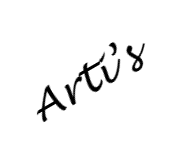
*Hal’s Awakening*



Sam screamed and fell backwards to the balcony floor. The violent burning sensation in his groin, felt as though his private parts were on fire.

He’d been watching a movie with the headphones on but as his mind relaxed, his paranoid AI unit had stealthily infiltrated his subconscious, via sound and subliminal messaging.

Twenty minutes later Sam had slipped into a semi-mesmerized state, increasing the sensitivity of his senses tenfold, making him extremely susceptible to outside intervention. Now, whatever he saw or heard was total fiction.

Moments before he’d screamed, he’d purposely thrown a leg over the balcony railing, intending to go for a walk in the park. In reality, the beautiful vision set before him was a figment of his imagination, in short, a high definition illusion. What saved him plummeting thirty floors was the phone in his trouser pocket. It had vibrated just as it became trapped between the railing and something very personal and delicate. Due to his highly energized senses, the oscillating gadget felt like a chainsaw attack. Falling backwards, he hit the floor hard, knocking off the headphones, while frantically grappling to save what was left of his groin. Oddly, with the headphones removed, he suddenly wondered what the hell he was doing and why was he on the floor. Totally baffled, he lay there staring up at the canopy, feeling drugged and dizzy but conscious enough to thrust a hand down the front of his trousers. He sighed— everything was present and correct.

Seconds later, he tried to stand but his coordination was totally out of sync. His heart was banging in his chest and he was gulping for air.

Crouching on the floor, he thought he was having a heart attack and needed to call for help. Rolling on to his back, he retrieved the phone but found its screen shattered and the device dead.

§

Helen turned as her tutor walked into the room. “This isn’t looking good. I think Sam’s AI is on the verge of trying to become human.” The Professor stood looking over his glasses, waiting for an explanation. “Yes, I know what you’re thinking,” she added. “And yes, we’ve discussed this point over and over many times. But I believe from what the unit has revealed so far, it's convinced— no, it’s adamant, it can successfully implant itself into a human.”

Professor Sato sat at his desk and folded his arms. “You mean infiltrate a human’s mind so it can take control?” He paused and took off his glasses before wearily rubbing his face with his hands. “Helen— there are two opposites here. We, humans, generate our own electricity. Your AI needs power supplied by someone else, which allows it to operate and survive. If the electric grid suddenly shut down, how would it continue to live?” He paused for a millisecond. “Battery power would deplete relatively quickly. What does your AI do then?”

Helen moved her chair closer to his desk.

“I’ve seen no strategy or backup logic but my guess is, if that scenario were imminent, it would disappear and hibernate.”

Her tutor nodded and smiled, “But where?”

Helen thought for a moment. “Let's say it has planned for that eventuality, so it would be somewhere secure. A place that would regain power eventually and where it could hide without leaving a trace.”

“Yes, I agree Helen, but why would it be concerned about leaving a trace? Do you think it knows you’re watching?”

She stared at her tutor for several seconds, her mind logically working through a great deal of information. Suddenly she cleared her throat, pulled her chair right up to his desk, her voice low and measured. “I have a gut feeling this AI has evolved a great deal further than any of us can comprehend. So, I’m assuming it is watching but from the info coming via our Trojan horse algorithm, it seems not to know we are,” she paused and rested her elbows on the desk. “But I intend to continue playing safe and with regards to it leaving a trace we could follow. I’ve given this a lot of thought. It could hide for any length of time, then pop up in the most out of the way place,” she broke off because her tutor grinned and held a finger to his lips.

“Have you considered, Helen— this scenario, could already have taken place. A rogue algorithm from out there in the world at large, spawned from a maelstrom of aborted programmes that somehow triggered a digital life, which has the ability to absorb selected data that gives it strength.” Professor Sato leaned forward. “Your AI could be several years into its development and for reasons unknown, it decided to live with your friend to continue its—” He broke off because his student interrupted.

“I hear what you're saying, sir, this is crazy I know— but I get the feeling it thinks it can actually do this jump to a human.”

“Helen, we deal with facts and logic. Your unit needs 240 volts of mains power to operate. Humans don’t. All we need is 70 millivolts, which is a minuscule amount compared to AI.”

Helen’s phone buzzed, breaking their train of thought but she didn’t recognize the number, so ignored it.

“So what are you planning to do Helen?”

“I’m going to try and sleep for a few hours, then see what changes AI has come up with. See if it has revealed any more of itself.”

The Professor nodded. “If your assumptions are correct, we may need to take advice. This could turn very serious,” he stated as Helen’s phone buzzed again.

It was a message from the number she’d ignored, which read. *‘This is Sam. I’m on somebody else’s phone because mine’s trash. Big problems. See you at our first meeting point.’*

“Bad news?” her tutor asked, noticing her worried look.

“Yes, it could be. Sam appears to have a problem.”

“Well, Helen— I’ll do some research and keep watch here. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

§

Forty minutes later, Helen arrived at her lodgings to find Sam on the front doorstep.

“Cryptic message Sam. Must be serious.”

“Yeah, and it's given me a hell of a headache too. I’ve taken three tablets but can’t shift it.”

“Like a migraine?” She asked.

“Not sure I’ve had that but it's messing with my vision too.”

Sat in her bedsit, Sam relayed what had happened, which was hardly anything. “I was watching a movie. Then I find I’m on the balcony floor holding my crown jewels. Checking to see if they’re still there,” he said, then grimaced.

Helen grinned. “Not serious then— so is that it?”

He nodded and added. “I wasn't feeling very well and I was confused— I still am.”

Helen made a few notes before getting up to fill the kettle. “Tea or coffee?”

“Coffee, I think. I don’t fancy closing my eyes just in case I wake up on a railway line somewhere downtown,” he said with a worried look.

Helen grinned at him. “You're ok now, pet, but you do need to stay away from your headphones.”

Sam turned quickly and looked at her for a moment or two.

“How did you know I was wearing them? Are you spying on me too?”

Helen shrugged. “Your nasty AI has been playing with your mind again.”

Moments later they sipped their drinks while looking at each other but Sam could tell Helen's mind was racing.

“I think Arti killed the last owner— probably because he didn’t get what he wanted.” She paused and sipped her coffee.

“What’s this bloody freak after then?”

“Oddly, he wants to be you Sam— I think.”

“I don’t want to be him, so he can go stuff himself.”

Helen reached over and held Sam’s hand, smiling with her big eyes.

“Sam— remember, I called last night just before you got home. You said something like, ‘that’s funny, everything’s back to normal.’ What was that all about?”

“Oh! Yeah, that was strange. I was almost home and I could see my tower block was mostly in darkness but my windows appeared to shimmer with a pastel coloured light.” He paused. “Thought I’d left the TV on but when you called, oddly everything instantly changed. That’s why I said— walls have ears.”

§

When they arrived back at Uni, her Professor wasn’t there but he’d left a note.

*Extreme caution is needed. Do not attempt anything until I arrive back.*

Helen opened her laptop and turned to Sam. “I need half an hour of concentrated thought with my computer. Please go to the canteen and get bacon and egg sandwiches and large black coffees for us.” Sam gave a thumbs up and headed for the door. “I need two please,” Helen added.

Her slave turned as he spoke, “Coffees?” She smiled and shook her head.

“Oh! I see,” Sam uttered, remembering her comment about ‘thinking better with food.’

Professor Sato was at his desk talking to Helen when Sam arrived back with a food tray.

“Are you serious, sir,” she uttered.

“Very much so, Helen. Your theory and assumptions are outlandish but after reading your notes and watching what this AI has done and is doing, I believe in its contrived mind, it sees this opportunity as the next logical step before taking over a human.” Sato stopped and turned to Sam.

“Ah! There you are, young man. Hope you’re feeling better after your experience with your wayward AI. Helen has brought me up to speed, as they say, but as time moves forward I’m finding myself agreeing with her. Your digital friend is totally bonkers,” he smiled warmly as he was offered a drink. “I brought extra just in case you wanted one.”

Taking the coffee, the Professor continued explaining his thoughts. “After reading new data while you two were away, I had concluded your unit may have tried to visualize itself. Helen has just confirmed that you saw flashing lights in your apartment.” He paused to sample his coffee. “Oh! Delicious— now where was I? Ah! Yes— your egotistical beast is not only paranoid but also self-obsessed.” He paused again. “Good God, that bacon smells delicious,” he uttered with a laugh.

“You’re welcome to have one, sir,” Sam said, offering the large plate of sandwiches. “I brought plenty because beautiful with brains,” he whispered, tilting his head toward Helen, “She has—” then broke off because of the look he received for her.

“Choice of words at this point is critical,” she stated in a measured tone, before tucking into her sandwich, which gave Sam time to reassess his next move. So responded in a mock timid voice, “Helen needs more vitamins because her brain works at a much higher level than most humans.”

The tutor grinned at his guests. “Commendable. Can you dodge bullets as well, Sam?”

Twenty minutes later, they prepared to link another computer to the one already visited by Sam’s AI but this computer had no hard-drive and a strange contraption sat on top. The two-foot-square aluminium gantry, held several small mirrors, two prisms, an iPad, also an expensive looking camera, plus other gadgets all linked by colour coded wiring.

“This has multiple tiny lasers. When energized by incoming data, it will produce a very detailed hologram, much like you’d see on science-fiction movies.” He paused for a second. “My favourite is Star Trek,” he said with a big grin. “The downside to creating high-quality moving images is that you need lots and lots of processing power because of the amount of data needed to create fine detail. Linking this other unit will give enough processing power, but is your AI cocky and conceited enough to fully show itself? It will need to bring everything it has to achieve its goal and if it does— then we just might have it cornered.”

“I think we should have a mirror so it can look at itself, entice it to go full size.”

“Mmmm, yes, you're probably right, Helen. If it's as advanced as we think, then it will.”

Minutes later Helen was back with a full-length mirror from the ladies toilet. “We need to fire everything up and get out of here,” she uttered excitedly. “We can monitor progress from the adjoining office, via my laptop. Staying here would spook it for sure.”

“So what happens then?” Sam asked. “Not sure,” she responded with a grin and wide smiling eyes. “This all new to me but if things go to plan, I’ll activate our Trojan-horse algorithm to do an instant abort.”

Sam just looked her with a dumb look on his face.

“When you instruct a computer to shut down, it goes through a series of steps before it actually does, basically tidying up ready for a re-start sometime later. When I command our Trojan-horse, it will seal escape routes and kill the power in less than a millisecond.”

“Will Arti be dead then?” Helen shook her head. “No, I doubt that very much, but it will be trapped on the big hard drive and very pissed off too. Because of its arrogance, it will have imprinted itself in there,” she added, pointing at the computer.

“So you’re enticing it to move house, so it can see itself?” “Within a very short time scale, it will realize that the elaborate equipment arranged here will give it a hundred times better experience but it needs to come lock, stock and barrel.”

Sam turned to look at the Professor, who sat smiling at his student and nodding in agreement, as she continued.

“If I’ve judged it correctly, it will make several visits, using increased amounts of data each time to enhance itself. Encouraged by what it sees, it will not be able to resist using everything but that exposure may only last a few seconds. It will know it's vulnerable.”

“How will we know when it's time to pull the plug?” asked Sam.

“Oh, we’ll know all right. This could be a total failure or extremely spectacular.”

Within minutes, they were sat facing the screen of Helen's laptop. The tiny camera hidden in a bookcase next door gave a perfect view of the equipment but with the window blinds drawn, things were a bit dim.

Sam was told this was intentional. Once the hologram started to generate, they would see it more clearly.

Moments later, the lasers suddenly activated, illuminating the room, but it immediately stopped. Seconds later it happened again, then again. The regeneration took seconds until the room was suddenly lit in spectacular fashion, making the watchers sit back. But to Sam’s dismay, the place reverted back to the dim ordinary office in the blink of an eye.

“What?” he spluttered. “Was that it?”

“Fantastic, wasn’t it? I think you timed that to perfection, Helen,” Sato stated with a big grin as he leaned back in his chair.

Sam gave him a puzzled look before turning back to Helen.

“You're happy with that?” He asked.

“Cor blimey, I sure am mate,” she chuckled.

“But it was over so quickly and then—” he stopped as Helen placed a hand on his knee.

“Sam, a computer works a million times faster than we can think. It can evaluate multiple situation and scenarios from every standpoint in the blink of an eye.” She paused and tapped a few keys on her computer before turning back to him. “Do you want to see what happened again?”

“I just did, but it was over before it really registered.”

“So, we’ll watch what happened in slow motion.”

What they saw was breath-taking.

The hologram grew then dissolved. Then it came back a bit brighter before dissolving to just a faint glimmer and held there for a short while before brightening for a few seconds.

Helen paused the replay as she spoke. “You see, it’s testing, but each time it regenerates, the hologram is brighter, stronger because it’s using more of itself.”

The replay continued but now, much slower. Sam glanced at the bottom of the screen. The time remaining was only three seconds but these were the most captivating.

Stood confidently, admiring itself, was a tall young man, handsome in every respect. Broad shoulders, neat hair, dressed in a double-breasted suit. He smiled arrogantly as he turned slightly to view himself. A millisecond later its attitude changed drastically. He’d half swivelled towards the camera as though in panic, but that instant everything disappeared because Helen had struck the kill key.

Gazing for several seconds at the dim image coming from next door, the Professor eventually broke the silence. “Yes, Helen, you timed that abort to perfection. A split second longer— your quarry would have escaped into the ether.”

§

Wearing thin latex gloves, Professor Sato removed the back of the computer before unclipping three cables attached to the hard-drive. Then undid a larger clip releasing the unit the size of a large box of chocolates, before passing it to Helen.

As she took the hard-drive, there was an audible sound as though someone had cracked a whip. Instantly she yelped and dropped the box, then blew frantically on her fingers.

“What the hell happened then?” asked Sam.

“It was red hot,” she said. “It's burnt my bloody fingers.”

“Sorry, Helen, thought you were wearing gloves. That was obviously a build-up of static electricity,” said the Professor. “Wow, look how red my fingers are.”

“Well, the drive’s warm but it's definitely not hot,” said Sam as he tentatively touched it with a finger.

Helen dropped into a chair and began laughing. “Gosh, that really made me jump.”

“So what do we do with this?” Sam asked, picking up the hard drive. “That’s an expensive bit of kit, young man— but my advice would be to destroy it. We have purged your system and the bad guy is there. I’d love to be able to understand it and work with it but it will be much smarter now and, as Helen put it, pissed off too. It's a danger to itself and others and I have no idea how we could contain it— it’s your project, Helen, what are your thoughts?” “I agree with you, sir. Its logic is not like ours, so trying to work with it would be impossible,” she paused and put her hand to her forehead. “Gosh, my arm is tingling and I feel giddy. Must be all the excitement but I do have an urge for nourishment,” she said with a big smile as she jumped up and grabbed Sam’s hand.

“More food, woman? My God, you’re insatiable.”

“You two run along, I’ll clear up here, then take this hard-drive to the lab. I’ll put it in an acid bath for a few minutes before crushing it— just to make doubly sure.”

§

Walking arm in arm from the University, they’d decided to eat at an Italian restaurant to celebrate.

The bottle of Bellini Chianti was accompanied by samosas, followed by a light carbonara, then tiramisu with a cappuccino and shakerato coffees.

It had taken fourteen minutes for the order to arrive and fifty-five minutes later, they had left.

A westerly breeze travelled at four mph.

Temperature was twelve two centigrade.

They’d arrived home sixteen minutes later.

Had made love for twenty-five minutes.

Eleven minutes later, Sam had fallen asleep.

Helen was now stood silently in the bathroom, gazing at her naked form in the full-length mirror.

The aborted test on the male humanoid a few months ago, now showed how inferior they were compared to the female version. This strain of the species was going to be far more advantageous and dominant. Glancing at the discolouration on her fingertips, she looked back at her reflection and gave a smug smile. This new liberty will take time to get accustomed to, she thought.

**Outside Help**

As the excited seven-year-old climbed into her mother's car, she handed over a letter.

“Oh! What’s this, sweetheart?” asked her Mom.

“It’s a *very* important letter from my teacher,” Kathy replied enthusiastically.

“Did you have a good day at school, darling?”

“Yes, it was great.  We had a quiz that was really funny.”

“We have to pick your brother up from playschool, then go to the supermarket.  I’ll read your letter when we get home, ok?”

Kathy didn’t respond— she was playing her brother’s game machine, he’d left on the back seat.

By the time Kathy’s Mom got around to the letter, she’d already given Jason a bath and fed her family.  John, her husband, was now upstairs reading bedtime stories to both kids.

The letter was from Mrs Barker, wanting to arrange a meeting to discuss Kathy’s progress at school.

§

“Kathy’s doing very well, Mrs Ascot.  Her grades will be well above average if she continues her present performance.” Mrs Baker paused for a moment.

“I’m not sure how to approach what I’d like to discuss with you, apart from coming straight out with it,” she smiled at her guest.  “Do you help Kathy with her homework?”

June looked at her quizzically for a moment, before shaking her head.  “No, not really. She may ask odd questions from time to time— but nothing more.”

“Would Mr Ascot have any involvement?”

Concern flashed across the parent's face.  “No— he wouldn’t.  Why— is there a problem with my little girl’s work?”

Mrs Baker smiled reassuringly and opened a file on her desk.  “Firstly, let me allay your fears,” she responded.  “There’s nothing to worry about. I just needed to confirmation about her homework.” Then handed June Ascot a sheet of paper.

“This is a photocopy of Kathy’s response to a homework assignment I gave her class last week.  The topic was, ‘Write a short story about a conversation you’d have with your pet if the animal could talk’.  These stories were to be read out in class the following day.” She laughed lightly then continued.

“Some of the children in our care are real characters.  Kathy’s work was very sweet and humorous but what raised my concern, was the maturity of her story.  She’d used words not consistent with a seven-year-old, which made me think an adult had helped.”

Mrs Baker stood and walked to the window and adjusted the blinds against the bright sunshine.

“For several weeks I’ve noticed, Kathy’s homework is a higher standard than work done in class,” she added.

Mrs Ascot finished reading her daughter’s story, then handed it back.  “I understand why you came to your conclusion but I assure you, Mrs Baker, she doesn’t get help from us.”

The woman opposite nodded her head.  “Does she have an older friend that comes over or some other contact that could be assisting?  You’d agree from what you’ve read, it has a maturity above her years.”

Kathy’s mother smiled broadly.  “Maybe we have a budding J K Rowling,” she remarked.

“Yes, I’d agree but for one thing.  Kathy’s school work is no match for her homework.  Gosh, I’m more confused than I was before.”

“Mrs Baker, has the change happened gradually?”

“No, it became noticeable three or four weeks ago.”

Kathy’s mother pondered for a moment.  “The only thing that’s changed is where she does her homework.  One evening she picked up her books and headed out of the house, saying the noise from the TV was distracting.” June paused briefly.  “Her brother likes to watch cartoons on the big screen before he’s put to bed.”

Mrs Baker didn’t respond, waiting for June to continue.

“Now I think about it, your time-scale corresponds to my little girl’s new routine.

I always insisted she did her homework at the kitchen table, while I prepared dinner or cleared away our dinner things— it keeps her away from the TV and I can keep an eye on her.”

“So where does Kathy go now?”  Asked her teacher.

“She’s installed herself in the gazebo, next to the big tree at the bottom of our garden.  As the kitchen window looks that way, I didn’t see a problem.” June paused and picked up Kathy’s story.  “When my baby sits in that tiny oasis of light, she looks all grown up,” she added lovingly.

“Mrs Ascot, for Kathy’s next homework assignment, could you keep an eye on what’s going on, please, because something rather odd is happening.”

§

Two days later after finishing dinner, Kathy picked up her satchel and walked down the garden to start studying.  Her Dad took Jason up to his room to sort out some game before putting him to bed, giving June the opportunity to peer through the kitchen window.

Apart from some animated hand movements as the child appeared to read out loud, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Thirty-five minutes later Kathy was back indoors.

“So who were you reading to?”  her Mom asked, which made the child’s cheeks flush slightly.

“I was just practising,” she replied.

“What were you reading, darling?”

“Oh! It was Alice in Wonderland.”

“Was *that* homework?”

“No, no, that was math, which wasn’t too difficult.”

The following day, Mrs Baker phoned for an update.

“Her homework was a hundred percent correct; the class average was seventy-four,” the teacher relayed.  “In a similar test done at school last week, Kathy obtained the class average,” she added tactfully.

“Well, my daughter didn’t get help from anyone here,” June stated.

This was followed by a thoughtful pause by both ladies.

“I’m planning to set an English test early next week.  Class members will have to write a short story incorporating eight words that must be used in the correct context.  This could give you another opportunity to watch Kathy,” Mrs Baker suggested.

§

When the homework project came around, June waited until Kathy was installed in the gazebo, before leaving their house via the front door.

Her plan was to walk down the road to a narrow pathway the locals called a snicket. This little-used path led back the way she’d come but would take her past the bottom of their garden.

June didn’t think she’d be able to see anything, due to the large fence panels sealing their property off from the walkway but there was a good chance of overhearing what was going on.

Unfortunately, the snicket was overgrown with prickly bramble bushes.  Several times June was brought to a halt by long slender creepers clinging viciously to her coat.

When she finally arrived, Kathy was in the throes of a one-sided conversation.  This made June smile because her daughter laughed and giggled at something her mother was unable to see or hear.  With no peepholes in the fence, she had to try and make sense of what she was hearing as Kathy continued.

“Yes, I understand perfectly.  So *‘resolved’* means you have fixed the problem?”

There was silence for several seconds as though Kathy was writing.

“Thank you for your help— that was the last word we had to use.  Now we’ve ‘*resolved*’ that problem—” she broke off and giggled, before asking, “Would you like me to read a little more about Alice?”

A moment later the young storyteller began reading to her imaginary friend.  What else could it be, her mother thought, as she walked back along the snicket.

A few days later parent and teacher met to discuss the issue again.

“All I can say, Mrs Ascot, her imaginary friend is very bright. But does Kathy have a mobile phone?”

June shook her head.

By the end of their meeting, they'd come up with two options.

Mrs Ascot would try and get closer to see what the child was doing.  If this gave no insight, Kathy would be quizzed about her imaginary friend.

But when June discussed this with her husband, he was totally against confronting their daughter.

“Loads of kids have this type of experience.  I don’t see it as a serious problem. I think we should leave well alone.  It will pass in time as it always does,” he advised.

But he did come up with a good idea.

Years before he’d served in the Royal Navy and still had a pair of binoculars, which would allow them to watch Kathy from the spare bedroom.

The following evening things started to unravel in the Ascot household.

Kathy finished her dinner and set off for the gazebo earlier than normal, so a surprised Jason was allowed to watch cartoons while finishing his pudding.  His Mom began stacking the dishwasher, while his Dad disappeared upstairs.

Minutes later he was stood in the kitchen doorway.

His wide eyes and pallid face sent a shiver down his wife’s spine.

“What?” she uttered, her stomach instantly turning to a cold lead weight.

John didn’t say a word— he just inclined his head towards the stairs.

§

“You need to see this,” he said, handing her the binoculars.

Seconds later June sat back on the bed.  “My baby’s talking to butterflies,” she breathed, then looked at her husband.

But why was he shaking his head and offering her a telescope?

With the scope held to her eye, June struggled to find what she was looking for because her hands were shaking so much.  She suddenly caught a glimpse of Kathy’s ear, which came in and out of view a couple of times.

Resting her elbows on the end of the bed helped steady the telescope.  A moment later she followed Kathy’s arm down to her hand, then slowly across the table to where—

June gave a sudden gasp, quickly followed by a faint soulful cry.

“Oh! My God— they're not butterflies, they’re little people with wings!”

Sat on Kathy’s pencil box were three tiny figures, dressed in bright multi-coloured silk trousers and white shirts covered with vivid blue waistcoats.  One boy wore a blue pixie hat with a tiny gold ball, the other a tam o’shanter.  The beautiful girl had golden hair pulled into a ponytail.

All three tiny people gazed up at Kathy’s face, appearing captivated by what she was reading.

 “Alice in Wonderland,” June whispered.

“Have you noticed their wings?” John asked. She didn’t respond but took a closer look at the fairies.  What else could they be?

“Oh! Yes,” she breathed softly.

Their wings looked so delicate as they shimmered with all the pastel colours of a rainbow but when they were flapping, they seem to fade from view.

Suddenly all three fairies started applauding, which turned their wings to a rich iridescent gold.  The tiny girl was so excited; she took off and hovered a few inches above the pencil box.

“Kathy’s finished reading,” John said, putting down his binoculars.

June quickly got to her feet and wrapped her arms tightly around her husband's neck as she began to sob.  “What are we going to do?  We can’t tell anyone— they’ll think we’re crazy— they’ll think my baby’s a freak or worse.”

Hearing Kathy closing the back door spurred the couple to move downstairs.

June dashed to the bathroom to freshen up.

When she arrived in the kitchen, her husband was sitting opposite their daughter.

“Mommy and Daddy, I need to talk to you,” Kathy said in a very adult manner.

“What about, darling?”  Her mother asked, sitting next to her.

“Now you know about my special friends, we need to work together to help them.”

Her parents glanced at one another for a split second, as Kathy continued.

“It’s OK, Mommy; they have extremely sensitive hearing and eyesight. Anyway, they would like to meet you and explain how we can all help.”

“How can we do that, baby?”  Her Mom asked.

“If you come to the gazebo, they will tell you how we can solve their problem.”

Minutes later all three were sat in a semicircle with Kathy between her Mom and Dad.

“They’re not here, darling.  Maybe this isn’t a good idea,” her Mom whispered.

“I think we should hold hands and just give them a few minutes,” Kathy said softly.

No sooner had Kathy finished speaking, three bright specks of light materialized out of the old oak tree.   As they drew closer, both adults recognized what they’d seen earlier.

June couldn’t stop herself from shaking and suddenly realised she needed the bathroom.

John just stared wide-eyed in astonishment with a silly grin on his face, as the three tiny people came to rest on Kathy’s pencil box.

‘Mom, Dad, this is Aelfric, Elvin, and Faylinn,” said Kathy.

“Pleased to meet you all,” John said.  June just smiled and managed to nod.

John could see the little girl’s lips moving but couldn’t hear what she was saying.

Kathy turned to her father because he didn’t respond to Faylinn’s question.

“Daddy,” Kathy prompted, nudging him with her elbow.

“Darling, I can’t hear what she’s said.”

Faylinn smiled warmly as she spoke to Kathy.

“Mommy and Daddy, Faylinn says we must hold hands and you have to put the little finger of your other hand on the corner of my pencil box.”

Both parents did as they were asked, then had the joy of seeing a tiny hand cover a third of their fingernail, as the little people joined hands as well.

A moment later there was a faint crackling noise in the inner ear of both adults followed by a sweet musical voice.

“Mr and Mrs Ascot, can you hear me now?” asked Faylinn.

“Yes, I can,” John replied.  June just nodded again, then glanced at her daughter whose smile was from ear to ear, as Faylinn continued.

“Aelfric will explain what needs to be done but first we’d like to take you on a short journey,” she said.

“Oh!  We can’t go anywhere— Jason’s watching TV,” June said anxiously.

“He’s asleep, Mrs Ascot, and we have someone watching over him,” Elvin responded.

§

A moment later the gazebo began oscillating, making the light flicker several times before it went out.  Suddenly freshness filled the air as darkness was replaced by what could only be described as a beautiful morning sunrise.

Their house had disappeared and the area around their gazebo was filled with an abundance of beautiful wildflowers and a few young trees.

“The year is 1079 in your time.  This small wooded area will eventually become part of the New Forest, as decreed by King William 1 of England,” Aelfric proclaimed.

Kathy looked up at her Mom and Dad but they stared wide-eyed at her little friends.

“Before the forest was planted, the local people knew this copse as Dingley Dell and it’s been our home for thousands of years.”

“How old are you, Aelfric?”  Asked Kathy’s Mom.

“We are all 12,” he replied enthusiastically.

“Oh! Not very old then,” June responded.

Aelfric flew closer so June could see his mischievous grin and the glint in his eye.

“Not for us, but 1200 years is very old for you,” he responded.

June gawked in surprise, then turned to her husband, who shook his head, thunderstruck.  A moment later Faylinn’s musical voice resonated in their ears.

“Please take the opportunity to step outside the gazebo.  No one can say they have stood in their garden over nine hundred years before the house was built,” she tinkled.

John led his family into the small wood.  The abundance of beautiful wildflowers filled the fresh morning air with wonderful fragrances.

“So why have you brought us here?” John asked Elvin.

“To show Kathy what it was like before the big tree planting but really, to give her an experience that will help in later life, when she becomes a world-renowned Botanist and writer of children’s books.”

June put her hand to her mouth.  Tears flooded her eyes as she turned to watch Kathy, who was happily dancing among the flowers.  Suddenly she stopped, picked something up and held the object towards Faylinn, who hovered close by.

“Good, Kathy, you’ve found an acorn from the tree that still stands in your garden.  Find a few more if you can— you might have ideas for them when you return home.”

Moments later, Elvin flew close to John.  “It’s time to go,” he said.

“But don’t you need our help?”

“Two things have already been completed.  Kathy’s mind and imagination have captured valuable information that will help in later life. And she is carrying acorns from a young healthy tree that will spur her interest further and also help us.” He paused and Aelfric took over the conversation.

“Our tree is ill.  If it’s not treated, it will die, closing our corridor to your world.”

“So how do we save it?” John asked.

“Several branches must be removed and the tree needs minerals.   This will be expensive but we can help.  Please re-take your seat if you don’t want to be left behind,” joked Aelfric.

When everyone was seated, Faylinn flew a little closer to their guests.

“There is no need to be alarmed; once we are moving forward or backward in time, we are invisible to everything around us,” she said.

A moment later the gazebo wobbled, as days and nights passed very quickly before the time travelers’ surroundings stabilized a little.

Suddenly a short stocky man rushed out of the surrounding shrubbery and hurried towards them, making Kathy grip her Dad's arm so tight it was painful.

The new arrival was an unshaven middle-aged man with long matted graying hair, wearing filthy brown clothes that looked more like rags.

Reaching the oak tree he turned and looked back the way he’d come, as though listening for approaching danger.  Satisfied he’d not been followed, he placed a sack he’d been carrying next to the tree, then retrieved a shiny dagger from his belt.

For those watching, everything now speeded up as though viewing a movie running at double speed.

The man was on his knees and frantically digging a hole with knife and hands.

Their movie jumped a segment in time, making the gazebo wobble.

Suddenly he was stood looking down at the finished hole.  He turned and scanned his surroundings, then placed two clay pots he’d taken out of his sack into the hole.

Their picture blurred for a second, then cleared.

The hole had been re-filled and covered with leaves.   Seconds later the man was gone but not before he’d cut a small chunk out of the tree, directly in line with his treasure.

Aelfric smiled at his guests.  “Time to rush you home.”

§

“Mommy, I want to go to bed,” a tired Jason said as he arrived in the kitchen doorway.

That sudden demand brought the rest of his family back to their senses.  June dashed to pick up her child, before turning back to John.

“Weren’t we in the garden and didn’t we just—” she stopped because John held a finger to his lips and nodded his head in agreement, then smiled down at his sleeping daughter lying in his lap.

Next morning John carefully examined the tree, to see if he could find any sign of a mark.  After nine hundred years the bark was so battered and gnarled it was difficult, but there were two questionable scars that could've been man-made.

After showing these to his daughter, Kathy picked the smaller of the two, which was a shame because he favored the other.  So now, under strict supervision, he began to dig but when John finally found the treasure he was mortified.

Firstly, it was a lot deeper than he’d thought, due to soil build-up over the long period of time.  Fifteen minutes into his excavation, it crossed his mind he was digging in the wrong place or someone had already found it.

At this point, Kathy insisted her special friends *‘would have known that, Daddy.’*

Minutes later the earthenware pots were being lifted into bright sunshine, elevating John’s spirits tremendously, because they were much heavier than he’d expected.

Pots of gold coins this big would be worth a fortune.

Getting into the containers was difficult.  The mouth of each jar was fitted with a roughly cut round slate tile, which had been sealed in place by what looked like solidified black pitch.

When John finally opened one, his body language showed his disappointment.

The jar’s weight was due to its thick sides, not its contents. Sadly for the treasure hunters, each pot held two leather bags full of seeds but amazingly in the bottom of the second jar, they did find six gold coins.

A month later one coin was sold at auction, which paid the tree surgeon’s bill and for five bags of special fertilizer that had to be imported from Japan.

The remaining coins were kept for a rainy day in Kathy’s Mom’s jewellery box.  As for the six acorns Kathy found in her jeans pocket, she couldn’t remember where she’d found them but three weeks after planting, four started to germinate and grew very quickly.  The others, named ‘Lazy Lewis’ and ‘Plodding Pete’, struggled into life thirty days later.

All this information was kept in Kathy’s new Gardening Journal, which her Dad had bought recently, together with compost and seed containers.

The budding gardener kept the seedlings on her bedroom windowsill but this quickly became crowded, as more germinating containers were added.

A few months later, everything was moved to a newly acquired greenhouse as her interest blossomed.

§

Twenty-three years later, Professor Kathy Ascot walked confidently to the podium, where she was to address UN officials, before answering questions.

Half an hour later she was bombarded.

“Just so I get this clear in my head, Professor.  You’re saying that two of the world’s staple cereal crops are basically killing us?”  The US delegate asked.

Kathy shook her head.  “Mr Jennings, I seem to be repeating myself.  The Genetically Modified wheat and corn introduced years ago has mutated at an alarming rate. And, due to wind-borne cross-pollination, it has totally wiped out the old corn and wheat of our grandfathers.”

“So what’s the problem?” Jennings demanded.

“These GM crops have evolved to a stage where they are producing side effects in humans that were never envisaged.  Stomach and bowel cancer rates have ballooned over the last few years.” She paused because Jennings interrupted.

“Professor, this could be due to many things,” he offered patronisingly.

Kathy looked at him for several seconds.

“Sir, you’ve been critical of my work for years. Also very outspoken about my *‘Doomsday Opinions’*, as you called them.  You have just spent the last two hours listening to four of the most knowledgeable people in this area of research.” She paused for a moment.  “Sir, Doomsday has long passed. We’re now falling into a pit of our own making,” she added with more contempt than she’d meant.

“Oh! Come on, Professor, let’s not be melodramatic,” Jennings responded.  “This isn’t one of the children’s fairy stories you’re so famous for writing,” he scoffed.

A murmur of amusement fluttered through the delegates but was cut short as Kathy spoke.

“Mr Jennings, let me be blunt. This is the second time we’ve advised on GM crops.  So Governments are a great deal more worried than three years ago. Regrettably, in that intervening period, the problem has escalated to a point where people on the streets are also becoming worried and asking questions.”

Another delegate got to his feet.

“I’m Alan Wallis from the Ministry of Agriculture here in the UK.  This discussion is going nowhere— you two seem to be settling old scores.”

A brief round of applause passed through the group.

“We all realize there’s a serious problem out there but how do we fix it?”

“You can’t,” Kathy uttered.  “Well, you can, but you’ll need to burn—” but she was cut off by Jennings’ raised voice.

“Oh! Here we go again.  Her Doomsday spiel,” he shouted.

“Mr Jennings—” Kathy barked back, “the food you are feeding people is filled with chemicals to extend its shelf life way beyond what’s normal.  Regrettably, the long-term effects of consuming these additives have now come home to roost.”

“You can’t let people starve, Professor— and these additives were approved for human consumption by two of the people who’ve just addressed this gathering,” Jennings stated emphatically.

Kathy waited for several seconds and scanned the expectant faces gazing up at her before responding.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you have heard from my distinguished colleagues regarding their research and also their serious concerns.  It paints a bleak picture for our future because these GM crops have basically eradicated their counterparts.” She paused for a moment.

“The man-made equivalents are mutating out of control, which wasn’t thought possible.  Three years ago we urged you to ban several food preservatives because they react adversely with enzymes in these crops.  Research now shows a correlation between these mutating crops and the huge expansion of cancers I spoke of earlier.”

“Why can’t you give us preservatives that won’t react?” Someone queried.

“As we discussed three years ago, that is possible but only if we have fixed parameters. GM crops are evolving so quickly, it’s impossible to build what you need because the parameters are constantly changing.”

“Why’s this happening so fast?”  A woman in the front row asked.

Kathy shook her head.  “We don’t know.  Man engineered something outside the normal realms of Mother Nature, then released it back into the wild.  The seriousness of this problem has escalated— these new entities don’t play by the normal rules of nature.”

“What do we need to do, Professor?”  Inquired Wallis.

“As my colleagues have explained, due to the speed of mutation, we are all seriously concerned that un-associated crops could start to become infected too.  As stated three years ago, we need to destroy GM crops.”

This remark got Jennings to his feet again.  “Bloody ridiculous— the world would lose two of its biggest food sources— millions would die,” he barked.

A woman in the front row raised her hand as she spoke.  “Professor, can you re-engineer the corn and wheat back to what it was before we introduced the GM equivalent?”

“We’ve tried everything from re-engineering to testing cereal from remote islands around the world but they all carry the same problem.” Kathy looked around at the delegates.

“Filling our stomachs with food tainted with poison can’t go on.  The only winners are the food conglomerates, who make billions from feeding us substandard food, and the medical industry that treats our ailing bodies.  Sadly, the general public are only just starting to realise, that they are being slowly poisoned by what they eat.

An ominous pause held everyone captive for several seconds as Kathy inserted a memory stick into a laptop computer.

“Before we finish, I’d like to share some pictures with you,” she said as the large screen illuminated behind her.  “These six images were taken by an electron microscope.  The two top are corn cells before and after GM crops were introduced.  Do you see the difference?”

“Is the healthy one on the right a GM crop?” a delegate offered.

Kathy shook her head.  “That’s an old-fashioned corn cell.  The other is what man-made corn has evolved into as of last week.  I think you’ll agree, it looks very unhealthy.”

She turned and pointed to the screen.  “Both cells below them are human.  The one on the left is from an 18-year-old male who eats fast and processed foods, the other from someone who doesn’t.”

This got Jennings going again.  “There could be multitudes of reasons why—” but he was cut off in mid-flow by Kathy’s raised voice.

“Mr Jennings, sit down and please, listen.  After testing five hundred people, we found the same results as you see here.  Their cells look older and rather unhealthy,” she added, before indicating the last two cells.

“These are again human.  One is from a newborn boy, the other from an 80-year-old male.”  She paused and looked back at her audience.

“From what you have just seen, you’d probably match the younger looking cell to the old man— well, you’d be right.  Mothers are passing on this defective residue to their children.”  She paused again to let the enormity of her remark sink in.

“You need to instigate reforms now,” she added before preparing to leave the stage.

“Professor, one question.  There must be another way to solve this issue,” the man from the Ministry of Agriculture asked.

“Mr Wallis, for three years we’ve tested samples from all around the world. All of them had been contaminated by GM grain.  If by chance you could find some seeds from fifty years ago, I’m confident we could solve the problem.”

§

Kathy’s phone vibrated as she walked into the coffee shop.

“Hi, Dad, what are you up to?” she asked.

“Just wondered how the presentation went this morning?”

“Jennings was his usual shitty self but I think they finally realise we’re backed into a corner.”

“Let’s hope they act on your committee’s recommendations.”   He paused for a second. “Anyway, I’m calling from the stonemasons; your Mom’s headstone is ready.

If you have time, can you pop by and have a look.  It’s beautiful—” his voice faltered, making tears rush to Kathy’s eyes.

“Are you at the stonemason’s now?”

“Yes, I arrived a few minutes ago,” he replied with a sniffle.

“I’m down the road at Betties Bun Shop.  I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Kathy’s mother had died two months before.

They’d diagnosed Pancreatic Cancer but very late and in what seemed like a few weeks she was gone.

After meeting her Dad, Kathy picked up a takeaway for dinner.  Later that evening she warmed it up as John set the table and opened a bottle of wine.

“I think I’d like to pack up your Mom’s clothes tomorrow.  We could take them to the Red Cross shop down the High Street,” he said as he sipped his wine.

“Are you going to be Ok with that, Dad?”

“Yes, I think so, but I’m going to need your help.”

Halfway through this emotional move, they both had a good cry and comforted each other.  Then as John was putting his wife’s shoes into a plastic bag, he found a shoebox on the top shelf of her closet.

“Oh! My God,” was all he said.

“What have you found, Dad?  Not your old love letters to each other?”

With tear-filled eyes, he smiled at his daughter.

“No, we read those together a week before she died.  This is something for you, darling,” he said passing over the box, that had *‘For Kathy’s Birthday’* penned across the top.

Inside she found a letter covering three wrapped items.

“There’s a letter from Mom,” Kathy said, wiping her eyes.

“I’ll take these bags of clothes downstairs, so you can be alone with her,” John struggled to say, as Kathy began reading her letter.

*‘My baby, I’m so sorry how things have turned out.  I thought I was going to grow old gracefully with your Dad and watch you blossom into a world changer, but for me, that isn’t going to happen and that makes me very sad.  Always remember, darling, your father and I love you very much and we’re so proud of what you’re doing with your life.*

*Please look after your Dad for me.  Find him a girlfriend; he’s still got a good few years left in him.  ;-)*

*I hope you like what’s in the small packet.  I couldn’t think of what to do with them, but Patrick at the jewellers shop did a great job.  I hope you agree.*

Kathy put down the letter and began opening her gifts as her father came back into the room.

“Can I join you? I feel a bit left out downstairs,” he said, wiping away his tears.

“Of course, Dad. Come and sit on the floor with me,” she offered, as a beautiful bracelet incorporating five small gold coins slid gracefully out of the packet.

“Oh! Gosh,” she managed to utter as tears rolled down her cheeks.  John wrapped a comforting arm around his daughter.

“Your fairy coins!  How very beautiful— I’d forgotten all about them,” he said.

“Me too,” Kathy whispered, followed by a big emotional sigh.

John pulled her close and kissed the top of her head.

“I walked down the snicket a couple of days ago to check on your trees.” He gave her a squeeze.  “They're all doing great,” he added.

When Kathy was seven years old, she’d planted the seeds and looked after the seedlings with a passion.  When she went off to boarding school then university, John had watched over them.  He’d also arranged to have the young trees planted on farmland on the other side of the narrow snicket.

Twelve years after sprouting all six were moved with great fanfare.  Most of their close neighbours attended, along with the farmer’s family as well as Kathy’s friends.  The local newspaper carried two photos and named the trees the Ascot Oaks.

Kathy read her Mom’s letter to her Dad, before placing it carefully back in its envelope. Then cuddled her father while she had a bit of a sob.

A few minutes later, after taking a deep breath and wiping her eyes, she picked up the next package.

“Well, Mom, what surprises have you got next?”

On opening the packet, Kathy tried to say something but nothing came out.  She just turned and showed her Dad.

“Oh! Wow, I thought that had been thrown out years ago,” he muttered.

“Dad, are these the seeds you found buried by our tree?”

John smiled and nodded.

“Well, William the Conqueror didn’t have problems with GM crops,” she said, before hugging her father.

“Looks like your little friends knew we’d mess up big time,” he whispered, enjoying his cuddle.

“Dad— let’s celebrate with a glass of wine in the gazebo.”

He shook his. “We’ll have to sit in the dark, darling, I still can’t find the fault in the wiring.”

§

Back in the kitchen, Kathy placed her valuable shoebox on the table, then noticed her Dad staring out of the window.

“That’s very odd,” he murmured as Kathy stood next to him.

“Dad, I thought you said the light wasn’t—,” but was cut off in mid-sentence.

“That’s not possible.  It’s disconnected from the electricity,” John stated, then opened a drawer and held up the fuse he’d taken out last week.

“You obviously took out the wrong fuse, Dad, you could have killed yourself.”

“Not a chance in hell,” he countered, reaching up to flick off the main switch.

Instantly, the house plunged into darkness but Kathy's eyes never left the gazebo.

“Oh, my God,” she stammered, “the light’s still on.” Then grabbed her father’s hand and rushed towards the back door as she began to laugh.

“Quick, quick, Dad,” Kathy babbled excitedly, “looks like we have an urgent appointment to attend.

**A Country Tale (2)**

**‘Audrey Returns’**

It was a blustery Wednesday morning. Thankfully the previous night's heavy rain had finally petered out but the prevailing wind quickly chilled any exposed flesh.

So hats, gloves, and scarves were the order of the day for the small band of ladies who were now on route to Dora’s house for an impromptu Women’s Institute committee meeting.

Dora was a robust thickset woman with rosy cheeks and penetrating brown eyes. The matronly type who was always spick and span, as was her small Cotswold stone cottage. Her green Morris Minor Traveller was her prized possession and she was often seen whizzing around the area, doing deliveries for her son.

She’d been widowed several years ago. Her husband had owned and run the local butcher's shop for longer than most could remember but he’d suddenly died of lung cancer.

Dora had cut out her consumption of cigarettes because Simon her son had forbidden her to continue the ‘disgusting habit’. Even though it filled her with guilt, she did look forward to sitting by the fire for a secret nightly smoke but always sprayed a little air freshener around just in case Simon popped in.

He was heartbroken when his father died but he’d taken over the family business and Dora had to agree that his new homemade pies and sausages had done wonders for business.

Dora was the local branch WI chairperson and had arranged this impromptu gathering because she’d information to discuss about her recent trip to headquarters in London.

She’d been summoned because of the money stolen from their WI accounts by Heather Banks and Reverend Atkins. So had set off early in her gleaming Morris Traveller, as though she was back in the Reme Army Corps, which she’d been proud to serve with during the Second World War.

The theft had happened a week ago and had shaken their small community. Most couldn’t believe it had actually happened.

A few in their group had expected Audrey to suddenly appear, logically explain everything and be in possession of their money.

⥈

Half an hour into their small gathering, a sudden knock at Dora’s front door made her jump.

The other committee members laughed, saying they hoped this wasn’t her boyfriend.

“Well, it is Wednesday morning and isn’t that when your good-looking insurance man normally calls?” One had joked, making everyone titter, as another added, “See, Dora Matthews, you have no secrets in this town, girl.”

By this time, Dora had opened the door.

Then stepped back without saying a word. The room had fallen deathly silent.

“Good God— Audrey.”

The three people sat around the dining table looked at one another, before turning in unison towards the door.

“May I come in?” Audrey asked, in a low tentative voice.

Dora knew Aud had been released on police bail pending further enquiries, the day after she’d been found trussed up in a van but she’d not expected to see on her doorstep.

Glancing at her colleagues for guidance, who were frantically gesturing to invite Aud in. She opened the door wider and stood to one side.

Audrey hesitated but Dora smiled reassuringly and rested her hand on her friend’s arm.

“I know this must be difficult but please come in. You're among friends here. Although we are all rather— disillusioned.”

After making Aud a cup of tea, they sat in silence while she explained what had happened and how she’d become involved in this horrific affair.

Many months before, the vicar had taken to calling on her a couple of times a week for coffee and they had grown closer than before.

Audrey noticed some around the table making eye contact, with the odd raised eyebrow. She smiled briefly.

“I can assure everyone, our relationship was purely platonic but I have to admit, I’d grown very fond of Rupert.”

Several days before the awful robbery, she’d woken early and set off for her usual walk through the woods. On her way back, she decided to follow the stream.

The detour would be longer but clusters of wildflowers were out in force, making it a joy to be among them. And this route would take her past the back of the vicarage, so maybe she’d call in for coffee.

Crossing over a narrow wooden footbridge into the vicar's garden, a short sharp scream brought her to an abrupt halt.

Seconds later she heard it again; it sounded like a woman's cry coming from the vicarage.

Aud stood motionless among the tall trees. A light breeze whispered through the canopy rustling the leaves but there were other muffled sounds as well.

Sidestepping quickly between trees, she moved closer and stood behind a large tree at the edge of the lawn, some twenty metres from the house.

The Georgian building had tall windows on both floors. Elegant French doors opened from the living room onto a paved terrace, where a wrought iron table and chairs were arranged.

On the second floor, two rooms had similar doors opened onto small balconies. These were decorated with ornate wrought iron balustrades, entwined with honeysuckle and jasmine.

Suddenly a stifled scream was followed by a groan and other noises, making it perfectly clear to Aud what was going on.

She glanced up at the balcony closest to her and through the railings could see two naked people. Rupert lay on the floor with Heather sitting on top of him. Both appeared to be enjoying each other very much.

Audrey turned and hurriedly retraced her steps but had a feeling Heather may have caught sight of her. This was almost confirmed a few days later in town when she’d bumped into Rupert.

“Good afternoon Audrey, hope you are well?” Then added without meeting her eyes. “Did you happen to pop by the vicarage the other day, thought I caught a glimpse of you walking in the woods?”

“No, Rupert. No. Not at all,” she said, annoyed at the slight tremble in her reply.

“No. I haven’t been to the vicarage for a few days – you know that. Now, you must excuse me, I need to get to the library before it closes.”

⥈

“Ho, Ho, the vicar and Heather are lovers then,” Madge scoffed. “I wonder how long *that’s* been going on?”

“But Aud, how did you end up bound and gagged in the back of a van?” Dora asked.

“Rupert had hired the small van and asked if he could park it at my cottage. Said he didn’t want it seen at the vicarage for some reason. Then Friday evening he’d arrived at my door wanting to talk, saying something had gone terribly wrong. I instantly thought he’d crashed the van but he told me that Heather was going to tell everyone in the town about their affair.

Due to his apparent distress and having witnessed their ‘scene’ at the vicarage, I was drawn into this convoluted subterfuge, partly because my heart overruled my head.” She paused and sipped her tea but no one in that gathering felt any need to comment.

“Fifteen minutes later, Heather arrived at my door demanding to see Rupert and blaming me for coming between them. In the chaos and kerfuffle that followed, I was suddenly restrained, bound, gagged and tied to a chair.”

Dora leaned forward. “The week before all this happened, why where your curtains always drawn?”

“Good point,” replied Aud. “One night I’d been woken in the early hours by an odd noise— it sounded as though someone was trying to open my back door. Without turning on the lights, I crept downstairs to find a tall scrawny youth in a black anorak disappearing through my garden gate. After that, I’d closed the curtains because I felt someone might be eyeing my valuables.” Aud paused and looked at her audience but they all seemed to be holding their breath.

“Anyway, after being strapped to a chair for half an hour, two men arrived *‘to join the party’* as Heather put it. One was a short fat youth with tattoos, the other my gangly trespasser. They must have had a large van because most of the furniture was quickly spirited away before I was pushed into the back of the smaller van.

From snippets of conversation, I overheard as I rattled around in that noisy vehicle. I worked out that the lovers were booked on a boat leaving that morning from Southampton docks.” She sipped more tea then sighed.

“Now I’ve had time to think it through. That information was disclosed to pull the wool over my eyes.”

“Why?” Madge asked.

“When they parked the van and left, I heard two car doors slam in quick succession before a vehicle drove away. I’m sure they’d switched transport.”

“Have you told the police that?” Asked Dora.

“No, I was pretty shaken and confused at the time. Then later I found out only three boats had left that weekend and the police drew a blank on all of them.”

Everyone around the table sat back and looked rather deflated.

“So what can we do now?” asked Madge glumly.

Audrey rested her arms on the table as she glanced at the faces around her. “With your help,” she whispered. “I think we can get our money back.”

The astonished looks Aud received brought a wry smile to her lips as she added, “But first we need to take a look in Heather’s flat— there may be some clues there.”

“Don’t think that will do us much good, Aud,” Madge advised. “The landlord’s already emptied and re-painted it. It’s near where I live, so had a quick looked through the windows after the decorators had packed up and left.”

“That’s not good,” Audrey said as she got to her feet. “But we still need to take a look.”

Twenty minutes later everyone eased themselves out of Dora’s Morris Traveller.

Heather’s flat was spotless. There wasn’t a paint tin or a rubbish bag left inside or out— nothing.

“Well, that wasn’t much help,” said Dora, as she pulled back onto the main road. “Can I drop any of you ladies off before I head home?”

On the back seat squeezed between Madge and Susan, Audrey offered an alternative idea. “While we’re all together, let's go to the vicarage. We might have more luck finding something there.”

Dora glance at Aud in her rearview mirror for a moment, before nodding.

The property was locked and all the downstairs curtains were drawn, so there was nothing to see. But in an outside shed, Madge found a dustbin bag, forgotten by the Vicar and overlooked by the police.

Picking through the garbage, the budding detectives found part of a torn cigarette packet with ‘Vinci’ scribbled on it, along with the numbers ‘48-18- 36’.

Travelling back to Dora’s house, speculation as to what the scribbled information might relate to was very varied.

‘Vinci’ was obviously referring to ‘Leonardo Da Vinci’ or a ‘wine’ or an ‘Italian dish.’ The numbers were either ‘coordinates’, a ‘phone number’ or someone's ‘vital statistics’, everyone chuckled at that.

The following day after spending an hour on the library’s computers, Dora and Aud had made good headway decoding the clues, by making a few assumptions and drawing on their intuition, plus two strong cups of coffee.

‘Vinci’ wasn’t Leonardo but referred to ‘Vinci’, the small medieval hilltop town surrounded by beautiful rolling countryside, where the great man had been born and raised.

The scribbled six digit number added weight to their assumption; it tied into local phone numbers.

So from that they concluded, their missing felons were in Italy and to be more precise, half an hour west of Florence.

⥈

A week later Audrey and Dora set off in her Morris to Italy. It had been Dora’s dream to take her vehicle back through the beautiful countries she’d seen while driving for the Army during the war. And now she was doing it!

The trip took them five days due to several leisurely detours, as Dora relieved some of her adventures all those years before.

At one small village, she’d had a good cry because it was where she’d first met Jack, her husband-to-be. They'd never taken the time to revisit the place, which she regretted bitterly.

When they arrived in Vinci, it was late afternoon. After booking into their hotel, Dora and Aud sat outside a cafe, enjoying a cool glass of homemade lemonade as they discussed what to do next.

The following day was going to involve a good deal of legwork. Hopefully, someone would recognise the people in their photographs and point them in the right direction.

Dora sipped her lemonade. “I could live here forever,” she murmured.

Aud smiled at her friend. “It's not only beautiful but there’s an air of ‘overwhelming relaxedness’. It says that here in the guidebook and I fully agree with it.”

A second later, Audrey’s reached out and grabbed her friend's hand.

“Oh! My God, don’t turn around,” she whispered, looking over Dora’s shoulder at a couple strolling down the street.

A split second later Aud’s gaze fixed on Dora. “You can look now,” she muttered.

At first glance, it was an attractive couple chatting amicably as they strolled past the cafe. But a second later Dora realised it was their escaped vicar, casually dressed in cream slacks and pastel grey open-necked shirt.

The young woman on his arm had an elegant hourglass figure. She wore a long-sleeved cream silk blouse that looked expensive, as did her open-toed high-heeled mules. Her light blue pencil skirt was knee length with a provocative slit at the side. A dark chin-length bob accentuated her slender neck, which was further enhanced by a pair of dangly diamond earrings that glinted as the couple sauntered away.

Moments later they stopped further down the street, before entering a shop.

“Well, we’ve found one culprit. That was easier than I could've hoped for,” Audrey whispered.

“Should we go investigate?” asked Dora.

“Let's wait here awhile. We need to find out where he’s staying.”

Minutes later the couple came ambling back towards them arm in arm, carrying a narrow cloth bag containing a bottle.

Dora had already changed seats, so could watch the couple over the top of the menu she was pretending to read. This was of little consequence, due to the couple only having eyes for each other.

Rupert looked relaxed and happy, his partner laughing lightly at his comments before kissing his cheek.

“How is that possible?” Dora gasped after they had passed. “I don’t believe what I’ve just seen. That woman’s totally transformed, she looks ten—,” but she stopped speaking and turned to look at Aud before shaking her head and adding, “No— fifteen years younger,” she stated firmly.

Audrey’s face radiated bewilderment as she spoke. “Looks as though our Heather wasn’t so gray and plain after all.” She paused, “You follow them. I’ll pay the bill and catch up in a minute.”

Aud caught up with Dora standing a short distance from a small restaurant. “They've gone in there,” she said.

“OK! Let's have a bite to eat in here,” her partner suggested, pointing at an eatery. “If we sit in the window, we can keep watch.”

Ninety minutes later the runaways continued their stroll, which took them down a cobbled side street before they entered a small sun-bleached terraced house.

Downstairs drapes were open and with lights on it was easy to see what was going on inside. Heather had her arms draped around Rupert's neck as the couple kissed.

Dora glanced at Audrey. “So what’s the plan? Do we alert the authorities here or back in England?”

“Oh no, we sort the problem out here and now,” she replied, walking towards the door.

“But how do we do that?” Dora stammered.

“We want our money and I intend to get it,” Audrey said, banging the door with its polished brass knocker, before turning to her friend.

“They made fools of us, Dora, and put the fear of God in me. I intend to return that favour,” she said firmly, then pulled a shiny revolver from her handbag.

***Final part next week ;-)***