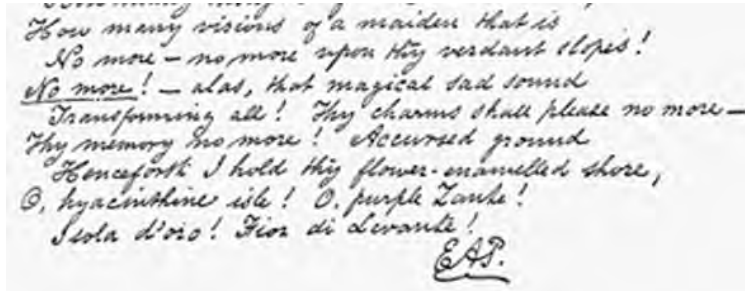


Susan Woldenberg Butler/Just Add Nauseam

## **Just Add Nauseam**

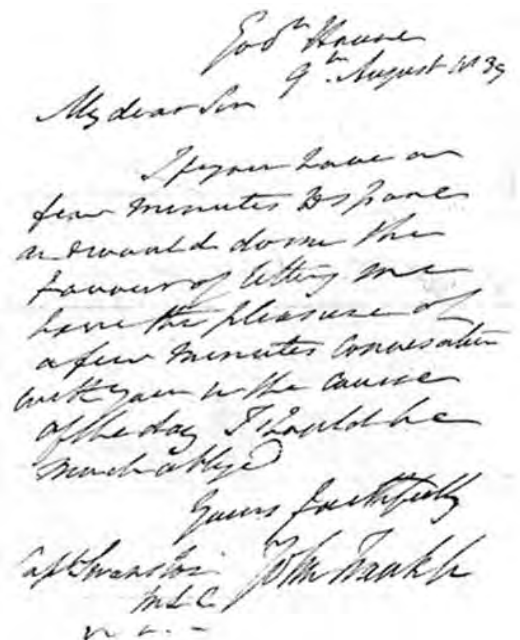
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Famous handwriting samples



How many visions of a maiden that is  
No more - no more upon thy verdant slopes!  
No more! - alas, that magical sad sound  
Transforming all! Thy charms shall please no more -  
Thy memory no more! Accursed ground  
Henceforth I hold thy flower-encumbered shore,  
O, hyacinthine isle! O, purple Lake!  
Sola d'io! Fior di Levante!  
E.A.P.

Edgar Allan Poe, author of first modern detective story, 'The Murders at the Rue Morgue'



God bless  
My dear Sir 9 August 1839  
If you have a few minutes to spare  
I would do you the  
favour of letting me  
have the pleasure of  
a few minutes conversation  
with you in the course  
of the day I should be  
much obliged  
Yours faithfully  
John Franklin  
G.C.



My dear Sir  
I shall be  
happy to see you <sup>within</sup> to day  
before 4 o'clock, or tomorrow  
3, when we embark  
in the schooner -  
I am my dear Sir  
very truly yours  
Jane Franklin  
Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> of

Sir John Franklin (1786-1847), Governor of Tasmania (l); Jane, Lady Franklin (1791-1875), wife of Sir John (rt)

### Editor's Note

I found this fragment from my casebook recently while redecorating my study. It brings to mind poor Caterina Hungerford, the obsessive-compulsive whom no one believed ... until too late.

‘A tribute to the late Mrs Hungerford, who lived when times were less bland and bleached, when sex belonged to all music, not just rock and roll—indeed to all of us, in any permutation we wanted,’ Caterina ting-ed her glass.

We gathered at the sideboard in the dining room. Blue food sat displayed on the antique silver Hungerford plate. Domed covers protected the hot dishes.

‘Any permutation at all,’ she repeated, raising a glass of white wine.

There is a gap in my notes—I think my brother’s dog ate them—which resume here. I recall with the same spreading horror the way our hostess looked at her dinner guests as she provided six good motives for her murder.

‘What if actions are legal but disgusting? Should the sins of the fathers, or others, be visited upon the children? Do one’s past negative actions negate one’s present good life? Is a life founded on the blood of others valid? Should one keep quiet or expose it? What if it is criminal? What if it is not?’

All eyes devoured our hostess. Duke Ellington horned Blue serge unheeded. ‘Let us begin with my dear hus—oh!’

Caterina gasped. She clutched her chest.

I present Caterina’s case in its entirety, with the high beam of life’s unflattering retrospectoscope turned upon myself. Please allow me to build up to my shame, *i.e.*, Caterina’s death. Oh alright, race precipitously to Chapter 5 if you must. One hopes one’s readers possess more self-control.

## **1.Monday. Bring my killer to justice**

She collapsed in on herself on like a crushed magnolia, repeating, ‘Bring my killer to justice!’

The solid cedar sill framed her perfectly in the window. Wife Imperilled. Dignity Unimpaired.

Deflating imps was not to my liking.

‘One of my dinner guests plans to kill me Saturday night!’ she whispered to the sheep dotting the distant blue paddocks.

I crossed my study to see facial expressions she was trying desperately to hide. My approach swirled the still air. She clutched a merino shawl closer to her chest.

We were two weeks into a soft autumn—no hard frosts or harsh winds—that stripped the sun of its biting edge and stultified my demons, who ceased pursuing me with their usual glee.

A new one slipped in with Caterina Hungerford.

‘Why would anyone want to kill you, Caterina, and why Saturday night?’

Her face contorted, so unlike the soft foothills undulating into the horizon. Such was the feeling of timelessness that we could easily have been in nineteenth-century Tasmania rather than twenty-first.

‘Come.’ I led her to a spoonback chair facing the desk. Her dark eyes flickered down my leg, reflecting my limp. Behind her head rose a glowing cedar cabinet from my grandfather’s grandfather’s days.

I resumed my seat. ‘Why, Caterina?’

‘I do not mean to attract them, the secrets. It just happens, and it can be dangerous.’

Blackmail for something other than money?

‘I am a professional woman, not a blackmailer. You know that, Quaminus.’

‘Computers, isn’t it?’ I asked, peeling back, one finger at a time, the white cotton gloves with which I examined documents.

‘Programming.’ She pulled her wrap tighter with a determined claw. ‘I will divest myself of all secrets at Saturday night’s dinner party.’ She nodded her wedge of light hair, cut short and sharp. ‘I cannot die, Quaminus, not with my plans for Hornbeam Hall!’

I eased onto my good haunch and crossed a leg. ‘Why Saturday night?’ The demands of farm and orchard meant that early autumn was not a particularly sociable time for our crowd. ‘And why did you leave it so late to contact me?’

‘There will be a blue-food dinner party to honour my late mother-in-law. Blue was her favourite colour. And this feeling—no, certainty—only invaded me recently.’

‘Can’t you postpone the celebration?’

‘It is her birthday, and all the catering was set in motion months ago.’

‘Nevertheless ...’

‘If you cannot prevent my death, Quaminus, then please bring my murderer to justice—justice in the true sense of the word.’

‘Have you contacted the police? Though no crime has been committed ...’

‘Of course not.’ She twisted her wedding ring first three times clockwise, then three times counter-clockwise. ‘It is a private matter. I knew Mrs Bennett and the dear old duchess.’

She referred to my two previous cases, undertaken as reluctantly as this one. The dear old duchess, well, retrieving those cheques had been messy but cash and contacts ensured a successful outcome. The death of Mr Bennett proved to be accidental. Myocardial infarction. That Mrs Bennett’s spouse expired in his mistress’s bed was irrelevant.

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‘Your husband?’

‘Ted sees it as part of my ... condition.’ Her sartorial crispness belied the desperation in her voice. She’d driven for two hours without the intrusion of a single wrinkle into linen trousers the colour of field mushrooms and shirt of Antarctic ice. She gestured at a manuscript on my desk. ‘A Royal Society presentation?’

I straightened its creases with feathery fingertip caresses. ‘A *billet doux* supposedly written by Sir John Franklin while he was Governor of Tasmania. It may be a forgery.’

‘Your fondness for old scraps of paper is well known.’ She toed the carpet with a stylish boot, the sturdy brown of a nicely roasted lamb.

She was beginning to irritate me. ‘I’m rather busy, Caterina—’

‘I will make it worth your while.’

Ah. The conventional plea from the drowning to the dry, floated daily on the waters of life. Politeness had dictated our social intercourse for long enough. The time had come to exercise the firmness of character for which I was notorious.

‘I’ve given up detecting. I suggest—’

‘Please, Quaminus.’ She tossed her pie-piece hair so that she resembled a stern pixie despite her thirty-odd years.

‘Who would do this, this deed?’ I could not say *murder*.

‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.’ She rammed thumbnail into little finger as suspects bubbled from her lips. ‘My disappointed husband, his despising sister, her hateful husband, my loving best friend and her self-adoring husband. And a gluttonous old family friend. Also present will be the servants—I mean household help: three of them plus an imported chef.’

‘Your children?’

‘Sally and her brother are away overseas on a school trip.’

Images of Clover and our work this weekend with asylum seekers blanketed my mind with comfort impossible to deny. I glanced longingly at the Franklin *billet doux* and recalled that I had to ring Dr Hassan, the local link on the Underground Railroad chain. I yearned for solitude, sans the well-meaning intrusions of my cleaner, Mrs Breech. Her Monday morning screeching wafted into the house as she harangued our firewood feral, Joe Steebles, out the back, reminding me that I was remiss in not offering morning tea to my visitor.

Caterina misinterpreted my expression as I started to speak. She said quickly, ‘As payment, Quaminus, perhaps you will accept a little something that has been in my father’s family since the First Fleet, a forged Colonial land grant. One of my ancestors was quite an accomplished artist, although we kept it quiet. He would have wanted it to go to a good home.’

Greed crimped the corners of my mouth. I controlled it immediately, ashamed, but she noticed. Caterina observed everything, an unfortunate trait which might well her life.

‘Why would you offer such a troublesome document?’

‘I do not think the government could confiscate our property at this late date. I would give it to you even if doing so might publicise that Father’s fortune was based on fraud and deceit. That should demonstrate the urgency of my need.’

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. After the accident that changed my life I’d developed an unexpected sensitivity, an awareness of subtle olfactory layers. Early autumn emitted its own siren scents, like leaves mouldering with rain trapped underneath and droplets on top. Pears rotted on the ground under the tree near the kitchen block, awaiting wattlebirds and wasps. Mulberries decayed, decadent in one last alcoholic fling before dissolving into the earth. Smoke

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from fires played its own symphony. Gums burned pungent and sharp, ineffably eucalyptus. Wattle exuded a dirty sort of smoke as it swirled to the heavens.

People also exuded strong scents. Some smelled relaxing, like Clover. Others reeked of darker emotions, like my brother Miles, damn and blast him.

A clean fragrance overlaid with heartbreak assailed me.

I opened my eyes and jabbed my thumb into the flesh just below the hipbone, still bristling from Caterina's involuntary glance at my game leg.

'We have heard about Miles's plans for this section of the property,' Caterina she. 'My brother George finds that unspeakable—we all do—and will offer you sanctuary on his land.'

Outside, black-and-white Belted Galloway cattle speckled the shimmering hills. A male fairy wren hopped on stick legs across the rim of a birdbath near the euonymus tree just outside the study, its tiny luminous turquoise body round as a tennis ball.

On her deathbed, Mother had two modest requests. I held her icy hand as we strolled on the dark side, which I have preferred ever since to grim and desiccated virtue. Would I make her a calligraphic memorial? That I never completed it remained one of my biggest regrets. And would I please, please live my life 'appropriately'? If I were unable to fulfill her first wish, then at least I could honour her memory when iniquitous humanity loomed, as now might be stalking Caterina Hungerford.

Caterina dangled lifetime security in front of my nose, on a chain that bobbed in the breeze like a voodoo doll. No cleansing wind blew in this new demon.

A weekend at Hornbeam Hall might do me a world of good.

## 2. Friday. The siren scent of cinnamon

I might not understand them, but I determined that two of the female species would not outsmart me, at least not today, Friday afternoon at Hornbeam Hall. I had rolled back the carpet and lay gloriously unfolded on my stomach in the first room at the top of the stairs, directly above Caterina's office. I reached for a water glass, wedged it against my ear on the hardwood floor and listened with unguarded abandon to the conversation below.

'I hate all this dishonesty, Cat,' came through sharp and clear.

'You should have thought of that before, Merry. I couriered him the samples yesterday.'

Six handwriting specimens had indeed arrived at Linden Park. Each guest wrote the same sentence using all the letters of the alphabet and including signatures, 'in anticipation that you would accept this challenge,' Caterina said when she rang last night to ensure delivery. 'You will find Meredith's different. She's so ... *irrepressible*.'

I splayed myself a little wider to catch every word.

'I've changed my mind, especially after what happened to your mother.'

'We were only nine years old, Meredith.'

'We're in trouble. He uses handwriting analysis in his work.'

Caterina's laughter wafted through the floorboards. 'I would not worry. His reference materials were printed in the 1970s.'

'Human nature doesn't change that much. Please let me out of it.'

'Not this time,' her friend said with deadly emphasis.

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

framed in the doorway.

I scrambled to my feet ungracefully.

‘The Brigadier always said—’

‘Please leave at once, Madame.’ 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. As it thumped against the wall behind her, she manoeuvred her free hand to prevent its contents from overflowing. ‘All safe,’ she purred to a military man in a pewter frame, a monstrous bar of Toblerone chocolate and the head of a stuffed giraffe that nestled behind her elbow.

Bolla Lester-Norman loved her husband, her food and staying in country houses. Hosting the widow of a brigadier added respectability to a gathering, Clover assured me.

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

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

‘Mrs—Bolla—’ I blubbered through the introduction to my first suspect. Frustrated, I pawed the floor with my foot like a wounded stallion. The rustlings and murmurings below stopped immediately. What were the old friends incubating? What happened to Caterina’s mother when the girls were nine years old?

The room smelled solid and oppressive, like the day. 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.

I went out onto the landing. The siren scents of ginger, yeasted wheat and cinnamon sang from the kitchen wing, beckoning me. Once down the stairs, I stopped near an old barometer, plain and lovely, that predicted calm weather. I wasn't so sure.

I rapped on Caterina's door. The woman of my dreams answered. A wild blond halo framed a remarkable face with liquid blue eyes and long black lashes. A stab of longing pierced my heart, alongside a jolt of treachery administered by the long reach of Clover.

'You must be Quaminus Frye,' she said, extending an electrifying hand. 'Meredith Eastmeadowson. We've just been talking about you.'

'I know, er, pleasure to meet you.' I touched fingertips with an oasis of symmetry and grace. To hide my confusion, I scrutinised a large whiteboard that 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 organisational feat recalled black-and-white movies in which overweening military commanders plotted destruction with overacting subordinates in front of massive world maps.

From the computer, Caterina gestured me toward a cedar sofa with scrolled arms and carved feet. 'I will be with you in a moment,' she said. 'I am just finishing some cataloguing. Birthdays, addresses, that sort of thing, before the serious work begins for the party.' Her computer posture was perfect. Most of us hunched or slumped.

'How much do you know?' Meredith asked from her perfect height of around five feet ten.

'Everything,' I lied, sitting as directed.

She glided over to the computer and perched on the edge of the desk. Surely Caterina's best friend did not have murder in her heart.

‘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 a stylish touch.

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

‘The Hawthorne Effect is a scientific principle of observation, is it not?’ I asked. Feeble, Quaminus. You’re losing your touch, old man, such as it was.

‘Yes. A woman found in the 1930s that people behaved differently when they knew they were being observed. A bit like us, petal!’ she said to her friend.

I fidgeted on the abstractly patterned raspberry-and-lilac upholstery, as difficult to settle into as our hostess. ‘Caterina, is it wise to obscure the colour of what we plan to eat tomorrow?’

‘I have searched for poisons on the Internet,’ she replied. ‘Murder-by-mushroom is too slow and requires more than one ingestion. Aconite, belladonna, digitalis—I think not. Hemlock leaves in the salad is possible but indiscriminate. Strychnine, arsenic, thallium: I doubt it. Cyanide has a certain *je nais se quoi* best suited to the festivities.’

‘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.’

A thwack at the door preceded the appearance of a female rump. ‘Miz Hungerford?’ asked a sizeable woman as she entered. No makeup masked her middle-aged plainness, which she accentuated by slicking back her greying brown hair into a tortured bun. A low buzz

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accompanied her like a cloud of wasps. She hummed *Waltzing Matilda* in a rasping monotone unsettling in its disregard for rhythm and pacing.

‘What is it, Delleen?’ Caterina asked, not turning away from the monitor.

‘Will you be wanting afternoon tea?’

‘No, thank you. Mrs Eastmeadowson is just leaving. Perhaps Mr Frye will have something in his room.’

‘Yes, thank you, a bit later,’ I said.

The cleaner departed in a haze of peppermint.

‘I overheard bits of your conversation earlier,’ I said to the two friends as the door closed.

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

‘To what do you refer?’

‘Oh Quammie, you should see your face,’ Meredith giggled.

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

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

‘I certainly hope so, Caterina,’ I said in sternest tones. ‘I’m tempted to leave and damn the consequences if you continue to obstruct my efforts.’

Caterina strode to the whiteboard like a general and faced us with hands clasped behind her back. Her muscles tightened, beginning with the jaw and flowing down her neck. ‘There is an old will which would turn life here upside down,’ she said.

‘Another one!’

‘Yes, Quaminus, another one.’

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Back upstairs, I fanned out the handwriting samples on a table in the centre of the room. I'd put Meredith's on top, as she was freshest in my mind. Instead of *The fox-and-bleu-cheese quiche evinced a mighty, purple haze in the kitchen's jaw*, as Caterina asked her guests to write out, Meredith wrote this:

A handwritten note in cursive script, written on a piece of paper. The text is: "how to begin to thank you, she took would not have sold her as it was, with". The handwriting is somewhat messy and slanted.

I'd never seen such honest and forthright As and Os: not a sign of anything untoward, tortured, secret. 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 thud at the door made me long to be in my study at Linden Park on a Mrs Breech-less day. 'Come in,' I growled with no good grace.

Delleen entered bearing a tray laden with scones, translucent pink jam, cream and tea things. 'Your afternoon tea, Mr Frye.' She plunked the tray on top of Meredith's sample.

I lifted a corner and slid the paper out of teardrop range. 'Thank you, Delleen.'

She narrowed her eyes and appraised me as if evaluating undernourished livestock. 'You'll get your sustenance in this house if it kills you.'

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. She withdrew a roll of peppermints from her apron pocket, flicked one free with her thumbnail and popped it into her mouth.

'You're to eat the lot.' She pointed to the loaded tray with the roll of peppermints. 'And don't be long about it, if you please. There's a lot to do for the party tomorrow night.'

I watched her backside fill the doorway, thanking God my family had been spared its

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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. One dare not object. Help was hard to find, and this created an uneasy alliance. I preferred the Bethany Breechs.

‘I would like to ask a favour,’ I ventured, trying to get her on side.

She stared implacably, left hand on hip. ‘Been here for forty-three years I have, since I was a girl, and nobody’s said that to me yet.’

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

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

‘More like protecting. I understand if you don’t want to help.’

‘Why should I?’ She sucked the life out of that peppermint.

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

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

‘One thing, Delleen.’ Her cheeks stopped puffing and contracting. ‘What happened to Caterina’s mother when the girls were nine years old?’

‘The poor woman died,’ she said simply, ‘and that’s all I’m going to say.’

Peppermint hovered in a cloud between us. Finally I said, ‘There. I have done it.’

‘Done what?’ she asked, leaning toward me.

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

Simultaneously she resumed singing *Waltzing Matilda* and sucking her lozenge. ‘Okay then, I’ll tell you something for free. I’ve heard interesting things.’

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

‘Miz Anthea—that’s Miz Caterina’s sister-in-law—hated going 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 a triumphant exit.

Concentration shattered, I stacked the examples of handwriting into a neat pile and reached for the tea tray. You are the most fortunate of men, I told myself. Fresh scones and homemade blueberry jam. I’d write a monograph one day on why each woman’s scones tasted so different despite the use of identical ingredients.

I stood up to stretch my bad leg, heeding the admonitions of my physiotherapist for circulation at least once an hour. Silence on the landing arrested my attention, a sudden cessation of creaking floorboards and comings and goings. I crept to the door and opened it sharply.

Nothing. No one. Must have been the late-afternoon chiaroscuro, flickering shadows upon shadows. From under the adjacent 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 Lester-Norman contemplate cold-blooded murder and plan either the writhing agony of death by poison or the slow seeping of extinction by exsanguination? *Keep an open mind*, Mother’s admonishing voice paddled through the ether. *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 like a turtle, secured the door and limped to the dresser. My image rippled through old glass mirror. *You’re a fraud*, I accused my reflection.

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*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 vanished years ago, the night of the accident. Now I felt as if—no, such thoughts must not be allowed to take root. I forced a smile at my reflection. A smile not a scowl, that first psychologist said after the accident. Ease the mind into other grooves and eventually they will become second nature. They call it CBT these days: cognitive behavioural therapy.

I reached for a comb. Clover insisted that women liked my brand of long lean looks, particularly as my hair, which I wore longish and combed straight back, had not receded one centimetre, despite my having achieved the late thirties. She said it reminded her of Michael Douglas in *Wall Street* and brought out my sculpted features. I outshone younger brother Miles, who already combed a long strand over a bald dome in the deluded way of men.

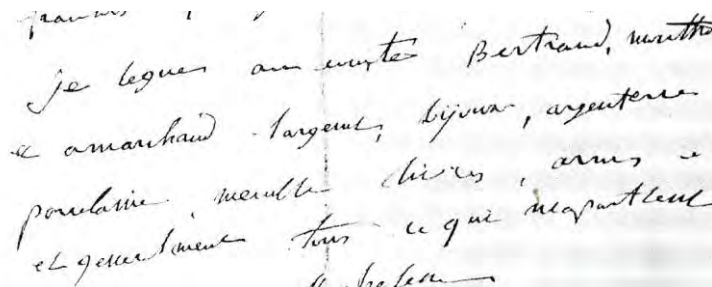
Why did I have to drink so much that night? The proprietor of Linden Park should be Quaminus Giles Frye, not Miles blasted Frye. I'd be breeding purebred Hampshire Down rams if the place were still mine, not Miles's nice safe merinos. Thank God I had health insurance so I was not a burden on the family. I needed to ring my cousin, to both confirm that my policy was in order and inquire about Caterina Hungerford's insurance activities.

I settled in at the desk for some serious handwriting analysis, fuelled by hot tea, steaming scones and blueberry jam. Always start with the victim. She had researched poisons on the Internet. How could she speak so calmly of impending annihilation? A morally disquieting alternative presented itself, that this little sylvan sprite was unwell or covering up another crime.

Always start with the victim. A beautiful woman with her father's fair hair and her mother's Sicilian eyes feared for her life. I unfolded Caterina's printed specimen and held it at

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arm's length for an overall impression. The knots and ties reminded me of the extreme secretiveness and obstinacy in a sample of Napoleon's handwriting I'd obtained written shortly before his death in 1821:



Je legues au comte Bertrand, marquis  
et marchand d'argent, bijoux, argenterie  
porcelaine, meubles divers, armes  
et généralement tout ce qui me appartient  
à la vie.

That my hostess's handwriting scrap might also be penned just before her demise did not bear thinking about.

### 3. Friday afternoon. So many questions

The mid-afternoon Friday sun settled peacefulness on the land. Shadows fledged and wove. Birds tweeted and dove. The olfactory riot my accident unleashed swooped over the land. I inhaled the aroma of freshly mown grass sharpened by omnipresent eucalyptus. Meredith's fried food citrusy smell and Caterina's crisp one galloped across mental lands. Lawns unfolded in crackling sheets behind the sandstone pile, with outbuildings were off to one side.

I saw Ted near the shearing shed and headed towards him. I passed the end of the *macrocarpa* pine 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. Long, tapered hornbeam thorns spiked out dangerously from the branches. 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 in Ms, and Rs. Meredith and Roddy. And in Ns and Hs. Graphoanalysts claimed such formations indicated the investigative mind of one who did not accept the findings of others, as shown in U.S. President Bill Clinton's writing:

A handwritten note in blue ink on lined paper. The text reads: "I need your help. In many hours and Senate races new Democrats are threatened by old Republicans filling". The handwriting is cursive and somewhat slanted.

Ted's hum-singing led me to the shearing shed. Woody Guthrie rode the breeze '... *My land I'll defend life with your life need be, My pastures of plenty must always be free.*' The master of the house hunched over a tractor with two farmhands burly and brown as beer casks.

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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 and excluded accidents of birth such as Ted's sister Anthea, despite her yearning 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 married and would reject his wife with her dying breath.

‘Quaminus.’

‘Ted.’ I shook the outstretched hand, hot and redolent of sheep, the meaty paw of a working farmer. Ted exuded an aroma of machine grease, petrol and a raw woolly lanoline.

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.

My shadow fell on the tractor's raised bonnet.

Ted straightened, spanner in hand. ‘That should do it. Fan belt.’

I gazed into the jumbled mess and tried to look intelligent. I was not with a woman or a city male, so I couldn't fake it.

Ted climbed into the cab and started the motor. Perfect. He switched the engine off and jumped down with the same easy swing with which his ancestors had probably dismounted their steeds. ‘Run of bad luck with the old girl lately. The tractor, I mean. Last week a rear tyre punctured. Prob’ly ran over a stake in the field without knowing it.’

Like his house, everything about Ted’s big bones projected solidity. Sun-cured, slow moving and stable as a tree. Rooted in a sense of place, as they said on the late-night radio. Conservatism appeared in his handwriting, in the compression and retracing of his Ms, Ns, Rs and Hs. He was his mother’s son and would do anything for the land. It comforted me greatly to know that such people existed.

Whereas his brother-in-law Guy Fitzadam exhibited a sort of restless mutability that suited the water, Ted was inflexible and stiff, with the countryman’s way of being part of the environment without dominating it. He gazed with such longing toward the shearing shed that I felt a criminal for keeping the man from his work.

‘I’ll be brief. Caterina thinks someone is going to murder her tomorrow night.’

He smiled, baring the teeth he had inherited from his mother. Their uppers slanted in and down toward the lower jawbone.

‘You don’t take it seriously.’

‘She’s a bit of a drama queen, old man,’ he said, shaking his head in the universal manner of bemused husbands. Ted wiped his hands on a greasy rag looped through his belt. That bit of cloth epitomised Ted’s conservatism. A shirt in the country was never just an article of clothing to be used until worn and then discarded. Once it had fulfilled its original use, the farm wife turned its cuffs. It could then be worn for warmth, hidden underneath something more presentable, or become a bush shirt for hunting trips and hard labour before retiring into a

thousand strips to tie around garden stakes or mop up machine grease. If particularly absorbent, it might be used inside to dry dishes, polish silver or dust cedar joinery.

As did other local farmers, my host dressed in inverse proportion to his wealth. He wore ancient jeans, a flannel shirt with a turned collar and a sheepskin vest that had seen better days.

‘But surely all threats must be heeded.’

‘I’m afraid you’re wasting your time, old man,’ he said. Beyond the shed the dark river snaked through the valley.

‘I do have something on the boil at home,’ I admitted, thinking of the Franklin manuscript and my presentation to the Royal Society.

‘Well, you’re not needed here, though of course you’re welcome to stay as long as you like. Pleasure having you with us,’ he added with reflexive good manners.

‘Caterina and Meredith seem to be plotting something,’ I said.

If the married state planted that haunted look on the features of such a man, I was fortunate indeed.

‘You realise that the police will suspect you if anything goes wrong tomorrow night.’

‘Nothing’s going to happen.’ Ted’s habit of tucking his chin under and elongating his neck sent ripples through his neck and throat, leathery creases like the folds of a sari. He discounted his wife’s preoccupations, apparently from long habit. I sympathised with the poor woman. ‘You might find it interesting to talk to her friend.’

He was not wrong, as it transpired. All the misgivings, the shadows and whispers, the allusions and uncertainties thrown into the mental loaf tin were preparing to emerge from the oven fully baked and lumpy, with the lumps being on my thick head.

I reviewed what I had got as I strolled back to the hall, glad of the warming autumn sun on my leg. Ted's handwriting lacked the recklessness to commit an unpremeditated act. Only one thing could rouse Ted to murder as far as I knew, and even that was unlikely. But people always surprise you, as Mother said. I needed to check that bit of muddiness in Ted's writing, indicating either uncontrolled sexuality or a smudge on the paper. Never overlook the obvious. Edgar Allen Poe. 'The Purloined Letter.' Would Ted do anything for the right woman? Sex, drugs and rock-and-roll did not define the man I knew. Or thought I knew.

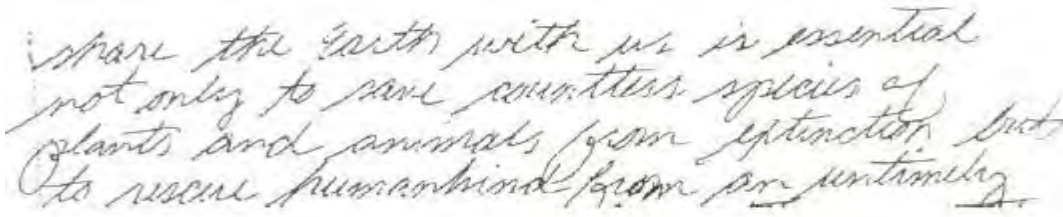
Doubts assailed me as I neared Hornbeam. Was I wasting my time with an empty intellectual exercise to mollify a neurotic farm wife? Was the lady truly in danger? Did she plan to commit suicide for the insurance money and blame it on a hated sister-in-law, or were the forces of uncontainable jealousy slowly driving her mad? Perhaps I'd better examine Anthea's writing. And Fitzadam's while I was at it. What was the saying about old friends equalling old grudges? And Bolla: was her self-indulgence a façade? Was she protecting someone unable to defend himself? What about Roddy the paleoclimatologist? So many answers awaited. I'd only to ferret them out.

The sense of being followed enveloped me. I turned. No one. And no sign of Meredith.

I stared at Georgian mansion, willing it to divulge its secrets. The way the windows closed and looped back protectively upon themselves brought to mind the teachings of graphoanalysis on 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. Imagine life without it! One shuddered. Letters closed and looped to the right indicated secretiveness. Double internal loops conveyed intentional deception. No one indicator stood alone; others factors

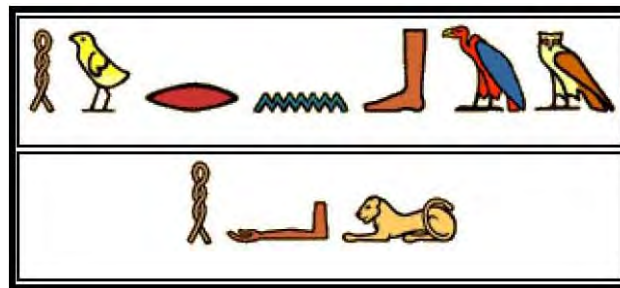
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influenced all formations. Manipulativeness, evasion, secrecy, honesty: none of the guests' handwriting showed these traits to the degree that did U.S. serial killer Ted Bundy's:



to spare the earth with us is essential  
not only to save countless species of  
plants and animals from extinction but  
to rescue humankind from pr-jun-timely

I eased onto the verandah and peered into the Egyptian Room through the French doors. I extended a flat hand to shade my eyes and examined a plaque on the far wall inside the room. The Hungerford daughter, Sally, had ordered a lozenge from the Internet and presented to her father, Ted, at Christmas, the words *Hornbeam Hall* in hieroglyphics:



My people preferred grand books in Mesopotamia. I said another silent thanks to the ancestor for whom I was named who'd left me so comfortably situated, that younger son who became a ship's captain and sailed from England early in the nineteenth century. He imported merino sheep to breed and run on the twenty thousand acres he acquired in Tasmania's rolling hills. No one had yet been able to ruin Quaminus the First's investment despite determined efforts, for example by my grandfather, a gambling man who died inebriated on horseback. As firstborn, I'd had a go at running the place. An encounter between my car and a tree one night ended that. The land needs someone whole, not dragging a bad leg. Nevertheless, I'd have managed had not younger brother Miles been lurking, ready to grab what he wanted.

The French doors to the Egyptian Room were unlatched. I pulled them towards me by narrow brass handles and entered another world. The plaque drew me close, colourful and full of meaning if only I could decipher it, a bit like tomorrow's dinner guests.

An armchair beckoned with a good view of the tennis court. I sank into it and manoeuvred myself into a comfortable position. Two Old Kingdom hunting tapestries 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.

The sploek of a fast-travelling ball attracted my attention through a window on the fireplace wall to the tennis court beyond. Fitzadam played against his agile wife with energy if not grace. Just like his handwriting. The property developer liked to play at every opportunity. We'd no doubt be subjected to that hollow pinging sound again, before the dinner party tomorrow evening.

I'd heard rumours of Caterina's business investments with her brother-in-law. Could she no longer hide bad investments from her husband? Was her jelly business in distress? Maybe Ted wanted a divorce or she could no longer bear Anthea's criticisms. Whatever it was, my hostess had confided at least part of the truth to her best friend. Were the old chums plotting a nice little dose of feminine poison? Had the medical examination uncovered a terminal disease that my third cousin neglected to impart? Did our hostess suffer from a fatal allergy? What would any of them gain, particularly the lovely Mrs Eastmeadowson? Did blackmail infiltrate their friendship? Appearances could be deceiving.

Caterina's computer troubled me. I needed expert advice to access her files should she prove uncooperative or unable. Where to find such a creature? Any investigation would have to

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include three-pronged research: personal contacts, the above-mentioned files and knowledge gleaned by graphoanalysis. To relying upon one prong only would be like windmilling butterfly nets in the air. Telephone calls during the week had resurrected my contact network, except for the computer expert, who was on maternity leave.

I returned my attention Fitzadam's flailings on the court. Nobody with a body that long and such squat legs could negotiate tennis 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: an heir, a spare and a little girl. Hamish, Alex and Felicity, I believe they were called, although I'd never met them and they didn't seem to feature much in their mother's world.

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 condescending greed.

One guest remained about whom I knew nothing. Dr Roderick Eastmeadowson depressed his dinner partners into catatonia with talk of catastrophic climate change and impending civilisation collapse. Why would he kill Caterina? Did Hornbeam 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 perhaps erred ethically on a paper's authorship? Blackmail again.

**SIDEBAR.**

**Ancestors & Egyptian Adventures**

The Victorian spirit of adventure infected both a Hungerford forebear and a Frye of 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 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 evolved whereby each generation of Fryes visited the area. I'd been on my way to Uruk when Father took sick and I had to return home.

The interest in Mesopotamian forms of applying stylus to tablet struck every generation 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. I believe he 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, where it was entirely wasted on my brother Miles.

A plaque that read Hornbeam Hall in hieroglyphics adorned the wall opposite the French doors to the front verandah of Hornbeam Hall. In each corner of the Egyptian 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.

#### **4. Saturday morning. Her eyes were puffy as croissants**

Something sinister dragged me into consciousness on Saturday morning at Hornbeam Hall. I awakened ungracefully, groggy after a bad night, and turned away from the bars of light escaping either side of the window's Holland blind. The blue sky hurt my eyes, thanks to that sleeping tablet. I had a lifetime supply of the little darlings, a bribe for the botched operation on a crushed femur that left me with osteomyelitis. The bone infection required another operation in which part of the femur was removed, leaving me with one leg shorter than the other. A strange bed and new surroundings invited a sleepless night. I succumbed in the small hours and reached for that little bottle. Hypnogogic and hypnopompic imagery merged into a mass of mental spaghetti as sleep drew me into its arms and later pushed me away to face the day. I dreaded those sensory states that preceded and succeeded dreams.

We'd dined last night at the local pizzeria, serenaded by the odour of garlic bread, the aroma of anticipated gaiety and a stench of unstated enmity. I had departed early after a wineless meal the colour of new blood and pus — I did not care for pizza — for the sanctuary of my room and a vintage bottle. I did not drink to be convivial and preferred to catch the guests alone or in small groups, particularly after what I'd learned last night while pouring over their handwriting samples.

I needed to get my blood moving. I dressed and went out to the landing. An intense cloud of patchouli incense slithered under the bathroom door in my direction, so I hurried downstairs and across the lawns. Upon my return I 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. Voices pooled in the dining room. Etiquette demanded that I dive in, despite my lack of appetite. The aroma of fresh coffee dominated the entrance and passageway.

‘There you are, Quaminus dear!’ warbled a melodious contralto utterly suited to its surroundings. I looked past a grandfather clock and two chairs to the woman leaving the dining room. Anthea Hungerford Fitzadam paused under a portrait of her mother, whose memory Caterina was honouring at that evening’s blue-food 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’d returned with breathtaking disregard for her daughter’s feelings. People other than my cleaner 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. Her tennis whites accentuated her majestic nature. 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 moved forward and took her hand. The flagged diamond sandstone blocks were cool and hard underfoot.

‘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 just finishing breakfast. Must dash and warm up. He plays hard. I do apologise.’

Some men found her trim fitness irresistible. Some women appreciated the way she wore a tennis outfit, muttered Clover in a tone that said she wasn’t one of them.

‘No need,’ I said. ‘I’ve plenty of snooping round to do to prepare for this evening.’

The princess royal looked daggers at the door to Caterina’s office and said, ‘She means well,’ leaving a mountain of unspoken ‘buts’ poised to avalanche our hostess’s good name.

‘Maman would not have approved.’ She gazed adoringly at the portrait, as one does at sacred Madonnas.

‘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. I caught a whiff of revisionist history floating past on tufts of cinnamon and apple from the kitchen. 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.’

Earn your pay, I admonished myself. Question Time.

‘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, Quaminus.’

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!’

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‘Your mother’s favourite colour, I believe.’

‘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. I’ve kept you too long from your breakfast. Let’s catch up later, shall we?’

I’d been regally dismissed, so went into the dining room. Caterina and Fitzadam *sotto voce*d over a platter of scrambled eggs and onions. They shot apart when they saw me enter. Now there was a permutation I had not considered. Guy removed his hand from Caterina’s elbow so swiftly I would have missed it had my eyes not been drawn to the oil painting of old Mr Hungerford, Ted and Anthea’s grandfather, hanging over the solid cedar sideboard. The artist caught the nature of that *bon vivant*, who counted afternoon tea as his favourite feed. He’d never approved of his daughter-in-law, so said Clover, but she redeemed herself with her scones.

Bolla Lester-Norman sat at one end of the large mahogany table, still in her night world, eyes puffy as croissants. She broke a triangle of toast, slathered it with marmalade and reached for a slab of bacon.

I shambled toward the laden sideboard, where the scents of tea, sausages, scrambled eggs and onions, bacon, toast and French pastries joined the coffee. I took the top plate from a pile at one end of the sideboard. The Royal Albert English Chintz china was perfectly appropriate for breakfast, with its roses, forget-me-nots and violets cavorting busily on a lilac-tinted background.

‘Beautiful bacon, dear,’ Bolla called out mid-chew. ‘Your own beast?’

Caterina nodded.

Bolla bestowed the ultimate benediction. ‘The Brigadier would have approved.’

Delleen hurried in, encased in peppermint. She whispered in her mistress’s ear.

Caterina scowled. ‘Excuse me, please,’ she said. ‘I am needed urgently in the kitchen.’

I started toward my client.

‘I can handle this, Quaminus. Have your breakfast..’

‘I shall accompany you, Caterina.’

‘Can’t you hear, Frye?’ Fitzadam said, brushing past me, plate piled high with sausages.

He deposited himself next to Bolla.

‘Please, Quaminus,’ my hostess said. ‘I insist.’

‘If you need me ...’

‘I know where you are.’

I pursed my lips to demonstrate displeasure. The gesture was wasted. Mistress and help had already entered another world. I surveyed the assembled food. The scrambled eggs and onions were unappetising, their yellow-and-brown unpleasantly aggressive against the lilac-tinted English Chintz china. I selected one piece of toast and a cup of coffee. Unlike tea, I took it black with four sugars.

‘About that apartment building in Sandy Bay,’ Bolla was saying as I approached.

‘Shh!’ Fitzadam said. He twitched his head in my direction and simultaneously sawed through his sausages.

‘Heard you refused an offer,’ Bolla continued baldly.

‘We can do better,’ the developer whispered. ‘Trust me.’ A vertical wrinkle over Fitzadam’s nose fanned into his brows, shielding narrow eyes.

I sat across from the sibilant twosome, quite looking forward to drinking my coffee from the fine bone china. No one could convince me that its delicacy and translucence did not enhance the flavour of hot liquid.

Fitzadam glared up at me, chewing.

‘A word please, Fitzadam — ’ I began.

A dreadful clatter arose from the kitchen wing. I jumped up, the pleasures of coffee drinking forgotten. I hurtled toward the passageway, and saw Anthea tilt the portrait of her mother slightly askew. Whether this mischief was aimed at her mother or her sister-in-law I’d no idea, but it made me wonder how well I really knew Anthea Hungerford Fitzadam.

I hobbled-ran down the passageway, following the throbbing scent of cake and consternation. Fitzadam was so close on my heels that I smelled the sausage on his breath. Bolla’s words wafted towards us, past the portrait of Anthea’s mother. ‘Let them fight it out amongst themselves. I shall finish my breakfast.’ I unknotted three strands of screeching voices as I neared the kitchen wing out the back: Caterina, Delleen and an unknown male. This was a hideous worry, completely out of character for my hostess.

Fitzadam and I burst into the kitchen. 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.

Three scents assailed me: furious peppermint, the ammoniac odour of cleaning silver and the stench of my own ignorance.

Delleen waved her arms like a demented windmill and cried, ‘I told him not to use those broad beans, but he wouldn’t listen!’ She knelt on the flagged floor and mopped up a pool of biscuity-brown silver-cleaning liquid. ‘He made me spill it,’ she muttered. She then sat at a table,

grabbed a chamois and resumed polishing in preparation for the evening's needs, a strong-smelling bottle beside her.

'Pride goeth before the fall,' she said. Indignation pulsed from every circular swipe of the chamois. 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.

'How you expect Manfred to make ze perfect Salade Nicoise!' the chef shouted. He was a fine-featured man with a weak chin.

'I told you, broad beans are not to be served in this house!' Caterina cried.

'Just one leetle — '

'Is that all this bloody fuss is about?' Fitzadam demanded. 'I'm outta here. Don't be long,' he said to Anthea. 'I've got a busy day.' With that he left.

'He's a fraud and a fiend!' Delleen screamed, sending out waves of ammonia every time she brandished the chamois.

Manfred Hermayne rose to his full height, which was not much. 'How dare — '

The mistress of the house turned to her housekeeper. 'Delleen, will you do something vitally important?'

'Of course, Madame.'

'Please scrub this kitchen from top to bottom. And disinfect it. Twice. You can finish polishing the silver afterwards. Call in Tina if you must, but you are the one I trust to do it properly. I am putting you in charge.'

Anthea had been silently reassuring herself about the safety of the family plate. She now spoke. 'That's not all, surely?' She gestured at the broad wooden table, sand-scrubbed creamy

white, which dominated the centre of the room, on which the paraphernalia of a pastry artist presided.

‘Thank you Madame, you are extremely correct,’ Manfred said, fuming protectively over a pastry structure in the middle of the table. Asian condiment dishes filled with icing sugar mixed with water and tinted every shade of blue from robin’s egg to royal huddled at one end of the table. 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.

‘That eez not all —’ 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. The chef gestured sweepingly to his Creation, enthroned on butcher paper. His colour calmed from mulberry to tomato to strawberry and hovered at pale peach.

Caterina, Anthea and I looked at him expectantly. Delleen continued humming, emitting peppermint and polishing silver.

‘I do this because of that!’ His hands made a grand arc from broad bean to table centre.

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

‘Someone has been tampering with Hornbeam Hall,’ Manfred Hermayne said ominously.

Caterina paled to whipped egg white. I thought she might faint.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘Sabotage!’ Manfred wielded a palette knife, designating a spot on a pastry wall in the rear of his Creation. ‘Someone thinks I do not notice, but they are dealing with Manfred.’

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

‘Here,’ Manfred pointed.

I bent my body and cocked my head. Then I saw it. ‘A pinprick, 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 look into it,’ I promised in my best authoritative voice. Such an act indicated a crime more indiscriminate than selective poisoning.

Mollified, the artiste swirled one of his smallest paintbrushes into a teal sugar mound. He had been successfully distracted from his Salade Nicoise. But I had not. I would check later about what all the fuss was about.

‘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 a nauseous ache. I cannot concentrate properly.'

'I've kept Guy waiting long enough,' Anthea said, and bounced out the door.

'Caterina,' I said. 'A word, please.'

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

Caterina looked from one of us to the other. I sympathised with her. Maintaining staff discipline could be hideously difficult. Just look at Mrs Breech.

'I'll speak to you a little later,' I said. 'I've work to do now.' I eased out the door. I had to do something to earn the Caterina's promised land grant, to keep the demons at bay. Handwriting samples waited in my room.

I climbed the stairs slowly, thinking about Caterina's printed sample, and adjured myself to remember the obvious, such as formalised writing previously taught in private schools. All the downward, upward, forward and backward slants, all the idiosyncrasies and different pressures began to blur in my mind. I needed a fine toothcomb to sort through all the guests' writing in a new light.

Hang on. I stopped at the top of the stairs, hand on rail. One thing stood out a mile. I had noticed it in Caterina's printing the morning she had engaged me but put it aside because things got busy. Her K-buckle, that indicator of resistance to authority.

I opened the door to my room and froze. An alien fragrance invaded the cedar. I couldn't place it. Something was wrong. I heard it in the heavy breathing that feathered the hairs on my neck. I saw it in the chaos on my table. I felt it as a thump on the head that made me see black.