

Excerpt from Beyond the Grave

Time: June, late 1990s

Prologue 1

It was a pleasant evening, the day he was murdered. The early summer weather had been mild for much of the previous week or two, with only the occasional shower. He had met some friends for a drink in their favourite pub and had left well before the others; he wanted a relatively early night. They had all had one drink too many, and he needed to clear his head before turning in. Tomorrow was Wednesday, a working day, and he had a full diary of meetings and appointments waiting for him in the office. The decision taken on the spur of the moment to walk for a few minutes in the park by the river proved to be ill-advised.

Down past the church he walked, enjoying the calm before the pubs turned out. Further on, he crossed the short bridge over the ancient mill leat diverted in centuries past from the Great Ouse – such a grand name for such a modest waterway, he always thought – and strolled along the footpath that was lined on one side by a thick hedge. Tut-tutting to himself, he stepped over some empty beer cans and thought he glimpsed a syringe discarded by the wayside, in the faint light from the houses across the water. It never used to be like this. All sorts of undesirables now roamed the parks and streets of his home town. Standards everywhere seemed to be in decline.

He heard a rustling sound and stopped, thinking that someone was coming up behind him on the footpath, but he saw no one when he looked back. It was nothing more than a light breeze ruffling the hedgerow and the trees that were scattered here and there by the water. He resumed his walk, but decided it was time to turn and make for home. The rustling sound when it came again didn't even arouse his curiosity. At the last moment – which turned out to be his last moment – the rustling became a rushing footfall. Before he could even turn to check it out, the blow crashed into the back of his skull. Shattered by a searing pain, lights flashed chaotically in his head and he collapsed to the ground. One blow was enough. He twitched once or twice, moaned faintly and expired with both eyes open as a dark red stain spread across the path.

There were no witnesses, not even a passing dog-walker to offer a modicum of solace, and no one to come to his aid. Twenty minutes would pass before an inebriated reveller stumbled in horror upon the body. By that time the silent perpetrator had slipped away like a shadow in the night.

Prologue 2

'Coo-ee! It's only me.'

It was an announcement that she had made on entering the house every Tuesday and Friday for the past twelve years. Occasionally there would come a reply from somewhere in the cottage, but not always, so on that morning at nine o'clock sharp it was no surprise when her greeting was met with silence. For a moment or two she hesitated in the hall listening, her head canted on one side. Odd. There was something final about the silence. She had once heard someone say that you could sense if a building was empty. On that Tuesday morning she had that feeling.

Being a practical kind of person, she accepted that there was a simple reason for the lack of a response. The owner of the house – the *lady* of the house, to her mind – had just popped out to go shopping. No time was to be wasted in getting down to work. She went to her cupboard – it was always referred to as *her* cupboard – and pulled out the Hoover. She always called it the Hoover, even though it was another make entirely. For the next half hour she dusted then hoovered downstairs. She had read in a magazine article that that was the correct order, though it didn't really seem to make sense.

She always left the kitchen to last, so she lugged the vacuum cleaner up the stairs and hoovered the landing. Next stop: the main bedroom. She pushed open the door with her bottom and entered backwards, pulling the cleaner behind her. It was only after plugging it into the wall socket that she straightened up and glanced round the room. Her employer always had the bed made by the time she arrived, and that day seemed at first sight to be no exception. Except ...

To her surprise – and, let it be said, *shock* – she saw that the bed was still occupied. She gasped and raised a hand to her mouth.

‘Oh, I’m *terribly* sorry. I didn’t realise you were ...’

Her voice faded away as she saw that the shape in the bed made no movement. It lay utterly still. She had always dreaded that, with such an elderly employer, this might happen one day. Everything in the room looked as orderly as before. The dressing table was tidy. There were no clothes lying about. The bedroom was a model of orderliness, just as her employer would have wished it. On the bedside table there was a book and the water that she always had to hand.

For a few moments, she stood with head bowed and hands clasped together and said a little prayer. Then, having ascertained beyond any doubt that the occupant of the bed had enjoyed her final slumber, she went quietly down the stairs and picked up the phone on the hall table. She dialled the number for the local doctor’s surgery and, while waiting for a reply, vowed that she would continue her day’s work as usual so that the whole house would be spotless. It was the least she could do. Standards had to be maintained.

It was only much later that she realised that the death of her employer had not caused her to shed a single tear. Such a display would have been frowned on by that austere lady as an unnecessary extravagance.

Chapter 1

It began with two phone calls and a letter, all on the same day. Two of the three were disruptive; all of them had far-reaching consequences.

After receiving the first phone call Marnie Walker had a lot on her mind. None of it was good. She put the phone down, slumped forward on her desk, head in hands, muttering under her breath. The call had come from the district registrar. Marnie thought it was the worst news she could possibly have that day. As it turned out, she was wrong.

Marnie Walker was in her mid-thirties. She was above average height for a woman and slim, with the kind of figure that looks good in jeans. Her hair was dark, wavy and shoulder-length, and her eyes were brown. She had an attractive face, with clean intelligent features and a good complexion.

That Wednesday morning she was alone in the office. Her assistant and close friend, Anne Price, had gone to the village shop for a few provisions; her lover, Ralph Lombard, was on his way to Oxford. Ralph was also her fiancé, but she couldn’t bring herself to think of him like that. *Fiancé* – a title from a bygone age, she thought.

Ralph was almost a decade older than Marnie, but had kept himself in good shape, both physically and intellectually. Just over six feet tall, with strong features, dark hair and piercing grey eyes, his manner was confident but not over-bearing. His passions included economics, boating and, of course, Marnie.

Marnie left the office barn and set off through the spinney towards the canal, desperate for fresh air to clear her head, It was a warm day in early June, and the trees were now in full leaf. She stepped out of the spinney fifty yards later, stopped, closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. The fresh clean smell of the water and the countryside was soothing to a degree, but her thoughts were still punctuated with question marks. She breathed out audibly and contemplated the scene before her.

An excerpt from *Beyond the Grave* by Leo McNeir

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Ralph's narrowboat, *Thyrsis*, was moored on the mainline of the canal to her right. On the left, her own boat, *Sally Ann*, also a forty-five footer, nestled in a private docking area cut into the main line of the waterway at rightangles.

Marnie walked past *Sally Ann* and headed towards the bridge spanning the canal about forty yards away. It was a brick structure, dating back to 1794, an 'accommodation' bridge, built to allow cattle and sheep to cross over the waterway. Its design was simple and elegant. Marnie walked to the centre of the bridge and leaned against the parapet, looking down towards the boats. It was a good place to find peace and calm. Within moments that atmosphere evaporated as the mobile in Marnie's back pocket began vibrating. The ID window revealed that the caller was her sister.

'Was that a sigh, Marnie?'

'Possibly, Beth, or something like that.'

'What's up?'

'Where do I begin?'

Beth changed the subject. She often did that. 'Have you heard the news?'

'The Martians have landed?'

'Apart from that,' Beth said.

'Enlighten me.'

'There's been a murder up in your neck of the woods.'

Marnie stiffened. 'What are you talking about?'

'It was on the news just now. I think it happened last night.'

'Up here?'

'Somewhere in Stony Stratford, they said on the radio. That's just a few miles from Knightly St John, isn't it?'

'That's terrible!'

'In fact it's really rather tragic. Seems the victim was a man who worked for a *charity*. Why would *anyone* kill someone like that, someone who just wanted to help people?'

'Well,' said Marnie, 'someone obviously did.'

'Yeah, poor guy. I think they said he was about our age, middle to late thirties.'

'Was that it? You just rang to brighten my day?'

'No. I was wondering how the wedding plans were coming along.'

Another sigh. 'They're not. We've had a glitch, as of this morning. Staffing problems at the registry office, something to do with cutbacks. We're postponed till the end of the summer.'

'But what about your honeymoon plans ... Venice on the Orient-Express? All that's postponed, too?'

'Inevitably,' Marnie said.

'A shame you can't do something else in the meantime.'

After disconnecting, Marnie gazed down at the canal. Perhaps Beth had a point. She and Ralph had cleared time in their diaries for a week or two without meetings. With their original plans in shreds, it dawned on her that the solution was staring her in the face. Literally.

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