holding so many secrets. For me it began as a child. I remember the awful event and how distressed keeping quiet made me feel. It was when we lost my mother. My life slipped forever out of its groove and started running parallel, not quite on track. Something pecked at the edges, causing the whole edifice to totter and vibrate, insecure in its moorings, if you will excuse the mixed metaphor. I articulated this later. At the time it was one long painful throb.'

"Magnolia Nights" rode on the sounds of *Billie's blues*, which mingled with the pre-party burr of expectant voices.

'I am sorry if this confession hurts Meredith, but I have got to slough off this black cloud. Then I shall release all the others from the secrets I hold — including yourself, Quaminus.'

'What could you possibly know about me? Why on earth would you even think of such a thing?'

Caterina's look told me she knew at least one of my secrets. Which one?

'Part of the clean sweep, Quaminus.'

Oh God.

'Out with every secret I hold.' With that Caterina disappeared, leaving "Magnolia Nights" to sharpen my memories of the cosh on the head I had received earlier that day. I had to match that scent with one of the guests. Fitzadam stank of petrol and expensive leather shoes. I associated Ted with machine oil and lanolin. Patchouli evoked Bolla's presence, while citrusy scents overlaid with fried foods recalled Meredith's. Anthea's combined expensive perfume and serviceable silk clothes not dry-cleaned often enough. None of them joggled the vital memory. That left Roddy.

Did she know about Clover or the asylum seekers? Did she know I expected visitors on Sunday? I felt a certain solidarity with the other suspects.

* * *

My hip was having a good night, unlike my head, so I did not have to concentrate on the limp. I gripped the stair rail and descended, following the sounds of *Blue Danube* that Meredith played on the violin by the door of the Egyptian Room, which Ted's ancestor had fashioned after his own heart.

The cornice in that Victorian extravaganza set the room's tone and always made me smile. I envisioned some local worker shaking his head in bewilderment as he painted the ornate upper cornice powder blue and the lower one terracotta and yellow with black accents. Not my taste, but one saw the appeal to a Victorian Egyptophile.

I shot straight to the drinks table, where Ted acted as bartender. 'Orange juice, please, Ted.' I dare not risk anything stronger. Armed with a stiff one, I drifted to another table laden with *hors d'oeuvres* and clothed in antique white linen that caressed the floor in graceful folds.

I located our hostess, determined not to lose sight of her or be too obvious about my guard duties. She circulated near an *ushabet*.

I was admiring the way the *ushabtis* bookending the table came alive at night. The statues winked in the downlights when I leaned over the drinks table and froze.

Thereon perched the largest cheese ball ever seen by man, fully two feet in diameter. It looked like a demented roosting hen in graduated shades of blue. Baby and sky shot through Prussian, French, Italian, Gobelin and Dresden. The boundaries of good taste had been exceeded, well and truly.

The orb floated in a sea of small white discs not immediately recognisable as water crackers. The odd crater pitted its surface, where a few brave souls had ventured to gouge out a chunk.

'Ah, you are admiring Blue Moon.' Our hostess appeared at my side as I swallowed a loaded crescent. I had not heard her approach.

'It is so large for eight people.'

'Manfred insisted we strive for effect.'

'I thought he trained as a pastry chef.'

'He is orchestrating the entire dinner. Creative people grow restless, you know.'

She glanced at Meredith, who was lost in the music she played on her violin.

'Sounds rather good. I have not heard this arrangement of *Blue moon* for strings. May I ask what I am eating?'

'Cream cheese, butter and garlic. I usually add chives, but Manfred insisted that green specks would spoil the effect.'

'Caterina, is this wise? Surely you must see the opportunities it presents for mischief.'

She laughed. 'We have not even got to the first course. I am safe for a while yet. Excuse me, but I must check with Manfred.'

My hostess and I parenthesised the evening's moods, with the guests ranged between us on the morose-to-manic nexus. Meredith sparkled in a midnight-blue cheongsam, easily the most elegant woman present. Her wild hair enhanced the effect.

Bolla shimmered differently, in a billowing avocado, lime and tangerine caftan that brushed the carpet. I averted my gaze from the sensual enjoyment suffusing her face as she savoured a pitted slab of cheese on a pale disc. She seemed to have stopped caring about the world and its dramas. Lack of concern for her figure and hair — so different from every other woman present — underscored this. Surely she would not scheme to annihilate her hostess.

One could not use the word *shimmer* of Anthea. If the colours adorning Meredith, Caterina and Bolla reflected light, Anthea's attire absorbed it. Taupe silk, a

poisonous yellow-brown, knee-length skirt, stiff and confining leather belt and tailored blouse: all displayed her shape to perfection.

‘Anthea dear, when those belts vanish I’ll know you’ve undergone a personality change,’ Bolla purred, peering with pity at the rigid strap encircling Anthea’s waist. ‘I stopped wearing anything binding when Clive died. I’m letting my body spread without a shred of guilt.’ She happily devoured another chunk of Blue Moon. ‘I’ve lost interest in men and all their baggage, and it’s made life blissfully peaceful.’ She adjusted her caftan, whose scalloped edges made her appear to float rather than walk.

Anthea harrumphed. She scrutinised Bolla’s hair, which escaped its coils round her crown and did exactly as it pleased.

‘I no longer care a hoot about good colour and great cuts.’ Bolla’s silver hair belonged to a benign deep-sea creature with tentacles.

‘Obviously,’ Anthea said.

‘Oh, I keep it moderately under control in deference to social conventions. I might stop that, too. Once one ceases to care how people respond, one becomes positively light-hearted. You ought to try it, dear.’

Anthea’s mouth tightened.

Ever vigilant, I assessed the moods of the ladies present. Although immersed in her playing, I thought I detected fierceness in Meredith’s faraway dreaminess. The lone battle waging on Bolla’s affable face focussed entirely on consumption of moon bites. Anthea’s stopped me cold, lost in a different sort of war.

‘Are you alright, Anthea?’

‘This doesn’t honour Maman.’ She flipped her head at the massive pocked globe. The matriarch withheld approval from her daughter in life; now the dutiful offspring defended the faith. ‘Maman acted appropriately at all times. This ...’

Delleen burst in wearing a starched serving maid’s uniform, bearing a tray of tiny sky-blue pastry cups heaped with a steaming mushroom mixture whose colour

can best be described as sea sludge. Obviously, Caterina had ordered her to smile. She proffered the tray, weaving through clusters of guests with a baring of teeth that was far from joyous, more like serving canapés at the Last Supper.

I searched for Roddy, hiding my inquisitiveness in a casual, 360-degree pirouette. Mother always judged people by their shoes, seldom incorrectly. I pinched the bridge of my nose between thumb and forefinger to cover my darting examination of male footwear. Fitzadam wore buttery leather loafers that would not survive one trip across a paddock. They did not need to. He couched his greed in terms of local economic development that would bring jobs to the community. They were unskilled, poorly paid and exploitative. If Fitzadam wanted a paddock, environmentalists wept. Those acquisitive hooks in the middle zone of his handwriting did not lie.

A glance under the drinks table showed that Ted had exchanged his scuffed Blundstone boots for a new pair of Rossis, the Australian made sturdy work boots he favoured. Boredom glazed his eyes. In my book, this was not the expression of a man planning to kill his wife. I had worn it enough myself at many a function. Mask it as one tried, it always appeared, shouting to the cognoscenti that one wished to be elsewhere but must humour his wife to avert domestic catastrophe.

Anthea glided to her brother's side and spoke from the corner of her mouth, subverting potential lip-readers. Ted stood straight, tucked in his chin and grimaced.

Another pinch of my nose-bridge and slight turn of the body revealed old brogues, bound to belong to the scientific feet of Roderick Eastmeadowson. Finally I encountered the last of my suspects. I confronted the most moulded and bumpy forehead I had ever observed on human visage. Quite his most distinctive feature. How different was the man from his smooth and polished wife. Translucent strawberry red rimmed his widely spaced blue eyes, repeating the colour of his lashes and brows. His hair was thick and straight as a stallion's mane. It flowed from a central point on his crown, providing a sort of sensitive *gravitas* in certain lights. Accusing Roderick Eastmeadowson of *levitas* was unthinkable.

I recalled the I-dots resembling dashes or mini-Ts in his handwriting. He had other temper indicators, such as t-bars slanted downward, which told of a domineering nature. The rest I could not recall. I would review the originals when I got home. I hoped it would not be too late.

Home, home, with those secrets that Caterina thought she knew.

Our hostess placed a hand on her friend's shoulder.

Meredith transformed her violin into a dinner bell, although how she managed to segue so seamlessly from Benny Goodman's *Blue room* was beyond me.

Caterina nodded at Delleen, who announced, 'Dinner is served.'