

Excerpt from Death in Little Venice

Part 1

She had all London to herself. At least that was how it seemed. The towpath was deserted. The darkness of the December evening surrounded her, relieved only by the lights from the blocks of flats some distance away outside the park. At the front end of the boat, the headlamp did no more than reflect off the surface, warning other boats of her approach. There were no other boats.

The engine clattered under her feet, a reassuring solid thumping from the diesel. Good old Sally Ann, Marnie thought, staring into the frosty air as they slipped slowly through the water of the Regent's Canal, heading towards Little Venice. She pulled her collar up to keep out the chill and steadied the tiller to hold the narrowboat in mid-channel.

This section ran through London Zoo and in daylight she had often seen African kudu looking down at her from their compound, and exotic birds in the aviaries, their food plundered by sparrows that slipped in and out through the mesh. Now, it was so dark she could scarcely see the boundary fencing.

On one such evening in the 1870s a boat carrying munitions had exploded along this stretch of canal, killing the three-man crew and a boy passing on the towpath, destroying Macclesfield Road bridge, subsequently rebuilt and ever after called the 'blow-up bridge'. Marnie could see its sturdy steel columns in the beam of the lamp. She took care to steer Sally Ann between the bank and the flotsam in the water, straining her eyes to make sure it was just another plastic bag floating on the surface and nothing more substantial that might damage the hull. She slowed down to ease past, watching carefully to make sure it did not slide under the stern and foul the propeller.

Her cheeks suddenly tingled, as she realised that the shape in the water was not a plastic bag. She pushed the heavy lever into reverse gear and revved the engine to bring the boat to a stop, while she lunged forward to grab the torch from its hook by the control panel. The shape in the water was a body, face down, barely visible on the dark surface.

Moaning to herself, Marnie guided the boat into the bank, trying to work out how she was going to pull the person clear, knowing all the while that there was no hope. She held the stern mooring rope firmly and jumped ashore, kneeling at the edge of the path to reach the lifeless form in the black water.

"Oh God, not again," she muttered, "not again."

Part 2

Tuesday 6 December

"You've done what? You've had it all cut off? I don't believe it!"

"Well, not all exactly ..." Marnie reached for the mirror on the desk, putting the pen in her mouth to give herself a free hand. "I didn't mean literally all ... just, well, most of it ..."

"And you've started smoking again!" Beth sounded irate. Marnie exaggerated the mumble caused by the pen protruding from the corner of her mouth. She often did this to wind her sister up.

“What do you mean smoking? You know I gave it up years ago ...” There was a hint of Bogart in the voice.

“I’m sure you just do that to wind me up.”

“As if I would ...”

“Marnie, no sooner have we begun to get you better, no sooner is my back turned, than you start doing crazy things. Has the air up there gone to your head?”

“I’m not up there,” said Marnie. She ran her glance over the large open-plan office at Everett Parker Associates. It had been her place of work for nine years as head of interior design. “I’m in London. I thought I’d look in on the old firm, say hallo.”

“Well, perhaps while you’re here you can say hallo to that rotting pile of junk that’s been cluttering up my garage for the last few years.”

“Do you mean ... my classic sports car ...” The tone was mock-indignant. “... my 1936 MG TA?”

“I mean that thing under the dust sheet I have to squeeze past every time I want to get to the lawn mower. You said you’d take it away and put it in one of your many barns once you moved to the country.”

Marnie’s conscience gave her a twinge. “Okay, fair enough, but I’m not sure I can get over to you this trip. It’s a flying visit ... I’ve come down to see Ralph ... we’re going to a sort of Christmas party.”

“Christmas party? It’s a bit early, isn’t it? Christmas is three weeks away.”

“Well, it’s more like a pre-Christmas party. Actually, it’s a reception ... in the House of Commons. It’s for arts organisations, writers, actors, musicians. There’ll be some famous people there. I couldn’t go with my hair the way it was, so I decided to get an appointment with Joanne.”

“And she said you should have it all cut off?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you ... She said it had been hacked about so much at the hospital when they were stitching my head wounds, the only logical thing to do was ... well, start again from scratch.”

“That makes it sound as if you had head lice!”

“Ha ... ha,” said Marnie slowly.

“But you had such nice hair, Marnie, thick and wavy. It always disappointed me that I didn’t have hair like yours, considering we’re sisters. I took after dad in the hair department.”

“Dad’s bald,” Marnie pointed out objectively.

“I meant before he went bald,” said Beth. “Anyway, you seem to have decided to follow his lead now.”

Marnie ran a hand over her newly cropped hair. The initial shock was wearing off and she had seen how expertly Joanne had cut it, taking care to conceal the areas where the medics had chopped it when Marnie had almost become a victim of murder that previous summer. She had left it to see what would happen, and at first it had been hidden by dressings, but it was obviously not

going to sort itself out and firm measures were needed. She wondered what Ralph would think when they met at the Commons that evening.

“It’s not bad, really,” said Marnie. “Joanne is very good ... and underneath it’s still the same hair. It’ll be all right when it grows out, I expect.”

“But is now the best time to have it done?” said Beth. “Mid-December’s hardly the ideal season to have your hair cut off. I would’ve thought you could’ve waited till the weather got a bit warmer, that’s all.”

“Just because I live in the country, it doesn’t mean I have to follow the life pattern of the sheep!”

“You know what I mean, Marnie. It’s the dead of winter. You don’t want to catch your death, do you?”

Marnie shuddered, even though the office was warm. “No. I don’t want to catch my death. Once is enough ...”

She was putting the phone down when Faye Summers crossed the office carrying two cups of coffee.

“Real cups on real saucers!” said Marnie, starting to get up from Faye’s chair that had once been her own. The movement caused her some discomfort and Faye signalled her to stay where she was.

“You know how we like to treat our visitors, Marnie. It’s great to see you. I love that hair style. You’re giving me ideas ... perhaps I should get my hair straightened.” She patted her tight dark curls, the heritage of her West Indian father. Marnie smiled at her over the top of the coffee cup.

“Mm, this is good. I’m glad to see you haven’t gone totally downhill since I left.”

When Marnie had moved away to set up her own business in the early summer of that year, Philip the principal partner in the firm, had offered Faye the job of senior interior design associate. It was a bold move and it had proved successful. Faye, at twenty-four, was almost ten years younger than Marnie, but the same age Marnie had been when she had joined the firm in that position.

“Your imprint is all over the company, Marnie.” Faye perched on the corner of her desk. “In fact, we still get clients asking for you by name. Some of them remember me as your assistant and agree to put up with me as second best.”

“You were never second best.”

“Well, third best then.” Faye laughed a deep, rich chuckle.

“It is about time you changed the decor around here, put your own stamp on the place.” Marnie rose carefully to her feet. She walked over towards the window. It was mid-afternoon and already a gloom was descending over London. “Not much seems to have changed ... same colour scheme ... same faces ... new receptionist ... probably the same litter on the canal.” She looked up and down to see if any boats were passing, but all was still in the pale winter light reflecting off the surface. Faye came up to stand beside her. She spoke quietly.

“Marnie, I haven’t said anything to you about ... you know ... what happened ... It must still be a painful experience. Don’t think I’ve forgotten, we’ve forgotten ... Everyone here talks about you ... in a nice way, I mean ... we were all terribly upset ...”

Marnie put her hand on Faye's arm. "Of course," she said. "I know that. I remembered as soon as I came into the room. Naturally, living in the country prepared me for that experience."

"What experience?" Faye was puzzled.

"When you cross a field of sheep, they all tend to look at you like that and stop chewing for a few moments." She smiled.

"Then they baa," said Faye, "close their mouths and get back to their drawing boards."

"Exactly."

"Seriously, though, Marnie, I wanted to give you a big hug, but I was scared I might hurt you. When you came in, there was something about you that told me you were still suffering."

"Actually, it's not too bad now. I tend to stiffen up if I sit in the same position for too long, but the headaches have gone and they tell me I'll have no permanent damage ... well not physical at any rate."

As they stood talking by the window, a boat slid quietly past, lights shining from portholes. They watched it go, Marnie raising a hand to the steerer from force of habit. He noticed her and nodded back.

"It's funny," said Faye. "Since you went off for your summer sabbatical last year, I've started looking at the boats that go by. Once I used to think they were all the same, but they all look different now. I expect you recognise the styles and know all about them."

"It's not difficult when you spend time on the waterways," said Marnie. "That was a sixty foot trad built by Black Country Narrowboats about 1989 ... three cylinder Lister engine."

Faye was astonished. "You can tell all that just by seeing it go past the window? That's amazing!"

"Not really. It belongs to Roger Broadbent, my solicitor. The boat's called Rumpole ... moored in Little Venice about six boats from Sally Ann's old mooring."

Faye laughed. "I'd thump you but you might break! Are you still using the boat ... it's your sister's, isn't it?"

"Yes and no. I've still got her and I'm still living on her while the building works are in progress at Glebe Farm. But she isn't my sister's boat any more. She's mine. I've bought her ... well, in principle I've bought her. There hasn't yet been any actual passing of money between bank accounts, but that's only for a technical reason ... All my money's tied up in buildings at the moment, so Beth's agreed to be patient."

"That's nice of her," said Faye.

"Well, perhaps agreed is a slight exaggeration ..."

"Marnie, sometimes you're impossible! I'm sure you'd get away with ..." The words faded on Faye's lips and her smile vanished.

"I'm sure you're right," said Marnie. "Come on, let me finish that coffee. Then I really must be off. I want to look in on Little Venice before I go to the House. I want to call in on a few more old friends so that next time they see me they might actually recognise me ... unlike Roger."

