

Red Rum

by Cara Hunter

I should have realized there was something fishy going on the minute the call came in. *Suspicious incident, 10 Morse Close*. I know that man's all over this town – literally – but it was still a dead giveaway.

And then there was the date. April 1st. We'd already had the whoopee cushion (hilarious) and upside-down glass of water (side-splitting). First job in CID, fresh off the fast-track graduate entry scheme - for which, read "well up herself" - and add to that my surname, I must have 'Sucker' tattooed on my forehead. Even so, I assumed they'd have got over themselves by this time of night. Apparently not.

Though if the guy who opens the door is someone from the station I don't recognize him. Then again I've only been at Thames Valley ten days and under that tweed cape and deerstalker he could have been just about anyone. And to give him credit, he doesn't fall about laughing the minute he sees me. In fact, he's doing a passable impersonation of someone who's genuinely unsettled. I force a smile. OK lads, if that's how you want to play it, I can give as good as I get.

"Mr Holmes, I presume?"

He stares at me, "What? Oh – *that* - well, obviously that's just for the party. My real name's Dave."

I raise an eyebrow, "Fancy dress, is it?"

He looks exasperated, "This isn't a *joke*." He sighs, "Look, you'd better come in."

As I follow him down the hall to the back of the house I spot a Columbo, a Kojak with a hat and lollipop, and a guy in jeans and a big cream cardigan. There's also a bloke with big lapels carrying a stack of cardboard files. Takes me a minute to get that one. Jim Rockford. Oh how droll. And it's almost entirely blokes, by the way. Figures. For CID.

"You're missing the belt," I say to Cardi Dude jovially, as I pass. "If you're Starsky, you should have a belt. Police work – it's all about the details. As I'm sure you know."

They're staring at me like I'm taking the piss, which is pretty rich.

We round the corner into a big extension with bifolds and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on all sides. Well, it is Oxford. There's also a large red stain on a hessian rug, and a woman in an old-biddy suit with a hat and handbag standing on the far side of it. I don't recognize her either, but I know who she's supposed to be.

"So this is the curious incident of the body *not* in the library, is it?"

And yes, I do know I'm mixing my sleuths, but what the hell. Like I said, two can play at this game.

She gives me a look Joan Hickson would have been proud of, "That's the *whole point*."

"I don't follow."

She purses her lips and shakes her head. Rather impressively in character, in fact. “It’s a *murder mystery evening*, officer. There’s *supposed* to be a body. Right here, on the rug. Only there isn’t.”

I’m tempted to say you don’t need a mind like a meat-cleaver to reach that conclusion but content myself with asking if they had anyone particular in mind for the corpse.

She frowns, “Mike.”

“Mike?”

“Mike Moriarty.”

You’ve got to hand it to them – they’ve put some thought into this.

“It’s his house,” she continues. “The party was his idea. Only he’s not here. No-one knows where he is, and he’s not answering his phone.”

“And *that*,” says Dave, pointing, “is blood.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

Sorry – I just couldn’t help myself.

I bend a bit closer to the rug. The red stuff, whatever it is, looks surprisingly realistic. But I’m not going to give them the satisfaction of saying so. “Smells like ketchup to me.”

As I straighten up a woman appears in the doorway wearing a plastic suit and carrying a SOCO case. The cavalry. Thank the lord.

I beckon her over, “Can you run a quick presumptive test on this stain before we all get carried away?”

Her eyes widen, “What, me?”

Of course. She’s not SOCO at all. She’s that woman off *Silent Witness*.

And OK, that joke really *is* on me. Only no-one’s laughing. Even now, no-one’s laughing.

More people are crowding in. A Brother Cadfael, a Poirot in spats and a stick-on moustache, a bloke in a bad jacket who could be just about any dick from 1975 on, and a tall good-looking guy who clearly didn’t have to make that much effort: he’s the spit of Idris Elba.

I turn to Miss Marple, “When did you last see this ‘Moriarty?’”

“I haven’t *seen* him for over a week, but he’s been on the WhatsApp group. Stuff about the party – how he’d be playing dead in here and we’d have to go through the house to find the clues.”

“And have you? Found the clues?”

I scan the rest of the group but most of them just look dumbfounded.

“Well, there’s a candlestick in the dining-room,” offers Starsky eventually, “but it could just be a coincidence.”

“And there’s that knife in the kitchen,” says Poirot, “but given it’s under a picture of a pink fish I don’t think that’s going to get us anywhere.”

“A *pink fish*?”

He looks at me like it's patently obvious. "You know, a red herring."

FFS.

"Was there any blood on the knife?"

He goes a little pale, "Shit. No. Not that I could see."

"And obviously you didn't pick it up."

Now he really does look worried, "No. I mean, yes. Maybe."

"Didn't employ the little grey cells on that one then?"

He flushes and gapes. Rather like a pink fish, now I come to think about it.

"I shouldn't worry, sir," I say genially. "I'm sure it's all just part of the game. Your mate Mike is probably in the pub even as we speak. I mean, he wasn't going to have much fun tonight, was he, being dead? This must be far more entertaining. Having a right old laugh at your expense."

I give them all a meaningful look at that one but no-one rises to it.

"I can see why you'd think that," says Marple firmly. "But I just don't buy it. In fact, I don't think he'd even got round to doing the clues. I couldn't see any, and I'm rather good at this, even if I do say so myself. I think whatever happened, happened before that."

"What about the Bacardi Raspberry in the study?" asks Bad Jacket. "Surely that's significant?"

I raise an eyebrow, "The professor isn't a cocktail man?"

"Mike's not a professor," says Kojak, frowning, "he's an accountant -"

"No, the clue is the *colour*," says Bad Jacket, cutting across him, "The Bacardi is *red rum*. Get it? It's *Murder* spelled backwards. Like a crossword clue."

"Right," I say briskly, clocking, too late, who this guy is supposed to be.

Enough is enough.

I start clapping slowly, "OK, that's all folks. Full marks for ingenuity – you nearly had me once or twice - but the game's up. You can all stop pretending now."

Silence. They're staring at me. Like this is real.

"What are you talking about?" says Marple. "You think this is some sort of prank?"

I stop clapping, "Well, isn't it? I mean, look at you all, for God's sake. What better way to rook the rookie? And as for *Morse Close*, Jesus -"

"What do you mean, 'rookie'?" says Marple sharply. "Are you not a real police officer?"

She's really starting to pissing me off now. "I'm as real a police officer as any of you," I snap. "Even if you have been at it a lot longer than me."

"But none of us are *in* the police," ventures Cadfael hesitantly. "I'm an RE teacher."

"And I'm an actuary," says Sherlock, "and Rockford here is a librarian -"

"And another thing," begins Colombo, before he's drowned out by my radio.

“All units, a dog-walker has just reported a deceased body on Port Meadow. IC1 male approximately 30 years old, suspected knife wound. Witness recognized him, says his name is Michael Moriarty, repeat, Michael Moriarty, believed to reside in Morse Close, Summertown.”

There are gasps, murmurs, expressions of shock, Marple has her hand to her mouth, Sherlock is telling anyone who'll listen that he *knew* that blood was real. As for me, turns out I'm the one who got the clues backwards. But there's no time for that now. I start shunting them back towards the door, fumbling with my radio in the other hand.

“Control? I'm at the address. We have a crime scene. DC Tennison requesting assistance.”

1458 words