

IN PURSUIT OF MURDER

Chapter One

"Did you know Morse?" asked the superintendent.

"Before my time," I replied.

"Lewis?"

"For a short time... and his sidekick Hathaway."

"Rumour has it that both Hathaway and Bradley have found their way back to the priesthood."

"Really?"

We were standing on the outside terrace of the Head of the River alongside the Isis down by Folly Bridge. It was raining. There were two girls trying to steer their punt under the bridge and up the river. Each time they reached the bridge, the flow of the river drove them back. When they finally got under the bridge, there was a cheer from the drinkers on the terrace, but the river pushed them back again and they eventually swapped the punt for a rowing boat.

At first it had been thought that the body that had been fished out of the river just above the bridge had died from drowning, but once the pathologist had got it back to her slab it was discovered that the lungs contained no water. Adding to the mystery, there were no signs of any physical injuries.

This would be my first murder investigation as a detective inspector and I was feeling nervous. For years now I had been a detective sergeant, in a supporting role – the bag man, with an inspector to make all the decisions. Now I would have to lead, to make the decisions. There would be no hiding place. I was feeling lonely. I had been told that the superintendent was strict, even severe, but I had also heard that she was sympathetic to her detectives. I thought that she would have to be in my case.

Later that day I was sitting with my new detective sergeant at a table by the window of the White Horse in the Broad between the Blackwall shops. My sergeant was a slip of a girl from Bristol, once the second largest city in England and she had that very recognisable accent of that great city. I reckoned she may have been a robin rather than a pirate. I had a pint of ale in front of me, she was the driver and she was on tonic water; the benefits of rank. My mobile rang. It was the pathologist. Could I come now to her "office"? She had found something that I should see.

Twenty minutes later, we were in the slab room. I was looking at the pathologist, as I often did. In her early thirties, she was very attractive; blonde hair, blue eyes, gorgeous legs.... when she discarded her long white overall and revealed the fifteen inch mini skirt. I never made an approach; knew better not to. She was lesbian. Pity... for me, that is. She was also an ardent feminist. I thought that by being feminists, girls were losing their femininity.

Sophie, the pathologist, pointed to a mark – a minute prick - on the body's neck. "That killed him," she explained. "Long before he ended up in the river."

"Poison?" I asked.

"Yes."

"What poison?" I demanded.

I thought I saw Sophie shudder a little; surely not. Then she frowned (she looked prettier still when she frowned). "It's a moraceae-based dart poison used by South American Indians." I could see why she had shuddered. "It may well be the niarra or kieratchi poison preferred by the Choco Indians of western Colombia. I've got an expert coming to test it and confirm it. But I'm sure that what it is."

It was my turn to shudder. To think that this horrible poison could be roaming on the streets of Oxford and inflicted through a dart. What a monster for my first case in charge as a detective inspector.

My sergeant had accompanied me in Sophie's "office" and we were both about to leave when Sophie called us back. The corpse had been lying on its stomach, face down so that we could examine the prick at the back of the neck.

"There is something else," Sophie was saying and turned over the body. I heard a stifled gasp from my sergeant. The face was greatly disfigured.

"At first," Sophie explained. "I thought it had been bashed around in the river, but actually its been burnt. I think by a Bunsen burner like those we had in chemistry classes."

"I didn't do chemistry," I grunted. "I did arts."

Sophie ignored my perhaps rude comment and went on to further explain. "I reckon this was done to stop recognition and this is further confirmed by the finger tips being burned as well."

"The perpetrator must think that we have the victim's finger-print record," my sergeant realised. "Good point," I responded.

Chapter Two

The next day when I arrived at the office, my sergeant was waiting for me outside. Her name is Margaret Farley, but she is known as Peggy as most Margarets are. "We have a visitor," she said. "He's waiting inside the office."

"Why hasn't he waited at reception?"

"He was already in the office when I arrived. The duty sergeant put him there. He's very determined, this man."

There was a black man sitting on the chair in front of my desk. He was smoking a large cigar, completely ignoring all the no smoking signs throughout the building. Before I had time to sit down at my desk and demand who he was and the purpose of his visit, he fired a broadside.

"This body in the river. You are treading on dangerous ground – dangerous waters."

I was shocked and angry, but before I could speak, he had continued.

"MI5, internal security are investigating it, but so are MI6, external security. Arguing over who should be in charge of it. Handbags at six paces. I don't regard either of them as being very effective. And your Special Branch have also joined the scenario. Our deputy leader reckons you will need some help.... and protection."

"What the hell are you saying?" I demanded. "Who are you.... what are you? How dare you come in here, a police station, like this."

He was unmoved. He took a final puff on the cigar and stubbed it out on the antique ink well on my desk, then rose to leave.

"I'm John Murray, senior member of the Blue Brigade. Marcias sent me. You'll be hearing from us."

As soon as he left, I immediately went to see the Super. As I stormed out of the office I could see the look of amazement on Farley's face. This case was becoming an even greater monster.

Superintendent Brent was not a happy bunny; I could see that by the angry expression on her face. "We're off the case," she hissed. "We've been taken off the case."

"Is this to do with the man I've just had in my office?"

"I've just had Special Branch here. They're running the show now" she replied. "But apparently MI5 and MI6 may also be involved. I don't understand it. What is this case? What man?"

"Some guy who says he's from an organisation called the Blue Brigade."

"I know of it. What was his name?"

"Murray... John Murray. He said someone called Marcias sent him, whoever that is."

Suddenly there was a smile upon Brent's face. She said nothing for several minutes, then continued. "You want to stay on this case, don't you and I want us to stay on it. If we have Marcias on our side, who knows what might occur. Just drop the case... for the moment and wait for Marcias to send a contact again, one of his emissaries. But keep aware of any developments. Marcias, eh? A good friend, but a bad enemy. Special branch won't like it."

Two weeks later I was sitting on the outside terrace of the Head of the River, gazing absentmindedly at the flowing Isis. Nothing was happening back in the office and I was still brooding over the fact that Special Branch had stolen my case; my first case as a detective inspector.

A man sat at a table near me. A man of smart appearance in his forties, wearing a pin-striped suit. Don't see many of those these days. He looked at me and said rather than asked, "Detective Inspector Wilson."

"Yes," I said, examining him some more. His voice had been pleasant.

"My name is Jonathan Steiner. I'm a colleague of John Murray," he continued. "Special Branch have been removed from the case and MI6 are no longer involved. It's MI5 running the show."

I became more alert and attentive and stared at him enquiringly.

"The man fished out of the Isis," he continued, "was a Russian dissident. Poisoned.... murdered on orders from the Kremlin. Thought you might like to know. With our assistance you can still be involved... at a distance."

Having apparently delivered his message, he got up from his seat and stood looking down at the river. "I never could manage a punt," he said. "Tried it once, but no joy." Then he turned around and walked up the slope to the main road and disappeared from view, never to be seen by me again as was the case with John Murray.

Chapter Three

Later that day I was sitting outside the Head of the River again. With nothing of urgency back in the office, I was staring absentmindedly down at the Isis, still brooding over the fact that Special Branch had stolen my case.

A young girl arrived and sat down at the table beside mine. She was petite, a brunette with a pretty face. Very attractive. Suddenly she crossed her legs, revealing a generous display of thigh. I was still staring at her when she looked up and our eyes met. She smiled and I smiled back. After a while she uncrossed her legs, got up and came and sat at my table. I was thinking that my luck was changing.

"You are Inspector Wilson?"

"Yes," I confirmed.

"I'm a colleague of Jonathan Steiner," she said. "The name of the man in the river is Roman Usmanov. You have him on record, or your Special Branch has. All your fellow investigators think that the killer is well away, probably back in Russia. But there were two assassins and they are both very nearby, at Bicester, staying at the White Hart there."

I absorbed this information without comment or reaction and simply demanded: "Marcias sent you?"

"Yes."

"Then his messengers are becoming more attractive," I smiled. "Have you met him... Marcias?"

"No. I just receive instructions." She looked closely at me and smiled again. "Join me for dinner this evening. Eight o'clock."

"Where?"

"The Randolph. Where else? Meet in the Morse Bar before for a cocktail. Don't drive. Take a cab. Don't be late."

Then she was going, with a departing smile. Not a sexy smile. Just a very nice, pleasant smile. She was half way up the slope when she turned around and looked back at me. "And I've booked a room," she announced. I thought the smile was becoming more sexy.

When I returned to the station I was summoned to the Super's office to further discuss developments of the case. At my request, Sergeant Farley was present.

At the super's request, deputy assistant commissioner James A. Robertson was already there. Robertson was known, not with a great deal of affection, by the rank and file of the Thames Valley police force as JAR. Jam Jar.

There were the usual formalities of introductions, then Robertson announced: "Special Branch have given up on the case. So have the security agencies. They feel that whoever killed this mystery man is well away. For some reason, MI6 think he's Russian and probably in Russia now. They say that there is no point in pursuing the case now, but I think there is. I'm convinced that MI6 know the identity of the victim, but they won't reveal it. I think that you should continue investigating this murder which has taken place in Thames Valley jurisdiction. We need first to identify the victim, before we start on motive, suspects and opportunity. You need to identify him."

"We already have." My turn to make an announcement. "He's Roman Usmanov, a Russian dissident, murdered on the orders of the Kremlin."

"How do you know this?" Robertson demanded.

"I'm a detective," I replied. I did not reveal that I had been told by the pretty girl, whose name I had forgotten to ask and she had not volunteered it like Murray and Steiner had done, that there were two assassins and that they supposed to still be in Oxfordshire. I told this to Brent and Farley after the assistant deputy commissioner had departed.

My night with Caroline, as I learnt was her name, but she didn't tell me her surname, was not a disappointment. As soon as dawn arrived and morning rays of sunshine shone on the Ashmolean, I knew that it was just a one-night stand. Soon she would be returning to the black hole that appeared to be the Blue Brigade, governed by the enigma Marcias, whose tentacles seemed to reach everywhere. From what I was hearing, I was beginning to think that Marcias was more than one man, a whole legion of them.

Superintendent Brent had organised the raid on the White Hart in Bicester, insisting that it should be carried out by the armed response unit. Lethal dart blow shooters were to be taken very carefully. If there was the slightest risk to any of the police, their holders were to be shot immediately.

It was soon clear that the birds had flown the nest, but the hotel manager had disliked them, although not knowing why. He had taken the precaution of photocopying their passport pages. We now had names for them, although they were probably false, and we had small photographs of them. The passports and the photos may be false as well, but the photos would have to have some resemblance to what they looked like. Their passport names, false or otherwise, indicated what seemed to be two brothers; Vladimir and Igor Shuvalov.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner James A. Robertson had been busy. He had liaised with Special Branch to ensure that all airports and ports were on the look-out for the two assassins. In doing so he had emphasised that it was one of his detective inspectors who had identified the victim and his likely killers. He did not, however, mention the name of that detective inspector.

I was disappointed that I had not been visited by any more Blue Brigade characters. I had found them very useful. I was very disappointed that there was no further contact by Caroline, but I guessed that's the way it was.

Then the duty sergeant came to tell me that there was a man waiting to see me in reception. The sergeant looked at his notes "Julian Sinclair. He said he was a colleague of" the sergeant glanced at his notes again, "of Jonathan Steiner. Both with the initials J.S." I went to collect him.

Sinclair could almost have been a double for Steiner; same build, slightly shorter maybe, a little younger, fair hair not dark. He was smiling. "How many more of you are there?" I asked. "Quite a few," he replied.

I escorted Sinclair to my office, but before we could sit down, his smile had evaporated and been replaced with a dark expression. "There is a problem. The two suspects have got away". He said it very simply, as if he was used to problems and could deal with them.

It was now my turn for my face to darken. We sat down. I did something which I had not done before. I unlocked the cabinet behind my desk and produced the half-filled bottle of Glenmorangie left by my predecessor and two glasses. I looked at Sinclair, he nodded and I poured two stiff measures of golden malt.

Sinclair took a long sip, as did I. "Your people, the Special Branch were covering all the main airports and shipping ports. We covered the more remote areas of coastline; Scotland, parts of Wales, Devon and Cornwall. We even had light aircraft flying over Exmoor, Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor, but it was so foggy there that nothing could have landed there. Even our pilots were becoming concerned. Nothing was seen anywhere by any of us."

Sinclair paused and took another sip of golden nectar. "Do you know of Leyhill Open Prison in Gloucester? Thousands of prisoners go through there each year, but only a few attempt to leave too early and they are soon recaptured. One did completely escape, though, a Sicilian. He was picked up by a helicopter and returned to Mafia land. We remembered it just too late. An abandoned air field in Plymouth. Wrong location for an airport; houses should be built there, especially with the housing shortage. Our man got there just too late, but just in time to see the two suspects board a helicopter. When he was spotted, the copter hastily took off. He had a machine gun and was about to fire at it, but decided not."

“Why not?”

Sinclair paused again and took another sip. I freshened his glass, but not mine. I sensed that the punchline was about to come. “The two suspects in Bicester did not carry out the killing.” He continued. “They were just decoys. Their passports and names were false. They aren’t even Russian. The assassin of Roman Usmanov is a Mafia hitman, out of Chicago, Illinois. Known as “Tiny” Roberts, a vicious little sod. Usmanov relieved the Sicilian Mafia of almost the equivalent of a million dollars and they were somewhat displeased about it. Hence his execution.”

“Tiny” Roberts was never found in the U.K. He evaded Detective Inspector Peter Wilson and all the Thames Valley police force, the Special Branch and, presumably, MI5 and MI6.

It must have been a few months later when I arrived in the office for my morning shift. There was nothing of importance on the agenda and I was feeling rather bored. There was a newspaper lying on my desk; one that I had not seen before – the Chicago Tribune. It was a few days old. The front page was showing and a couple of small columns at the bottom of the front page had been encircled with a red pen. I sat down and started to read them.

“Tiny” Roberts, a notorious Mafia hitman, had been found dead outside one of the entrances to Soldier Field. He had been shot in the chest and through the heart. As yet the killer had not been traced. A witness had reported seeing a black man smoking a large cigar nearby, but the police had discounted this as just being a passer-by. It seemed that the Chicago police did not regard the killing of a Mafia hitman as being the greatest tragedy.

I reached for the cabinet, unlocked it and produced the Glenmorangie. I poured a sort of medium amount, raised the glass and drank a toast to the Blue Brigade. My first case as detective inspector was closed, but unfortunately not by me. There would soon be another case. I was beginning to savour this Glenmorangie. I hope I’m not becoming an alcoholic, especially on duty.