

Smoke without Fire

Prologue 1

1940

A still, calm mid-summer evening. The commander of the unit lay flat on moss-covered ground that was springy to the tread. The smell of the earth mingled with the brackish tang drifting over from the Foyle. They had crossed the river from Donegal and hoped to cross it again when their task was done. The sun was poised above the low horizon and would not set for another twenty minutes. Even so, they had already been in place for more than an hour. Nothing was being left to chance.

The commander was a young man, and his unit comprised only young men. Beside him, he could hear his lieutenant breathing steadily. Behind them, the others waited in silence, as ordered. From where they lay, shaded by a clump of trees, with no risk of reflection off the lenses of his binoculars, the commander had a clear view across the flat land. He could see a good half mile down the road.

‘What if they come early before night falls?’ said the lieutenant in a half-whisper.

‘They never come early.’

‘But what if they do, this one time?’

‘Then we’ll fight them in the half light.’

But they did not come early. In fact little traffic of any kind passed by that evening. Petrol rationing and shortages limited movement for all but essential transport. So it was that the only vehicles on the road at that time were a baker’s van and an army staff car hurrying past. As the light faded, the unit – the commander called it his *flying column* – found itself alone in open country.

Twenty yards away a small van stood parked on the edge of the road. It was at the heart of their plan, and the commander was confident that he had prepared carefully. His motto: keep it simple, make it work.

The commander checked his watch. The luminous dial told him that the hour had come. But the enemy had not come. Time passed, minutes became an hour, and still no lorry travelled the road before them. The lieutenant shuffled closer on his elbows, and the commander caught the smell of the oil from his pistol. It had been freshly cleaned.

‘This isn’t right,’ the lieutenant murmured.

‘It is what it is, Liam,’ said the commander.

‘I hope nothin’s happened to the poor fellas,’ the lieutenant whispered. ‘These roads can be treacherous.’

The commander smiled at the jest. ‘They’ll be here soon enough. You can ask ‘em then.’

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A new Neighbour

A still, calm mid-winter afternoon. It was three o’clock on the first day of the new year, 1998, a Thursday. The narrowboat pushed its prow through smooth water scattered with flakes of ice. They crunched and split as they parted beneath the weight of the bows. On one side of the canal the towpath was lined with trees and bushes, all freshly encrusted with snow. On the other side, fields extended away, gently sloping upwards towards the horizon where a chilly haze merged into an opal sky. Some fields were dormant, waiting to sprout crops when winter eventually gave way to spring. In others, cattle and sheep were grazing half-heartedly on random tufts of grass.

The boat was steered by a slender woman in her thirties. Rounding a curve, a bridge came into view. She stepped forward keeping one hand on the tiller, leaned into the hatchway and called down into the cabin.

‘Five minutes to home!’

Over the clanking of the engine she heard a muffled reply. Moments later a man arrived on the stern deck, followed quickly by a younger woman. The man was in his forties, tall and of slim build, in a navy blue jacket. The girl was thin, in her late teens, with sharp features topped by a Cossack-style hat in imitation grey fur.

The boat slowed at the approach to the bridge, ready to give way if necessary to oncoming traffic. The man leaned out from the deck, peered ahead and announced that the way was clear.

The steerer pushed down on the accelerator, the clatter of the engine increased and the boat gained speed almost imperceptibly. As the bows emerged from the bridge hole, a solitary angler on the bank glanced up and saw the name *Sally Ann* in

black letters on a white background. He lifted his rod to let the boat pass underneath. He had seen it many times in recent years and knew its mooring was close by below the village of Knightly St John. As the stern deck came into view he raised a hand to the woman at the tiller. Everyone in the area knew Marnie Walker. He liked her for her looks and for the simple fact that she always had a friendly word for anglers and for everybody she passed. That day was no exception.

Seeing him there, she called out a new year greeting. Her voice was attractive, warm and deeper than usual for a woman.

The angler pointed down the canal. 'I think you've got a visitor, Marnie.'

Marnie acknowledged with a wave, slowing the boat as it drew nearer to craft moored along the bank on the towpath side. A hundred yards ahead on the opposite bank she could see someone standing, an unrecognisable shape bundled in winter clothes.

Marnie steered over to the right to prepare for docking. With the boat coasting at dead slow, she had time to observe the person apparently waiting for her. It was a woman, now stamping her feet against the cold. Something about her body language gave the impression that she had not come as a welcoming party. Both arms were folded across her chest. The posture may have been intended to fend off the cold, but it gave out a signal veering towards hostility.

A docking area branched off from the canal at ninety degrees. Marnie focused all her attention on manoeuvring the boat into its narrow slot. The other members of the crew hopped ashore to attend to the mooring ropes. The man was Ralph Lombard, her lover, an eminent economist, professor at the University of Oxford. The girl was Anne Price, Marnie's closest friend and colleague. The three of them went about their tasks with experience drawn from years of practice.

The boat slid into its dock. Marnie pushed the gear lever into reverse and pressed down on the accelerator. The nose button barely nudged the end wall. It was a perfect landing. An observer would have taken Marnie's expression for intense concentration as she brought fourteen tonnes of narrowboat to a precise halt, pulled the gear lever into neutral and stopped the engine. In fact, her face wore a frown. She had recognised the woman on the bank who was now slowly pacing up and down in an exaggerated display of impatience. Marnie looked in her direction.

'Happy new year, Valerie.'

The woman turned to face Marnie but made no reply. Her look was chillier than the weather. Marnie stepped down from the stern deck onto the bank and approached her.

‘This is a surprise. I wouldn’t have expected to see you down here on New Year’s Day.’

‘Or on any other day,’ the woman replied.

‘Quite,’ said Marnie. ‘So what brings you here?’

The woman was Valerie Paxton, secretary to the head teacher of the village primary school. She had taken an instant dislike to Marnie since the day a few years earlier when Marnie and Anne had arrived in the village. They had set up an interior design business in the semi-ruined complex of barns and cottages known as Glebe Farm. To Valerie, anyone who could work among tumbled-down buildings and live on a canal boat was little more than a water gypsy. And now, living in sin with a man who was not her husband – even if he did have a fancy academic title – put Marnie well and truly beyond the pale.

‘I’m acting under orders,’ Valerie said primly. ‘Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.’

Ralph and Anne came up and joined Marnie.

‘Orders from the *Obergruppenführer*, no doubt?’ Ralph said with a smile.

Valerie scowled. ‘What do you mean?’

Marnie said, ‘Do I take it you’re here at Margaret’s request?’

Margaret Giles was head of the school.

‘Mrs Giles has asked me to give you a message,’ Valerie said stiffly. ‘The intruder alarm has gone off at the school. Mrs Giles has tried to get hold of the firm that deals with such things, but she couldn’t get a reply.’

‘Surely they operate even on a bank holiday,’ Marnie observed.

Valerie sighed audibly. ‘Well apparently they don’t. The police turned out and checked the school over, and it appears to have been a false alarm.’

‘I’m not sure I see where I feature in all this,’ Marnie said slowly.

‘Mrs Giles thinks you probably know someone from your ... *business contacts* ...’ Valerie made them sound entirely disreputable, ‘who might be able to do something to make sure the alarm doesn’t go off again without good reason. The education office is worried about possible arson attacks on schools.’

‘Is Margaret up at the school now?’

‘No. She’s away staying at her brother’s in Leicester. She asked me to phone you for advice, but all I got was the answerphone message. That’s why she asked me to try to find you here. I’ve been waiting for ages.’

‘Ted Hopkins?’ Anne muttered to Marnie.

Marnie nodded. ‘He’s the nearest.’

‘I’ll check him out,’ Anne said. ‘I’ve got his mobile number on file.’

Marnie turned back to Valerie. ‘If you give me a contact number I’ll see what we can do.’

Anne was already producing a notebook and pen from her jacket pocket.

Valerie quoted a number and, without another word, began walking away. She had gone barely ten paces when she stopped and turned.

‘Oh, one other thing. The vicar was up at the school. She’s on the board of governors and heard the alarm on her way to church.’ Valerie sniffed. The vicar – the *woman vicar* – similarly met with Valerie’s disapproval. ‘She also seems to think I run the village messaging service.’

‘What does Angela want?’ Marnie asked. ‘Has she been promoted to bishop?’

Another sigh from Valerie. ‘Miss Hemingway asked me to tell you we’re going to have a new neighbour in the village, in the Old Vicarage, in fact. And apparently it’s someone ... *rather famous*.’

With a final valedictory sniff, she went on her way.

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Twenty minutes later Marnie, Ralph and Anne were sitting in the office barn with mugs of steaming coffee, nibbling their last slices of Christmas *Stollen*. It had been a gift from Anne’s boyfriend, Donovan.

Marnie had given up her job as head of interior design at an architects’ practice in London and moved to rural Northamptonshire. There she had set about converting an almost derelict farm property beside the Grand Union Canal into a home, an office base and a terrace of three cottages for letting. She had come across the buildings by chance while cruising the waterways a few years earlier. Now, her energies and profits had led to the renovation of the cottages to provide additional income. Meanwhile, work proceeded gradually on the restoration of the farmhouse. All the buildings were constructed of the local cream limestone under roofs of Welsh blue slate, including a collection of small barns. One of these had been turned into a comfortable and practical office for Walker and Co, interior design consultants.

An excerpt from *Smoke without Fire* by Leo McNeir

Once they were settled in the office, Marnie phoned Angela Hemingway, the vicar. She pressed the speakerphone button so that the others could hear and join in if they wished.

‘So, Angela, who’s this mysterious *famous* new neighbour?’

‘Ah, Valerie passed on my message. I did wonder if she would.’

‘She passed it on through gritted teeth. Tell me more.’

‘Well, I’ve had a letter from Charles Taverner. He’s now living more or less permanently in the south of France. Anyway, he says he’s put the former vicarage up for sale, and already had a good offer, which he’s accepted.’

Charles Taverner, a retired captain of industry, had scarcely lived in the Old Vicarage for any time at all, and it had remained unoccupied and neglected for the previous two winters.

‘I don’t quite see where you fit into this, Angela,’ Marnie said. ‘After all, the church has no direct interest in the property any more, surely.’

‘That’s right,’ Angela agreed. ‘But nonetheless Charles has asked if I’d be able to act as a go-between in his absence as I know the house quite well. He’s asked the agents to let me have a key.’

‘I see.’

‘There’s something else. That’s where *you* come in, Marnie.’

‘Oh?’

‘The new people have had a survey carried out.’

‘Charles had a survey two years ago,’ said Marnie. ‘I read it at the time. The building was declared to be in good condition ... *very good*.’

‘Well, that was the case back then, but during that severe winter it seems some roof slates were damaged and now the upstairs rooms have suffered from water penetration. Worse than that, the surveyor recommends rewiring the whole house on safety grounds.’

‘That’s bad luck.’ Anne had remained silent so far, but now looked dismayed. ‘Does that mean the beautiful decoration will be hacked about and all Marnie’s good work undone?’

‘I’m getting the picture,’ Marnie said. ‘Does the new owner want me to produce a redesign?’

‘More than that,’ Angela said. ‘He wants you to supervise the works, as you’re *in situ*, so to speak.’

‘So who is this owner, this *rather famous* owner?’ Marnie asked. ‘I’ll have to set up a meeting with him to get things started.’

‘I don’t have his name yet, but I know he lives abroad at the moment.’

‘Where abroad?’

‘I don’t know, but the agents say there’ll be no shortage of money for the works involved.’

Ralph spoke for the first time. ‘Perhaps we’re going to have a Hollywood film star in our midst.’

‘In Knightly St John?’ Marnie sounded sceptical.

‘Why not?’ Ralph said. ‘A number of them have come to live in and around Buckinghamshire. That’s only just down the road.’

‘Frankly,’ said Angela, ‘my imagination is already running in overdrive.’

‘Do you know if our mystery star has a wife or a partner?’ Marnie asked. ‘I’ll need to meet them both when the time comes.’

Angela came back to earth. ‘Oh, er ... a niece, I believe.’

Marnie laughed. ‘Really? That’s a new one!’

‘Do you think that sounds ... *odd*?’ Angela asked.

Evidently, she was the only one who didn’t.