

## Room 228

'This will be the finest hotel in the heart of England.' The chairman of the board of directors of Willards Brewery had stated this with confidence when he offered a contract to Marnie Walker.

'And you want me to do the interior design?' Marnie said.

'Who else? After your *brilliant* scheme for the Docklands Project, I wouldn't think of turning to anyone else. A touch of *Marnie Magic* is what we need to turn the refurbishment into a triumph.'

That was how it all began. How it ended proved to be an altogether different story.

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Thus it was, just over a year later, that Marnie and her lover, Ralph Lombard, made their way up to Birmingham for the Grand Re-opening of the five star Waterside Hotel. They had planned to make the journey on board Marnie's narrowboat, *Sally Ann*, but the Willards directors had invited Marnie and Ralph to spend a few nights in the hotel as their guests with all expenses paid. This was not only a way of expressing their thanks to Marnie for a job well done – superbly well done – it also made her available for media interviews in the days following the opening ceremony.

Marnie was now in her mid-thirties and had carried out several interior design projects for Willards. Initially these had been part of her work when based in an architectural practice in London. Then, after she had moved away to set up her own firm close to the Grand Union Canal, they had called upon her services again. They were her best clients, offering attractive contracts on a regular basis in their hotels and canalside inns. Ralph – or, to give him his full title, Professor Ralph Lombard of Oxford University – was in his early-forties and enjoyed a worldwide reputation for his books, articles and lectures on economics. The two of them lived in a former farm complex in rural Northamptonshire.

'I'm looking forward to seeing how it all turned out,' Ralph said, as they found their seats on the train pulling out of Milton Keynes Central.

'I'm quite pleased with it,' Marnie said quietly.

Ralph smiled. 'You should be. Not every day you pick up a Civic Award. I know you don't like anyone looking over your shoulder, but I happened to see some of your plans in the office and they looked good to me.'

'Thank you, kind sir.'

'I do like the way you use your *trademark* murals of working boats on the canals in the nineteenth century. Very stylish, Marnie.'

'Well, that design fits in with the hotel's location right on the waterfront at Brindley Place.'

They took a taxi from New Street station and arrived in good time for the private lunch with the directors of Willards in the hotel's restaurant. It had already been tipped for four stars and two Michelin rosettes. Marnie and Ralph soon discovered why. Tiger prawns with avocado and caviar set the tone. They still had half-full glasses of champagne when claret was served to accompany noisettes of lamb in tarragon sauce. Passionfruit sorbet rounded off the meal.

Afterwards, the directors moved into the lounge for coffee where Marnie and Ralph were joined by the company's chairman, Henry Willard. He smiled at them.

'Settled into your room?' he asked. 'Everything satisfactory?'

'Our *suite*, you mean, Henry,' Marnie said.

Willard beamed. 'We want you to be comfortable while you're here.'

Marnie shot a quick glance at Ralph.

'Henry, can I ask you something?' she said hesitantly.

'That sounds ominous.' His smile was still in place, but now no longer extended to his eyes.

'Am I missing something? I mean, what 's going on?'

'I'm not sure I follow, Marnie.'

Marnie made a gesture with one hand, encompassing their surroundings. 'All this ... the grand opening ... the lavish treatment ... the – for want of a better word – the razmatazz. You don't usually go to these lengths.'

The chairman cleared his throat. His smile turned to a frown.

'We've known each other a long time, Marnie,' he began.

Ralph shifted in his seat. 'I can make myself scarce if you two want to –'

'No, Ralph. No need for that. But truth to tell, Marnie's right. You see, there's a lot at stake here, with this venture. It's not without a certain risk.'

Marnie said, 'Henry, I didn't mean to pry. It just struck me that something wasn't quite right. It all seemed ... how can I put it?'

'Over the top?'

'Perhaps a little.'

The chairman settled back in his armchair and breathed out audibly. 'I expect you probably know something about the history of this hotel ... under its previous ownership, I mean?'

Marnie shook her head. 'Not really. I've been so engrossed in the redesign that I've scarcely had time to come up for air, let alone research the archives.'

'I think I vaguely recall something,' Ralph said. 'Did this used to be the Brindley Hotel at one time?'

The chairman nodded. 'It did, which is how we came to buy it at, shall we say, a very favourable price.'

Ralph said, 'Wasn't it quite famous in its day?'

Willard corrected him. 'I rather think *infamous* would be more the word in its latter days.'

Ralph looked thoughtful. 'Oh yes, I see what you mean, at least I think I do.'

'I don't,' said Marnie. 'Can someone enlighten me, please?'

The chairman's smile had now evaporated, giving way to a more uncomfortable expression. He even glanced briefly over his shoulder. It was a reflex action. He knew there was no one else in the lounge, apart from the other directors sitting in a cluster a short way away. Despite this, when he spoke he lowered his voice.

'Time has passed now, but several years ago this hotel was the scene of ... a death.'

'You mean a murder?' Marnie said, her voice similarly lowered.

The chairman nodded. 'For weeks it was in all the papers both locally and nationally. You see, the investigation dragged on for ages, but the police never found the murderer.'

'*The phantom killer who stalked the corridors of the Brindley hotel ...*' Ralph quoted. 'I remember that particular choice piece of tabloid journalism.'

'You and a few million others,' Willard said ruefully. 'You can imagine the effect it had on business.'

'Bookings plummeted overnight?' Marnie suggested.

'Strangely not, actually. For a short while they remained buoyant. I've seen the figures. There was apparently an almost ghoulish interest in staying here. But gradually bookings fell away, once people realised that no one had been apprehended by the police.'

'And the killer was still at large,' Ralph said.

'Exactly.'

'You think people started to believe there really was a killer stalking the corridors,' said Marnie.

'Definitely. From then on, the hotel fell into terminal decline.'

'That's when your company stepped in?' Ralph said.

'Oh no. It wasn't even on the market. MRHG – that's Midland Regent Hotels Group, the previous owners – mothballed it, hoping things would die down.' He winced. 'Sorry about that, or that the murderer might be caught.'

'Something made them change their mind?' Ralph asked.

The chairman said, 'A TV series about unsolved murders put it back on the map. The local media picked it up, and the whole circus started again. That was two years ago. MRHG decided to throw in the towel. We were looking to expand in this area, so when a possibility arose in a top location we thought we'd give it a go.'

Marnie glanced at Ralph who looked deep in thought. The chairman continued.

'So, new name, totally new decor, grand opening. There you have it.'

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Later that afternoon Marnie was unpacking her clothes when Ralph came out of the bathroom. He looked around the room, the *suite*, and was obviously impressed.

'This place really does you credit, Marnie. It's beautiful. Of course, I realise this is one of the suites ...'

Marnie looked round. 'The other rooms are to the same standard, just a little smaller.'

Ralph sat in one of the button-back armchairs. 'Marnie?'

'I know what you're thinking, Ralph. I didn't want to say anything to Henry, but –'

'Willards are taking one hell of a risk here.'

'I hadn't realised,' Marnie said. 'About the murder, I mean. Do you know how much they've spent on the refurbishment? I do. I've seen the figures.'

'Not to mention your fees.'

'Not to mention my fees,' Marnie echoed. 'I think the future of the company could be riding on this single project. Phew!'

Ralph said, 'Everything has to go like clockwork. They can't afford any mistakes, with the opening, the publicity, the presentation, the whole caboodle.'

'The presentation?' Marnie queried.

'Henry was telling me they've arranged to have the plaque for the Civic Award unveiled by the Lord Mayor of Birmingham immediately after the opening ceremony.'

Marnie looked approving. 'Good move. I'd forgotten about that. Willards' public affairs people are usually right on the ball.'

'They'll have to be,' Ralph agreed. 'No room for mistakes.'

'I'll be on my best behaviour, then,' Marnie said.

'I thought you were just here graciously to accept praise from admirers of your work and look beautiful, darling.'

'And be on hand for a few interviews with the press,' Marnie reminded him.

Ralph grinned. 'So no pressure there.'

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There was no need to worry. The opening took place the next morning. The chairman's speech hit just the right note of ambition for the future. On the grounds that he wanted to keep it short, he made no reference to the past other than that this was traditionally one of the most prestigious sites on the whole British canal network. He stressed that it was intended to enhance the position of Birmingham as the heart of England. For her part, Marnie made a brief and modest speech of acceptance of the Civic Award and thanked the Lord Mayor for his support for the project.

The public affairs team at Willards had not scheduled a general press conference but had produced media packs containing background information on the hotel and its *renaissance*. The chairman of the board took part in a series of individual interviews in which he carefully steered discussion towards the future and his company's hopes for 'the finest hotel in the region'. Marnie joined the directors for a series of photo-shoots in which they placed her, not surprisingly, in the centre.

That evening Marnie and Ralph dined together in the hotel's restaurant and were pleased to see that it was almost fully booked.

'So far, so good,' Marnie said. 'The word seems to have got around.'

'And the word is good,' Ralph added. 'Any idea how bookings are going?'

'Henry said he expects them to take a while to pick up, but they're already starting to come through.'

'That's a relief,' Ralph said. 'Mind you, it's not surprising. I think this will turn out to be an absolute gold mine, and a lot of the credit for that is down to you and your designs, Marnie. Do you have any other duties to perform while we're here?'

'I've got an interview with someone from the *Birmingham Courier* tomorrow morning. That's all. Are you itching to get back to your work? We're booked in for one more night tomorrow, but we can leave earlier if you'd prefer.'

Ralph said, 'Actually, there's an exhibition on the Pre-Raphaelites at the city museum I'd quite like to see, so I'm happy to stay for the duration if you are.'

'Good idea, Ralph. One interview, then we can relax for the rest of the day. A little holiday. Perfect.'

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Prompt at five to ten the following morning Marnie and Ralph exited the lift and headed for the reception desk. In addition to her briefcase, Marnie carried a set of drawings under her arm. As they approached it, a man in a raincoat got up from a seat in the entrance hall and began walking towards them. He had journalist written all over him. Before their paths crossed, they became aware of a heated discussion taking place at the reception desk.

'That's nonsense,' a man was saying. He looked like a typical middle-aged executive in a dark suit, and was leaning against the desk with an expensive leather overnight bag at his feet. 'Look again. There must be some mistake.'

The receptionist was trying to retain her unflustered composure. She dutifully returned to staring at her computer screen.

'I'm sorry, sir,' she said in a calm voice. 'But that isn't possible.'

The man facing her snorted. 'This is *ridiculous*. I want to see the duty manager.'

By now, Marnie and Ralph were almost at the desk. The journalist was a little further away, but none of them could fail to observe what was going on.

'Just what the hotel *doesn't* need,' Marnie murmured to Ralph. 'Let's head him off.'

But it was too late. The journalist had already stopped and was paying close attention to the dispute at the desk. The receptionist had turned to knock on the door behind her. Without delay another woman appeared. She was smartly dressed in a navy blue suit with a company badge in her lapel: the duty manager, no doubt. With a reassuring smile, she faced the customer.

'Good morning, sir. Is there a problem?'

'There shouldn't be. I'm just trying to make a booking. Surely that's not too much to ask.'

'Of course not, sir. I'm sure we can manage that.' She turned to the receptionist. 'Something not working, Stephanie?'

'The gentleman is asking for a particular room.'

'I've stayed here many times before,' he said, 'and I always have room two-two-eight. It has a view out over the water.'

The manager said to the receptionist, 'Is that room already taken?'

'That's not the problem, Mrs Carter. There is no room two-two-eight.'

In the moments of silence that followed, the duty manager stepped forward and tapped keys on the computer. She checked the screen before turning back to the customer.

'You appear to have booked into room two-*one*-eight, sir.'

The man shook his head in irritation. 'No. I asked for two-two-eight and was only told it wasn't available after I'd checked in. Surely it's a simple matter to alter the number on your computer.'

The manager frowned. 'I'm sorry, sir, but my colleague was quite correct. There is no room two-two-eight in the hotel.'

Marnie nudged Ralph and began walking towards the journalist. She held out a hand.

'I think you've probably come to interview me,' she said brightly. 'I'm Marnie Walker.'

He shook her hand. 'Jerry Thwaite. Glad to meet you.' He nodded in the direction of the reception desk. 'A problem you can resolve, I think.'

Marnie looked baffled. In the background, the customer was becoming increasingly irate. Thwaite pointed at the roll of drawings under Marnie's arm.

'Aren't those your design drawings?'

'Yes.'

'Then surely they'll prove things one way or the other.'

Evidently this exchange had been overheard. The customer at the desk turned and faced Marnie.

'Is that right?' he said. 'Do you have plans of the whole building?'

Marnie stared down at her roll of drawings. 'Er, not actually. These are my scheme design drawings. I handled the interior decor. I'm not the architect.'

Marnie had no desire to be drawn into the dispute, though she would have gladly produced documents that would settle the argument, if it had been within her power. Her priority was to get the journalist out of the way, but he was clearly in no mood to be deterred.

'There is one obvious and simple way to sort this out,' he said. He turned to the customer. 'The lifts are over there. You can easily pop up to the second floor and see for yourself if it's there or not.' To the manager he said, 'That would be all right, wouldn't it?'

The manager hesitated. 'Er, yes. That's a possibility.' She came round the desk and stood beside the would-be customer. 'Would you be willing to do that, sir?'

The man hurrumphed in annoyance and nodded curtly. He went off with the manager, closely followed by the journalist who no doubt sniffed a human interest story. Dismayed, Marnie set off in pursuit with Ralph in tow behind her. They piled into a lift, and the journalist hit the number 2 button.

When they emerged on the second floor they found rooms with odd numbers facing them. Numbers increased from left to right, so the group turned right along the

corridor. Towards the end they stopped beside a cleaner's trolley outside room 227. As they did so a young woman in overalls came out, followed by a slightly older woman wearing what appeared to be a white lab coat. The manager introduced her as Martine, the housekeeping supervisor. She in turn introduced Irena the cleaner.

The manager said, 'This gentleman has a special request, which is causing us some difficulty. He would like a particular room with a view over the canal.'

Martine pointed. 'The rooms on that side have waterways views ... even numbers.'

'The request is for room two-two-eight.'

The supervisor and her cleaner both looked puzzled and stared at the door behind the group. It clearly bore the number 218. Next along the corridor was a short passageway leading to a fire exit. On the opposite side were rooms 229 and 231.

The customer pointed at them. 'There you are. The numbers go up to 231, so logically I think you'll agree, there must be a 228.'

The supervisor said, 'It's the lift wells and the fire exits. It's the same on all the floors ... fewer rooms with even numbers.'

Everyone turned to look at the customer. With an angry exhalation he stormed off towards the lifts. The supervisor looked anxiously at the manager.

'Sorry. Did I say the wrong thing?'

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By the time the manager and the others returned to the ground floor there was no sign of the customer or his overnight bag. The young woman receptionist explained that he had taken the bag, which she had put behind the counter for safety, and left without another word. Marnie introduced the journalist to the duty manager who looked slightly less than delighted to meet him.

'I can assure you that was *not* an everyday occurrence, Mr Thwaite.'

'Not a good start though, was it?' Thaite said. 'Him being a regular customer and all.'

Suddenly Ralph spoke for the first time. 'I can't see why he didn't just accept room 218 as an alternative, since it was available.'

'It is a lovely room,' the receptionist said. 'And it has a great view, especially when everything is lit up at night.'

'I suppose there's no pleasing some people,' Marnie said. 'Well, shall we get on with my interview now?'

Marnie was about to set off when the receptionist spoke.

'Excuse me, Mrs Carter, could I ask what I should do with the gentleman's reservation details?'

'What do you mean, Stephanie?' the manager asked.

'Well, you see, he's on the system after checking in, but he hasn't finalised the booking.'

The manager pondered this for a moment. 'Store his details as you would for a regular guest in case he comes back. You never know, he might return when he's cooled down.' She paused. 'On second thoughts, we might already have his name in the system. Could you just check in case he's included on our mailing list of previous guests.'

'That seems likely,' Marnie said. 'He did mention that he'd often stayed here before.'

The receptionist finished tapping on the keyboard, gazed at the screen and looked up. 'No, he's not on our mailing list.'

'Are you sure, Stephanie? What name are you looking for?'

'It's . . . Mr A P Rawlings with an address in Maidstone, Kent.'

The manager shook her head. 'Doesn't ring a bell.'

'Should I hold room 218 temporarily?' the receptionist asked.

'Do that. Bookings aren't so heavy these early days. We can decide what to do at the end of your shift.'

And with that decision the matter was closed, at least for the time being.

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After all that morning's excitement, Marnie's interview with Jerry Thwaite went off without a hitch. She handed him a one-page fact sheet and a small collection of photographs to ensure that he had all the material he needed to produce an accurate and attractive feature article. Now free for the rest of the day, Marnie and Ralph headed out to the city's museum and art gallery.

It was late afternoon when they eventually returned to the hotel feeling a little footsore and weary. They were crossing the entrance hall on their way to the bar when they were spotted by the duty manager. She walked towards them.

'Had a good day?' she asked. 'Apart from this morning's shenanigans, of course.'

'Very pleasant,' Marnie said. 'Now we find ourselves in need of a chilled glass of Pimm's. Are you able to join us?'

'Tempting though that is, I'm afraid I have to decline.'

'You don't drink on duty?'

'That's just it. I'm about to go off duty and frankly I'll be glad to put today behind me.'

Marnie sympathised. 'You can do without dissatisfied customers at this stage in your operation, especially when there are journalists on hand, lapping it up.'

'Did he in fact come back, your Mr A P Rawlings of Maidstone, Kent?' Ralph asked.

'No, he didn't, and between ourselves I can't say I'm desperately disappointed.'

Marnie smiled, reached forward and touched the manager's arm. 'Forget about it, Mrs Carter. Look on the bright side. Tomorrow is another day.'

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The next day was bright and clear, and Marnie and Ralph were in good spirits as they packed their bags before going down for breakfast. It had been a pleasant break and another milestone in the life of Walker and Co, interior design consultants; a successful contract topped off with a Civic Award. Things were looking good.

On the way to the breakfast room Ralph diverted to ask the concierge to arrange a taxi to take them to the station an hour later. He joined Marnie to find she had been shown to a table with a view over the waterway. They were both looking forward to going home, but agreed that if you had to spend time in Birmingham on business, there could be no finer place to stay than the five star Waterside Hotel.

They were just enjoying a second cup of coffee when their waitress returned to the table.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'The manager's compliments. Would you be free for a few minutes after breakfast?'

Ralph inclined his head to look round her. 'Is that her, standing at the entrance?'

'Yes, sir. She didn't want to disturb you.'

Ralph raised a hand and gestured. 'She's coming over. We're more or less finished. Perhaps you could ask if she'd like to join us for coffee.'

'Yes, sir. I'll do that.'

But Mrs Carter declined the offer, though she accepted a seat at the table. One look at her told Marnie and Ralph that all was not well. Marnie had a fair idea what the problem might be and she suspected that it was a case of adverse publicity. She kicked herself mentally for not getting that wretched journalist out of the way.

‘Something wrong, Mrs Carter?’ Ralph asked.

‘Are you sure you won’t have some coffee?’ Marnie said.

‘I could use a brandy,’ the manager sighed.

Marnie looked sympathetic. ‘Is it Jerry Thwaite ... bad publicity after yesterday?’

The manager stared out of the window for a long moment before replying.

‘I know you’re aware,’ she began slowly, ‘that Willards bought the hotel because the previous owners wanted to be rid of it.’

Marnie said quietly, ‘We know about the murder.’

‘Well, I’ve been looking up past records. I suppose it was seeing that journalist that gave me the idea. I’ve checked old newspaper reports online.’ Mrs Carter paused, her expression bleak, her voice little more than a whisper. ‘The unsolved murder was indeed in room two-two-eight.’

Marnie and Ralph stared at her in silence. She continued.

‘The board of directors decided from the outset not to have a room with that number. They briefed the architect to plan the layout in such a way that no such room would be included.’

‘Now Jerry Thwaite is digging it all up again?’ said Ralph.

‘No, at least, not so far.’

‘Well, that’s a relief,’ said Marnie. ‘With a bit of luck he’ll move onto other stories and forget all about room two-two-eight.’

'That's not what's bothering me. In fact, Marnie, that's the least of my worries.'

'Then what is troubling you?'

'When I was reading the newspaper reports I found that the man murdered in room two-two-eight was ... a Mr A P Rawlings of Maidstone, Kent.'

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