

## Excerpt from Kiss and Tell

### Part 1

It was a misty morning, the best time of the day at the best time of the year, with the sun rising above the horizon through veils of pale cloud. The jogger pounded the towpath of the Grand Union Canal between Yore and Hanford where the waterway followed the contour line in a series of gentle curves, flanked by woods and meadows, fields and paddocks. It was early May, and the countryside was alive with lambs and blossom.

He gulped in great mouthfuls of the clean air, rejoicing in muscles that he had carefully honed over the past few years in the fitness centre and on the local pathways. The walkman beat out the rhythm in time with his fists, thrusting like the pistons on a steam locomotive. This was his favourite route. Today it was a deserted landscape, not a boat, not a cyclist, not an angler in sight. Not even the lugubrious heron that took flight as soon as he raced into view. On a straight section over firm ground, he glanced down at his watch. Nine minutes forty-five seconds so far, according to the stop-watch dial. That was nearly ten seconds inside his best time. This was a memorable morning.

For the next fifty metres he had a clear run before the path became rougher, and branches from overhanging trees were liable to lash his face if he was not especially vigilant. Then it was over the canal bridge and on to the final killer section up the steep meadow to the main road where he had a flat run for all the last mile home. He squared up to face the challenge and accelerated the pace. Today he would beat his record.

On a day like this, even the meadow seemed less of a mountain to climb, though he knew he had to treat it with respect. A pity to get a stitch from over-enthusiasm at this stage in the run. It was when he was almost in sight of the road, in a patch of scrub and bushes, that he saw it up ahead. The colour first caught his attention, bright red in amongst the green and yellow leaves and grasses. Reluctant to slow down, he told himself it was just a hold-all that someone had left behind, and he moved over to skirt it in a wide arc.

But a further glance told him it was obviously not a hold-all. He could see a trainer, a Reebok like his own, and curiosity was beginning to draw him nearer. The red fabric was the lower half of a jogging suit. Startled, he realised that someone was lying on the ground, half-hidden by a bush. Perhaps they had collapsed through running too hard; it was easy enough on this hilly terrain. There was nothing for it but to investigate, and he swung reluctantly back towards his original course.

Kneeling beside the prostrate shape, he began to pull back the bushes to take a closer look. Suddenly, in horror, he tasted bile as he realised that the form had no head. He was staggering back starting to retch when the blow came. He was completely unprepared for it. One moment he was straining backwards in the undergrowth, the next there came a sickening explosion on the back of his head, a blinding light and a rapid descent into darkness. He never saw his attacker, never felt the walkman being lifted from his belt or the watch snatched from his wrist. As he was released by his assailant, he hit the ground and began tumbling down the slope. His momentum carried him a long way, almost as far as the canal itself.

The whole episode had been witnessed by no one and, as the unconscious jogger rolled to a halt at the bottom of the meadow, he was seen only by a solitary heron on the bank. It flapped inelegantly into the air, settled its head back like a pterodactyl and flew out over the fields through which ran the silver strip of water.

The car cruised slowly down the high street, past rows of cottages where spring flowers made a bright spectacle against honey-coloured stone. It was a conspicuous machine, a Mercedes-Benz in metallic silver, that would have looked just right parked on the drive of a country manor house. The bright, late morning sunshine glinted off the coachwork, and the car rolled to an elegant halt outside the village shop. Dark tinted windows made it difficult to see the driver, and it was only when he emerged that the few passers-by in the street, the shop-keeper putting up a notice in her window and two neighbours from behind net curtains, could get a sight of him.

The man stood for a few seconds taking in the view. The street was generously wide, flanked by stone houses, a few of them thatched, a few with wisps of smoke curling from chimneys. On the opposite side of the road was a pub, *The Two Roses*, with window boxes filled with primulas in blue and yellow, ivy covering part of the stonework and tubs of multi-coloured wallflowers. Beyond the shop and two more cottages stood the church, slightly raised and set back from the road, behind neatly trimmed hedging. It had a strong, tall, crenellated tower contrasting with the delicate stone mullions of its windows in the Early English style.

Those who were watching, saw a tallish man of medium build with dark short hair. By any yardstick he was good-looking, and his appearance was aided by the cut of the jacket and the expensively casual line of the trousers. The clothes were under-stated, as if he was taking care not to compete with the opulence of the car.

In the shop he was greeted by Molly Appleton, whose husband Richard was seated in the booth that comprised the post office. One or two customers were browsing at shelves, only thinly disguising their interest in the stranger.

“Good morning,” Molly said brightly. She suspected that the man had not come in for a pint of milk and a loaf of bread. “Lovely day. Can I help you?”

“Yes, I hope so. Good morning. I’m looking for Marnie Walker’s place. Do you know it?”

“That would be Glebe Farm.”

“Glebe Farm,” the man repeated dubiously. “The person I’m looking for is an interior designer.”

“And a very good one.” The comment came from a stocky man in his late fifties, bull-necked, in tweed jacket and country check shirt, emerging silently from behind a stack of shelving.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” said the stranger. “It was the farm address that made me wonder.”

“Marnie’s converting it,” Molly said. “She lives down there ... with her friend. They’ve been there since last summer.”

“Right.”

“Mind you, they’ve fitted so well into the village, you’d think they’d been here for years. Very nice people.”

“And she lives there with a friend,” said the stranger.

“Yes,” chimed in one of the other customers, a woman with white hair. “Just the two of them. I heard she was a widow.”

Molly stared at her blankly. “Well, you won’t have any trouble finding her,” she said to the visitor. “Take the road round past the church and go through the first field gate on your left. Just follow the track down. Keep bearing to the right and you can’t miss it.”

“She’ll do you a jolly good job,” said the bull-necked man. “She did a first rate ... *makeover*, I think she called it, for my cousin Dorothy Vane-Henderson at Hanford Hall. Excellent.”

“I see. Actually, I’m not looking for a designer. This is more of a social call.”

“Oh that’s nice,” said Molly. “I didn’t realise you were a friend of Marnie’s.”

The stranger turned towards the door. "I'm not. I'm her husband."

### Part 3

This had to be the perfect spring Saturday. The narrowboat boat glided past two anglers on the canal bank, its engine running quietly a little over half speed, barely any wash at all spreading behind it. Only one of the men looked up. He could make out the name *Sally Ann* on the bow and was pleasantly surprised that the steerer of the boat raised a hand and smiled in his direction. It was a lovely smile. He had an impression of a slim figure in navy sweatshirt and blue jeans, and short brown hair.

"Any luck?" she called out across the water. Her voice was attractive, deeper than he expected. The angler shook his head. The steerer smiled again. "Never mind. Next time." She turned her attention to the bend ahead, swinging the boat clear of the shallow bottom on the inside of the curve. On the hatch cover, a sturdy black cat sat up and stretched.

Straightening up, Marnie Walker increased engine speed, drew in a deep breath and enjoyed the view. In a sunlit landscape she could make out the tower of the church in her adopted home village of Knightly St John. She estimated arriving back at her mooring in under ten minutes. On all sides, fields extended away into the distance, some of them still showing the undulations of mediaeval ridge and furrow, now home to sheep and lambs. On the other side of the canal, crops were sprouting, with reflections from the sun visible in puddles left by the rains of the past few days. Even with the thump and clatter of the diesel engine under her feet, this was a peaceful and refreshing sight.

She was lining up to approach a bridge on an awkward bend when a face appeared in the hatchway, and she was joined on the stern deck by a girl.

"Right, Marnie. That's the washing-up done." The girl looked around and recognised the position. "Good. Just in time. Nearly home." She was almost as tall as the steerer, who was five foot seven, and had ultra-short blonde hair, pale skin and thin sharp features. She was just seventeen but looked younger with a slender boyish figure.

"Anne, can you pop up to the front and check nobody's coming through the bridge hole."

"Sure." She skipped nimbly along the gunwale on the outside of the boat and held up a thumb as an all-clear signal before walking back to the stern.

After the bridge they stood together for a few seconds, taking in the scenery. The trees in every direction were shading pale green with new foliage, the bushes were filling out and no longer transparent, and the countryside was splashed with yellow where fields of oil-seed rape were flowering. Cows and sheep were grazing in warm sunshine.

"No rough winds shaking the darling buds of May here," Anne said.

"Nope."

"I love that poem." Anne laughed brightly. "I don't suppose anyone'll ever write anything like that for me."

"I don't think people do that sort of thing any more," said Marnie.

"Never mind."

Ahead they could see the start of the long, sweeping right-hand curve in the canal that ended at their mooring. Visibility on that side was hindered by the spinney that extended some fifty metres inland, but through the treetops they could just make out the uppermost chimneys of Glebe Farm, their home since the previous summer and still undergoing restoration.

*Sally Ann* rounded the curve and Marnie eased her over to the outside edge of the canal in preparation for docking.

"Do you see what I see?" Marnie said, pointing ahead. "We've got company."

“Someone you know?”

Marnie shook her head. “Don’t recognise it. Not one of the Little Venice crowd. We’d better pull in alongside *Thyrsis* so as not to block our visitor in.”

“They can’t have realised it was a private dock,” said Anne.

Marnie had thought of putting up a sign along the lines of: ‘Private – mooring of N/B Sally Ann’, but she had decided that would look possessive and unwelcoming. She was beginning to have second thoughts as she eased back the accelerator and lined the boat up to slip gently beside *Thyrsis*, the boat moored just beyond the entrance to her docking area.

In *Sally Ann*’s place now stood a boat of about fifty feet in length painted all over in grey, either primer or undercoat, a not uncommon sight on the waterways. No name was visible.

She slowed *Sally Ann* to nudge the side of *Thyrsis*, which belonged to her lover Ralph Lombard, and dropped the rope she was holding round a mooring stud on his boat, when she saw movement from the corner of her eye. A window was sliding open on the boat in the dock. The face behind the window was indistinct, as if the person on board did not want to be seen.

“Can I help you?” A man’s voice. His tone gave the impression that helping was the last thing on his mind.

Marnie was uncertain how to answer a question that she felt she should be asking him.

As she stepped down onto the bank, the man called out again. “I say ... don’t you realise this is private property?”

Marnie stopped. “Actually, I did know that. I’m the owner.”

In reply, she heard only a muffled grunt, and the window slid shut, leaving her alone on the canalside. She felt like Alice in Wonderland, where everything was the opposite of what it should be and where she, the owner, was the trespasser. Anne had finished tying up the bow rope of *Sally Ann* and now came to stand beside her.

“What was that about? He sounded stropky. Doesn’t he realise it’s a private mooring?”

“Apparently not. Must be some misunderstanding. Perhaps he thinks he’s somewhere else.”

“I wish he was,” Anne muttered.

The hatch at the stern of the grey boat slid back, and the door opened to reveal a man of about forty, thin, balding and in shirtsleeves. He hesitated in the hatchway before coming out onto the deck, eyeing Marnie and Anne with suspicion.

Marnie decided to make a fresh start. “Good afternoon.”

“Hallo. Did you say you were the owner of this property?”

Marnie and Anne walked forward. “Well, yes. It’s not how I usually introduce myself, but it seemed appropriate in the circumstances. I’m Marnie Walker.” They stopped beside the grey boat, and the man looked down at them appraisingly.

“And that’s your boat.”

“*Sally Ann* is my boat, that’s right.” Technically, *Sally Ann* still belonged to Marnie’s sister Beth and her husband Paul, but that did not concern him.

“And the other one?”

“*Thyrsis* belongs to a friend of mine. Is that relevant?” Marnie was becoming impatient at being interviewed by a complete stranger, and a trespasser at that, about her legal position while standing on her own property. She thought it was time the man explained himself. “I don’t think I caught your name.”

“No.”

“Look ...” Marnie began, “You’re welcome to stay around here, of course, but at some point it would be nice if I could put my boat back in her dock.”

“Yes.” He looked at Marnie thoughtfully. “I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“I rather think so, too.”

“I thought this was Ralph’s place.”

“You know Ralph?” Marnie was taken aback. “He didn’t mention that anyone was coming.”

“He didn’t know. I sort of ... guessed. It was a typical Ralph kind of joke.”

“What was?”

“The name of the boat ... *Thyrsis* ...the Scholar Gypsy ... the Oxford connection. I saw it there, knew he had a place in the country, had a boat and put two and two together.”

“And made five and a half,” Marnie heard Anne whisper at her side.

“It’s certainly his boat,” said Marnie, suppressing a smile. “Good guess. But his *place in the country* is miles from here in the next county.”

“I see. Well, I’d ... er ... better pull out and let you have your mooring back.” He retreated into the cabin.

“Not over-endowed with charm,” Marnie said quietly.

They heard the engine of the boat start up, a smooth-running modern diesel, unlike the old Lister two-cylinder on *Sally Ann*. They returned to their boat, and Marnie switched on the ignition. The engine began thumping rhythmically away under the deck, faint puffs of light grey smoke blowing from the exhaust at the stern. The anonymous boat eased out from the dock across the whole width of the canal, and the stranger manoeuvred backwards and forwards a few times to bring her round in the channel to draw alongside *Sally Ann*.

“Would you mind if I tied up alongside Ralph’s boat?” he called over to Marnie.

“You can tie up anywhere along this section while you’re in transit.” She hoped the hint was subtle.

“Good. This’ll do fine.”

Too subtle. They eased *Sally Ann* into her slot and made her secure.

“That man doesn’t seem to know the words sorry, please or thank you,” said Anne.

Marnie smiled. “Amnesia.”

“You reckon?”

“Didn’t you notice? He seemed unable to remember his own name.”

“I wonder who he is.” Anne lifted the cat from the roof. “Come on, Dolly.”

She put the cat down on the deck, and it leapt silently onto the bank. All three of them made their way through the spinney in stripes of sunlight, stepping round puddles. The air smelt fresh and clean. For Marnie and Anne this was heaven, and they walked companionably, enjoying the early warmth, absolutely where they wanted to be. For Marnie it was the culmination of her desire to run her own show. For Anne it was the starting point of a career that she hoped would give her a life like Marnie’s.

They emerged from the spinney into the farmyard where the cluster of buildings was starting to look more finished. Glebe Farm was still in the throes of reconstruction, but it was coming together and looking more like a home with each month that passed. On the far side of the yard in front of them stood the main farmhouse, like all the buildings constructed in stone the colour of set honey. The windows were still boarded, but its stone mullions were visible and its proportions were balanced and pleasing to the eye. At rightangles to the house it was joined on the left to a row of three cottages, one occupied since the previous autumn by Jill and Alex Burton, newly married, the others still in progress.

Marnie and Anne turned to the right, walking across the cobbled yard towards the outbuildings set apart from the houses. Here, there was a group of small barns, all built of

the local stone. One of them, known as the *office barn*, was their workbase, with a bed-sitting room under the roof for Anne. The few other barns were used for storage. One of them housed Marnie's classic MG sports car, a 1936 model TA, fully restored, in British racing green. It was her only car since her Rover GTi had been destroyed by a bomb in London in January, and she was still wrangling with the insurance company about its replacement.

Anne slid back the barn door revealing full-length windows, while Marnie opened the wooden door into the office and picked up the morning post. Anne followed Dolly in and took a fax message from the machine. She put it on Marnie's desk, beside the cat who had taken up station under the lamp. It was a routine fax from their main client, Willards Brewery, confirming dates for the completion of projects. Marnie sat and read through the message, absent-mindedly slitting open the mail with a paperknife.

"Those dates are okay, aren't they?" said Anne. "No surprises."

"No surprises," Marnie echoed. As she picked up the first of the letters, a small piece of paper fell onto the desk. It was a note written in a bold hand that had a familiar look. As Marnie read it, she frowned.

*Hallo Marnie*

*It's been a long time. I read about what happened to you in the papers. I missed it first time round - abroad on business. Nearly murdered, car bombed! I was worried about you, thought I'd look in. I'm in the area - I'll call back in the next few days. Hope you don't mind. A lot to catch up on.*

*Love,*

*Simon*