

Outside the Box

Excerpt

Chapter 1 – one year later

Marnie Walker knew she had a tendency to drive faster than she should. She was contemplating that thought as she swept along the dual carriageway homeward bound at the end of the morning. Passing a string of three lorries, she spotted the sign for her turn-off in half a mile. Further ahead on the inside lane she saw a small saloon car cruising gently, a Nissan Micra she thought. It was decision time. Should she blast past it and then signal that she was leaving the main road? Or would it be more courteous to pull in behind the car, slow down and wait patiently before turning into the narrow country road that led to Knightly St John?

For Marnie, the meeting that summer morning had gone well. Her clients had been delighted with her design proposal and the contract had received the go-ahead. She was consequently in a buoyant mood and looking forward to a light lunch at home, the complex of buildings that she had converted, known as Glebe Farm.

Marnie decided to opt for a considerate approach, rather than possibly alarming the driver of the Nissan. She signalled, pulled over to the inside lane and tucked in behind it at a respectful distance. A good decision, she thought. Through the rear window of the Nissan Marnie could see that it was occupied by four people. The two on the back seat had the tightly-permed white hair often favoured by older women. No sooner had she fallen into line than the three-hundred-yards board loomed up and the driver of the Nissan signalled that they too would be turning off.

The road from the dual carriageway to the village wound its way between fields under cultivation and pastures, flanked on both sides by tall hedgerows. Marnie followed the Nissan without crowding it. Arriving at the signboard for Knightly St John, the Micra continued along the high street. Marnie expected it at any moment to turn into a side road. It drove past the cottages with their pretty front gardens, past the village shop-cum-post-office, past the pub – *The Two Roses* – and past the primary school and church, which were separated from each other by the graveyard.

Still it motored on with Marnie's Land Rover Freelander following at a distance of around twenty metres. There was only one more road before leaving the village, a cul-de-sac on the right, that led to the former vicarage. Marnie's curiosity was now aroused. The old vicarage had stood empty for a while. Could the people in the Nissan be potential buyers? To Marnie's surprise the Nissan signalled that it would be turning left, not right.

An excerpt from *Outside the Box* by Leo McNeir

Left?

The only left turn available on leaving the village was the track that led down to Glebe Farm, Marnie's home. As she too indicated a left turn, she wondered if she knew the car's occupants, but from the rear she failed to recognise either car or passengers. She held back momentarily. Perhaps the Nissan driver was only using the field entrance to turn round, having missed his intended destination. But no, the little car proceeded steadfastly down the rutted track with Marnie following a short distance behind.

When the Nissan reached the end of the trail just before the patch of gravel beside the farmhouse, its brake lights lit up and it came to a halt. Marnie too stopped the Freelander. There was no way she could move forward. She could see that some kind of animated discussion was taking place inside the car, and looks were being cast back in her direction. Her curiosity was now heightened. Moments later the driver's door swung open and a man climbed out. He walked a few metres back towards the Freelander and positioned himself in the middle of the track, facing Marnie, hands on hips.

Marnie studied the Nissan driver. He was a small lightly-built man, probably shorter than Marnie, who was five foot seven. Probably in his seventies, he was smartly dressed in a tweed jacket, slacks and a dark tie. His white hair was neatly parted and he sported a white moustache with short bristles. Yes, Marnie thought, that was an apt word for the man himself: he bristled.

Marnie opened her door and stepped down. 'Hello,' she said, in as friendly a tone as she could muster.

'Can I help you?' he said. His tone of voice suggested that assistance was the last thing on his mind.

Marnie considered the question for a moment or two. She smiled.

'Well, yes, you could as a matter of fact.'

'Are you lost?' said the man, even more stropky than before.

'Far from it,' Marnie said amiably. 'You could help by moving your car a little further forward, if you wouldn't mind, so that I can park mine in the barn round the corner behind you.'

'Barn?' the man scowled. 'Round the corner?'

'If it's no trouble.' Marnie added, 'You see, I live here.'

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Marnie entered the farmhouse kitchen where Ralph, her husband, was laying the table for lunch. Ralph Lombard was visiting professor of economics at All Saints College, Oxford. Seeing Marnie, he smiled.

'Hi,' he said. 'Are you ready for ...?' His smile faded. 'You're not, are you? What's the matter ... meeting not go well?'

Marnie dumped her briefcase on a chair and sighed loudly. 'You know Emmy Sexton?'

'Sexton? That rings a bell.' Ralph, deadpan.

'I'm serious, Ralph.'

'Er, no, seriously. I don't think I do.'

'She's moved in next door to us, apparently. She's Mike Branville's girlfriend.'

Ralph reflected. 'Now that you mention it, I think I may have glimpsed a young woman once yesterday or the day before. I had no idea what her name was. Why are you talking about her?'

'She popped out of next door, cottage number three, and made introductions. I've just had the dubious pleasure of meeting – or rather *encountering* – her grandfather.'

'I'm guessing you didn't hit it off,' said Ralph.

'Absolutely not ... *rude* little man. He actually tried to get *me* to back off so that he could turn *his* car ... on *my* drive!'

'Where did you hide the body?' Ralph was trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Marnie flopped down onto a chair and said wearily, 'A very tempting prospect.'

Ralph decided to change the subject. 'Had you remembered that Donovan is coming to stay for a few days? We're expecting him for lunch.'

Donovan was the boyfriend of Marnie's friend and associate, Anne, otherwise known as Anne with an 'e'.

'Excellent,' said Marnie. 'Bumping into old misery-guts put it clean out of my mind.'

'That's a shame. It's a lovely day and the summer term has just ended. I have a suggestion to make ... well, two suggestions in fact.'

'Anything to brighten the day, Ralph. I don't want that ghastly old bloke to ruin it, especially after my really good meeting this morning.'

Ralph stepped towards the fridge and pulled out a chilled bottle of Italian white wine, Orvieto. 'My first suggestion is that we open this instead of your *designer water*.' He used Marnie's usual name for sparkling mineral water.

'Agreed unanimously,' said Marnie, the only other person in the room. 'And your second suggestion?'

'We down tools and take the afternoon off to celebrate your success this morning and the long summer vacation extending before us. Time for a tootle on *Sally Ann*?'

'A wonderful idea.' Another unanimous decision.

At that moment they heard the familiar sound of a burbling Volkswagen engine. It was time to put out four wine glasses. Donovan had arrived, which meant that Anne would not be far behind.

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When Donovan entered the kitchen a few minutes later he was carrying a large cardboard box. This was not unusual. Donovan was in his early twenties and had just completed his university course in Media and Communication at Brunel. He and Anne had brought Marnie's boat back from a marina on the South Oxford Canal near Duke's Cut the previous week. Anne attended art school in Oxford and lived during the week on *Sally Ann* in term time.

They all liked Donovan, especially Anne. He was not quite as tall as Ralph, who was a little over six feet, but he had a distinctive sense of style. He tended to wear black or dark grey clothes which emphasised his slim build and contrasted with his blonde hair. His own narrowboat, *XO2* – pronounced *Exodos* – was similarly monochrome outside and in.

Donovan placed the cardboard box on the kitchen's work surface. It was his custom to bring German food and drink with him when he visited – which was frequently – and it usually provoked a conversation with Marnie who impressed on him that he really didn't have to do that.

'I like to share,' was Donovan's habitual reply. 'Anyway it gives me a chance to use my German. It's probably the only time the old Austrian couple in my local delicatessen get to use their own language in the shop.'

Donovan's full name was Nikolaus Donovan Smith and he was bilingual in English and German. His Anglo-Irish father had been a lecturer in German at various UK universities and his German mother had been a professional translator. Donovan had been brought up by uncles and aunts in Germany and Britain after his parents had died in a road accident in South Africa. Donovan was ten years old at the time. He had miraculously survived the coach crash uninjured and had inherited a house in Uxbridge, a suburb of London, plus investments and a number of vehicles, including the Beetle. He had bought his boat with part of his inheritance and part of his parents' insurance money.

'Anne's not with you?' said Marnie.

'She wanted to finish something in the office. She said she'd be here in a minute. Can I put some of these things in the fridge?'

'Sure. Go ahead. But you really –'

'So you always tell me. I don't think we need to have our usual discussion, Marnie.'

Marnie sagged. She knew when she was beaten. Donovan was transferring wine, beer, cheese, cold meats, sausages and cakes from the box to the fridge when Anne breezed in.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting,’ she said breathlessly. ‘We’re now up to date with invoices and they’re on your desk ready for signing, Marnie. So, what’s the plan?’

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After lunch the doorbell rang while Marnie and Ralph were upstairs changing their clothes for the outing on the boat, the *tootle*. Donovan was loading the dishwasher, so Anne skipped to the front door. She opened it to find a young woman and an older man on the doorstep, neither of whom she recognised. She was wondering if they were Jehovah’s Witnesses when the young woman spoke.

‘Hello. I’m Emmy.’ When there was no immediate reaction she added, ‘I live next door.’ She briefly inclined her head in the direction of the cottages that occupied one side of the cobbled yard.

Anne tried not to look baffled by this news. ‘Hi. I’m Anne. I also live next door.’ She nodded in the direction of the office barn on the opposite side of the yard. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Is Mrs Walker around? Emmy glanced at the old man. ‘My grandad would like to speak to her.’

Anne said, ‘Sure. Would you like to come in? Marnie’s just getting changed. We’re going for an outing on the boat.’

‘Boat?’ said the old man. He looked far from happy.

‘On the canal,’ Anne added, inviting the visitors into the living room.

‘Canal?’ The old man was obviously in the habit of repeating everything that was said to him. He invested the word with a sinister overtone. ‘Did you say *canal*?’

Anne was pointing towards the spinney when Marnie and Ralph walked in. They were both wearing sweatshirts and jeans, their customary boating attire.

Anne said, ‘I was just explaining that we were going for a trip on *Sally Ann*.’

‘*Sally Ann*?’ said the old man. Anne tried not to roll her eyes.

The visitors both rose from their seats. Marnie recognised the grumpy old grandad and tried not to look hostile. She turned her gaze on the young woman.

‘I don’t think we’ve met.’

‘I’m Emmy. I moved in with Mike a few days ago. I hope that’s all right.’

Introductions were made all round. Marnie refrained from pointing out that any tenant moving into one of her renovated cottages had to receive prior approval. Emmy seemed pleasant enough, so it was probably not a big issue.

Marnie said, 'I'd offer you something but we really are about to set off on the boat.'

'It's just ...' Emmy began. Her voice faded. 'My grandad would like to apologise to you, Marnie. Is it all right if I call you Marnie?'

'It's fine.' She looked expectantly at Emmy's grandfather. 'You wanted ...?'

He cleared his throat. Anne vowed to herself that if he repeated the word *apologise*, she might have to be physically restrained.

'I think,' he said firmly, 'we got off on the wrong foot. It never occurred to me that you might actually live down here when you followed us from the main road and through the village. You see, I was wary on account of the trouble there's been hereabouts.'

'*Trouble*?' Marnie repeated.

Anne was thinking that repetition must be catching.

'Well, you know, the murder ... or whatever it was ... last year, I think.'

'You're probably thinking of the one in Stony Stratford,' said Marnie. 'I don't think I recall any other murder being reported round here.'

'Last summer,' the old man said. 'I don't think it was in Stony Stratford.'

'Are you sure about that?' said Ralph.

'Well, they didn't in fact say where the murder had actually taken place, but on the news they reported that it was by the canal in this neck of the woods. Now what did they say was its name?'

'The Grand Union?' Marnie suggested. She glanced across the room. 'It's about fifty metres away, over there through the spinney. Anyway, you were saying ...'

'Yes, that's the one,' said the old man. 'The Grand Union Canal. Well, that's about it, really. I was worried that you were following me, which is why I, er ... spoke to you.'

'Okay, Mr ... sorry, I didn't catch your name.'

'Hethecote-White, Bernard Hethecote-White.'

'Well, Mr Hethecote-White, you're welcome to park beyond the small barns. It's where the tenants keep their cars. There's plenty of space.'

'Oh, we'll not be staying long. My wife and sisters just wanted to see where Emma would be living –'

'Emmy,' she corrected him.

He glanced at her and continued. 'We wanted to see the place, assure ourselves that it was suitable, given that she'd be coming to a rather rough neighbourhood.'

Marnie and co looked stunned.

'Mr Hethecote-White,' Marnie began slowly, 'Glebe Farm is on the edge of one of the most desirable – and dare I say *peaceful* – villages in the county.'

'Yet the vicar was murdered here, or so I believe,' Hethecote-White pointed out.

‘Are you thinking of 1645,’ said Ralph, ‘at the time of the Civil War?’

‘Ah no,’ Hethecote-White countered. ‘There was another one, much more recently ... a woman vicar.’

Marnie said quietly, ‘That was a very tragic event an accident, in fact. She was my friend. Her name was Toni Petrie.’

The old man opened his mouth to speak, but Emmy restrained him by putting a hand on his arm. ‘I’m sorry to hold you up, Mrs Walker ... Marnie,’ she said.

Marnie replied, ‘Yes, we should be making a move. Will you be staying long, Emmy ... I mean in the cottage?’

‘While Mike’s working on this year’s project in the area ... if that’s all right with you, Marnie?’

Anne said, ‘I’ll drop some paperwork in for you to sign if you’re going to share the tenancy.’

‘That will be fine, thank you,’ Emmy said as they walked towards the door.

‘Just one other thing,’ said Anne. ‘What’s your surname? I’ll need it for the paperwork.’

‘It’s Sexton, and I prefer Emmy to Emma, if you don’t mind.’