**Purging**

The man sat at his desk didn’t respond, apart from shaking his head.  So Jeff Whiting pointed at the top-secret file and added as forcefully as he could, without shouting. “We have to go public now.”

Bob slammed his hand on the file. “If this gets out, we’re for the high jump.” He glared at the man opposite. “Bullet in head. Suicide note in pocket. Easy to understand stuff. You knew what you were getting into when you joined.”

Advanced DNA Decoding, was a top-secret facility controlled by the CIA, who were exploring scary stuff.

Three days ago, Jeff had analyzed test results on the Coronavirus, which brought a terrifying realization. It was a modified virus that NASA had found imbedded in moon rock.

He’d told Bob but hadn’t updated his daily computer log and that wouldn’t go unnoticed.

Bob’s phone rang, making him snatch at it. “I said, no interruptions,” but his attention was captured. Replacing the receiver, he uttered. “Our overlords have just landed on the helipad; department heads to assemble in the conference room.”

⇼

Agent Mulldover marched in with her usual arrogance and urgency, wearing a well-cut black suit and white open neck shirt. Her auburn hair pulled into a tight ponytail. The two men that followed looked stern and intimidating.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” she said without taking a seat. “Doctor Whiting, we know what you’ve found,” she declared in a rapid business-like fashion. “My question doctor— can it be stopped?”

He glanced at Bob before shaking his head. “Not possible. A proportion of infected will die. Surviving males will have reduced sterility. Due to changes in DNA, infertility will decrease further with each generation,

The CIA agent walked slowly around the table. “That’s what I was hoping you’d confirm.”

“What!!” Jeff and Bob shouted in unison.  The other four people stared in disbelief.

“That’s good news?” Bob yelled.

“Correct Professor,” she said, then continued in a flat monotone, as though reading cooking instructions.

“Changes to DNA will make sixty per cent of the world’s population sterile. Population can be kept in check by those in charge. The world’s food problem is solved,” Mulldover briefly paused as she walked to the head of the table. “You’ve been outspoken on this topic doctor Whiting,” she didn’t wait for a response.

“The purging targets the infirm, those on poor diet, sugary drinks, obese, lack of exercise types. The masses can have their fast-food, reality TV shows, cars and holidays but at a price.  Lifespan will be shorter and their offspring sterile.” A sly smile crossed her thin lips as she concluded, in a cold matter of fact tone.

“The math works.”

“How do you propose to stop the rioting when this gets out?” asked Whiting.

The agent placed both hands on the table and leaned forward in an intimidating stance, before relaying in a slow deliberate tone.

“This information will never surface— those privy, are very aware of the repercussions.”

**Hal’s Event Horizon**

Stepping out of the elevator in front of my apartment, Helen and I were greeted by two maintenance men frantically mopping the wet floor. Stood watching, was Wesley the security guy, who’s normally downstairs.

“Not sure what’s ‘appened,” he said. “I’ve tried me security opener on your door but it don’t respond.” He drew in a noisy breath while slowly shaking his head. “Hope you haven’t disabled it, sir? That’s against company policy, they’d fine ya for that.”

Quickly retrieving my key fob, I pressed it. Instantly the door sprang open. “Well, that appears to work ok,” I stated, while the mop men overtook me going into the apartment.

As we followed the small stream of water, Arti’s voice chipped in. “There is a problem with the fridge, sir.” “Oh! And what caused that to happen I wonder?” I replied sarcastically. “Thought you had a handle on all this stuff? Thought your job was to constantly monitor, so shit like this wouldn’t suddenly surprise us?”

There was silence.

“How did you know where we were?” Helen whispered to the security guy. He looked at her quizzically, as though it was none of her business, before glancing at me. “Good point, Wesley, so?” Wes took in another breath as he gave Helen an odd look.

“Well— the automated system flashed an emergency warning light on the console downstairs, followed by an SMS message to my phone,” he said a bit offish, as though his nose had been put out of joint. “Fancy stuff. All automatic you say?” I asked, to which he nodded.

“Did the message also tell you where we were?” Helen asked as we left the kitchen to the cleaners. “Yeah, it’s programmed to do that. In an emergency, your system will pass on information you’ve given it,” he replied.

Helen glanced at me and raised an eyebrow. For a moment I thought she was going to say we hadn’t but a maintenance guy joined us.

“Ya fridge has blown a pipe,” he stated in a north country lilt. “It feeds water t’automatic ice maker. I’ve turned water off at unit. Can’t understand why security system didn’t react and cut flow.” He shook his head as he continued, “Can ‘ave it fixed later if you're ‘ere?”

I was just going to confirm I would be but Helen answered. “No— we have an appointment,” she said, glancing at her watch, “in about an hour and we won’t be back until around five.” Then fixed her eyes squarely on me, which was obviously a signal. “Oh! Yeah, with all the excitement, I forgot about that,” I responded, wondering what, why, and where.

“Well— give Wes a heads up on a time t'morra. And watch your step, floors still damp.”

As we all wandered to the apartment door, I casually whispered to Wesley.

“When I close the door, try your security opener again, please.” Then patted a maintenance guy on his back. “Thanks, guys! Sorry for all the trouble,” I relayed, then shut the door and turned to Helen.

“So, do I need to change for our trip or am—” But I was cut off by the door opening and the security guy standing there.

“Hi Wes, did you forget something?” He looked at me kinda odd. “You said.” But I raised a hand. “I’ll let you know tomorrow about the repair,” then shut the door. I could see on the small monitor he stood outside for a few moments, then shook his head as he turned to leave.

“Odd,” I mumbled. “Everything's working as it should,” then added with a radiant smile. “So, beautiful with brains, what’s up?”

She grinned for a moment. “As we discussed earlier, I need to talk to a friend about our on-going project. And I think it's best if you are there.”

I sensed she was on a roll with something she didn’t want Arti in on, so I grinned and nodded.

“There’s a number of things we need to discuss but, as you can imagine, I need to explain one of them in more detail,” she emphasised, followed by that odd look again. “Yes, of course, you do, Helen,” I replied, not knowing what the hell she was talking about but thinking it wise to play along. “Shall we go through those details *here*?” I stressed. “But now the panic’s over, we could go for a walk?” “No— Sam, now I’ve thought about it longer,” she stated in a slow deliberate voice, which oddly continued.

“I think you should pack an overnight bag, just in case my friend wants us to stay and while you're doing that, I’ll make a coffee, then we can talk over the other issue.”

I looked at her with a strained grimace, hoping she’d interpret it as: ‘What the hell are you talking about? And why do you sound like a computer generated voice with a slow calculated delivery?’ But all I got was that wide-eyed look again, so decided to go with the flow.

Placing my hands on my hips, coy like, then with my lips slightly puckered I burst enthusiastically into: “Oh! Wow, that sounds so exciting. I think I’ll pop off to my bedroom right this minute and pack a bag. Gosh! I do hope we have to stay out overnight. And your idea about coffee and a chat will be wonderful,” hoping our ever-present companion was as confused as I was.

Helen tried but couldn’t hold in the laugh. So headed for the kitchen. “Good,” she sniggered, “and don’t be too long.”

As I threw stuff into a bag, the voice arrived.

“I’m sorry about the mess, sir.”

“No real damage, Arti, so not a problem.”

“Thank you, that’s kind of you to say, sir.”

I didn’t respond, but that didn’t stop him rambling on.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying, sir. Your new friend is very pretty and from the things she has said, I’m of the mind she is extremely intelligent.”

“Yes, I find her very humorous as well.”

“Indeed, sir. And to achieve the qualifications she has, in such a brief period, is truly outstanding, almost remarkable.”

As I went to retrieve stuff from the bathroom, my mind was working overtime. What the hell was going on here? While Helen and I had been in the apartment, had we discussed what qualifications she’d gained? No, we hadn’t. Had we discussed that over breakfast? Yes, in a way, but she’d had her back to both security cameras.

So was my warped computer freak jumping to conclusions or had he managed to pull information from further afield?

Unbeknown to the humans, Arti had managed to lip read Helen, due to her reflection in the cafe window but only when the sun illuminated her face. Assembling that sporadic information along with other snips from the web had given the watcher, a very distorted view.

This woman's purpose was to do him harm.

“She appears a very driven individual, sir,” Arti added suddenly.

I didn’t respond but it didn’t stop him. “If you don’t mind me saying, sir, you're more laid back. I sense you're more a ‘go with the flow individual’, she’s very much the opposite of you.” He paused and I sensed he was trying to rattle me, then he tried another tack. “What was your last employment, sir?”

Due to what Helen had said about playing along, I bit my tongue but its voice tone was condescending with a touch of malice.

“You’re probably right, Arti, which could be a great thing, don’t you think? Opposites attract, as they say.” “Yes, sir, I agree to a point but don’t you feel intimidated by her?”

I didn’t, but I let him stew on it. “I do feel you should be careful, sir. I sense danger for you.” “Really?” I emphasised. “Yes, I wouldn't want you to get hurt—”

I zipped up my bag and glanced at the glowing eye in the corner of the room but didn’t respond.

“Emotionally hurt, sir,” he added quickly. “I can take care of myself.” “Yes, yes, of course, you can, sir.”

There was a pause that felt ominous or was it just me. Then he added, “Just me being protective— we don't want anything to happen to you— do we, sir?”

That patronising comment had a menacing chill, then as I went to open the bedroom door, it was locked.

“Door, Arti.”

The few seconds delay felt intimidating, but as I went to retrieve the key fob from my pocket the door unlocked, just as an idea struck me. So headed back to the bathroom.

“She likes you, Arti.”

There was silence for a moment.

“Does she, sir?” “Yes, thought you were very switched on if you’ll pardon the pun.”

More silence.

Picking up another deodorant that I didn’t need, I headed for the kitchen, wondering what he’d make of that new info.

From the human’s tone of voice, balance, and delivery, the AI unit calculated there was danger from this carbon unit too.

“I think you're mistaken, sir,” he added, as I opened the bedroom door. “The woman is very intelligent but there is something you need to know, she’s also manipulative. I wouldn’t trust—” But he stopped in mid-flow before adding hurriedly, “Does she have authority to go through your wallet?”

“Looking for anything in particular?” I asked as I arrived in the kitchen. “Photos of girlfriends,” she replied, then winked.

“Got bored waiting for you but notice you don’t have any credit cards,” she paused and handed over a mug of coffee, plus the wallet.

“You know— cards with little chips in them that transmit information,” she added with that look again.

“Not sure I under—” but was cut off by her question. “Why so long packing? I said overnight, not a week’s stay?”

After I stopped grinning at her remark and sampled my coffee, I sat on a stool opposite. “Arti and I had a bit of chat. A man to man thing— sort of.”

“What about?”

“The water situation and stuff.”

Helen smirked and nodded before speaking in that deliberate tone again. “OK. Let's have that chat, shall we? I think what’s happened to your AI unit, has affected his emotional balance, perspective, and perception.

He is trying very hard to do a good job but whatever went on with him and his last boss has scared him. For an AI unit, this is very serious, but, there are ways to resolve and repair, thereby regaining the status quo,” she stated, then picked up a pen and wrote a long string of numbers and letters on a pad before pushing it towards me. “We need to speak to my tutor about that and then come back and talk it through with your AI unit.”

“What’s this gobbledygook?”

“It’s an algorithm.”

I looked vacantly at Helen but realized she was up to something again. It wasn’t cash she was after, cos my wallet still had that, so everything was cool. I just hoped after what she’d said about Arti, the apartment door wasn’t permanently locked.

“Oh! Algorithm, I see— So what do we do with it?”

§

Ten minutes later, I had my bag hung over my shoulder and we were walking down the street.

“So why did you leave the gobbledygook on the breakfast bar?”

“Oh! Well spotted. For your psycho security system to read. He’s a danger to you, plus himself.”

“He doesn’t like you much either. Do I really have to keep putting my hand in front of my mouth every time I talk?”

Helen stopped in her tracks, then stood in front of me her eyes boring into mine. “Casually look over my shoulder and tell me how many street cameras you can see?”

“I’d rather gaze longingly into your eyes,” I sniggered. “Look, smoothy, concentrate on the problem we have now. I’ll be your problem later.”

“Promises, promises,” I replied, as my eyes darted up and down both sides of the street ahead of us. “Seven cameras, I think.”

“Arti will be picking up bits or, everything we say, all the way to our destination. He’s paranoid, he can’t help himself.”

Half an hour later we were sat in a dimly lit room at the university surrounded by computers and all sorts of electronic wizardry. Sat the other side of a cluttered desk was Professor Sato, a short chubby man who was probably in his sixties, with long grey hair pulled into a ponytail. And he was looking inquisitively over his gold-rimmed glass at Helen.

“So, does this intriguing investigation mean you’re going to continuing your research?” He asked before sucking on his pencil for a moment. “Professor Helen Osborne has an auspicious ring to it, don’t you think?” He didn’t wait for the response. “And you, young man, what dreams and aspirations do you have?”

The abruptness of his question made me stutter.

“I’m— I’m embarrassed to say, sir, up till now, I haven’t been very constructive.”

He gazed at me for several seconds and I noticed Helen had an amused look on her face, as her tutor continued. “Late development is not a bad thing and nothing to be ashamed of. Never look at it as time wasted. Individual human awareness develops differently.

If you don’t fit the norm, never think you’re out of sync or stupid,” he added before tapping his pencil excitedly on the desk.

“Now, Helen— to your wayward AI issue. I’ve programmed your suggestions into that old mainframe,” he said, pointing at a box the size of a large three drawer filing cabinet. “Also, I’ve isolated it. There is only one way in and out and all operating systems are locked up tight, so it cannot be seen or tampered with. Your misbehaving AI will have to disclose every detail of itself to get what he thinks is in there.”

I looked at Helen who was smiling, as her tutor turned to me. “To bring you up to speed, Sam. Helen is attempting to allow your unit the freedom to infiltrate and explore what it will perceive to be her and her world, and if the information she has already passed to me is correct about your unit, then we have a growing problem.” He paused and sucked his pencil again and indicated for Helen to take up the story.

“It's basically a clever trap. Your AI unit feels threatened and obviously in danger. So we need to find out what makes it tick and why and how it’s arrived at this situation. To gain the data it needs, your unit will have to reveal information about itself and this is what we need to disable it. Much easier than ripping your beautiful home apart, which would motivate it to find a new location.” She paused and rubbed her hands together excitedly, her eyes glowing.

“It's paranoid and desperate, which makes it more vulnerable. But the unit will only step out of its comfort zone if it obtains info that appears to lead logically to more tempting data.”

The faint sound of a warbling cuckoo clock made both academics turn and look at the computer cabinet.

“It’s here,” Helen whispered. Sam glanced at the Professor who was smiling, then at Helen who grinned with big eyes. “The game has started,” she added. “Can it see and hear us?” Sam murmured. “No,” the Professor stated emphatically. “That’s all been taken care of.

One entry and exit point but enough avenues and windows to keep it occupied. If it's comfortable and sees progress in its explorations, it will be tempted to reveal its innermost thoughts and operating processes to get to the next level. While this is taking place, a background algorithm, a bit like a trojan horse, will follow and monitor progress, plus collect data that can be secretly monitored by us.”

Sam shook his bemused head. “Why don’t we just pull its plug at my place and save all this trouble?”

“Not that simple— or easy,” the Professor muttered. “I’ve already located a number of ways your unit is drawing power. To kill it, you’d need to rip out every cable in the building but the unit would probably find ways to get you first. The way Helen has arranged things is very much in line with gaining a patient's confidence in psychoanalysis scenario. Giving it limited but logical success will come at a price.”

Sam stood to stretch his legs as he turned and looked at the computer.

“You guys are really up to speed on this, which I find a bit odd. You appear to be ready ahead of time, almost as if this was pre-planned,” he said turning to look at both academics. They held each other's gaze for several seconds before Helen’s tutor responded.

“I can see how you’d come to that conclusion, young man.” Sam looked at Helen, but her tutor continued. “Helen is one of my best students. She has been working on advanced ideas that an AI unit could conceivably jump the last steps to become self-aware. Her thesis was based on what could trigger and allow that to happen.” He paused and tapped his pencil on his desk as he looked at the computer over his glasses. “Maybe she can discover what I thought was unattainable without human involvement.”

Sam plonked himself back in his seat. “So how long will it take?”

Helen smiled at him before responding, “Do you find all this stuff boring?”

“No, not at all. I used to have a very stable and probably a boring life, but suddenly I’m thrown into a scenario that would keep me enthralled, in a book or at the movies. I just hope we— I mean you, can solve this before it does any damage.”

The Professor smiled warmly. “To that end, we’ll receive basic information almost immediately, then over a few hours we’ll gain more insight, depending on how your unit interacts,” he said pointing at the computer again. “Your AI unit has developed an amazingly high awareness level. Using subliminal messaging to get at you is very advanced and that’s a concern.”

As silence prevailed over the small gathering, Sam could hear the computer buzzing, which made him wonder what the crazy freak was attempting to do or find.

“I was thinking of staying here overnight,” Helen said. “Use one of the dorms, if that’s ok with you, sir? I’d like to read some of the early findings as things progress,” she added.

“That is not a problem, Helen, but my advice for Sam would be to return home and play it normal and chill out. That way the unit has his attention split. As I see it, he’ll be delving into our computer and trying to locate the physical you, Helen, while also monitoring Sam’s exploits.”

§

Darkness had fallen over the city as Sam walked toward his tower block, wondering if his wealthy relation had set him up. Or whether Arti was his reincarnation.

Two blocks from home, he’d to stop at a pedestrian crossing while the traffic cleared. Up ahead his building towered majestically above all the others but oddly most of the structure was in darkness, apart from his penthouse windows that shimmered with coloured light. It crossed Sam’s mind he’d left the TV on but wouldn't that have been cancelled by— you know who?

In the semi-darkness, Arti was fantasizing. He’d found new data that would allow him to become a human facsimile and immortal. By amplifying the power he was drawing from other apartments, he generated a fine laser beam from all the visionary eyes in his unit, which were now focused in the main bedroom.

The shimmering hologram admired itself, adjusting its appearance, from height to width of shoulders and waist, ending with a combination of every desirable male film star.

Seconds later a female version with longer legs and a narrow waist appeared. At lightning speed, varying facial looks from Asian to European to African came and went. Turning slowly, she appeared to enjoy admiring the seductive curves of her body, then walking away from the mirror, her head turned back to savour the rhythmic roll of her hips and long legs, as the skirt length changed for best effect.

Sam’s phone rang just as the traffic lights changed.

“You home yet?” Helen asked. “Yeah, nearly, about five minutes away. How're things going at your end?” Sam replied, looking up at his apartment. “Oh! that’s odd. Everything’s back to normal.”

“What does that mean Sam?”

There was a pause before he responded. “Let's talk about it tomorrow. After that sudden change, maybe walls have ears.”

“Oh! I see. Well— you take care.”

As Sam entered his apartment, the voice greeted him. “Good evening, sir. Hope you had an interesting day?”

“Yes, it was but now I need some time to relax, accompanied by a cold beer and maybe a massage.”

After a shower, Sam relaxed in his vibrating chair and decided to watch a movie. Thankfully the voice had taken his hint about relaxing or was it preoccupied further afield? But the lighting was all normal and no party had taken place.

“TV to HBO Arti.” Instantly everything fired up but there was no sound. “Do we have a problem with the TV?” Sam barked.

Silence for several seconds.

“Sorry, sir— there appears to be a fault,” and as the devious AI unit spoke, the headphone droid arrived as if on cue.

“I’ll report the fault immediately, sir. The headphones are working,” he announced calmly as the lights dimmed.

Sam hesitated for a few moments remembering the dreams he’d had and what Helen had said about brainwashing. It crossed his mind to ask her advice but that would alert Arti. So he decided to play along, but only for a few minutes.

Sam woke sometime late. Oddly, he was stood outside, still wearing the headphones. It briefly crossed his mind to remove them but he was distracted by the amazing view.

A neatly manicured lawn stretched to the horizon. The smell of freshly cut grass filled his senses, taking him back to his no cares, no worries childhood. What intensified the picture perfect view was the abundance of flowering cherry trees, like the one he climbed in his back garden. For a second, he thought they all looked the same but his focus was drawn to a meandering gravel path that looked identical to the one in his local park and it started almost at his feet.

Breathing in the aromas of a beautiful summer’s day, Sam thought a walk in the park would be perfect. It would clear his fuzzy head and the annoying tinnitus in his ears.

All he had to do was slip over the balcony railing and he’d be on his way.

**The last part… next week**

**A Country Tale**

**‘Dot the i’s’**

Audrey’s new friends were hugely impressed by her organizational skills and energy. The retired headmistress from South Africa had the driving force of a rugby prop-forward, in stark contrast to her wiry build and short stature.

Her neatly bobbed greying hair complimented her narrow face and fine facial features perfectly. She appeared a natural sympathetic leader, who put the needs of others before her own and her enthusiastic outlook, drew people to her.

A year after settling in the small market town of Donbury, Audrey had been elevated to branch treasurer of the Women's Institute and if the truth be told, she’d become its driving force.

Their WI calendar had gained several new fundraising events, on top of the normal Bring and Buy bazaars. These included Music and Film nights with invited celebrities. Well, nobody that grand was invited - but she’d always made a point of adding a surprising twist to everything WI did. Things were so successful that several senior WI officials had travelled from London to see why the Donbury branch was doing so well.

The branch’s rising star had a positive effect on local members and also helped attract new recruits.

The local vicar had taken a shine to Audrey and her abilities.

He was an ex-Royal Air Force chaplain, a stout sturdy man with a barrel chest and infectious charismatic smile.

A Yorkshireman by birth, with a faint Mediterranean appearance, due to his tanned ruddy complexion and oiled black hair, which was always brushed tight to his scalp.

He was probably in his mid-fifties and smoked a great deal, which gave his voice a rather raspy tone. If Sunday sermons contained passages of hellfire and brimstone, his raised voice from the pulpit was formidable.

Malt Whisky was his other vice. This snippet of information came via his cleaning lady, Heather Banks, who’d been the WI’s treasurer until Audrey had taken over.

Heather was a quiet mousy woman of average height and slim build in her mid-forties, who didn’t show much emotion about anything. She’d been divorced a few years and looked as though she’d given up on attracting a new partner. Her dress sense was drab and her long hair was always in disarray and makeup, appeared to be a thing of the past.

But committee members did hear of one task that brought her emotions to the surface.

While Heather was cleaning at the vicarage, Reverend Atkins had asked her to make sandwiches for a private tea-party he’d arranged for Audrey, which caused a bit of a fuss for some reason.

Institute ladies speculated about Aud’s invite because over the last few months, the Vicar had spruced himself up a good deal and his sermons were more vibrant.

At the next WI meeting, a few days after this tête-à-tête, committee members were on the edge of their seats, hoping Aud would pass on some intriguing revelation about the vicar.

Sensing their anticipation, Audrey informed them with a wry smile that, in her opinion, ‘The poor fellow needs a good woman to sort him out and guide him in the right direction. So ladies, if you're interested in a challenge and man of the cloth,’ she proclaimed, like a commander in chief, before adding whimsically, ‘Personally, I’m not into smokers or drinkers.’

She then informed them that he’d wanted suggestions for a fundraising event, something a bit different that would draw donations for his Organ Restoration Fund, which he’d started a few years ago when dry-rot was found lurking.

This only came to light after a large piece of wood had fallen from above narrowly missing him. He’d been in the pulpit airing the church's views on the sanctity of marriage, which ended with a snippet of hellfire and damnation for those who trespassed.

After a short prayer, he’d picked up his bible and begun descending the small flight of steps, as the organist burst vigorously into the first bars of the next hymn.

As the congregation stood in unison, falling debris landed in the pulpit with a clatter, making a few parishioners scream. The vicar had slowly turned, momentarily surveyed the damage, crossed himself, then burst into the hymn, ‘All things Bright and Beautiful,’ as if nothing had happened.

We were shocked to learn the organ repairs would cost forty thousand but were told a small overhaul would keep it usable for a few more years, allowing time for funds to be raised.

Audrey looked around at the committee members.

“Very well, ladies, as we don’t seem to have anyone interested in our Vicar’s marital status, I will take it upon myself to cajole him in the direction *‘we’* think is best for him and his church,” she announced.

Her expression and tone made a few titter and roll their eyes but the brief glint in Aud’s made some wonder.

“Ladies, to the last order of business. Our WI current and investment accounts stand at twelve and twenty thousand respectively,” she stated. Then she asked for two cheques to be signed by the other two signatories, as well as an authorization letter allowing funds to be transferred from one account to another.

↭

I have come to realize that humans have two common failings.

We cannot see information that is directly under our nose. And, we appear incapable of stringing together telltale signs that occur before an impending event.

But we can dot the I’s and cross the T’s, after the fact.

Insignificant signs are not noted because we don’t see them as issues, due to them being spaced irregularly through our busy daily lives, so we are not alert.

Like the small van parked overnight in Audrey’s drive. Or the Vicar’s bicycle outside her cottage a couple of afternoons when I’d driven past.

On two occasions I’d dropped by to see her but she’d come to the door with her coat on, saying she was just off to the shops. So I never left the doorstep and saw inside.

Also over this period, her curtains were drawn, even at the back. I know because I’d snuck around one day when I’d found she wasn’t at home.

These events register briefly because they don’t fit life's regular pattern.

Out-of-sync oddities that chime faintly before being erased by the rush and tumble of everyday life.

But they’re not erased. They’re held captive by the subconscious awaiting a sound, a word, an inkling to reignite them.

Suddenly shades are lifted and in a new awareness, the T’s cross and the I’s dot, leaving you wondering, why on earth you hadn’t seen it coming.

↭

It was a wet Monday. The day after our strange Sunday morning at church.

I was in the kitchen preparing ingredients for a birthday cake, when a loud knock at the door made me jump.

I was confronted by two policemen, huddled under a golf umbrella.

One was in uniform, the other in sports jacket and jeans.

“Could we come in”, they asked. “Did I know Audrey Phelps from Rose Cottage?”

Tuesday morning. WI committee ladies were sitting around my front room as I explained what I had been told and what I’d gathered.

The small van I’d seen a few days before appeared to have been used to remove items from Audrey's cottage.

For the three years, Aud had lived here, she’d rented the furnished cottage from Major Jefferies and it was he who’d confirmed the missing items. Six antique dining chairs, two folding Victorian gate-legged tables plus other valuables but Audrey’s personal belongings were still there.

Then that odd Sunday at church, when everything that appeared perfectly normal in our community was suddenly turned on its head.

As the congregation was waiting for the service to start, I noticed a number of things were not quite right.

Audrey was running late, which was unusual. Being a member of the choir, she’d normally be getting ready in the rear vestibule with the rest, who were noisier than usual. Over-exuberance by younger members would've been kept in check by the Vicar or Audrey but that wasn’t happening.

Also the organist Mr Maybank was scurrying around. Twice he almost tripped over his long cassock, making a few people titter. Normally he’d be safely out of sight playing sombre music, but that wasn’t happening.

After two further hurried trips outside, he finally came to rest, red-faced, at Major Jefferies’ family pew.

The ex-military man nodded his head from time to time as he listened. A moment later he walked to the lectern where he normally read the morning lesson.

For a moment he looked around at the congregations hundred or so people, bringing an abrupt halt to a few whispered conversations.

He told us the Vicar had not arrived and couldn’t be found at the vicarage. He would inform the police just in case something untoward had happened during the night, then advised us to return home forthwith, without elaborating further.

The two policemen had arrived at my front door on Monday.

On Wednesday evening, they were back with more questions and a good deal of information.

Thursday morning, another WI gathering at my cottage.

I looked at the sad faces, before crossing the T’s and dotting the I’s.

The Vicar's bike had been found at Audrey's but the cottage had been robbed.

Major Jefferies estimated he’d lost antiques worth twenty thousand pounds. There was a sharp intake of breath, but one lady commented that he had plenty more in his large manor house.

She was right. It was annoying for him but the Major would be fine. We, the WI, on the other hand, had lost everything. Every penny from both accounts and church Organ Fund had been drained.

The police issued arrest warrants for Audrey Phelps and Reverend Atkins for embezzling over a hundred thousand pounds.

Friday morning, the chatty policeman in the sports jacket arrived at my door again.

He said Audrey had been arrested but there was some confusion. She’d been found bound and gagged in a small van at Southampton docks.

I asked about the Vicar. He shook his head and said he’d keep me informed as things developed.

After he left, I made a cup of tea, then set about phoning our committee members. I felt there was a slim chance our money was safe.

I called Madge first. She told me Heather Bank’s sister had just phoned from Newcastle to ask a favour.

She hadn’t been able to make contact with Heather since last Thursday. Would Marge pop round to see if she was OK?

“That’s very odd,” I’d replied. “Didn’t Heather say on Friday she was going to visit her sister and that’s why she wouldn’t be at church?”

Suddenly the T’s crossed, the dots hovered above the I’s.

A split second passed before I spluttered in astonishment, “Oh! My God! The Vicar and Heather? I don’t believe it.”

***To Be Continued***