



Story Chain



Celebrating the 2026 theme
‘The Ripple Effect’.

“Stories connect us.”

NWR Story Chain 2026

Celebrating the 2026 annual theme

‘The Ripple Effect’

Thank you so much to all NWR Groups and Members
who contributed to the 2026 NWR Story Chain.

We had a fantastic 17 stories written, and almost
150 contributions in total!

I hope you enjoy reading them as much as our
members enjoyed writing them.

It has been a joy to read all of the stories, and to
compile them all for you to read.

Thank you so much, again, to all those who took part.

Thank you,

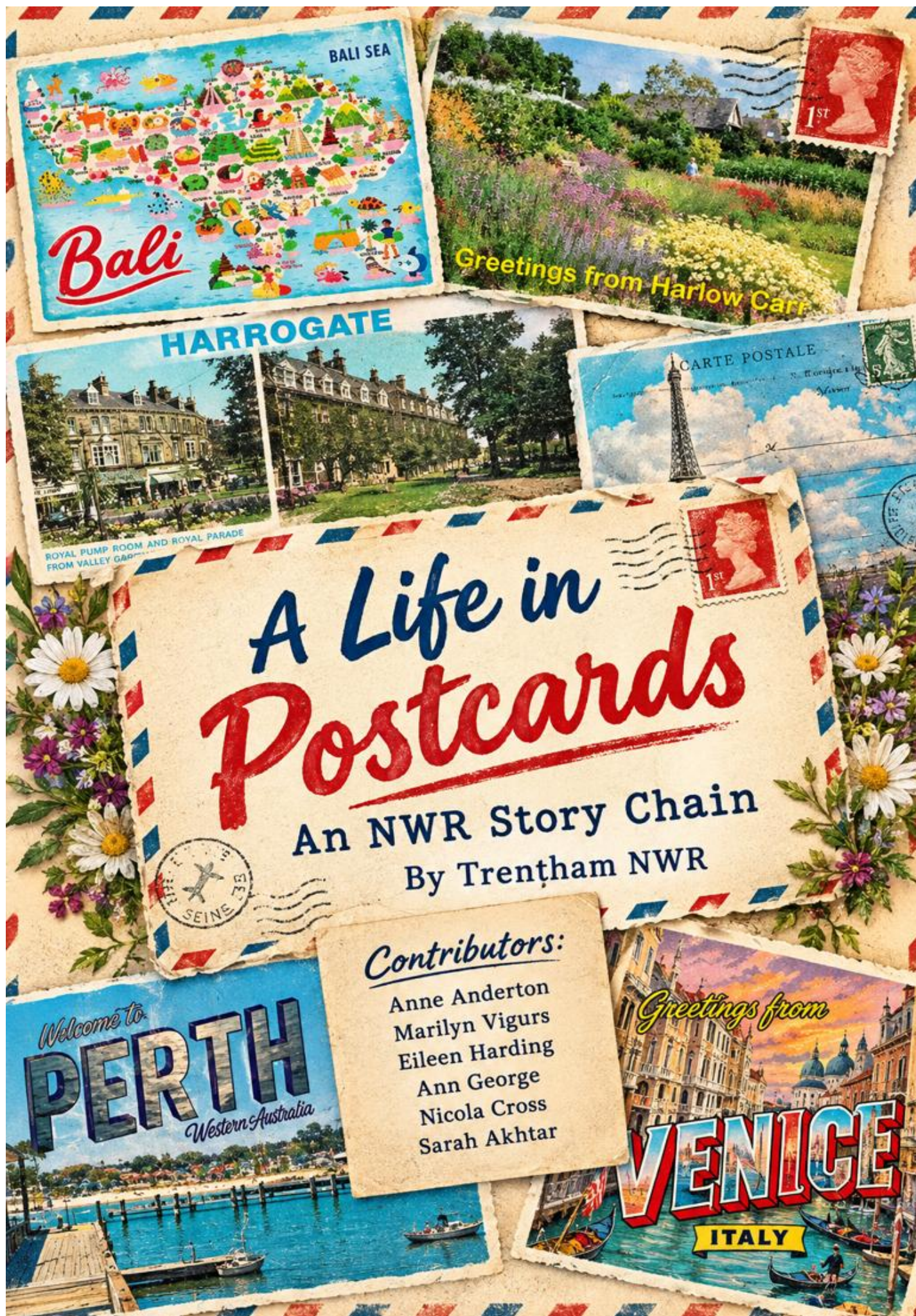
Alexia



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17 stories from NWR groups and members

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Chapter 1 – 1980

Alice, 25, on the sun-lounger, admired her now-tanned legs flattered by her crisp white shorts, then turned to see Linda's rather plump, slightly blotched legs topped by pink shorts as she reclined on her lounger. 'What a life!' she exclaimed. 'I wish I had done this years ago, and I'm so glad you agreed to come!'

'Two Yorkshire lasses on a cruise in the Med!' replied Linda. 'Well, I was fed up with the office job anyway, so I needed your idea of this and you needed to get over the split from Rob after you found out about him carrying on with that Mandy from the pub'.

'It wasn't like that at all. When I got home after that dreadful row I cried because I had my life planned - wedding, small house, car, dinner parties, children – then I remembered a magazine article about women who had changed their lives and I decided to ditch what one of them called 'domestic servitude' and look for adventure. I was still quite young, I knew I was attractive to men and the wedding dress money paid for the ticket. When you said you had holiday money saved, well....'

The previous day they had been in Venice and Alice had bought a postcard showing St Mark's Square for her parents. But when they actually stood there, she had been horrified by the flocks of pigeons all around them, over their heads and scrabbling about their feet.

Escaping them, they found a smaller square with tables outside for coffee but it was too expensive, as was the idea of a ride in a gondola. They had to be content with crossing the bridges and gazing down at the traffic on the canals, noting the floating debris and scum on the water in places.

In their cabin Alice wrote the card:

Dear M&D, Linda and I having a wonderful time, amazing food and lovely visits. Venice v picturesque – Beautiful buildings and churches, canal ride in a gondola, Linda not limping too much after her fall last night in the bar (a bit tipsy?) two crew helped her and - coincidence! – one was James who lived v near us for a few yrs when he was young! I have bought pressies for all and I look forward to showing you lots of pics. Blondie songs concert tonite! Alice xxx

As they were being organised to leave the boat in Southampton, Alice felt a tremor of excitement as James came to help them and asked if they had enjoyed the cruise. 'I think I will be on the Caribbean run next year – shall I see you?' he asked Alice with a wink. She smiled enigmatically.

Chapter 2 - 1985

As Alice opened up the Thomas Cook travel agent's office in James Street on a Friday morning in early July 1985, she thought ruefully that she had not exactly found the adventure she had been longing for 5 years ago. She and Linda had managed a couple more cruises around the Adriatic and the Greek Islands in the early 80s, before Linda became embroiled in anti-Thatcher left wing politics and support for the local miners. In contrast Alice had spread her wings by moving away from their home town to Harrogate where, helped by a BTEC Level 3 in Travel and Tourism from Harrogate College, she had quickly worked her way up to branch manager. The prospectus had promised "access to dynamic international sectors". That had certainly not happened...not yet anyway.

In fact, it was unlikely to happen anytime soon as she was currently planning her wedding to Hugh, a chartered accountant with Wild & Trotter Ltd. An unlikely and whirlwind romance had blossomed at Linda's 30th birthday party earlier in the year. The wedding date was set for 3rd September and she was still saving hard to pay for her designer wedding dress. She was looking forward to sharing her life with Hugh. They would be equal partners in all ways and travel the world together at every opportunity. It was going to be absolute bliss!

She stooped and picked up the post from the floor. It was the usual mix of business mail and one colourful postcard. Customers often sent cards to the office with thanks for getting them to their destination with the minimum of fuss. She idly turned it over and immediately recognised the tiny, scrawly writing as Linda's.

*Greetings from amazing, beautiful Bali. Thanks for spotting this last-minute deal. It is just what I needed after recent events. It really is the Island of the Gods. So far, I have been to the **sacred** monkey forest [monkeys are really nasty], a **sacred** bat cave [very smelly] and some **sacred** springs at a Hindu temple [beyond lovely]. Darkness falls every day at 6 pm prompt. I'm just off to a Balinese dance concert. I really wish you were here. See you at the wedding, if not before. Thanks again, this holiday is absolutely fandabbidozi! Linda xxx
PS This would be a brill honeymoon destination!*

Alice smiled, she had read the card in Linda's voice with its familiar Yorkshire burr and was glad that her friend was enjoying discovering Bali, then, unbidden, a frisson of envy rippled through her. She quickly shrugged it off. There was a busy day ahead and a weekend with Hugh in prospect. She switched on the lights and the travel shop with its bright posters promising sun, sea and adventure sprang into view.

Chapter 3 - 1990

Their 5th anniversary was due shortly. Hugh suggested a romantic weekend away to Paris. "That's perfect" Alice said. Hugh was handsome, kind, caring and loveable, Alice blessed the day she met him. Their last holiday alone had been to Bali for their honeymoon. She'd thanked Linda for the suggestion. A year after they were married baby Paula arrived. She made their life complete. Paula was an adorable baby and becoming a very intelligent child with an amazing sense of humour for someone so young.

Still on hold were the adventures she yearned for when younger. Maybe that would happen one day but for now she was thoroughly content. After checking with Mary, Alice booked the ticket.

As Alice's parents now lived quite a distance away, Hugh's widowed mother Mary was always there to lend a hand. She was a nursery assistant at the local school and loved her job. She spent a lot of time with Paula and inevitably they formed a very close bond. Occasionally Mary would accompany them on their family trips to Bridlington, where Paula never tired of riding donkeys, paddling in the sea, splashing everyone then making sandcastles. This year was slightly different, they had their usual family trip, then on 31st August, Alice and Hugh waved goodbye to Paula and Mary, blowing kisses as they drove away to the airport.

Paris was everything they had hoped for. Their balcony overlooked the Arc de Triomphe, they enjoyed walking everywhere. Strolling down the Champs-Élysées felt so special. They had tickets booked for The Lido, and a river cruise along the Seine for their anniversary.

At the end of their final day, Alice sent Linda a postcard to add to her ever-growing collection. They didn't see much of each other now as Linda was married to Derek, they lived much further away and had quite a hectic lifestyle.

Hi both, Paris great. Fab views from top of Eiffel Tower. Saw Bluebell Girls at Lido, my choice, Hugh's eyes on stalks, "ha ha." Great pic of Hugh by Napoleon's tomb, museum his choice. No Louvre, Musée d'Orsay instead, as my fave artists there, Monet, Renoir, etc. At roadside café rock band 'James' playing 'Sit Down' on radio. Reminded me of handsome James from our cruise years ago. Wonder where he is now! Highlight Seine trip. Light when set off, meal, violinist played 'The Swan' next to our table, fab, raised our glasses and whispered, "Love you", sooo romantic! On way back, moonlight, tower fully lit up, WOW! Love from us xx

On returning home there was an official letter waiting for Hugh from the office regarding a possible takeover of Wild & Trotter Ltd. and a crucial meeting to be held the following week. This was totally unexpected and Alice wondered what the future might hold for them all.

Chapter 4 – 1995

A chill Autumn wind whipped round Alice as she unlocked the door of Thomas Cook, travel agents. The jewel-bright colours and exotic views of posters on display seemed to mock her as she prepared for another working day. What was wrong with her? Was the thought of her impending milestone birthday getting her down? Forty sounded so old: what had happened to the young woman who sought adventure. She and Linda had dreamed up such exotic plans, but only a couple of cruises had materialised and both were caught up in other aspects of their lives.

Alice knew she should be grateful: she loved her family and beautiful home in Harrogate. Hugh was kind and loving. Daughter Paula was adorable and Hugh's mother Mary, now retired, was a great support. Ever since the take-over at Wild and Trotter, Hugh had changed. Alice knew he felt threatened by new IT systems taking over the workplace and had lost confidence. He found no pleasure in travel any more.

Wearily, Alice sorted the mail and pulled out a postcard. On the front was a glorious scene of the Swan River in Perth, Western Australia. It was from Linda! Alice was intrigued. Why had she written today of all days, when Alice had been feeling so down in the dumps? Then she remembered although Linda was already 40, she was still fancy free.

Dear Alice, guess what! Fed up with our dreary UK life, persuaded Derek to move while still young enough to enjoy it. We're living in Perth, Western Australia. It's fantastic: "sun, sea and sand" with so much freedom to enjoy the outdoors. Do visit – I'm sure you can get a good deal for a month's holiday. Send flight details, I'll pick you up at Perth airport. Love from your would-be partner in adventure, Linda. PS: I've glimpsed a look-alike for "handsome James" on the beach. Could it really be him?

Alice spent the afternoon thumbing through brochures extolling wonders of Western Australia: the vibrancy of Perth city and historic port of Fremantle: natural wonders such as Ningaloo coral reef and strange landforms in Pinnacles desert to the North. To the south was the former whaling port of Albany, which had been the embarkation site for Australians to join the Allied troops in WW1. Above all, Alice was attracted by the huge, ancient trees in the Valley of the Giants. A spectacular tree tops walk would soon be opened, allowing visitors to walk above ground, looking down on flocks of brightly-coloured birds. Thriving vineyards and lavender fields prospered alongside traditional farms. Animals and plants looked so different from those at home. Alice longed to see kangaroo and koala, quokkas on Rottnest Island, whales migrating south and dolphins coming into shore. Alice tried to ignore Linda's reference to James, but her desire for adventure was rekindled. The family would be fine: she'd keep in touch and find perfect presents for them. She checked her passport and booked her flight.

Chapter 5 - 2000

One of the ways Alice passes time is in daydreaming, especially when she's occupied with a mundane task. She is ironing the fourth of five work shirts for Hugh.

'What if', she muses, 'What if I'd gone to Australia when Linda asked me?' 'And what if James had chanced to be there and we met on the beach?'. 'And what if ...

'Mum'. calls Paula as she charges through their kitchen then pulls up short. 'Oh, I'm glad you're ironing. I need my white shirt doing. Please?' Paula makes prayer hands and looks at her with large begging eyes. She knows she's supposed to do her own ironing now she's fourteen. 'I don't have time before drama class tonight.'

'If you bring it here, I will', replies Alice, laughing at Paula's blatant overacting. She certainly enjoys a bit of melodrama, thinks Alice. Her brother Mike, aged four, is drawing at the kitchen table. He is a peaceful, thoughtful child. Mike is the reason Alice didn't go to Australia, not that she bears him any resentment for that. Alice recalls the postcard she had written to Linda after un-booking her plane ticket and refunding herself. Being a Travel Agent has its advantages.

*Dear Linda, sorry to disappoint you but I can't come over just now.
Have baby due in six months. Very exciting. My kind of adventure.
The airline would let me fly this early on but I won't risk a long-haul flight.
If you see handsome James again, say hi from me.
Have fun! Alice xx*

Alice and Hugh had been astonished and delighted after waiting and trying for another baby for so many years. There had been numerous disappointments. Their marriage had been in the doldrums but Hugh had been energised by the news and finally took the training that enabled him to get to grips with the changes at work. He was promoted to a senior position, losing his haggard look altogether. Although Alice loved her job as a travel agent, she realised that it would be too much for Mary to have a baby to care for and as they didn't want to leave a baby in childcare she gave up work to be a full-time mother. So, adventures have to be taken vicariously for the present.

Alice picks up the iron. Where was she? Oh yes, on the beach in Australia, the sun is going down and the sand is warm between her toes. She is at a barbie holding a tinny. She will be disappointed if snags are not on the menu as she has always loved sausages.

Chapter 6 Part 1 – Spring 2005

Alice was out of bed early and seized the opportunity to log onto Hugh's computer.

Good morning Linda and a VERY happy birthday! I hope your card arrived. You probably have autumn colours to enjoy, while we have daffs and tulips. Enjoy! Love Alice xx

She and Mike were having breakfast when Mary arrived.

"Sit down Mary, I'll make you some tea. Hugh's already left for work and Mike walks to school on his own now he's nine."

She kissed Mike goodbye and the two women sat together with mugs of tea.

"What have you got planned today, Alice? I'm taking Paula into town."

"Well, did I tell you I've joined a book group? It's part of the NWR - National Women's Register - and I'm really loving it. We're discussing a book by Gervase Phinn today after hearing him talk at the NWR conference last year in York."

"Sounds interesting love, hope it goes well. You go and get ready and I'll start the crossword."

Later that day they were all seated round the kitchen table.

"Mum, can we talk about your big birthday?"

Alice looked at Paula and hesitated.

"Yes love, but first can we talk about where you're going to study English at uni?"

"Oh yes. Didn't I tell you? I've decided on York, if they'll have me. What about your party venue?"

"My birthday's months away but I would choose to celebrate at Harlow Carr Gardens, if that's possible."

Once Mike was settled into bed Alice got back onto the internet and found a reply waiting from Linda

Greetings from your 50 year old friend! We've had a lovely day and Derek has agreed that we should come over to the UK for your 50th. In other news - we saw James leaving his apartment block with another bloke whom he introduced to us as Steve - his partner! Will update you on September plans when I can. Much love Linda xxx

Alice replied straightaway:

This is SO much easier than postcards isn't it? Hope we don't make postmen redundant! Glad you've had a good day and cheerful news about James. Looking forward to seeing you soon. Alice xxx"

Chapter 6 Part 2 – Autumn 2005

Alice had arranged to meet her friend Beryl for coffee and a chat.

“So much to do next month, I’m hoping you can help please.”

“Happy to help, what’s coming up?”

“Our 20th anniversary, Hugh will sort that out, getting Paula ready for uni in York and then it’s my 50th. Do you know if we can celebrate at Harlow Carr?”

“Indeed, looking lovely in September with salvias and autumn colours. We’ll speak to Maureen, the manager of Betty’s café at the garden, she’ll help.”

Beryl worked her charm on the staff at Harlow Carr and on September 17th Alice and Hugh welcomed friends for an early evening meal at Betty’s cafe. Linda and Derek had arrived from Australia and Paula had asked some of her friends along too. Together with her Dad and Linda she had also arranged a surprise for Alice.

All present enjoyed savoury delicacies, scones and luscious desserts followed by birthday cake with glasses of prosecco. Cake all gone, Hugh stood to give a toast to his wife of twenty years and then all present stood to sing Happy Birthday.

Alice was feeling very emotional when Paula came and stood next to her.

“Stay standing please, we have another visitor. Mum, Linda told me about your love of the group ‘James’ and the connection you feel with your friend James in Australia. Maureen told us that Tim Booth from the band lives nearby and visits the garden often, so we asked him to come along today and he’s going to sing for us – please everyone SIT DOWN and feel free to join in!”

The next day, after a good sleep, Alice picked up the autumn card she had bought at Harlow Carr and wrote this inside: -

Dear James, thank you so much for the lovely card Linda brought.

I had a fantastic party and the “icing on the cake” was a surprise appearance of Tim Booth from the group ‘James’! He sang “Sit Down” (of course) to much applause from all present.

Linda and I have been friends for almost 30 years now and we’ve known you since our first cruise in 1980. I consider myself very lucky and agree that true friendship is a bond stronger than time or distance.

To quote Winnie the Pooh “every day spent with a friend is a new adventure”.

Much love to you both, Alice xx

A Life Reimagined

by members of Park Gate NWR group

Chapter 1

The curtains were ruffled by the breeze coming in from the sea and she lay awake thinking of the day ahead and how she would cope.

She needed a new career. Someone once told her she was her job, and it was true. She loved working for the regional newspaper group publishing morning and evening dailies and weeklies. She was proud to show groups round and explain how a newspaper is made in a short time. She always experienced a thrill when she heard and felt the press running and knew papers were being printed.

Then she thought of Tim, a film cameraman, her partner, whom she had met abroad. She had worked for both regional and national papers and she had excelled at teaching staff new systems. So much so, she was poached by the software company making the system and with them she travelled the English-speaking world.

She and Tim were working abroad when they met. She thought he was nice, the word she would use to describe him. They became friends, then there was a spark and when that spark ignited it was like nothing she had experienced before. If she was ever to try to write about it, the page would catch alight. It was an all consuming fire, a passion, but like all fires with no fuel to feed it, it dies.

She needed to see Tim, she hadn't told him yet how she felt. They still owned a flat in London and an apartment in a French ski resort, where they used to spend all the time they could. She had to see him, she loved him, she still loved him, but something was wrong.

She thought about the places she had lived or been lucky enough to visit, Singapore and how she loved her flat in Sentosa, higher and cooler. The craziness of Hong Kong, she could never live there. Places in English-speaking Africa. Tim had worked all round the world as well and sometimes they were in the same place for several months. Bliss.

But now to the future. She had friends all over the UK and abroad and family of course. Her brother owned a sailing company on the Solent, maybe she could go there? She needed a new career and to deal with the ramifications after speaking to Tim.

But now, Belinda decided she would get up and walk from Aldeburgh to Thorpeness for lunch and back to her house in the town synonymous with Benjamin Britten, Snape Maltings and wonderful classical concerts. So how would she cope with the future? Only time would tell.

Chapter 2

Hoping her familiar walk along the Suffolk shoreline would steady her mind, Belinda showered, dressed and snatched a bite of breakfast, before heading out into the early morning sunlight. She passed swiftly through the largely sleeping town of Aldeburgh, encountering only an early morning dog walker on his return to the town. As she passed all the familiar landmarks and reached the coast, her head began to clear. By the time she returned home, she had decided to contact her brother James to see if she could stay with him for a few weeks at his home in Bishops Waltham whilst considering her next move.

Belinda was in luck. James was delighted to hear from her and excited at the prospect of her visit. His diary was relatively clear for the next couple of weeks. He suggested she make the journey by train to Southampton, where he would meet her, to save her the stress of a long drive. A wave of relief flooded over Belinda as they agreed she would make the journey the following day.

Spurred on by a positive plan Belinda set to securing an open-ended return ticket from Saxmundham to Southampton Parkway and focused on the practicalities of leaving her house for an unspecified period of time. By 10.00pm her bag was packed and she was ready for bed, having set her alarm for 06.00am. She had a good night's sleep, knowing that she had a plan and woke in time to hear the dawn chorus. After a quick shower and a light breakfast, Belinda texted to James to let him know she was on her way and that she would keep him posted en route. She had one last look round her house to check all was secure before closing the front door and driving to Saxmundham station where she would catch the train to Ipswich, and from there to Southampton Parkway via London and Reading.

All went to plan, and as the train left Reading she sent James a text to let him know her ETA. A wave of relief flooded over her as she spotted him on the platform. Initial smiles and greetings exchanged, they headed for James' car and the short drive to his home in Bishops Waltham, where James had supper waiting for them. Over their meal Belinda explained her mission to track down Tim, sort out their joint assets and more importantly to find employment with a view to rebuilding her life.

James listened intently and topped up their glasses before suggesting he could perhaps help with employment. He was always on the look out for competent staff to employ in his company, based at Hamble, organising sailing charters across the world and confident that he could find a role for her, whether on a temporary or permanent basis. This would give her time to track down Tim and hopefully enable the pair of them to sort their lives out. Belinda felt a lump in her throat, and fought back tears of relief, as the prospect of James' generous offer sank in. It had been a long and emotional day for Belinda, and she was relieved to retire for the night, where she fell immediately into a deep sleep in the knowledge that she had James' support and, more importantly - the beginnings of a plan.

The next day James made several phone calls to contacts in the local sailing community, finding one with a vacancy for a temp "girl friday" with a charter company, based at one of the Hamble marinas. They suggested Belinda pop in for a chat with them about 3.00pm that afternoon, to see if she would fit the bill, which Belinda was delighted to accept. It was a long time since she had attended an interview, but she spruced herself up and steadied her nerves before walking down to the marina. To her relief it was all very relaxed and she left with the offer of a temporary job in the publicity department, working flexible hours, to start as soon as possible! The next day James drove Belinda to the station for her return journey to Aldeburgh, having extended his offer of accommodation when she started her job, hopefully in a few weeks time.

Chapter 3

Tim was lying low in Greece on the island of Hydra, Leonard Cohen's island. He woke up, disengaged himself from the arms of Sofia, languorously got out of bed, showered and went downstairs to throw open the blinds while the air was cool enough to welcome it in.

Descending the stairs, to make the first strong cup of coffee of the day, Tim mused about life past and present. He felt like Ulysses, waylaid by the enchantress Calypso on the mythical island of Ogygia. His old life with Belinda had been blown away and all thought of London, Alpe d'Huez and the life they had shared together had been pushed aside. He knew he would need to face reality and disentangle himself but the task seemed too huge. For now, his passion for Sofia and this easy life they had together was all he cared about. He had left no tracks. The bank continued to pay his share of the bills and there were enough complications in the rest of his life to deal with. The love potion, Sofia, was the perfect escape from the mess he had landed himself in.

That photo was where it all started. One photo, which had got him in too deep. 'Investigative journalism', his colleague and friend Gunther had assured him; it could expose a whole mafia of drug - smuggling and bring in big bucks. Utmost discretion was needed and a backstory to keep the operation under cover. Tim, always looking for the next freelance assignment had signed up. Keeping the status quo with Belinda was important to his backstory for now. He had no idea where she was anyway and he did not want her to be incriminated in his dangerous situation. As for Sofia, how much should he tell her?

Tim walked swiftly down the steep steps to catch the ferry to Poros, 35 minutes away. A yacht charter company needed someone to take photos for their next brochure. Sofia, bilingual, would help with translating the text; British punters were a key market. Tim presented as a 'nice, unassuming' yachtie type – perfect to infiltrate the shadow side of the yacht charter business and scope out further Gunther's latest lead on the drug - smuggling story.

The day was already hot and the quay in Poros full of tourists. Tim found a shady spot in a café to check his notes and prepare before approaching the charter company. He lay his camera down and hailed the waiter. A fiery altercation between a couple took his attention and the next thing he knew his camera had vanished. Frantic, he spotted a boat speeding away towards Piraeus and the anonymity of Athens. Was this a warning? The photo was already safely with Gunther, not on his camera roll, but was someone on his trail or was this an opportunist thief? Could he trust the Greek Police? A shiver ran down Tim's back as his mind ran riot.

Chapter 4

Belinda was delighted with the job opportunity her brother helped her find. She thought that she would be able to travel again, and maybe meet Tim. She was thinking about him lately, and she needed to tell him about her feelings towards him. They needed to talk about ending their relationship, and and sort out the properties that they shared together. She wants to tell him about her suspicions of his involvement in some illegal work, hoping that he could trust her and open up, so she might be able to help him.

She did not sit down dwelling on the past and what might happen in the future. She emailed the company and informed them that she was happy to accept the job that they offered and ready to start.

She sat on the balcony watching the beautiful sunset and imagining meeting Tim and remembering the happy and passionate times they spent together. But now it was time to promote her career and concentrate on proving herself worthy of the job she was offered.

She didn't have to wait long before she was asked to start working. She was very excited to be working again, though it was only temporary. The first few weeks were challenging as she needed time to settle and get to know the team she was working with. But as usual she managed to excel in her job, adding new innovations, working well with her colleagues and was a good team player. She gained approval and praise from her employers.

The company decided to take part in an international charter yacht sales show in Greece on the island of Poros. She was chosen to represent the company. She could not believe that after a very short time working in the company, she was given this great opportunity, which meant the chance to travel again. She accepted the offer without hesitation. Having researched the other participants in the show, she prepared the presentation about the company she was working for; she was ready to go.

She left with her team to Greece, thrilling with excitement of taking part in an international show, with some of the famous sailing yachts companies, in beautiful and sunny Greece.

Thinking about Greece brought back the happy times she spent there with Tim; Greece was one of their favourite places. She pushed the thoughts away to concentrate on the present and the great opportunity that she was given to further her career.

Chapter 5

Sweating with panic and indecision, Tim didn't know if his camera had been stolen by the drugs cartel or whether he should report its theft to the police. Although the incriminating photo was not in his camera, the criminals might somehow have uncovered him.

Meanwhile, Belinda, delighted and excited by her new job, arrived at the yacht sales venue and began preparing her pitch. A lady approached who explained that a cameraman would arrive to take marketing photos. Her name was Sofia and she would translate.

Suddenly, in rushed a distraught man explaining that his camera had been stolen. It was Tim! He and Belinda looked at each other in disbelief. Belinda spoke first, demanding to know why he hadn't contacted her. He wanted to explain how he had unwittingly photographed a container of drugs being

unloaded from a British yacht and his friend Gunther had persuaded him that he could bargain with the drug smugglers for money and so began a more risky side in his career as an investigative journalist. He had been sucked in by the bribes given to him and to the prospects of uncovering more secrets. Caught by this and the easy life he had with Sofia, who he'd met through the yacht club, he'd grown complacent.

Belinda, of course, did not know this. Just as she was challenging him, there was a commotion on the quayside- police officers had intercepted the speedboat speeding towards Piraeus. On board was Gunther. Tim had not been so naïve as to only have one copy of the incriminating picture and had a copy in his safe. Sophia had become suspicious of his spendthrift ways and disreputable friends and had challenged him. Horrified by the truth, she had passed the information on to the police.

Although very shocked by the turn of events and the coincidence of finding him in Greece, Belinda felt relieved that her suspicions about Tim were explained. It all happened so quickly that she didn't know what she felt when she saw him being escorted away by the police.

However, gathering her thoughts, she quickly turned her attention to the task of showing potential clients the benefits of her yacht company. During the next few days, the initial shock of finding Tim had lessened. Knowing that he had likely been involved in illegal activities killed off any residual feelings she had for him. Although the police were making discreet enquiries at the yacht sales show, Belinda was relieved that her company seemed not to be involved.

Back in the UK, Belinda's new employers were delighted with the publicity and sales she had helped secure and rewarded her with a permanent position and she was relieved that they were not involved in the smuggling. She continued to follow the Greek investigation and was aware of Tim's three year jail sentence.

Three years on, she had been promoted to a well-paid senior position. Tim had completed his sentence and they had appointed a solicitor to sell their joint properties. She had moved on with her life.

2,575 words

‘The Ripple Effect’ - Battle and District’s short story

BAGGAGE BOUND

CHAPTER ONE

Sitting down in the departure lounge, Emily could feel the rising panic within her.

Breathing heavily, she tried to calm herself by using the tapping and breathing exercises she had been taught.

" Okay try to relax and breathe in through your nose " Jay, her husband, said. Emily feverishly tapping at her neck and downwards through her body, tried to recall the technique she had been taught, hoping to put an end to the sheer terror she felt at the thought of this flight.

Why, oh why had she agreed to this last minute bargain trip to Paris?. Now they were at the airport, and there was no going back. Their call to embark appeared on the screen. With shaking legs and a stomach to match, she stood up, gripping her husband's arm.

You are doing great, " Jay said trying to be encouraging. " Just imagine, in a few hours we will be sipping Champagne alongside the Seine"

Stepping onto the plane they were greeted by the cabin crew. They were all smartly dressed, immaculately made up, and looked incredibly calm. Trying to draw comfort from this, Emily clutched her husband's hand as they made their way down the aisle.

" Seats 17 and 18 " Jay said glancing at his boarding pass on his phone. " Would you rather sit next to the window" ?. Emily would rather have been sitting an exam, giving birth, or being just about anywhere else than where she was at that moment. But she opted for the seat away from the window. Sitting down, she immediately clamped herself into her seat belt, as if this might help to secure her mind as much as her body.

Emily glanced at Jay. He had settled back in his seat gazing out of the window. Turning to Emily and grabbing her hand, he grinned to reassure her that all was well.

Once the passengers were firmly strapped into their seats, the cabin crew started their usual safety routine. The plane started to back out, turn and taxi down the runway. Starting the tapping and breathing exercises again, Emily closed her eyes and tried to relax. The plane seemed to taxi endlessly and then came to an abrupt stop. The engines suddenly broke into a roar, the plane began to shake and vibrate like an angry child stamping its feet in the throes of a tantrum. Emily could feel the force of the plane trying to thrust forward, yet simultaneously being held back and the urge to escape from this sensation became overwhelmingly powerful. Sobbing silently and breathing in short, panicked breaths, Emily gripped Jay's hand tightly, digging her nails into his flesh.

Suddenly the plane thrust forward and they rapidly gained speed as they hurtled down the runway. Then they were airborne. Swaying slightly from side to side, the plane started to ascend and then bank as it set course for its journey. Emily felt every fibre of her being was out of control. Weeping quietly, feeling dizzy she hyperventilated with terror.

CHAPTER TWO

Across the aisle Cilla was feeling every inch the voyeur.

Being of a nervous disposition herself, particularly when airborne, she muttered the Lord's Prayer knowing she didn't really believe a word of it but felt somehow reassured by the familiarity as her mind went back to the security of school assemblies.

Cilla felt acutely sorry for the girl across from her but also hoped she'd try harder to hide an obvious terror as the vibes were transmitting themselves left, right and centre.

She became aware of other passengers nearby using their own calming techniques. One lady had some worry beads, another twiddled the crucifix on a chain around her neck. All will be well thought Cilla, and all manner of things shall be well. She was used to dredging up these helpful words.

As Cilla's top lip began to moisten, always a bad sign, she wished the poor girl she now knew as Emily, wasn't in her proximity. Instead of feeling the terror radiating around so obtrusively, Cilla wanted nothing more than to read her copy of The Guardian. The English Channel had come into view, the Captain had introduced herself and the safety instructions had been given by a flamboyant steward; he was obviously not a person to be ignored. She could hear the rattle of the drinks trolley creeping closer.

Emily was now crying freely with all the associated noise of nose blowing and gulping, drawing the giddy steward's attention in her and Cilla's direction. He was very discreet and comforting, quietly suggesting the techniques Emily was already battling to employ.

Cilla abandoned all hope of completing the Guardian crossword by touchdown and instead thought back to a terrifying experience she and her family had had whilst on holiday in Turkey decades ago. It was an event branded into the family's hard drive and was still talked about now and again. The memory reminded her of how hysteria can spread very rapidly through a crowd even if some of their number don't understand the precise danger. Cilla and her family had been on a bus in Turkey. The driver had mistakenly left the main road and ventured up a narrow track that wound steeply around a forested mountain. The offside wheels left the track and the bus swayed from side to side. The driver stopped but not before a huge man built like an American fridge freezer started yelling that he wanted to get off. As the other passengers sensed that this man mountain was frightened, so began the frenzied shouting at the driver and young children began to scream.

Cilla felt her jaw clamp shut so she couldn't join in with the cacophony. She tried to appear calm whilst her children looked at her for reassurance with their eyes wide in terror. The driver cursed and disembarked leaving his passengers to figure out the best course of action.

Cilla glanced across at Emily and Jay picturing them aboard that bus.

CHAPTER 3

Cilla's train of thought, remembering that strange bus trip in Turkey, was distracted by the flight attendant with the drinks trolley.

She heard Jay ask the steward for a paper bag for Emily to help bring her breathing under control. Hopefully then she could relax.

Jay had hoped the trauma Emily had suffered would have eased over time. What had happened a few months ago had been heart breaking, not only for her but also her younger brother Matt.

He knew that Emily would have no issues with the landing at Charles de Gaulle airport. Landings didn't bring back the memory of what had happened to her parents.

Emily and Jay had been enjoying a week's holiday in Cornwall with their teenage children. Their days of holidays abroad had ceased when the children were born, mainly due to the cost. The few trips abroad they had enjoyed as newlyweds had been wonderful. Greece, Italy, Portugal and Turkey. All had been memorable for different reasons, especially a bus trip in Turkey.

Halfway through their week in Cornwall Matt had phoned Emily's mobile. He had sounded quite shaken and said it was urgent. " It's mum and dad " he said in a choking voice, " there's been a terrible accident". Emily couldn't comprehend what he was saying.

Their parents were flying back from their annual trip to Kuala Lumpur, Matt had dropped them at Heathrow Airport two weeks ago.

" Have you heard or seen the BBC news " he queried "A Boeing 787 Dreamliner has crashed shortly after take off from Kuala Lumpur airport ". Emily attempted to calm her younger brother despite a feeling of panic welling up in her chest. " Matt " she quietly asked " How do you know the parents were on that particular flight ?". " Because I booked their tickets for them " he replied "I know their flight number " his voice breaking into sobs, " the BBC are saying there were no survivors". Emily told Matt to stay calm and that she would call him back.
In a few minutes.

She immediately attempted to call both her parents on their mobile phones. No response on either phone. Jay confirmed the news on his mobile, also the flight details with Matt. Now it was a waiting game, hoping that they had somehow missed their flight home, it was not to be. The crash happened after take off when the plane appeared to just drop from the sky.

The following month had been extremely difficult, not just for Emily and Jay but also their daughters Louise and Lydia who adored their grandparents. Emily and Matt whilst completely devastated had grown closer. Hopefully they were now coming to accept that they were orphans.

Jay had booked a last minute trip to Paris. Not only wanting Emily to enjoy a change of scene but some much needed time together as a couple. Jay despite his feigned cheerful manner had serious concerns over Emily's terror at take off. He worried that she wouldn't be able to go through that ordeal again to get home.

CHAPTER 4

Paper bag for Emily, a measure of whisky for Jay, he was beginning to regret this 'bright' idea. Then, with the seat belt sign pinging up, the captain's voice crackled over the tannoy that they were about to begin their descent into Paris Charles de Gaulle airport. Cilla glanced across at Emily and gave a sympathetic look at her pale, sweaty face, makeup forming in streaks. Cilla opened her handbag to find a mirror as she hoped that she didn't look that bad! She was being met at the airport by Maximilian, (he didn't like his name shortened!) 'Good looking, intelligent, athletic, comfortable said his details on the Match app, she was trying yet another app, hoping to find 'The One.' Emily still had the landing to get through and, as there was a cross wind, 'Was the captain experienced enough in that situation?' She kept her eyes tightly closed, body tense, feeling very, very sick.

There was a slight swaying of the aircraft, side to side, followed by a gentle bump. Next thing she heard, people were cheering and clapping....terra firma!

Jay made a sideways glimpse at Emily, there was no doubt that she had really suffered on the short flight which didn't bode well for his future plans of exploring more of the big, wide world that they had started to enjoy when they first got together.

Emily wanted her legs to carry her down the steps off the plane as quickly as possible but they wouldn't move, all that tension had taken her strength away.

The taxi ride to the hotel around the Boulevard Periferique in the middle of the day wasn't the most relaxing, but, as she spotted the rebuilt Notre Dame, she was beginning to unwind. She needed a rest and a shower before going out again and lay on the bed, thinking about her fear of flying....However was she going to get back home? 'Why didn't we go on Eurostar, only three hours from London to Paris?' But it was Jay who found tunnels claustrophobic. Years ago, he had one of those expanding play tunnels for his birthday. His brothers and he used to play in it a lot until, one day, his brothers put it on the newly dug trench in the veggie patch by the soft earth. 'One, two, three.....nine, ten, coming to get you!' Jay had hidden in the tunnel and the brother who was 'It' had noticed. Thinking it would be amusing, he got the largest spade he could carry and started covering the tunnel with earth. Jay felt the ceiling caving in as the weight of the soil got heavier, causing him to panic. Fortunately his mother was watching from the kitchen window but the damage had been done.

Emily mustn't think of the return journey now, she must clear her mind and enjoy the time in Paris with Jay, after all just the two of them was an occasion to celebrate.

CHAPTER 5

As she lay there, the mental and physical exhaustion of her journey soon lead both Emily's body and mind to drift into a more relaxed state and ultimately into a quiet mindful sleep. Jay wearily gazed upon her with relief.

Though it may not have been such a good idea to travel so soon after the devastating family tragedy after all, he himself felt the strong desire to be set free from the all-encompassing situation back home. Stepping away, even for a few days, could help them both see the bigger picture from afar and begin to work through the raw emotions that Emily in particular understandably was going through.

Meanwhile, glad to be leaving behind the anxiety ridden woman 'Emily' who sat near her on the flight, Cilla made her way through all the necessary airport procedures. Whilst queuing at passport control, an earlier thought that had been lingering at the back of her mind came to the surface; had she not seen this woman somewhere before or did she simply resemble someone else whose name had escaped her?

Quickly leaving such ideas behind Cilla began to centre her thoughts on meeting Maximilian. How exciting to be meeting him for the first time and in Paris, the city of love! Butterflies began to gather in her stomach at the thought of what was ahead of her.....could this man really be the answer to her dreams? On paper at least he ticked all her boxes; but, had he been honest when compiling his profile? Cilla had. Well, mostly hadn't she?

Less than an hour later Emily slowly opened her eyes to see her dear husband slunk uncomfortably in one of the apartments's armchairs. He was fast asleep. Feeling more refreshed Emily began to realise that, though her anxieties seemingly were out of her control, she had not considered how difficult and distressing it was for Jay too. The tragedy had not happened to his parents but that did not mean that he too wasn't devastated by all that had happened. After all she knew that he was very close to her family as she was to his, and it was painful for him to see her, his beloved wife so distraught, just as it would be for her to see him if it had been Jay's parents who had died in a terrible accident.

Emily knew that, though she might falter, she was going do her utmost to be strong and do all she could to recognise and appreciate how lucky she was to be married to, and have a family with such a kind and loving husband. Dear Jay, she thought, as she made her way to the shower, he too has his own fears and anxieties; neither of us will ever truly get over what has happened, but we will get through it – together

CHAPTER 6

The next few days were wonderful. The pair toured the galleries, rode on the Grand Roue had their silhouettes cut in Montmartre and visited the Pere Lachaise which they had wanted to do for ages. Emily forgot about having to fly home, but all too soon the day of return arrived. She was determined to do her best and not to give in to her fears.

They arrived at the airport in good time. While waiting to board Emily studied the other passengers. She recognised a woman who had sat across the aisle from her on the outward journey. This time she was accompanied by a tall, rather attractive, well dressed, man. The woman caught her eye and smiled. Emily smiled back nervously, wondering what the woman had made of her antics on the plane coming. They came over to introduce themselves. Her name was Cilla and her handsome companion, Maximilian, Emily, well impressed, thought it suited him perfectly. "How do you feel about flying back?" enquired Cilla. Before Emily could reply. "Oh are you a nervous flier too?" asked Maximilian. He was obviously not referring to himself but Cilla. "It's the safest form of travel you know, you'll be fine" he added unoriginally. Emily and Cilla exchanged a sympathetic glance. The former re-evaluating her initial impression.

Thirty minutes later they were onboard. Emily fastened her seat belt immediately for security. The aisle seat next to her was vacant until, at the last minute, a tardy passenger arrived to fill it. She studied him, he was young with olive skin and wearing a black and yellow track suit. He didn't stow his backpack but placed it between his feet. He looked more nervous than she was, in fact there were beads of sweat on his forehead.. He avoided looking at the other passengers. Was he also a nervous flyer? Or, was he up to no good? Emily wondered anxiously. Just then, Jay leaned over and whispered "Well done" in her ear. She wondered why, then realised she'd been so intent on the late arrival she'd been totally unaware that the plane had taken off and was climbing.

A few moments later her fears were realised when the young guy leapt up shouting something about diverting while brandishing what looked like a gun. There was uproar. Emily who'd been contemplating this very scene and what she might do in response had an idea if she could just summon up the courage. She wasn't going to let this upstart get away with endangering her life. A stewardess who had just left the galley after hearing the commotion found herself behind the hijacker and in shock dropped the flight manifest from her hand.

As it thudded to the carpet he turned towards the sound and Emily who'd been waiting for such an opportunity, immediately grabbed his back pack and aimed it forcefully at the gunman's head knocking him to the floor. Other passengers helped hold him there until the stewards arrived with plastic zip ties to secure his wrists.

Before the plane landed the Captain thanked Emily over the PA system and the passengers and crew applauded. Emily was the hero of the hour. She asked about the would be hijacker. It transpired that the gun was fake and the authorities had contacted his relatives in Paris and found he'd not been taking his medication.

The airline in gratitude presented her with free flights for life.

August 2026

Choices

Written by NWR Horsley

Choices

Hannah was in the kitchen finishing off the dessert she was making. It was her son's 16th birthday and she was making a special meal for them all to eat together to celebrate. It had been a difficult time lately; Zak was nearly always out, giving little information as to where he was going or who he was meeting. Max, short for Maxine her 14 year old daughter, who had always been easy and open now seemed to spend most of her time shut up in her room and barely spoke to her unless necessary.

If there was a problem they certainly did not want to discuss it with her, not at the moment anyway, she would bide her time.

It was while Hannah was musing on this and thinking they would have to make a special effort to become a family once again when the doorbell rang.

It seemed to shrill extra loudly in the quiet kitchen and she jumped, spilling the cream she was holding. A look of irritation crossed her face 'who could be calling at this hour?' It was most inconvenient. She wiped her hands and went slowly and reluctantly to the door.

Her neighbour opposite who was out watering her plants could not help but notice the myriad of emotions that passed over her new neighbour's face.

Hannah, stared at the visitor, transfixed, she held tightly on to the door frame as memories swam in front of her eyes and although she opened her mouth to speak no sound came out.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" the voice said, and Hannah, with great misgivings opened the door a little wider.

Hannah is aware that her neighbour is watching this male visitor with interest and realises she will have to let him in with a welcoming smile.

She backs away when he tries to hug her and anxiously looks at her daughter's bedroom door. Satisfied that Maxine can't hear her she tells David that he can't visit her on his own and that "things are bad enough already".

He looks at her sympathetically and nods in agreement but can't help himself when he says "We can't keep this secret forever. The children will find out eventually".

Hannah shakes her head. She knows that teenagehood is stressful enough without adding to it. "My husband is prepared to keep the real reason for our divorce away from our children until they are older".

David starts to protest when Maxine opens her door and walks into the room and the atmosphere changes. To answer her daughter's confused expression Hannah explains that this is David and his son has recently started at their school having lived in Dubai. He wants to ask Hannah some questions about the school. Hannah explains that they were good friends at university.

"David. I need to get on with making a birthday supper for Zac so perhaps we could continue this chat at some other time" ushering him to the door, grateful that Zac was not yet home.

Then quietly adding " I don't know how we're going to sort this out , but you can't come here again.

If you hear anything else you can find me in Sainsburys after work every Thursday."

With her head reeling Hannah turned back to the job in hand...Zac's birthday meal. Dessert complete she started chopping vegetables for the stir fry "Ouch" as the knife slipped. It was no good, she couldn't concentrate. How one's life could suddenly change because of one decision years before. Things have ways of catching up with you. "Oh God, let Zac and Max have more sense than I did back then."

She thought back to those student days, so carefree, their whole lives before them ; endless possibilities. Then that offer: she and David. "No one will know" the man had said. "You'll look no different to any other student travellers". Oh why did we not see what we were getting involved with? and now the world had changed. Damn those investigative journalists! Damn her husband's principles! Why did she ever tell him? Now he says he feels he's been duped: his lovely wife is not the person he thought she was; all because of something stupid she did years before. "What if it got in the papers?", he said "What of my career?" No thought of her or the children: always his career, and fear of the press. But it wouldn'tsurely...they couldn't track her down...it was years ago.

Hannah and David had loved those long, carefree student days. Long days travelling the world, but they knew their time would end and that despite their love for each other they would go their separate ways. But here was David back in Hannah's life after she had had spent so many years trying to forget him. What did he want?

Should Hannah tell Zac and Max the real story of her life and the reason Malcolm had left. Or would that be too challenging for two teenagers trying to find their own way in the world and coming to terms with their lives now that Malcolm was no longer part of them. His absence was felt keenly by them all. Hannah was concerned that David's presence would challenge all of them; their perspectives, their memories and their relationships. What should she do?

Zac and Max had seen David. Had they heard Hannah agree to meet David on Thursday evening. Perhaps then Hannah would find out why David had come back.

What could she do now? Where could she go for help? No time to do anything now. Hannah had Zac's birthday to celebrate.

"Happy Birthday, Zak!"

Hannah bore in the cake, topped with a token candle, he was far too grown up now for the full number.

Zak leant back in his chair

"Thanks, Mum, that's my favourite". Then he leant forward to blow out the candle. Hannah felt relieved, and at the same time, encouraged, that the three of them had enjoyed the celebratory meal together without the usual gripes and sniping between the two youngsters. Maybe they were growing up at last.

"Are you meeting up with your mates?" she asked, casually, she hoped

"Yeah, probably round at Liam's"

Max looked a bit left out so, when she asked if she could go round to her friend's, to do homework she said, Hannah relented even if it was a school night.

After the two of them had left, chatting between themselves, almost like normal brother and sister, a deafening silence fell over the house. Hannah now had no option but to consider what she should do now after the strange events of the day.

Should she tell the children everything? Are they mature enough to cope?

Should she ignore David and hope that he will go away? Unlikely to work and who knows if there is anyone else involved.

Should she beg Malcolm to help and support her? In his current mood that seemed a very long shot, without much chance of success.

After some thought she came to a decision. Maybe it was the nuclear option but it would leave everyone the space to get on with their lives.

She sat down at her little "working from home" desk and opened her laptop and began to type.

'Dear Malcolm. Yes, you are still dear to me despite all that has happened recently. You know my history now and the stupid decisions I made all those years ago. I am sad that you have not as yet been able to appreciate that I have changed since then and am now a far more responsible person.

Now Zak and Maxine should be our focus. It seems that someone who may wish me harm has tracked me down, so, rather than bring any danger to Zak and Max, and to you, it is best that I disappear from your lives.

Do not try to find me; all that I ask is that you support and care for the children as you have always done so lovingly in the past. I am sure that you will be viewed as the heroic one left to pick up the pieces and look after the innocent, abandoned children and your career will survive, even flourish.

Take care of them, and yourself

Your loving ex-wife Hannah'

Her finger hesitated over the 'send' button, she dithered, "Right thing? Wrong thing?" but then went ahead, not seeing any alternative.

Now she had to act quickly, pack up and disappear before the children got home. She picked up a pen, found a piece of paper and wrote a note:-

'Hi both.

I hope you had a good time. Please phone your father as he wants to speak to you. I have just sent him a message.

I have to go away but remember I love you and always will.

Mum xx'

Dead House

Written by NWR Droitwich Spa

NWR Story

Part 1.

She stood on the balcony of the 'Dead House', looking at the reflections on the meandering river and the boat racing upstream leaving foamy ripples as it passed. In the distance, the vista of office blocks, tower blocks, churches, and bridges spread across the horizon. With the sun high in the sky a thousand windows reflected back at her like so many sparkling, all seeing eyes. Although the city was spread out in front of her the balcony of the Dead House, was perched above the river, where it had stood for many hundreds of years and the water below continued to swirl gently against the shore. The 'Dead House' is a pub so called because, after funerals in the nearby churchyard, it hosted the traditional 'wake' to mark the passing of loved ones. It was somewhere she had been before. In fact, she had been here countless times over many years and had shed tears for those she had loved and lost. Standing here today, looking out at this familiar scene, the tears wouldn't come. She felt numb and wasn't sure what she felt or what she should do.

She had seen them at the graveside all five of them, all wearing black and with the look of grief on their faces. They had all, in their own time, glanced across at her, one or two had shown a brief hint of recognition, the others had stared blankly showing no sign of how well they knew her. But they did know her and as she stood looking across the river she waited for them to come and find her. They would come. Of that much, she was sure. Each of them would follow her onto the balcony and bring with them their version of the man they had just buried. Each would have their own requests, their own excuses and their own demands. Was she ready to deal with them? Would she be able to respond with dignity or would they, in turn, crush her resolve? Would she be strong?

She knew who would come first, who would peel away from the rest of the mourners, who would make his excuses, who would grab, as he passed the bar, another drink to steel his nerves. He would have his preprepared story and would lay it out in front of her expecting her acceptance and perhaps even her gratitude. Would she give it? Then which of the other four would come next? She couldn't be sure although she knew they would come. They wouldn't be able to resist it, even though back in the graveyard they could barely catch her eye. However, she was sure of who would be last and she knew that, despite whatever the others might say, this story would be the hardest to predict.

She stood quietly looking out onto the surface of the river and as she expected, she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Had she been right in her prediction?

She was right. Of course, she was right. He was always the predictable one. Since their childhood, growing up together in the local village, he had been the one to make suggestions, plan their adventures, order their lives.

Part 2

He looked at her with a mixture of shame and defiance. He had never been able to hide his feelings, especially from her. When she had married her husband, whom they had just buried, he had found it hard to smile and laugh with all the guests. He had loved her, and he had let her down.

He spoke with a defiant look on his face. 'I'm sorry that I haven't seen you before today, while he was so ill. I would have come to support you, but you know how it is. Life is busy. I have been busy.'

'You have been avoiding me for years', she replied. 'You couldn't cope with the fact that I loved someone else. We had been friends since school along with the others. We had had adventures together, laughed and cried together and learned to be adults together.'

He looked down at his feet. He had to admire this woman who had such grace and assuredness. She was obviously grieving but still had that spark within her. What could he say to atone for his years of ignoring her. She used to invite them all to her parties, dinners and celebrations but he never replied and never went. Did the others go? He couldn't be sure as they never spoke about her. All felt ashamed of their behaviour after she left their circle and married someone else.

'I'm sorry, ' he replied. 'It was just that our lives grew apart when you moved away. I knew that you had returned a few years ago but it was never the right time to call you.'

She looked at him and said 'I have been hurt by you never replying to my invitations. I thought that we were friends and friends share their joys and sorrows. I never knew what you were doing or where you were. I wondered if you had moved away, married, had children. The silence between us became a wall. A wall I couldn't climb or see through'.

'I came to see you' he said 'as I needed to know. I needed to find out what you thought of me and whether we could be friends again. I have never married as you were my ideal woman and no-one else ever matched you. Could we be friends again?'

He abruptly turned away. Was he wrong, but he didn't want her to see his face. He moved to the doorway and looked back. She was looking out over the river again. He swiftly went back down the stairs. As he left the 'Dead House' he saw another person coming towards him. He wasn't surprised when he saw who it was.

Part 3

She had waited for this moment for years! She trod carefully as she approached on the stairs, wishing to catch her by surprise, now she was alone on the balcony. Emotions welled up inside her. Was she the only one who felt this way? She wanted answers.

What had happened all those years ago? Was it deliberate? What makes someone suddenly, inexplicably change direction?

It felt like yesterday, the shock and disbelief and the agony of wondering why. The sensation of betrayal, why she hadn't been confided in! She wasn't a fan of the man, but others had a more measured opinion. Maybe because of her own distress she wasn't able to appreciate the needs of others.

She stood at the doorway, a hundred questions in her mind, watching her on the balcony, gazing over the river.

It wasn't a surprise!" Her dearest friend turned to face her, stepped forward and gently embraced her. The years fell away, and the deep understanding between them briefly returned. "It cannot have been an easy decision for you to come today" she said softly. Then lifting her head she smiled, her resilience shone through revealing the proud woman she had become.

We moved slightly apart, taking in the physical changes that had occurred to us over time. It was now or never, the time was right! There were questions that had to be answered. Before a word could be uttered, suddenly, there was a shout from below. They both froze, did they recognize the voice?

Part 4

The one person she had not expected to turn up or wanted to meet was the brother of her late husband's first wife. He had always been a thorn in their side but neither of them had seen or heard of him for more than fifteen years. 'Blast!' he must have seen the death notice in the paper. She was visibly shaken to hear his voice now. But at the same time, she had almost plucked up the courage to try and engage her long-lost dear friend in some kind of belated explanation.

"Can I trust you if we slip out the back and across the way to that wine bar we used to visit?" she whispered. "I simply can't face him today of all days". Her friend nodded and they descended the stairs desperately hoping he wouldn't enter the building and confront them in the hallway. They made it into the High Street and the safety of a dingy corner of the 'Cork and Barrel'.

Her friend opened up the conversation first. "We five have remained friends and when we saw the notice in the paper, we made up our minds to come, not to intrude, possibly you think to gloat, but we genuinely wanted to see you once more. We knew we might not be welcome, but I suppose a morbid curiosity got the better of us, safety in numbers and all that."

"I had a feeling one of you might spot the death notice and come. I know you would have all been aware and dismayed at my behaviour all those years ago and, especially towards Mark. But in that moment, I was swept off my feet by my husband, I trusted

him. Please believe me I only discovered he was already married with two teenage daughters and a highly respected wife two years later. He lived a double life all that time and never once did I suspect he was a bigamist, but whilst ignorant of all this I tried hard to keep in touch with you all. I guess you knew what he was but said nothing”. She paused thoughtfully, tears welling up in her eyes, desperately seeking the courage to go on.

“Believe me when I discovered he was already married and living a double life I was about to leave him, but she (*his other wife*) suddenly died leaving the girls who were then in their late teens to fend for themselves. Their pain was awful to witness, and they refused to have anything to do with their father once the truth became apparent – he could do nothing to persuade them to come and live with us. After that there was no reason for me to leave. The police determined the situation was uncomfortably resolved. After all he had always been decent to me, I wanted for nothing, I built a good life for us and our son”.

Her friend pondered for a moment. “Mark was devastated at you falling for someone else, even though he was partly to blame. He wanted to make amends but no, you could not wait, always head strong. But taking off with someone else so quickly! For God’s sake why?”

Part 5

Before Harriet could respond her son Jake walked into the bar, anxiously scanning the clientele. He spotted Harriet and walked purposefully towards her, relief showing on his face. As she watched him she was struck as always by how much he resembled his father. The same athletic build and shock of wavy black hair. He was about the same age now as David had been when she first met him. The thought brought tears to her eyes and she had to struggle to hold them back, although no-one would blame her for being upset today of all days.

“Mum, thank goodness I’ve found you. Everyone at the wake is asking for you. Of course we understood why you needed some time to yourself and went up to the balcony, but I was worried when I found that you weren’t there any more. People are beginning to leave and want to say goodbye to you.”

“OK love. I’m just catching up with Sarah. We were best friends at uni but we haven’t seen each other for years. Sarah, this is Jake, my son.”

Sarah and Jake politely exchanged a few words and then Jake turned to return to the wake.

“I’ll just be a few more minutes Jake. Please explain to everyone.”

As soon as Jake had left, Sarah spoke again.

“So, Harriet. After all these years I think you owe us, and me particularly, an explanation. Why ever did you just take off like that?”

Harriet thought back to the events that had totally changed the course of her life. The summer of 1986, when she and her friends had inter-railed around Europe, celebrating the successful completion of their degrees, enjoying being free of any responsibilities. She and Mark, revelling in being young and in love. A kaleidoscope of scenes flashed through her mind: the azure blue sea and golden sands of the Greek islands, the sprawling masterpiece of Islamic and Moorish architecture of the Alhambra, walking in the Swiss Alps among the stunning wildflower meadows, relaxed suppers of pasta and red wine during long, balmy evenings in Umbria. It was the summer that they had met David. Charming, suave, sophisticated David. The love of her life despite everything. Also, of course, the summer that Lisa....

“Harriet! Harriet! Are you ok?”

“Oh sorry Sarah. I was miles away, thinking back to THAT summer.”

Part 6

‘Mum, I’m off now’.

Harriet put down her book and went into the hall. Jake had his back to her while struggling with his key to open the front door. His bag slipped from his shoulder and it landed with a thud on the tiled floor. She looked on admiringly. The same head and shoulders - she squashed the feeling, it was too powerful. Jake turned and they hugged, tight and slightly lingering. They were used to these separations, it had been four years since the funeral. Jake was 26. She hadn’t lost him yet. They exchanged a few finalities and he walked towards the car, threw his bag in the back seat. He turned on the engine before leaning out of the window.

‘Be careful,’ he shouted, with a smile on his face. They both laughed in recognition – that was her line! Not until the car left the drive did the tears come. Just a few, of pride and joy, they were salty and she let them dry naturally.

The house took on a silence once again and her inner voice became her muse. She fingered the wedding invitation on the hall stand. ‘Do I really want to go?’ She recognised that she felt differently now compared with her feelings on the day of the funeral. There had been no resolutions. Questions had not been pursued, it wasn’t the occasion. They had all parted after exchanging pleasantries, and truly, their thoughtfulness had been endearing. There had been little contact since then and the discomfort remained. She really needed to forget and forgive, to be able to breath freely once again.

She turned her mind to the day ahead. She had arranged to have a conversation with the new intern, the young woman, bright and likeable, gregarious, clever. She needed to speak to her. It would be tricky. But she wasn't a team player! She reflected for a moment on her younger self - 'Was I a team player. Hm?' She put the invitation back on the hall stand. 'Maybe I should go'.

It had been a successful day. She felt pleased. She had handled the situation, amicably, decisively, rationally. She felt stronger, calmer, happier even. She poured herself a glass of wine, carried it into the lounge. The dark beams and high bookshelves gave her an inner peace. It felt comfortable, she imagined him there sitting opposite. She slumped into the soft leather chair and found herself drifting into that other world.

The accident had been horrific. Lisa had come off worse, her leg crushed. It was a beautiful day. The sea looked calm with a gentle breeze, the last day of the holiday.

We were all to blame and we were all guilty. We were simply having fun, carefree. Yes carefree! It was his boat, he had taken the helm, he could navigate, he knew the navigation rules, we could all relax. The boat danced on the waves and the spray was cold and sharp. He was a wonderful water-skier. He was an expert helmsman, he had taken charge, (of everything), and they blamed him for doing so. My heart warmed to him at that moment and there was no looking back. Mark shot me a piercing glance. He knew.

Lisa wanted a turn at the helm. David wasn't keen. I saw that fleeting hesitation, then that all too hasty abandonment of risk. Lisa insisted, we all insisted. She was dependable, daring and trustworthy, she knew how to balance enjoyment with caution, the values we all shared. We understood these things, it would be fine, we were confident. Lisa was competent, we knew that. But Lisa didn't know the navigation rules.

It was chaos when we crashed. David was amazing. I was proud of his bravery, his courage, his expertise and efficiency. It would have been much worse without his quick, clear response. We followed his instructions and survived pretty much, but not without injury, hurt, damage, separation. Lisa had a long stay in hospital. They blamed him. Then they blamed me. We all recovered slowly. I needed to escape. My relationship with David was taking me down a new path.

She answered the invitation. "I wonder what she will be like, Mark's new wife?"

PART 7.

Once again Harriet stood gazing out on a tranquil scene. The High Street of the small, honey coloured Cotswold village was quiet now. The people bustling in and out of the shops or standing with friends in gossiping groups had gone home for the evening. If she

leaned slightly out of the half opened window she could see the rays of the setting sun shining through the trees which surrounded the graveyard of the little church at the end of the street, the church where Mark would be married in the morning. She had seen photos in the Tatler of his bride, Isabella, a sweet looking young woman, several years younger than him, the P.A. to his boss at Price Waterhouse.

She had just decided that it was time to go downstairs for dinner when she was startled by the shrill tones of the phone beside the bed, The hotel receptionist informed her that a gentleman was downstairs in the lobby asking to see her. She was not surprised but slightly alarmed to find Mark waiting for her. "Whatever are you doing here?" she exclaimed. "Surely you need to be with your family tonight?" "I had to get away from all the fuss", he replied rather sheepishly. "I wanted to be alone with you just one more time",

They found a quiet corner of the lounge bar and settled down with their drinks. He asked about Jake and she asked about Isabella and their plans. Suddenly he moved closer to her and took her hand saying urgently. "I have never lost my love for you. If I asked you, would you come away with me tonight? I have no idea where we would go or what we would do but I don't care as long as we are together." For one delirious moment she allowed him to pull her into a long, passionate kiss as she surrendered to long forgotten sensations. Then her brain reasserted itself and she pulled away. "Dear Mark" she sighed, "you were always the impetuous one. You cannot throw away your chance of happiness. Isabella is your ideal companion and I am an independent woman who has no wish for more emotional entanglements. Jake is settled in his career, I have detached myself from our friends and came here to put the past behind me. I am looking forward to a new chapter in my life. Besides, we would not be able to live with the guilt of the hurt we would cause". He paused for a moment then said with a rueful smile "You are right. You always are. Forgive me". "Of course," she said, raising her hand to touch him gently on the cheek. "Now go, before I change my mind".

Traditions Can Change

Written by NWR Edenbridge

Chapter 1

It's the start of a new week for me. I should be safe for the next few hours as they will think I have gone to work. What they don't know is that my three friends - my only friends - are helping me to escape. They are putting their lives on hold and putting themselves in danger to help me. My life is on the line. I just cannot accept the way of life they want me to follow. I was born and brought up here but it did not stop my family expecting me to live the type of life I would have lived had I been born in Pakistan. My name is Karmala and I am 17 years old and live in The Midlands. My friends are all white British but we have been friends since primary school and share all our secrets with each other. When I told them my family were arranging my marriage to a boy from a "suitable family" and that I had not even met him, they were horrified. It was at that point they put the plan together to get me away. Paula, Lucy and Sara are my age and Lucy drives so the plan is to leave when I should be going to work in Auntie's shop. It will take a little time for all my family to find out I am not where I should be. Hopefully by that time we will be a good distance away. Sara's parents are on a three month cruise but they have a holiday home in a remote area of Wales so that will be our initial stopping place to make plans for the next move. Paula is always really organised and has taken on the role of 'mum' gathering essentials for us so we don't have to be seen at shops on the way and even thought to get a couple of canisters of extra petrol for the car. The others have packed holdalls and taken extra clothes for me as we are all about the same size. We have tried to think of as many things as possible and at the last minute I secreted my passport from the family chest which always sat proudly in full view on the sideboard in the front room. It is unlikely anyone will look in there for a while. We hoped we had time and distance on our side. The girls were all waiting for me in the car near my Auntie's shop and as soon as I jumped in Lucy drove off making sure I lay down on the back seat to avoid being seen and to avoid detection by cameras. This was it. I am going to be free like my friends. We headed for the motorway to make our way to Wales. Have we done enough to put distance between my family and us? My friends are risking their freedom for me. They have no idea the lengths my family will go to. Please let us escape safely

Chapter 2

I'm really panicking now, Karmala, my beautiful 17 year old daughter has gone missing. She works in Auntie's shop and Auntie has just phoned to say that she didn't turn up for work today. I know she's been very upset lately because we want her to marry a boy she hasn't met, from a family in our community. She doesn't want to but it has always been our way in Pakistan to have arranged marriages. I've called her phone that she always carries but it's switched off. Where is she? I'm frightened to tell her father in case she really has run away.

My name is Begam and my family came to England over twenty years ago. I have found it hard to learn English, we never speak it in our house but I have made friends with one of my neighbours, an older English lady called Jane. She is really kind and friendly and is helping me learn some English words, my family are pleased. They wanted me to go to classes to learn but I can't.

I have three daughters and one son, Karmala is the eldest. The younger children will be so frightened if Karmala doesn't come home soon.

My husband, Ahmed works really hard in the family restaurant and takeaway business. It's called Spice Station, they have five restaurants in the area. He works during the day at one of the restaurants and then makes food deliveries in the evening, he's a good man. But I know he will want her to marry a Pakistani boy, his family will insist and make it very difficult for us all if she doesn't do as her family says. It will bring shame on us all. How will we survive?

I'll phone her friends Lucy, Paula and Sara, they're great girls, they might know. Their phones are switched off too.

I'll have to tell Ahmed, he won't want to tell the police, he'll ask his family to find her. Something awful might happen, I know my cousin's friend knew of an honour killing of a girl who disobeyed her family. My beautiful Karmala where are you? I can't drive and don't have a car, how can I find her without telling my husband? If I can cover for her for a couple of days she might realise she's made a mistake and come home. That's a good plan, I'll just tell Ahmed that she's staying with her friends for a couple of days. How can I keep calm when I'm feeling so distraught but I must be strong and control my feelings for my daughter's sake. Karmala, please let me know you are safe!

Chapter 3

I am Karla now, new identity , I have opened a bank account in that name and been secreting money for a couple of weeks. I still cant believe what my family expect me to do, will my 9 A stars count for nothing, my dream is to study medicine and work for MSF

We need to stop, I need to get rid of my phone, Im sure my uncle has put a tracker on it, so as we pass the train station Sara hops out, hoody up, face down and disappears onto the platform where the Glasgow express is due and slips it into a travellers bag. That might work to move searches away from our planned destination, hope she evaded the cameras

The cottage is amazing, absolutely in the back of beyond. We unpack, eat, play music and finally can relax a bit for tomorrow is my transformation day. Paula gives me a haircut, short bob and fringe, next is colour, chestnut, it is so amazing I don't recognise myself especially wearing the plain lens glasses bought in Boots and Paula's clothes. Wow, I have a total new look.

Lucy has a cousin, Anna ,at Aberystwyth uni and our plan is for me to stay in her room over the summer whilst she is abroad backpacking. I plan to find work . That was easy, cash in hand, a few hours waitressing in a local cafe. There are few people of my origin here so if my family do come searching I might spot them easily. I must be vigilant.

I woke up, there was a knock on the door, jumped off the sofa and hid in the bathroom. Hearing a female voice call, Anna relaxed and went to meet her. It was Anna's mum bringing her a celebration cake. She was with friends she introduced as her NWR walking group on their way to the beach. Invited to join them we set off , it was good to get exercise. Naturally I was questioned and I just burst into tears and confided in them . They were all so shocked that arranged marriages could happen in the 21st century they offered to help in any way possible. I'm really upset I can't contact Mum so they are finding a way to do it and I trust them. One lady, a retired lecturer, is going to help me find fast track A levels. In a year I might be heading for uni IF it all works out..
Stay vigilant.

Chapter 4

Ahmed reacted more angrily than I could have imagined. Karmala had been gone for five days before I finally plucked up the courage to tell him she was missing. On the fifth evening when he returned from his deliveries, he again asked where she was. I had to admit that I didn't know, that she hadn't been staying with her friends here and that they were all apparently missing. No one had any idea where they were. The only clue was that they had left in Lucy's car. His face changed, his eyes flashed angrily and he pushed me roughly aside as he picked up his coat and stormed out of the house.

I knew where he was going; to his brothers and I also knew this would only mean danger for Karmala.

I awoke as dawn broke and I could see a faint streak of pink through my half closed curtains. Ahmed's side of the bed was empty and cold, he hadn't been home that night. But where was he and how was he going to find our beloved daughter? What would he do when he did?

I decided to go next door in the hope that Jane was in and perhaps be able to help me. It was just gone nine when I knocked on the door. I didn't have to wait long until Jane was smiling broadly and ushering me into her cosy sitting room.

Between my tears I told her all that had happened and how frightened I was at what Ahmed and his brothers might do to her if they found her first. She was horrified that such practices were still going on in respectable homes in the leafy suburbs of Birmingham. She didn't know if we could find her any more easily than Ahmed. She did, however, know Lucy's and Paula's mothers and thought this would be a good place to start. She found her jacket and bag and stepped out of the door and hurried off down the road.

I went home and sat staring into space in the silent house. Suddenly my phone rang, startling me. I looked at the number and it was Karmala's. With shaking fingers I answered it. A Scottish voice said "Who am I speaking to?"

Chapter 5

I am now starting to relax a little more now, but it hasn't been easy. Unexpected noises and voices used to frighten me and I always sounded terrified when I responded to questions, even if they were from my friends.

I'm beginning to study, which helps, nothing like working towards 'A' levels to take one's mind off other things happening. That's what I cannot understand. My father was so pleased with my GCSE results - why do I have to stop my education and marry someone that my father chooses and have children - can't that happen years in the future when I have finished my education? I will choose the man with whom I wish to share my life. We live in England and that is how it is done here. It is difficult that I can't talk to Mum, but to keep safe I need to be sure that no-one knows where I am.

It's time for me to go and do my waitressing job, it helps to pass the time and means I have some money when I need to move on.

A few hours later and I am returning to the cottage - a little more money to add to my pot. There is a car parked outside the cottage which is strange, who on earth has come here, the middle of nowhere? I push open the door and enter. Anna's mum and one of her friends, Lizzie, are inside and talking to the others. When they see me they smile and say they have an idea as to what I should do. Lizzie works at a school, and is happy for me to come and live with her for a while and get my 'A' levels at her school, that way I should be able to apply for a university place over the next year. The other NWR ladies are all able and happy to do what they can to help. That way all my school friends will be able to go home and say they had a very nice holiday together and had no idea I was missing, I had just said to them that I was unable to go with them.

One of the NWR ladies will try to contact my mother and let her know that I am fine, but will not tell her where I am in case my father finds out. I am sure that my uncles have persuaded my father that I should marry whoever the family decides, being a girl means so little to them, they really have to make all big decisions for her.

Chapter 6

We sat talking for a long, long time, my friends wanting to help and the adults trying to find a solution. I know there is no easy way out and I have known of girls who have tried to refuse a marriage and have been locked indoors or sent back to Pakistan. I am so frightened. It was finally decided that Lucy, Paula and Sarah should return home. It was also agreed that my mother should be informed that I am well and missing my family.

I am so worried for Karmala, she has been missing for several days and I want her to come home. Her sisters are missing her so much. I have had a telephone call from Scotland and the lady had found this phone in her bag and she did not know how it got there and then another telephone call from a lady saying that Karmala is safe and well and would like to talk to me without Ahmed knowing. I don't know what to do. I love Karmala and would like to help, but this is the way things are done in our families and Karmala is bringing dishonour, disgrace and shame to the family. It will be very bad for her sisters. I am so worried, I go and see my friend Jane to see if she can help me. Jane says I must talk to Karmalait. It could be at her house at a given time. I will try. If Ahmed finds out I will be in big, big trouble.

Anna, Lucy's cousin, has arranged for me to speak to mum at Jane's house. I cry and say I miss my family but I want to finish my education. Mum will talk with dad but she has little hope but will phone me in two days time. I believe I will have to do this on my own and accept the very kind offer to stay with Lizzie and fast track my A Levels and work to pay for my keep. Another telephone call at Jane's house. Mum tells me there has been a big family consultation with dad and Aunty. Aunty is dad's eldest sister and is very highly regarded by the senior members of the family. Dad is very proud of your examination results and has discussed our family affairs and your education at length with the Imam at the Mosque and the Imam is in favour of education for girls. Aunty has already lived her own independent life in owning a shop. Mum tells me that dad has agreed that I can live with Aunty until my A level results.

I am not sure now what I should do. I love my family and it does seem a good arrangement for me but will dad keep to that arrangement or should I go it alone with the help of Lizzie.....

Chapter 7

I go to bed but cannot sleep. My mind is racing. A decision has to be made.

I miss my family. Paula, Lucy and Sara will be returning home tomorrow. Should I go with them? The plan to stay with Auntie until I complete my A level studies is a sensible compromise. She will welcome me and our relationship has always been close. It's encouraging to know that my father has spoken to the Imam. Would this be enough for my father to have a change of heart? He might be very upset that I ran away and I don't want to bring dishonour and shame to my family. Staying in Wales with support from my new friends who have been so kind to me just doesn't feel right. Oh, what shall I do? Will I become a doctor or marry a man that I have no love for and have his children? After a short sleep I am awake at 5am. Lucy wakes first and I confide in her that I have come to a decision. Lucy feels it is best to wait until the others wake then we can discuss everything together. I have to return to Birmingham. It has always been my home. Living with Auntie, working in her shop and studying hard to get grades good enough for medical school, then spending time with all my family will be a priority when I have free time. Later that day, after saying goodbye to Anna and Lizzie and thanking them for showing me so much kindness and understanding, we have a group hug and set off back to Birmingham. Lucy will drop me off first. My father will be at work. I will talk to him in a few days. Our journey is slow and takes a long time. My eyes are closing but I can't sleep now. Mother comes to the door and smiles. My sisters and brother run to the door shouting "Karmala" and I feel the tears starting to flow. My father is at home sitting in his armchair looking tired and unwell. He calls me over and takes my hands. Has the stress of me running away brought this on? My mother reassures me that in recent months he has been seeing the doctor without telling anyone. Tomorrow his younger brother Karim will take him to hospital in the morning for more tests and to see a consultant. I will stay at home tonight in my bedroom that I share with my sisters. They are so happy. Breakfast the next morning with all the family is a noisy affair. Mother and father are so pleased that we are all together again. Karim arrives to take father to his appointment followed by Auntie who takes me to her shop. Later that afternoon Auntie receives a call from mother. Father has kidney failure and needs

to start dialysis urgently, four times a week, to help him get stronger. Two weeks later I am back at school. Sixth form is great. I am living with Auntie and it gives me plenty of time to study and working in the shop gives me money to spend. Father's treatment is going well and his consultant has referred him to a transplant specialist. A few days later I visit father after school and he tells me Karim has offered to give him a kidney if he is compatible. He then tells me about his hospital visits and how excellent his consultant is - praising her knowledge and how she always spends time explaining everything. She is from Pakistan and her name is Begam just like mother. Six weeks later I visit father and Karim is with him. Tomorrow morning they will go to the hospital for the transplant surgery. Father asks me about my studies. He is sure that I will become an excellent and caring doctor and we hug. I am filled with joy! Father and Karim recover well and will soon be making plans to return to work. A lady that I have never met has helped change my future. Thank you Dr. Begam Khan

What is it about the sea that draws so many of us towards the coast? Is it because we are an island and nowhere in the UK is very far from the sea, whereas other countries may be landlocked or many hundreds of miles from any stretch of water?

I have always loved family holidays on the beach, even though when I was young the weather probably wasn't too warm as our family didn't go abroad – my father said he had seen enough during his wartime service overseas! The water is mesmerizing, constantly changing shape and colour but virtually impossible to capture on film or canvas. As you enter the water you experience many different sensations, what is underfoot, seaweed swirling around your legs, the movement of the waves and above all the shock of cold water on a previously warm body! Wild swimming in lakes and rivers is very popular, at any time of year, but not for me. The water has to be warm and welcoming, although I do enjoy bodyboarding when the waves are high enough.

The constant movement of the water means that your vision can conjure up images or sights that are hard to describe. Is this why we are still fascinated by stories about the Loch Ness monster? Loch Ness is an enormous body of water and crossing it in a small boat is an overwhelming sensation, surrounded by high mountains and dark impenetrable depths. Could there be something there, do you think you spotted movement or a strange shape just above the surface some way in the distance?

It was looking at old family holiday photographs that got me thinking about the sea. Mother died late last summer, and at first I couldn't bear to bring back memories of her. Everything was too raw. But now I'm beginning to venture into those happy places again.

When it came to holidays, Mother always insisted on being close to water. She said it brought her peace and gave her time to reflect. What caused her to make such a remark? Peace from what or whom? Reflect about what? Free from the stresses of domestic life and running a household, she was often quiet, almost withdrawn. At the time I put it down to relationship problems with my father. He could be quite difficult to manage and it was advisable to give him a wide berth. We assumed the war had made him like that, so we all tolerated it, but it must have been hard for Mother.

I finished with the photographs - saved a few but discarded many. The next task was sorting through Mother's many books. She was an avid reader, although lately she hadn't been able to concentrate well and found long novels too much to cope with. She loved the old classics like Dickens and Thomas Hardy, and I thought I'd like to keep some of those. They were such handsome editions anyway.

There were two bookcases in the house – one in the sitting room, the shelves bowing slightly under the weight of so many tomes, and one in

the bedroom. I tackled the easier job first. These were probably the novels she read most recently and were mostly paperbacks, with titles such as The Shell Seekers or The Cottage by the Sea. The sitting room job was a lot more daunting. The books were stacked in double rows, one in front of the other, and I knew it would take me many hours and boxes to get through. I tried to be as disciplined as possible.

It was when I was sorting through the second row on the third shelf down from the top that I came across a copy of The Sea, the Sea, a Booker Prize-winning novel by Iris Murdoch. I had never read this, but was intrigued by the title, so I began to flick through the pages. Suddenly the pages parted and another photograph fell out. It was an old black and white image of two girls. One was obviously my mother, her blond hair falling in ringlets around her shoulders. The other girl, maybe slightly younger, had a much darker complexion and black straight hair. I had never seen this person before, but Mother and she were very close. You could just tell. Who was she?

Some years earlier...

It was a long time ago when that black and white photo was taken, at a school event. I was 10 and Noor was 11. City life before the war was traditional for us both, even though we came from different cultural backgrounds. There were rules and expectations for girls especially, which we both rebelled against. We saw each other at school and had the same lively natures, always active and looking for something new. Lessons were strictly rote learning from the blackboard and no time to talk, except in hurried whispers. Playtime was the best part of the day and we sought each other out, even though this raised some negative comments from the other girls. We took no notice of the boys and they in turn ignored us and continued their rowdy games. We didn't fit in with any particular group but were happy to play together, complaining about our teachers and parents and daydreaming of freedom and adventures.

We longed to explore our surroundings and not just go from school to home. We were both allowed to go to the corner shop, to run errands, or, if we were lucky to buy sweets. On that fateful day, we met up and resolved to go further, to the park, and maybe along the canal. We had both been there with our parents but never alone. It was a hot, sunny day and we hated the thought of being cooped up in indoors. We had read about adventures in story books and wanted one of our own. We giggled at our daring and started off across the park, watching anxiously in case we saw anyone we knew. Some boys shouted at us and kicked a football in our direction, but we ignored them and carried on. Once we were in the copse, we slowed and looked around. The trees were bright green with new

leaves, and it was quieter and more shady. I felt a tinge of anxiety, as we were out of sight of everything familiar. However, Noor, always the leader, pushed on ahead, saying we were near the canal now. She ran on, leaving me to push my way through the bushes and that was the last time I ever saw her!

I struggled through the undergrowth getting scratched and scraped, increasingly worried about where Noor had gone. Eventually a vista opened up before me as I came out of the undergrowth onto the canal bank. I expected to see her there - looked all around, up and down but there was no sign. There were a few narrow boats moored under the trees to my right, I ran in that direction but one after another seemed closed up and empty. With increasing desperation, I began knocking on windows and shouting out but to no avail, every boat seemed deserted.

As I turned to look in the opposite direction towards a distant lock, a disturbance in the water caught my eye. I began to run along the towpath focusing on where I thought I'd seen movement, but the water was once again still and calm. I stopped and stared and stared but saw nothing. Then I heard a splashing sound and transferred my gaze to the bend in the distance. I saw that the water there was disturbed, rippling and forming little waves in a sort of "V" shape. I started running again and then froze in place as a bright flash of silver seemed to rise above the surface of the water, I had the impression of something enormous but as I got to the bend the waters settled again and I began to wonder if I'd imagined the shape, the water was once again still and smooth.

My daddy found me some hours later, lying in the long grass by the bend in the canal. I was fast asleep, filthy and covered in scratches, my dirty face bore the tracks of the many tears I had shed. He woke me quite brusquely and hoisted me onto his back to carry me home.

Back to the present

I woke up to find myself in the armchair with the black and white photograph still in my hand, thinking about mother's love of the sea and then I remembered that, although mother had loved being close to the sea, she had always been very nervous when we walked by the canal. Looking closely now at the photograph, I could see that this is where it must have been taken as there was a narrow boat right there in the background. I rushed to find my magnifying glass to read the name of the boat. It was hard to make out at first but after a while I was pretty sure that the name was *Water Nymph*. If I could trace the owner of the boat, then maybe I could trace the girl in the photograph with my mother.

An internet search lead me to the National Waterways Archive where I might be able to trace previous owners; a map of the uk canal system would also be a useful tool; and a plan began to form: I should hire a narrow boat, get to know the community on the canals; track down the *Water Nymph* and solve the mystery.

Looking back now, I can see that it was trying to escape grief that drove me deeper and deeper into this project. I think Harriet must have been worried about my mental health. It was not like her to be so helpful, but one afternoon,

after I had spent over an hour sharing my promising findings and my dead ends with her over afternoon tea, she became quite animated. “Mum, this is a mystery just crying out for AI! Send me everything you’ve downloaded and I’ll get Claude to crawl all over it. It will save you so much time!”

I wasn’t sure I needed to save time. I seemed to have a surplus, for the first time in my life. But it had been so long since Harriet had wanted to do anything with me, I bumbled my gratitude and forwarded all the mooring lists, repair receipts and tollage records.

With Harriet’s technology scouring the waterways material, I turned my attention back to the last remaining boxes from Mother’s attic. At the bottom of a large packing box, I found a smaller box, like an old-fashioned trunk. Along the top was a faded inscription: *The Suez Mediterranean Steamship Co.*

I recognized the large looping handwriting immediately – Grandmama’s. She and Mother had had a difficult relationship, but I had always enjoyed visiting her and listening to tales of her and Grandfather’s travels. There were hundreds of letters between my grandparents, and from Grandmama to Eliza, her closest sister. And then, an olive-green leather-bound book. There was a small brass lock, but it didn’t put up much resistance.

The entry that stopped me in my tracks was one of the last she had written. Dated 12 June 1938, it read:

I hope to goodness I have done the right thing. I suppose I may never know – until perhaps God judges me. Heaven knows Sabiha thought she was doing the right thing bringing her here. But she knew Noor was not safe here any longer. Not now Nabi has tracked them down. With his anger and his hold over so many people, I suppose it is miraculous that we actually managed to get them out of Egypt at all. They have settled so well here, it is a tragedy that they have had to flee once more. But their only chance of staying hidden was with the boat people, constantly moving, no schooling, no rent, no trace.

Poor Jessica is beside herself with worry. I hate not being able to tell her the truth about her very best friend, but I simply can’t.

An email alert pinged. Harriet apologizing for the lack of progress on her side – early 20th century penmanship was proving quite the match for Claude apparently. I typed a reply:

“Don’t worry darling. I’ve had a bit of a breakthrough. How about we take a picnic to that little beach Granny loved so much and I’ll fill you in?”

NEW BEGINNING

Written by NWR Members Hilary Wallace, Claire Lanario, Susan Matthews, NWR Oakham, Carol Bowden, NWR Sheffield Crookes and Phyllida Walton

Serena climbed the narrow stairs to the first floor flat with a breathless air of anticipation. Ellie leapt up the stairs ahead of her. Serena opened the door wrestling with the unfamiliar key and Ellie rushed inside. She ran from room to room squealing with delight. "Which is my room?" she asked. Serena was encouraged by her daughter's excitement and she pointed to the smaller bedroom. "That will be yours."

"Oh it's lovely and there's lots of room".

"Only until you get all your toys and furniture." Ellie had shared a bedroom with her sister Mandy at their old house. It was not their house now, Serena said to herself silently. She had not yet explained to Ellie that this move was permanent, not just a holiday. Perhaps at her age nothing was permanent as she had not developed a sense of time. Everything was in the moment and the absence of her father and two siblings did not seem to concern her. Serena knew however that this situation might not last. David had insisted on a timetable of visits which would take priority over all other arrangements.

Serena surveyed the empty rooms trying to envisage furniture in place. She found a game on her mobile phone and gave it to Ellie who had settled into a corner of her room with the only toy she had brought, a bedraggled Sindy doll. She was talking to her and trying to reassure her that her friends and other toys would be arriving soon. Serena smiled as she recognised her own expression in the way she had talked to Ellie about the move. She looked out over the balcony rail anxiously waiting for the removal van to arrive. She had brought coffee and a few snacks in a shopping bag forgetting that there was no kettle to boil water or plates or cutlery to prepare food. She sat on the floor by the patio doors where she could see anything arrive. The excitement of getting her own place was beginning to ebb as it mixed with the challenge of organisation in starting a new life. Now is not the time, she told herself, to have doubts and shy away from the decision.

The sound of a van crunching over the gravel drive revived her and she shouted to Ellie.

"They're here." Ellie rushed out on to the balcony and waved to the removal men. There were heavy steps on the staircase. Serena opened the door to be greeted by two well-built young men casually dressed in jeans and t shirts.

"Mrs Gregory?" the older looking one enquired waving a bunch of papers. "Could you sign here please?" He offered her a pen. She wasn't sure what she was signing. Ellie came up to her mother and grabbed her skirt observing the men suspiciously.

"Have you got my doll's pram?" She asked shyly.

"Oh yes, sweetheart, It'll be here in no time."

Serena was desperate for a cup of tea and much needed chocolate, which she had made sure were in the box marked "Kettle and Essentials." Feeling guilty for deceiving Ellie she had also included Jammie Dodgers, Ellie's favourites, a love inherited from her father. "Jammie Dodgers," Serena thought, reciting this over and over until the words sounded ridiculous. Then, thoughts shifted to David making her stomach lurch.

"Enough," she muttered to herself.

She walked into the small living room where already a stack of boxes stood two rows high. They looked like a fortress, a defensive shield to keep them both safe. If only she could protect Mandy and Alex, too. Her legs nearly gave way as reality hit her. *One foot in front of the other*, she reminded herself. *Tea. She needed tea.*

She searched the stack but the essential supplies must still be in the van. Gripping Ellie's hand tightly, they descended the stairs and bumped into the older man. Politely but firmly, Serena asked him to look for the essentials box.

The man put down the box he was carrying, then laughed and said, "Here we go. It's this one, Mrs. Gregory." He picked it up and continued, bellowing, "I'll put it straight in the kitchen!"

Back in the flat Serena grabbed her scissors from her handbag to cut the binding tape. Suddenly, she noticed the label was different. Written in elegant italics were the words: *Open this box first.*

Confused she struggled to turn the heavy box to check for her own label. It wasn't there. The box felt incredibly heavy and she couldn't recall putting anything else inside.

"Can I help?" Ellie asked as Serena sliced through the tape.

"Yes, let's open it together," Serena replied. "On three... one, two, three... open sesame!"

They cried out their shared joke, giggling as they peeled back the cardboard flaps. The laughter was replaced by silence as they stared into an empty box.

But it felt so heavy, Serena thought. She lifted it again, this time it felt like lead.

Ellie tugged at the flaps to peer deeper inside, accidentally revealing a pink piece of paper tucked behind the tape. Ellie grabbed it, ripped it free, and held it up. "Look, Mummy!"

Serena took the handwritten note from her daughter's hand.

"What does it say, Mummy?" Ellie asked.

Before she could stop herself, Serena read the words aloud: *"The fractured heart will mend its broken space and scattered threads will weave back into place. Two hearts align as one, deserving of respite and childhood fun."*

Tears welled in Serena's eyes. Overwhelmed by emotion, she instinctively wrapped her arms around Ellie. As she bent to kiss the top of her daughter's head the room suddenly tilted. The world shifted to a sharp diagonal before Serena's eyes rolled back, and they both fell heavily onto the kitchen floor.

"Why did you pull me over?" asked Ellie crossly as she tugged at her mother to get up off the floor. Serena had no idea what had caused her to keel over and hurried to get a drink out of the tap; still no cups but she managed a good drink which made her feel a little better.

"Right, there's your 'Essentials' box," said the older removal man rather sarcastically – "We'll be off now!"

"Just a minute" interjected Serena, "Where did that other box come from, that you said was the 'Essentials Box'? I don't think it's mine"

"Well your old man said it was 'essential' and to make sure you got it. Bye love – hope you settle in OK"

Settled was the last thing Serena was feeling at that moment. Why was it continuing even after she had done her utmost to break away? How could she explain to Ellie that this was now their home and she wouldn't be living anymore with her brother and sister, and of course her 'Daddy' as she thought he was? Serena picked up the pink note and read the words again:

"The fractured heart will mend its broken space and scattered threads will weave back into place. Two hearts align as one, deserving of respite and childhood fun."

She hid it in the bottom drawer of the kitchen units and kicked aside the heavy box, not daring to look in it again and decided she just had to press on and try and get unpacked and settled in. Ellie had located her dolls' pram and a box of her toys so was happily humming to herself and talking to her dolls.

Serena opened a box marked 'KITCHEN' in her own handwriting, and started to find homes for the favourite bits of crockery and kitchenalia she had packed. Halfway down the box amongst the bubble wrap was another piece of pink paper. Serena hesitated then decided she would have to read it:

“Nothing can break the chains of love; even misdeeds carried out in haste.”

Selena hid the paper with the other and decided a cup of coffee and a couple of Jammie Dodgers would be a better idea. She filled the kettle and put it on to boil, made a drink of squash for Ellie and sat down to contemplate who had put the pieces of paper in the mysterious box (why was it so heavy?) and in her own packed box. Surely it couldn't be David? Did he know about Greg? Why had he never tackled her about it? The kettle came to the boil and simultaneously there was a loud knocking on the door of the flat ...

... Serena cautiously opened the door to find her best friend from University, Yazmin, already bouncing in with a bottle of Prosecco and flowers.

“You finally did it” she yelled, “welcome to freedom!”. Serena gave her a meaningful hug and they went off to find glasses from the kitchen. As they opened the bottle with a pop and filled glasses to the brim, Ellie heard them as they made a toast to freedom. Ellie, not to be left out, joined in happily, not really understanding much except that her mum was smiling again and she had her favourite lemonade and jammie dodger.

Serena, Yazmin and their mutual friend Greg had been at University together, studying Architecture and Quantity Surveying, and had kept in touch despite Serena's husband David being very reserved and suspicious of their friendship. Greg had been a close friend of both girls, but never a boyfriend as his tastes were otherwise and later his friend Alfie was ‘the one’ for him.

David preferred his wife (Serena being his second wife) to stay at home, where he could watch her and look after his beautiful house. She became a very much loved new mother to his two other children, Mandy and Alex along with their child Ellie.

The secret Serena had never told anyone, and to her knowledge David was unaware, was that he was not Ellie's biological father. The product of a fling at Uni had seen the father abandon Serena when told of her pregnancy, and to save face, she had married David, an eminently suitable and old family friend she had been dating on and off since she left school. Ellie was born ostensibly premature at 8 months into their marriage. The fact that she was a healthy 8lb baby did not publicly raise eyebrows but was no doubt the subject of whispers amongst her friends.

Serena endured six years of realising her mistake, the only consolation being her strong bond with Ellie as well as Mandy and Alex, while David became more controlling and abusive. She felt emotionally and psychologically stifled but gradually found the strength to plan her getaway.

She and David thankfully had a joint bank account where she had been able to gradually syphon off small amounts and open an account in her own name.

Recently and after not hearing from Greg for a while, he had contacted her through Yazmin with an offer. Greg was CEO of a real estate company he'd set up at the other end of the country and wanted Yazmin and Serena to join him as trusted co workers. Knowing the situation between David and Serena, he even offered ‘staff accommodation’ suitable for a single mum and young family, near to schools and countryside.

The toast to freedom and new beginnings held a very special meaning

Ellie sat quietly in her bedroom looking out of the window of her new home. The view was quite nice, better than the one from the balcony which overlooked the other blocks of flats in the complex. She wasn't allowed on the balcony on her own of course. At least the view from her bedroom looked out towards the distant countryside. It reminded her a bit of her old home with her father and brother and sister, and helped her to remember them, which made her both happy and sad at the same time. Mummy hadn't said when they would be visiting them again, she really hoped it was soon.

She had unpacked all her toys now but it wasn't as much fun without other people to play with, even if her older siblings sometimes teased her about her 'baby' toys, but generally they were kind to her and joined in with her doll's tea parties at least for a few minutes when they asked her.

She started to wonder whether she would make some friends in her new home, it was the school holidays, and mummy hadn't said anything about what they were going to do – they usually went away as a family to the seaside but there had been no mention of that since they had moved.

Perhaps there is a park nearby she wondered, I must ask mummy, but she is always so busy.

Just as that thought passed through her head, her bedroom door opened, and her mummy appeared.

'Are you ok, Ellie? It's a nice day; I thought we might go for a walk and explore a bit. Put your shoes on love and grab a cardigan in case it gets cooler. I don't think it will rain today'.

Ellie didn't need to be asked twice, and soon they were heading down the stairs to the main exit to the flats.

They walked for a few minutes along the pavement which wasn't terribly exciting at all, as all they could see were more blocks of flats identical to the one they were now living in. Ellie began to worry a bit that they wouldn't find their way back again, but then perhaps, they might have to go back to their real home, but deep down, she didn't think that was going to happen.

They turned a corner and much to Ellie's delight suddenly they were faced with a gate into a small park with a roundabout and swings and a slide, and also a few children, who looked to be about her age or perhaps a little bit older.

Maybe she could make some friends which would make her new home a lot more fun.

Serena pushed open the gate and she and Ellie walked in. It was then that Ellie became a bit hesitant, there were a lot more children there than she had seen from outside and it was very

noisy. There were some scrambling up the jungle gym, all three swings were occupied, there was a seesaw and a roundabout both in full use. A group of three small boys were riding round on their bikes and shouting at each other, they were being followed by a very determined younger boy on a scooter. Over in one corner there were five girls, about Ellie's age who were playing a game with dolls on one of the benches.

On another bench two women were having a conversation, one of the women was rocking a pram while two toddlers were sitting on the ground next to them playing with brightly coloured plastic cups. Over the other side of the playground several women were standing in a group talking quite loudly together, occasionally one of them would shout at the cyclists, telling them to slow down, or to be careful, or to watch out for the younger children, but the cyclists took no notice, just peddled faster and shouted more loudly to each other.

"This looks like a fun place to be", Serena said, as she closed the gate behind them. "I hope you will be able to make friends here". Ellie pressed herself closer to her Mummy, suddenly she felt overwhelmed by the noise and the activity. She thought she would like to play dolls with the girls at the other side of the playground, but she was anxious about crossing that very busy space, and then when you get there what do you say? Could she just ask to play too? Ellie wished she had brought her dolls pram and a few special dolls, at least if she had she could play with them near the others. Perhaps the thing to do was to go on one of the swings, but they were all occupied with children who were competing with each other to see who could swing highest and they were singing songs together. Everyone seemed to know someone else.

Ellie felt very alone, she wished Mandy and Alex were with her, why couldn't they be together as a family anymore. Suddenly Ellie started to cry, she buried her face in Serena's skirt and in a small muffled voice interrupted by hiccups and loud sobs she said "I want to go home".

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At the time of our marriage, I gave Serena her mobile phone, tracker installed. My first wife proved faithless; I knew it was a necessary precaution. The ex-wife tried to 'have it out' with me; understandably my rage got the better of me and she died – she shouldn't have argued. I put her body in the boot of an old car that I had already bought, and took it to the crusher in an acquaintance' scrap yard. I told her family she had left me and the two children, and that I could find no trace of her.

Today, alerted by Serena's tracker, I am following, and see the two of them enter the park. I feel such anger. Dishonestly and deceitfully she planned to leave me, but I knew what she was up to. I'd followed her to the housing charity, and then her bit by bit packing up of boxes which she stored with her friend, the despicable Yasmin. On the day she moved them

out, I gave the removals men an extra box for her to think about... It seems she has been building up a bank account of her own. How? She has only the money I give her for clothes and food for the family. There must be some other source; I suspect the appalling Greg, probably via Yasmin. She gave up work on our marriage. It would have been wrong for my wife to work, and anyway she was expecting Ellie by then, the result of some very indifferent sex the first time we formalised our relationship from old friend to something more.

She was using me.

She left her engagement and wedding rings by my bed. Such dismissiveness, such ingratitude; how dare she. She took with her my little girl, my Ellie. Mandy and Alex have been asking today where are they? They seem to love her, although I know she had no feelings for them. O yes, she was good at the 'caring mummy', but I know. I know. When I bring her and Ellie home again Mandy and Alex will see her as she is. She will need close monitoring and discipline, and given that Ellis has inherited some of her character, it may well be that she too will need careful disciplining. They should both be at home with me, where I can watch them, preventing the forming of inappropriate friendships that might take them away from what I know is best.

I watch. Ellie had a little sob, but Serena has urged her away, and she is coming across the park. I step out, a packet of Jammie Dodgers in my hand. So easy. I will get her into the car, and when Serena comes across, I will show her that the best thing will be for her to get in as well, and we will go home.

We can collect Ellie's things and Serena's clothes some other time.

Not Extraordinary

Written by NWR Members Emma Moffat, Karen Girard, Lorraine Webb, Liz Vandenbosch, NWR Perth group, Patricia Kingsbury, Julie Berry and Caroline Worlsey.

Bryony had a dilemma. A nice dilemma but still something to be resolved. She had freedom. Too much of it. She was not unhappy with her life and had no regrets but there was something missing.

Bryony always thought of herself as typical, not extraordinary in any respect. She was the UK average in height and dress size, her looks were attractive but not distinguished, and with short, greying, hair, she saw many women like her on the high street. Her pastimes were those of most women of her age; reading, sewing, walking, visiting National Trust sites and meeting with her NWR Group.

She reviewed her current status; divorced after a long marriage, children now grown up and independent, elderly parents passed away, she was recently retired with a modest home and easily managed garden, and a comfortable income. Bryony's life had followed the traditional pattern of school then work, she had married young and brought up her children as a stay-at-home mum. When, in her 40s, she had realised that being a housewife and mother was not longer a full time occupation, she had gone back to education and spent five years attending an Access Course, achieving an undergraduate degree and eventually a Masters degree. It had allowed her to learn about herself and her capabilities. She had enjoyed meeting so many new people, in new situations, and spending time studying alongside a university cohort who were younger than her own children. It had been refreshing and revitalising and she had been rejuvenated by their acceptance and enthusiasm for life. She needed more of that.

Bryony smiled to herself at the idea that she was living her life upside down. She had the liberty that most enjoyed in their youth and even better, she had the life experience and money to support a selfish pleasure. She suddenly knew what she wanted. Bryony was going to take a Gap Year, something she had not done when she was young. She had always enjoyed seeing new places and she wanted an adventure before she got too old. She wanted to be brave, reckless, not a sensible and controlled grown up. The question was, where? She picked up her old atlas and started turning the pages. Too many opportunities were laid before her. Bryony closed the maps, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She let the atlas fall open and placed her finger on the page. That was where she would start her adventure!

Had she lost her marbles? Does one automatically lose common sense along with a few grey cells as they mature in age? She asked herself, not really interested in obtaining a response from the furniture decorating the room, and which might or might not be able to understand little less to respond.

Is this a sign of getting old? Of not feeling appreciated enough? Is this a sign of a midlife crisis? Or is this healthy normal curiosity? Moment of fulfilments that one is allowed to have, once one's purposes have been accomplished? Or even when one's duty as a mother has been fulfilled? She was far from

being ready to settle down. To settle and just do crochet or light gardening, that was in “all their glory!” But not yet in her agenda no, no!

She grabbed a pencil and placed it between her lips. And since she needed her reading glasses, she reached out her left hand, grabbed the spectacles from the coffee table that was in the middle of the room, close to where she was standing, and placed them on top of her head for future use. She then proceeded to open one eye and then the other.

Her finger had pointed to Oceania. At least, this is what was written in the very old Atlas that was at least twice her age, and which she had inherited from her late Nana. Oceania she repeated in a soft voice as if to convince the rest of the cells in her body what she had just seen written.

Oceania, that’s broad, she thought. But Australia! That’s specific enough. And with my knowledge of the English language I shouldn’t be all that far off from my change of scenery. On my free weekends, I could always go island hopping. Keep blogs of my travels, keep a diary, and make new acquaintances. It would be perfect! My next thought now is to somehow find an organisation dealing with pets where I could volunteer some of my time. I would do this part-time, and with the rest of the hours, since I would be living in a family where I would be useful, cooking, and helping the children with their homework after school. This is just how I would love to sacrifice my time there.

Opening her laptop and signing into DuckDuckGo, she started researching for the near future plans.

OK money won’t be the issue here, but living in a family would allow me time to never feel too lonely.

First things first, she knew that in the past, she had been tied to a clock. But starting now, things would be different. Or would they? And again, nothing works without a plan. Plan, plan, plan.

Most importantly, she should find the application that will connect her with families needing a nanny. Then she reminded herself that “She had enjoyed meeting so many new people, in new situations, and spending time studying alongside a university cohort who were younger than her own children. Therefore, she wished solely to care for the kids, no more than 3 of them. She was more than willing to do some light cooking and light tidying up in exchange for a free living quarter. No additional drama, no difficult issues from dislocated families. She knew that kids or teenagers came with their own drama, and she was willing to cope with its entirety according to their size. But nothing more.

She had it all figured out; she would be doing free evening babysitting 1-2 weekends a month in addition to her agreed-upon amount of hours available for the family per week if absolutely necessary. Otherwise, she had plans to volunteer at an R.S.P.C.A. caring for abandoned animals. But that usually happened between business hours anyway. She would meet new people with whom she’s got something in common, and still find the time to socialise

Once that is all set, she would write a potential family, share her interests with them, and hope to receive an answer A.S.A.P. and make her decision from there.

I shall organise a goodbye party, where everyone would contribute either by bringing a special dish or helping with the cleaning up.

I shall organise a garage sale to get rid of every unnecessary object. One can never have too much pocket money. For animal associations, whether pets in need or wild animals, there may be a necessity

to buy medicine, food, or even build a new place for them to stay. She was altruistic enough in that way.

I shall also put my current place available for rent to short stayers only. Very importantly to garden lovers. After all, I plan to come back don't I ?

My thoughts are clear enough, now. I need to start choosing what I would like to pack and look into flights.

Speak to a few of my good friends and neighbours who will collect my snail mail post. I don't really want to have them forwarded all the way to Australia. Nowadays, I don't receive too many of them anyway. Or at least, not for now. Not to forget, I need to share with my kids about mummy's new mid-life discovery plans.

Most importantly, she thought, she would go on with the project no matter what others thought or said. Would she be strong enough to go on with it? She started reflecting. So far away? Would she have allowed her own kids to just get up pack and relocate to such a faraway place?

Still, casting her cares aside, she decided simply to trust her instincts and go with the flow. After all, she had enough life experience to hold her in good stead should she run into difficulties and was perfectly capable of asking questions, reading books, researching any information she needed. The only question now was whether Australia was ready for *her*.

And so the day quickly came when, suitcase in hand, she arrived at the airport. She hadn't packed too much, after all, they had shops in Australia and she had a reasonable income coming in from the lovely couple who were renting her home. She was sure the garden was in capable hands with them as the photos they had shown her of their previous home had looked more like Kew Gardens than the back yard of a standard British semi.

As she stood alone on the crowded airport concourse, queuing to check in her suitcase and to head through to security, she wondered for the first time whether she should really have told her children the truth. They might have come to wave her off if she had admitted she had an open return to Australia rather than a weekend ticket to Paris. But no, they would only have fussed. You'd think she was in her nineties rather than her late fifties, the way they seemed to want to wrap her in cotton wool. She'd let them know where she was going and why when she finally reached her destination.

Through security without a hitch (put your passport somewhere safe, Briony!), unless you count the embarrassing search when her underwired bra set the scanners beeping, and through to departures where she sat browsing the latest NWR news on her phone for a while. Then she took out the letter and read it one more time.

"We will be delighted to welcome you to our home as a part-time live-in nanny. You'll have your own en-suite bedroom in the wing where the children sleep. Jemimah is the eldest at fourteen, Derek is ten and Peregrine (Perry) is just turned five. You'll have access to all of the house except the master bedroom and please do not, under any circumstances, go through the cellar door. If you ride, you'll be able to borrow one of the horses, and we have a pool if you like to swim. We're very free and easy, as long as you keep out of the cellar. Shane will meet you at the airport – look

out for him standing by the arrivals gate.” It all sounded very promising.... though just how was she going to recognise Shane?

Bryony boarded her flight. No regrets, but definitely she held on to the guilt that her albeit adult children; James and Lily, were not fully aware of her true plans. Why had she initially told them that it was a weekend trip to Paris, they must have realised surely from her recent decluttering and Garage Sales and her renting out her house, that the adventure was longer.

Sleep evaded her. She wished that she had taken her friend Gina’s advice on purchasing diazepam to comatose her into a deep sleep. Every time it seemed that she had a doze a flight steward arrived to feed her with the airline’s copious offerings, all part of the service to re adjust your body clock to flying through the different time zones. Yes, that was the reason surely breakfast arrived in the middle of Bryony’s natural night time.

Thoughts turned to the new family adopting her as their Nanny. It seemed strange to her that she was going to be a Nanny, when her biological children had not as yet given her the title of Granny. Both were career minded and although in settled exclusivity, if that’s what they call it these days, had not yet become procreative. Bryony pondered, what would it be like to deal again with a little one, an “independent” teenager and a sporty 10 year old at her age, she wasn’t after all the spring chicken she was when James, followed 18 months later by Lucy had arrived. Would they accept her or was she another “Nanny” passing through their lives? What would the father Shane be like to them and as husband to the yet unnamed wife? She knew to remain calm, settle her nerves, after all this was the adventure she had chosen.

Thinking over, the Captain announced for the aircrew to prepare for its arrival at Sydney Kingsford Smith airport, local time 17.30. Twenty three hours had elapsed. She was now walking through Passport control, onto baggage reclaim and Customs. Please Shane be the other side; hopefully she hadn’t been duped into making a terrible mistake. She was buoyed by the images of the large house nestled in The Blue Mountains, some two hours west of Sydney. She was clearly going to need a vehicle to explore Australia in her days off.

Bryony needn’t have worried as it transpired. A banner in arrivals was held high with “Welcome to Australia Bryony”, with a kangaroo and koala added in decoration. Later she discovered that 5 year old Perry felt his Dad would need this to greet this mystery English Nanny.

Shane and Bryony settled into an easy rhythm on the drive to the Blue Mountains House, both exchanging a free flow of information; he a jobbing musician, his wife Ruth a busy legal professional. Bryony couldn’t help but soak in the scenery as the car motored from the City to the Mountainside landscape. All of a sudden the House, her new home presented itself. Statuesque and gleaming at her. No time to take it in, the door opened and Perry rushed towards her with a hesitant Derek behind, followed by a tall slim sun-kissed teenager. What to say, do first, rushed through her brain, foggy from jet lag, she mustered a “G’day kids”, well that is what you should say to Aussie, kids isn’t it?

After an evening of introductions and house tour, Bryony succumbed to sleep, but her dreams tapped into her imaginative side, a ripple moved through her, well at

least that’s how she explained it to herself. She awoke, knowing her later life Gap year had begun.....

Bryony woke up to her first day in her new life. She was tired – a combination of jet-lag and weird dreams – but excited and eager to explore. Today will be an orientation opportunity, she told herself. Find out what the routine is, and what's expected of me.

She bumped into Shane on the stairs. He stared at her as if he had no idea of who she was, then recollection dawned. "Good morning, em ..."

"Bryony," she supplied. "I'm glad I've caught you, Shane. What time do you normally have dinner?"

"Oh, we don't really do mealtimes. Just make something we can help ourselves to when we feel like it. Oh, and Ruth probably won't be here. She stays in our place in Town when she's working on a big case."

Bryony felt disappointed. She had imagined them all sitting around the polished walnut table in the cosy dining room, exchanging stories about how their day had gone.

"I'll be up in the studio today, working on a new piece. Unless there's an emergency, I don't want to be disturbed."

Oh, well, she thought. I suppose that gives me the chance to organise my own day.

She found the children in the kitchen, Jemimah drinking black coffee, Derek packing toast into his mouth and little Perry sitting patiently at the table.

"Can I have cereal?" he asked.

"Of course. The chocolate one?"

Once they had all left for school, Bryony did some washing up, then explored the house. The cellar door was solid wood, with two heavy-duty mortice locks. She peeked through the keyholes, but her view was blocked. She listened but could hear nothing. No smell, either, so probably no decomposing bodies. Stop it, she told herself. If you really want to know what's in there, you could just ask.

However, ten minutes later she found herself gazing at the row of hooks where the keys hung and failing to identify any that would fit the locks. She knew it was possible to pick a lock with a hairpin, but this was a life-skill she had never acquired, and besides she didn't own a hairpin. Her sensible self was telling her to forget the cellar and not to risk everything by doing something she had specifically been asked not to do, but her less sensible self was consumed with curiosity.

To distract herself she started chopping vegetables for a casserole and promised herself a walk around the neighbourhood later. She thought about her impressions of the family so far. Jemimah seemed typical of teenagers everywhere – obsessed with her appearance and largely monosyllabic unless communicating with her friends. Perry was a bit like a puppy – affectionate, noisy and messy, with a tendency to knock things over. Derek concerned her. He seemed troubled and withdrawn. Shane had said he was very competitive and hoped to be a professional athlete.

"You won't see much of Derek," he had told her. "He spends most of his time in the gym and on the tennis courts."

She wondered if she had just exchanged one kind of loneliness for another and resolved to start looking immediately for some kind of voluntary work.

Bryony, before looking for a volunteering role, felt should get to know a bit more about where she was living. Avoiding the excluded master bedroom and cellar ,had a look upstairs , gave Perry's room a quick tidy up but felt the others were old enough to take responsibility for their rooms . Then started wondering who did housework ,laundry and shopping. All questions she would have asked on arrival but jet lag numbed her brain . Where would she go to do any shopping ,certainly not Sydney as it was two hours away .The letter offering her the position stated the children were her responsibility . Were there any other staff ?

Further exploring was needed , well maintained grounds ,must be a gardener . Found the horses in loose boxes, quiet and did not show any interest in her . Bryony was suprised how pristine the yard was , no sign of anyone . Boxes were clean so someone must be caring for the horses.

The pool again immaculate ,only sound was the pool robot cleaning . Someone must have put it in the pool .

Bryony begining to feel a little a little uneasy , decided she was being a bit dramatic . Surely Shane would have told her about other staff. Decided she would make a list of questions for him , could not disturb him as very clear could only be disturbed if an emergency .

Perry and Jemimah returned from school , where was their school and how did they get there ,another question for Shane . Derek had training after school and would be home later .That information came from 5 year old Perry , he ate a bowl of the casserole that Bryony had made earlier , Jemimah declined any and went up to her room . Bryony not concerned as that was typical teenage behaviour . Derek came home a couple of hours

later , raided the fridge and also went to his room .

Bryony had not seen or heard anything from Shane all day and the list of questions was getting longer .

Where did the children go to school and how did they get there ?

Were there any other staff re looking after the horses and the grounds ?

Who was responsible for looking after the house re cleaning ,laundry and shopping for food ?

When Ruth was at the house did Bryony have to cook for her ?

In letter offering Bryony the position it was acknowledged it was part time and she would have time to explore and look for voluntary work .

Would a car be available for her to use ,she had seen several in the garage .

Bryony then heard Shane going downstairs , she went onto the landing , he looked angry and clearly did not recognise her .

Bryony reintroduced herself, decided to only ask one question . The one that would give her some freedom .

Which vehicle is available for me to use ?

Shane stared at her and coldly said , “Whatever do you need a car for ?”

His question hit her like an express train. The many, many weeks and days since she had set herself on this so-called ‘adventure’ had culminated to this: alone, unknown, isolated, over 10,000 miles from Wakefield and her and life in West Yorkshire.

The decisions and careful plans she had executed to bring herself to this Australian wilderness beyond Sydney with this strange family suddenly paralysed her with fear. She stared at Shane open-mouthed, white-faced shaking from head to foot. Images and memories of James and Lucy, her own dear children, far, far away – would she ever see and hold them again - crowded into her mind. What had she done!

Shane realising his tone took pity on Bryony. He called the children outside to help. They clustered around Bryony and comforted her with little kindnesses and coaxed her back to reality with smiles, many reassurances and iced water.

Katoomba in the Jamison Valley has been welcoming tourists for a hundred years, attracted to the beautiful mountainous countryside and preserved Art Deco buildings, wineries, aborigine walks, waterfalls and trails. Getting around on public transport, on foot or cycle is a way of life here – hadn't she come for a complete change, a chance to live an outdoor lifestyle in a mild climate? Hadn't she left behind the everything she owned; the trappings of her solitary life; the British weather, the traffic, litter... for this utopia? Yes...

A new realisation began to creep into her consciousness, a new glowing within her emanated from her very core. Bryony soon realised she was healing. Yes, healing from her failed marriage, healing from her divorce and self-isolation. Healing from her separation from dearest Lucy and James. She knew now that missing her adult children was a valid emotion, being 'stoic' was simply idiotic – life is for loving others and more importantly for sharing with those you love. She thought back to the way her marriage to Michael had come to an abrupt end. She had been so discontent, so unhappy, unfulfilled. She had initiated the arguments that had led to the split and finally divorce and freedom. Bryony truly alone began to see how she had replaced the loving in her life with 'interests and friends' - she had become hollow and lonely. Finally, she realised what she truly needed.

There was a scrunch of tyres on the drive. "It's Mum!" shrieked Perry, "she's home!" He swooped past and rushed out to greet Ruth.

As soon as they met, Bryony knew that they'd get on. Ruth's face broke into a welcoming smile. She set her briefcase down and opened her arms. Bryony fell into a warm, friendly, woman-to-woman hug.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived." She raised her voice, "Shane – go put the kettle on. Make us some tea." She sat down with Bryony. "He's not the most intuitive man; most of the time he's miles away somewhere else in his head, but he's a caring dad and a good provider. Has he explained how the household works?"

"Well - " Bryony was hesitant, she didn't want to tell this friendly woman how confused she'd been feeling.

"I'll explain everything later, and about the mini truck I hope you'll feel comfortable driving. But I did ask Shane to warn you about the cellar. Did he do that?"

"Well," Bryony started again. "He did say I shouldn't go in there. He made it sound rather . . . scary."

"It is rather scary. We've had such torrential rainstorms that just seem to get worse every year, and living in the Valley there's been nowhere else for the water to go. Five years ago we were promised flood defences, but nothing's been done. That's the legal case I'm working on. This year an awful lot of the floodwater has got into our cellar. It's nearly two metres deep in there!"

Bryony's fears of imagined horrors began to recede.

"It's been such an awful time," Ruth continued. "The whole of the Valley has suffered – the wildlife, the people, their homes, their livelihoods. Compensation is what I'm fighting for. I'm hoping you're going to help too."

"But, but . . ." Bryony was flustered. "I'm not a lawyer."

Ruth put her hand on Bryony's arm. "No, no! You said you wanted to work with animals, and that's what we need. We're setting up an Animal Rescue Centre and we need someone like you to run it."

At that moment Bryony's phone began to ring. Excusing herself, she opened it. Lily! Her daughter!

"Hi darling!"

"Hi Mum. How's Aus?"

Bryony's brain whirled. "How do you know -"

"When you leave letters from the Australian High Commission lying around," Lily started laughing, "detailing what sort of visa you need for a year's stay -"

"Oh, my goodness."

"- and you advertise your house for rent in the local paper -"

"I just didn't know how to -"

"Did you really think we'd buy the 'Weekend in Paris' line?"

Ruth was laughing too. "And Lily found my number and phoned me and told me the sort of voluntary work you'd be really suited to."

Shane brought the tea, and a smile spread across Bryony's face as she announced, "I get the feeling this is going to be the best Upside-down, Later-life, Gap Year ever."

THE UNLIKELY LATEST NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLER

By Ruislip NWR

Sharon Adlem, Jill Wells, Tricia James, Jean Gillen, Elizabeth Freestone, Jackie Marchant

Celia glanced furtively around the car park to check which trolley shelter housed no beggars – *don't call them beggars, Celia* – and had just retrieved her pound coin, when someone appeared from behind the advert for Tena Gentleman.

'Excuse me Miss, would you be able –'

Celia had a number of repelling sentences at her disposal. *I'm sorry, I've only got my card with me* (one of them actually produced a machine the other day) or *this is a trolley token, but I could get you a sandwich if you like?*

She'd received some stock responses too – *Thanks love I've had five sandwiches this morning God bless you darling*, being a favourite. Almost certainly translating to *f*** off you posh bitch, what self-respecting supplier deals in prawn sandwiches*, but this time the reply took her aback.

'Yes, please. I'll just get my things.' He dived behind the clothes recycling facility and returned with a large backpack and a Nike shoe box. He fell beside her as she edged away – apparently he not only wanted a sandwich but intended to eat in.

Celia made a quick assessment. She'd identified the Edinburgh accent immediately and it had made her throat squeeze. He seemed very young, his clothes neither cheap nor dirty and, as he walked beside her, he protected her from the idiots reversing out of parking spaces without the benefit of see-through windows.

She stopped by the display of wilting petunias at the entrance to her café and turned to face him. She didn't like being taken for a fool – and he did not fit the profile. 'Are you homeless?'

'Yes. No. Not exactly. I've been here three days.' He gave the impression he didn't like lying. She noticed he had clean fingernails.

'Not helpful.' Had she said that aloud? Or had Des said it in her mind?

He looked slightly affronted and a bit tearful but recovered quickly. He had clear, dark eyes without a trace of yellow. A frantic scrabbling came from his box, followed by a faint whiff of ammonia. 'Hamsters,' he offered. Shortly to be one hamster, if Celia knew hamsters.

She decided to go with her hunch. 'You are going to walk into the café and put that box discreetly under a table with your rucksack firmly holding down the lid. My book club meets here once a month and my rodent management record is, so far, impeccable. Then go and have a look at the counter and come back to tell me what you'd like.'

One fried breakfast, three bottomless Cokes and two Cappuccinos later, Celia had mentally listed and saved the information Hamish had carefully spilled. (*Surely only fourth generation Texans called their sons Hamish?*) She was certain he'd told her half-truths and the odd downright lie, yet for some reason she trusted him. But Celia trusted everyone until given reason not to. As he spoke, and she listened, her two spare bedrooms niggled.

Last week at book club a sanctimonious 'content creator', who showed twelve-year-olds how to turn their eyebrows into draught excluders had told Celia that her house was far too big for one person. She said it was no wonder Gen Zees were still living with their parents at the age of 25. *Poor bloody parents*, Celia had thought. She wasn't sure what Jencies were but assumed it was another category of gender preference.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a notification pinging on her mobile – British Boxers choosing that moment to notify her that their bamboo knickers were now selling at half price.

'Sorry,' she glanced at her phone, forming a little lie. 'My brother has messaged, I need to reply.' She fired a quick message, not to her brother, but to her friend Penny, appraising her of the situation. Penny's reply was immediate.

Don't blame me if you wake up dead.

Celia put her phone away and took a deep breath. 'Come on Hamish, I'm taking you home.'

Back home, she shared her Taste the Best lasagna meal for one and a bottle of Merlot. Hamish wasn't very forthcoming during the meal and went to bed early, understandable she thought, having probably not slept well in the open air for the past few nights. She went to bed early herself with some trepidation, thinking about Penny's text.

But she didn't wake up dead – she woke up feeling better than she had done since her nest was well and truly emptied. Except in her case it wasn't children going off to start their own lives, it was bloody Des going off with his personal trainer ha, ha, that was a new name for it. *Don't dwell on it Celia, move on.*

Her intrigue about Hamish and why he was yes/no homeless grew into a need to know. She was inquisitive (alright, downright nosy) and like a dog with a bone, would not rest until she had solved the whole mystery. Celia loved puzzles, often completing Wordle, Nerdle, Murdle, Squaredle and various other dle-puzzles before she got out of bed.

Hamish, however, didn't want to discuss anything about his time before leaving Edinburgh, apart from saying he'd got away as far as his funds would allow. There'd been a bit of trouble on the bus with the shoebox, when the driver had objected to the strong smell and had rudely ejected him at an unscheduled stop in Ruislip, before carrying on to London Victoria. He'd managed to find an underground car park at the supermarket to sleep in for a few nights (at least it was dry) until Celia had offered him a sandwich.

He must know he owed her more of an explanation, but the thought of giving her one seemed to threaten to tip him over the edge. 'So, Hamish,' she asked him gently. 'What's the story behind the hamsters and how many are in the box?'

Hamish breathed a sigh of relief and happily explained the hamsters. 'I was working for a pet shop called 'Bark side of the Moon'. On my last day, I took two robohamsters in lieu of pay'.

Celia was nonplussed. 'Robots?'

'No,' he explained. 'Roborovski hamsters, also known as robohamsters. They're really tiny and I have two of them'.

'There won't be two for much longer,' said Celia. 'You can't put hamsters together.'

'Robohamsters are happy living together,' Hamish corrected her. 'Provided they're the same sex. Or they can live on their own – they don't mind.'

'Why?' asked Celia.

'Why can they live together or singly?'

'No – why did you want them, and more to the point, what are you going to do next?'

'About the hamsters?'

'About your life.'

'Do you have an Apple phone charger?' he asked. 'Only my phone's completely dead and I forgot to pack it.'

Clever change of subject, thought Celia. She'd come back to that later but for now she understood that he must have been in a bad state when he left Edinburgh. No-one under 40 went anywhere without their mobile phone. As for someone not planning on returning home, wouldn't packing a charger be top priority? Things must be worse than Hamish was letting on.

'I'll have a look,' Celia offered. 'My ex-husband used an Apple'. She went upstairs and noticed that the spare room door was wide open.

She couldn't help herself. She looked in and was astonished to see how tidy the room was. Hamish had unpacked the rucksack and made the bed. He'd placed a silver-framed photograph on the bedside table, of an elderly couple sitting on a garden bench. Who could they be? The photo must have meant a lot to Hamish – after all he'd forgotten his charger but remembered the photograph. Celia needed to know more.

As she left the bedroom, she noticed that the lid of the Hamsters' shoe box was slightly askew. She looked inside, but no hamsters! After a frantic search of all the obvious spaces, but with no luck, she hurried downstairs.

'Hamish – the hamsters have escaped!' She found him in the sitting room, studying her bookcase.

Celia was very proud of her bookcase. It was the one thing she had insisted upon when she and Des moved into the house. Celia was an academic, but Des was more of a hands-on type of man. (Well obviously, he'd run off with his Personal Trainer). Her bookcase took up the whole of one wall, with a run of cupboards along the bottom and shelves going up to the ceiling. It was full of books, all sizes and all genres and Hamish was clearly fascinated by it.

'Oh no!' He turned with a start. 'I do hope they haven't escaped outside.'

'Surely not,' said Celia. 'It could have only been a short while ago. I've checked upstairs, but you'll have to help me search the ground floor.'

The runaways were eventually found in the old sheepskin slippers Celia always left near the radiator in the kitchen. There's a lesson to be learned here, she thought - never step into your slippers before checking if anything has crawled or crept inside.

Having safely returned the hamsters to their home in the shoebox, Celia and Hamish settled in the kitchen. It was getting on for eleven o'clock, so Celia prepared coffee and a couple of slices of banana bread. Not just any banana bread, but one that included chocolate chips and was a favourite at Ceila's local Women's Group. Hamish obviously thought so too – he devoured the whole plateful.

'I've been thinking,' said Celia. 'If you're going to stay a while, perhaps we should go along to the pet shop in Eastcote and buy a more sturdy home for the hamsters? You could also ask if they had any job vacancies. You do have the necessary experience.'

'I'd really like to stay,' said Hamish. 'And the new home for the hamsters is a great idea. But I was only working in the Pet Shop until my next audition came along. You see, I'm really an actor. I thought it might be more beneficial if I came to London and signed on with a theatre agency. It was time for me to move on.'

'I've always loved literature and visiting the theatre,' said Celia.

'I noticed your wonderful book collection. But it's not all literature, as far as I could see.'

Celia explained that when she was eighteen, she went to read Ancient and Medieval History at the University of Edinburgh. She'd loved her time there until the tutor she really liked, Professor Todd, left rather suddenly at the end of her second year. He made History alive, at times moving and at other times funny. The course had made her think and appreciate the world centuries ago. The university couldn't find a suitable professor at short notice, leaving Celia and her fellow students no option but to study online under the supervision of Cambridge University.

She could have moved to Cambridge, but her romance with Tom, who was on her course, was going well, so she spent many hours in the library and online, doing her best preparation for Finals. But she needed exercise, and so it was that she joined the gym where she met Des.

Des was rather more dashing than Tom, more exciting. As the Summer term closed after her Finals, Tom became history and Des became her partner, enjoying many events at the Edinburgh Festival together. They married and moved to Ruislip so Celia could work in London, pursuing her love of History. But this had not been a good move for Des, who yearned for Edinburgh. He'd left her to go back there to live, together with the Personal Trainer.

Anyway, that seemed a long time ago, and now Celia needed the truth from Hamish, if he were to be her lodger. But it was very difficult to find just the right moment to encourage him to talk freely about his past.

'I know nothing about the world of theatre and agents,' Celia said, as they finished the washing up that evening. 'But I'll be happy to share my home with you for three months while you look for the right part and have success at an audition. Just one thing, though,

before that – you really must tell me just why you left Edinburgh.’ By now he’d told her about his early happy childhood there, but she still felt there was a big part of his story he hadn’t shared.

Hamish looked out of the window, seeming thoughtful, but after a while Celia became impatient to help the conversation along. She remembered the photograph of the elderly couple – there was something about it that had triggered a memory. She’d start with that, by saying she found the photo interesting and assumed the couple in it meant something to him.

Hamish went upstairs and retrieved the photo. ‘My maternal grandparents,’ he explained. ‘Yes, they are special to me.’

Celia took a closer look at the photo. Yes, the man bore a resemblance. ‘He looks like my professor from Edinburgh – Professor Todd.’

‘My grandfather Todd was a professor there,’ said Hamish. He told her that Professor Todd had left suddenly, due to short-term medical problems that affected Hamish’s grandmother, to whom he was devoted. Hamish’s own father had died when Hamish was in his early teens, after which his grandparents became even more supportive of him. Then his mother remarried. Hamish didn’t get along with his stepfather, who was strict and wanted Hamish to either get a *proper job* or else leave, which only added to the tension between them. One day, after a particularly heated argument, Hamish decided he’d had enough and left.

Celia did understand, but was concerned that his family would be worried about him. At the same time, despite being someone who’d never wanted children, she didn’t truly want him to leave either. She found herself caught between detachment and a reluctant desire to keep him close. Into all this, amazement that there was a connection between them in Hamish’s grandfather and her Professor Todd.

They sat in silence for a while, each with their own thoughts. Then practicality took over and Celia started to talk about Hamish’s acting. She told him about her friend Penny, who’d be a good person to help. Penny knew everybody and had some links with the acting profession.

Penny was duly invited around. She’d wanted to find out more about Celia’s guest and was dying to meet him. Hamish charmed her with his good manners and with his huge interest in acting. Soon Penny was planning introductions to workshops, which led to auditions, giving him a foothold into that community. This support not only boosted his confidence but also deepened the bond between Celia and Hamish, as they faced the challenges of this new chapter together.

Over the next few weeks, Hamish prepared for auditions, practicing monologues and learning about the characters that he might portray. Celia supported him, offering feedback and helping to overcome the nerves that came with putting himself out there. The auditions were a mixture of challenge and revelation. Hamish met other actors, some seasoned and others just starting out, each with their own stories and dreams. Through this new journey, Celia felt that Hamish was beginning to feel a sense of belonging and purpose that had eluded him for a long while. She felt a quiet pride and hope for what the future might hold for him. However, she couldn’t stop thinking about his family back in Edinburgh, not knowing where Hamish was and what he was doing.

She tried to talk to him about it, but he always clammed up until even the mention of the word *Edinburgh* had him either changing the subject or leaving the room. As time went by, Celia became convinced there was something he wasn’t telling her.

It came to a head one evening when they were sitting together watching a programme about Stonehenge, followed by the news. A terrible item about a missing teenager and the anguish of the girl’s family. As she watched the tears and the pleas, she understood how selfish she’d been.

‘Hamish,’ she said, turning the TV off. ‘We need to talk.’

‘About what?’

‘Your folks back home. In *Edinburgh*.’ She emphasized the word to show that she was serious. ‘You haven’t contacted them have you?’

'So? You never told me what you were doing in my room, when you discovered my hamsters were missing. I didn't ask, because I don't pry.'

'I'm not prying. But I care about your folks. And you.'

'Enough!' He'd never snapped at her like that before. She thought he was about to leap up and march out.

'No.' She positioned herself by the door, blocking his escape. 'You are going to either tell me why you won't talk about your folks, or you are going to contact them in my presence.' She folded her arms to emphasize her seriousness. 'It's about time you told me what you've been keeping from me.'

'There's nothing to keep.' He bounced up and stood close to her. Too close. 'I'm going to bed now.' She had no choice but to step aside as he marched passed her.

As she slumped back down on the sofa, she realized she was shaking. Upstairs she could hear his footsteps, heavier than usual, the cord of the bathroom light being yanked on and off, the slamming of his bedroom door. What had she done?

By the time she rose from the sofa, it was pitch black outside. She closed the curtains and went to bed. Eventually, after much tossing and turning, she managed to nod off. Only to be woken by a bang. Opening one eye told her it wasn't morning yet – the birds hadn't even started singing. She fell into a deep sleep.

She woke to a silent house. She reached for her kindle and began her routine of morning puzzles that ended in *dle*. But she couldn't concentrate – something was amiss. As she got out of bed and shrugged herself into dressing gown and slippers, she realized what it was. The house was too silent.

The silence swept up the stairs as she made her way down, slunk around the hallway and through the open kitchen door. The kitchen was deserted and tidier than she'd ever seen it, the only object marring its perfection a note on the table.

I can't do this anymore.

She turned it over, as though there might be something on the other side. But those four words were all Hamish left her.

Do what? She asked herself, over and over in the coming days. Live with people who cared about and supported him? Eat her food and enjoy the roof over his head? Take Des's charger on permanent loan? Couldn't he see that their final, and only, confrontation, was due to the fact that she cared?

His room was exactly as it had been before he moved in, except tidier. The only addition was the hamster cage, with its supplies of food and bedding in neat bags next to it and two small furry creatures rattling around on their wheels – filling the house with sound, deadening to silence when they stopped.

'Well,' she addressed them. Then realized something that hadn't occurred to her – she didn't know their names. She'd given them so little thought, as Hamish took complete care of them. 'I'll call you Nameless and Blameless, although I'll never be able to tell which is which.'

As days and then weeks went by, the hamsters became a fixture of the spare room, as well as a regular routine. She found she enjoyed looking after them, even after thoughts of Hamish faded. In the winter months, she'd hear them rattling around as she lay in bed and the mornings took longer and longer to lighten.

It was on a harsh winter morning that she stayed in bed to read her emails on her kindle after doing her *dle*-puzzles, look at the news and, on a whim, put *Professor George Todd*, in her search engine. He was now a speaker for groups such as WI, U3a and would probably be good person for her own women's group. Before she knew it, she was filling in his contact form, with a short paragraph hoping that he'd heard from Hamish and that she'd last seen him alive and well.

His reply came back before she'd finished her next *dle*-puzzle. *I'm sorry, but I don't know anyone called Hamish Todd and I don't have a grandson.*

She'd been taken for a fool.

She heaved herself out of bed and began her day. With the weather being awful and nothing in her diary, she decided to make an early start on the spring cleaning – at least

that's what she told herself. It just so happened that she might use the opportunity to take stock, see if anything was missing.

She found several things that had gone missing and turned up in unlikely places. But, as far as she could tell, Hamish had not taken anything of value. She would just have to put him, and her annoyance at never finding out who he really was, behind her.

As Spring finally came and went, followed by summer and autumn, Celia got on with her life and tried not to think about the fact that something seemed to be missing. She supported the homeless souls outside the supermarket and told herself she wasn't trying to find one in particular.

The following spring, she buried one of the hamsters, no idea whether it was Nameless or Blameless. In summer, she buried the other one, two little mounds in her rockery. Life carried on, until another dreadful winter morning had her staying under the warmth of her duvet to do her *dle*-puzzles, followed by a check of the news and her email.

Is this your Hamish? The subject line of an email from Penny. Inside a link, which Celia clicked on – and nearly dropped her Kindle.

Homeless with Hamsters – the Unlikely Latest New York Times Best Seller.

And under that, a picture of Hamish – or his identical twin. She read the article.

New York Times bestsellers really do come from the most unlikely places. This one from Hamish Todd has truly taken the US by storm. After a drunken night in a pub, Hamish (not his real name) deliberately made himself homeless, for a bet. In order to win the bet, he had to spend his homelessness with two hamsters.

'I nearly fell at the first hurdle,' says the author. 'When an interfering, cantankerous and bonkers old lady decided to take me under her wing. She even bought me a cage for the hamsters! I had to leave them behind so I could escape and start all over again.'

But Hamish managed – and how. You only have to read the first few pages to be hooked by his remarkable story. As well as that, the book is full of hints as to his real identity, the possible answers to which are now all over social media. It appears the world is full of people who look like him.

To order the book –

'No way am I ordering that book!' Celia yelled at her Kindle. 'How dare that ungrateful young man call me old!'

THE END

The Journal of the True Light

Written by NWR Members (and staff) - Alexia Mennie, Lesley Fenton, Ruth Nobbs, Wendy Jefferies, Alison Rogers, Karen Leigh and NWR Cleeve Prior.

The first thing people noticed about Ava Roberts wasn't her sense of humour or her bright blue hair - it was the enormous white cat draped across her shoulders like a living scarf. Nimbus, as fluffy as a drifting cloud, considered himself the unofficial mascot of the community charity where Ava volunteered every Saturday. Whether they were sorting donated clothes, serving hot meals, or organising fundraising events, Nimbus always managed to charm smiles out of everyone who walked through the door.

Ava loved the work. Helping strangers made the town's morning rush feel worthwhile, and every thank-you reminded her that kindness could spread further than anyone realised. This morning, however, the charity shop buzzed with an unusual problem.

"The old journal has vanished," sighed Mrs Patel, the shop manager. "It was donated years ago, and now a local historian wants to see it. We've searched every shelf."

Ava frowned. She had catalogued the rare books herself, and she distinctly remembered placing a faded leather-bound volume with gold lettering into the locked cabinet. Somehow, it had disappeared overnight.

Nimbus suddenly leapt from her shoulders and padded towards the dusty back room. His tail twitched as he stopped beside an antique oak bookshelf that seemed far older than the rest of the building.

Behind a loose plank, Ava discovered not the missing journal, but a tiny, folded parchment tied with a blue ribbon. Curiosity won. She carefully untied it and read the elegant words aloud.

"Lumen veritas, ostende viam."

The room shimmered.

Golden light curled around the shelves, dust floated upward like sparkling snow, and the bookshelf creaked softly before sliding aside to reveal a narrow, hidden alcove. Resting on a carved wooden stand was the lost book, untouched by time, its gold letters glowing faintly as though the spell had awakened it from a long sleep.

Nimbus purred so loudly the sound echoed through the secret space.

Ava reached toward the mysterious book, but as her fingertips brushed its cover, the pages began turning by themselves. Strange symbols danced across the paper, and a warm breeze whispered through the hidden room despite the closed windows.

Had she just uncovered an ordinary forgotten book, or opened the door to a kind of magic that had been waiting specifically for her?

Ava turned towards Nimbus and was puzzled as to why he was acting so strangely, and why those strange happenings had affected him so much. He just stood shaking in the doorway where the large oak cabinet was. So frightened, the expression on his face was something that Ava had never seen before, and it seemed that he was frozen to the floor. He could not move. Ava leant down towards him to give him some love, and as she moved, she saw out of the corner of her eye an image of an elderly white-haired lady who seemed to have been working a treadle machine with a large piece of colourful material. Ava gently spoke to Nimbus, and scooped him up in her arms, and gave him some loving words, but he was having none of it. He just seemed stunned, in shock. She decided if he did not look more like himself when she finished her shift, she would pop into the local vet to get him checked out. Ava, who was puzzled by everything that had taken place, got up off the floor and turned towards where she saw the image of the elderly lady, but it was not there anymore.

Ava looked along the passageway, but the length of material was also gone. The only thing left visible to the eye was the treadle machine. Something strange was going on, but what connection did the missing book have to do with it all? Ava wandered along the passageway, looking at both sides as she did, and then she noticed another message on the wall, on her left-hand side, also written in gold. HAC VIA. Ava wondered who had written this message, and the reason why. Mrs. Patel popped her head around the door and called out to Ava to ask if she had had any luck in finding the missing book, and if so, could she have it to give to the historian, as he had just popped in to ask if the book was now available? Ava called back that she had found it on a shelf in a cupboard, but she really wanted to take it home herself that night to read, as she had some unanswered questions, and felt it best that she investigated before passing the book out on loan. And if possible, could Mrs. Patel get his telephone number, and he would be phoned as soon as the book was returned, possibly within the next 3 days?

Ava, now on her own, walked carefully along the passageway, scouring the walls and surroundings as she walked to see if there were any further messages or drawings that could give her a clue as to why the book had ended up in the back shop. Through a closed door that looked like it had been closed for many years, and who had put it there? But more importantly, what mystery did the colourful length of material have hidden, and where was it now? Ava continued walking slowly along the passageway, when she came across another interesting structure, which looked like a porthole with a small wooden door and a key in it. Ava slowly turned the key and opened the door and was pleasantly surprised to find a little

garden of painted seashells in various colours. Ava stood mesmerised for a short time before entering through the doorway, which she felt held many secrets. She looked around the room, slowly taking in her new found surroundings. What struck Ava most was that the room looked lived in. But that was impossible. If someone rented the room, she would have known. Or was she just imagining this, and her mind was playing tricks? The biggest surprise, as she looked around the room was that she could see the length of material lying over the old leather armchair sitting in the corner of the room.

The air in the little room felt strangely still, as though it had been holding its breath for years. Ava stepped closer to the armchair, every floorboard creaking beneath her feet. The colourful fabric shimmered in the half-light, its threads seeming to catch colours that weren't there a moment before. Reds melted into emerald greens, then softened into deep violet before settling once again into an ordinary patchwork of cloth.

Nimbus, who had refused to move only moments before, suddenly wriggled from Ava's arms. He landed silently on the worn wooden floor and padded towards the fabric with surprising purpose. His tail stood bolt upright, but there was no fear in him now. Instead, there was recognition.

"Well," croaked a gravelly voice from somewhere beneath the window, "it's about time."

Ava spun around.

Perched on an upturned bucket sat a wizened troll no taller than a garden gnome. His beard, the colour of old moss, reached almost to his feet, and his nose curved like the handle of an ancient teapot. He leaned on a crooked walking stick polished smooth with age.

"I was beginning to think the cat had forgotten," he muttered, scratching one pointed ear. "Mind you, he has always preferred naps to prophecies."

Nimbus gave an indignant flick of his tail.

"Oh, don't look offended," the troll sighed. "You've had nine lives to practise and you're still dramatic."

To Ava's astonishment, Nimbus answered - not with words exactly, but with a low, musical purr that echoed around the room. Tiny silver lights drifted from his fur like floating dandelion seeds, circling the walls before disappearing into the old stone. Wherever they touched, faded symbols glowed briefly, revealing maps, names and curious star-shaped markings hidden beneath layers of plaster.

"You can...do magic?" Ava whispered.

The troll chuckled dryly.

"The cat doesn't *do* magic, girl. He remembers it. That's considerably rarer."

Nimbus walked to the patchwork cloth and gently placed one snowy paw upon it. Instantly, the fabric rippled like the surface of a pond, and the image of the elderly woman at the treadle machine appeared once more. This time she looked directly at Ava and slowly raised one finger, pointing beyond the room towards a place that shouldn't have existed.

Then the wall behind the armchair began to disappear.

What was waiting on the other side?

Ava shivered. The day had started strangely and it was becoming stranger by the minute. "Nimbus" she whispered. The cat trotted back towards her. She scooped him up and returned him to his usual perch across her shoulders. His familiar weight and soft purring gave Ava confidence to walk forward past the armchair towards the mist which now swirled behind it. She heard the troll's voice behind her, saying "Trust the cat; he has good instincts even if he does like to be dramatic."

The mist felt cold but after a few seconds it started to clear and she could see that she was in a copse of closely-growing trees with trunks of different colours – red, green, violet – all the shades of the patchwork cloth she had seen. The colours slowly faded and Ava stepped onto a deeply-trodden path that wound away through the trees until she emerged on top of a low mound overlooking a round hut which had wisps of multi-coloured smoke emerging from a hole in its roof.

Ava made her way carefully down the path, Nimbus, warm and comforting around her neck. He leapt lightly down and, with fluffy tail held high, led the way to the hut entrance. It was dark inside and at first she thought it was empty but then she heard a woman's voice. "Welcome", it said, "we have waited long years for you and your guide to arrive". Nimbus purred and Ava again saw the sparkles spreading from his fur. The light increased and she saw

the white-haired old lady seated on a stool, smiling as she slowly worked the treadle so that the familiar patchwork cloth grew a little longer. Nimbus rubbed himself against the old lady's grey skirt and she bent to stroke him so that he purred louder than ever.

"We knew that one day a special person would find the journal and follow the path of the True Light" the old lady continued. "Your guide will help you and I can give you this gift." She produced a pair of shears and cut off a length of patchwork cloth. "Keep it safe", she said, "you will know when the time comes to use it".

Ava took the cloth, folded it and thrust it deep into her pocket. "But I don't understand. What do you mean when you say 'we' have been waiting for a special person. It can't be me, I am nobody special."

The old lady stood up and came towards Ava. "An ordinary person could never have come this far and the cat has chosen you, so you are more special than you know. And "we" are The Guardians who keep the world safe and, with so many dangers in the world, your help is needed more than ever before."

The old lady faded from view. "I am so very glad you are with me", Ava told her cat as he led the way out of the hut.

'Me too' purred Nimbus. Ava took a step back. This was all too much! A glowing journal, a secret door, a troll, a hidden passage, a rainbow world where even the smoke from a cottage chimney was multi coloured? Now her beautiful Nimbus with his newly shimmering coat could talk?

'Nimbus wait! Did you speak?'

'Of course, now please hurry or we are going to be late' purred the white fur ball before hurtling along a twisty coloured path that Ava could swear hadn't been there before, 'and no more talking until we reach the Abbey, these trees have ears'.

Ava realised that clearly questions would have to keep; someone, it seemed had been waiting a long time for help and she wasn't about to let them down, after all helping was what she did. Deep breath. Nimbus and the book it seemed had chosen her! This was her chance for a real adventure; she could do this – whatever this turned out to be!

Ava hurried to catch up with her furry friend who floated rapidly, tail rudderlike, shedding sparkles of glimmering light, steering them both towards

Suddenly Nimbus halted and turning to Ava placed a paw pad in front of his mouth. Ava could hear voices but the dense violet hedge in front of them made it impossible to see who or what was speaking. Carefully they made their way through an opening in the hedge.

They emerged into a splendid, deep hued maze and as they crept closer the voices grew clearer. 'I tell you he is panicking; says he heard it whispered on the breeze – the Special one is coming; may even be here. All guards must put on their invisibility cloaks and arrest anyone they see approaching. A second voice 'but no-one has been here in centuries....' the two voices moved further away.

'Nimbus what are we to do? How do we go forward and remain unseen?

That's easy purred her guide – take out your rainbow cloth, wrap it around us like a cloak – it will add light and colour to everything nearby making invisibility cloaks useless and US the invisible ones.

Ava reached into her pocket, her fingers brushing the familiar patchwork material. She pulled it out and as it unfolded, it caught the light of the maze, changing it into a spectrum of glowing threads. Carefully, she draped the vibrant cloth over her shoulders and pulled Nimbus close.

The transformation was immediate. The air around them rippled with iridescent colours, hiding them completely.

They crept deeper into the maze. Suddenly, a strange shimmer appeared just a few feet ahead. Thanks to the rainbow cloth, the figure became visible: a guard, wearing an invisibility cloak, exposed by the fabric's brilliant light. The guard looked around, unaware that the light was coming from the woman and cat beside him.

Ava held her breath as they slipped past the oblivious guard. The path widened, leading them towards a grand archway woven from golden stone. Beyond it lay the Abbey, its towers rising into a multi-coloured sky.

Ava stepped towards the archway, where a towering statue of a guardian monk blocked the entrance. In the courtyard stones glowed with carved letters HAC VIA. Ava remembered seeing those letters before, but what did they mean? Ava realised that the letters moved and could be arranged to make an anagram: a word meaning life and V or five.

Fixing her eyes on the statue, "CHAI", she spoke aloud, her voice steady. When nothing happened, in desshe said the word five times over. The stone eyes flashed with a golden light, and with a loud grinding sound, the guardian stepped aside, granting them entry.

Nimbus stalked ahead of Ava, his majestic attitude reminding Ava that she was merely his servant. She gazed around, spellbound. It was very dark until the guardian, who had followed them into the Abbey, flicked a hidden switch and illuminated the ornately carved ceiling and stained-glass windows.

Nimbus, transforming suddenly from cat of mystery to moggy seeking a cosy corner, vanished from sight.

Despite the cloak of invisibility wrapped securely around her, Ava felt lost and vulnerable. Cautiously, she continued down the long aisle, intending to follow

the beams of light to the colours of the window puddled on the floor. Her progress halted as she reached the choir stalls. On each side, hooded monks stood silently, heads bowed, dull brown robes with cord waists removing any individuality or personality. Even their heights and rounded bellies were the same.

Only their hands were on show, each pair raising an incongruously red folder. On each monk's right hand gleamed a huge silver ring, bearing the number five.

Ava gasped involuntarily. Fortunately, the sound was masked by 15 monks' voices sounding both hypnotic and joyful. Ava tiptoed towards the end of the nave, continuing towards the mesmerising light.

Ava almost fell over Nimbus when he reappeared suddenly in front of her. Their way was barred by a very tall figure, wearing the same coarse brown woolen robe. He was slimmer than the other monks, almost skeletal, holding aloft the familiar faded gold illuminated journal.

Ava was transfixed. She began to wonder if her breakfast mushrooms had been the magic kind.

As she pondered, the monk held up his hand and began to speak 'you have been chosen, Ava, to deliver the journal to its next keeper. Nimbus will guide you and keep you safe as long as you are not tempted to read the contents. You are simply the messenger. Do not fail me'

With that, the monk handed the journal to Ava and disappeared as quickly as he had arrived

Nimbus purred and began to walk towards a door in the corner of the room, which glowed hot and silently slid open. Ava hesitated but began to follow her beloved cat. The light was blinding and Ava had trouble seeing the way, her disorientation increasing step by step. Low chanting sounds filled her senses

and the smell of incense was intense. The path was descending sharply and Ava saw beyond a steep staircase, shimmering water, like a lagoon. A white coracle drifted into view and Ava and Nimbus stepped in. A silent boatman rowed them across the azure water and although Ava felt some trepidation, she also felt an enormous peace.

On reaching a sheltered cove, the Boatman reached into his robes and handed Ava a pouch made from the softest leather. He indicated that she should place the Journal in it. Pointing to a path winding up from the cove towards a small woodland glade. Ava and Nimbus stepped from the boat and turned to thank him but he had left as silently as he had arrived.

Ava looked into the pouch and found a silver ring with the number 5 and another strip of the magical cloth. What could be the significance of that - she looked wordlessly at Nimbus who only blinked and turned towards the path. The sparkles of light from his fur were now silver and red like mini fireflies flitting along the path behind them. The Ring and the Journal Ava thought!

Nimbus seemed determined to carry on upwards towards the glade. As with everything Ava had encountered on this extraordinary journey, the glade was not what it initially seemed. Instead of leaves, the trees were covered with shimmering ribbons, the same colours as the magic cloth. Between them were small figures, like chess pieces beckoning Ava and Nimbus on. As they passed each of the tiny figures dissolved into silver and red arrows which sped forward indicating the way into the darker parts of the wood.

As the arrows vanished, Ava saw on every side of the path strangely familiar figures appearing, gently closing in on Ava and Nimbus. Instead of being afraid, Ava felt as if she was being carried along in a protective cocoon. Was that the Old Woman? Surely there was the Troll, and the Guardian and the Monks! Ava and Nimbus were surrounded but Nimbus was urging her on. Ava realised that they were guarding her from the unknown but fearful Enemy, out there, beyond the protective circle, trying to snatch the Journal and prevent her from completing her mission.

She still had the pouch clutched tightly in her arms but something compelled her take the ring out and place it on her finger and to wrap the piece of magic cloth round her head like a scarf. A feeling of lightness overcame her and she felt herself floating above the path with Nimbus beside her. The protective circle gradually dispersed leaving them alone but Ava somehow knew she was safe and almost at the end of her journey.

The Journal seemed to be stirring in the pouch, It's golden symbols again glowing but brightly this time. Nimbus nudged Ava who seemed to be in a trance and gently guided her through an opening. Ava found herself in a room, the dusty room, with shelves and an empty wooden stand. Nimbus jumped onto the shelf and nudged the stand. Ava realised he wanted her to place the Journal on it. She felt a strange reluctance to part with it but her cat was quite insistent. As she did so, she heard a voice – a familiar voice and realised that it was Mrs Patel asking her if she was ready for her morning coffee. Shaking her head in disbelief, Ava looked at Nimbus for reassurance but Nimbus turned away and vanished in a cloud of silver and gold dust. She called after him but all she heard was a faint purr which sounded like "Goodbye my dear" then nothing. Ava was distraught and bemused by his disappearance but as she watched the shining cloud disperse, she knew that this was what was meant to be. He had completed the task he was destined to perform.

When Ava emerged from the back room, the shop was quiet for once. Mrs Patel was waiting with her coffee and a home-made cake iced in silver with the number 5 iced in red on top. "The shop is 5 year old today Ava so I thought we ought to celebrate" . Ava was startled. Silver cake, number 5 – she looked at her hand and found the ring exactly where she had placed it. She put her hands up to her neck and found the patchwork scarf still in place. " Sit down my dear, are you all right, you look very pale" said Mrs. Patel. What could she say? "I have been on a magical journey with Nimbus trying to save the world?" It sounded ridiculous and Ava knew she would never be able to explain.

The shop door opened and a dishevelled looking gentleman entered, carrying something small and fluffy in his hands. "Does this belong here"

he asked – it was a small white kitten – “It was sitting outside the door whimpering.” Ava jumped up. The kitten leapt from the gentleman’s hands and jumped up on to Ava’s shoulders – “Nimbus” she whispered. The kitten purred what sounded like “yessss.” Ava was completely dumbfounded. Whatever was happening to her. Then the gentleman introduced himself. He had come to look at the journal he explained. “Did you find it my dear” asked Mrs. Patel who explained that Ava had just been searching for it. “Did you find it” the gentleman asked gently. “Let me introduce myself” - he held out his hand to shake Ava’s and she saw he was wearing a silver and red ring and instead of a necktie, he had what looked like an old piece of patchwork cloth wound round his neck. When he shook Ava’s hand, his neck cloth and Ava’s scarf both began to shimmer slightly and the red stones in their rings glowed showing the number 5, a special number indicating grace and goodness. As Ava had seen this number on the monks’ rings, she was certain that this was the person to whom she was meant to entrust the Journal.

She led the gentleman into the little room and indicated he should take the precious book. “I believe it should go into that leather pouch you are carrying” he said. “I will ensure that this extraordinary book will be safe in my keeping and that the Guardians and I will be forever grateful for what you have done.” Smiling, he went back into the shop and asked Mrs Patel how much he should pay for the book. Mrs Patel looked at Ava who said, “I think that if the gentleman agrees, we could keep the kitten in exchange for the book” Mrs Patel beamed in agreement. She really was not sure what had been going on in her shop that particular Saturday morning but she had a feeling it had been something very special.

The Letter - A short story by members of Sway NWR

Story chain part 1

The village high street looked strangely quiet on Monday morning. Yesterday hundreds of cars crammed onto the playing fields and crawled around the lanes searching for a stopping place. Probably thousands of visitors (human and canine), clutching programmes wandered the streets seeking tombolas, bouncy castles, open gardens and, most importantly tea and cake. Imogen remembered the village fete from when she was a child skipping along between mum and dad and knowing everyone they passed by name. Apparently, it hadn't happened for about a decade, village fetes being seen as old fashioned and too much trouble to organize but as more and more people moved into the area it had been revived and now seemed a major event in the county calendar.

Having a gap in her schedule she had booked a village B&B and thought she would take a look, surely it would do no harm now. As she drove along motorway that Sunday morning, she had almost decided to just keep going but told herself not to be so silly and was there by 11.

The place had certainly changed but so had she. Imogen hoped that her greying hair and lack of the make-up that had once scandalized her aunties no-one would notice her amongst the crowds. Once or twice, she was aware of someone giving her more than just a cursory glance but there was always a rosebush to duck behind.

As the afternoon warmed and became more humid she found shelter in the church. Choosing a pew to one side she felt her shoulders relax and breathing slow but then she glanced down at the floor. Of all the dozens of carefully sewn kneelers the church proudly possessed she had found herself by the one she would have given anything not to see. The one not quite as well worked as the others and the one with the initials LP & TR, the finishing tale of the R slightly too short making the whole letter look unbalanced.

Dinner in a quiet corner of the pub had passed without incident and after a slightly restless night she had managed the full English breakfast her hosts had offered. Imogen had learned long ago that the best way not to attract attention

was to do what was expected. The couple who ran the B&B were newcomers to the village and mercifully uninquisitive.

By 9 o'clock her suitcase was in the boot of her car and she stood to take one last look down the quiet road towards the station. Almost as if following a script a man in a 3-piece suit and tie emerged right on cue.

Turning back hurriedly to the car her way was blocked by a small dog with one black ear and one brown.

Surely it couldn't possibly be Rusty. No dog ever lived to 43! The dog put his front paw up as it to say "just wait right there".

(Sue Seymour)

Story chain part 2

"Hello little chap!" she said quietly, bending to let the little dog investigate her hand. "You remind me of a very good friend of mine from long ago."

The dog wagged his tail and licked her hand, enjoying a scratch.

Unexpectedly her eyes filled with tears as she was transported back 30 years...

Rusty had belonged to one of Imogen's aunts who had lived in the village all her life. Auntie Lottie was a potter and well known in the area. She made beautiful pieces that were sold in galleries and shops in the local town. The colours and shapes were unique, delighting the brisk local tourist trade. Imogen loved watching her aunt at work in her studio, occasionally being allowed to try out her own creative talents - though not as successfully as she would have wished!

Lottie was her mother's eldest sister and had been born in the village, but had remained while Imogen's mum had moved away to London to work. Lottie loved country life and it was treasured memories of holidays with her and village fetes from those summer holidays that Imogen held close to her heart. A time when her Mum, Dad, Tilly and Imogen were still a family.

"Good grief! That's not Imogen Ramsay?" a deep voice exclaimed, startling Imogen out of her reverie.

It was the suited man she'd spotted coming out of the station just before she had been distracted by the dog. A man Imogen had no desire to see ever again...

Fortunately, as she stepped back in shocked recognition, the dog began barking furiously, almost mirroring her anxiety. A lady ran out from a nearby cottage to retrieve her excited pet allowing Imogen the chance to slip into her car and start the engine.

“Wait!” cried the man who had caused such disquiet. But Imogen just glared through the windscreen as she drove away from the village - away from the memories she had worked so hard to bury.

(Deb Magrath)

Story Chain part 33

Driving away from the man she had recognised, the man in a 3-piece suit and a tie, the man with the deep voice, Imogen remembered the kneeler in the church with the letters LP and TR. She just wanted to run away from the memories she had worked so hard to bury.

She was surprised that her greying hair and lack of make-up made her still recognisable. Still upset by seeing the letters ‘TR’, Tilly Ramsey, her sister next to ‘LP’, Langston Potbatton, the poor man was given such a ridiculous name by his very affluent parents trying to hide their working-class roots.

She tried very hard to remember clearly what had brought such unhappy memories to cause her to run away in such panic. It was such a long time ago. She had been so close to her sister Tilly, but once she left the village for London, they lost touch.

Slowly memories came back on her drive home. Her mother had phoned her to tell her that Tilly and Langston were ‘an item.’ Going to great lengths to voice her disapproval. A man with illusions (delusions) of grandeur, with parents with false belief that they were more important than they were, because of new money.

Clearly Langston was still unable to accept reality, still clearly arrogant wearing a suit and a tie in a village!

A few months after her mother had phoned her, her sister Tilly suddenly showed up in London, devastated that the love of her life, Langston had deceived her. She then remembered that her Aunt Lottie had also phoned her and Lottie had a very different impression of Langston, she actually had

defended him. Imogen was confused then and now. Perhaps she ought to give Langdon a chance to explain himself now that sadly her sister Tilly had passed.

(Susana Weiner)

Story Chain Part 4

Imogen sighed deeply whilst driving through the beautiful countryside, the high banks of the hedgerows laden with wildflowers and the sun shining through the tree canopies creating dappled shade on the road ahead. Looking in the mirror, she watched the village that she grew up in, Stay Matravers, recede in the distance and without realising she found she had pulled into a layby and decided to stop running from the terrible events of her past. Imogen knew that until she faced up to the facts of her early life, she would never find peace, something she craved now she was entering her 7th decade.

Turning the car round, she headed back to the B&B she had stayed in the previous night and booked another room from the bemused landlady resolving to stay and face the music. The problem was even though they all had strong opinions neither her mother, her aunt Lottie or her sister Tilly really knew the truth of what went on with Langston and herself all those years ago.

Imogen recognised that she was a child of the sixties, maybe she was as much to blame as Langston, and in fairness to him in those days there was no three-piece suit in sight, instead miniskirts and long straight hair for her and flared trousers and impressive moustache for him combined with a freedom that her mother's generation could only look on with envy.

Langston was a few years older than Imogen, not obscenely so but enough to raise some eyebrows in the village where the population was so much smaller and it was difficult to keep your private business to yourself. Was it her fault that Langston's family were from "new money", no, but it was her fault all those years later that Tilly found the letter that caused her the grief and anguish that had ultimately led to her sister Tilly's untimely and premature death. If only Langston had never written it, her sister might still be alive today.

(Melanie Seacombe)

Story chain part 5.

Imogen knew that she must confront Langston. She, her sister Tilly and Langston had been part of a much bigger group all growing up in the swinging sixties.

All teenagers do daft things when they are growing up, and still do to this day, Things that they will shudder about in years to come when the hormones have settled down and they have a mortgage to think about!

After the war in the 1940s which was such a hard time for everyone, and the 1950s in which teenagers were finally beginning to be heard, or looked down upon, by their older and wiser parents, as rock and roll came over from America, and Teddy boys with their long hair and drain pipe trousers were seen around the coffee shops that were springing up.

The 1960s was an even more extreme time, what with the new bands in the UK. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, The Who, Procol Harum. The teenage scene really took off, with many an adult shouting along the road at the fast receding back of a teenager, "Get yer hair cut!"

It was many years since they had seen each other and time had not been kind to him! Langston was now sporting a quite ridiculous 3-piece suit, which, OK may impress the neighbours, but he had been such a Wow in the sixties, with skin tight jeans and long flowing hair, a real member of the flower power set. But needless to say, Langston also indulged in the wacky baccy that was all the rage then and probably a few other illegal substances along the way. He had his contacts, through some really weird people!!

Langston, Tilley and Imogen had all been very close when they were younger, but Tilley was much more vulnerable and believed everything that she was told. Reality has a way of getting in the way of having fun, and reality had come crashing down.

{Sheila Butler}

Story chain Part 5

After Imogen had re-settled herself in the B & B, she unpacked and calmed herself down with a coffee. She then decided that she ought to find out if Langston was staying in the old family home, "Potbatton House" or did it still exist?

Imogen decided to take a walk around the village and to see if Langston's old home was still there or had been demolished.

As she walked, many old memories came flooding back to her, bringing tears to her eyes.

Years ago, Imogen, Tilly, Langston and a few other old friends had decided to go to the music festival a few miles away.

Langston had a car, a present from his parents, so he drove Tilly and Imogen to the music festival. The others either hitched lifts, walked or managed by bus.

After arriving, pitching tents and getting themselves sorted, everyone started to party. The drink flowed, the bands were great and the music very loud. Everyone was having a good time dancing and chilling out.

Imogen wasn't sure what exactly happened, but she noticed that Tilly and Langston were arguing. After a while Tilly stormed off, leaving Langston looking bemused.

As they often had digs and arguments with each other, Imogen decided to ignore the situation. She knew her sister, Tilly, would be back later as she always returned.

At the end of the evening everyone sat around the campfire chatting, a bit heady from the drink. Eventually all but Imogen and Langston had returned to their tents.

Imogen shook her head, "those were the good days" she thought to herself.

Imogen eventually found herself standing in front of Potbattan House, Langston's family home. She took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

It was a while before the door was opened and Langston was very surprised to see Imogen on the step.

He invited her in. She noticed how shabby the place looked.

She braced herself and said, "we need to talk".

Imogen said, "Langston, you were an idiot to have sent that letter to me. And I was such a fool to have kept it. Tilly would probably still be here now, if only I had destroyed that letter."

Imogen and Langston had a good heart to heart talk and agreed that neither of them was to blame for Tilly taking offence at the contents of the letter, when it was all innocent fun.

They were not to blame for her accepting a lift into town either, by her friend, who unfortunately had decided to drive, after having a few drinks.

The end.

(Janice Perry)

The Lost and Found

Written by NWR Tadley

The lost and found

Charlotte always felt the overwhelming and rather embarrassing urge to giggle loudly whenever anybody told her that they were sorry for "her loss" - it implied a certain carelessness on her part, as if she had left Gordon behind in a supermarket by mistake or he had somehow managed to fall out of her handbag

She wanted to shout at them that he wasn't lost, Gordon her husband of 43 years was dead, not lost, not misplaced but dead, shuffled off this mortal coil, pushing up daisies, dead, gone, no longer in this world, never coming back

When someone close to you dies there is always an assumption that whoever is left behind will be bereft, devastated, absolutely beside themselves with grief.

The reality is that lots of people may well feel this way. Charlotte envied them, she really did. To her it showed that what they had had was real and important, and that they truly missed that person.

However, all Charlotte had felt when she received the news that Gordon had been killed in a three car pile up on the M25, was relief. She really had to restrain herself from throwing her arms around the grave faced young policeman who had come to deliver the news and blurting out her thanks

She felt so guilty for feeling like this, and the really worst part of it was that how she was feeling was something that she felt she couldn't share with anyone, not her friends, not her work colleagues, not the people that attended her church, and never, (and just the thought of this made her cringe), with her two children, Helen and Michael

To the outside world Gordon had seemed the perfect husband, hardworking, kind and attentive. He still kept himself fit, he was charming to her friends, a nice man, a good man, a good husband.

There were no deep, dark secrets. Gordon didn't drink excessively, he didn't gamble, she had never caught him out with another woman, or another man for that matter. He was rarely critical of Charlotte and usually told her she looked nice when they went out for their regular fish and chip supper at the Codswallop café.

So why, oh why, did Charlotte feel this overwhelming sense of relief on the death of such a good husband and father? Well, the reality was Gordon was soooo boring, mind numbingly, heart achingly, coma inducing boring !!!!

Charlotte, enjoying her new found freedom, poured herself a large glass of red wine and forced herself to think about Gordon's funeral tomorrow. Lots of nice things would doubtless be said by the people she had asked to speak, safety-first her priority. Just as well, as she had no conviction that her husband was in anyway aware of the event.

In her imagination she went back to their first meeting. She was just 20 when she caught his eye. Not a bad looker, though nothing outstanding. Her blue eyes were lively, her pale skin improved in the sunshine, although it always had some UV protection. These days she had to use a lip liner to stop colour leaching, but she was wearing pretty well. An irritating question came to mind, remembering these first encounters. Why had she chosen to marry Gordon? Guess the idea of sex was a big attraction. Gordon was attractive and at 6ft appealed to Charlotte at 5ft 7inches tall.

His job, when only 23, had prospects and he was 'a good catch' it seemed. Home and family beckoned.

At school, when total attention wasn't needed, amazing, crazy daydreams would keep her happy. Flights of fancy were more enjoyable than routine chats or discussion. In Gordon she had found her man, new adventures beckoned.

After a year or so, the children came in quick succession, bringing with them, worry, tiredness, responsibility and general chaos. Charlotte couldn't believe it when at this stage Gordon suggested that they move as a family to America with a job promotion. Imagine, she needed her mum to help her through those early days, no way would she move to a foreign country. While the children were still toddlers they moved to a bigger house with a garden - what a relief for Charlotte. Children take so much time and attention.

So how/when did life become so boring? It was so fixed in her mind that way. She hated the 'Codswallop' every Friday. One thing did surprise her and had made her laugh last Christmas. Michael and family bought Dad a racetrack experience. She was shocked at how exhilarated Gordon was afterwards, she had been terrified of a crash. Did his son recognise something she'd become too bored to see? Maybe Gordon was driving a bit fast on the M25?

It made her question the compulsion she felt to keep her relief a secret, too many confusing feelings....so maybe a small glass of wine suited her better

She sat in the sitting room as the sun went down, refilled her glass of wine and thought about her boredom and the funeral tomorrow. She had turned down offers to be with her from Helen and Michael because she felt so guilty about not being sad, she would try to act appropriately as the grieving widow when they arrived in the morning. She reflected on why he was boring. Was it the golf every weekend and every holiday since the children had left home? Was it because he spent every night on his computer; wasn't it enough to sit behind a screen in the office every day? They had drifted apart and had no interests in common. She remembered that sometimes Gordon had wondered what their lives would have been like if they had moved to America.

Lying in bed later she tossed and turned but sleep did not come. She felt awful the next day as the house filled with friends and relatives waiting to follow the coffin to the church. Her memory of travelling to the church and taking her seat was hazy, Helen and Michael sat either side of her and the familiar words were read from the book of Common Prayer. She stifled a yawn as Sathnam, a representative from the golf club, rose to read his eulogy.

He praised Gordon and thanked him for introducing the guys to Bitcoin and forming the investment society that met in the club house. Also, for teaching them how to use AI to manage their portfolios and for planning their visit to the motor museum that he had enjoyed when he had his Christmas test drive at Silverstone. So many of them were increasing their wealth because of him, and he had created a community for the men of the town. The emotion of the occasion started to get to him and his voice quivered as he explained how Gordon had also found the funding to set up a computer and Lego games club in the old building at the back of the driving range. This was for autistic boys who were beginning to make friendships and have a social life. Gordon had made a difference and would be missed by so many people.

Charlotte felt numb but also wide awake, why hadn't Gordon told her this, did he have a bitcoin investment account? Who were his friends? Who were the boys? What did Helen and Michael know? Why had she ignored the man she used to love?

Then it occurred to herwas SHE the one who was boring? Horrified by this thought, Charlotte began to think about suggestions Gordon had made that she had shunned - he was always trying to get her to join a Salsa dance class - as if they were young enough to do such a thing! And as for going on a longboat holiday on a canal - perish the thought. Why

did he want to visit a Thai restaurant when he seemed happy with fish and chips? And why did Gordon keep wondering about the life they could have had in America, if they had gone?

Exhausted by these confusing thoughts, Charlotte finally fell into a deep sleep ... and started to dream....

Her dream took her back to when the children were very young and Gordon had come home from work very excited about the offer of a promotion if he took a position in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. In her dream, Charlotte was as excited as Gordon, and they spent a few hours going over plans to accept the post to move the family to America. They poured over the brochures they had been given about life in America they looked at maps of the country and talked about travelling to different states and visiting landmarks they had only ever seen before in books and on TV. They imagined the life they could offer their very young children and the visits from friends and family.

Still in the dream, Gordon accepted the job to move to America, and their house was put on the market. Gordon's company was arranging everything for them Stateside, including the rental of a family house. The plan was to move to America in two months' time and in her dream, Charlotte was busy excitedly packing up their house ready for the move, whilst telling the children how lucky they all were to be given such a wonderful opportunity.

Charlotte woke from her dream, slowly and disoriented. She remembered that, when it came to the crunch, America was out of the question, as Gordon's widowed mother gradually developed motor neurone disease, and they couldn't abandon her. For several years she, predominantly, had responsibility for her care, and until her death had very little time for herself.

Perhaps that was when she became boring? And when Gordon, weary of all the restrictions that illness inevitably brings, turned to other pursuits, respectable and worthy though they were. And did she really care? After all, she had her own secrets – mainly in the form of Rupert, the suave and sophisticated financial adviser she had dealt with frequently after the death of her mother-in-law.

For many years they had carried out their secret illicit affair, snatching moments wherever they could. He had an entrée into a lifestyle well beyond her means, with a group of friends who were equally well-heeled and connected – days at the races; evenings at the opera, and dinners in expensive restaurants. She had covered her tracks well and thought that Gordon had never detected her secret passion. Not that she wanted anything more permanent with Rupert – he remained tantalisingly out of reach, and she was happy that it remained that way.

She did wonder whether Helen had an inkling – on one intimate occasion outside the most expensive restaurant in town, they had been in a romantic clinch, and she had spotted Helen's car passing by. Quite possibly she had seen, but had never said anything – well, not to her, in any case.

She sighed. Somehow with Gordon's death, the thrill of the chase and (if she admitted it) the equal thrill of being caught, had lessened. Had she actually wanted Gordon to find out? However, now she would be a wealthy widow, and perhaps there were even more fish in the sea? She would never marry again, of course - most people would think it was out of love and deference to Gordon, but she wouldn't risk losing her newly found independence and money by marrying it away.

She daydreamed about where her wealth would take her, and what she could do with it. Holidays to exotic places; a new car – perhaps even a new house in a new area? – better quality clothes and a make-over - Botox?! The list seemed endless, and not impossible. She sighed again. Helen and Michael would doubtless not approve of any of this, and it might just have to remain a daydream. Unless she found a way of concealing her new life from them –

perhaps by further deception? Something to sharpen her mental processes on, all in the name of deterring dementia, of course.

She did, however, suspect that she would have lots of opportunities to see Rupert again soon, with probate looming

One evening, when Charlotte was browsing through some travel brochures, there was an unexpected knock at the door and in marched Helen. She saw the brochures and immediately realised what her mother was up to. Charlotte said 'Well, I deserve a holiday after all the time I have looked after my mother-in-law'. 'Does that include taking your fancy man away with you on your round the world cruise?' shouted Helen?

Charlotte went white and collapsed in a chair. 'I knew all about you', said Helen. 'I didn't tell Dad because I could not hurt him. He was such a wonderful loving and caring man. I could not believe you were such a selfish deceitful woman, Mother. Dad had planned in his will to help provide a respite care home for autistic children, and there you are about to throw money away on a luxury cruise with your boyfriend, something you would never have done with Dad. Unless you do as he would have wanted, I will never speak to you ever again', said Helen. 'Nor will you ever see your grandchildren again'.

Helen stormed out. Charlotte sat motionless for a few minutes, shocked by her daughter's outburst. She leant back and grabbed her phone and started dialling. 'Hello ...'. Charlotte slammed the phone down. Realising the shock of Helen's outburst was bringing on a deep sense of numbness and shame. Helen obviously thought her mother selfish, self-centred and deceitful.

Suddenly, floods of tears started falling, and Charlotte felt deep sobs rising up from within her. She thought to herself that this is how she should feel, for her partner, father of her children, and that after 43 years he would no longer be there. She felt the convulsive sobs subsiding and began to re-evaluate her feelings and thought more of the surprising eulogy at his funeral. She questioned herself again, and realised that it may have been she holding Gordon and their family back from grabbing life and opportunities.

The following day Charlotte picked up the phone and dialled the number from the Facebook page for the computer and Lego games club. She spoke to a lady called Megan who explained how Gordon, on a charity day from work five years' previously, had helped at the local school for autism. From there he had realised how much he bonded and enjoyed the pleasure of helping the boys develop and learn. This led him to make his decision to create a club. A computer and Lego Games club for the boys, to help develop their skills and social skills. He had wanted more from his life!

When had Charlotte and Gordon stopped talking to each other? What had happened to their hopes, dreams, and feelings for life? She didn't know.

A few days later Charlotte visited the computer and Lego games Club. She felt the enjoyment the boys felt, and the pleasure of the love and kindness they all felt from the experience of deployment and socialising.

Charlotte woke up the next day full of sunshine inside and out, and thanked Gordon silently for all his support and love for her over their 43 years together.

Tadley NWR
September 2026

NWR Wokingham Forest Group Story 2026

The Ripple Effect

Chapter 1

The tea had gone cold - a stagnant film covering its surface. Helen sat at the kitchen table, the silence of the house pressing against her ears until it hummed.

On the mahogany surface lay a single, rusted key and a handwritten note that simply read: *The basement was never empty.*

For twenty years, she had lived in this Victorian sprawl, painting its walls and polishing its floors, convinced she knew every creak of its bones. She had ignored the faint scratching behind the wall and the way the shadows in the hallway seemed to stretch just a little too far when she turned her back. She had chosen comfort over curiosity.

Now, she was fearfully looking at the heavy iron door that had appeared where the pantry used to be, curiously drawn to what lay beyond. She never imagined it would come to this - standing in her own home, realizing she was the guest and something else was the landlord.

She clasped the key. The air in the room dropped ten degrees, and for the first time, the house didn't just creak - it exhaled.

The key weighed heavy, its cold iron biting into Helen's palm.

As she slid the metal into the lock, there was no resistance. The mechanism turned with a wet, heavy thud, as if the portal had been waiting - hungry - for this exact moment. The door swung inward, revealing not a staircase, but a narrow, descending tunnel.

She stepped inside, her torch beam cut through a haze of dust dancing like tiny insects, the smell of damp earth and rot assaulting her nostrils.

The scratching she'd heard for years was louder here, a rhythmic "*scritch-scratch*" coming from just beyond the curve of the tunnel. The tunnel opened into a small, circular room. In the centre sat a vanity table, identical to the one Helen used every morning.

Sitting at the table was a figure. From behind, it looked exactly like Helen - the same slope of the shoulders, the same silver-streaked hair.

Helen gasped. The figure didn't turn around, but its voice - a perfect, melodic mirror of Helen's own - echoed off the dirt walls.

"You're late, Helen. I've been waiting for you for so long"

The figure leaned in toward the vanity mirror, reflecting Helen's own image. Her eyes widened in shock as the figure didn't stand up so much as it *unfolded*. It rose menacingly and as it turned Helen's torch flickered, the beam died down to a dim muted orange. It could have been Helen's twin – except Helen was an only child. Its eyes bore into her with a malevolent air. When it finally faced her, the doppelganger tilted to the side.

"Don't look so horrified," the thing whispered, its voice vibrating from somewhere deep inside its chest rather than its throat. "You've been living a double life for years – your own and mine. The house requires a tenant," but there can be only one – only one Helen can live here."

Chapter 2

Helen felt as cold as ice, she was trembling and hardly able to stop herself collapsing. The walls of the unpleasant room seemed to be swirling round, closing in on her and she found it hard to breath.

"Who are you?" she croaked hoarsely "What do you want with me?"

"I don't want you, you're finished," snarled the horrible figure "I'm going to replace you. I'm your true self: your suppressed anger, your unhappiness, your negativity. No-one will notice, you will just disappear, trapped forever in this cellar watching me living your life through the mirror.

"Emma will notice!" cried Helen.

"No," whispered the dread creature "She'll just think her mother is sliding into dementia, she avoids conflict like you. So she'll turn away, go no contact."

"I know Emma wouldn't desert me." thought Helen, beginning to recover from her horror and shock. She noticed the doppelganger looked slightly different, slightly faded maybe, as she had this happy thought.

"Is it affected by my emotions?" she wondered.

"Peter deserted you," scoffed the malevolent thing "he betrayed, robbed and left you." The familiar hurt and anger surged through Helen as she thought of Pete's treachery. As usual she tried to put him out of her mind and the foul manifestation in front of her immediately grew in stature as the negative thoughts flowed into its nasty being. It watched Helen closely through green eyes unnervingly identical to her own.

The walls were stable now and Helen was able to breath without gasping. She noticed the tattered rags draping the loathsome form in front of her were the remains of the dressing gown she'd worn for weeks after Peter left, depressed and self-neglecting. She hadn't even realised she was pregnant until she was five months gone. She'd had to pull herself together then, paint a room for a nursery, buy a cot. She smiled as she thought

of Emma again, her precious daughter, and the doppelganger looked peaky as if it'd had three sleepless nights in a row.

"What should I do?" Helen sent a silent prayer upwards. Her mother's unhelpful answer, from beyond the grave, was "God knows!" Did that mean no idea or Christian forgiveness?

Helen thought of the evil doppelganger taking her place, making Emma miserable, telling Emma the truth about her despicable father....

Suddenly a cold rage flooded through Helen, directed at the doppelganger.

"You can't destroy me, because you can't exist without me" she spat "You're just a manifestation of my anger and unhappiness and I'm going to destroy YOU.

Chapter 3

"AS IF YOU COULD" the creature cackled. Helen was paralysed with fear, her thoughts swirled.

She started to look around the basement to see if there was anything she could weaponize the doppelganger with. The room was dark, dusty, and smelt of damp. It reminded Helen of her grandfather's wine cellar but without the easy exit. How could anyone live here she asked herself. As her gaze focused on the righthand side of this circular room she spotted a table in the shadows and on the table was an open book. Why had she not noticed this earlier, maybe she had directed all her energy towards the creature sitting at the vanity table.

Helen leaned towards the table, not wanting to attract attention, she remained still. Her eyes were out on stalks as she tried to read the page. Her body stiffened as she could make out the date in the book. It was the date Helen was knocked down as she crossed the road. She was on her way home from school, her friends had made it to the other side but from nowhere came a speeding car which hit Helen. She was in hospital for three months and hated the separation from her mother and school friends. This was a very horrible memory and as she glanced over to the mirror she could see a smirk on the face of the evil creature.

As the smirk became a smile, the pages rolled over in the book and stopped about half way through. Helen could see the date. It was the day she discovered she had breast cancer. Another difficult time in her life. She had pushed this memory to the far reaches of her mind. Emma was only seven years old at the time. If this was a book of her life and it was at the half way point, does this mean she will live until she is seventy two, what else is to come, she thought.

Helen couldn't contain her curiosity and wanted to see what the remainder of the book was about to reveal. She moved towards the table at the same time as the malevolent thing span round, looked her directly in the eye and pointed her index finger at Helen. "I'm not frightened of you" Helen screamed as she tried to move. It felt like she was walking through treacle, then a sudden electric shock surged through her body, an immediate explosion in her chest and a stinging sensation. Helen lost consciousness and fell to the ground.

Chapter 4

As she slowly came round, Helen was confused. Where was she? What had happened? Slowly her memory returned as she looked up to see her doppelganger standing over her smirking. Helen forced herself to think more. How was she going to escape this situation? Was it even real – she pinched herself and decided it was real. In that moment, she decided that she could no longer avoid conflict and that she had to face up to this terrible living nightmare that she found herself in to protect her daughter. She would do anything to protect Emma.

First of all, she had to name this creature, so that she could recall it. She thought of naming it Helen2 but it was not a person so it could not have a female name. No, she would call it 'Thing' because it was an object, a ghost, a phantom.

During this thinking time, Thing was observing Helen silently. It was unnerving but Helen was determined to keep thinking. She could not panic now. She needed a strategy, a plan. Remembering that Thing seemed to weaken when she was positive, not angry or unhappy, this became her strategy. Thing thrived on negativity so she must be the opposite. Although it was difficult in the circumstances, Helen summonsed all her strength both physically and mentally thinking about Emma and happy times in her life.

Helen tried to stand with difficulty as the shock of whatever it was that had sent her crashing to the floor had weakened her but she managed to move and raise herself first to her knees and then to her feet. Thing just watched and continued to smirk. Helen smiled. She decided to ask questions and find out more. 'How long have you been here?' Helen asked. 'Do you need food to live on?' 'Do you ever leave this room?'

Thing looked over at Helen showing no emotion. 'I've been here for many years. I never leave this room and do not need food. This is how you will live when I take your place' replied Thing. Helen shivered. It was cold and damp. This was really hard – how could she keep positive? How was she going to escape?

Chapter 5

As usual on Saturday mornings, Emma would pop round to have a coffee with her mum after dropping Sofia off to her dancing class. Although Emma was very fond of her mum, she experienced her as quite smothering and wished her mum would have more of a life of her own rather than living vicariously through her and Sofia's. She acknowledged that it must have been quite a struggle being a single mum and Emma had, over many years, worried about her as she witnessed her mum's dive into episodes of deep depression.

It was unusual for her mum to not answer the doorbell and so Emma tentatively let herself in using her spare key. The hall was cold and gloomy and stepping into the kitchen she called out 'Mum, it's me – where are you?'

There was complete silence except for Emma's breathing as she felt a wave of panic rising in her chest as thoughts of harm raced through her brain. She was suddenly aware that there was no tray that mum always laid out for their coffee, and then she gasped as she saw an open doorway leading to a passage that had never been there before.

Dreading what she might find, Emma shivered as she ventured along the dark, musty tunnel which opened out into a tiny room. In the gloom she could just make out a strange, ghostly figure looking like her mum and wailed in panic 'Oh mum, what's happened to you and why are you wearing that awful dressing gown'? Before the figure answered, a small querulous voice from the dark corner of the room cried out 'Emma, please help me, there's a Thing trying to replace me'.

Chapter 6

The figure rose, walked over to the shadows; picked up a limp, rag doll and a large, leather-bound book. Returning to the vanity table, she placed the book in front of the mirror and propped the doll beside it facing the mirror. Emma could have sworn the doll looked the spitting image of her mother. How strange! She turned to her mother and was shocked to see how dishevelled she looked.

"Are you feeling ok? Have you forgotten we were having a coffee and then picking up Sofia. I've booked a table at the pub for lunch. Why don't you go upstairs and smarten yourself up while I make the coffee."

Her mother bristled, "Don't boss me around. I'm perfectly fine, I was just reminiscing about your father, he was such a wonderful man."

Emma was shocked, her mother had never thought her father was a 'wonderful man'. She had never met him but had always been told he was a philanderer and a wastrel. What on earth was going on. There was a waft of cold air as her mother pushed past her and headed upstairs. Emma retreated to the kitchen and busied herself making coffee. Minutes later, her mother returned dressed totally in black looking as if she was heading for a funeral rather than a pleasant family outing. Emma felt anxious, was her mother

sinking into depression again? She watched closely while they drank their coffee, there was certainly something strange about her.

At the pub, Emma was appalled as her mother carped and complained loudly about the table, the food and the service.

“What’s got into you, mum? You’re making a scene and everyone is looking at us.”

“So what! They’re staring at us because you and your ugly daughter look like filthy scarecrows,” screamed her mother.

Every face turned towards them, shocked by the evolving fracas. Emma and Sofia leapt to their feet tipping over their chairs.

“How could you, mum, after all we’ve done for you. We’re leaving and don’t expect to see us ever again,” cried Emma, bursting into tears. Pulling the tearful Sofia with her, she rushed out of the pub trying to ignore all the stares.

“What are you all gawking at? You’re a bunch of haggard, old crones,” yelled Helen, contemptuously, as she glided out, leaving the bill unpaid and a horrified sea of faces.

Helen snarled and insulted everyone she pushed past on her way home, leaving a trail of people shivering and downtrodden. By the time she reached home, she had grown in stature and had a devilish smile on her face. She pushed open the door, rushed in and slammed it shut, malevolently. The beautiful garden withered and died and the house disappeared into a grey mist. An aura of doom and gloom descended on the whole area.

Chapter 7

“Helen, wake up now”. Helen stirred and half opened her eyes. Beside her, was the comforting presence of Doctor Cowan. She had the strangest feeling that he had been wandering in and out of her consciousness for some time.

He gently began to explain that she had been going through a huge psychotic episode. Her daughter, Emma, had asked for his help as she had done many times over the years; however, before he had actioned any treatment Helen had experienced an incident which caused her to faint, hitting her head and rendering her unconscious.

It had now been four weeks since she was hospitalised. “I have been working with you most days. We’ve been right back to the day you were born and a picture of your backstory has emerged that will fill the gaps that you have been desperate to understand. It has been a journey of discovery to uncover the cause of your depression. I can see today that the fog is lifting and you are beginning to look your old self”.

As he left the room, Helen heard him say, “In you go”. Emma rushed in followed by her father, Peter. Emma tearfully hugged her mother whilst Peter took her hands. “There is someone waiting outside who is anxious to meet you”. The door opened a crack and a

face peered in. It was like looking in the mirror – her doppelganger. It glided towards her, sat on the bed and gently took her hands from Peter's.

"I don't know where to begin. I'm Harriet and you are my twin sister". Helen felt an overwhelming surge of relief. It was as if she had always known that there was a missing piece in her life's jigsaw and now she was complete.

"Let me tell you the story as we have pieced it together.

When we were about four weeks old, our mother took us out in our pram. Unusually, we were both asleep, so our exhausted mum left us under a tree and went to sit on a nearby bench where she dozed off. When she awoke, I was gone. The poor, broken woman was never the same again. She drove our father to a premature death and it was as if she blamed you for my disappearance. She made your existence a living hell, treating you as a skivvie, you had no childhood.

Then, barely more than a child yourself, you met Peter, fell in love and married. Happy at last, until you had Emma and the onset of post-natal depression. You had not acquired the necessary building-blocks to keep a home and family together and bent on self-destruction you forced Peter to leave. You and Emma muddled through but there were difficult periods.

Four weeks ago, I plucked up courage and rang your doorbell. I had traced you with the help of my adoptive mother and the agency in the north of Scotland that had rehomed me. When you saw me, you collapsed and hit your head."

At that moment, Dr Cowan returned telling them he was going to take a photo of the smiling family group, so that if there were sticky times ahead, he could remind Helen of who she was and how much she was loved. He placed Helen's leather-bound journal on her bedside saying, "It will have a happy ending".

The Secret Ingredient

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On behalf of NWR Taunton

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Chapter One

This was always one of her favourite times of the day. One where she could just be by herself to unwind, collect her thoughts and enjoy the beautiful scenery. Hilary had grown up by this shoreline her childhood days spent in the rock pools and building sandcastles, in the stretch of the beach that was more popular with the bathers. Her father taught her how to swim in this bay; she had collected pebbles and interesting flotsam; she had fond memories of ice-creams and fish and chips in newspaper. The beach huts, once painted with an array of bright colours, were now faded and slightly shabby but this remained her happy place.

Here in the evening, with the families long since gone home for their teas, she could enjoy her walk along the beach and relish the tranquillity, which was interrupted only by the gentle lapping of the water on the shore. Watching the sun setting on the ocean's horizon and the passing of inshore shipping, as well as the local fishing boats, gave her immense pleasure.

Her thoughts turned to the recent NWR meeting and she wondered how she had ended up at this point. The Group was an important part of her life; she had made some wonderful friends and greatly enjoyed the stimulating conversations and discussions that they had when getting together. It gave her the time she needed to be 'her' – not simply someone's wife or mother. Hilary also felt it was important to contribute to her local community. Like her mother before her, she often baked for various stalls at events; created miniature gardens for the flower show, made jams and marmalade; bottled fruit when there was an abundance in the summer, which always made nice gifts for friends.

However, she had never been overly ambitious, or competitive, just always happy to support others and to 'do the best she could' at anything that she turned her hand to. So why had she risen to the challenge this time? Was there something lacking in her life that she hadn't faced before? Was a new challenge worth all the stress, upset and upheaval that it would inevitably cause?

Hilary thought of her family which gave her, along with her various hobbies and interests, a full and mostly satisfying life – surely that should be enough for anyone? This would be new territory for her, and she didn't know how she felt about it, she hadn't even told her husband Paul! Never having considered that it would come to this; what was she going to do? How could she have been so easily persuaded; after all it really is only a

hobby to her. Admittedly one she enjoyed but when all is said and done, what might people say? What if she makes a complete fool of herself?

She also considered her brother. As a big shot in government Hilary was always mindful of anything that might impact on his image or reputation, rarely accepting his invitations to events, as she dreaded embarrassing him in front of his posh friends. But she loved him just the same; she was proud of what he had achieved and they were family; surely that counted for a lot? Maybe this could be something that would make him proud of her.

Sitting on the bench at the far end of the bay her thoughts were no clearer than when she had set out walking. Perhaps she would know what to do once she had slept on it and decided it might be best not to mention it until she had thought it through. After all, the letter had only arrived this afternoon.

Hilary set about returning to the house. She had served Paul his dinner before she left, just as he liked it. Many years ago, he had said that he required time alone at the end of his working day and that he didn't want to hear her "withering on about the smallness of her day", so it suited her to go for an evening stroll. But Paul didn't like her being away too long from the house. There were, after all, always things for her to be doing around the home, as he frequently reminded her. How was he going to deal with this news? She felt sure that he wouldn't like the disruption it would certainly bring to their routine; who would get his dinners and pack his lunches? But something in her had stirred and maybe, just maybe, she would be brave and do something in her life that was just for her.

Clearly, she hadn't thought it through when she had been encouraged by her friends to send in the application - but now it had been accepted!! "Oh golly" she thought - "I'm going to be on Master Chef"

Chapter 2

Paul heard the front door close behind Hilary, as she left for her walk. He knew that she would be gone for at least an hour so he could enjoy the peace and quiet after his stressful day at work before heading upstairs. Today had been challenging as he had made some staff members redundant. This included Joan who had been with the company for nearly as long as he had, but, whereas he had risen to become a partner in the business she had been happy to stay at the same level, with few responsibilities. Although staff had been expecting some job losses Joan had murmured that she would miss the people she worked with and tears had rolled down her face. Paul knew that the future would be particularly difficult for several of them as they were approaching retirement age and there weren't many job opportunities in the area. Added to which, things at home could become awkward, as Joan was one of Hilary's closest friends.

As he drank his usual glass of Merlot, Paul contemplated his life so far. His marriage, like most, had had its ups and downs, but they had managed to overcome their problems and life was comfortable. He was content with how things were. Hilary had a close group of friends, and she kept herself busy with cooking and other outside interests. He, on the other hand, didn't have any hobbies, but enjoyed being at home watching a bit of sport, although he'd never wanted to participate in anything himself. He and Hilary had different tastes in TV programmes, but they did enjoy crime dramas so watched them together trying to guess "Who Dunnit". Mostly though they led, what some might observe as, parallel lives but he felt it suited them both. He doubted that Hilary had anything of interest in her life that he didn't know about. But he, most certainly, had one thing that he kept to himself. People may have thought that he was dull, but all was not what it seemed.

On the many occasions when Hilary was out with friends, or at one of her meetings, he watched Ru Paul's Drag Race. He was fascinated by the characters and loved the costumes, glitz and glamour. Looking back, he remembered that as a child, he had enjoyed dressing up in his sister's princess costumes, much preferring them to his own superhero outfits and he had always wondered whether his attraction to women's clothes had stemmed from then.

Having finished his wine, Paul went upstairs to the bedroom, opened Hilary's wardrobe and rifled through the rainbow of numerous dresses hanging there organised according to colour. He loved the feel of the

various fabrics against his skin – there was everything from velvet and silks to leather and suede. During their marriage he had taken a great interest in the clothes that Hilary wore and had helped her choose many of them.

Picking out a particular favourite dress he slipped it gently over his head. He felt a completely different person when looking at his reflection in the full-length mirror on the wall. As he stood there Paul made a decision. Often he'd wondered what people would think if they knew of this obsession and had lost count of the number of times he had tried to open up to Hilary but 'bottled it' at the last moment. He couldn't think why, but today's events had made him feel different, braver and more confident; wanting to be true to who he really was. Paul felt admitting to Hilary that watching such a TV programme was the way to start the conversation. After all, lots of people they knew watched it. He looked at the clock by the side of their bed. Hilary had been gone for forty-five minutes and she would be back soon.

Within a short space of time Hilary walked up the drive towards the house. She was still deliberating how she was going to tell Paul her news. He had been in a strange mood this evening so tonight might not be the best time to tell him. Maybe she should speak with Joan. Although her friend would be able to keep the secret, Paul, would be upset if he found out that he hadn't been the first to know.

Coincidentally, her phone rang at that moment. It was Joan. Paul had told her, when he'd arrived home, that he had made Joan and others redundant. She was very confused as he had given her every impression that the business was doing so well. Although she was tempted not to answer, as she knew how upsetting it was going to be, Joan was a good friend who was going to need her support in the coming months. However, this might be difficult with her commitments for the upcoming participation in Masterchef but tonight she did have the time to chat with her, so she took the call.

Paul could see Hilary on the drive. She seemed to be talking to someone on the phone. Would he have time to change before she came in? Did he want to? His heart was thumping.

Pacifying a distraught Joan hadn't been easy and Hilary agreed to them meeting up tomorrow to chat further. She felt that perhaps her own news might not be welcome, under the circumstances, but believed that Joan would want to share in her excitement as well as providing her with encouragement and support should Paul become difficult.

She decided then and there to tell her husband straight away. Paul heard his wife enter the hall downstairs. “I’m back” called Hilary. She took a deep breath. “Are you coming down? I’ve got something I want to tell you.”

“I’ve got something I want to tell you as well,” said Paul. Hilary looked up the stairs and couldn’t believe her eyes.

Chapter 3

Paul waited for Hilary's reaction. After a few moments to gather her thoughts, she calmly said "I hope you haven't creased or stretched my dress that you're wearing, it's one of my favourites as you know". Flabbergasted and stunned at Hilary's response Paul said "Is that all you've got to say? Aren't you surprised or shocked?"

"No, I'm not" said Hilary. "I knew someone had been trying on my clothes, I thought perhaps it was one of the children, but they didn't have the opportunity like you did. I know you prefer to have your meal alone and in comparative silence but I had no idea that this was the reason, I just thought your solitude was a chance for you to clear your mind from the stress of your working day".

Paul said angrily "Clearing my mind is most certainly the reason I like a quiet reflective moment. Dressing up in your clothes wasn't why. If you suspected something, why didn't you say anything?"

Hilary thought about it for a moment, then said "We have been married a long time Paul, we have had our disagreements over the years but nothing major and nothing we weren't able to talk through, so when I suspected that you were wearing my clothes I thought you would tell me when you were ready. Did you think I'd be shocked? I may seem to be a quiet suburban housewife, but I'm not immune to what goes on in the wide world. I have friends and we talk about a lot of diverse subjects. I would have discussed these things with you, but you have always made it quite clear that you weren't interested in anything that I had to say."

Paul didn't know how to react and, if he was honest, he was somewhat deflated. This was his big reveal, and it had fallen flat. After his difficult day at the office, he didn't know why he had decided to tell Hilary tonight but somehow this had seemed the perfect opportunity. He finally wanted to share his secret with somebody and who better than with his wife? "So, what's going to happen now? Are you going to tell all those friends of yours and humiliate me? I'm not ashamed"

Hilary was shocked but calm in her reply. "Why would you think I would do such a thing?" She asked. "You dressing up in my clothes is a personal matter, unless you want the whole world to know!"

With that, she walked to the kitchen but Paul caught up with her and shouted, "And what were you going to tell me? Are you having an affair, as I have suspected for some time?"

Stopping in her tracks she almost laughed in his face. She said, with as much dignity as she could muster, “Why on earth would you think that? I like walking alone along the shore it gives me peace and it gives you space. I very rarely meet anyone to talk too, let alone to have an affair with.” Pausing for a while to let that sink in, she felt the opportunity had presented itself and said, quite confidently, that she had applied for, and had been accepted to appear on, Master Chef.

Her husband snorted derisively. “You!” he said “What do you know about cooking? This is a joke. What will our friends think and more importantly what will your brother think?”

Hilary was getting angry now. “What do I know about cooking? Who has prepared all your meals over the years, and always to the exact time to suit you. I have given you a variety of dishes and accepted your requests for ‘something different’ on occasions, with never a thank you or even a comment. It’s about time I did something for myself and this is what I have chosen to do. You can either be supportive or dismissive, but you won’t change my mind. Also, I do care about my brother and I wouldn’t want to cause him a problem so I will speak to him”.

In a sarcastic tone Paul responded “How will you manage to fit it all in as well as seeing all your friends and providing me with my dinner on time? That’s if you still want to, given your new career?”

Hilary replied with glee “Well you might have your meticulous schedule disrupted on a few occasions, but I’m sure you will survive! Besides I am going to ask Joan to help me, as she’s now out of a job, and I’m sure she would be grateful to have something to do as well having a little extra money in her pocket.” With that she turned tail feeling very pleased. For once she had spoken up for herself and it made her feel good. She would look through her many recipe books and dream about preparing and serving these new dishes, but not for Paul, as he wouldn’t appreciate her efforts. No, she’d save that pleasure for Alex.

Chapter 4

Hilary decided to leave Paul to clear up after himself. She felt no desire to speak to him again tonight, and certainly no inclination to carry on waiting on him. Slightly enjoying her defiance, she paused on the landing to look out over the sea, noticing that the waves were rougher than they had been earlier. She ran a bath, lit one of her scented candles, and then lay back in the warm water trying to relax. What had got into him lately? Now that she reflected on it, he had been rather irritable and jumpy for the last few weeks. It must have been hard to deal with the redundancies, but she felt it was more than that. Paul had always stayed at a distance from her emotionally, and his attitude towards her had often been on the selfish side. Unsettled, Hilary wondered what had prompted this uncharacteristic honesty from her usually restrained husband. And wondered again how she had managed to stand up to him, when she would usually give in to keep the peace. It felt like her normal routine life was poised to change.

The phone flicked into life. "I must see you". Hilary stared at the screen.

A second message arrived "Why aren't you answering?" She turned her phone off and put it back on the side of the bath, not wanting to speak with him just at that moment. Listening to the sound of the wind on the shore, she got ready for bed and knowing that sleep wouldn't come easily she headed towards the spare room. Paul would not be very happy with that, but she was past caring.

The next morning the atmosphere was tense. Paul came down early, remained monosyllabic while he rushed his breakfast, desperate to leave the house. After he had gone, Hilary was still sitting at the kitchen table, a cold cup of coffee in front of her, when her phone buzzed again. "I need to see you."

A few minutes later, "We've got to talk".

Hilary replied "OK, I'll try and make it tonight". Dutifully, she cleaned the kitchen and hung up the washing. Her mind returned to the events of the previous day, and she found herself thinking about the implications of what had happened, and her previously unacknowledged discontent with her life and her marriage. Something had changed.

The thought of having a draining conversation with Joan was too much for her today so Hilary left her a rather vague message saying that she couldn't make their coffee meet up. Then, determined not to allow herself to be

dissuaded by her husband's comments, she got some of her favourite recipe books down from the shelves and, after an enjoyable hour, chose a suitably impressive meal to cook that evening. For once she ignored Paul's fussiness and chose ingredients that appealed to her, and after a quick trip to the shops, set about her task. As always, the preparation of the meal soothed her and helped her to stop mulling over the events of the previous evening.

When Paul got home, later than usual, he looked drawn as he often did nowadays. He seemed startled to see Hilary in the hall and, shoving his hands in his pockets, quickly made an excuse to go up to the study. This was also unusual and, not wanting the meal to be spoilt, Hilary thought she would look upstairs later, rather than follow him now. Paul eventually came downstairs to find Hilary putting the last touches to the main course. "What's this?" he said, looking at her aggressively.

"I thought you'd like a treat".

"Getting ready for Master Chef are you? Well, you're not going to do it. Your job is to put me and our home first. Your cooking's never been that good anyway" he sneered slumping down into his place at the table.

Hilary, hands shaking, leant over to put his meal in front of him, but the plate, in her rather dirty oven gloves slipped out of her grasp. Paul shrieked and jumped up as the hot food and rich sauce landed on his shirt and dripped downwards. He looked at Hilary in disbelief, then furiously grabbed the plate and threw it on the floor. She watched in horror as he then grasped the bowl of trifle sitting on the counter and hurled it against the wall. After a moment's silence, his legs seemed to give way and he sat down abruptly. She leant against the wall, shocked. The worm of discontent and anger which had been growing, roiled in the pit of her stomach. Paul stared, willing her to retaliate and give him another weapon to use against her, but she refused to play his game.

Shaken, and silent, she began to clear up the shattered remnants of the cut-glass bowl, which was her most treasured possession, a gift from her mother. Paul watched her guiltily as she wrapped the pieces and put them in the bin. Quiet and controlled, not making eye contact with her husband, she served up another plate of food and placed it in front of him. "Have mine. I'm no longer hungry". She poured him a large glass of wine and left the bottle on the table. He watched her leave and then realized he was still covered with food. In a rage, he downed most of the wine in his glass, refilling it, before getting a cloth to wipe down his clothes.

Churning and angry, Hilary went upstairs and crept into the study. The room looked as tidy, as usual, but she found that the desk drawers were all locked. The keys were not in their usual place. What was going on, she thought? Paul's harsh words echoed in her mind as she tried to make sense of what had happened. Her phone went again. "Are you coming tonight?" Hilary smiled as she clicked on reply. "Yes. I've given him a double dose. He deserves it".

A mile away, Alex put the phone down. Maybe tonight would be the start of getting things resolved. Before that though, there were a few things to be done.

Chapter 5

Alex laid the phone down on his desk after messaging Hilary; his first thought was what did she mean by “double dose”? Nothing foolish he hoped? He then contemplated the things that needed doing and in what order. If he didn't it would mean the end of his career and his ambitions to go even higher in public office. Why on earth had he broken his own rule about not working with family members in his work as a government minister? He had always loved his sister Hilary and was horrified when she met and married Paul as the two men had never got on. About eighteen months ago he had invited them to a charity dinner, together with Sir Percy and Lady Cochon. During the meal Paul had been bragging about his engineering business and Sir Percy had suggested that he could bid for some up and coming government contracts to produce 'dirigibles'. Alex had felt caught between involving Paul and keeping Sir Percy happy as his future could depend on it. In the following weeks Alex had briefed Paul on the contracts and at the same time he had kept Hilary in the loop, as he realised that Paul wouldn't. Alex didn't want to do anything that would upset Hilary.

After one particularly difficult day of meetings Paul and Alex had gone out for a meal. Paul had got very drunk on his favourite tipple and started to talk about the Ru Paul's Drag Race UK programme and cross-dressing. After the meal they had gone on to a club in Soho and ended up in a compromising situation with some drag queens. Alex had become very concerned about Paul's behaviour and had been trying to get him to leave. However, before he could, someone had taken photos of them. If they were to get published they would put Alex in a very difficult situation, and it would certainly ruin his career. He was desperate to get rid of all the evidence.

As with all the contract details, Alex believed the photos were being held by his brother-in-law because, shortly after the incident, he had mentioned his concern about the photographs, but Paul had brushed him off saying it was all sorted. “It was a mate having a laugh and I’ve got them” but he didn't know if he had them at his office or at his home. Until he had reclaimed and destroyed the photographs Alex still felt very vulnerable and wouldn't trust Paul not to use them against him in the future, maybe to get further contracts. Initially he didn't want to involve Hilary in any of this, so he had got in touch with her friend Joan, who he felt he could trust to look for them. She had found nothing at the office so he could only assume they

were in Paul's study at home. The whole situation had become ever more complicated as Alex had become aware that Paul's business was in financial trouble and there had been some recent redundancies.

Alex arranged to meet Hilary in the shabby hut on the beach where they had spent much happier times as children. He knew it was a place where she was particularly happy and it would make the conversation easier. He drove down to the bay and indulged himself with a walk along the sand before his sister arrived. He saw her coming along the beach carrying a large bag. They greeted each other with a hug, but both looked a bit sheepish and, with a lot on their minds, neither knew how to start the conversation. In the end it was Alex who said "What on earth have you got in the bag - not body parts I hope?"

"Of course not!" replied Hilary - "it's not that desperate. Come inside, I have something to tell you."

"Me too" said Alex "but you go first."

They made themselves comfortable at the little table and Hilary started. "I hope you haven't eaten yet and are hungry."

"I can always eat your cooking, but why today?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you - I have been accepted to go on Master Chef and I wanted you to be the first to try the meal I'm preparing. I know you will be honest, whereas Paul would be non-committal and just expect it in front of him, and on time!"

"Great news sis, and I'm sure you will do well - you have always been a great cook and it will be good for you to have a challenge of your own." Pausing slightly "I don't want to spoil your moment but it's Paul I want to talk to you about."

"Is it something to do with the dirigible contracts you told me about? I was concerned about how this all fitted with him having to let Joan and others go. It didn't seem necessary if everything was going okay with the business. He has been behaving very strangely lately and has also just dropped a bombshell about his personal life that he seemed to think I wasn't aware of."

Alex paused for a minute and looked hard at Hilary not knowing whether to say anything or not. "Sis, when you were on the phone you talked about giving him a double dose. I'm worried - what did you mean?"

"Oh that - nothing to worry about, I meant a double dose of his own medicine. I have stood up to him twice now in the last twenty-four hours and it feels good - just a shame I didn't do it sooner."

"That's a relief!" said Alex. "I was worried something more serious had happened." Thinking for a minute or two longer he decided he needed to be straight with her. "There are a couple of things still worrying me. One is that all the contract communication has disappeared and the second is that Paul and I got ourselves into a difficult situation one evening recently. Someone took some photos which would be embarrassing if they got out, and they have also disappeared. Apparently, neither are in his office. Joan kindly helped me out by looking but I need to find that paperwork, and the photos, or my career and my future are at an end!"

Chapter 6

Hilary was not quite sure how to respond after all that Alex had told her. She said goodbye to him and made her way across the beach towards her house. So many thoughts were going through her head as she walked along. Paul's cross-dressing, Alex and Paul being photographed at the Soho Club, the missing contract for the "dirigibles", and Alex's and Paul's careers, and, of course, her being accepted for Master Chef. She must not let herself be swept along with all these other things so that she couldn't give her time and energy to the competition entry. She wanted to prove to herself, and everyone else, that she was Hilary - an individual in her own right.

Putting her thoughts into some kind of order, Paul's cross-dressing had not been a total surprise to her – if that was what made him happy then let him continue. She certainly had no intention of telling anybody else. People might think that she was inadequate in some way. Although not having a business background, Hilary couldn't understand why a profitable company would suddenly start losing money. Paul told her very little about the workings of the Company, assuming that it would all go over her head, but she understood enough to know that businesses didn't collapse unless there was a good reason.

Reaching her front door, Hilary felt sure that the answer revolved around the missing photos. If they could be found what else might be discovered? Joan had been unable to find them at the office so she felt they had to be somewhere in Paul's desk. As she walked into the hall, she heard the noise of the television and knew her husband was watching one of his favourite programmes. She very quietly closed the front door and put the food containers in the kitchen. She'd deal with those later. In the hall, hanging on the coat hooks, were several of Paul's jackets and coats. Was she brave enough to search through them? She made her way along the row feeling inside each one but they all appeared to be empty. The last one had a very small pocket, so she squeezed her fingers inside and felt something right at the bottom. Lifting it out she saw it was a small key. She felt quite sick wondering what she was going to discover.

Hilary could still hear the noise from the television as she quietly walked upstairs and crept into Paul's study. Putting the key in the desk drawer she gently pulled it open. Reaching around inside it felt, at first, as if she would discover nothing but tucked away in the corner was a small envelope and inside was, what appeared to be, something from a computer. Could this

be something to do with the lost photos and the missing contracts? She did not know a great deal about the workings of computers and so she needed to speak to Alex. Texting him, they arranged to meet the following evening.

The next morning, after Paul had gone to work, she phoned Joan and suggested they got together for coffee. When they met Hilary gave her friend a big hug as she was understandably still quite tearful. However, when Hilary told her about her entry into Master Chef she brightened up and told her that she would be thrilled to help her in any way she could. She then decided to ask Joan about Stan. Having known him, and worked alongside him, for many years Joan told Hilary that he had been very angry when she had been made redundant. She went on to explain that in the few weeks leading up to her departure he had talked about things he'd recently bought, particularly showing off a very expensive watch. Hilary didn't think that Stan's job would have a big salary so where was he getting the money? Could this be linked to the missing contracts? Did Stan have something to hide?

That evening she walked to the beach hut, the sea looking calm with no ripples, unlike her stomach. Alex was already there and she gave him the envelope and told him all that Joan had said about Stan.

A few days later Alex went to the dirigibles factory knowing that the conversation he was going to have with his brother-in-law would be very uncomfortable. He sat down, opposite Paul, and took the memory stick out of his pocket. Paul's head dropped. The computer screen revealed all the accounts for the last twelve months and it was obvious that money had been leaving the Company on a regular basis. Paul was now sobbing and the only word Alex could make out was Stan's name. Stan had been blackmailing Paul. He wanted money for not revealing Paul and Alex's behaviour at the night club. He too had been there that evening and was the one who had taken the photographs. Paul had been paying him out of the company funds to keep it quiet.

Back at Hilary and Paul's house, along with Alex and Joan, they discussed how they should deal with the situation. If they were to report Stan to the Police, then it would expose Paul as having embezzled from the Company and it would additionally expose Alex and the photographs. Joan felt sure that Stan's wife was unaware of what he had been doing and suggested it was worth a try to reveal his blackmailing in front of her. Making it clear that if they were to involve the Police, he would be looking at a long prison

sentence. They just had to hope that, in the shock of the approach, he wouldn't realise that prison would also be on the cards for Paul.

The four of them arrived at Stan's house, greeted at the door by his wife, who initially looked very confused as to their presence. Welcoming them she showed them into the lounge, where Stan was sitting in his fireside chair. His face immediately registered that he knew he was in trouble. Alex spoke firmly but in a measured manner. His wife was appalled to hear that he had been blackmailing Paul and very quickly Stan confirmed everything and handed over the photographs and digital card, in exchange for them not involving the Police. He also agreed to resign from the Company, with immediate effect, a small price to pay for not going to jail, and to repay a large portion of the money that he had taken.

"What an evening" Hilary exclaimed when they all arrived back home. "Let's open a bottle of wine, I think we all need a drink". Paul realised that he had come very close to losing everything but now, with the blackmailing dealt with, the finances of the Company would begin to improve again and hopefully they would all survive unscathed.

Life for Paul and Hilary quickly returned to some kind of normality. Paul's recent experiences had frightened him and his attitude to his wife mellowed. Hilary's job now was to concentrate on her Master Chef entry as the date was getting closer. She had tried out various recipes with Joan and finally agreed on two which they thought would be perfect. The day before the show Hilary and Joan travelled to London. The next morning, walking into the studio, Hilary felt flutters in her stomach, but Joan gave her hand a squeeze, which reassured her. After what seemed a very long time Hilary and three other contestants were called. She knew what she had to do, the order in which things would work best, and throughout the day she could hear Joan's reassuring voice. The judges agreed Hilary's Beef Ragout was perfectly seasoned and the mustard mash delightfully creamy. The Mandarin Cheesecake with Orange Jus was full of zest. They declared it as "Perfection."

Hilary's NWR friends gathered around the television not wanting to miss a moment of the programme. They felt very nervous for their friend but at the end, when the judges announced the winner "Hilary Jackson", they all looked at each other, cheered and popped the champagne corks.

So, from being a very ordinary person who never took centre stage Hilary was now a super sleuth, a Master Chef winner and a valued member of the NWR. Life was very good.

The Secret of the Silver Scarab

Written by NWR Members Jan Ellen, Janet Mercer-Brown, Valerie Parker, Moira Coats, NWR Bishop Stortford, Helen England, Elaine Pitt and Marilyn Barnes.

The girl had a dream.

It wasn't a sleep dream, but real. It wasn't a dream like her friends had. She didn't want to be a princess, or marry a prince. She didn't want to be a film star or make a hit record with a girl band. She didn't even want to get married and have loads of children and she wasn't bothered about getting rich either.

No - she just wanted to be a coleopters.

None of her friends understood what that meant and when she told them she wanted to study beetles they did little screams and made ugh noises. But she didn't care. Beetles would be her life, were already her life. So she just made a smiley face, shrugged and went off to the library.

She had acquired lots of books about beetles and, now she had an iPad, she could look up stuff online too. She'd found some scientific papers and was cross she couldn't understand them - yet - but she would. The girl was determined.

Although she was armed with questions for her biology teacher there was disappointment that Miss Smith couldn't answer many of them. 'I really only know a bit about beetles,' Miss Smith had confessed to the girl. 'I'm mainly a plant person.' She could tell her the names of the beetles that were plant pests but that was all. It was frustrating but the girl didn't give up. She knew she was a learner and just had to be patient.

She studied hard at all her subjects and was often top of the class. Her parents were proud of her but a bit concerned too. They wanted her to be a more like other girls, playing out with her friends, experimenting with make up, attending dance and drama classes. The girl rarely played; she felt she was past that and was now a serious student.

By now she could recognise and name any beetle she found in the UK and some she had spotted in Spain where they went for their annual holiday. Spain was great and she loved swimming; it was the only sport she really enjoyed and she worked hard at that too, practising the different strokes and trying to get faster. But she didn't dream about winning an Olympic medal. Oh no, that was for others to do.

One day in Spain, she'd just climbed out of the pool when a woman spoke to her.

'You are an excellent swimmer. Do you swim competitively?'

The girl looked at her, shook her head, smiled diffidently and went to pass by. The woman spoke again.

'You should. Why don't you?'

The girl explained that it wasn't her goal in life, just something she enjoyed doing when she was on holiday.

'So, what is your goal in life?' The woman spoke a little mockingly. Walking away, the girl said, over her shoulder, that she want to be a coleopterist and had a secret smile.

The woman would be someone else who wouldn't know what that was. I can mock too she thought.

But:

'Really?' said the woman. 'You want to study beetles?'

The girl turned, surprise showing on her face. She nodded.

'Well, that's a big coincidence,' said the woman. 'That's what I do. I am Professor Amy Tuttle. I could lend you some books on the subject if you like?'

The girl gasped.

'I have your book. It's one of my absolute favourites. It's in my bag just in case I see a beetle I can't identify. I hadn't realised you worked here.'

'I don't really although I am a specialist in Spanish beetles. Professor Tuttle paused. 'Look, let me come and meet your parents and then maybe we could go and have a drink together and a chat. I'm sure I could help you reach your goal.'

The girl was excited. At last here was someone who could answer her questions, who had the same love and ambition she had. But then she stopped. Would her parents approve? Would the Professor want to spend time with her, still a mere child?

Her Mum and Dad were not surprised to see their daughter's delight at meeting one of her heroines, another coleopterist.

"How did she know about your obsession with beetles?" her Mother asked at dinner.

"She saw me swimming and said I was good, so we started talking and I recognised her name, I have her book and I showed it to her. I really want you to meet her,"

The parents were delighted that their daughter had found someone she could relate to and looked forward to meeting Amy Tuttle themselves,

That evening the three talked for the first time about their own family heritage and her father pointed out that not only did they share their name with a famous wildlife biologist, that of Charles Darwin, but that he was known for his collection of beetles which he had gathered on his journeys around the world. Of course, the child had noticed this but not seriously connected his name with her own.

Then she asked about her Christian name, Freya.

Her Mother explained, "It means, 'intrepid traveller'. Also, your middle name, Avis, means 'bird'. It signifies flight and freedom. Will you go far in pursuing your goals? Have you even thought about such things yet, I wonder?"

Freya kept her thoughts to herself.

Her Mother continued, "We did think that you, like Charles, might also think about classification of beetles, a very difficult area of expertise."

The next day the Darwins spoke to Amy Tuttle and they all soon got on well enough to decide that on another occasion, convenient to both parties, they would look into the idea of going as a group for a holiday in Egypt.

Amy suggested that there would be a lot of opportunity to explore tombs and see museums where grave goods were kept. Both Freya and Amy were determined to see and research scarab beetles, known for the belief that as they only ever had been found as males, so they were traditionally believed to conceal within themselves the secret of eternal life. Freya was delighted at the thought of being with such an eminent specialist, in Egypt, really beginning to research for herself. She did not ask herself what Amy might be expecting from such a trip, or whether as an author on the subject of beetles, she may not already have connections in Egypt.

But for now, Freya was on holiday. There were only a couple of weeks before college began again and the weather was hot and the pool was cool. She felt elated as she prepared to dive in. She had met a new and fascinating friend who took her interest in beetles seriously. Could the origin of her name possibly be an omen and might she be one step nearer to her goal?

She had been contacted by Professor Rakeem who is professor of Egypt heritage at the University of Cairo. He is organising a dig at a newly discovered archaeological site near the Pyramids of Giza in January next year and I have been asked if I would like to accompany him. Even more exciting is that he has places for two students of archaeology...did I know of any students who could join him?"

Freya's heart skipped a beat. She felt dizzy and light-headed. Surely Amy didn't mean her?

Amy continued, "My nephew, Beau, is in his final year at Fitzwilliam College Cambridge reading Archaeology. Freya had spent a wonderful first term at Somerville college, reading Classical Archaeology and Ancient History. She revelled in all the reading that was required and she spent many hours in the college library reading the volumes of Classical Archaeology. The Ashmolean Museum with its special collections was also close by the college. Whilst the course was mainly centred on the two classical cultures of Greece and Rome, Freya had signed up for a module entitled The Ancient Egyptian civilisation which was due to take place during her second term.

It was whilst she was upstairs in her bedroom reading "The Song of Achilles" by Madeline Miller, that she heard her mother calling her name.

"Coming," she called as she ran down the stairs. Who should she see in the hallway but her friend, Amy Tuttle.

"Amy, how lovely to see you," she said. "What are you doing here? Sorry, I mean, why have you come to see me?"

Amy laughed. "I know that I haven't seen you recently but I have news of a wonderful opportunity that has come up and I couldn't wait to see you."

"Come and sit in the living room," said Freya's mother. Freya and Amy went into the large sunlit living room and settled themselves down in two comfortable armchairs. Freya was puzzled. What was Amy going to say to her?

"I have an idea so I immediately thought of him then...who could be the second student? Well, I thought of you, Freya. What do you say? Would you like to join us?"

Freya was speechless. What an amazing opportunity. It would be beyond amazing. It would be phenomenal. It would be awesome. It would be unbelievable.

"I...I don't know what to say," stuttered Freya. Her heart was thumping.

"Say 'Yes'" said Amy. "Apart from Beau, I couldn't think of a more worthy student to be part of this expedition."

Freya didn't need to think twice. "Yes...Yes, I would love to join you."

"Great! That's settled. You never know, we might discover some scarab beetles..."

Freya sank back into her armchair. Wow! She was going to Egypt, home to one of the world's oldest civilisations. And she would be in the company of Professor Rakeem, Amy and her nephew, Beau. Fleetingly, amidst all the excitement of going to Egypt, she wondered what he would be like??

Freya spent much of her Christmas vacation pondering on the forthcoming dig in Egypt. She agonised over what to pack knowing full well she would need plain and practical clothing for the dig itself but was also considering outfits for leisure time as her thoughts strayed to Beau, Amy's nephew.

Freya had not yet had a proper boyfriend; she knew she was quite attractive and had been approached a few times by young male students who had invited her out for a drink and even for a pizza once. However, these occasions were not exactly successful. Freya struggled to engage with them, found their incessant talk of rugby and rowing boring, and suspected they found her conversation, which was mostly limited to beetles, equally boring as she was never invited on a second date.

She completed her packing, which consisted of strong practical trousers and tops plus a couple of sweaters as she knew the January weather in Egypt, whilst much warmer than at home, could still have some chilly evenings. She added in a white blouse and floral skirt, then on a whim she threw in her little black dress and some strappy sandals knowing they might not even come out of the suitcase. The mysterious Beau was on her mind – someone with similar interests to her, so having been a Girl Guide in her younger days she resorted to the guiding motto of “Be Prepared”.

It had been agreed that Freya was to meet Amy and Beau at the airport so a few weeks later her parents duly dropped her at Departures and, suitcase in hand plus her rucksack containing her research books and several rolls of toilet paper, she waved them goodbye. She had been told by friends that toilet paper is rarely provided in public or tourist site restrooms in Egypt so again she relied on the Girl Guide motto.

She looked around the sea of people and saw Amy waving frantically at her. As she gathered pace and rushed forwards Amy pushed through the crowds to meet her and embraced her with a big hug. Standing a few paces away she saw him! Taller than her by some six or seven inches, both his hair and his eyes a deep shade of chestnut brown. He extended his arm and took her hand in his. This was Beau !

Part 5

The first morning at the excavation began before sunrise. The desert air still held a surprising chill as Freya stood with the rest of the team overlooking the newly opened trench. Beyond them, the Pyramids of Giza glowed pink beneath the first rays of the sun, while Professor Rakeem outlined the day's work.

"This chamber has only recently been identified," he explained. "We believe it belonged to a high-ranking official during the late New Kingdom, although nothing has yet been removed. Everything you see is exactly as it was discovered."

Freya could hardly contain her excitement. Months spent reading about Egypt in the libraries of Somerville College had not prepared her for standing on genuine ancient ground.

Beside her, Beau smiled. "First proper dig," he whispered.

Freya nodded. "I still can't quite believe we're here."

The students were divided into pairs, carefully brushing centuries of dust from the floor of the burial chamber. Amy worked nearby with Professor Rakeem, occasionally explaining the significance of painted symbols that slowly emerged from the sandstone.

Several hours passed before Beau suddenly stopped.

"Hang on..."

His trowel had struck something hard.

Thinking it might be part of a necklace or bracelet, he carefully loosened the surrounding sand. A tiny object caught the light, flashing with a dull silver sheen.

"A bead?" suggested Freya.

Beau lifted it gently into the palm of his hand.

"No..." he murmured. "It's shaped like a scarab."

The others gathered around.

It was no larger than Freya's thumb, yet astonishingly detailed. Tiny legs were folded neatly beneath its body and every ridge of its wing cases seemed perfectly preserved. Instead of the familiar black or brown colouring of the sacred scarab, however, it shimmered with an unmistakable metallic silver.

Professor Rakeem frowned.

"Curious."

Amy reached for a magnifying lens.

"It isn't carved," she said quietly. "Look at the joints...and the antennae."

Freya felt her pulse quicken.

"Do you mean..."

Amy nodded slowly.

"I think this was once a real beetle."

"But that's impossible," said Beau. "Surely scarabs like this belonged in tropical forests millions of years ago?"

Amy smiled thoughtfully.

"North Africa was indeed covered by tropical forests tens of millions of years ago, long before it became the desert we know today. But this isn't fossilised. It's something altogether different."

Professor Rakeem looked puzzled.

"I've excavated Egyptian tombs for thirty years," he admitted. "I've never seen anything remotely like this."

As everyone turned their attention towards an inscription newly revealed on the chamber wall, Beau quietly closed his hand around the tiny silver scarab.

No one noticed him slip it into the side pocket of his rucksack.

If this is unique, he thought, it could be worth a fortune.

Only Freya remained staring at the shallow hollow where the beetle had lain for over three thousand years. There was something else there—almost hidden beneath the dust.

Very carefully, she brushed away a final layer of sand.

An engraved stone plaque emerged, bearing a single line of hieroglyphs surrounding the unmistakable image of another silver scarab.

Amy leaned closer.

"I can translate most of this..." she whispered, her voice suddenly uncertain.

Her eyes moved slowly across the final line.

She froze.

"That's..." She swallowed. "That's impossible."

"What?" Freya asked.

Amy looked up, her face suddenly pale.

"This wasn't buried to protect the scarab."

She glanced back at the empty hollow.

"The scarab was buried to protect everyone else."

Part 6

"and it states that harm will befall those buried within this chamber and to anyone removing the scarab. I think we should replace it where it was found."

"Surely, you don't believe in those old myths about curses." scoffed Beau.

"Not really," replied Amy, "after all, it is known that Lord Carnavon did not die from the curse of Tutankhamun's tomb but from a bacterial infection arising from a mosquito bite. Still, I think out of respect for the dead and the beliefs of those who have gone before we should leave things as we found them until we've done some further research."

Professor Rakeem had a high-resolution digital camera amongst his kit and suggested that he should take lots of photos to help them identify the beetle and its meaning. Whilst he was setting the camera up, Beau quietly removed the scarab from his rucksack pocket and dropped it in the sand. Professor Rakeem spent his time taking multiple shots of the scarab, the plaque and the location where it had been found. By which time, it was the end of the day, so the team returned the plaque and scarab to the place where they had found it and secured the site before returning to their accommodation.

"We can continue our research over dinner this evening." suggested Amy, on arriving at their accommodation. "Let's re-convene in an hour."

Following a refreshing swim, Freya returned to the lounge where both Amy and Professor Rakeem were already deep in discussion. They shared their initial thoughts with Freya: the scarab was very similar to the silver chafer beetle found in Central America with its iridescent exoskeleton resembling a mirror; silver was very rare in ancient Egypt as there was no naturally occurring sources, all silver had to be imported and was, therefore, valued higher than gold. Their early conclusion was that the silver scarab they had discovered was

extremely rare and valuable and that they would need to consult with the Egyptian authorities as to the best way to deal with and protect the find.

As they started to enjoy their evening meal, Beau rushed in looking hot and bothered. He apologised profusely for this lateness, explaining that he had been for a walk to admire the sunset over the desert and had lost track of the time.

The following morning, after sharing a good breakfast together and having a further discussion regarding the scarab. The team returned to the excavation site where they found to their dismay that the site was in disarray. The chamber had collapsed and their exploratory trenches were destroyed.

Part 7

Back home, Freya's dad had been doing some research himself. He had seen how excited Freya was when she talked about it and he was also, now intrigued with the ancient beliefs around the scarab beetle. He knew that Freya hoped to uncover a scarab on this dig but now he was rather concerned for his daughter's safety.

One evening, over supper, he told his wife about what he'd found out in his research and his concerns about Freya's safety should they find the elusive scarab beetle. Freya's mum was less intrigued by the scarab beetle and told him it was all a lot of nonsense and something you'd expect to see at the cinema, in an Indiana Jones film and Freya will be fine. He said she was probably right but at the same time he had a gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach that he couldn't explain and couldn't shift.

They agreed to chat about his findings and concerns with Freya when she next called them to share how things were going in Egypt.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Freya and the team around her, were in shock as they considered the sight in front of them. It was utter devastation. It looked like the ground had imploded over the chamber, pulling the very soul of it into the centre of the earth, leaving a sad depression in the sandy soil, which was rapidly heating up with the fast-rising desert sun. Their exploratory trenches, which had been prepared for them by a local team of workers, were almost invisible, except for a few poles that stuck up like arms pleading for help.

A small group of the locals who had been providing manual support to the site had gathered at the far side of the dig and Freya could see that they were talking amongst themselves.

Freya thought how angry they must feel about the sight before them and they would be trying to understand, just as she was, what had caused the implosion and ruined the trenches and all their hard work.

For a few moments Freya's mind was in a whirl. What on earth did happen here?

Could this be vandalism by other teams who didn't get chosen to be part of the dig or perhaps locals who want their ancient tombs to be left alone, or another group of workers who didn't get the job on this dig. Or was this the vengeance, written in hieroglyphs, under the scarab beetle, that Amy translated and read to them yesterday.

She was jolted out of her thoughts, as suddenly the group of workers got very rowdy, pushing each other and two of the older men in the group started to shout at the others and at the same time point in the direction of Professor Rakeem and his team. This made Freya feel quite scared and she turned to seek reassurance from Beau. He'd also noticed the rumpus with the locals. Freya thought that he was starting to act strangely, his face was ashen white and he looked very agitated.

Part 8

Professor Rakeem was now approaching the group of locals, and they turned their attention to him. The two older men, who were obviously the leaders of the group, were continuing to shout at the Professor and he was trying to get them to calm down. The two older men would not be calmed and continued to shout and point in the direction of Professor Rakeem's team and the devastated dig site

.A younger man, who held an air of authority, stepped forward with an arm raised and the two older men halted and listened. The onlookers listened as the young man spoke to the assembly in what Freya realised was their local tongue. Professor Rakeem seemed to follow much of what was being said. They had taken offence to this new dig. Professor Rakeem spoke to the younger man and assured him that all the correct authorities had been informed. That any concerns regarding what was found would also be shared with the authorities so it was a win win situation. The Professor asked the younger man to translate all to the assembled group.

The young man turned smiling and said that now there was understanding there would be cooperation. The young man suggested that everyone should reconvene early tomorrow and work could commence. . Meanwhile why didn't all those who wished to meet together at the residence this evening and whilst there might be some language barriers, attempt to socialise a little. Maybe take wine together. Beau looked relaxed and beamed at Freya. Now that seemed a good plan. Was that a little heart flutter?

Three Little Words

(Story Chain created by 6 members of Wokingham 3 NWR group, August 2026)

What is it about friendships? They can be life savers, entertaining, comforting and downright frustrating. The latter was the feeling that Felicity had today.

Today had been planned for ages; Felicity (known as Fliss), Jane and Iris – collectively known as the 3 Amigos, the 3 Stooges, the 3 witches or simply the Terrible Trio depending on who was talking about them – had organised a nice spa day, pampering and relaxing before the theatre and dinner. Why?

This year was their 50ths. They had known each other since the day they all started working at Trubsham Middle School, becoming firm friends despite their very different personalities:

Fliss the organised one, always considering all options, wanting plans firmly in place well in advance, like today. Jane the original model for a ‘bull in a china shop’, impetuous, flippant, speaks before thinking, Fliss’s nightmare, but the kindest, most thoughtful and fun friend you could imagine.

Then Iris. Cautious, nervous, hating conflict (especially when Fliss and Jane were loudly disagreeing) and always anxious to please everyone – impossible when strong personalities wanted to do things differently, consequently annoying everyone.

So, today had been agreed and planned as their collective celebration, details firmed weeks ago. What could possibly go wrong?

To start with, Iris messaged first thing and said she was feeling a bit ‘off’. Nothing specific. Just wasn’t sure she was up to a full-on day. “Take paracetamol and pull yourself together”, was Jane’s reaction. Fliss silently agreed but felt the language to be a little unsympathetic so had tried a gentler approach indicating that of course Iris should put herself first but she would be sorely missed.

As a result, she was dithering more than usual, with messages being posted rather frequently. Then there was a news item about problems on the rail and there wasn’t any clear indication of when trains would be running again. “Easy,” said Jane. “I’ll drive,” which sent shivers down Fliss’s spine and had Iris in near melt down. F1 drivers had nothing on Jane’s driving. They would use taxis.

Finally, arrangements were adjusted, Iris felt a little better and all were congregating at Fliss’s house to wait for the taxi. When it appeared, the three friends cheerfully piled in and the celebration began.

It didn't last long. They had driven a good half hour when an unexpected, huge thunderstorm and lashing rain started. The driver pulled over and stated that the dashboard was showing several flashing lights indicating a problem. The storm had affected his ability to contact his firm and the rather nasty smell wafting through the car suggested it would be far safer to get out and stand on the side of the road – which they did, wading in posh summer shoes through the huge puddle that the car had stopped in.

Not another soul was using the road, no-one's phone had a signal, and they were dressed for a nice summer day out not a torrential rainstorm. Could anything else go wrong?

The driver, feeling responsible for their predicament, said he thought he knew where they were and was going to look for a short cut, on foot, through the woods to get back to town and before anyone could object, off he went. He shouted back, "Don't worry it'll take less than an hour to get there, I'll be back in no time with another car for you ladies."

"Well, this is a fine kettle of fish," shouted Jane above the noise of the rain. Fliss felt the accusation was levelled at her.

"It's not my fault. Who could foresee this?" she snapped.

"Oh, please don't argue," wailed Iris. "I'm not feeling very well and I'd really, really appreciate it if we could just all get along; this is supposed to be a happy day".

"Oh no, sorry Iris, I thought you were feeling better".

"Yes, yes, I thought I was but I'm feeling really anxious and I think that's what's bringing my queasiness on again. Sorry to be such a pain."

Jane rolled her eyes and turned away. Fliss was more sympathetic. "Oh no, so sorry you're feeling ill again. Look we can't stand here in the rain, it's not easing up and he's going to be a bit longer yet. Let's find a bit of shelter while we wait."

The hour came and went: the torrential rain continued.

"Ok, we'll have to come up with a plan B or we're all going to drown or get pneumonia. How about we try and flag a car down and see if we can get a lift, if we all stick together, we'll be alright." Fliss, ever the planner, needed to start to feel in control again. They all agreed it was the only realistic idea; they couldn't walk along the roadside; it was too dangerous and there was no way they could find their way through the woods.

"Of course," Jane, always up to challenge any idea Fliss had, "there's only one flaw in that idea. I haven't seen a car go by in the last half-hour we've been standing here."

"Well, there will be one and we'll make damn sure whoever it is, they stop. Anyway, who would drive by three damsels in distress in this weather?" Almost as she'd finished speaking, a car slowed down and pulled up behind the taxi.

Jane went running up to the driver's side of the car to speak to the driver. It might be the taxi driver who had come with a car to rescue them all. It wasn't, and she could see the car was

loaded up with stuff all over the back seats; it didn't look like there'd be room for them all. There was only the passenger seat free. But she thought she recognised the driver from somewhere.

"Aren't you Nick? Nick Johnson?" she asked. "That's me," he said, "And it looks as if you could do with some help." Jane explained briefly and he offered to give one of them a lift to the nearest town. Fliss started to discuss who should go – if anyone – but Jane jumped in, saying she would be back "in a jiffy" in a taxi. "Suppose our driver comes back!" Fliss shouted, but Jane just said to wait for her anyway, and off she went.

"Oh dear," was all Iris could say, as the remaining two watched the car's rear lights speed away. Fliss, too, was uneasy – she hated the uncertainty of plans going awry. She knew that the nearest town couldn't be far away, and Jane may well return before too long, so she tried to cheer up Iris with these thoughts.

"I'm more worried about Jane's safety," was Iris's reply. "I don't think that looked like Nick, Penny's son."

Fliss was almost speechless. "I thought Jane said she knew him! Why didn't you say so? What were you thinking to let her go off like that?"

"I wasn't sure. It's a long time since I've seen Penny's son and even boys change their hair colour these days. And he seemed so polite, I didn't like to interrupt ...". As Iris burst into tears, Fliss looked at her in disbelief. For once in her life, she was at a loss about what to do or say.

Fliss decided that it was no use worrying about the driver Jane had gone with, as there was nothing they could do about it anyway – although her mind would keep returning to the very real and distressing possibilities and worrying anyway. The rain had eased a little and they leant against the taxi to wait.

But Jane, meanwhile, was enjoying herself, warm and comfortable in the car and content in the knowledge that she would be the saviour of the day, rather than Fliss getting all the plaudits as usual. The young man didn't say very much as Jane reminisced about her friend Penny and how they had met at work fifteen years ago. Penny had been the life and soul of the staffroom, and Jane had continued to meet her for coffee for several years after they had both left work and had children. "Your mother was such a lovely person," she told him, "Always laughing and helpful." But we lost touch a couple of years ago. I thought she had moved to Scotland."

"My mother died when I was six," the man told her. Jane didn't know what to say. "But I knew her long after you were six – you're the same age as my Chris, and we often saw you and your mum at school events.... Didn't we? You *are* Nick Johnson, aren't you?"

"Mick Thompson is my name. That's what I thought you had said to me, so I thought you must know me through work. My mother died in a terrible incident when I was small, and I don't like being reminded of it. We're just about at the town now. There are taxis at the station." He spoke curtly before he stopped the car, leant over and opened the passenger door.

Jane got out of the car, feeling embarrassed at her mistake, and hoping she hadn't offended Mick Thompson. As she got out, she glanced at all the packages on the back seat, some covered with a blanket. What were they? Anyway, she had to find a taxi and hurry back to Fliss and Iris. Looking around she saw the original taxi driver getting into Mick Thompson's car. She waved at him, but he didn't seem to notice her and they sped off.

"What on earth is going on", thought Jane. It all seemed a bit suspicious to her, and "How were Fliss and Iris getting on?" There was nothing for it, but to wait for another taxi, and stick to the original plan.

As poor Jane waited in vain at the taxi rank, Mick Thompson and the original driver saw Fliss and Iris at the side of the road. They were both drenched and bedraggled and one appeared to be crying and being supported by the other. "We had better stop and pick up those two", muttered Mick. The women were so grateful as they settled in the back seat which was now empty of its load and as Fliss was putting the blanket over their knees, Iris moaned and fainted.

Mick suggested, "We had better take the short cut through the woods. We can leave these ladies at the warehouse in the woods, go back and get the other one and drive them all home". Fliss felt a little anxious but Mick reassured her, "Don't worry, we'll be with your friend soon."

Iris didn't seem at all well and the men left the ladies at the warehouse which was in need of some repair. Fliss clambered out helping Iris, who had regained consciousness. Fliss noticed the packages on the floor near the entrance: they were the same as those she had seen on the back seat when Jane got into the car.

Iris lay down on some sacking and fell asleep. "This is a fine kettle of fish," Fliss muttered, quoting Jane's earlier remark. She thought about all the things that had gone wrong that day: Jane stranded in the wet, Iris obviously suffering one of her migraines and the two of them stranded miles from nowhere, in a ramshackle old warehouse.

As if in answer there was a tremendous clap of thunder and the lights went out.

"Oh My God!!! Where are we, what do we do now?" panic rose in Fliss's throat. "What the hell is going on? Right – I really need to calm down here, I mustn't panic. Think, think, think." Remembering her yoga teacher and the breathing techniques she used, Fliss tried to calm herself down.

"Your 'out' breath needs to be longer than your 'in' breath" she remembered the teacher intoning. Something about 7/11 came to her. "That's it, breath in for 7 and out for 11. I can do this" Fliss thought. Except when she tried, she found she couldn't.

"Things like this don't happen to me. What have I ever done to deserve this?" she thought. A combination of fear, panic, cold and wet, and feeling a bit sorry for herself, made Fliss do something she rarely did. She burst into tears.

Loud, snorting sobs came out of her. She even wailed a bit. Pent-up frustrations were mixed in there too. The crying was, she thought later, out of proportion to what was happening.

Whatever it was, her outburst had woken Iris, who had slept through the last few terrifying minutes.

“Is that you Fliss? Where are we? What’s happening?” came her timid voice.

“I don’t know” wailed Fliss. “It’s all a nightmare. Basically, we’re trapped here until those guys come back, if they ever do. I don’t know where we are, I don’t even know how to try to get out of here, the lights went off in the thunderstorm, the rain is hammering on the roof. I think it’s a warehouse, but it’s miles from anywhere and, and.....” More tears from Fliss.

Iris was quiet for a moment.

“I’m so sorry, you were looking after me, weren’t you? Thank you for helping me when I needed it. Now let’s think about what we can do.”

If there was any light, Iris would have seen the disbelief on Fliss’s face. Here was the perfect situation for Iris to be anxious, worried and flaky, but no, she was calm and talking about planning. And she, Fliss, chief organiser and planner, was wallowing in self-pity and panic. This was a confusing role reversal.

“Have you got your mobile phone?” asked Iris.

“Well yes, for what it’s worth I have, but there’s no signal or anything so it’s absolutely useless.”

“Not entirely. Or at least, mine isn’t. It has a torch.”

“Oh my god, yes, of course they do! I’ve never used mine. I’d forgotten about it.”

“Right, let’s use our torches. At least we will be able to see where we are. I use my torch a lot. I’m scared in the dark.”

And with that, Iris’s phone lit up the darkness.

Fliss sat there, still in shock and wonder about the role reversal. She didn’t move or say anything. “Hand me your phone.” Fliss silently handed it over. Iris swiftly got the torch working so that they could look around at their surroundings. As they looked around, they could make out the dirty, age-worn walls of the warehouse and a large, ragged hole in the roof, above where the packages lay, abandoned. Water was pouring in and a small lake was starting to form on the floor.

Fliss sprang into action and thought quickly. It was none of their business, but the packages clearly belonged to ‘Nick Johnson’, their would-be rescuer. Were they important, what did they contain, should they move them out of the way of the water? Iris was, no doubt, thinking the same, but was too nervous to voice her thoughts. She stood back as Fliss approached the packages cautiously.

They were all odd shapes, not square or rectangular, like carefully boxed birthday presents, but uneven edges, as if they contained other, smaller packages. Two were long and thin and reminded Fliss of her favourite French baguettes. How she would love one now, loaded with butter. Hunger was setting in! There were labels attached, written in a language unknown to either of them. Then Fliss noticed a tear in the end of one and was just about to poke it with her toe when there was the roar of a diesel engine coming to a halt outside and the sound of a door being slammed.

“Thank goodness,” Fliss said, sure that help had arrived, and even Iris’s face broke into a smile. The door was flung open and there was Jane. As she came in, she tripped over the threshold and landed in a heap amongst the packages. The 3 Amigos were together again, though not in the way they had imagined when they left home all those hours ago. Then the warehouse door slammed shut and the sound of a bolt being drawn filled the silence.

Fliss, Iris and Jane stared at each other in the eerie light of the phone torches. For a split second, smiles began to creep across their faces - quickly replaced by horror, fear, anger and every other negative emotion imaginable. What was happening? Why were they in a warehouse in the middle of the woods? Was the door really locked? As one, they ran to the small wooden door within a larger goods door. Jane arrived first and pushed the handle. Nothing. Fliss arrived, nudged her to one side and tried again. Nothing. In a panic, both started hammering on the door and shouting.

Eventually they gave up. Turning round they realised that Iris was not with them. A small spot of light was moving slowly away from them, searching the walls and floor.

“Iris,” Fliss called, “what are you doing?”

“Well, it is obvious that we are not going to get out through that door, so I am looking to see if there is another way.”

The three friends searched every nook and cranny of the warehouse but all they found was discarded broken furniture and the mysterious packages first spotted in the back of the taxi. Despondently they righted an old sofa and huddled together on it. They had been so preoccupied in searching the warehouse that none of them had realised the light was changing. It was getting dark. Speechless, they sat engrossed in individual thoughts. Thoughts of spas, meals and theatre couldn’t be further from their minds.

Fliss had tears running down her face. Jane kept opening her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Iris stared into space. Nothing changed for what seemed like hours.

“Right,” Iris’ voice echoed through the vast space. “This won’t do!”

Jane looked at Iris in amazement. “What have you done to Iris, and who are you?”

“Meet the new Iris,” Fliss whispered. “She really held me together earlier before you arrived.”

“It seems like we have been incarcerated here for no reason we can think of”, Iris went on. “We are locked in and we can’t find another way out. Let’s have a look inside some of those strange packages. They may give us a clue.”

Opening a couple of the packages the 3 Amigos were horrified by what they saw. Perhaps this was why they were locked in here, although none of them had known the contents before now, so how could they be a danger to anyone?

Before further panic set in, Iris ordered, “Let’s check our phones for signals, even faint ones might help.”

Dutifully Fliss and Jane found their phones.

"My battery is dead....." Jane wailed.

"Mine's very low," added Fliss.

"But am I correct in thinking that even low batteries can access the emergency services?" was Iris' contribution. "I think we need the police here asap."

The problem was they had no idea where they were, so how could the police find them? Could they be found from their phone signal? It seemed unlikely.

"What Three Words" said Iris suddenly.

"What Three Words' what?" said Fliss and Jane together.

"It's an App on your phone – you can use it and it will tell you exactly where you are on the planet giving you a three-word unique clue"

"What are you on about?" Fliss and Jane, in unison again.

"Let me try it, it will take too long to explain. You just need to memorise three words. OK"? "Three words?" said Fliss, "yes I can do that"

"OK, let me try to get a location on 'What Three Words' first. Then I can give that to the police, I think. Wish me luck" said Iris, swallowing hard. She knew she would probably only get one chance to get it right as there was very little battery life left on her phone.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the App on her phone. "You see there are some benefits to me being so anxious and timid. I'm armed with survival Apps."

Everyone held their breath.

Suddenly Iris shouted "alarmed..neatly. shop. Remember these words"

Once again in unison, but this time shouting. Jane and Fliss said "alarmed neatly shop" over and over. "It worked!" beamed Iris. "Now let me see if my theory about being able to get through to the police with minimal signal works"

Iris was right and she managed to get through to the Police. They were all gabbling and shouting at the same time down the line until Jane grabbed the phone and held up her hand for silence from the others.

"Officer, we have been kidnapped and we are being held in a warehouse. Our 'what three words' address is Alarmed. Neatly. Shop. We have very little signal and practically no charge. Send help immediately – do you understand? We are three women of a certain age and need help – it's an emergency! Alarmed. Neatly. Shop. Please hurry. We think our kidnappers are dealing with illegally imported animal parts"

Although it seemed an eternity until two police cars arrived, it was actually only twenty-five minutes. The friends huddled together for warmth, hardly speaking - because what was there to say? Every minute they thought they could hear someone approaching – would it be the police, or the criminals? They agreed that they would know if the police were coming because of the noise of the sirens, so they were terrified when they heard the crunch of tyres on gravel.

They heard car doors closing and the approach of footsteps. Then the sound of someone trying to open the door, and a voice calling,

“Hello? Anyone in there?”

“Yes” they screamed in unison, and then they heard the bolts being opened.

“We didn’t hear your sirens,” was, idiotically, the first thing Iris said to the tall, rather handsome, young police constable.

“We don’t use them unless we need to clear traffic out of our way,” he said, “or criminals would all run off before we found them. Don’t believe all you see on the TV!” They couldn’t help thinking that the day had been more like TV than real life.

The rest was an anticlimax really. They were looked after, kept warm and taken to the police station where they were given steaming cups of tea and something to eat. Meanwhile the police waited for the criminals to return, entrapped them and arrested them. It turned out that they were part of a gang importing animal parts that had been illegally obtained.

Fliss, Iris and Jane were told they would be asked for their statements later and were then put in a police car and driven home.

“I feel completely and utterly exhausted,” Jane was the first to admit, and they all agreed that they felt the same.

“Tell you what we need,” said Fliss, “a nice, relaxing spa day....”