

## The Pink Roses

22nd May 1928.

Marlow, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom.

The pink roses had bloomed early. They weren't completely to Gloria Deuce's liking - she preferred more striking colours in her garden like scarlet poppies, purple lavender or yellow marigolds - but Ralph, her husband's new gardening robot (or Grobot, as the brochure had described him) was doing some amazing things and she hadn't liked to comment negatively.

Gloria would watch the bottle-green Grobot hover its way around the tidy cottage garden, forever extending scateurs from his undercarriage or a weeding hoe from his rear compartment, his AI light blinking happily and fed by internal commands from his horticultural chip. The rose blooms were large and airy, like balls of soft summer cumulus, and their delicate fragrance did smell nice drifting around the cottage garden like the fabric softener her husband insisted upon. But it was just one more thing that was nearly right, and Gloria suspected that her flowerbeds of bolder and brighter colours would just have to wait for a slightly modified instruction down the line.

Under Kenneth Deuce's direction Ralph had also planted a herb garden. It was just as neat and orderly as the rest of the garden of course, housed inside a square, timber surround and sited next to an area where the foundation for the summer gazebo had been marked out and staked beneath a green tarpaulin. Gloria had wanted the gazebo painted lunar white like the picket fence to complement her ultra-colourful flowers, but Kenneth had insisted that its woodwork should be a soft pink to match the roses. Just one more thing that was arguably nearly right.

The herb garden had been completed a few weeks ago, and Ralph had duly planted it out with precise rows of coriander, flat leaf parsley, sage, chives and even mint for Gloria's new iced-tea machine. Now there was another example of Kenneth doing things almost right. Gloria had never drunk tea in her life, let alone iced tea. She didn't like hot drinks, not a single one, and didn't even like the smell. So when the machine was installed and its little AI light glowed a bright and willing green for the first time, she had wondered just how much attention her husband had been paying her for the last decade and more. She had tried the iced tea, of course, if only to be civil - it had been a present, after all - and although she hadn't minded its weird taste too much, it was never going to replace a gin and tonic or a Pimm's on a sunny afternoon.

Kenneth had strayed - that was the polite term to use, not had an affair, not cheated - and that was the plain and simple truth of it. In as much as Gloria understood it at all, his straying had started in the most crass and cliched way possible, last December at the Deller Law & Legal office Christmas party. His straying had lasted a few months, sometimes straying after work until nine at night, until she had caught on.

Kenneth was an associate executive with his own corner office and his own secretary. The secretary's name was Felicia Field, if you can believe a name like that. Gloria had met her just once and briefly, the previous summer at a cocktail event when spouses were mandatory. Felicia Field was ten years her husband's junior, with long legs running all the way up to her rocket-ship boobs, a whirlwind of flouncy blonde hair, and pouty lips like the puckered rear end of a cocker spaniel - you know the type. His big slip-up had come in April and Gloria had maintained a higher standard of taste and decorum than her husband had managed,

and had insisted with a collected and steady voice that Kenneth either stopped seeing her or got himself a new secretary, and preferably both. Over dinner that night he had said that he would.

That was a month ago. Kenneth had informed her that Ms Field had been moved to the wages department on the other side of the building and that he no longer saw her, not even in the cafeteria. Kenneth Deuce had even gone one further, which surprised her, and insisted that as their eleventh wedding anniversary was fast approaching, they should get presents for each other early to reaffirm their vows.

The traditional gift for eleven years of marriage was steel. After some thought Kenneth suggested that they should choose each other a new household robot each. But there were enough mechanoids in the house already, Gloria had argued, what with the Nu-Chef smart oven and the tiny and tireless Scarab drain debuggers, not to mention the new eZee-T iced-tea machine just installed in the kitchen.

But Kenneth had said that it wouldn't do any harm to make another appointment with the sales rep from the London Global Robotics Corporation. And so Mr Tucker came, they looked at his shiny, picture-filled brochure, and two new intelligent machines were promptly purchased. Kenneth received his gardening Grobot a week later, which he named Ralph after Ralph Hancock the influential Welsh landscape gardener, and immediately put him to work in their cottage garden. Gloria received her cosmetics robot a few days after that, which she named Genevieve after Genevieve Tobin the glamorous Hollywood actress. But she still wasn't sure she wanted it.

It was now six o'clock on a Friday afternoon and Gloria stood at the bedroom window with another thumping headache. She was holding the curtain open,

waiting for Kenneth to come home from work.

Genevieve hovered behind her like an off-screen character of her namesake, edging to take to the stage, still and silent but for the gentle thrum of her magnetic rotary engine.

Gloria had called her over from her docking station on the dressing table, but hadn't said anything further. She hadn't felt herself for a couple of weeks now. It was headaches mostly, occasional bouts of nausea, forgetfulness, and sometimes a light-headed dizziness that made her think that one day she would just be found at the bottom of the stairs with her head facing the wrong way.

Her skin had grown pale too, and she thought that her face looked like a Victorian death mask, probably made worse because she'd taken to keeping out of the summer sun completely now that it made her bones hurt. She'd downplayed it as much as she could to Kenneth, especially after all the work he'd had Ralph do in the garden for her, and she didn't want him to worry about some malady that would probably sort itself out in due course anyway. No, she'd make another appointment with Dr Appleton in the morning, and see if there was anything else he could prescribe for her.

Gloria turned away from the window to face Genevieve and squinted with pain from the motion. She knew her complexion had become a ghostly white. It reminded her of the lead-based makeup that the Elizabethans took to wearing even though they knew that it rotted their skin and to hell with the price of vanity. Gloria had noted in the brochure that all of LGRC's cosmetics were guaranteed fully synthetic, with nothing natural or naturally harmful added.

"I need more rouge, Genevieve," Gloria said to the robot, "and more earth tones. Something to get rid of all this whiteness."

She faced the pink robot that hung in the air like a party balloon. It was the same shade of pink as the roses. Pink Bouquet it had been called in the brochure. Gloria had liked Yellow Sunset - it was more like the fiery marigolds that she'd wanted in her flowerbeds - but Kenneth had insisted that a softer shade like the pink model looked more feminine.

"Leave it to me, Gloria," Genevieve purred.

Gloria heard the pigment palette whirr round inside her pastel-pink shell. Cylinders slid in and out of hidden receptors. The cosmetics robot hung in the air almost silently, her bright-green AI light blinking happily as her central processor made thousands of colour and shade calculations. Gloria leaned slightly forward and aligned her face into Genevieve's open cavity, a space which had been inversely crafted to her exact facial measurements.

Gloria closed her eyes as Genevieve's scanners registered the current elements and parameters of her skin: colour, texture, blemishes, follicle depth. Micro-nozzles adjusted themselves and then lightly sprayed her face from ear to ear, and chin to hairline. Micro-filaments extended to condition and coat her eyelashes with Midnight Serenade mascara. Micro-tweezers plucked two erroneous brow hairs and discarded them to an internal hair trap.

"Would you like perfume, Gloria?" Genevieve asked. The robot's voice was soft and dusky. Genevieve Tobin, a star of silent film, hadn't appeared on the lengthy list of voices from which to choose, so Gloria had chosen Greta Garbo's.

"Yes please," Gloria said. "Something light and summery."

"Wild Orchid, Gloria?"

"What's that one that Kenneth likes?"

"Pink Roses, Gloria."

It would be.

“Yes, of course it is. I’ll have that one, please, Genevieve.”

There was a gentle whirring sound as the carousel of perfume cartridges rotated at the base of Genevieve’s pink shell. Micro-diffusers opened beneath Gloria’s jaw-line and sprayed a fine mist of the delicately scented perfume across her neck.

“Your make-up is complete, Gloria. You’ll be the belle of the ball.”

Gloria lifted her face from Genevieve’s interior facial cavity, and Genevieve retreated silently to her docking station. As Gloria returned to the window Genevieve’s bright-green AI light dimmed slightly and then began to slowly flash as she recharged.

Gloria’s head was still thumping with a headache. She pressed a hand lightly to her temple, the other to her stomach. The nausea had come in fits and starts all day. Kenneth would be home soon and ready for his dinner. Just the thought of preparing food made her stomach turn, but she left the window and went downstairs anyway, holding the handrail for support.

In the kitchen she opened the pantry door and chose the special cans for tonight: one of venison carpaccio and one of asparagus spears. Gloria placed them into the smart oven and pressed the start button.

The bright AI light on the oven shone keenly as it set to work calculating the different thermal and temporal parameters required by the recipes encoded into each can’s culinary chip.

In the cupboard under the sink was the box of medicines. Gloria gently opened the door and took out a packet of Brisk headache powders, a mix of aspirin, caffeine and a secret ingredient, probably cocaine. She stirred them into a glass of cold water and then swallowed the foggy solution. She leant against the

sink with her eyes closed, waiting for it dull her head.

As the Nu-Chef oven drew the cans into its corkscrew mechanism and the filaments of its internal neodium core began to radiate complex heat patterns, Gloria quietly instructed the eZee-T to make her two tall drinks.

Its AI light glittered instantly and she winced with pain as the clattering sound of ice rattled into the long, slender hi-ball glasses from inside its hidden dispenser. Jasmine green tea filtered slowly down over the ice, like meltwater falling across a glacier.

As the glasses casually filled she heard the sound of Kenneth's new Austin 7 chugging into the driveway, its neat and narrow tyres crunching across the gravel. The engine died and then the door slammed closed. Through the open cottage window she could hear his footsteps marching across the gravel to the front door. The key turned, she heard the front door open, and then it closed. The glasses of iced tea, now filled, slid forward into the ejection tray just as Kenneth Deuce stepped into the kitchen. He smiled, set his briefcase and herringbone trilby down on a kitchen chair, and then strode towards Gloria to kiss her cheek. The touch of his lips was light, but the contact amplified the ache in her head and she flinched.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Probably about as good as I look," she said.

Her eyes were closed, her brow knotted with pain.

"But you look fantastic," he observed.

She'd forgotten that she'd used Genevieve. She attempted a smile, but it hurt too much.

"Have you taken any Brisk?"

"Just before you came in."

"You want to go lie down?"

Gloria exhaled with frustration. "I've been

lying down most of the day. I wanted to be up for when you got home, and try and make myself look at least slightly respectable.”

“You look more than respectable,” Kenneth said. He went to stroke her cheek with the backs of his fingers but stopped himself as she flinched in anticipation of the pain. “You smell good too.”

“Your favourite. Pink roses.”

Kenneth smiled again and kissed her cheek as lightly as he could. She still winced at the contact, and he apologised.

“I wanted to make you a nice dinner too. I got the special cans out. The venison and the asparagus. You like asparagus.”

“I appreciate everything you’re doing, honey, really. Especially with you not feeling well at the moment. But you’ll be better soon, I just know it. Would you like me to collect some fresh parsley from the herb garden? And some fresh mint for our iced teas?”

Gloria tried to nod but the slightest movement caused her to wince again. Kenneth hurried upstairs to change out of his office suit. He emerged a few minutes later in his brown corduroy slacks and olive-green cardigan. Gloria had managed to fill his pipe and was holding it out for him, along with a match. He struck it with a well-practised thumb and sucked its flame into the bowl of his pipe, puffing contentedly as the tobacco burned flavourfully.

He found Ralph outside mowing the lawn. The Grobot’s magnetic rotary engine whined cheerfully as the nest of whirling blades beneath him neatly trimmed the already well-manicured grass.

Kenneth called him over. The mower blades slowed to a halt and Ralph retracted them into a compact body that contained all of his many gardening implements, everything from a hose pipe to hedge



trimmers. Then he hovered across the garden towards his owner.

“How may I help you, Kenneth?” Ralph enquired.

“The roses,” Kenneth said to the bottle-green Grobot. “They don’t look as perfect as they could be.”

“I will prune them right now, Kenneth,” Ralph said. His voice was strong and authoritative. Kenneth had suffered the same dilemma as his wife, in that Ralph Hancock’s voice had not been on the list of voices from which to choose an appropriate speaker. Kenneth had instead chosen someone of military prowess and precision, one Edmund Allenby, the last great British leader of mounted cavalry. Sometimes Kenneth privately wondered how Ralph might look with an elegant moustache.

“She loves pink roses, you know, Ralph.”

“Yes, Kenneth,” Ralph agreed.

With his gardening gloves on to protect his office hands and puffing happily on his pipe, Kenneth strolled contentedly around his garden inspecting Ralph’s handiwork and diligence, before visiting the herb garden and pinching off half a dozen of the parsley and mint leaves. He found his wife sitting at the kitchen table when he returned, and she was gently holding her head in both hands. Kenneth popped a couple of mint leaves into the hi-ball glasses of iced tea still sitting in the chilled ejector tray, and then set one down in front of her.

“Thank you,” she said, without looking up.

Kenneth sipped his own iced tea and set the parsley down on the chopping board on the countertop, still with his gloves on. “Why don’t you let me finish dinner,” he said.

“Thank you,” Gloria said again. “I just don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing that Dr Appleton can’t put right, I’m sure,” Kenneth assured her, picking up a kitchen knife and the chopping block.

The Nu-Chef pinged with triumph behind him, and a serving tray emerged upon which the venison carpaccio and asparagus spears steamed tastily on two plates. Kenneth turned and picked them up, smelling them heartily before placing them on the kitchen table. Gloria forced herself to sit up as Kenneth slid one of the plates in front of her. The smell of the steaming food creased her already knotted stomach as Kenneth went to the cutlery drawer, but she knew she had to eat something. She managed a smile of appreciation as he placed a knife and fork next to her plate, and then sat down opposite her.

“Cheers,” he said, as he lightly clinked her glass of iced tea.

“Cheers,” she forced herself to repeat. “Here’s hoping to me feeling better soon.”

“Amen to that,” Kenneth said, and settled down to eat.

Gloria managed a few mouthfuls at least. Just the simple act of eating hurt, and even as she swallowed her stomach complained and threatened to force it back up. She managed to keep it down with sips of iced tea, but halfway through dinner she frowned and stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Kenneth asked, looking up.

“You forgot the parsley,” she observed, with as much of a smile as she could manage. “You picked it specially, so you may as well chop it and serve it.”

He looked behind him at the chopping board as if the absence of parsley on his plate wasn’t evidence enough.

“No matter,” he said, dismissing it with a brief wave of his hand. “We’ll just have to have it next time, won’t we?”

Gloria couldn't manage much more anyway. When she placed her knife and fork down on her plate Kenneth suggested that she go and have a hot, relaxing bath while he cleaned up and reloaded the dishes. Gloria agreed and slipped from the table like a wraith, making her way from the kitchen and up the stairs like a woman three times her age. Kenneth listened to his wife enter into the bathroom and then heard the bath water run.

He pulled his gardening gloves back on and set to chopping the flat leaf parsley on the board into fine pieces. Then with a teaspoon he pulled from his cardigan pocket he dripped cold water from the tap onto it, mashing it into an emerald paste until it looked more like a very thin salsa verde. But this was no add-to-anything flavoursome sauce that he was preparing.

From his other cardigan pocket he retrieved a small glass vial, stoppered with a tiny cork. It also contained a thin tapered pipette. Kenneth removed the cork from the vial and then carefully removed the glass pipette. He squeezed the tiny suction bulb with his thumb and forefinger and sucked up some of the dark-green liquid from the chopping board, and then decanted it into the vial before replacing the pipette and the cork stopper. Then he tucked the teaspoon and the vial back in his cardigan pockets and took the chopping board to the kitchen sink. A small, glass panel next to the taps controlled the Scarab debuggers. Kenneth pressed his thumb to the scanner and waited for the tiny, beetle-like robots to scuttle from the drain. He placed the chopping board into the sink when they emerged.

"Clean this thoroughly," he said to them. Each unit possessed a scarlet AI light on their heads, and they now blinked brightly with the new instruction and swarmed across the board, nibbling and scouring.

Kenneth could hear his wife huffing and groaning upstairs as she climbed into the bathtub. He left the kitchen now, silently climbing the stairs and entering the bedroom where he approached Genevieve as she sat charging. The thumbprint reader on the back of her shell opened the refill units. Kenneth pressed his thumb to it and waited while the unit whirred slowly open.

He extracted the perfume cylinder marked Pink Roses, removed its tiny cork stopper, and then set it down on top of Gloria's dressing table. Then he retrieved the glass vial from his cardigan pocket, glancing subconsciously over his shoulder in case his wife should be standing there fresh from the bathtub to catch him.

He uncorked the vial and withdrew the glass pipette. He pinched the tiny rubber suction bulb and drew up some of the dark-green poison, and carefully dripped it into the perfume cylinder. When he was done, he slid the pipette back into the vial, recorked it, and slipped it once more back into his cardigan pocket. He quickly resealed the cylinder of Pink Roses perfume and slid it back into the refill unit, before pressing the tray back into place.

So diligently had Kenneth been with his sabotage that he hadn't been listening to how quiet the bathroom had become. Nor had he noticed that his wife had now returned and was standing in the doorway behind him. She had a towel wrapped around her which she held in place with one hand at her chest. It was her other hand that interested him more though, for in it she was brandishing a shiny new handgun. Both hands were shaking.

"So that's how you were doing it," Gloria said to him. Her voice was thin and stretched out like carnival taffy.

He was caught. There was no point in lying about it, so he simply shrugged.

“Is that my gun?” he asked, nodding at the trembling weapon. It was a Browning pistol he’d bought with the intention of shooting her. Until he realised that the police would investigate her murder, quickly discover his affair with Felicia Field and then just as quickly work out the rest. He’d hidden it, but obviously not well enough.

Gloria nodded slowly, wincing with the motion.

“What’s in the syringe?” she asked.

“It’s a pipette not a syringe,” he corrected her annoyingly, and Gloria shook the gun at him, urging him to explain himself more quickly. “I had Ralph grow it in the herb garden. It’s called Hemlock Water Dropwort, and damn me if it doesn’t look exactly like flat leaf parsley. Highly toxic too, and almost impossible to detect if administered over time in small doses.”

“So you’ve been putting it on my dinner?”

Kenneth smiled, despite the small Browning aimed at him.

“At first,” he confessed, “but chopping it proved too big a dose. You’d have been dead in a few days and the autopsy would’ve found it in your stomach. Shame really, especially as you bought the story about it giving me indigestion, that’s why it only went on your plate.”

“I did wonder why you claimed parsley gave you indigestion when it’s generally used to ease it.”

He shrugged again. “What do I know? I’m a solicitor not a doctor.”

They faced each other in silence for a few moments like some kind of Mexican standoff, with only the shiny new Browning between them. Eventually it was Kenneth who spoke.

“So what do we do now?”

“I want you outside,” Gloria said.

“You want me to leave?”

“Just get walking. I’ll point the way.”

With the bath towel still held around her in her left hand, Gloria Deuce stepped away from the bedroom door and waggled the pistol with her right, indicating for her husband to go through it. He held his hands up in a gesture of mock surrender and dutifully walked through it, a slight smile still playfully creasing his lips. Gloria followed at a safe distance in case he should try anything, like they always seemed to do in the movies.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Downstairs,” Gloria instructed him. “Outside. To the herb garden.”

“You want me to show you the hemlock actually growing?”

“Just keep walking.”

Kenneth made his way down the stairs and twice Gloria had to ask him to slow down. She didn’t want him to get too far ahead of her, and it hurt her head to move too quickly. He still had his hands raised as he marched through the back door and out into the garden, whistling a nonsense tune like it was all a joke. Gloria was right behind him. She followed him as he made his way to the herb garden where he stopped and turned to face her.

“So what now?” he wanted to know.

On the ground next to the herb garden was the green tarpaulin, stretched out and staked, indicating where the foundation for the gazebo was going. Gloria waggled the Browning at it. Kenneth looked down at the tarpaulin, frowned and then looked back at her.

“Pull it back,” she instructed him.

Kenneth Deuce did as he was told. He bent down, lifted the tarpaulin and began to haul it back. But

then he dropped it almost immediately as he gasped in shock. In the hole was Felicia Field with a bullet in her chest.

“I called her two days ago when I found a smear of light-pink lipstick on your shirt collar,” Gloria said. “I suggested she come over and we talk it out, woman to woman.”

“What have you done?” Kenneth stammered, still staring into the hole, ignoring her.

“She said she loved you,” Gloria went on. “If that’s any consolation.”

“What have you -“

“And now it’s your turn,” she said. “You want to be with her so much. Get in the hole with her.”

He looked round at her now.

“What?”

“You heard me. Get in the hole.” Gloria levelled the Browning at him. It wasn’t shaking so much now. “Who isn’t going to believe me, Kenneth? Who isn’t going to believe that the two of you just ran away together? Mr Deller knows all about you two. He told me that she’s still your secretary. He told me that you both have lunch together everyday in the cafeteria. He knows what you two got up to at the office party.”

“Now wait. Just wait. We can -“

“It’s too late for all that, Kenneth. Felicia told me everything. She told me all about our dissolving marriage, my terminal illness, her moving into our bedroom the minute I move out in a box. She even told me how much she loves iced tea. And how she just adores pink roses.”

Kenneth held placating hands up in front of him now, for real this time, but Gloria just indicated the hole once again with the pistol.

“How did you even dig this thing?” he wanted to know, glancing back at it, and at the dead woman

he'd intended to have move in a discreet few weeks after Dr Appleton had signed the death certificate. "It's got to be, what, four feet deep?"

"Five," Gloria corrected him. "It's a bit much for a gazebo foundation but Ralph didn't mind digging it so deep. I'm sure he won't mind mixing all that extra concrete either. You see, I have thumbprint access to him as well."

Kenneth Deuce swallowed. His hands were still up in front of him, as though he might be able to catch the bullet that was coming. Then she aimed the Browning right at him, closed one eye like the New York gangsters did, and fired a single shot into his chest.

His eyes bulged as all the air came out of him at once. His hands, which moments before had been out in front of him, now clawed at the front of his olive-green cardigan. His full weight dropped down onto his knees and then, with less sound than Felicia had made, he toppled backwards into the hole on top of her.

Gloria watched him go, and then lowered the pistol to her side as smoke drifted lazily from the end of its barrel. She waited a few moments to make sure her husband wasn't going to climb out, and then tossed the gun into the hole after him. Then she called Ralph.

The bottle-green gardening Grobot appeared quickly from the other side of the cottage, secateurs withdrawing whirringly into his body, the gentle hum of his magnetic rotary engine carrying him fluidly and silently across his own neatly manicured lawn.

She softly pressed the back of her hand against her forehead as though she might be able to push the thumping pain away. The crack of the gunshot had only intensified it.

"How may I help you, Gloria?" Ralph asked.

She took a minute, waiting for the throb of the hemlock to subside. The black sparks of pain behind



her eyes began to fade, and then she spoke to him.

“Please can you fill in the foundation for the gazebo,” she instructed him. “You can put back most of the dirt that came out. And there are some extra bags of Portland cement in the shed.”

“Very good, Gloria,” Ralph said.

As he was about to leave, however, she held him back momentarily.

“Ralph, before you go,” she said, wanting to place additional instructions into his itinerary circuit, “would you be so kind as to remove every trace of hemlock from the herb garden too. That can go in the hole as well.”

“Very good, Gloria,” Ralph said again.

“And can you dig up all of those pink roses, they can go in too, and then replant the flowerbeds with some more vividly coloured flowers.”

“Of course, Gloria. What did you have in mind instead?”

“How about some poppies, some lavender and some marigolds?” she said. “The brighter and bolder the better.”

“Very good, Gloria,” Ralph said, and gently hovered away as his grab-hands extended from his rear compartment.