

**Editor's Note**

I found this fragment from my casebook recently while redecorating my study. It led me to recall 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 said, tinging her glass.

We had gathered at the sideboard in the dining room and gazed at blue food displayed on the antique silver Hungerford plate. Domed covers protected the hot dishes.

‘Any permutation at all,’ Caterina 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.

Caterina studied each of us. ‘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 life's unflattering retrospectoscope turned upon myself on high beam. 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**

‘One of my dinner guests wants to kill me Saturday night!’ cried Caterina Hungerford.

We stood side-by-side in my study, gazing out the window past hawthorn hedges and distant paddocks dotted with sheep. The mountains stretched blue and silent beyond Tasmania’s foothills into the far horizon. Such was the feeling of timelessness that we could easily have been in the nineteenth century rather than the twenty-first.

We were two weeks into a soft autumn — no hard frosts or harsh winds — that had stripped the sun of its biting edge and stultified my demons, who had ceased pursuing me with their usual glee. I did not know that a new one had slipped in with Caterina Hungerford.

‘Bring my killer to justice!’ said my visitor before I could speak.

*Let me explain myself. I, Quaminus Frye, dabble in document examination and damsels in distress. The former I have been doing for some years. I love poking round in the past and quite enjoy my growing reputation. The latter, well, two grateful ladies appreciate my discretion.*

*I am comfortably situated, thanks to the ancestor for whom I was named, a 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 these rolling hills splattered with old sandstone villages. No one has 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. I have had my go at running the place as firstborn. An encounter with a tree one night ended that. The land needs someone whole, not dragging a bad leg. Nevertheless, I would have managed had not my younger brother Miles been waiting in the wings to grab what he has always wanted.*

‘You had better be seated.’ I led Caterina Hungerford to a spoonback chair facing the desk. Her dark eyes flickered down my right thigh to the ankle before rising resolutely to my hairline. I pulled off the white cotton gloves I used when examining documents and straightened all ten fingers to give myself time to collect my thoughts.

‘Why would anyone want to kill you, Caterina?’

‘Because of the secrets — ’

The door burst open after a short explosive knock. ‘Tea Mr Q?’

‘That would be lovely, Mrs Breech,’ I said. Not strictly part of her cleaning duties, but over the years we’d fallen into comfortable habits. Our relationship was not so unusual in this remote outpost of the British Empire, where certain things still mattered.

As Mrs Breech’s divested the tea trolley of its load, a wheel caught on a corner of the Victorian wool carpet.

Caterina jumped up and strode past the fireplace, in which a gum log popped. She smoothed the carpet’s rucked edge and eased the traymobile on its course.

Mrs Breech kneaded the top of her faded navy-blue tracksuit trousers.

‘Thanking you, Miz Hungerford, and I not a young woman meself, me, with me weak lungs and arthrititis, although my Will says —’

‘That is all, Mrs Breech, and please do the laundry today.’ Wicked of me to banish her to the kitchen block behind the house, but I dare not risk eavesdropping. In the delicate dance between master and domestic help, I had just trod on a toe.

That it was intentional we both knew. That it would increase my payback we also knew.

The cleaner tilted sideways, signalling the beginning of locomotion in that stolid form, then paused. She stared at my visitor, eyes round as full moons.

'Please close the door behind you,' I said.

She nodded reluctantly, her eyes devouring the birdlike woman before me. The way the door boomed shut indicated the kind of music I had have to face later. I could hear the bush telegraph humming as she headed down the passageway.

For a few moments, my visitor and I engaged in mono- and duo-syllabic conversation. Weak or strong? Milk? Sugar? One lump or two? Biscuits? Scone? Butter or cream? Jam? Ritual's end saw Caterina balancing one ginger biscuit and a cup of weak black tea on her knees. I preferred tea so strong it puckered the mouth, a full two-second tilt of the milk jug and four lumps of sugar. Scones I slathered with half an inch of butter, a lashing of jam and whipped cream so thick it mesmerised Caterina despite her despair.

'Now,' I prompted. I jabbed my thumb into the flesh just below the hipbone, still bristling from Caterina's glance at my game leg.

'Because of the secrets I hold.'

'Have you gone to the police?'

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

My previous cases. The death of Mrs Bennett's husband proved to be accidental — myocardial infarction — although he had been found in his mistress's bed. And the dear old duchess, well, that had been messy but I had retrieved those cheques. Cash and contacts ensured a successful outcome.

'Your husband?'

'Ted sees it as part of my ... condition.' Her attire underscored the crispness of her voice. She had driven for two hours from Hornbeam Hall without the intrusion of a single wrinkle in her pale linen jacket the colour of field mushrooms.

'Which is? Forgive me, but I must ask.'

She ignored my question and nodded at a manuscript on my desk, near the computer. 'What is that?'

'A *billet doux* supposedly written by Sir John Franklin when he Governor of Tasmania. It may be a forgery.'

'Yes, your fondness for old scraps of paper is well known.' She toed the carpet with one of her snug and stylish boots, which were the sturdy brown colour of a nicely roasted lamb. 'I will make it worth your while.'

Ah. The conventional plea from the drowning to the dry, floated daily on the waters of life. I had let her keep her secrets until the first flush of morning tea ended, then exercise the firmness of character for which I was notorious.

'Who will be in the house during the party, Caterina?'

'Seven of us altogether and the staff.' She shook her head of light hair, which was cut short and sharp. She resembled a stern pixie despite her thirty-odd years.

'And the children?'

'Sally and her brother are away on a school trip.' Caterina hunched her shoulders forward as if expecting attack. Her mouth hardened and lengthened like an oar dipped into darker waters. What was she protecting? Or whom?

'Which of your guests or staff hates you enough to kill you?'

'Hate is such a judgemental, harsh word, don't you think, Quaminus?' She gnawed her ginger biscuit like a worried rodent. 'Does one have to hate to kill? I think not.'

'That may be, and would make a fascinating conversation at some future date, but I must learn about your guests.'

'You know Anthea.' Caterina's sister-in-law hadn't a murdering gene in her body — no more than the rest of us. 'I have got her home and her late mother's approval, for which my dear sister-in-law will never forgive me. Her husband, Guy Fitzadam, well, Ted's never liked him, says he is not quite quite ... ' she hesitated.

'Out of the top drawer,' I finished. Snobbery was alive and well in Tasmania.

'Ted does not think a property developer of uncertain birth is good enough for his sister.'

'And you?'

'I do not mind Guy, although he has a reputation for ruthless single-mindedness, which perhaps is not such a bad thing in his occupation.'

The soft autumn morning turned chill as Caterina smiled.

I pulled my merino wool cardigan a little close around me.

'My best friend Meredith Eastmeadowson will come down from Launceston,' she said. 'We are like sisters. I have known her since we were children and our mothers became friends. The experience has not always been smooth. And there is her husband, Roddy.'

A sip of hot tea did not dispel my growing gloom. 'Dr Roderick Eastmeadowson, the respected scientist one reads about in the newspapers, who is always warning us about global warming?'

'The very same. He's absolutely monomaniacal about climate change. Unfortunately, Roddy is one of those brilliant people who do not make small talk easily.'

'Which can drag down a dinner party,' I said.

She nodded, twisting her ring again three times each way. This seemed to calm her. A fleeting smile flattened her brow's frowning furrows. 'Then there is Bolla Lester-Norman, the merry widow. She loved Brigadier Clive, loved him fiercely. Her husband and Ted were close after they moved here from England. Her conversational repertoire consists of two topics: her dead husband and food.'

Caterina underscored the last word with a verbal slash at odds with the softness of the autumn morning. ‘Lastly, there is my own dear husband, Ted. I have tried to make him happy but the forces of life have aligned — maligned — against me.’ Caterina suspired something between a sigh and a sob. ‘Perhaps the memory of me will do a better job.’

I did not like where this was going. I bit through a mountain of cream and jam to the scone underneath. ‘And the staff?’

‘Delleen, my housekeeper, will be overseeing the kitchen and the serving. Tina will help. The challenge offered by my theme intrigued Manfred Hermayne, who will be doing the cooking. You should see his *pièce de resistance*.’

‘A pastry creation?’ The pastry chef’s temperament was renowned.

‘Yes. Hornbeam Hall in miniature.’

‘For someone concerned about dying in a few days, you are remarkably calm.’

Caterina grimaced. ‘It would be a relief after all my stress. I have prepared as fully as one can. I only hope it is not messy or undignified. That is another reason for your presence.’

I hoped never to have to prettify corpses. ‘And the host and hostess: what can you tell me about them?’

‘Your hostess comes from a good family — “one of us, you know, something behind her,”’ she mimicked. ‘Her brother has a farm. She herself worked as a computer programmer before cementing an alliance with Mr Solid and Dependable, from one of the oldest families in the country, perfect husband material.’

‘She must be bored to death.’

‘Bored at by a drilling insect of a sister-in-law,’ escaped before Caterina censored herself. ‘The demands of the property came before her career. She produced the heir and the little girl, both safely away on a boarding school excursion at this very moment. She still dabbles in her profession.’

'Could the unintentional hazards of unlimited computer access prove dangerous in this case?'

She slewed her eyes to the door as if yearning to escape.

Some tall men undoubtedly found lost waifs attractive; I must say that Caterina's fine features did move one, but her behaviour irritated me. 'I will need details if I am to help you, which I am disinclined to do.'

'Secrets,' she responded meekly. 'I don't mean to attract them. It just happens. Either people confide in me, their friends and relatives do or I uncover information accidentally. It can be dangerous, especially when people become respectable after a delirious youth.'

Blackmail for something other than money?

'I am not a blackmailer. I am a professional woman. As for motives, we will leave that for now, if you do not mind.'

'I do mind, very much.' Dissatisfaction niggled at my insides.

'Alright then: family name and birthright, economic salvation and past crimes.' Caterina adjusted the collar of her linen shirt, a light Antarctic blue. Her wool-denim trousers, the colour of a sailing ship's deck, complemented my own beige moleskins.

'They will do nicely, thank you, for starters. How do you know that one of your guests may kill you?'

'Just a feeling. My efforts to forestall what may be inevitable by divesting myself of all secrets at Saturday night's dinner may explode in my face. That is where you come in.'

'What would you like me to do?' I eased onto my good haunch and crossed a leg.

Caterina replaced her teacup in her saucer, perfectly centred. 'If you cannot prevent my death, then please bring my murderer to justice — justice,' she repeated, 'in the true sense of the word.' She reached into a leather handbag and extracted a hand-sized notebook with a tiny gold pen attached by a cord. 'We have discussed

Anthea, Guy Fitzadam, Meredith Eastmeadowson, Roddy Eastmeadowson and Bolla Lester-Norman — and of course Ted.'

That list would be a graphoanalytical treasure, if only I could wrest it from her.

'One more thing.' She ticked off another item on her list with evident satisfaction. 'Please accept an invitation to Hornbeam Hall this weekend. The unexpected arrival of an old acquaintance would not be untoward.'

I glanced longingly at the *billet doux* on my desk. I had been looking forward to two days of solitude.

Caterina followed my glance. 'As payment, 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. I want it to go to a good home.' Good meant discreet.

Her voice trailed off as greed crimped the corners of my mouth. I controlled it quickly, ashamed, but she noticed. Caterina noticed everything, an unfortunate trait that might well end her life.

'Caterina, why would you give me such a troublesome family document?'

'I do not think the government could confiscate our property at this late date. I would give it to you even if proved my father's fortune to be based on fraud and deceit. That should demonstrate the urgency of my need.'

Perhaps time away would do me a world of good and enable me to approach the Franklin manuscript with a fresh eye.

'The time may come when you need a rather large favour, Quaminus. I have heard about the plans your brother Miles has for wanting it for himself.'

A wind gust blew clouds across the sun, adding a layer of shadows to our consultation.

'However did you know?'

'My brother George is not far from here, as you know. He will ensure you have got comfortable quarters for life. Certain things matter to him.' She glanced out the window. 'You would see the same hills.'

'One would think the big house would be enough.'

'He told George he doesn't feel that it is home anymore, after those decorators worked their magic.' Caterina scrutinised my face. 'Maybe he will change his mind, Quaminus.'

I inhaled deeply and closed my eyes. The clangings of Mrs Breech claimed the aural landscape, but another belonged to me. I had developed an unexpected sensitivity after the accident, 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 from fires played its own symphony. Gums burned pungent and sharp. Nothing like eucalyptus. Wattle exuded a dirty sort of smoke as it swirled to the heavens.

People also exuded strong scents. Some smelled relaxing, like my sister-in-law Clover. I banished her from conscious thought, along with my other secret of harbouring asylum seekers. I was ashamed of the Federal Government's immigration policies and determined to act in accordance with my conscience. I had no intention of divulging either of my secrets to Caterina. I made a mental note to ring Dr Hassan, one of my contacts on the Underground Railroad. He would tell me to expect visitors on Sunday night.

Other people reeked of darker emotions, like my brother Miles, damn and blast him. A clean fragrance assailed me now from across the desk.

Mother had left me just enough, assuming I would live here forever. Shifting into a shack on the land at Miles's whim was completely unacceptable. So was moving to a flat in the city. I could think of nothing worse, except perhaps being

powerless to impede my younger brother's plans. If I took the initiative and moved to George's, then I would not be able to see Clover as much. We were very discreet, my brother's wife and I.

Caterina was offering me security for the rest of my life. I hesitated, but not for long.

I opened my eyes. I had made a decision which would haunt me. It was not a cleansing wind that blew in a new demon. I pushed notepaper and pen to Caterina, thereby closing the distance between us forever. 'Write directions on this, please.'

'You have often been to Hornbeam,' she said, surprised.

'All the same.' I needed a spontaneous example of her handwriting.

I watched Caterina write out the directions and slide them back.

A row of stuffed parrots shot by my grandfather's grandfather perched atop the cabinet against the wall behind her. The jumble of blue wings, rumps and faces made Caterina seem like Medusa in an ice blue shirt.

'Have you ever considered the perception of reality, Quaminus?'

'Occasionally, Caterina.'

'The theme for Saturday's dinner will be blue food, to honour my late mother-in-law. Blue was her favourite colour, and it is her birthday Sunday.'

'Perhaps it is unwise to obscure the colour of what you consume.'

'The thought had crossed my mind. I have searched for poisons on the Internet. Murder-by-mushroom would be too slow and require 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. To my mind, cyanide has a certain *je nais se quoi* best suited to the festivities.'

I marvelled again that she spoke so calmly of possible impending annihilation. Perhaps Caterina intended to frame her sister-in-law Anthea or commit suicide for the insurance money. I would have to check with a third cousin, an insurance agent.

A morally disquieting alternative presented itself: perhaps this strict little sylvan sprite was unwell or covering up another crime.

‘If I am to help you, Caterina, I shall have to pry.’

She closed her handbag with a sharp snap that overwhelmed the soft avian twitter outside.

Perhaps she was not so helpless as I had first thought. Some would say I had the best of both worlds, living on the land without the custodial responsibilities. This led me to feel the approach of a good brood. I wished Caterina would leave me in peace.

I stood up. ‘If that is all ...’

‘Not quite.’

I sat down.

Caterina handed me a piece of paper. ‘Here is the guest list, with phone numbers, postal and email addresses. And something else.’ From her handbag, she pulled an envelope that resembled a sheet of puff pastry. ‘I understand you use handwriting analysis in your work.’

‘Yes, I find it a most useful indicator.’ At best, it supplied vital clues; at worst, it informed my approach to the suspects and whatever traps they set. I had found a set of correspondence-school books and a small library on the subject once at an estate sale. ‘I use books printed in the 1970s, so they may be dreadfully out of date.’

‘Surely there is an organisation on the Internet.’

‘Perhaps in the future.’ I had no intention of approaching what society viewed to be a group of quacks and cranks, although almost certainly they were reasonable people.

‘I doubt that human nature changes much. Here are the six samples. I have had each guest write the same sentence using all the letters of the alphabet, then a sentence or two using the word *blue* and their signatures, in hopes you would accept this challenge. You will find Meredith’s different. She is so *irrepressible*.’ Caterina

*never* spoke in italics. I should have been alerted. Missed Clue Number One. Or capitals.

'Have you included samples of serving staff and caterers?'

'I am certain it is not one of them. You can always add them down the line.'

'Are you forgetting something?'

Caterina frowned. 'I never forget anything.'

'Your own handwriting.'

'I am the victim. And you have the directions I just wrote.'

'Printed.'

'Friday, Quaminus, now I must run or I will be late. Manfred is always so busy.'

'I would prefer a more spontaneous sample, if you don't mind.'

'Spontaneous?' she asked as if she had never heard the word. 'Later, I promise, but I need to think about it.'

We stood; before long the leaving process had been accomplished and she had departed.

Caterina's final words floated on the air. 'See that justice is done, Quaminus. That is all I ask.'

Blue food. Was it some bizarre joke? This case might prove to be beyond me. Taking on more than one was able to deliver was nothing new. Everything would have been different had Father lived another few years. I was no different from most teenage boys, who let off steam by going to the pub, round here anyway.

I succumbed to a good brood about my family as I gazed out the window past hawthorn hedges and distant paddocks. Undulating hills disappeared into the horizon, dotted with merino sheep and black-and-white Belted Galloway cattle. A male fairy wren caught my eye, its tiny turquoise body round as a tennis ball. He hopped on stick legs across the rim of a birdbath near the euonymus tree. Mrs Breech's screeching wafted into the house as she harangued our firewood feral, Joe Stebbles.

My younger brother had Linden Park now. The proprietor should be Quaminus Giles Frye, not Miles blasted Frye. Why did I have to drink so much that night? I would be breeding purebred Hampshire Down rams if the place were still mine, not Miles's nice safe merinos. I dug my thumb into my thigh, gouging at the sore spot. It did not help.

No, it did not help at all. It did not distract me from thinking about life in the big house, where I should be; but Linden Park required an owner in top physical condition. Thank God I had health insurance or I would be a hideous burden on the family.

With all the policy changes and government subsidies, I decided to ring my cousin, both to confirm my policy was in order and inquire about Caterina Hungerford's insurance activities. It seemed a good way to ease back into the world of officialdom. This process began some years ago with my first case as an amateur detective. Mother observed over sherry that my familiarity with documents of all kinds and close relationship with my third cousin — who had successfully blitzed the battlements of finance — would save the dear old duchess from besiegement.

Mother had another agenda. She preferred that I aim the lancet of my dissecting tendencies outward rather than upon myself, to rescue others from actions compelled by their dark sides. I quite enjoyed life on the white steed, rebuffing the attacks of the banking brigade upon Mother's dear friend with no sharper weapons than pen and powers of reason. The duke's wife had been so grateful that her sister appeared in my study at her time of need. Mrs Bennett's philandering husband had a heart attack in his mistress's arms. By the time Case Number Two ended with my determination of natural causes, I had cemented alliances with police, state government bureaucrats and various health practitioners.

Those matters constituted the sum of my investigative experience. I had refused subsequent cases which involved skulking about. To be honest, after

Mother's death no one remained to nag me out of myself. Clover certainly did not. Our times together were too limited and precious.

Eavesdropping reminded me of my childhood, of peeking through stair rails and feeding on adult conversation addled by alcohol, to be stored for later dark ruminations which still invaded my nights. 'He's not got a farmer's temperament.' 'He prefers a calligrapher's quill to a shotgun.' 'Quill? What sort of sixteen-year-old boy asks for Chinese brushes and Italian glass pens?' 'The kind influenced by *you*, my dear.'

I hated them speaking like that. I saw Mother huddled over her worktable, ignoring Father's insistent demands as she reverently unrolled undreamed-of vistas along with the Tang Dynasty scrolls of those eighth-century Chinese masters. When she died we were exploring Oracle Bone Script, the oldest known form of Chinese writing.

On Mother's deathbed two things happened. She asked me to make her a calligraphic memorial. That I never finished it remained one of my biggest regrets. Our second deathbed collusion influenced me to this day. I held her icy hand for a stroll on the dark side, which I have preferred ever since to grim and desiccated virtue.

I felt Mother's grip on my shoulder yet, tapping me with a pen or a brush, every time an injustice threatened to perpetrate. If I were unable to complete her calligraphic memorial, then at least I could honour her memory when iniquitous humanity loomed, as now might be stalking Caterina Hungerford. That was my main motivation for taking this case. There were others: I needed to use my contacts before they dried up and, oh yes, I desired my client's forged Colonial land grant.

'He's like my little Clover, doesn't quite fit in,' said voices from long ago overheard from the stairs. 'You're too soft with the boy. He'll never be fit to run the place. Now Miles ...'

The words were lost as their owners drifted to the dining room, but they pursued me to this day.

I glanced into the room. The prosaic remains of morning tea — ginger biscuits, scones, cream and jam — offered a total contrast with a cake creation of Hornbeam Hall and a blue-food dinner party.

Blue food ... Dusting off the social skills ... This job would be good for me. At least the weekend's focus would not be matchmaking. Not that I considered myself desirable, but Mother called me a good catch despite the accident, as mothers do. My sister-in-law Clover's attempts to pair me off became less energetic as I settled into contented bachelorhood. Clover insisted that women found my brand of long lean looks attractive, particularly as my hair, which I wore longish and combed straight back, had not receded one centimetre, despite my having achieved the late thirties. I proudly outshone my younger brother Miles in that department: already he combed a long strand over a bald dome in the deluded way of men.

Time to stop brooding and do some work. I laid out printed Caterina's directions near the computer, a machine I needed but was unwilling to give more than minimal attention. Analysing printing required different parameters but it was possible, and I hated to waste the good sunlight streaming onto my desk. I bent forward and jiggled the magnifying glass, tilting it to the left over my client's printed sample.

I frowned. Rejiggled. Frowned again.

What was that doing there?