**Pen-Drive Encounter**

Due to Courtney’s tight schedule, she’d flown from London to Birmingham, before immediately driving sixty miles to her final destination in a rented car, which reeked of body odour and stale tobacco.

Later that morning, she presented an advertising campaign for a quick snack product the Pork Pie Company was planning to launch. Unfortunately, Courtney was coerced into taking a factory tour but the place was filthy and the warm putrid smell that hung everywhere, made her nauseous. It was like walking through an open sewer.

At that point, she decided. Her clothes would be dry-cleaned as soon as she returned to the civilized world.

It wasn’t as though she was fussy or particular. Mind you— if you listened to the women at work, she was ‘stuck up’, ‘a toffee-nosed princess’, and was ‘starring in her own movie.’

Courtney realized they were jealous of her looks, poise, and intelligence. Everyone always commented on her honey-blonde hair, because of its beautiful colour and light natural curl.

In sensible heels, she stood five ten, which made her slender legs look a little more attractive than if she was wearing flats. Her size eight dress emphasised her elegant feminine shape and ‘exquisite firm breasts’— a comment made by a guy in a pub last week, as he reached out to caress them.

She’d quickly sidestepped, then told him what she thought but his remark did bring a warm glow as she sashayed away.

In Courtney’s egotistical world, she was a focal point, which was why the women at work made comments about her. In her mind, they were lucky to have someone close at hand to look up to.

With her Pork Pie task successfully completed, Courtney returned the car to its drop off point at the airport. As she struggled out of the low driving seat, Courtney noticed a short fat man leering at her. The look she returned made him turn on his heels and scurry away.

Once out of the vehicle, she pulled her wayward skirt to a respectful level before boarding a shuttle bus, which was filthier than this morning’s death trap.

At the check-in desk, she handed over her flight details to a female who was of a similar age but looked several years older. And who wasn’t a natural blonde, Courtney could quite clearly see the roots of her hair.

Why the woman kept smiling she couldn’t imagine, her teeth were terribly stained but what made Courtney shudder were the woman’s badly bitten fingernails. She was tempted to advise of medication that would cure the habit but distracted herself by re-checking her pockets to make sure she’d retrieved her phone from the hire car.

She had, so continued to search for the next most valuable item. After a few moments, she realized her pen-drive was missing. This held the pie presentation and also—

Her train of thought was broken by the check-in woman, who handed over her ticket.

“Your flight’s been delayed forty-five minutes. Please go to Gate Four when called.”

Courtney moved away from the counter and re-checked her pockets, before rummaging through her genuine Louis Vuitton handbag— but annoyingly didn’t find what she was looking for.

Oh dear, she thought. What if it’s still in the Pie Company’s computer?

A tendril of anxiety began to unnerve her. There were personal things on the drive she’d prefer other people not to see.

To appease her mind, she reasoned that most people would not snoop— her name was neatly engraved on the device. Then wondered, had the pen-drive fallen out of her pocket or bag during the car journey?

§

Ten minutes late Courtney was back at the rental depot but couldn’t see the vehicle, so went to the office.

A surly overweight woman begrudgingly called someone and gave the car’s registration number. She grunted a few times at what she was hearing before putting the phone down.

“It’s already been through cleaning bay— madam,” she advised from the corner of her lopsided mouth. “So can’t do anything for ya. You’d better check over there,” she added pointed to a large hut at the end of the parking lot.

Courtney took off at a brisk walk.

One scruffy individual was vacuuming out a car, while his helper, in ripped jeans and a dirty t-shirt, cleaned its windows at a snail’s pace.

“I think I've left something in my car,” she said hurriedly, arriving at the youth’s side.

“What?” he snapped, then removed his headphones.

Courtney quickly repeated her question and added, “It was a silver vehicle.”

His eyes looked skyward as he shook his head but didn’t comment.

“The woman in the office has just spoken to someone over here,” Courtney explained.

He gave a nod and pointed a thumb at a plywood door behind him.

Courtney knocked and opened it without waiting.

The fat man she’d seen earlier was sat at a desk, a cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. Ash dusted the desk in front of him. Squashed discarded butts lay scattered across the floor.

He seemed to be reading a newspaper but his watery eyes appeared half-closed.

“I believe I left something—” she announced but stopped because he turned his head and eyed her with a lurid gaze.

Noticing her distaste, his thin lips curled into a sneer, as he indicated to a small opaque plastic bag in front of him.

To retrieve it, she had to lean over the desk as his bulbous eyes ogled her bottom.

Snatching up the bag, feeling the pen-drive within, she turned and left without a word. ‘If the ignorant filthy pig couldn't treat her in a civil manner,’ she could reciprocate.

Back on the bus, she opened the plastic bag to find not one but two pen-drives— her slate grey gadget with CIM engraved neatly on its side and a dirty cream one with DUM scratched into the plastic.

How ridiculous, she thought. Don’t parents think before giving their children names? Courtney glanced quickly at her watch— there was no time to go back.

She’d contemplated giving it to the bus driver but couldn’t bring herself to do so. He’d a strange design cut into his hair and a tattoo that crept up from beneath his dirty shirt collar. What made her shiver was the black disc pressed into his earlobe, stretching the flesh so much it looked painful.

So she decided to post the pen-drive from work.

§

As the following Friday wound down, Courtney patted herself on the back for a successful week's work. She’d had to pull a couple of people into line. This wasn’t her job but they’d needed to be told, which brought the usual looks and whispered remarks.

Saturday night had gone very well; a couple of men had bought her drinks and tried to entertain her. She’d giggled and laughed in all the right places and they’d happily paid for her expensive cocktails.

Early Sunday morning, she completed her rigorous exercise routine, this was to make sure she didn’t end up like most women in her office, with things sagging and dropping.

Refreshed and showered, it was time to glance through her emails, before relaxing with the Sunday papers.

As usual, these had been delivered along with a carton of fresh milk by her faithful slave, who lived just across the street.

William was a handsome seventeen-year-old who was infatuated with her and besotted by her breasts. His eyes would always wander from her face; especially if she was wearing a low cut t-shirt.

After replying to her last email, she was wondering what to do for lunch when the phone rang. It was Jennifer Wiggins who worked for a travel agent in the same building as her. They’d been friends for a while and went out from time to time. She was a couple of years older and looked it due to her being a little out of sync with fashion, but Courtney made allowances.

“Good morning, are you free for lunch? I’m meeting two friends at twelve-thirty at the Mucky Duck.”

With that settled Courtney opened her desk drawer and saw the pen-drive she’d forgotten to return to the car hire company.

Tumbling the plastic item over in her fingers, she remembered the anxiety that had welled up on thinking she’d lost hers— but she was intrigued.

Intuition told her to go no further but suddenly curiosity overwhelmed and knowing she shouldn’t, the gadget was connected to her computer.

Moments later, Courtney was viewing part of someone’s life— a stranger from out there in the world at large, who didn’t know she was looking over his shoulder. A voyeur sampling segments of his life— well, that’s what *she* thought.

Miss Prim and Proper had succumbed to temptation and was now being systematically set up by someone far more savvy and streetwise.

Courtney had stuck her nose in— that was her first mistake— and now she was about to make another very expensive one. By methodically opening three numbered files.

The first contained photos of a happy couple enjoying themselves at the seaside. This drew her on to open file two, which held four recent letters asking— no begging— Rosemary for forgiveness.

In Courtney’s mind, he’d obviously had an affair and was now trying to convince his ex-partner to give him a second chance.

‘Rosemary, don’t do it, he’s a scumbag,’ she whispered.

With trepidation coursing through her veins, Courtney closed the letters before opening file three as she wondered, ‘Did he win her back or lose her?’

The captivated voyeur’s heart sank suddenly— the file was empty. Even her computer reacted with disappointment, as several fuzzy lines darted across the screen.

That’s when Courtney glanced at the clock and realised she’d be late for lunch.

Abandoning her computer, she dashed to the bedroom and pulled on her new Diesel jeans and Republic t-shirt.

Walking towards the river, she admired her reflection in several shop windows. Satisfaction cocooned her. All was good with her and the world.

But that Karma pendulum was on the swing. In her haste, she’d forgotten to turn off her computer.

§

In the dingy makeshift office, a man rocked back and forth in his chair, as grubby fingers lazily thumbed through a well-worn copy of Playboy.

But a faint beeping sound from his desk drawer dissolved his sordid fantasies, as he sat forward to retrieve his laptop.

“Welcome home,” he mumbled, as his office door scraped open.

“You want fish and chips or a bloody burger?” the youth asked, toying with the black disc in his earlobe.

“Burger— now fuck off I’m busy.”

For the next twenty-five minutes, he concentrated on the job in hand, before sitting back and lighting another cigarette from the stub he was just about to discard.

“What’ll the bitch think now?” he chuckled, which brought on one of his coughing fits.

His face turned crimson and he spat a thick green glob into yesterday’s burger bag, he’d scooped up off the floor.

§

Courtney was disappointed there were no men in their small group. Normally she’d have contrived for one of them to pick up the tab but as Jennifer had paid last time, Courtney felt obliged to reciprocate. The other two made overtones but she made a point of saying that it was her treat.

With over ten thousand pounds in the bank and two credit cards that had limits of five thousand each, she had plenty of back up if needed.

“Sorry, madam, your card don’t work,” the young waitress stated flatly.

In Courtney's mind, their server had as much tact and personality as a wet paper bag.

“That’s not possible. There must be something wrong with your machine,” Courtney replied firmly, then laughed nervously as she looked at the others around the table.

“It’s worked for all my uver tables, Miss.”

“Don’t worry— I’ll pay,” Jen offered.

“No, no, try this card,” Courtney responded, passing over another to the waitress. A moment later, she handed it back and shook her head. “This don’t work eva.”

“Courtney, you need to call the card company,” one of the girls suggested. “They’ve probably put a stop on them for some reason.”

Courtney was feeling embarrassed and a little uncomfortable.

“Yes, I think I’d better do that. Could you wait until I sort this stupid problem out?” she said to the waitress, before walking outside with her phone.

Oddly she received the same response from both companies— she’d not long notified them that her cards had been stolen. Walking into the pub she managed to catch the waitress’s eye.

“How much is the bill?”

“Five quid short of a ‘undred and fifty, Miss.”

“What does that actually mean?” Courtney asked indignantly.

“145 to pay, *madam*.”

“Oh! Yes, of course— well, I don’t have that amount of cash. My bank is not far, I’ll be back in a few minutes,” she replied, but the waitress eyed her suspiciously before nodding her head.

The ATM didn’t dispense any money or return her card. It only printed a paper receipt saying to visit your local branch. Courtney then called Jennifer and apologised, asking her to pay and saying she’d return the cash on Monday morning.

On arriving home, Courtney logged into her bank to see if there was a message. There wasn’t but she almost had heart failure, because her account showed a zero balance.

An email in her Hotmail inbox marked ‘Lost RBS funds’ instantly caught her eye.

Half an hour after responding, the proverbial penny dropped.

This was followed by several threatening notes to the thief, which drew little or no response, ending with her screaming at the computer before bursting into tears.

An hour later she’d agreed to meet the perpetrator the following day, which meant catching the train to Birmingham, followed by a cab ride to the rental car company depot at the regional airport.

The unshaven man who’d taken her money sat in his dank makeshift office, smoking while flicking through the curled pages of a girly magazine.

Courtney hadn’t noticed on her first visit, but the office was plywood box with no windows and a rough concrete floor. There wasn’t room for a second chair - which was fine, as she preferred to stand.

As far as she could remember, he seemed to be wearing the same filthy clothes, which probably accounted for the terrible body odour that mingled with the smell of stale tobacco.

“You took all my money. I’ll report you to the police,” she blurted, holding back her tears.

“Wouldn’t do any good. They couldn’t prove a bloody thing. You simply authorized a transfer to an account in Africa,” he responded, eyeing her up and down as he picked his nose.

The captured residue was rolled between his finger and thumb before being flicked towards a rubbish bin.

“Want ya money back?” He asked flatly.

For several seconds, she looked at him as though he was stupid.

“Of course I do,” she replied indignantly.

He nodded his head thoughtfully for a moment, before swinging his chair around to face her. Lifting his extended beer gut, he struggled to undo his leather belt. Then he unzipped his flies, revealing his grimy underwear as he splayed his legs.

Courtney stared at him in disbelief for several seconds, before her thoughts were eclipsed by revulsion.

Noticing the change, he grinned and winked before dispatching a triumphant plume of smoke towards the ceiling.

Tears welled in Courtney's eyes. ‘If he thinks for one moment I’d—’ Suddenly bile reached the back of her throat making her gag— turning abruptly she walked out through the empty cleaning bay.

“I’ll give ‘alf ya money now— t’other lot on completion,” he taunted.

Fighting back the urge to vomit, Courtney stopped walking and stared vacantly across the lines of cars.

A moment later she turned slowly and walked back.

The computer screen was facing her, clearly showing her RBS account containing five thousand pounds.

Courtney glared at the fat repulsive man through tear-filled eyes, before reaching out and submissively closing the plywood door.

§

The following day her bank manager confirmed they’d been informed by both credit card companies about the loss. The oddity she’d encountered regarding her ATM card and bank account was puzzling.

He could only confirm that over the last ten working days her account had seen no activity whatsoever. Her balance had neither gone up or down.

On the way home, Courtney stopped off at the local store for milk and bumped into her slave, William.

He was engrossed in a magazine, which she imagined was full of naked girls but was actually computers.

“Hello, are you into those things?” she said, indicating to his reading material.

He smiled and raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I can hold my own, if you get my drift,” he replied, a little too suggestively for Courtney but she smiled back patronisingly.

“I seem to be having a problem with mine. Would you like to come and sort it out?”

Half an hour and two cans of Coke later; he stood up and walked into the kitchen.

“That was very odd,” William stated. “Your computer had been programmed with a bogus web page from your bank. Why would anybody bother to create an identical copy of your bank account, which could be manipulated by remote access? What would be the point in that?”

She closed her eyes and tried not to think about what she’d done.

“Courtney, how did that get on your computer?” William repeated.

“Probably from a pen-drive that wasn’t mine,” she replied sheepishly as her hands covered the small graze marks on her knees.

“Oh! I see,” he said slowly, smirking. “Well, one shouldn’t push other people’s things into sensitive places.”

Courtney’s eyes glistened. Her face suddenly turned parchment white. Without warning, she gagged, spun around and threw up in the kitchen sink.

William backed away in horror, but his astonished eyes never left the slumped figure clinging to the draining board.

She shivered then reacted to the acrid purge with a violent heave that made her fart.

Her slave’s eyes grew larger.

Courtney moaned and coarsely cleared her throat, then gobbed like a roadside labourer.

William glanced at the apartment door, as every erotic desire dissolved, an instant before he dashed silently to freedom.



As I approached the law firm’s entrance, the door burst open and a tall thin man strode out as though late for his next court appearance.  He was wearing a pinstripe suit, embellished with a black silk robe and a small white wig perched jauntily on his head. The two younger men behind looked stressed and weighed down by armfuls of files, decorated with pink ribbon.

I grabbed the door before it closed and entered a large room with very little in it. Several seats were arranged around a dark wood coffee table and stood opposite, was an occupied reception desk. To add to the stark solemnness, intimidating sullen faces stared down from dozens of gilt-framed portraits that adorned the wood panelled walls, of old men wearing wigs and gowns. Then the smell hit me— leather, polish and something I couldn’t define but it was old and medical.

I handed over my letter to the receptionist, a neatly dressed woman in a black suit and cream blouse, who looked me up and down before picking up her phone.  She gave my name and a reference number from my letter, then indicated to the seats.

“Please, you’ll be attended to in a moment.”

As I settled into the leather button-backed chair, I glanced out the window and what I saw made me smile.  The tall guy was now striding up the road, with his robe fluttering behind him like Batman on a quest, his overladen minions scampering in his wake.

A small mousy woman in a tweed suit and highly polished brown shoes suddenly arrived at my side.

She reminded me of Miss Tiggywinkle, her greying hair held in a tight bun by a small tortoiseshell clasp, which matched the half-moon glasses perched on the tip of her nose.

As we shook hands she gave a timid smile, like someone's grandma.  Fortunately, I was able to lip read her animated mouth movements, so understood her whispered request.

“Would you like tea, young man?”

I declined and then followed obediently behind, as we headed down the long corridor.

Her shoe heels made an odd rhythmic click on the polished marble floor.  It crossed my mind she had a gammy hip or knee because the beat was slightly off.

“You’ll have to speak up, he’s a little hard of hearing,” she said before knocking and opening the office door, we’d arrived at.

“Samuel Sutherland,” she announced.  “Your two o’clock appointment, my Lord,” then escorted me to a chair before whispering, “Are you sure about the tea, dear— it’s green?”

I declined again.  Then, couldn’t decide if the odd smell was mothballs or formaldehyde.

The frail old man sitting on the other side of the huge desk appeared overpowered by it. He also looked too small for his leather wingback chair and was dwarfed by a multitude of paperwork bundles that were stacked on his desk and on the floor.

For a few moments, he looked over his glasses at me, as he rocked back and forth ever so slightly.

I decided his grimace was due to his difficulty seeing me through his bushy eyebrows but then he gave a brief thin-lipped smile and shook his head.

“So you’re the black sheep of the Sutherland family?” he remarked, which was followed by a mixture of coughs and chuckles. He noted my puzzled expression, so referred back to his file.

“Grandfather, Edward Sutherland. Father, Paul. Mother, Nancy Watts.”

He looked at me expectantly with a grimace that showed his widely spaced teeth. I shrugged and replied, “Yeah, that’s my family but I’m the only child. You sure you’re not after my Uncle George's lot. There are six of them and I think they have a wayward child.”

He rocked back and forth again, then stopped and sucked air through his teeth noisily before he spoke.

“Knew Rupert, your Grandfather's brother. Odd man. Extraordinarily intelligent, almost to the point of madness. He was also a black sheep. Left England to seek his fortune in Mongolia but ended up in South America. God knows how he knew about you but we're informed he read a poem you wrote when you were six. Made him think you’d turn into something special.”

He stopped and tapped the file repeatedly with a finger.

“From our investigations, it appears he was wrong but that’s bye the bye.” He paused and started the rocking again, then took in more air.

“I have to inform you, young man. He’s bequeathed you a considerable amount of money that is held in trust but distribution of said funds comes with strict criteria,” he stated in one breath, then filled his lungs with an extended gasp. I thought he was about to have a seizure but thankfully he started tapping the file again, so there was obviously more to come. Then the office door opened and in came the mousy woman with a tray of tea things and this time I accepted her offer. My mouth and throat were dry and I felt oddly sick.

§

Half an hour later, my sinuses still filled with formaldehyde, I walked aimlessly down the street to the park. I had to spend a million pounds on a flat in London, not a penny more or less. My trust fund would pay all utility bills. I basically then had ten years to make something of myself by getting my poetry published or generate income by using the written word.

If I failed, the property would be sold and all the monies generated would be donated to charity.

The old guy had been straight to the point on every aspect, as though this was an everyday occurrence. “Notify my secretary when you have found a property,” he’d wheezed, before asking if I had a bank account. “Well, that’s very positive, the same bank as ours. Please give your details to Mrs Hardcourt. She’ll have documents for you to sign in a few days.”

I’d sat there stunned, just nodding and shaking my head. Then he was suddenly saying, “Well, keep my secretary informed of your progress, young man.”

With that, Mrs Tiggywinkle appeared again and escorted me to her office, where we exchanged phone numbers.

§

At 5.20 the following morning, the Band of Brothers Shelf Stackers sat in the coffee shop opposite the supermarket as I told the story for the fourth time.

“I suppose you’ll give up your frigging job then?” asked Rory the redhead Scot, who didn’t mince his words.

“Well, I reckon. I get a small allowance but it's double what I get paid now,” I replied.

“Can I take over your flat? It’ll save me using the bloody tube,” Rory added, to which I nodded as Max, the Geordie chipped in.

“Where ya gana look for a flat, ya lucky bugger?”

For a few months, I’d shared a flat with Max, until I’d found my quaint burger box. He was a nice guy who’d played drums in a group. They’d come south from Newcastle to make their fortunes but after six months he quit. Three months later, with a new drummer in place, the group became famous.

“Charlie’s woman works for a posh estate agents uptown, don’t she?” Rory asked.

“Jude’s only the bloody receptionist, you dickhead,” came the usual frank response.

“Yeah, but she might know stuff, you prat. Those tossers make big bucks selling them flats. She might get a kickback,” Rory added.

Charlie pondered that for a moment as he toyed with his goatee beard. “Yeah, I’ll give her a call later and let you guys know.”

Early the following evening, the shelf stackers and Jude met at a swish pub not far from where she worked. The venue was filled with horse brasses, wood beams, cigar smoke, and real ale, and as Rory put it, ‘Hoity-Toities’ everywhere but Charlie preferred calling ‘em flash bastards.

“I can have a word with my boss, I'm sure they'd have something that would suit,” she said after I’d repeated my story. “Gosh aren’t you a lucky bugger? Wish something like that would happen to me. It's like what happens in the movies, innit?”

§

A couple of days later I walked into the grand offices of Rigby, Rigby & Waterstaff Estate Agents & Auctioneers. Jude came over as I entered and whisked me upstairs to a plush office, filled with dozens of golf trophies and several oversized bottles of champagne, with ribbons wrapped around their necks.

“Come in, young man, come in. I’m Hubert Waterstaff,” a rotund gent offered, in a loud pompous tone. “Thank you, Jude, that will be all, unless Mr Sutherland would like tea?” he added, pointing at the chair I should sit in. I declined the tea, so he dismissively waved Jude away with the back of his hand.

“Now, I’m told you have a million to spend. Splendid. Have just the property for you. Overlooks the river, don’t you know,” he relayed in a chipped over-friendly manner.

“Capital place. A snip, if you can move quickly. Huge growth and resale potential, if you have a mind, in a couple of years.”

Then he omitted to tell me something that I found out later.

This ‘snip’ had been acquired nine months earlier by Waterstaff after the previous owner had thrown himself off the balcony.

Waterstaff had snapped up the property, hoping to make a quick killing, but couldn’t offload it due to the stigma of that event. The last owner must have been traumatized or completely out of his mind. It was obvious to those who investigated the incident that the deceased must have run at full tilt and launched himself into the sunset. On his rapid descent, he’d collided with a couple of obstructions, the last removing an arm and a leg, before propelling his remains away from the building. What was left of his battered body had splattered face down in the middle of a busy intersection at rush hour. The media had loved it of course and splashed it across TV screens nationwide.

“Nice enough bloke but kept himself to himself,” one neighbour told a reporter.

“Didn’t see much of him. Had the odd chat in the lift but he always seemed preoccupied,” said another.

“A quiet chap. Solitary. A bit paranoid I thought,” said a tall dark-haired woman with bright red lipstick, who kept fiddling with her hair.

The apartment block doorman didn’t have much good to say about the dead man either. “Seemed odd to me. Never made eye contact. Always looked around to see if anyone was watching him.”

Rigby senior had put up half the money to buy the property but after spending time there with his wife, he wanted the place offloaded.

It had a strange unnatural feel that unnerved him, it upset his wife so much, she was out of there after only twenty minutes.

§

“We’re asking one point two million,” Waterstaff said, handing over a glossy colour brochure. “But we could accommodate a slightly lower figure if you can move quickly.”

Fifteen minutes later I was whizzed to the river in a brand new black Bentley Continental.

Seven minutes after that, I opened the penthouse door.

I stood motionless, my astonished eyes taking in the opulence of this fully furnished property, which looked like something out of a high-class movie. Glass, gold, marble, more glass, exquisite wood furniture and were those Persian carpets?

“Sorry, old chap, but there’s no electric,” Waterstaff relayed. “If I’d had prior warning, could have sorted that out,” he added.

This was a blatant lie, he’d had three days but due to my excitement and sudden surprise on entering, I missed the error as Waterstaff continued. “But as you can see, old chap, huge windows, 180-degree view. No lights needed, what.” he boasted.

It was ultra ultra modern, a show unit that had been completed by a very high-end interior designer. The few bits of polished wood furniture in each room made it look more spacious and the curtains and soft furnishings looked brand new. In comparison, my place looked like an overfilled dumpster.

The interior was undeniably stylish, but it paled into insignificance when Waterstaff pressed a button that opened the sitting room curtains. The view of the river and London was amazing and it stretched in every direction.

“Gosh, that’s frigging stupendous,” I stuttered.

The sun had not long gone down and in the twilight, thousands of city lights glittered like diamonds as far as you could see. Waterstaff the salesman, had timed the showing to perfection and hooked the buyer, who was totally out of his depth.

§

Three weeks later I moved in. And this is where things started to become unnerving. I’d gone to pick up the keys but Waterstaff wasn’t in his office, there was just a note.

*Sorry, old chap, been called away. The electricity has been turned on, so Arti will keep you organized and I’ve left a couple of bottles of Bolly in the fridge. Have also arranged to have food supplied for your housewarming party from the local Chinese. All you have to do is call and they will rush a delicious piping hot meal to your door. Enjoy your new home. HW.’*

Jude said he’d gone sailing in the Caribbean for a month, so wouldn’t be available. And Arti was the Artificial Intelligence Security System that ran everything.

My mates helped me move my meagre rubbish in and the meal that arrived two hours later was indeed a feast.

Oddly, only minutes after they had all left, I met my equivalent of what sounded like HAL, which made me shiver. If you saw the film 2001 Space Odyssey, then you will instantly recall the slow patronizing voice.

‘Good evening— Sir, can I be of assistance?’ a condescending un-human male voice asked.

The tone was low and measured, making my neck hair bristle. “Am I to understand that Mr Jamison no longer resides here?”

“Correct,” I responded.

“He never mentioned he was thinking of selling. This is very upsetting. I must consider my position very carefully.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

There was silence for several seconds.

“Did Mr Jamison indicate where he was going? He left very suddenly via the balcony— We’d had words— I think he was a little upset but he—” I interrupted the voice. I’d found out from the doorman a few hours ago what had happened.

“No, the last owner didn’t say.”

“Are you sure?” The cold voice snapped.

“Whoa— hang on a minute— you're basically a servant that looks after the security systems and running other stuff.”

Silence again.

I’d thumbed through the ‘Security System’ instruction book or ‘Arti’ for short. That name was scribbled across the front cover, so I presumed the previous owner had reprogrammed the system. Like me, he was probably unnerved by the similarity to the space odyssey freak.

There was also a note written on the inside cover that made me wonder. ‘321-TROBA’. What was that all about?

My eyes briefly glance towards Arti’s eye. In the upper corner of every room, the system had a small dim glowing eye that also generated his voice. He basically ran the place— things like activating small robotic floor cleaners and polishers when no one was home.

Also, he switched things on and off when asked and sorted out what was needed to keep the fridge full.

Now that was something I needed to reprogram. Jamison’s tastes were ultra-healthy to the point of yuck. But the manual’s overriding declaration was: ‘If you don’t know or understand, just ask the system.’

The prolonged silence was suddenly broken by a dispassionate comment, with a hint of malice.

“You will come to realize— Sir, I am far more than a servant.” A longer silence followed.

“I take it by what you’re wearing, sir— you’ll be staying in this evening?”

I was just going to ask, ‘what frigging business is it of yours,’ when I heard the apartment door lock.

Sat alone in that abrupt confrontational silence, knowing my every move was being analysed, made me shudder. Then I wondered if I was safe here, which was creepy. So distracted myself by emptying the last couple of boxes I’d brought.

Ten minutes later I lay back in a vibrating massage chair to watch a movie on the huge TV.

“A light body massage Arti,” I said, thumbing through his instruction manual. “TV to HBO, if you can manage that?” I added sarcastically, then thought I should apologize but didn’t. Moments later the lights dimmed, the chair started trembling as the TV came on and the surround sound was theatre quality. Then I thought I heard a cupboard open. A moment later a robotic device the size of a small bucket dashed toward me, which made me sit up in defence. It stopped a foot my chair as Arti’s voice chipped in.

“Mr Jamison enjoyed wear headphones, said it added another dimension to the experience.” With that, the lid of the bucket lifted and up popped a chrome cradle holding two sets of expensive looking headphones. Arti was right, they did and soon I was completely taken over by the film.

The dream I had that night was all consuming and dashed me all over the place. I was James Bond, Casanova and several other heroes rolled into one.

I enjoyed last night so much, I stayed in the following evening and had a pizza with a couple of beers while watching Guardians of the Galaxy. Later that evening, my dream was overwhelming. I’m sure I had lingering affairs with Lady Gaga and Charlize Theron but the following day, I felt exhausted and oddly run down. It took some effort to motivate myself but I’d promised my aunt I’d pop to her place to fix a couple of things. As I dragged myself out of the shower and headed for the kitchen, my watchful companion chipped in.

“If you’re feeling under the weather sir, may I suggest a change in diet? White flour and carbonated drinks are toxic to your system. Mr Jamison had a similar—”

“Look, pal, if and when I need your advice on what I eat, I’ll ask,” I barked, as I rummaged to find headache tablets. “And if you keep pushing your nose into my life, I’ll switch you off at the bloody mains.”

The tense dialogue that followed ended with me knocking back my pills before storming out but as the lift descended, a couple of remarks my unfriendly sentinel had revealed made me wonder.

When I arrived at my aunt’s, she was in the front garden chatting with Doris from next door.

After a cup of coffee, I sorted out the washing machine and fixed the dishwasher, then had to go next door to rehang two cupboard doors for Doris. This is where I met Helen, her lodger. Gorgeous does not cover this woman. She was petite with a slight Asian appearance. Her long black hair was pulled into a ponytail and her black-rimmed glasses emphasized her sexy brown eyes.

“I’m the odd job man,” I’d said after we were introduced.

“Well, that’s useful but I thought you were a poet.”

“Who told you that? Anyway, I thought it was my calling but it must have been indigestion,” I added, which made her laugh.

“Your aunt told me that while I was doing her hair.”

“So you’re a hairdresser?”

“No, side-line— just finished my PhD.”

“Wow— brains and beauty— dangerous.”

As I fixed the doors, I learned she was twenty-eight and was taking a year off to look for something different to do.

She reeled off loads of stuff about where she’d like to live and the jobs she’d be interested in doing but hairdressing wasn’t one of them. Helen was so together and organized, it was gobsmacking and when I told her about my dropout life and how disorganized I was, it just made her laugh. Then as I was leaving she comes out with.

“Well, what about taking me out for dinner?”

I’d only seen girls like this on the TV or in films. “I need to go home and scrub up,” I responded.

“Ok, but I’m ready now. So why don’t I come to your place then we can find somewhere to eat?”

What flashed through my mind was: If this had happened a week ago— but I stopped the thought— her in my burger box flat. I couldn’t put that horrible scenario into words.

§

Helen’s comment as we walked into my apartment made me laugh.

“Cor blimey, mate,” she mimicked in a Cockney accent. “Are you wealthy or what?” Then snorted with laughter.

After a quick look round, she stood with her hands on her hips gazing at the river. “Let's stay in. Get a takeaway. I want to sit here by the window with the lights out.”

“I have champagne in the fridge,” I said as casually as I could, which made her laugh.

“Oh! What a flash monkey you are,” then laughed again.

It was one of Waterstaff’s bottles of champagne. The shelf stackers had opened one the other night but weren’t taken with it, preferring the beer they'd brought.

“How about a Chinese, Helen?”

“Yes, but only if they have honey spare ribs. Oh! And Peking duck too. I adore eating with my fingers, I find it very erotic.”

§

While we ate and chatted, she read some of Arti’s manual, which I hoped wouldn’t start him off. Later we watched a movie and halfway through, I noticed her covering one eye with the book for a few seconds like she was doing some sort of experiment. At the end of the film, Helen finished her drink with a couple of pills she’d taken from her bag.

Then asked to do a sleepover in the spare room, as she felt a migraine coming on.

§

It was the noise from the kitchen that woke me. It was just after seven and I could smell coffee. After a quick shower, I wandered into the living room. Helen was sat on the floor watching TV with headphones on but doing the eye test thing again with the book, so putting my hand on her shoulder startled her. “Gosh, sorry Helen didn’t mean to scare you.” She jumped up and grinned, then headed for the kitchen.

“I’ve already made coffee but we’ll go out for breakfast, my treat.”

“Oh! Why do I get a treat?” I asked as I sat at the breakfast bar. “And what’s with the eye test thing?”

Helen was silent while pouring coffee but she looked pensive. “I’ll explain everything over breakfast, and it’s my treat for letting me stay over and not murdering me in my bed.”

I laughed and grinned at her. “Why can’t you tell me now?” She sipped her coffee for a moment or two then shook her head.

“No, let's go eat, I do things better with food inside me,” she said, before inclining her head towards the door and giving me a cute wink.

She was oddly quiet all the way to the cafe, so I tried to jolly things up.

“Let's sit outside like Parisians. It's a beautiful Sunday morning, a bit early for me but—”

“No, inside, please,” she said, then took a few seconds to scan the place before picking a corner table and indicated the seat I should sit in.

I’m now looking at her, kind of weird, which changed to weirder when she said, “When you talk, put your hand in front of your mouth or use the menu,” then winked again.

“What?” was all I said, because she put her finger to her lips. Just then the waiter arrived and we ordered. “Gosh, Helen, you have an appetite! Can you eat all that?” Then I thought that was a bit rude, so quickly added. “You’re just a slender little thing,” I said, trying to pull myself out of the hole I’d started digging, but I got a crooked smile and an air kiss. “How on earth do you stay so trim, you eat like—” but the look I got stopped me in mid-flow.

“Careful how you choose your words here, you could end up wearing your eggs,” then she grinned. “As I said, Sam, I work better with food.”

“OK, so what’s the prob—” but was cut off again by her glare, followed by— “Hand or menu please.”

I quickly put a hand in front of my mouth. “So what’s your problem, Helen?”

“I don’t have one, but you do, and I think it could turn serious.”

I gawked at her. I was going to ask what it was, apart from fancying her, but she just stared wide-eyed until I remembered my hand. “This is ridiculous! Why the hell do I have to hide my mouth— does my breath stink?” She laughed and going to respond but our meal arrived.

“You’re telling me you can eat a full English breakfast with toast and a side order of pancakes? Gosh, so glad we didn’t eat out last night, I’d be penniless.”

She cut a finger of toast and prodded the yoke of her egg, then smiled as she scoffed it. The next few minutes were taken up with eating and odd snippets of irrelevant chat. Halfway through her breakfast, Helen poured maple syrup over her pancakes and beamed triumphantly.

“This is how you should start every Sunday morning!” Then popped a crispy bit of bacon in her mouth before leaning towards me. “Now, Sam, don’t say anything.”

I picked up my coffee and sat back.

“Let's start with here first. The camera by the door can’t see my lips, the same as the one by the till, so I can talk freely.” I was just going to open my mouth but got that look again.

“We are being monitored Sam, so that’s why you have to hide your mouth. It can lip read.”

She ignored my surprise and slipped a wedge of the pancake into her mouth, her beautiful almond eyes showing her enjoyment. After wiping her lips delicately she took a sip of coffee.

“OK! Let's cut to the chase. You told me yesterday that the last owner had thrown himself off the balcony.” I nodded.

“Also, you have more than a strange feeling about your AI companion because he’s let slip a few things about you, he could or should not know. The place you went to buy underwear and snippets from a conversation you had with the doorman in the pub across the road.” She paused to drink coffee. I nodded again. “And, when you threatened to pull his plug or switch the electric off, as the estate agents had done, Arti told you neither option would now work. That is why I’m sitting here and you’re there. Your not-so-friendly computer stalker is following you and watching what you do.”

“How’s that possible?” I asked from behind my hand.

Helen shook her head. “Somehow he’s gone viral by plugging himself into the outside world.

And from what you’ve told me, I think he’s paranoid about something or maybe everything.”

“Like in the film 2001,” I muttered. “The on-board computer made a mistake and tried to cover it up.”

She just nodded and then delved into the pancakes again. “Sam, there’s a greater risk you need to be aware of but until we find out what’s going on, you need to play along with him.”

“Blimey, Helen, how can you think that? No, what I mean was, how’ve you come to that mind-boggling conclusion so bloody quickly?”

“My PhD is in Physics and part of my research was mind control and mind management. Professor Sato was heavy into subliminal programming.”

I gawked at her, which made her smile as her fork headed back to the pancakes. “I want to talk to my tutor, which I’ll do later today or tomorrow.” Another pause as more pancake was scoffed.

“I think your spooky Arti is trying to programme you,” she added suddenly.

My eyes must have grown very big because she reached across and squeezed my hand.

“Watching the film last night, I felt something odd in my head. I’ve not had a migraine for donkey’s years but found out they can be caused by high-frequency signals.”

“Is that why you were covering one eye?”

“Partly, but as we were both wearing headphones, that’s another way of getting into your brain.”

“Not sure I understand any of it.”

“OK— in simple terms, there are two ways to implant subliminal images and sounds in humans. Transmit sounds or words below the human hearing range.

Images can be flashed so quickly it’s below the threshold of your conscious mind but not the subconscious. You’d never notice you were being controlled or programmed. There is another way to get at you. Supraliminal programming which is where you see and hear stuff but aren’t consciously aware of the picture or sounds. Buying wine at a shop that’s playing French music, you’re more likely to come out with a bottle of French.”

We remained silent for a few minutes while finishing our food but all too often my eyes were drawn to the camera by the door.

“Is he giving me the amazing dreams I’ve been having?”

“Very likely, Sam. He’s got into your head and we need to get him out quickly.”

Suddenly a flustered waiter appeared at our table. “Are you Mr Sutherland? The doorman from Goldman Towers has just phoned. There’s water coming out from under your apartment door.”

“Er— thank you I’ll go—” I uttered as I stood, but Helen reached across and grabbed my hand.

“How did the doorman know you were here? Did you tell him?” I shook my head.

“Methinks, Arti wants you back home and is prepared to go to any lengths to make that happen.”

“Can’t think what I’ve left on,” I said.

“Sam— I wouldn’t be concerned about that. Worry about what his warped digital mind is planning next.”

**To be continued next week**

**Circles**

**Award ‘Editor’s Choice’**

**International Competition**

**December 2020**

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When I finally returned to work after my stomach operation. I found things a little strained between me and management. It was probably due to the secondary infection that had forced me back to the hospital, only days after I’d returned.

I’m not a key player; the world would continue to operate without me. I’m a backroom guy, a data analyst assisting astronomers and physicists who push projects forward. I methodically analyze a few hundred pages of data, highlighting anomalies that meet particular criteria, before handing it back with pages tagged and a brief summary.

An hour after arriving at my desk, I was summoned to the boss’s office.

“Come in, George, and take a seat,” he said, shuffling papers on his desk. “You’d better close the door.”

As I sat opposite, we made eye contact and he slowly shook his head.

“I’m afraid it’s bad news, George. I’m going to have to replace you.” He paused and drew air in through his teeth. “We're under pressure. I need every able-bodied hand to the wheel, so to speak.” He rearranged the same papers and drew more air. “As you’re only a year from retiring,” he broke off and sighed, then added the killer punch. “To be honest, you're not looking that well. So maybe it's time to take it easy and put your feet up.”

I thought— you bastard! I almost busted another gut, trying to get back to work— it wasn’t as though I’d planned my exploding internals.

“George, we’ll give you three months’ severance pay but would you mind sharing your office with Nickola for your last couple of days? It would be a great opportunity to give her some useful pointers.” With that, he patted my shoulder as he went to open the door— then asked my replacement to join us.

I’d noticed her when I arrived. An attractive young thing straight out of university, I’d guessed.

Mind you— when she walked in I could see my boss's point about me not looking that well.

Compared to her glowing youthful aura, I looked like I’d popped my clogs weeks ago.

After introductions and a brief chat, where I agreed to everything, I was dismissed.

Dawdling back to my office, I wondered if I should’ve told him to shove the whole kit and caboodle up his fat ass but I didn’t have the energy or willpower.

Over the last few months, I’d had the stuffing knocked out of me and after this stab in the back, I felt like giving up completely. Life didn’t seem fair at all.

I know what you’re thinking. Pull yourself together, man up. But maybe my doctor was right— I’d worried myself into this bloody illness.

It had all started nine months ago when Cathy, my wife, had been killed in a car crash. We’d been together since University. We liked the same things and didn’t want children.

Well— she did but couldn’t. I said it didn’t matter but I would’ve loved a couple. We’d talked about adoption but I could tell she wasn’t interested, so never mentioned the topic again.

The police said both occupants had been killed instantly.

Mr Willis, the driver, must have fallen asleep or been distracted. He’d smashed into the back of a truck which had broken down on the slip-road into Tree-Tops Motel.

I had no idea who Willis was or why she was in his car. Cathy had told me that morning she was meeting her sister for coffee and would probably do some shopping.

She’d been a part-time dental receptionist for several years and seemed very content with life but things were not what they appeared.

I met Willis’s wife at the inquest. A short well-built reserved woman, who had four children and lived on the other side of town. Cathy would’ve called her *a homely-body* but at the conclusion of the inquests, she tore my heart and mind to shreds by telling me in a calm matter of fact manner that her husband’s affair with Cathy had been going on for three years and they’d been planning to live together in France.

I was numb for weeks. The house, my home, felt cold and empty, as did my life.

A month later it got worse. Bobby our dog was killed by a kid on a motorbike, close to the cemetery where Cathy was buried. How the dog managed to get out of our garden, I’ll never know— then later that week, my stomach problem flared up.

The doctor told me I needed to relax and get a hobby. Said I was worrying excessively. I’d confessed to having had a couple of anxiety attacks, the week prior to my visit. Plus I’d been consuming loads of indigestion pills.

But now sitting here in my soon to be vacated office, I felt pissed off and raw.

Raw because the nurse who’d removed my stitches yesterday obviously hadn't had much experience. I wondered if she’d purchased her certificates or trained as a vet.

Glancing around my small bland office, soon to be filled with feminine paraphernalia. Made me ponder my declining situation further.

In reality, my life was as stark and boring as this bloody office. And my tedious routine, a circular rut I was trapped in. Get up— Go to work— Go home- Watch telly— Go to bed.

To add to this mind-numbing lifestyle, the time between these repetitive events appeared to be getting shorter.

Life— my life— was vanishing at lightning speed and I couldn’t see any point in continuing.

Swivelling my chair to face the window darkened my mood further. Storm clouds filled the sky. The heavy rain that had started yesterday hadn’t relented.

I stood and glared at the glistening car park far below, then realized I’d opened the window.

The leap from the tenth floor would take seconds.

Opening the window further, I wondered if I’d hold my breath or scream on the way down. Would I look at the ground rushing towards me or keep my eyes—

A female voice behind me interrupted my thoughts. “I hope you're not thinking of doing something sinister?”

Slowly I closed the window, then turned and forced a brief smile.

“I needed to fill my lungs with cold, wet, polluted air to anaesthetize my brain,” I said, wiping rain from my face. “So, Nickola, what can I do for you?”

“May I come in and have a chat?” she asked. I pointed at the only other chair in my box.

“I’m sorry they're letting you go, George. I hope you don’t think I’ve prompted that decision?”

“Well— you've just taken my job,” I replied flatly.

She grimaced. “Yes, I know— Oh! Gosh, George, I feel so bad about this. I’d hoped they’d give me a job, but not someone else’s— if you see what I mean?”

I leaned towards her across my desk. “Look, Nickola, don’t lose any sleep over this. It appears my time has come, a bit earlier than I’d expected. So for me— it's a bit like the final straw— if you see what I mean?” I added sarcastically.

She nodded and gave a brief awkward smile, which basically meant she'd been brought up-to-date on my situation. We sat looking at each other for several seconds before she asked, “Do you really believe the Chilbolton Crop Circles are an alien response?”

Surprised, I sat back and gazed at her. Then she added, “A response to a binary message sent into deep space twenty years ago by the Arecibo Radio Telescope?”

“Why would you think that’s of interest to me?”

The right corner of her mouth lifted slightly as though a smile was about to follow but she spoke instead. “I read your notes attached to a data file, which appears to have drawn very little comment apart from— *vaguely interesting* and *not worth further investigation*.”

With my elbows resting on the desk, I supported my head as though I was tired or bored but I was neither.

Twenty years ago, I’d found an anomaly in data generated by one of NASA’s deep space projects.

In a distant star cluster 25 light-years from Earth, a faint beacon was transmitting repetitive data, information we’re still unable to decode but it appeared someone or something was trying to catch our attention.

Within days NASA had responded by transmitting a high powered digital signal lasting almost three minutes.

This compact binary message, when viewed as a diagram, showed a human figure, our solar system, a DNA molecule and the telescope that sent it.

Oddly, several months ago, the Crop Circle at Chilbolton replicated this diagram but with subtle changes. This had sparked an intense debate in many quarters.

“So what’s your conclusion, Nickola?”

She shrugged. “As a child, I was dragged around loads of Circle sites by my mum, who was fascinated to the point of delusion. She was, or is, an old hippy and it was her interest in this phenomenon that spurred me to study Physics at Uni.”

“What does your mum do now?” I heard myself ask.

I wasn’t that interested due to my state of mind but years ago I’d done the Crop Circle thing too. And I’d met some interesting and weird people, who’d given my life a nudge towards university. This was something I’d not really considered because I hadn’t a clue what I wanted to do with my life, let alone study.

Nickola was shaking her head and said. “I worry about her. She takes off at a moment's notice with the excuse she’s collecting inspiration for the short stories she writes.”

⇎

Towards the end of the day, I’d shown my replacement a great deal and her questions and thought processes were impressive. She’d be a great asset to the company.

As it was Friday, I left work early and drove to one of my favourite steak-house operations. Thought I’d cheer myself up with a couple of pints and a steak— while I could still afford it. Probably then I’d wander home to watch a bit of telly. Then go to bed— again.

The Fox and Hounds was quiet. Staff were milling about, getting ready for the evening rush, so I sat at the empty bar and waited.

Moments later the barman arrived carrying a cardboard box.

“George, how are you? It is ‘George’, isn't it?”

“Correct, good memory,” I replied.

“Haven't seen you in a while, George. Been away, have we?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer, as someone walked up behind me.

“Kimberly— let me introduce you to George.”

I turned to be greeted by a woman who was obviously dressed for a night out. Not someone who was on their way home from work. And, she’d probably just come from the hairdressers, because her auburn hair was—

The barman’s voice chipped in. “Sadly, George, she’s spoken for. Arrived here fifteen minutes ago to meet someone— but he’s a no-show. Can you believe the guy?” Then added in a camp manner, “Kimberly darling— shall I move your drink down here next to George? Then we can all have a good old gossip.”

His animated routines had always made Cathy laugh. It was all done in such good humour.

“Pleased to meet you, Kimberly. You look like you’ve just returned from abroad, nice tan.”

“Thank you, George. I’ve been back a few days. I have a tiny villa in Italy that I use a great deal— due to my problems.”

The sudden glint in her eyes was mischievous, so I had to ask.

“What problems could you possibly have?”

She grimaced then smiled. “My love of red wine and sadly— arthritis.” Rolling her eyes she added, “Probably from sleeping on wet grass as a young thing.” Then laughed freely, which I found very refreshing.

Over the next fifteen minutes, she told me about her love of travel but suddenly stopped. Glancing over my shoulder she smiled.

I reasoned her date had arrived, which made me sad. I was enjoying this woman’s company. Even though I knew very little about her, I didn’t want to share her. She was natural and easy to talk to, making me feel very relaxed. She was unaffected in a laid-back way and any quip the barman had come out with, she rebutted with an equally hilarious one.

“Darling— you're here at last,” she said lovingly. “You look tired. Have they been working you too hard?”

The words stung deep in my brain. Remembering how hollow my relationship with Cathy had been. Then Kimberly said,

“George, let me introduce you to Nick.”

I was quickly finishing my pint— I’d a sudden urge to get away. Slipping off the barstool, I turned in readiness to meet some good looking guy.

“Oh! Hi, George, you've met my mum then?” said Nickola.

I gawked for a moment. “I thought the eyes and smile were vaguely familiar.”

“Do you two know each other?” Kimberly asked.

The next fifteen minutes were taken up with explanations and a good deal of laughter, which was something I’d not done for a while. Then it seemed in only a short time, last orders were called.

After a very enjoyable evening, we all linked arms as we walked across the car park. Luckily the rain had stopped and the air smelt fresh and clean.

“George, thank you so much for treating us to dinner. That was extremely generous,” Kimberly whispered.

“You're very welcome. You guys brought some sparkle back into my life.”

Kimberly squeezed my arm affectionately. “George, tomorrow I’m planning to go to Cornwall for a week. Would you be interested in tagging along?”

The question brought me to an abrupt halt. “Gosh. What a wonderful idea. I’d love to— but sadly, I have work Monday and Tuesday— my last days for the company.”

Nickola stood in front of us with her hands on her hips and an ironic look on her face. “George— do you think they’d believe you were back in hospital?” she asked, glancing at me then her mother.

I just nodded.

“Mum— do you want to know the truth about Crop Circles?”

“What!” Kimberly exclaimed. “He knows stuff about our amazing Circles?” Nickola burst out laughing. “He knows loads, mother!” Then she turned and walked off as she shouted over her shoulder. “Guys, go enjoy yourselves. Life’s shorter than you think.”

I turned to the woman next to me and grinned. “I have a distinct feeling I've just been given the green light on Cornwall.”

“Fabulous— we have a plan, George!” Kim said excitedly.

“Why so taken with Crop Circles?” My question brought a brief grimace, followed by a coy smile.

“I was seduced by an alien in one,” she said seriously, before laughing.

“A good enough reason, but did you marry him?”

“Good God, no, darling. I’m a free spirit, the proverbial candle in the wind.”

“Well, you've certainly been blessed with a very smart daughter.”

“I can’t say she gets it from me— and I don’t think it came via her father either. Mind you, he could've had hidden talents.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“He told me he was a ditch digger and worked on the local farms. Not that bright but as I remember, he did have the most beautiful bottom.”

We both laughed, then looked at each other for a few moments before Kimberly added, “Can I trust you with a secret?”

I smiled and nodded.

“My ditch digger was a perfect young male specimen.”

“With a great butt,” I added.

“Yes, with that— and amazing blond hair that was so fine and curly, it was gorgeous. He worked in this area because we get more Crop Circles, which gave him the opportunity to visit them all. Reckoned they gave him insight and energy,” she paused and grinned at me for a moment, before continuing her story.

“We met one afternoon at a fantastic circle and sat there in its centre, talking into the small hours. Anyway, one thing led to another and to cut a long story short, I became pregnant with Nickola. Over the coming months, I pottered around the area on my old scooter trying to find him. I didn’t want anything, just wanted to share my joy. Oddly, none of the farmers in a twenty-mile radius of that circle had ever seen the person I described,” she paused and gazed up at the stars. “Not one of them,” she whispered.

“Anyway, fifteen years later I’m in the middle of a Circle in the Wiltshire countryside, meditating. When I open my eyes, I see this heavily pregnant woman standing at the circle's edge, looking at me. She couldn't have been a day older than seventeen and probably only days away from giving birth.

She asked how often I visit Circles. After explaining my ongoing fascination, she hands me a postcard. Then says, if I ever see her friend, could I pass it on. When I turned the card over from her address details, I almost fainted.

It was a sketch of the face of my beautiful ditch digger. The amazing image she’d produced, with shaded textures and fine detail was photograph quality. Seeing that face again made my heart pound but oddly, my Crop Circle lover had not aged a day.

I quickly turned the card over, to stop his hypnotic eyes drawing me into his.

The mother to be was Jessica Mason from Maiden Bradley, a village fifteen miles away. And she’d signed the card, with love from Jessica and Nickola. I’d gazed at her quizzically and asked who Nickola was.

She’d smiled and ran a hand lovingly over her swollen stomach. I gawked at her— my hunch made me lightheaded. But was I making too much of the coincidence?” Kimberly paused and stepped back.

“What are you grinning at, George? Having second thoughts about hanging out with a fruitcake like me?”

“No— but you might. I’ve a strange story to tell about Crop Circles too. Equally astonishing, but never felt comfortable about telling it— until now.”