

Spring visitors

Was there at last a hint of spring in the air? Earlier in the week they had watched newborn lambs gambolling in the meadows beyond the canal. The heavy rains of the past few weeks had finally drifted away, leaving only puddles in the furrows of the undulating fields. Crocuses had supplanted snowdrops, and the first daffodils were opening cheerful faces to the world. All these optimistic signs of the coming of the sweet of the year had encouraged Marnie to think of a day's outing on her boat, *Sally Ann*. A good decision.

Marnie and Anne had donned warm clothing that Saturday morning and taken food to cook on board in one of many beautiful mooring places up the Grand Union Canal. The third member of the crew, Dolly their sturdy black cat, sat on the hatch, her thick-pile fur puffed out, observing through deep amber eyes everything they passed.

Reversing *Sally Ann* out of her docking area, they had pointed the bows northwards and set off, both of them holding a mug of coffee in gloved hands. In jackets, jeans, woolly hats and boots, they stood together on the stern deck and breathed in deeply the fresh country air. It was chilly enough to make their noses tingle, but the sun was climbing, and by mid-morning the first sharpness had become a memory.

Marnie was in her early thirties, Anne not yet nineteen, and they had lived and worked together for over two years. They relaxed in each other's company, taking turns at the tiller, chatting easily about their interior design projects and plans for the months ahead. Marnie had had health problems at the start of the winter but was now recovered. This did not prevent Anne from keeping a surreptitiously watchful eye on her friend and mentor, especially when Marnie's lover, Ralph, was away as now on one of his frequent lecture tours.

Surveying the pastoral landscape, Marnie turned to Anne.

‘You know, Ralph says no sunshine is as welcome as the sun in March because it brings with it the hope that it will stay.’

Anne grinned. ‘He always was a know-all.’

They had smiled together at that thought.

By mid-day the sky had clouded over for a time, but the weather remained dry and they pulled over to tie up for lunch by the towpath. Tuna steaks with new potatoes and broccoli followed by raspberry fool had done wonders for crew morale, especially when accompanied by a glass or two of Fleurie.

Later in the day Dolly opted for the comfort of the bed in the cabin to sleep off her share of the tuna, while Anne turned the boat round a mile south of the Stoke Bruerne flight of locks and steered them homewards. Within a few miles of their destination, Anne went below and tackled the dishes leaving Marnie at the helm. She was lining the boat up for the bridge hole on the approach to base as Anne came up the steps onto the deck. Anne looked back over the countryside where the late afternoon sun was casting long shadows.

‘Oh no,’ Marnie muttered. ‘What do *they* want now?’

Anne turned to see Marnie frowning.

‘What is it?’

Marnie indicated the bank beside their mooring place at Glebe Farm. Two men in coats were waiting by the water’s edge, their expressions serious.

‘It can’t be possible,’ Anne said.

Marnie sighed. ‘I think it is.’

Gin

Roger Broadbent was retying the mooring ropes on his boat *Rumpole* in London's Little Venice while his wife, Marjorie, prepared refreshments. He was a tidy man with a tidy mind and liked his ropes to look immaculate. After a day spent cruising on the Regent's Canal he liked to sit back in one of the comfortable armchairs in the boat's saloon to enjoy what he called 'afternoon tea'. This involved at least two chunks of ice, a slice of lemon and not too much tonic. While admiring his ropework he expected at any moment to be called in by Marjorie to the sound of the gin bottle being replaced in the cupboard.

'Roger!' Marjorie called through the window.

'Coming, dear.'

'It's the phone for you.'

Odd to have a call at this time on a Saturday. He stepped briskly onto the stern deck and down into the cabin.

'Who is it?'

'Marnie,' Marjorie said, *sotto voce*.

She handed him the mobile and stood beside him while he took the call.

'Hallo Marnie ... yes, of course. What can I do for ... You've been *what?* ... On suspicion of *what?* ... Have you been formally charged? ... Interview at the station? ... Well, I advise that you don't say anything until I get there. Where are you being held? ... Right. ... Anne as well? Good lord. Sit tight. I'm on my way.'

'Whatever is it, Roger?' Marjorie looked worried.

Roger shook his head. 'Marnie and Anne. They've been arrested on suspicion of murder.'

'Dear god!'

'I have to go at once.' He eyed the gin and tonic. 'I could sure use that drink.'

'Not when you're driving, dear.'

'Bugger!'