

Excerpt from Getaway with Murder

Prologue

The girl sat hunched on the edge of the chair, fists clenched white in her lap, staring forward, in deep shock. For a few moments she had been left alone in the small, bare room containing only an examination couch, a mobile folding screen and the single chair on which she was sitting.

Outside in the corridor, people were bustling past with the quiet haste of a hospital casualty unit. But in this room there was only the deepest silence centred on the girl, utterly still, scarcely breathing, her eyes wide open and unseeing, accentuating the frailty of the small face and the pale fair hair cut short, almost sculpted to her head. She was sixteen and wore the clothes typical of her generation all over the world, T-shirt, jeans and trainers, the only unusual feature being that hers were smeared with blood, still vivid and fresh. Her hands opened slowly and she looked down to see the palms sticky and red and she breathed in with a shudder.

At that moment the door swung open to admit a nurse, another woman and a man. The girl did not raise her eyes and seemed unaware of their presence.

'This is the girl who found her. She came in with the ambulance,' said the nurse in a low voice.

'Is she injured?' asked the woman in the same quiet tone.

'No. That's blood from ... the victim. Doctor said you shouldn't stay for more than a minute. She's very disoriented.'

'Will she be able to speak to us?' said the man.

'It's hard to tell. People react to shock in all sorts of ways. She may not even know who she is.' The nurse had a homely West Indian accent that seemed strangely re-assuring after the horrific events that had taken place. The other woman knelt down beside the girl and put a hand gently on her arm.

'Where's Marnie?' said the girl. Her voice was a harsh, dry whisper and she cleared her throat. 'What's happened to Marnie?'

'We need your help. We can't stay long. My name is Cathy Lamb, I'm a detective constable. Can you tell me your name?'

'Marnie?' said the girl.

'No, that isn't your name. What are *you* called?'

'I know that. My name is Anne. Anne with an 'e'.' As she spoke, two tear drops rolled down the thin face and dripped onto the blood stains in her lap. She made no sound. The man knelt down on the other side.

'Did you see anybody there?' he said softly. The girl nodded 'Anne, you know me ... I'm Sergeant Marriner. We have to know if you saw anybody when you were in the church. It's very important.' The nurse tapped him lightly on the shoulder. He looked up to see that a doctor had

slipped into the room. The girl stared blankly forward. 'You must help us if you can. You know we're conducting a murder enquiry. Just think.' In the background, the doctor gave a slight cough.

'Someone,' muttered the girl and began breathing more quickly. Her shoulders slumped and she shook her head.

'Please.' The doctor laid his hand on the detective's shoulder and he stood up.

'Anne, we'll come back and see you when you're feeling a little better,' said the woman detective. She smiled and gently squeezed the girl's arm. 'Is there anyone else we should contact? Do you know anyone in her family?' The girl mumbled something indistinct. 'Ben?' said the woman.

'Beth. Her sister.' For the first time, the girl raised her head and looked up at the group standing in the room. Her face was vacant, without animation, but her voice had become firm and clear. 'I'll have to tell her, not you. What's happened to Marnie? Is she all right?' The detectives turned to face the doctor. His face was grim and he gave only the slightest shrug.

ooo0ooo

The car turned off the motorway at junction 15 and headed towards Northampton and the casualty department of the General Hospital. As it rushed down the dual carriageway, neither of the occupants spoke. In fact, hardly a word had been said during the entire journey from London. Beth stared out of the window, but did not register the fields and the golf course, the hotel and the filling station as they flashed past the window. Paul her husband had never driven so fast and once or twice it had crossed his mind that they could easily have been pulled up by the traffic police, but they had raced along undetected and neither of them cared.

Beth tried not to think of her sister lying under a white sheet in some unit where they had laid her. Again and again she went over the events leading up to that moment, wishing she could turn the clock back to the beginning of this episode in their lives. She was thinking of all the things she could have said that might have dissuaded her sister from this venture, so that they would now be living their usual routine in London, for all its shortcomings, rather than making this desperate journey. It seemed pathetic now, but above all else, she wished she had never uttered those stupid words that day in the spring when Marnie told her that her plans to move were completed and she explained how she was going to carry out her project. She wished she had never said: 'Marnie, sometimes I think you'd get away with murder.' As they swung off the expressway and followed the signs to the hospital, she heard Marnie's reply as clearly as if she had been with them in the car.

'I like the idea of making a getaway ... but I can do without the murder.'

Part 1

'You've done *what?*' Marnie shifted the 'phone closer to her ear.

'I've sold her,' Beth repeated.

'You've sold *Sally Ann?* Why?'

'Well, for a start, it's winter and we are fair weather sailors. We were talking about the boat to a colleague of Paul's who said he was nuts about narrowboats and canals and he asked to see her and we took him down to Little Venice. He really liked her.'

'What about all the hard work I put into her?'

'Great! That's why we could get a really good price.'

'What?!

'No, seriously, you had her practically all last year and you must have got boats out of your system by now, just as we have. Let's face it, Marnie, you've never been the outdoor type.'

'I might have changed.' Marnie reached over the desk for her Zippo, clutching a pencil in her teeth.

'Not you. Your idea of the great outdoors is a window box filled with geraniums and trailing things or a documentary about wildlife on BBC2.'

'Beth, there is such a thing as honour among sisters, you know. I did all that work turning *Sally Ann* into a smart boat ... not to mention the expense. Have you *any* idea how much effort I put in?'

'Marnie, I really appreciated it.'

'And now you've gone and *sold* her!'

'Good as ...' There was a pause.

'*Good as?*' Marnie's tone was heavy with suspicion.

'Our friend wants to take another look. He's going down tonight by himself to spend a little time on her and walk around Little Venice. Get to know the place. We can't go with him. We're having Paul's Professor and his wife to dinner. So he's going alone. He can take his time. Maybe it's just as well.'

'Well, it's up to you, I suppose.'

After they had hung up, Marnie sat fondling her Zippo. It was the nearest she ever came to smoking these days. From her desk she could see out to the canal that went past her office window. Winter should have ended by now, but nobody had told it. There had been a frost in the night and most of the surface was opaque and brittle. Down the middle of the channel was a strip of clear water. A boat had passed by in the early hours, heading down to the pool of Little Venice about a mile away, or making for Bull's Bridge and the main line of the Grand Union Canal in the opposite direction. Marnie remembered her own journey the previous summer on Beth's narrow boat *Sally Ann*, a journey that had taken her up through the middle of England and down to Oxford and the Thames. She had taken the whole summer as sabbatical leave to refresh her spirits and had refurbished *Sally* in her own taste, with new curtains and brass lamps, safari-style furniture and a whole set of new crockery, *matching* new crockery.

'Yes, Beth, maybe it's just as well,' she muttered to herself and reached across for the diary to see what she had planned for later that afternoon.

ooo0ooo

It was three-thirty, bright but chilly, when Marnie pulled into a parking bay round the corner from the canal at Little Venice. She paused at the railings and looked down on *Sally Ann*. There were one or two places where the paintwork needed to be touched up, but Marnie had to admit that these days *Sally* had a smart livery. She had painted the roof the previous year, covering the drab maroon with a pale cream and had used the same colour around the bow, along the centre band and round the

An excerpt from *Getaway with Murder* by Leo McNeir

© Leo McNeir

stern. Above that band the body was in navy blue and below it the hull was black. She was finished off with two broad bands of white and red at the stern.

It had been hard work, as hard in its way as learning to control the boat and work the locks. But Marnie was in no doubt that it had been worth the effort. It had given her a real sense of achievement to learn how to manage forty-five feet of steel narrowboat weighing fourteen tonnes, and a sense of freedom to know that she could take *Sally* on over two thousand miles of canals and waterways. There was a time last year that *Sally* had come to her rescue when Marnie was at a low point in her life. The sabbatical summer spent travelling on the boat had become a turning point and, looking down on her from the pavement, Marnie knew how much *Sally Ann* meant to her.

'Surveying your handiwork or making a list of tasks to be done?' With the traffic going by, Marnie had not heard anyone approach, but turned smiling on hearing the voice of Mrs Jolly, the old lady who lived in the house opposite *Sally's* mooring.

'A mixture of both. Actually, I'm thinking of changing her name.' Marnie's tone was matter-of-fact, Mrs Jolly's expression unconvinced.

'All right, I'll buy it. What will you change it to?'

'I think *Forth Bridge* would probably be appropriate,' said Marnie. The old lady chuckled.

'It was when you started working on her last year that I realised you were serious and not just dabbling.'

'Not just a water gypsy?'

'Quite. You've never let me forget that. Anyway, you made a big improvement compared to the way the other people, sorry, I mean your sister and brother-in-law, treated her. By the way, they were here the other evening.'

'Yes, I know. I do allow them to come from time to time. It is after all *their* boat.'

'They had someone with them, a friend I suppose, a big burly chap. I just *happened* to be looking out of the window.' They both smiled at the unspoken knowledge that nothing happened around *Sally Ann* without Mrs Jolly noticing.

'That was their potential buyer,' said Marnie.

'Buyer? For *Sally Ann*? ' Mrs Jolly looked shocked. 'But surely they can't sell her to someone else?'

'They can. She belongs to them, technically.'

'But not *morally*,' said Mrs Jolly in a grand tone. 'Think of all your hard work, Marnie. In many ways she's more your boat than theirs.'

'Fancy a cup of tea?' asked Marnie, leading the way through the gate onto the towpath.

They had hardly sat down in the saloon when a face appeared in the hatchway at the far end of the cabin. It was a man's face, pleasant with a cheeky grin, almost plausible but not quite.

'Come in, Gary. Tea?' He rubbed his hands and hopped into the cabin, looking round as he made his way nimbly to the table and took a seat. He smiled at Mrs Jolly.

'I think you've met Gary, Mrs Jolly?'

'Oh yes. No need for introductions. It was when you let *Sally Ann's* mooring while Marnie was away,' she said in an even tone.

'Waste not, want not,' said Gary with a nod of the head and a twinkle in the eye. 'You know, Marnie, this used to be the scruffiest boat in Little Venice, apart from that houseboat up the other end that's actually sitting on the bottom.'

'Thank you. How many lumps?' There was a menacing edge to the question.

'Two please. I said *used to be*. Now she's definitely one of the smartest.'

'It's all Marnie's hard work,' said Mrs Jolly, turning her head slightly as a shape passed the window on the towpath side.

'We'll have half of Little Venice in here in a minute,' said Gary and, right on cue, a voice came from the aft deck.

'Hallo-o-o. Anyone at home?' This time it was Albert, a retired merchant seaman who lived on a large boat halfway along the towpath with two cats, also retired.

'The door's open, Albert,' Marnie called out, reaching for another cup.

'But is there a welcome on the mat?' he said. 'There are two of us and you seem to have a full house.' Albert stepped down into the cabin accompanied by Jane Rutherford, who kept a narrowboat along the cut, from which she worked as a sign-painter in the traditional canal style. Space was made for them at the table. Gary rubbed his hands together again and grinned.

'This *is* nice. We can have a party ... or even an orgy.' He winked at Mrs Jolly.

'I'm surprised you have to ask about the welcome,' said Marnie, ignoring Gary and handing the newcomer a cup of tea. 'I'm not sure if you know Mrs Jolly who lives across the road. Mrs Jolly, this is Albert, who is I believe Little Venice's longest-standing resident.' They shook hands. 'You know Jane, of course.'

'I always think of Little Venice as a village,' said Albert, 'but really it's two villages, one on the canal and one outside the fence. They don't often meet, which is sad, really.'

'To be honest,' said Mrs Jolly, 'the people on the outside of the fence, as you put it, don't often meet either. They come and go by car and rarely have much contact with each other.'

'Same where I live,' said Jane. 'I don't often see the people who live around me. I suppose that's London for you. Little Venice, *this* side of the fence, is a friendly community like a village.'

'Nomads.' It was Gary who spoke, in between taking sips from his tea.

'Thank you for that contribution, Gary,' said Marnie. 'Is there more to come or will you rest on your laurels?'

'Canals are for travelling, so people who use them are like nomads. Little Venice is like an oasis.' There was silence while the words were digested.

'So the canal is a community,' said Marnie. She felt that Gary had a point.

'It's not static like a village in one place,' said Gary.

'It is to some of us who live here all the time and don't move our boats,' said Albert. 'Or am I like a camel dealer staying at the oasis?' He guffawed.

'Perhaps that accounts for the help and hospitality we give each other,' said Marnie, passing round the biscuits. 'Anyway, it always feels like a village to me, somewhere secure where everyone knows you and is friendly.'

'I think that's a rather idealised view of village life, Marnie,' said Mrs Jolly. 'I grew up as a country girl in a village in Hampshire. It was lovely in many ways, just as you say, but there were sometimes tensions under the surface. There were some families who had not spoken to each other for years and nobody could remember why, but it made no difference. Perhaps there are things under the surface in Little Venice, too.'

'Fish,' said Gary. Mrs Jolly giggled.

'Well, whatever Little Venice is, I may not be in residence for much longer,' said Marnie. Three cups of tea paused in their ascent from the saucer. Gary's eyes narrowed.

'You off again?' he said. Marnie and Mrs Jolly both suspected that he was already calculating how much he could make by sub-letting her mooring while she was away.

'Are you leaving us, my dear?' said Albert.

'I'm about to be evicted,' said Marnie. Albert looked bewildered.

'*Evicted?* From the mooring? This is the first I've heard of it.' Albert always knew what was going on, as if the canal system had long ago become the information super-highway.

'My sister wants to sell *Sally*.'

'Is there no chance that you could buy *Sally Ann* from her?' said Jane.

'Most of my resources are tied up in the flat.'

'She may not find it so easy to sell,' said Albert. 'There are half a dozen boats with 'For Sale' signs in the window at the moment, none with 'Sold'. It's probably not a good time.'

'But she already has a prospective ...' Marnie paused and looked pensively at Albert. An idea formed in her mind. She got up and crossed to the galley, where she put on the kettle. 'Shall we have another cup of tea?'

It was half an hour later that the party dispersed. It was still light when Marnie locked the towpath gate behind her. She glanced at her watch. Paul's colleague would be arriving soon to look at *Sally Ann*. He would be coming alone.

'Yes, Beth, maybe it's just as well,' thought Marnie.