

Devil in the Detail

Prologue

He was walking quickly along the towpath when he spotted the pub and stopped in his tracks. It was on the *other* side of the canal from where he now stood ... the *wrong* side, as far as he was concerned. Hesitating, he looked back down the towpath. There was a bridge not far behind him. Presumably, if he crossed over at that point he would be able to walk round the houses that backed onto the water and find his way to the pub along the road leading to its car park. That would probably involve a lengthy detour, and he was already late. The phone call had delayed him.

There was no one in sight to ask for help. He stood thinking for a few seconds, a fine-looking man over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and slim build. Like many black athletes and sportsmen, he wore his hair close-cut so that his head was almost shaved.

Somewhere at the back of his mind he had the notion there was an alternative way to go. Looking behind him he saw steps leading down the bank and remembered Marnie talking about a pedestrian tunnel at Cosgrove under the Grand Union. Cautiously on the bumpy surface, he descended and found the entrance.

It looked as if it had been built for children, or even *by* children, and it brought a smile to his face. Everything about it seemed eccentric, from its irregular outline to its undulating walls. From outside he saw how the roof lining dipped in the middle and knew he would have to walk its length bent forward to avoid hitting his head. He could understand why Anne had said it was her favourite tunnel on the whole waterways network.

They had sat out that evening a few weeks earlier, the whole group, making plans for the summer, Estelle, Marnie, Anne, Serena, Ralph, Dorothy, George, Margaret, Ronny and the others. He pictured each of their faces in turn as they sat drinking chilled wine in the warmth of the evening while the stars gradually came out. On one face in particular his mind dwelt. Ducking his head to enter the tunnel, he revisited the scene, lit by the flares they had stuck in the ground when the light had begun to fade into dusk.

He had barely gone five paces when someone came into the tunnel from the opposite end, and he felt self-conscious; they would feel threatened at the sight of a powerfully-built black man in such a confined area, especially in these difficult times. But the person coming towards him seemed unconcerned, and he began to move over, ready to stand aside to let them pass more easily.

As he stopped, recognition dawned on him, and he was now no longer surprised that the on-comer had no hesitation in advancing towards him. The smile was already returning to his lips.

Talk of the devil, he thought.

Looking back later on the strange and terrible events of that long hot summer, Marnie judged that this was the moment when she had the first inkling that things were going badly wrong.

Life had started to settle down to a busy but enjoyable pattern. She had begun feeling that all the changes she had brought into her existence were paying off. The struggle to establish herself with a new business in a new place, a new home and new relationships had reached a plateau from which she could look to the way ahead with confidence.

That morning she had left the office for a routine meeting with her biggest client with words of warning in her mind ... *there's something you ought to know for your journey ... you could have problems.*

Now, sitting at the traffic lights in Leicester she stared at the scene unfolding before her with incredulity. How could this be happening on a pleasant summer's day in the heart of England? While she waited, not daring to move for fear of drawing attention to herself and inviting trouble – potentially very big trouble – she scrolled back through her memory to try to work out when the series of events that had led her here first started.

The last moment of normality – if anything connected with her sister approached the normal – was when Beth had phoned about her plans for the summer. If only Marnie had taken up her sister's suggestion, everything would have turned out differently, for good and for ill.

Yes, she decided, the starting point was that phone call.

"You cannot be serious!"

It was Marnie's sister, Beth. She always had a tendency to sound like John McEnroe when faced with what she would regard as the wilder eccentricities of her younger sister.

"What did I say?" Marnie retorted into the phone.

“You said you weren’t going to take a summer holiday. Marnie, you *need* a break, especially after all your hard work over the past year ... not to mention ... well, all the things that have happened to you recently.”

“I told you I was staying here – in this *rural paradise* – for the summer. I can relax here while everyone else is away. What’s so strange about that? Don’t answer that. Tell me about your holiday plans, instead.”

“And that’s another thing you always do.”

“What?” she said wearily.

“Change the subject as soon as I pin you down in an argument.”

“Do I?”

“And you do that, too.”

“Now what?”

“You aren’t going to tell me you’re not aware that you start answering a question with another question?”

“Are you sure about that?”

“*Marnie!*”

“Sorry. Only joking. But seriously, do tell me about your holiday. Where did you say you were going?”

“Phuket.”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.”

“You’re trying to wind me up, Marnie ... and that’s a *very* old joke.”

“I thought you said *you forget*.”

“You know perfectly well I said *Phuket*.” She pronounced it Foo-kett. “You also know it’s in the south of Thailand. It’ll be idyllic. We’re staying in a gorgeous hotel. One of Paul’s colleagues stayed there last year on a stopover from San Francisco. Actually, it’s more like a chalet with its own patio under the palm trees, almost on the beach. I can’t wait.”

“You’ll hate the crowds.”

“*Crowds?* Marnie, the place is famous for its seclusion. Our next-door neighbours will be hermit crabs.”

“No. I meant the crowds at Gatwick airport. That’s what summer’s all about. Your next-door neighbours will be irate tourists complaining about the delays to their flights – and yours – as the air traffic controllers can’t squeeze all the planes into the sky, while the baggage-handlers go on strike. It’s the Great British Summer Holiday Rush.”

“Would there be a touch of jealousy creeping in here, by any chance?” said Beth.

“Why would I be jealous?”

“There you go again ... a question on top of a question.” Before Marnie could reply, Beth added, “Don’t even think about it.”

“Beth, I have no reason to be jealous. I’m sure you’ll have a great time and it’ll be perfect. For you and Paul. Me, I’m happy to stay here. This is a beautiful place. They’ve promised a long hot summer, and I’ll be able to go for trips on my boat on the lovely Grand Union Canal. Who could ask for more than that?”

“Well, yes, that’s very nice too, and I can see why ... wait a minute. Aren’t you forgetting something? *Sally Ann* is in fact *my* boat ... Paul’s and mine. It seems to have escaped your notice that you haven’t yet paid us for her.”

“Of course. Fair comment. Anyway, this chalet ... does it have cooking facilities or do you get all your meals at the hotel?”

“The chalet? Oh, it’s got absolutely *everything*. We thought some of the time we’d – *Marnie!*”

Ten minutes later, she was still smiling at the thought of her conversation with Beth when Anne walked into the office carrying a tray. She had been doing her regular morning round in the yard, handing out mugs of tea and coffee to the builders working on the renovation of the former Glebe Farm. Without pausing, she walked across to the kitchen area at the back of the large open-plan space and filled the kettle. She looked over at Marnie.

“You’ve been speaking to Beth, haven’t you?”

“Anne with an ‘e’, I swear you’re psychic. How else could you know that?”

Anne poured hot water into the cafetière. “Easy, really. First, I was the one who gave you the message to ring her just before I went out on site.” She enjoyed using the proper term. “And second, you usually have that amused expression on your face after you’ve been chatting with her. You wound her up, didn’t you?”

Marnie stood up and went to look out of the window into the yard. “Yes, but she enjoys it. And she deserved it ... telling me all about her exotic holiday trip to Thailand.”

“When are they going?”

“Next week. Paul’s finished all his exam marking, and they want a break before he gets on with his research project. They’re coming back via California so he can join in a seminar at Stamford University.”

“You’re not jealous,” said Anne.

“Course not. I love my life ... wouldn’t want to change a thing. Travel’s great, but at the moment ...” She made a gesture with her hand, encompassing the farm complex, the office, their environment, everything around them.

“I know. I feel the same. Though I would like to do some travelling. I’ve only been abroad once, to France. We went camping. It was great. That was before dad was made redundant the first time. Since then ...” She made the same gesture with her hand.

“Actually,” Marnie said. “I think we might be in line for a job in Italy.”

She walked back to her desk and picked up a letter from the pile of correspondence. It had been sent by Philip Everett, senior partner in the firm in London where Marnie had worked for nine years, most of them as head of the interior design group.

“Italy?”

“Yeah. Philip has asked if we could look at this renovation project in Umbria.”

Anne brought the mugs of coffee and stood beside Marnie to read the letter. They were both about the same height: Marnie five foot seven, Anne an inch shorter. Marnie was in her early thirties but looked younger. She had dark hair that had been cut close to her head after treatment for an almost fatal head injury the year before, but was now growing back to her preferred shoulder-length style. With a clear complexion and brown eyes, she had the kind of slim outline that looked good in jeans.

Anne was seventeen, and ‘slim’ would have been an understatement. A tramp of their acquaintance had once described her as a ‘skinny bint with no tits’ and, although her figure was developing as she grew to maturity, no one would yet have called her an out-and-out liar. On a good day she looked as pale as bone china, with light blonde hair cut ultra-short and bright blue eyes. A fortnight earlier she had passed her driving test at the first attempt, and the examiner had remarked that she looked far too young to be at the wheel of a car, but he could not fault her ability as a driver.

Marnie pointed at Philip’s letter. “I think there’s a catch here. Look at the last paragraph.”

Anne read it out. *“The job was to be handled by one of our team in the office, but she has had a few problems lately, and it would help matters if she could do the work under your guidance. Need any staff up there? Give me a ring and we’ll discuss.”*

“See what I mean?” said Marnie.

“You think Philip wants you to take her on as well as the job?”

“I wonder.” She sat down and reached for the phone. “Let’s find out.”

Philip was out at a site meeting. His secretary promised he would ring Marnie back later in the day. She put the phone down and glanced through the letter again.

“Oh well,” she said. “It’ll keep.”