EXCITE

# **Learn What to Trust:** A New Approach to Educating Older, Rural Adults about Online Health Misinformation

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## Background

Corrective approaches to health misinformation often trigger psychological reactance, limiting their effectiveness in large-scale communication. The Model of Inspiring Media, a recently introduced framework, posits that narrative framing and autonomy-supportive cues can promote reflective engagement rather than defensiveness. Yet this model remains largely untested in applied settings. This campaign addresses that gap by evaluating how narrative appeals and exposure influenced engagement while encouraging audiences to "trust their instincts" when assessing misleading health claims. Rather than focusing on younger populations, EXCITE focused on older populations who have been shown to spread more misinformation online.

## Campaign Aims

Focusing on adults aged 55+ in rural areas, with a household income less than $60,000 per year, we aimed to:

- Encourage older adults to engage with educational content about health misinformation
- Increase time spent with educational material
- Illuminate which creative approaches resonate most with this audience

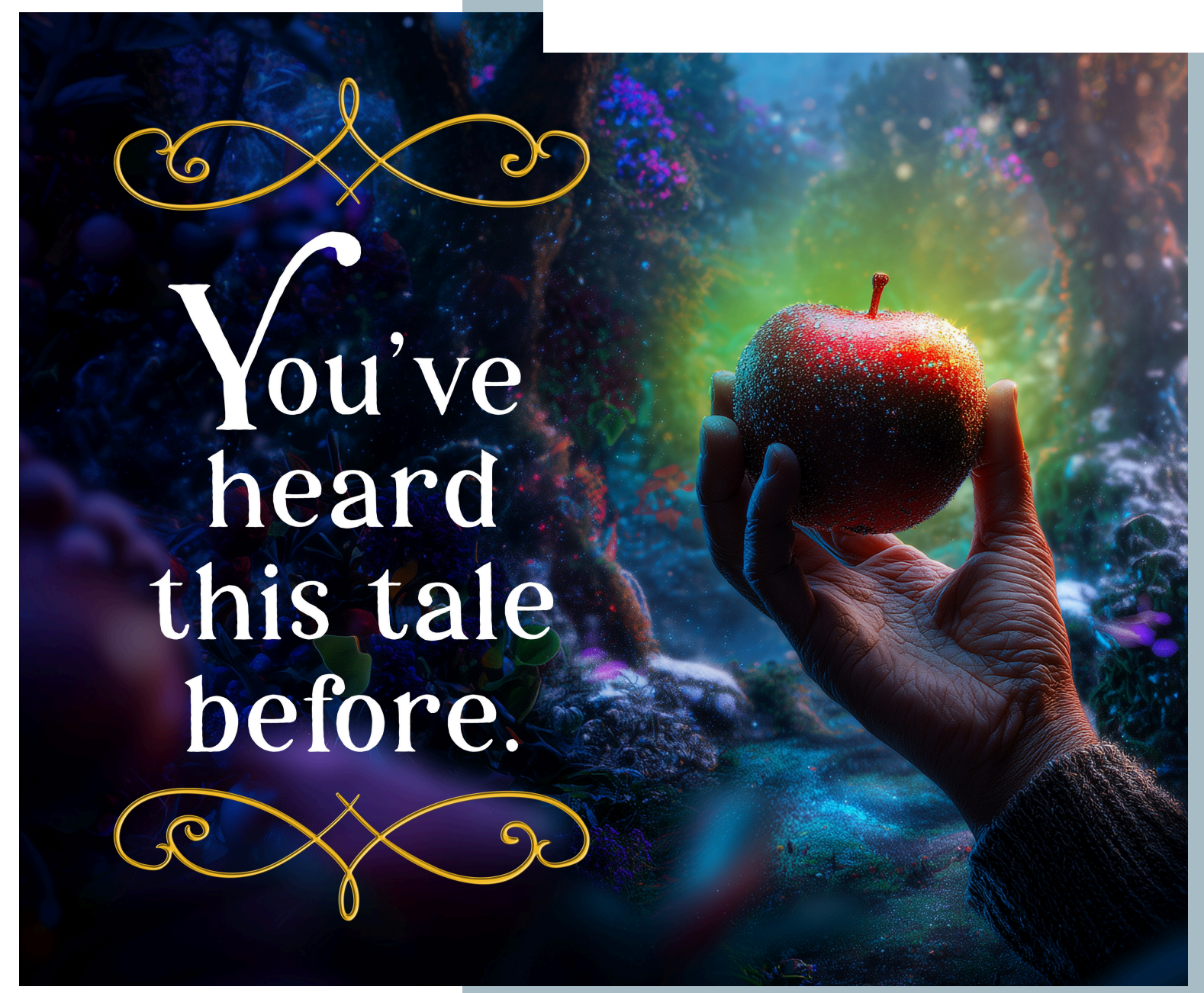
## Approach and Analysis

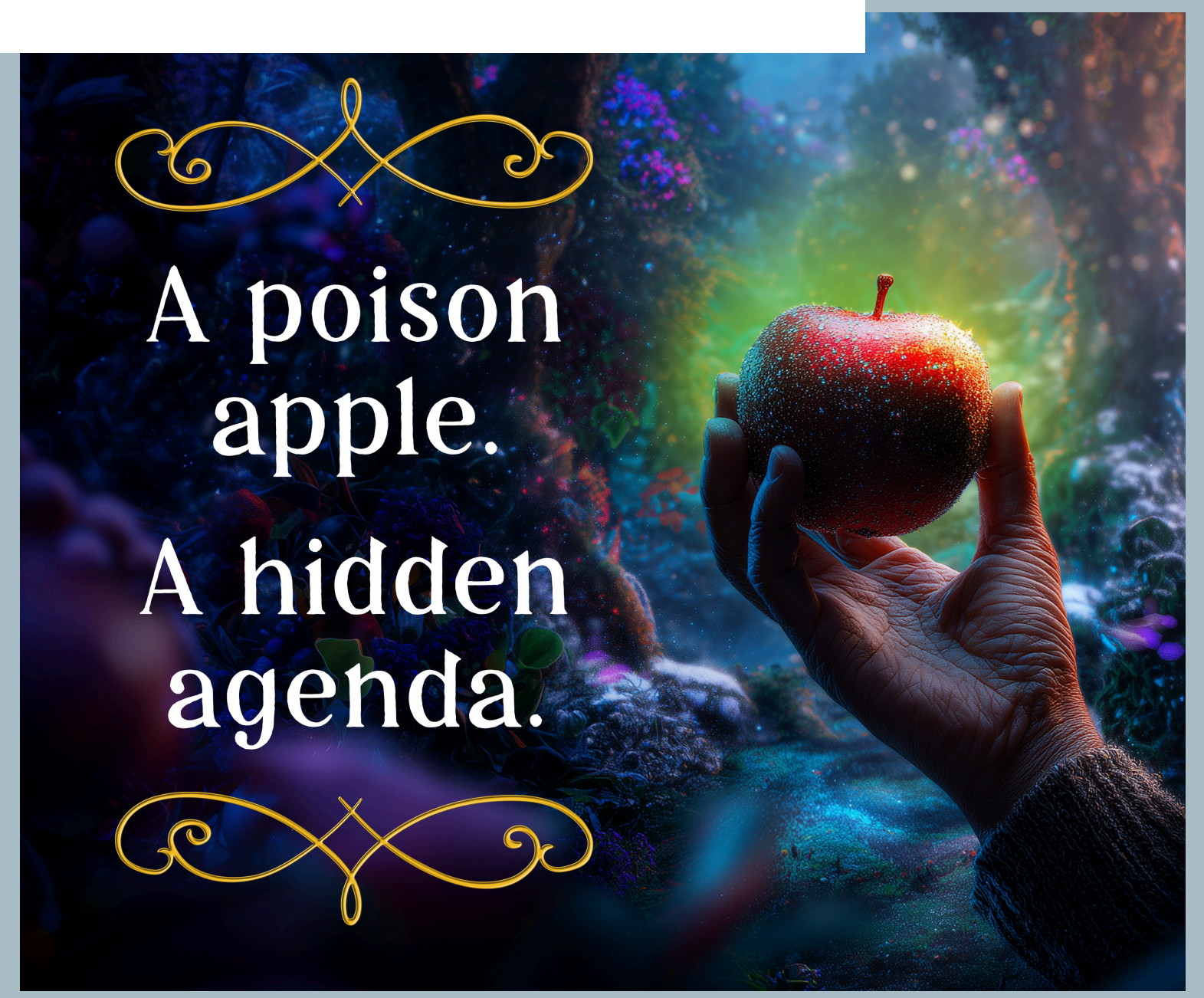
EXCITE developed an online campaign with support from Outright, an advertising firm, that invited people in three states (Idaho, Florida, and Tennessee) to recognize misinformation by leaning on their own lived experience. It used familiarity, wit, and interactivity to empower the audience to learn how to identify evidence-based health information. We created a series of ads that tested three messages using different narrative appeals: hidden motives, exaggerated claims, and urgency cues.

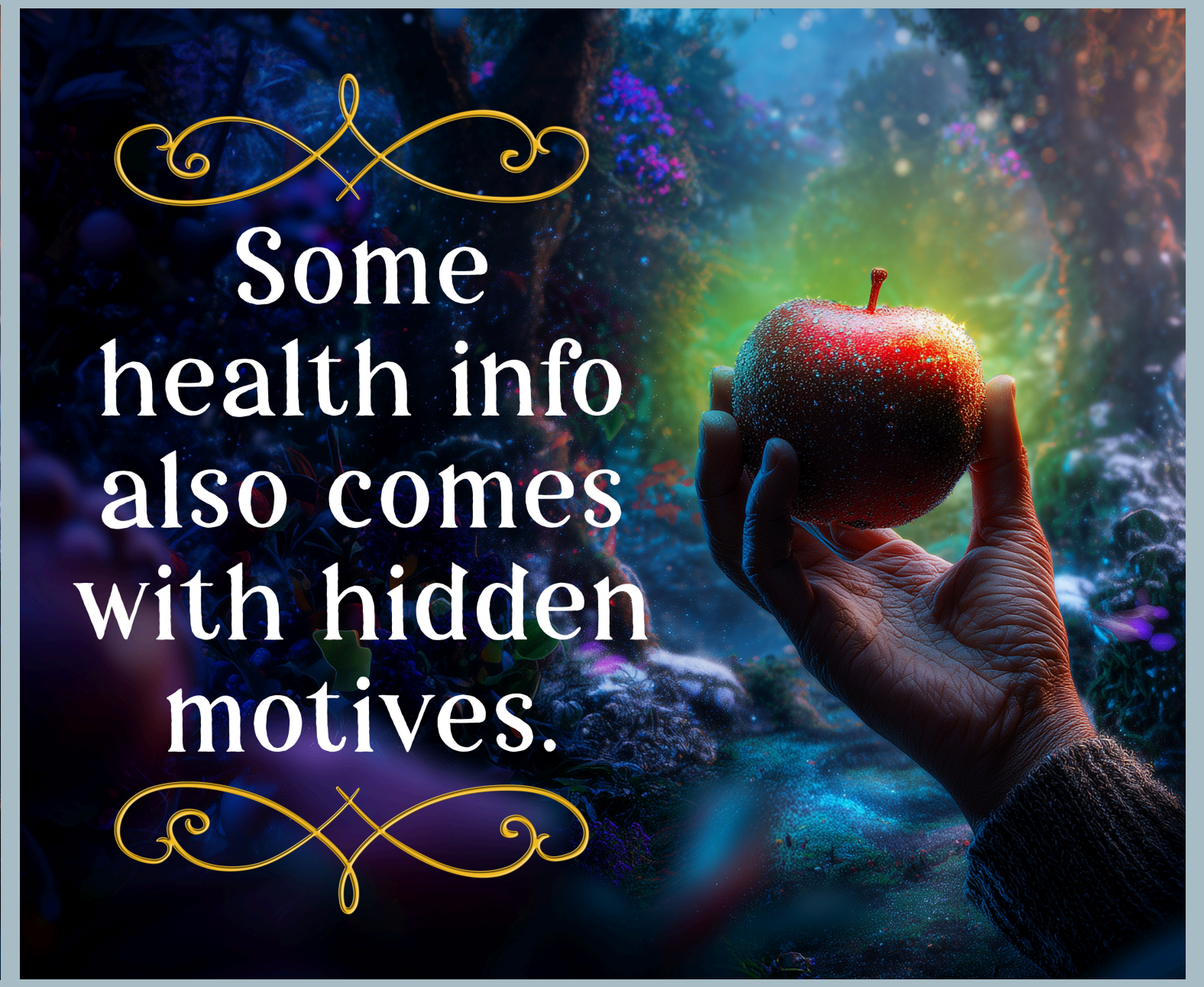
The multi-media advertising pointed to an interactive website, LearnWhatToTrust.org, which took a new approach to helping people identify health misinformation. Rather than just directing site visitors to sources of evidence-based information, we also provided links to activities to practice identifying untrustworthy information. Behavioral outcomes included click-through rate (CTR), landing page views, social engagement, time on site, and effectiveness of retargeting.

Scan the QR Code to
Visit Our Website:
**LearnWhatToTrust.org**

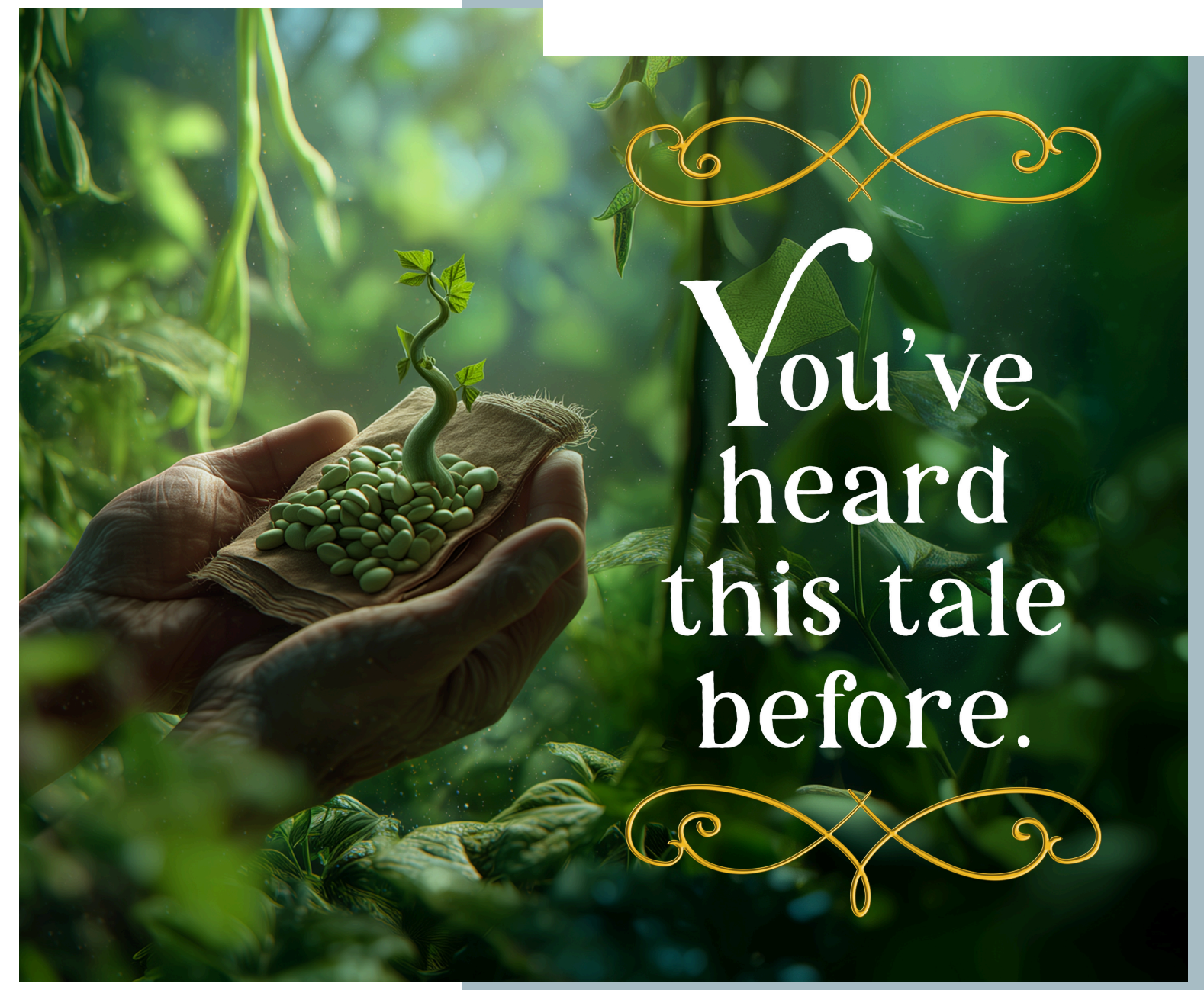
## Hidden Motives

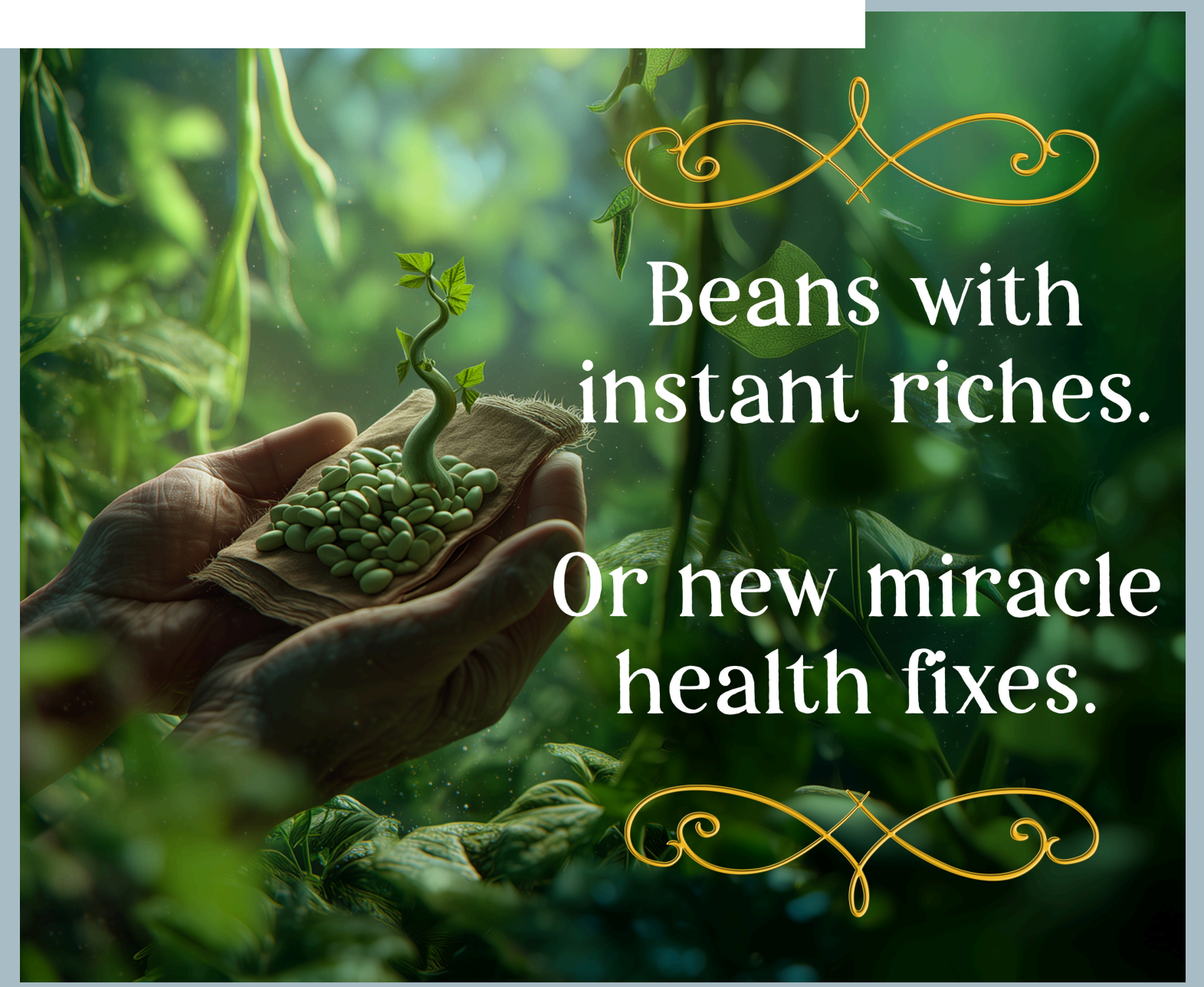

You've heard this tale before.

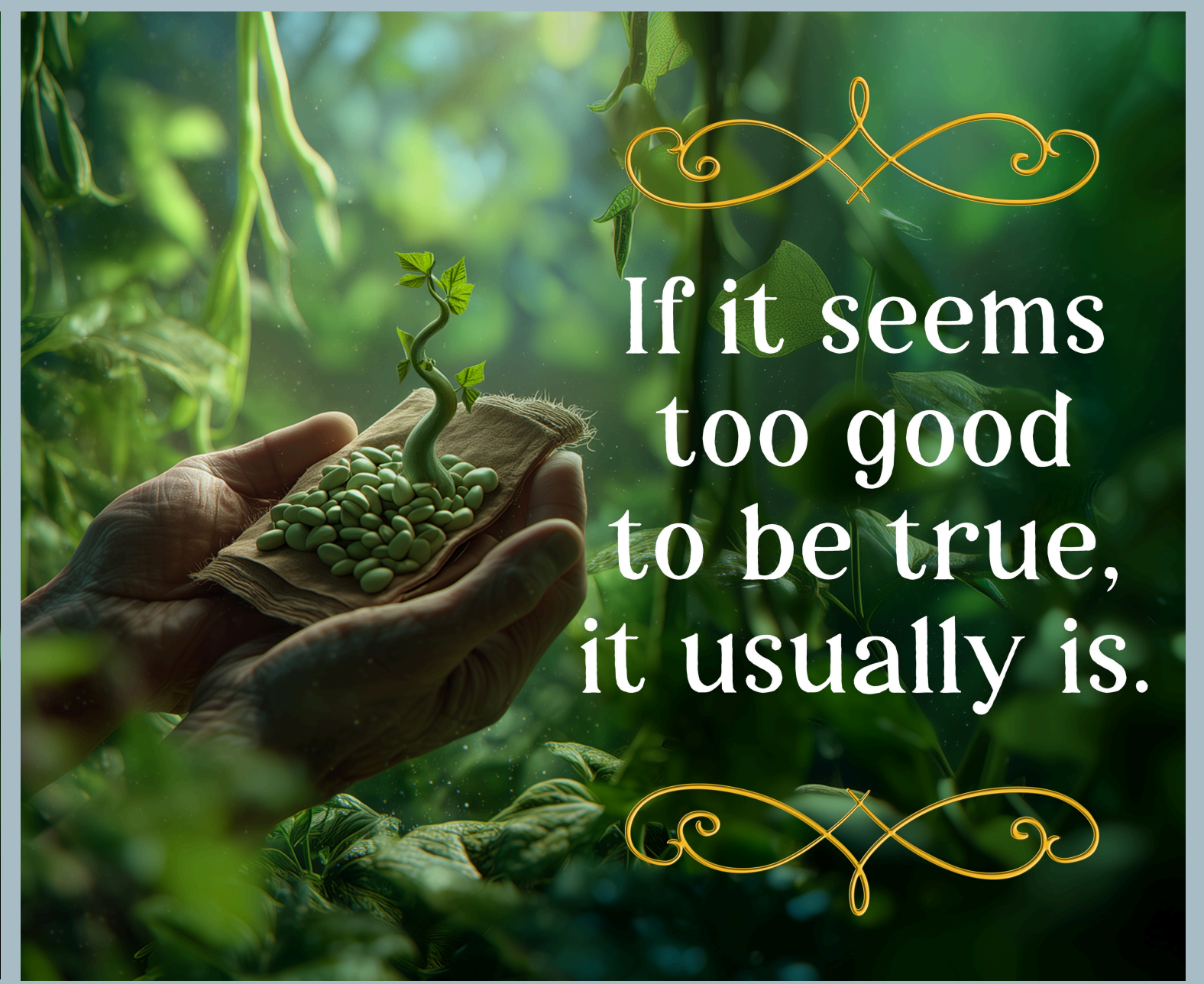

A poison apple.
A hidden agenda.


Some health info also comes with hidden motives.

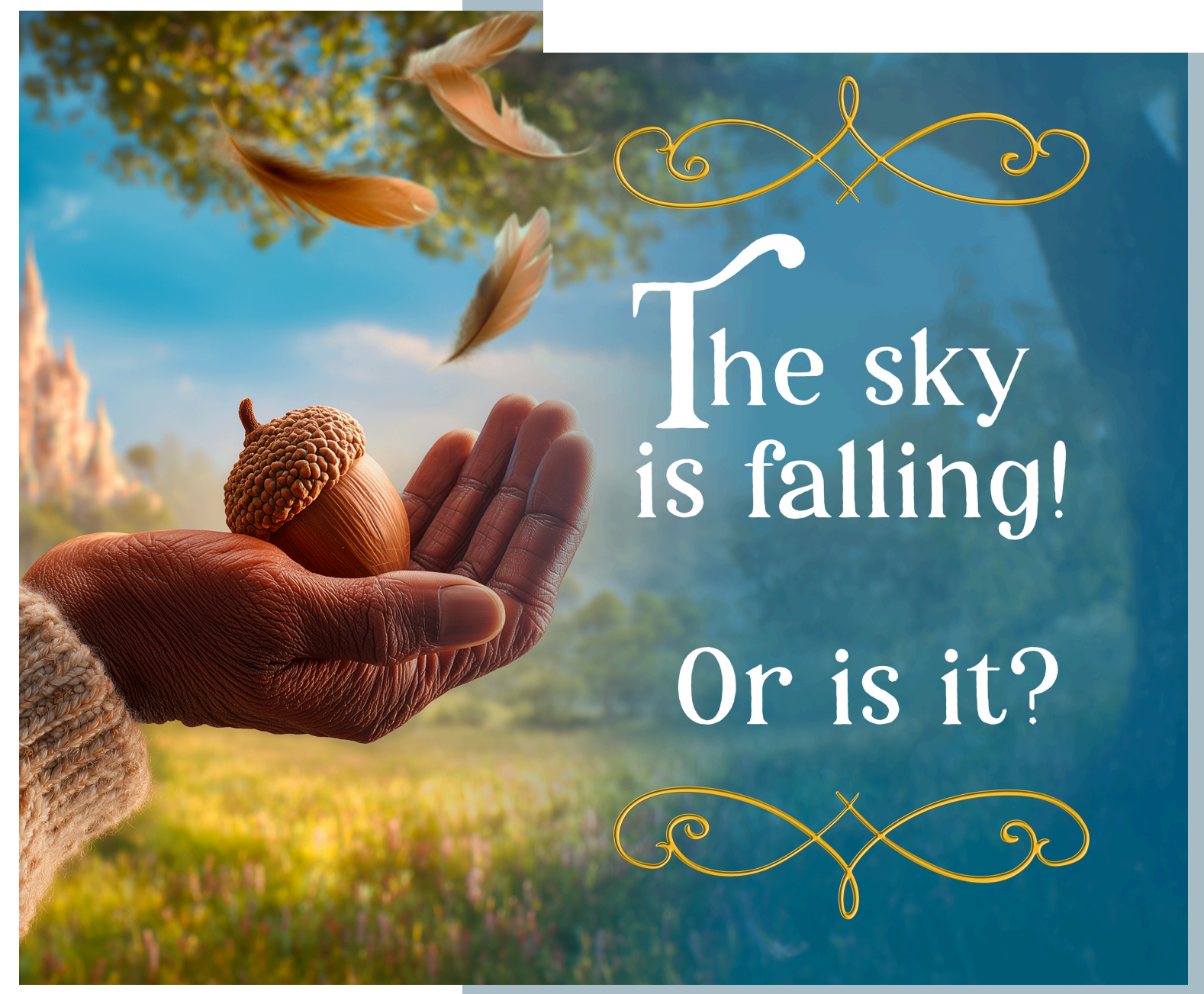
## Exaggerated Claims

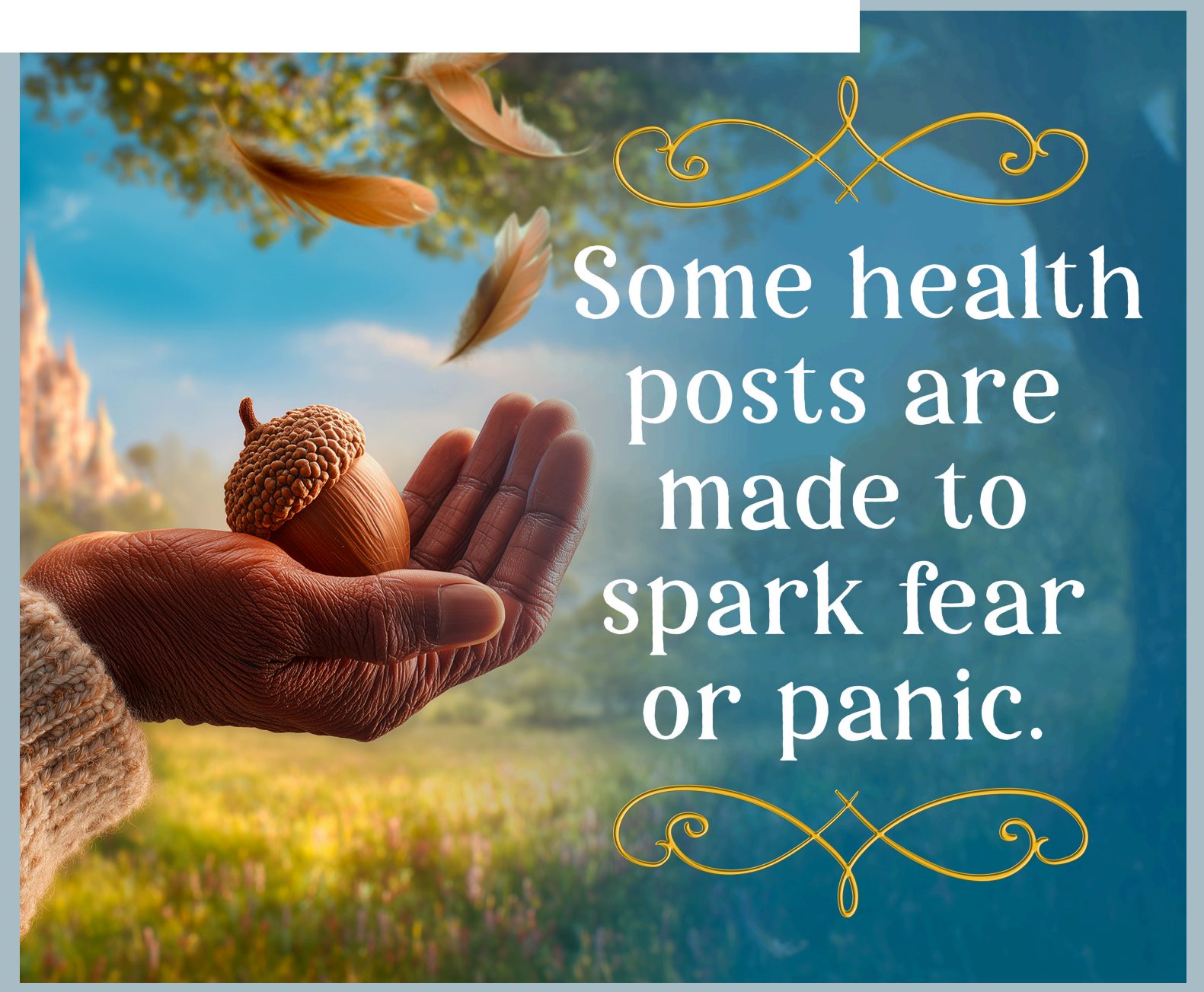

You've heard this tale before.

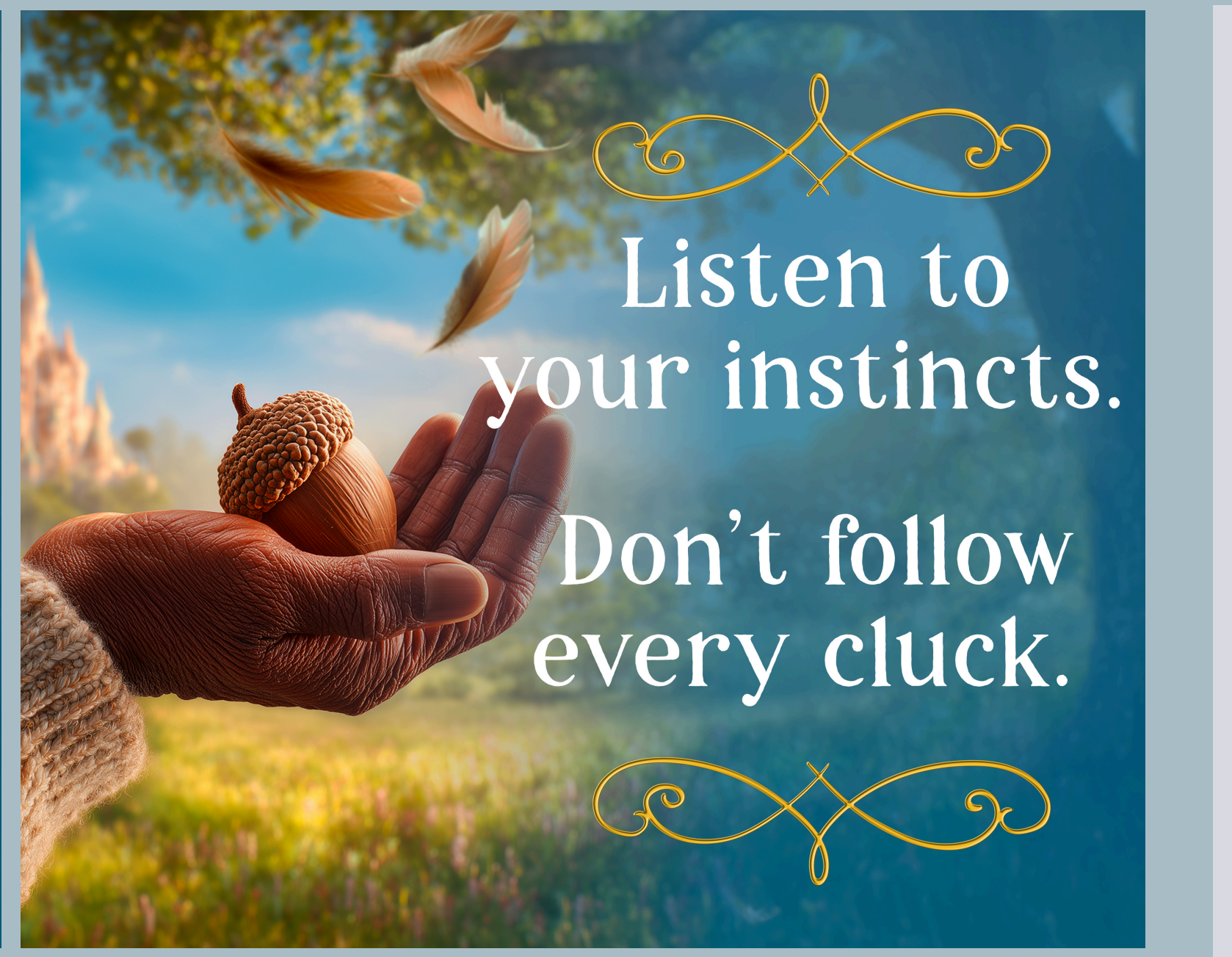

Beans with instant riches.
Or new miracle health fixes.


If it seems too good to be true, it usually is.

## Urgency Cues


The sky is falling!
Or is it?


Some health posts are made to spark fear or panic.


Listen to your instincts.
Don't follow every cluck.

**Author Affiliations**

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3) Nicole H. O'Donnell, PhD, Washington State University
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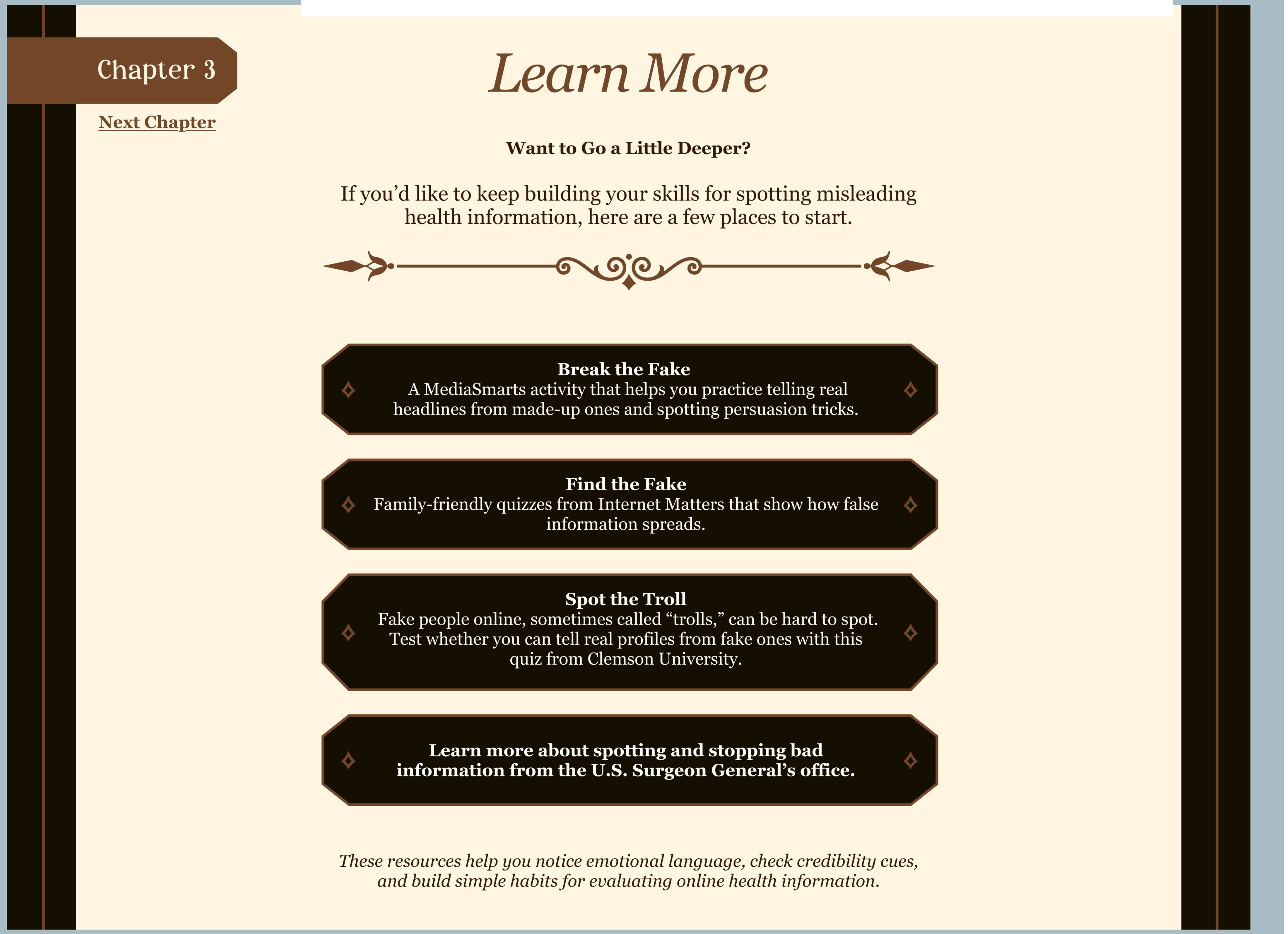
## A Website that Encourages Continued Learning



Chapter 3

Next Chapter

*Learn More*

**Want to Go a Little Deeper?**

If you'd like to keep building your skills for spotting misleading health information, here are a few places to start.

**Break the Fake**
A MediaSmarts activity that helps you practice telling real headlines from made-up ones and spotting persuasion tricks.

**Find the Fake**
Family-friendly quizzes from Internet Matters that show how false information spreads.

**Spot the Troll**
Fake people online, sometimes called "trolls," can be hard to spot. Test whether you can tell real profiles from fake ones with this quiz from Clemson University.

**Learn more about spotting and stopping bad information from the U.S. Surgeon General's office.**

*These resources help you notice emotional language, check credibility cues, and build simple habits for evaluating online health information.*

## Results

- Adults aged 65+ were more likely to engage with the campaign than those 55 - 64 years of age
- The website's engagement rate was 14%, putting it on par with news and entertainment sites rather than health awareness websites
- Engagement grew over time, indicating that the campaign resonated more with audiences the more they saw it
- Social media generated more clicks, but programmatic ads drove higher engagement
- Users who typed the website into their browsers spent 5x longer on the site than those who clicked on an ad
- Users showed interest in interacting with the content - 254 interacted with the quiz
- Confirming previous research, urgency cues (Henny Penny) led to less engagement than exaggerated claims (Magic Beans) and hidden motives (Poison Apple)