A Narrow Escape

Faith Martin

Published by Black Star Crime

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.



SUPERINTENDENT MARCUS DONLEAVY leaned back in the comfortable leather swivel armchair he'd purloined from the police liaison officer many moons ago and looked up to turn a brief smile on DCI Philip Mallow, who'd just walked in.

'You wanted to see me, sir?'

'Sit down, Mel,' he said, his use of the officer's nickname a tacit acknowledgement of their friendly personal relationship. 'Just thought I'd bring you up to speed on the latest developments concerning the Ronnie Greene affair.'

Marcus was dressed in his usual navy blue suit and trademark black tie, but his face had a drawn look that wasn't at all usual.

Mel, who was in the act of easing his six-foot-two frame into the less comfortable chair in front of his superior's large and rather messy desk, glanced up, a grimace on his own clean-shaven face.

'Trouble?'

Marcus waved the flat of his palm in the air in a rocking motion. 'Yes and no. Seems they've definitely got their teeth into something, but nothing, so far, that ties in to us. Or Hillary.'

As Marcus mentioned the DI's name, he watched Mel speculatively. Station gossip had it that Mel was rather fond of

Hillary Greene, but Marcus could detect nothing of the sort in the thoughtful blue eyes now. And in truth, he'd never have thought of linking them together.

'Well, that's good. Mind you, I never thought Ronnie Greene would have been the kind to share his action with anyone else.' But even as he spoke, the image of Frank Ross's moon-faced, evil-eyed spectre rose up in front of him.

Wisely, he kept his mouth shut.

Besides, he knew that Marcus was almost certainly thinking the same thing. If Ronnie's corrupt little ways had infiltrated the Kidlington HQ, there was really only one place to look. Ronnie Greene and Frank Ross had been as close as two ticks on a sick parrot.

'They've requested an interview with Hillary this week,' Marcus said, the 'they' being the officers from the Discipline and Complaints Department, who'd been assigned by the Police Complaints Authority to investigate Ronnie Greene over two months ago.

They came from a North Yorkshire force, so everyone at the station was currently engaged in thinking up scathing jokes and insults about Yorkshire puddings, Leeds United, cricket and everything else Yorkshire. One university graduate had even come up with a War of the Roses pun that nobody got, but it was supposed to be very derogatory indeed towards Yorkies and so everybody laughed at it.

Mel sighed. 'Well, no point trying to put 'em off, I suppose. Sooner they're out of her hair, the better. It beats me what they expect to find. She left him more than, what, a good six months ago, didn't she?'

Donleavy sighed. 'Unfortunately, it's looking as if our Ronnie's had his hand in the till for a good few years now. So it's well within their purview to take a good long look at the wife, don't you think?'

The fairness of his words, however, were belied by the hard glint in his eye and Mel wasn't fooled. Like everyone else in the station, from the humblest PC to the highest brass, Donleavy didn't like cops investigating cops. Full stop.

'Yeah, right,' Mel snorted. 'I hope somebody's put them right on Ronnie Greene's wandering hands and eyes, though. Made it clear that theirs wasn't exactly a match made in heaven. If Ronnie has been raking in the dosh, Hillary's the last woman he'd have spent it on. Or trusted to hide it for him, for that matter. In fact, knowing her, she'd have been more likely to donate the whole lot to the Sally Army, just to see the look on his face when he found out.'

Donleavy grinned. Mel was certainly quick to defend Hillary, but was there anything more to it? No, Marcus couldn't see them as a pair. Mel, for all his laid-back reputation, was an ambitious sod, and although he'd always thought Hillary was too, there was a difference. A vast difference.

Mel wanted to be chief constable one day. He was political. He knew how to cultivate friends in the right places and play the game. Hillary…Marcus sighed. He'd always thought Hillary simply hated bad guys. And girls. Just liked doing the job. Enjoyed seeing crooks take the fall. To Mel, that was almost a means to an end, but with Hillary, he'd always felt, there was something far more personal about it. It was as if she enjoyed being a copper in a way very few of them did. He'd never known her to complain about public bias, for instance. Some cops got fed up with the 'pig' jokes, the carefulness of friends with their drinking habits whenever a cop was invited to a party, the endless innuendoes about racism, elitism, or whatever 'ism' was currently in vogue. But Hillary never seemed to care. If a member of the public barracked her at a crime scene, for instance, it made her smile, if anything. And that wasn't something that, for all his 'mellow' reputation, Marcus could ever see the Chief Inspector doing.

Mel was too wise about himself not to have at least some idea that they were oil and water. And since masochism wasn't one of his faults, who *did* Mel have his eye on? One thing Marcus was sure of, Mel's two previous divorces hadn't been enough of a case of 'once bitten, twice shy' to keep him away from the ladies.

'So, you want me to tell Hillary to keep herself available?' Mel offered now, a little surprised to see Marcus shake his head.

'No, I'll do it. Besides, I wanted to tell you, I've assigned her to a case.'

For a moment DCI Mallow looked surprised, as well he might. To all intents and purposes, Hillary had been practically desk-bound since her husband's death and the allegations of corruption that had quickly followed. What was the idea of giving her an assignment now?

But a second later, he had the answer. Of course, if Hillary was working an ongoing case, she'd have less legitimate time to give to the D&C people. Or the Yorkie Bars, as they were currently known at the station, for no good reason that Mel could figure out.

It was Donleavy's way of giving them the good old two-finger salute.

Not that she wouldn't have to co-operate eventually, of course. But still, he was with Marcus. Why make it easy on the buggers?

'So, what's the case?' he asked.

'Suspicious death.'

Mel frowned. A suspicious death could turn into a murder enquiry, and that might lead to ramifications in certain quarters. True, Hillary *herself* wasn't under investigation. Yet. But he wondered how long it would be before her bank statements would be subpoenaed and her neighbours questioned. Had Mrs Greene been going out a lot lately? New fur coat? New car? Where did she go on holiday last year? The year before?

Of course, they'd find nothing, because there was nothing to find, but to have someone under that kind of pressure heading up a murder case…

'Relax,' Marcus said, showing that uncanny (and sometimes downright unnerving) ability to read a subordinate officer's mind, and making Mel shift uncomfortably in his seat. 'It's a body in a lock. It's bound to be some boozed-up boatie who took a tumble. It has death by misadventure written all over it.'

Mel nodded. Or suicide, maybe. Just serious enough to give her some good excuses to be out in the field whenever the Yorkie Bars came a-calling.

'OK. I'll keep an eye on things.'

Donleavy nodded, then added thoughtfully, 'When I rang her this morning she didn't seem all that up. Still, no one expects her to be chipper, with her life in the crapper. Hey, didn't know I was poetical, did you?'

Mel smiled obligingly. 'I don't think she likes living on the boat.'

'No?' Marcus said, looking genuinely surprised. 'I thought it would have been most people's idea of a dream come true. Life on the open road. Well, open canal then. All that wildlife, kingfishers and stuff. A small space to keep clean, no housework to speak of.'

Mel shrugged. 'I suppose it all depends on the circumstances, doesn't it? I mean, it wasn't as if she'd always wanted to live on the canal, is it? It's just that when she left Ronnie, and the bastard kicked up rough about not selling the house till the divorce was final, or letting her live in it either, she had nowhere else to go until her solicitor could flex some of his own muscle. And you know what house prices in Oxfordshire are like these days, sir, she'd have been mad to shackle herself to another mortgage before she'd offloaded Ronnie for good. You know what a

tricky bastard he was. And she had to stay local, and you know as well as I do, living so close to Oxford, what rents are like round here for anything even halfway decent.'

Marcus nodded. Luckily, he and his wife had bought their modest (but now very desirable) detached house in 'The Moors' nearly 25 years ago, before things had got so crazy.

'Right. Think the government's latest plan to help us and the nurses and firemen buy locally will be any use?' he asked, and for a while their talk turned to more broad and general topics.

It wasn't until Mel was making moves to go that their conversation got back to the internal enquiry that was causing so much aggro.

'If Ronnie has been pulling in the dosh for so long, he must have collected quite a wad,' Marcus said, automatically lowering his voice even though the door was firmly shut and only Julie, Marcus's secretary, sat outside. 'I know he was a brash working-class oik in many ways,' Marcus continued, thinking back on the late unlamented DCI Ronnie Greene without enthusiasm, 'but he could be surprisingly sophisticated in certain ways.'

But not with women, Mel thought, remembering the string of affairs, always with blondes, usually culled from the restaurants, pubs and hairdressers of nearby Oxford.

'So, with a bit of luck, they'll never be able to pin him down,' he mused. No wads of cash packed around the central heating lagging on the boiler. No gold coins in a safety deposit box. No stocks and shares and a portfolio with a city stockbroker that would have kept a professional footballer's wife happy.

'Let's hope not,' Marcus said, with feeling. 'At any rate, the bugger's safely dead. So that was one huge favour he did us.'

Mel laughed and nodded, then rose, stretching as he did so.

'Funny, who'd have thought there'd be so much money in tiger pricks,' he said.

Marcus Donleavy grunted.

The sun was definitely shining as if it meant it, Hillary thought, glancing once more at her watch. It was now gone half past ten, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Behind her some dog roses, the first of the season, were beginning to uncurl their pale pink petals to the world, and a squadron of ducks and one brave moorhen, no doubt attracted by human activity, were clustered around her feet, looking for a bread handout.

If it hadn't been for the presence of a black, rubber-suited diver below her, and the insistent presence of the bobbing corpse, it would be a perfect kind of day. The sort of day Evelyn Waugh would have set on the Isis, with Oxford's dreaming spires shimmering around his characters, rather than the more prosaic Oxford canal in the middle of nowhere.

'Ready, guv,' the diver called up to her, and she nodded, wondering why there wasn't a second one. Didn't divers always, for safety, dive in pairs? Probably cutbacks were the reason, she thought, with a non-accountable person's smug indifference to the cost of things. Or perhaps, with the water being barely four foot deep, the other diver had managed to skive off.

'Right, let's get the gate fully open,' she said, calling to the uniforms who'd since gathered. 'Give the man some room.'

As she spoke, she wondered if she was talking about the diver or the body.

Detective Police Constable Tommy Lynch moved forward, pushing the lock's arm without waiting for help. Not that he needed it. At six foot three, he was powerfully built, though Hillary had heard his particular sport was running rather than boxing or weightlifting. She nodded a silent thanks as she

went past, and a little knot of professionally interested people gathered at the lock's edge to watch the proceedings.

Doc Partridge walked down to the end in anticipation of being presented with the body, and began to lay out a plastic sheet on the grass. From his voluminous bag, he pulled out a white coverall, that literally covered all, slipping over his shoes and coming to a hood at the top of his head.

Yellow police tape had already been set up around the lock, although who it was expected to keep at bay Hillary wasn't sure. Unless you counted a pair of curious crows, and the ducks.

Still, the season was getting on. There was bound to be a boat come along sooner or later.

And that reminded her.

'Janine,' she said, turning to look over her shoulder at her sergeant, who stepped a bit closer, 'you'd better call up the Rivers Authority—Thames Water, who-the-hell-ever—and warn them that this lock is going to be off-limits for a while. We'll be having boats backing up sooner or later, I know, but they might have some kind of CB or radio system whereby they can warn holidaymakers to avoid this area for a few days, if at all possible.'

Janine nodded, her eyes not on her boss but on the progress of the diver.

Not that he was doing much diving, poor sod. In fact, the muddy, greenish-tinged water only seemed to come up to his shoulders. He moved jerkily, as if wading through thick mud. As he probably was.

'I can feel something metal down here,' the diver called up. 'What's the betting it's a Tesco's shopping trolley?'

The diver looked impossibly young, Hillary thought, remembering that old chestnut about policemen looking younger the older you got. But this one really did look as if he should be in school. Riotous auburn curls, now tucked under

the black rubber hood, did nothing to lessen the impression of a boy playing hooky from school. Now his pale, freckled face frowned in concentration as he got nearer the body.

Hillary tensed. She hoped he wasn't as much of a novice as he looked. It would be nasty enough down there as it was, without him puking his guts up into the water as well. But she needn't have worried. The frown was all professional.

'There's a lot of ground sludge here, guv,' he called up. 'We might have to dredge. I imagine visibility is practically zero down here. Especially with all this churning up I'm having to do.'

Hillary sighed. 'Let's have him out of there first. You never know, the water might clear.'

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw DPC Tommy Lynch grin widely. Yeah, right, she thought, with an answering smile. And she might sprout wings and fly.

The diver, whose name she hadn't caught, reached the body and carefully looked all around before trying to move it, just to make sure it wasn't caught up anywhere. Hillary nodded in unconscious approval. Finally, sure that the body was free-floating, the diver carefully and very gently wrapped a gloved hand around one wrist, to prevent post-mortem bruising, and then, with one hand slipped underneath the belly, began to slowly, almost courteously, usher the floating body out of the lock, towards the waiting ministrations of the pathologist.

DID YOU PURCHASE THIS BOOK WITHOUT A COVER?

If you did, you should be aware it is **stolen property** as it was reported *unsold and destroyed* by a retailer. Neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this book.

All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

All Rights Reserved including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. This edition is published by arrangement with Harlequin Enterprises II BV/S.à.r.l. The text of this publication or any part thereof may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, storage in an information retrieval system, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the prior consent of the publisher in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

® and TM are trademarks owned and used by the trademark owner and/or its licensee. Trademarks marked with ® are registered with the United Kingdom Patent Office and/or the Office for Harmonisation in the Internal Market and in other countries.

Black Star Crime is a trademark of Harlequin Enterprises Limited, used under licence.

First published in hardback by Robert Hale Limited in 2004

First paperback edition 2008
Black Star Crime
Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1SR

© Faith Martin 2004

ISBN: 978 1 848 45002 8

Set in Times Roman 10½ on 12¼ pt.
081-0908-70907

Printed and bound in Spain
by Litografia Rosés S.A., Barcelona