

Excerpt from To Have and to Hold

Summons

The sun was shining down on Little Venice. The confluence of waterways in the heart of London looked beautiful that warm Thursday afternoon in late May. Soon spring would be easing its way gently towards the first days of summer. Dappled shade from the plane trees splashed down on the narrowboats that lined both banks of the Regent's Canal. Birdsong masked the hum of traffic in the background. The water sparkled. Those fortunate enough to have a mooring there regarded this as the most attractive section of the entire canal network.

One such boater was Roger Broadbent, solicitor. As senior partner in the firm and in his late fifties, he enjoyed the luxury of taking the occasional day off from work. That was one such day, and he had spent the previous two hours applying a final top coat of paint to the roof of his narrowboat, *Rumpole*. Now he was looking forward to cleaning up and relaxing on board with a gin and tonic. He stepped back on the towpath, wiping both hands on a rag and surveyed his work, satisfied with a job well done.

He was advancing towards the stern deck of the boat, when he heard a cry. A man was hurrying in his direction a short way along the towpath, one arm raised, brandishing a piece of paper. Roger frowned. He recognised the man as Albert, a retired merchant seaman who lived aboard the 'security boat' with his two cats, also retired. The frown was because Albert rarely moved with any appearance of urgency. Something must be serious if it caused the old man to attempt a marathon run of almost forty yards.

Just then, Roger's mobile began vibrating. He fished it out of his pocket and pressed the green button. As he listened intently to the voice on the line, his frown increased.

Meanwhile, Albert shuffled to a halt, waving the paper in front of him. He was bent double and panting. "Have you ... seen ... this ... Roger?"

Roger half turned, pressed the mobile hard against his head and put a finger in his free ear.

"Say that again?" He furrowed his brows as he listened. "Dear God ... yes, yes ... surely ... I'll be on my way, soon as. Right. Leave it with me. Say nothing until I get there, not a word."

Roger disconnected and gave his attention to Albert for the first time. He nodded at the paper.

“What’s that, Albert?”

“Haven’t you ... seen it?” The old man was still breathing heavily. “Here, have a ... read.”

Roger shook his head. “Sorry. Can’t stop now, old chum. Gotta go.”

“But they’re going to double our mooring fees ... just like that! Not so much as a ... well, I don’t know what.”

“Sorry, old love . Something very important has cropped up. I really must go.”

“But ... but ... why so sudden?”

“Remember Marnie Walker? Used to have the mooring by the tunnel ... *Sally Ann*?”

“Course I do. We all know Marnie ... lovely girl.”

“She’s the reason.”

“What can possibly be ... more important than ... having our mooring fees doubled?” Albert protested, wheezing.

“Marnie’s been arrested.”

“*Arrested*? What ever for?”

“Attempted murder,” Roger said bluntly. “That important enough for you?”

Albert gaped. “Bloody hell! You’d better get going, boy.”

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Roger's wife, Marjorie, laid out his casual day-off clothes on the bed in the sleeping cabin, while he made a quick phone call. Marnie had asked him to ring home and let her partner, Ralph, know what had happened. The police allowed one call only, and she knew Roger would sort things out. Marjorie relieved him of his overalls while he held the phone, explaining the situation to Ralph. That was simple; Roger only knew the nature of the charge and the police station where Marnie was being held.

Marjorie held up Roger's slacks and he climbed in. She tucked his shirt into the trousers and zipped him up.

Ralph sounded incredulous. "Who's she supposed to have attempted to murder, for God's sake?"

"That I can't tell you, my friend. The line was crackly, and I just got the bare minimum. All I know is, she's at the cop shop in Milton Keynes. I'm on my way."

"I'll meet you there," Ralph said.

"Don't bother. They won't let you see her. I'll come on to Glebe Farm and fill you in after we've had a talk. Er, Ralph ... don't take this the wrong way, but –"

"Of course I don't know. The idea's *absurd*. Marnie wouldn't harm a *fly*."

"So you've no idea what this is –"

"Oh, yes. I can guess what it's all about in general terms. But who the actual victim is, is frankly anyone's guess."

On that enigmatic note, they hung up. Marjorie eased Roger into his jacket, handed him his briefcase – it never left him, even when away from the office – and held up the car keys. She kissed him on the cheek and wished him a safe journey.

"You've got cash for a taxi home, darling?" he asked.

"No need to worry about me, Roger. I'll be fine."

"You'll lock everything up all right?"

“No need to fuss now.”

“Sorry to have to dash off.”

“That’s okay, dear. I’ll just have to sit and have my gin and tonic all by myself.” She sighed. “It’s a hard life.”

Roger groaned and clambered out of the boat. He waved at Marjorie through the window and hurried along the towpath towards the entrance gate.

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Fifteen minutes later Roger reached the motorway and set cruise control to a steady seventy. Traffic was light by the standards of the M1, and he was able to relax a little. Only then did he think back to Albert and his letter. Doubling our mooring fees, had he said? Outrageous! That would mean another meeting of the Regent’s Canal Boat Owners’ Association in the Little Venice pub; more heated discussions, more righteous indignation, more protests. Hey ho ... *plus ça change*, and all that.

Nonetheless, Roger knew where his first priority lay. What the hell was Marnie up to this time? Attempted murder? Ridiculous! On the other hand, she had run into more than her share of trouble over the past few years. In fact he had sometimes thought of her as a walking disaster zone. It had all started after she left her job in London and set up her own interior design business in the country. He recalled her saying at the time that she was hoping for a ‘more laid-back lifestyle’ in rural Northamptonshire. Some hopes! But an attempted murder charge ...

Roger smiled to himself. What had Albert called him? *Boy*. That was a new one. Roger had settled into comfortable middle-age, complete with expanding waistline and incipient balding patch. He was hardly anyone’s idea of a *boy*. But to Albert, doyen of Little Venice and well into his seventies, every boater along the cut was his junior. He even had the most senior cats.

Roger’s thoughts strayed back to Marnie. He hoped she would have the good sense to follow his advice and say nothing. More than anything, he wished he had some inkling of what had happened so that he could arrive better prepared. He told himself there was no way

Marnie could have committed such a crime, or indeed any kind of crime worth the name. And yet, his years as a London solicitor had taught him that in life nothing was impossible, and things were often not what they seemed.

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Meanwhile, fifty miles to the north of London in the canalside village of Knightly St John, there was frenzied activity in Marnie's home, Glebe Farm. Despite Roger's advice, Ralph was making preparations. To Marnie, he was her partner, lover, fiancé, significant other. To the outside world he was Professor Ralph Lombard, visiting professor of economics and Fellow of All Saints' College in the University of Oxford.

He was not alone. Helping him was Anne Price. To Marnie, she was her work assistant and closest friend. Anne was a student at art school, just completing her foundation year. She looked up to Marnie as her role model and inspiration and regarded herself as her apprentice. She also loved her like a sister, and the feeling was mutual.

At that moment the two of them were on the phone. Ralph was speaking with Marnie's sister, Beth; Anne was talking to her mother. Their message was the same: you may hear on the news that Marnie has been arrested. It's all nonsense and we're doing everything we can to sort things out. Don't worry, whatever you hear. They both had their fingers crossed for luck, but after Roger's call they had to take action, rather than sit at home and wait passively for news. Anne knew that Marnie adhered to what she had called the Royal Marines School of Management; *Seize the High Ground*, was her motto. Assuming that Marnie might be held overnight by the police, they optimistically put her sponge bag and a box of cereal bars in a carrier bag to keep her going.

Ralph brought the car round from the garage barn, while Anne quickly put out a saucer of food for their cat, Dolly, and locked up. She raced out and met Ralph's Jaguar as he turned the corner to line up for the ascent of the field track. Anne leapt aboard, and they took off. The track climbed up to the village from the cluster of buildings that constituted Glebe Farm. At the top, Ralph slowed to pass through the field gateway and accelerated out onto the road.

They drove past the primary school, the church, the pub, the village shop and the collection of stone houses and cottages that lined the high street. Anne took a series of deep breaths when they left the village and followed the narrow, winding country road that led to the

dual carriageway. Only then was Ralph able to speed up as they headed for police HQ in the town that called itself the 'New City of Milton Keynes'.

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Finding the police station was easier than they expected. Anne had spotted a town plan for Milton Keynes in the map pocket behind her seat. She gave Ralph concise directions, and they located the building, fronted by a spacious car park.

"Loads of room here, Ralph," she said. "You can park practically outside the door. No probs."

Ralph made a non-committal kind of sound and, to Anne's surprise, drove past the main entrance and slotted the car into a space round the corner a short walk away. This puzzled her, but she made no comment. Ralph switched off the engine and turned in his seat to face her.

"I've got an idea," he said.

"You have a master plan?"

"Presumably no-one will be allowed to visit Marnie, apart from her solicitors."

"Is there a clue to your master plan in the use of *solicitors*, plural?" Anne asked.

"You've got it. If we wait till Roger gets here, we could go in together and perhaps he might be able to take me in as his assistant. What d'you think?"

Anne nodded. "Must be worth a try. Let's go for it."

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They lurked in the car park for quite some time before Roger's Volvo swung into view. Before he was out of the car, Ralph was beside him, with Anne in pursuit.

"Ralph." Roger climbed out and closed the door. "Now there's a surprise ... I don't think."

“You didn’t really expect us sit at home twiddling our thumbs, did you?”

“I suppose not.” Roger opened the rear door and retrieved his briefcase from the back seat. “But you do realise –”

“Ralph has a master plan,” Anne said.

Roger looked suspicious. “Which is?”

“You introduce me as your assistant, clerk, co-counsel, paralegal or whatever, and we go in to see Marnie together.”

Roger considered this. “Rather irregular,” he said at length. “But we can give it a whirl. The main thing is, what can you tell me in advance that I ought to know? I’m totally ill-prepared for this.”

Ralph shrugged. “You’re the one who phoned us. We didn’t have a clue about any attempted murder charge.”

“Except that it’s utter nonsense,” Anne added.

“I’m sure you’re right,” Roger said. “But there must be some sort of background.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of background, all right,” said Ralph. “But why don’t we go in and let Marnie explain?”

Roger looked Ralph up and down. In contrast to Roger, who was wearing an open-neck shirt, slacks and a casual jacket, Ralph had changed into a navy pinstripe bespoke tailored suit, with a white shirt and dark red silk tie. His black semi-brogue shoes were polished to a brilliant sheen. Ralph looked every inch the distinguished academic authority that he was. He could certainly pass for a city solicitor.

Roger sighed. “Come on, then. We can but give it a try.” He had an afterthought. “They don’t know you here, do they?”

“Not at all.”

“Good,” Roger said. “It really would be Sod’s Law if you were recognised. Let’s go. You can carry my briefcase.”

Ralph took it and smiled. “Certainly, sir.”

They hurried across the car park and up the steps to the main door. As befitted his station, Ralph opened it and stood aside to let his ‘boss’ through. Anne followed them in.

It was one of those days when Sod’s Law prevailed. The first person they encountered in the entrance area was DC Cathy Lamb heading for the door. Ralph and Anne had known Lamb for virtually all the time they had lived in Northamptonshire, and their paths had crossed on several occasions. She had a moment of hesitation before recognition dawned.

“Ralph, Anne, hello. What are you doing here?”

Ralph tried not to sag visibly. “Hi, Cathy. It’s ... well, a trifle awkward actually.”

Lamb grinned. “I heard there was someone in being charged with attempted murder. Nothing to do with you, is it?”

There was no quick-and-easy answer to that question, even for an articulate university professor.

“Well, in fact ...” Ralph’s voice tailed off.

Seeing his expression, Lamb became serious. She looked from Roger to Anne and back to Ralph. Her gaze took in the whole of the entrance area. Her expression darkened.

“Marnie not with you?” she asked suspiciously.

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Ralph and Anne walked back to the Jaguar and climbed in.

“So much for the Master Plan,” Ralph said. “My disguise was blown before it even got started.”

“You weren’t to know Cathy would be there for a meeting,” Anne said.

“Par for the course just lately. Everything seems to be going awry these days.”

Anne agreed. “Certainly is. Roger’s in there being briefed by Marnie who’s on an absolutely *ridiculous* charge, and we don’t even have a clue as to who the victim is.”

Ralph stared at Anne for a long moment. He said quietly, “It’s not even easy to hazard a guess, is it?”

Anne reached over and took Ralph by the hand. “It’s weird.”

Ralph nodded. “Our lives have been turned upside down ever since Samira arrived.”

They fell silent, both thinking back to the day not many weeks earlier when Samira Khan had come into their lives.