

Excerpt from Sally Ann's Summer

Prologue

This was where it all began.

Marnie Walker was rummaging in the back of a locker on the boat when her fingers touched something unexpected, a notebook, weather-beaten as if left out in the rain, oil stains on its cover, a grimy thumbprint clearly visible in the corner

She had been looking for torch batteries, but now abandoned her search and sat down at the table in the saloon. A few years had passed since she had last seen the book. The day she acquired it had been a turning point in her life, though she had not realised that at the time. It had been one significant moment in a summer that had led her not only on a tour of the waterways, but which had taken her away forever from the life she had known until then.

She flicked through the pages. Each entry brought back memories. The life she now knew – a life that had for some years been filled with incident and episode – had not just come about by careful planning and hard work. There had been the element of chance. Marnie sat back, gazing out through the window across the still water of the canal to the fields beyond.

Chance has determined the whole course of my life, she thought. At any other time those influences might have worked out differently or never come together at all. What started as a simple holiday trip brought me to where I'm now sitting in the saloon of the narrowboat *Sally Ann*, at our mooring on the Grand Union Canal, fifty miles from London.

It was all down to that summer. Marnie closed the logbook and cast her mind back, trying to remember. It all started, she thought, with a phone call.

Shelf

Marnie was on the point of reaching for a cigarette when the phone rang. It was Beth and that was bad news.

'I'm busy, leave me in peace.'

'You're always busy, *too* busy, I keep telling you.'

Marnie definitely needed that cigarette and put the phone under her chin so that she could pull one out of the packet.

'I hope you're not smoking again.'

Marnie thought *Hell – she must be psychic!* and put the cigarette between her lips.

'Whatever gave you that idea?' she mumbled, stretching to reach for the Zippo.

'Very funny. I always did like your Humphrey Bogart impressions.'

If the truth were told, it was more the appurtenances of smoking that appealed to Marnie than actually breathing smoke into her lungs. She especially liked the Zippo, that was just then evading every effort she made to reach it.

'Do you have to ring me at work when I'm really busy, to nag me about giving up smoking?'

'What are big sisters for?'

'Good question. What do you want, Beth?'

'You know what I want. You *promised*.'

Marnie had a vague idea about a distant conversation, but had not registered anything remotely resembling a promise. She had by now given up all efforts to reach the Zippo and dropped the cigarette from her lips onto the drawing board in front of her.

'Look, Beth, I'm not in the mood for promises. In fact, now is not a good time to be asking favours.'

A change of tone. Sisterly concern. 'Actually, you don't sound too cheerful. What's the matter?'

'I'm just a bit fed up, that's all.'

'*Fed up!*' Beth yelled down the line. 'How the hell can you be *fed up*? You've got just about *everything* anybody could want: a good job, big salary, no ties, no debts, your own place, good prospects ...'

'Okay! Okay!' Marnie yelled back. She lowered her voice. 'I don't need the inventory. Anyone can feel fed up once in a while, can't they?'

'Is it the work or the private life?'

Marnie sighed. 'It's the work *and* it's the private life.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'Of course I don't want to talk about it. I'm sitting in an open-plan office with nine other people. I might as well sell serial rights to the *News of the World*.'

'You're the boss aren't you?' Beth had a logic that was curiously her own.

'It doesn't make the others deaf.'

'I meant that you had more space around you on account of being a senior executive.'

'I am not a *senior executive* or any other sort. I'm an interior designer.'

'Well, you're *senior*,' Beth insisted.

Marnie had had enough of this. 'Look. I am senior in that I have two plants, a bigger chair and a view over the litter in the canal just outside my window. Big deal.'

'That brings me back to the promise. You said you'd look after *Sally* for us and I have to see you to give you the keys.'

There was a pause. 'Look after *Sally*?'

'You promised you would. Don't you remember?'

Marnie had completely forgotten. 'Sure. When and where?'

'Ring me at home tonight. I've just remembered, I have to get to the cleaners before they close. Must rush. Bye!'

That was it. Gone.

Marnie cradled the phone, looked at the plans in front of her and felt stale. She seldom chatted with her sister, but now, with Beth and Paul going away for a year's sabbatical, she realised she would like a confidante for her various woes.

Without noticing herself, Marnie had the cigarette in her mouth and leaned across the drawing board for the Zippo. She enjoyed the smooth feel of the metal against her fingers and flipped the lid open with one movement, just like Bogart or Cagney. The striking wheel felt rough on the edge of her thumb and she looked at it thoughtfully, willing it to light first time. On the point of flicking down on the wheel, she heard a cough over her shoulder. She knew that cough. It was Larry, the office creep, one of her assistants. Of course, he was making his point. They had all democratically decided that the office should be designated a *no-smoking zone*, and she had gone along with the idea because at the time she had given up and thought it would be an inducement to persevere.

She would not give Larry any satisfaction. Deftly, she slipped the lighter and the cigarette into the pocket of her long cardigan and set off towards the loo.

Washing her hands, she glanced in the mirror. Could this really be the promising young designer of not so long ago? It was not that she had totally gone to seed, at least she persuaded herself of that. But the signs were there. Were those bags forming under the eyes, and was the skin becoming just a little slack around the jaw line? She was glad the

mirror only showed the top half and had already given up inspecting herself in the full length mirror at home. The weighing scales had acquired a light coating of talc-scented dust, standing alone and neglected in the corner of the bathroom. These were not good signs. She was not a complete person at ease with herself, as the magazine articles were wont to tell her.

Involuntarily, Marnie found herself opening the door onto the tiny patio that everyone in the office called *the shelf*. She stepped out and stood by the murky waters of the canal, lighting her cigarette in the shadow of the bridge and keeping out of the range of vision of those in her office, such as Larry, who would smirk to think she had had to retreat to this forlorn smoker's haven, where she always felt like a schoolgirl skulking in the lavatories for a clandestine drag.

This was meant to be an idyllic waterside social area, where creative people would come to be refreshed by contact with a soothing element. At least that was how they had planned the office building several years before. It had looked good on the drawings, with sketchy figures standing languidly among pots of geraniums, coffee cup in hand, thinking creative thoughts, swapping creative ideas and looking like the colour supplement people they imagined themselves to be. Few came here now, apart from one or two hardened cases who found it impossible to kick the smoking habit.

Marnie flicked the butt into the canal and turned to go. As she did so, she heard the rumble of an engine and, looking round, saw the prow of a boat painted in bright colours in a bold diamond pattern coming under the bridge, swirling the floating litter aside with its light bow wave. She paused on the threshold before going in, drawn by a vague curiosity to watch the narrowboat pass. It was green and yellow with red lining over a black hull and had flowers in tubs on the roof. The effect was cacophonous and jaunty, all the colours merrily vying for attention.

Marnie became aware of a middle-aged couple standing on the minute rear deck, each clasping a mug of coffee. They seemed free of cares, glancing around as the boat chugged along at walking pace. Suddenly, they caught sight of her and raised their mugs, calling out a cheery greeting that was made indistinct by the throb of the diesel. Marnie waved back and noticed that their mugs did not match.

What was the attraction of these slow-moving vessels that led apparently normal people to set off like nomads, wandering at a slothful pace through the oily waters of urban decay? Why did they always seem to throw away any aesthetic sense they might once have possessed, as soon as they boarded a boat?

What on earth was she doing here, she thought, wasting time when there were drawings to be done, colour schemes to be devised? The canal boat was receding into the distance,

and the couple were looking up at a hideous block of high-rise flats as if in wonder. She made a mental note to collect the keys to Beth's boat later that evening. Just what she was expected to do with the thing while they were away, she had no idea. She opened the door and went back to the drawing board.