

The Secret Cave

Chapter 1

The early autumn sun had begun to slip silently like a thief into the cold dark Irish Sea. Jeffrey sat fidgeting, impatiently peering through the windscreen of his blue Ford Escort. He didn't mind admitting to himself that he was nervous and not just a little apprehensive. He felt a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, a gnawing feeling which bored deep into his soul bringing a pained and anguished look to his youthful face. The haunting sound of a seagull did nothing to lift Jeff's mood as its forlorn call echoed through the air of the all but deserted shore. Making its way inland from the seashore driven by the incoming cold the birds call drifted away into a lonely shadowy nothingness. And all at once Jeff felt the deepest despair.

A life, which should have been so good, was so good began to leave a sour and bitter taste in his already dry mouth. Shakily he looked down at a vicious looking hunting knife lying on the passenger seat next to him. Its blade, sharp and gleaming, cold, hard and efficient seemed to him to be just like her. It sat as if to taunt him and he wondered if he really could go through with using it. Earlier he had worked himself up into such a jealous rage, but now in the cold dim light of the fading day... well; he began to doubt himself.

Suddenly a familiar shadowy figure emerged from a distant cave entrance, Jeff caught his breath, for even at this distance he recognised her, she was moving quickly and furtively like a wild animal afraid of discovery. Glancing at his watch, he noted the time 5.00 pm. It was going to be dark soon and the sky was beginning to cloud over, it was going to rain and his view of the cave would become obscured. It wasn't for the first time that day, that Jeff cursed his bad luck.

It had been one of those accidents of fate, that Jeffrey had uncovered Shirley's deception. If he hadn't arrived home early twice last week in order to surprise her, he would never have become suspicious, something which at the time had made him feel guilty. He told himself repeatedly that he was being foolish, that there was probably a simple explanation for it, and yet something deep in the back of his mind just wouldn't let go. An inner voice nagged at him making him act out of character, this spying just wasn't him; it belonged elsewhere to someone else. He wasn't like that and yet... As it turned out he had good reason to be suspicious, Shirley he found, was sneaking out every single day and not arriving back until 5.30 pm. At first he considered that she had merely gone back to work, but then why would she have been so secretive about that, it made no sense. She had blatantly lied to him, blatantly and without shame lied to him and that could only mean one thing in Jeff's mind and that really had shook him to his core.

Shirley and Jeffrey Benson had been married for only a short time, roughly around three months. Everything had been fine, in fact better than fine; just as it should have been in the early days of a marriage, but then Jeff found during the last few weeks that a subtle change had come over Shirley. Nothing he could really put his finger on, he sensed her tension. She evaded answering him when he inquired how her day had been, always

giving vague ambiguous answers. Was it he thought that she had given up her work, after all it had been Shirley's own idea to give up her career when they married. Maybe she regretted it. Hadn't she told him how her modelling had taken her all over the world? Perhaps she was bored, feeling stifled and caged in her new role as housewife, maybe now she regretted her decision. He was simply at a loss, was she up to no good? Why else was she lying to him? That of course had been then, and this was now and now he was sure, as sure as if he had found them together in each other's arms. Jeff had to shake the image which had horribly formed in his mind, clear from his head; he had to keep alert, to watch. He had to find out, he had to know who, and then when he did, he would know just what to do.

By 5:45 the cave had disappeared into the murky evening light. The rain, which had been promising to show, was now coming down hard and cascading over the windscreen which had long since misted over inside of the car. Jeff sat cradling the knife that he had bought earlier that day. Opening the car door after realising what a fool he had been, and with tears in his Grey weary eyes, he threw the knife over the fence and into the dark where it belonged. Deep down he knew that he had never intended to use it, not really, but it had brought something to him when he was feeling helpless, lost, unable to turn back destiny, he saw it through a misty red rage as away to throw destiny a curve ball by interfering with its plans and keeping the newly formed lovers apart, but he knew... he always knew he could never, would never use it.

The drive home was uncomfortably short leaving little time to sort out his emotions. He knew that he had to hide them, tuck them away from prying eyes; two can keep secrets as well as one he thought to himself as he steadied his nerves. By 6 pm. Jeff was already pulling the car into the familiar driveway which he called home. The house lights shone through the dark, harsh and piercing. His tired eyes flinched at them; they somehow belied the abnormality of the situation, the turmoil Jeff felt within. He knew that she would be in there now and that she would behave like nothing at all had happened, business as usual, like butter wouldn't melt', such acting. Well if she could do it then damn well so could he. Until that is, he thought, I catch her out, and when I do... and when I do

"Hello Shirley." He forced himself to kiss her on the cheek. "How have you been? How was your day?" Trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice and only just succeeding.

'Have you had a tiring yet, fun filled day' He wanted to say, but didn't

"Fine darling, It's been the usual, you know, I went shopping this morning. Sorry your dinner isn't ready yet. I got involved in a film on the television. I forgot the time." Jeffrey looked at Shirley, again she was lying and he found it difficult not to explode. He would follow her tomorrow and find out once and for all just who *he* was and then...

"Are you okay, you look a little tired Jeff, you haven't been over doing things at work have you?"

"No," he said too abruptly, "Just one of those days." He said more gently.

After dinner Jeff found himself looking through the Radio Times and he noted that there hadn't been an afternoon film on television. He thought about questioning her over this so-called film but then thought better of it. He didn't want to tip her off that he was on to her, no, he wanted it to come as one big explosive surprise when he walked in on them.

“Anything on?” asked Shirley.

“What? Oh just some political thing, how in hell they think this guy will ever become prime minister” he said pointing to a picture of some suited man in the Radio Times, “is beyond me, after all his dirty, sordid little affairs have come out.”

“Oh yes he became prime minister all right but then voting is all” replied Shirley who started confidently and then faded away.

“I mean I think, maybe... no perhaps not...” she muttered.

Jeffrey stared at her in confusion for a moment, “Well I wouldn’t vote for the creep.”

Later as she reached for him in bed he turned away from her. “Are you okay?” she inquired with genuine worry in her voice.

“Yes, just tired, a big day tomorrow.” He knew that he wasn’t lying, at least about that, but sleep was shy and elusive the stresses of the day spinning round and round inside his head like a demented merry-go-round. It was a long night that night and an unpleasant one.

The next morning turned out to be bright and crisp. On any other occasion it would have been the sort of day that Jeff would have enjoyed, maybe even going as far as having a little stroll around before breakfast to take in the glory of the day. It was things like that which had first attracted Shirley to him. He knew this and partly because of it he sat sullen and brooding at the breakfast table. It was a quiet and uncomfortable start to the day which was rounded off with an indifferent peck on the cheek as he hastened out of the door. Shirley looked on in silence, her worry showing but failing to raise any response from Jeff. She told herself that pressures of work were getting to him and she vowed to have a serious talk about some time off for him, maybe a long weekend away would be the thing.

Jeff set off at a steady pace, drove around the corner and pulled up. He made a quick call into work on his mobile and made his excuses for the day then he settled down for what could have been a long wait. The knot and churning in the pit of the stomach was back again and he wondered if it had ever truly left him since the stress of yesterday, it seemed to him then that it had not. The time dragged by while Jeff sat anxiously waiting for his wife to appear. It had seemed like forever as he gazed at the façade of the little white fronted bungalow he called home, and yet in fact it was just over the hour before Shirley finally emerged. It was with a casualness that one associated with routine that she walked out of the front door and began walking back towards that infernal shoreline. The shoreline that he had once loved and had been so much part of their lives, now it somehow felt tainted, ruinous, it had in such a brief time almost become a place to shun.

Curiously, Jeffrey climbed out of the car, and began to follow her, leaving enough distance between them he hoped, so that she would not notice him. They had soon left the quiet regimented streets behind them as she made her way down toward the sea front. Intrigued, Jeffrey followed her. It was hardly seafront weather, in fact it was the typical November day misty, drizzly and Grey reflecting how he felt inside. The roaring familiar noise of waves crashing and the call of the seagulls grew stronger as they twisted their way down the muddy lane towards the beach. Luckily there were a number of other people about and so another figure on the path wouldn't stand out too much, or so he

hoped. And yet it was just that very thing that suddenly turned from friend to foe as he carelessly bumped into one of his neighbours.

“Mrs Coulson, I'm so sorry.”

Mrs Coulson was a big woman and the collision had almost knocked her over, he cursed himself for not paying attention. Had he not been so intent on looking down he would have seen her, but instead here he was apologising profusely for his clumsiness.

“Mr Benson is that you, oh you frightened the life...”

“Yes, yes I really am...” It was then that he looked away, and began to scan the area for Shirley. “Damn it, Damn.” He set off down to the edge of the beach looking left and right but somehow in that short time she had gone he had managed to lose sight of her. Although Jeff searched for her, it was no use she was nowhere to be found. Angrily he made his way back to the car passing the indignant Mrs Coulson on the way.

A heavy sea mist began to roll in and by the time he had phoned work to tell them of his change of plans it had become quite heavy. He almost wished that he hadn't phoned in when a blond woman came into sight, at first he thought the figure to be Shirley but as she came closer he realised his mistake. The woman glared at the staring figure as she passed. He averted his eyes and wondered what she must have thought of him madly eyeing her up. A noise startled him as his mobile phone informed him that he had a text message from Shirley.

It read “Have a nice day honey and do take it easy.”

Bitch was all he thought.

He sat a moment longer with his eyes shut trying to blot out the thoughts rushing at him like an express train. When he did open them again he then noticed the rotund figure of Mrs Coulson who was stood at the corner watching him with a style one would come to expect from a nosy neighbour. It did however spur him into action and he quickly brought the Escort to life squealing the tyres as he set off for work.

Jeff pulled the Ford into a tiny private car park in front of a small office bearing the name of Benson and Associate Engineer Designs. It was one of those old office blocks that was starting to look a little dated. The four bay car park was now full as Jeffrey looked over and noted the ostentatious Jaguar of Bill Preston, the other half of the teams rather showy car. Bill was always flashy and gregarious but a firm favourite with the clients, whereas Jeffrey always felt a little uncomfortable dealing with them, Bill on the other hand shone at it. Andy, the junior designer's old VW Beetle, a classic as Andy would have it, seemed to be sat rusting before his very eyes; it had the sorry appearance of a long abandoned car. Tucked up in the corner was the more practical Vauxhall Corsa belonging to Ms Sheldon the secretary, and the heart of the business enterprise that was Benson Associates.

Jeff mounted the few steps leading up to the office and stepped inside the warm outer room to be greeted by the slim figure of Gillian Sheldon. “You look terrible, are you sure that it isn't you that's ill?”

Jeff gave a wave of his hand as he walked past and towards the rear office as if to say don't ask, and so she didn't.

Bill was already waiting and as Jeff sat down at his desk he shoved a letter in front of him. "This is all we need, that new mark two as failed prematurely and the company is furious, threatening to sue."

Jeff took up the letter and began to read it studiously, he turned and smiled at Bill. "Not our problem, they changed our specs. I told them not to. No doubt trying to save money, Talk to them Bill let them know what arses they've been."

Bill snorted, "I may perhaps be a little more diplomatic about it but your right the Carlisle plant is running the unaltered spec and it's been no problem, I'll ring after lunch he is always half pissed after his pub lunch...." then he added "Hell you look like death warmed ole' boy to many late nights eh?"

The routine of the day seemed to help Jeff to lighten a little as he pushed the problems he was having at home into the back of his mind. Occasionally something would remind him and the pain welled up and flooded his soul with sadness and sorrow, but he quickly pushed his feelings aside as something demanded his attention placing his mind elsewhere.

Later that day Jeffrey arrived home a little later than usual as the traffic had been worse than normal. It was already dark as he walked in through the door. The wind was beginning to pick up again it was almost as if the weather was reflecting his dark mood, the mist of the day had cleared but it was like the mist that seemed to surround his wife hiding her from him, was she really who he thought she was, did he know her at all he wondered as she greeted him with a warm smile.

"The weather is awful." moaned Jeff

"They should have turned the generator on." replied Shirley

"Generator, What generator? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, take no notice I was miles away." Jeff looked at her and she blushed slightly and turned her head away as if hiding something from him.

"How was your day?" asked Shirley

"You know, just routine as always, one step forward two back. How was yours?"

"Much the same as usual, I didn't see anyone, I didn't go out at all today. Promise that you won't give up Jeff, Promise me, no matter what, you won't give up it's so important, much more than you realise, more important than anything." She had tears in her eyes and flung herself into Jeff. Jeff despite himself wrapped his arms around her, confused he reassured her the best that he could. "I have no idea what you are talking about but ... I promise." Shirley looked up at him and smiled "Take no notice of me I'm just that side out."

He wondered how well he really knew her and above all what she had to hide. I will, he thought, follow her until I do find out.

The next day Jeffrey kissed Shirley dutifully goodbye and then once more he waited around the corner. True to form Shirley arrived roughly about the same time as the previous day, she was dressed much the same as before. Jeffrey followed the same pattern. Once again the mist swallowed up Shirley. This time thought Jeffrey I will go left. So left he went however, he was just as disappointed as before, there was no Shirley insight. Jeffrey by now was getting really annoyed, he was up until now used to everything in his life going plain sailing. This was getting to him in no uncertain terms. Jeffrey left frustrated with himself for not being able to find Shirley and angry with her

for being so deceptive. So his mood stayed with him throughout the day. This was remarked on several times during the day.

Arriving home again Jeffrey asked Shirley how was her day? Once more her answer was the same. The disappointment on Jeffrey's face was obvious. "What's the matter with you?" Shirley ventured. "

"Nothing, nothing at all I've just had a trying day. I lost a couple of sales, I wouldn't have expected to lose."

"Oh poor you." She said affectionately stroking his face gently. "I'll run you a hot bath, that will help." Jeffrey studied her carefully today; he thought she was more like her old self. Perhaps he was worrying needlessly. Still he knew that if he was to have peace of mind he must find out what was going on.

The next morning true to form Jeffrey again embarked on his vigil. This time however, Shirley arrived thirty minutes late and looked quite flustered, In fact he noted she still had on her carpet slippers. What strange behaviour Jeffrey surmised. It was as if she had a rendezvous and dare not keep whomever she was meeting waiting. Seeing it was a very misty day. Jeffrey shadowed her closer than before. Shirley looked round only once, but never spotted him. His chances this time of seeing where she went must he thought be very good. She stopped suddenly, appearing to go into a cave. "Funny," Jeffrey said, "What an earth was she doing going into a dark cave." He ventured forward where the opening was? "It must be here." He muttered to himself, whilst pulling out his cigarette lighter. In the light he could still not find any way in. How could that be possible, he knew he had been near enough and although misty, saw her disappear at this very spot. Again frustrated he had no other recourse but to depart.

Jeffrey pondered over this all day, he knew however, that it was bad for his business and he must get this problem resolved as soon as possible. He wondered if he should confront Shirley with what he had seen. Then decided against it, because he could see that this showed a definite lack of trust on his part. If it should turn out however, that there was an innocent explanation he would look rather foolish to say the least. That night the conversation was very stilted, Jeffrey being preoccupied with the events of the day. Shirley obviously had something on her mind too. Jeffrey lay awake that night tossing and turning, after about two hours he decided to get himself a stiff drink, a nightcap. Passing by the hall on his way to the lounge, his right foot hit upon something cool and metallic. He bent down to pick it up, what's this he thought turning it over in his hands. It was a small spherical shaped metal object with two, what looked like fork prongs jutting out from the centre. This was like nothing Jeffrey had ever seen before, he noted that it fitted nicely into the palm of his hand. Where had it come from? He wondered. It was obviously Shirley's, but what on earth would she do with it? It sprang to mind that it undoubtedly had something to do with this morning and the cave. He promptly returned to his bed forgetting all about his nightcap. I will now have to confront Shirley with this object and find out what she had to say. Maybe he thought this would now be resolved once and for all.

That night Jeffrey slept soundly, the best night he had in weeks. He was up showered, shaved and breakfast ready when Shirley awoke. "What's up with you?" She said

sleepily. "I'm usually first up, oh and breakfast ready too. It's not my birthday!" She said laughing.

"No". Replied Jeffrey; he had his hand outstretched.

"What have you got there? Is it a present for me?" Shirley said.

"You tell me? I have never seen anything like it in my life. Explain it to me please Shirley?" Jeffrey stood there with a stern expression on his face. Shirley gasped putting her hand up to her mouth. "I can explain." She stammered. "I would rather take you and let you see for yourself. I doubt if you'd believe me otherwise. If you're agreeable we will go after breakfast." They both ate their breakfast in silence. Afterwards Jeffrey cleared the crockery away whilst Shirley went to prepare herself. Jeffrey noted her appearance was the same attire as the previous days. "Hardly dressed fashionable, are you?" He stated. She was wearing a simple grey dress, buttoned down the front. Which reminded him of a nurse's uniform. Her shoes were black lace ups, unlike anything he'd seen her wearing before. "I know it seems that way, but all will be clear later." She answered. "Let me just get the key." Having done so, she walked out of the front door followed by Jeffrey.

They followed the now familiar path, stopping at the cave. Shirley took the metal object and seemed only to scan the opening. To Jeffrey's surprise what slowly appeared in front of them, in the cave was a large glowing spherical object. "What?" Shouted Jeffrey. "Don't worry, it's all right, it's not as sinister as it looks." Shouted back Shirley over the loud humming noises the object was emitting. Stepping up to the sphere Shirley placed the metal prongs into a slot and this revealed an inner chamber. "Just follow me." She said, taking Jeffrey's hand. Once inside the chamber Jeffrey was amazed to find how spacious it was. He guessed by now it was some kind of flying machine. Now he could clearly see control panels. "What?" He said. "Shush." Shirley replied. "I told you all will become clear soon." With that she began to press various controls on the panel. "I like to know what's happening and where we are going?" Said Jeffrey nervously. "Nowhere, just wait and see, I've already told you once." She snapped back. Shirley continued to turn her attention to the control panels. The machine began by making an even louder humming noise. "Sit down Jeffrey, over there." Shirley yelled. "You'll find seat belts, fasten it tightly it's important. I'll do the same when I've finished here." She proceeded with her task only looking at Jeffrey as she took her seat beside him. With a loud whirring noise the machine began to spin, first slowly, then accelerating, holding the pair of them tightly against their seats. As quickly as it began, so it ceased. "Unfasten your seat belt, let's go. It's important you stay close by my side from now on." Shirley remarked.

"I will, I promise." Said Jeffrey who was by this time very much overawed by the events now taking place. He pinched himself to see if it was a dream. Shirley using the key carried out the same procedure in a reversed order. Jeffrey then saw the cave. "What have we gained? He cried, disappointingly. "We are back where we started!" "Just wait and see Jeffrey, you are so impatient. I've told you once." Shirley chided.

Chapter 2

Jeffrey took a deep breath in, taking in the scenery as they walked along. It was the same place he was sure and yet it looked so different. That building wasn't there, this is not the same he thought. As they moved towards where their street should have been, it was no longer there. Instead, there was this huge complex, towering buildings and mighty monuments. He spotted a large lake encircling it there were at least two dozen beautiful females, all blondes, all wearing identical outfits. Where was he, maybe he had died and gone to heaven he thought? "Who are all those pretty girls? Where have they come from?" Asked Jeffrey pointing towards the scene.

"They are chosen handmaidens. Now come on time is of the essence or I shall be late." Replied Shirley. Scene after scenic he drank in as they progressed. "I know you told me not to ask any questions." He stated. "Are we in heaven?" "Don't be silly." She laughed. "Come on slow coach."

Shirley led Jeffrey into a large complex; she scanned a wrist across a panel next to the huge metallic door they then went through a narrow corridor. Jeffrey noted the walls, were they really walls? He stretched out his hands and touched them, they felt soft and warm and Jeffrey was amazed to see that the wall had left an imprint of his hand for a good few seconds before they faded away. They passed through several large doors each one Shirley had to scan before entering into an average sized room. This room was sparse only containing a strange looking glass petition, standing on what he thought must be an extension of the walls. He witnessed two bucket chairs floated down hovering above them Shirley grabbed one and Jeffrey promptly followed suit grabbed the other. Confronting them were four girls. Jeffrey stared at them, opened mouthed. All the girls were identical, both in looks and in dress. All had dark hair and dark brown eyes. In fact to Jeffrey's amazement were all Shirley look-a-likes. That's why he thought to himself she had dressed in that fashion. It must be some kind of uniform. He looked across at Shirley; she gestured with a finger to her mouth, for him to keep silent. She mouthed. "I'll explain later."

"What," Said one of the girls "Is this male doing here? Number seventeen you know this is not permitted."

"I am sorry number three, but it was, believe, me necessary." Shirley replied. "I will explain everything to the controller." Just then the door opened, gliding in the most beautiful girl Jeffrey had ever seen. "So your back number seventeen!" She said without giving Shirley a second glance. "Follow me you." Looking at Jeffrey she said. "Stay here, the team will look after you until we get back." This was not a request. This Jeffrey knew was an order. Shirley followed. "See you soon." She whispered on passing. Jeffrey was left with the Shirley look-a-likes, more bewildered than before. What on earth was going on? He thought. What was this place? Were they all robots? He felt sick to his stomach. Maybe he was married to a machine number seventeen! All these thoughts going around his head. He was brought back to reality one of the numbers (is how he now thought of them) handed him a tray. On this tray was food, but of a kind he had never seen before. It wasn't hot, but there again it wasn't cold he noted. He

sniffed at it, much to the amusement of the onlookers. Jeffrey then cautiously took a bite. "Mm not bad." He announced out loud. "Different, but certainly not bad." One of the numbers laughed, the others glared at him. He realised then just how hungry he felt. Looking at his watch was amazed to see the time it was 2.30 pm. Wow he thought how time flies, then he giggled out loud, when realising time had really flown for him this day.

Jeffrey knew he had a lot of questions needing answering. Also he had to come to terms with his Shirley. How did he feel about her now? He really didn't know. His emotions were all over the place, above all he wasn't sure about anything any more. Jeffrey the practical down to earth man. He laughed again, he wasn't even sure he was on Earth. Jeffrey felt his whole life was crumbling before him.

Meanwhile, Shirley was being thoroughly grilled by her controller. "Well seventeen." Her controller said when Shirley had finished talking. "You are a dark horse, what possessed you to marry this man? You know when you travel back into the past for your pleasure, you are not allowed to touch, never mind marry, don't you?" She chided. "I know, I know, don't think I didn't tell myself over and over again the same thing." Shirley cried. "I tried not to love Jeffrey, but I couldn't help myself. I was only going to rent the property for my allotted annual holiday. I didn't mean to stay and I certainly did not intend to deceive you or Jeffrey. This is why I sneaked back everyday. I thought it would resolve itself and that no one would be any the wiser".

"Well now," the controller said angrily "You have messed everything up. I am answerable for you and will take the consequences. You know that don't you?"

"I'm sorry what can I do to make amends?" Shirley replied nervously. "Oh don't worry you will, no doubt the head will find away." With that the controller dismissed Shirley.

"Go and keep your Jeffrey company, I will inform you what is to become of you after I have spoken to the head." Shirley once back with Jeffrey said.

"Can we go back to my apartment? It's quieter there and we can talk." She promised him she would tell him all, omitting nothing.

Shirley's apartment complex was also very sparse, once having gone through the scanning procedure and having walked down the white walled corridor they finally entered Shirley's minimalist room. Jeffrey could see that Shirley tried hard to add a feminine feel and he guessed she had learned a little from their life together. He recognised the vase he had bought her, sat upon a wall like table. There was a bed in the corner, small and plain with plain white bedding. Yes it was truly a gloomy little room. Jeffrey settled down in a cosy armchair to the right of

Shirley. Taking a deep breath in Shirley began. "It all started the day we met, that morning was the start of my

holiday, I as you have now guessed, live in this all female complex. There are thirty girls living here, yes I know all of us do look alike, I will explain why." She said knowing Jeffrey was about to ask. "Firstly, though

do you know what year we are in?"

"That's easy said Jeffrey smugly 3rd July 2002, the day before American Independence Day". Shirley smiled at that, she knew how Jeffrey being half-American (on his mother's side) had planned a big celebratory party for all his friends and neighbours. She also had

been looking forward to the event, it would, Shirley thought, be quite different to anything she had ever experienced in her life before. Jeffrey said, "Go on Shirley."

"Sorry I was miles away." She replied. "It is in fact 3rd July, but the year is 2052."

Jeffrey gasped, Shirley

continued. "You see, she said I wasn't even born in your time. I will continue to explain. In the year 2024 four

years before I was born, selective breeding became popular. People began to choose what they wanted their child to look like. It was an inevitable step I suppose, to cloning.

In 2027 it was all cloning, no one gave birth any more. In the beginning of the next year, it was decided to clone in bulk. The dark ones like myself are in administration, the blonde ones you have seen are handmaidens". Jeffrey interrupted at this point. "Aren't there any males?"

"Oh yes, indeed there are." She replied with a rueful smile. "Apart from the handmaidens we are not allowed contact. The maidens tend to the males every need each one has two males to attend to. The males also fall into two main categories. We have the tall dark males; these are for law and order. The fair slighter built ones are bred for their brains, therefore they run the country".

"How do they know who has strayed off the path when everyone looks alike?" Said a puzzled Jeffrey.

"Quite easily, remember the numbers, mine being seventeen. These numbers are put on us all at birth, though you can't see it, I assure you it is there." Shirley remarked unconsciously, rubbing her right upper arm. She continued. "You will also now be aware that the machine we arrived in was a time machine. This was invented five years ago. We the administrators were the first to try them out and because of this we were allowed to use them annually for two weeks holiday. However, we were warned not to get close to anyone".

"Did you all choose 2002?" Jeffrey demanded.

"No not at all." Was the reply. "When I walked into your office, it was the first time. I just decided on the year because it was fifty years before. I'm so sorry Jeffrey." Shirley began to cry.

"Don't cry darling." Jeffrey stood up drawing Shirley into his arms. She sobbed on his shoulder. Jeffrey just stood there in silence. When Shirley's tears were all spent, he handed her the handkerchief from his top jacket pocket. "Thank you, I'm all right to carry on now." She smiled bravely. "I've made a mess of everything, haven't I?" Jeffrey did not answer. What could he say? It was all out of their control, he felt hopeless, and lost what to say or do for once he knew it was beyond him. This someone else would have to solve. He was beginning to get a headache and realised he in fact was very tired. "Look," Shirley said, feeling Jeffrey's tension. "I will go and see if the controller will allow you to stay until tomorrow."

"Thanks." He gratefully replied.

After ten minutes, Shirley arrived back at the flat. "It's all arranged, I will take you to the place where you can stay. I'm afraid I cannot stay with you, but your every need will be looked after. We will talk some more tomorrow when you have rested. I know it's a lot for you to take in." With that the two of them departed.

It was only a short walk to the next complex. Jeffrey and Shirley walked in silence. Once there Shirley handed Jeffrey over to one of the blonde maidens. "Hi," She said.

"Take good care of him will you?"

"Of course." Was the reply. Shirley waved forlornly. Jeffrey saluted back. "Night see you in the morning." Then Shirley was gone.

Has good as her word the blonde handmaiden tended his every need. Jeffrey smiled ruefully under different circumstances he knew he would enjoy the attention. For now though, he wished she would go, leave him alone with his thoughts. His mind was in turmoil, after what seemed like an eternity, but was in fact only thirty minutes the maiden took her leave. Jeffrey then could think over the day. Try to get things into perspective. Fifty years for him would make him in his seventies. That was if he was still alive. If he was, where was he now? This is where he started off, perhaps even this very spot or at least somewhere nearby. What if he should meet himself? This was silly he chided. There isn't anyone around here, apart from look-a likes. Perhaps, he thought they killed all the others off or even shipped them away into camps. Such was Jeffrey's thoughts at the time.

Jeffrey yawned, he felt very tired and on looking around he noted that this room was much larger and more luxurious than Shirley's. In the corner was a large ornately carved circular bed. It wasn't like anything he had seen before, being suspended about a foot from the ground. Hovering, without apparently any means of support. There was also a beautifully carved statue of a handmaiden and sitting on the top was a wash basin. When Jeffrey placed his tired body onto the bed, he was amazed at how very comfortable it was. Dam he thought where is the light switch? He searched in vain, guess I'm stuck with it. However, to his amazement has soon has his head hit the

soft pillow, out went the light. This shocked Jeffrey and he raised himself from the pillow and the light came on again. Fascinating he mumbled to himself I could do with one of these lights at home. Despite his mental turmoil, Jeffrey was very soon in a sound sleep.

Next morning Jeffrey was awakened gently by the maiden. "Good morning." She said. "I have prepared you a bath. Your breakfast then awaits you."

"Thank you." Jeffrey said politely. She smiled.

"I have arranged for number seventeen to come and collect you in an hour. So you must get a move on. I will leave you now. Goodbye, good luck." The handmaiden looked at him sympathetically and promptly left not waiting for a reply.

Jeffrey having bathed and breakfast now awaited Shirley's arrival. Shirley opened the door flinging herself into Jeffrey's arms. She said. "Oh I have missed you. Do you realise this is the first night we haven't been together since our marriage?"

"Of course," Said Jeffrey cynically. "It is probably not going to be our last."

"Let's go for a walk, we'll head towards the cave. There we will be totally alone. We won't be interrupted. Get your jacket Jeffrey, we have to be back before lunch. The controller is going to give me her decision then". Said Shirley walking towards the door. Jeffrey noted as they walked a total lack of cars. He remarked upon this to Shirley. She told him that they did not require transport any more. Everything was done within their own complex. This was the same throughout the country. That is why the time machine

was developed and used for the annual holidays. Poor things Jeffrey thought to himself, he knew he couldn't live this way. "Do you do any partying?" He asked Shirley,

thinking about the one he had planned for tonight back in his own time. "Not really, but until I met you, I didn't know about partying. What you've never had, you cannot miss. I know now how different and in some ways better life was in the past." Shirley answered. Jeffrey looked at her tears staining her face. "Don't cry, I can't bear it." With that Jeffrey embraced her. "Please don't." She cried. "People walk here before commencing their daily tasks. This situation is unheard of here; there isn't any physical contact now. Should anyone see, this also would be reported to my controller."

"Oh I see." Was all Jeffrey could say. He was becoming more and more confused. He thought he would be a lot happier when everything was resolved and they could go back to his time. He hadn't any doubts that they would let Shirley go back with him.

They arrived at the cave Shirley let them in. "We'll sit in the machine. Then I will answer any queries you have. Sit beside me Jeffrey." Jeffrey really didn't know where to begin. His mind was still in utter turmoil. "When will we be able to go back?" He said meekly. "We have the big party tonight."

"Oh I'd forgotten that." Shirley replied "You know Jeffrey I don't think the controller will let me go."

"Of course she will. Why wouldn't she?" He remarked. "It's not as if they don't have a lot of Shirley's!"

"Jeffrey," Shirley screamed. "How could you?"

"I'm sorry, it's just that I am so uptight I'm afraid OK. I will not lose you now that I have found you. You are my life, my soul mate, my life wouldn't be complete without you." Jeffrey cried.

"Oh darling." Shirley placed her arms around him trying to console him. Please let's not waste time arguing." They embraced.

Later, sitting back all content, Jeffrey said. "Maybe I'll smoke or is it too dangerous?"

"You may if you're careful." Shirley answered with a smile. Whilst Jeffrey lit his cigarette, Shirley combed her hair, looking ruefully at her reflection she said. "Are you fed up of looking at me now that you see me everywhere?" Jeffrey laughed.

"I would never get tired of seeing you. Seriously, though there are certain things I need to know."

"Fire away, I will answer as truthfully as I can." Was Shirley's reply. "In your time I would be in my seventies. I could still be alive. If I am, where will I be?" He said with a wry smile.

"Oh I never thought of that. This does add to our problems. As far as I know, none clones were tagged. They were then placed in a village complex where they were allowed to grow old gracefully. However, they were sterilised, because they weren't allowed to breed. I don't think they have a bad life though." She said defensively.

"How do you mean tagging?" Jeffrey said angrily, imagining himself being tagged.

"Well. Shirley responded. It's quite a story really. When my visit in your time came officially to an end, I was by then very attracted to you and did not want to leave. I confided in my friend, the one whom I spoke to when we arrived. She came up with an idea for me to stay on. Maybe if I could get my controller to agree. In your year the government started a tagging scheme, because the prisons were overcrowded. They

needed a way of controlling less violent prisoners in their own homes. This I am sure you are aware was electronic tagging. I convinced my controller that I should research into how successful it was at that time and how we had adapted it for modern day use. Today's tagging is totally different to earlier methods. It is similar to our numbers, just a means of knowing everyone is where they should be."

"I see, clever girl aren't you? I wonder though, would you change the course of history, should you come back with me? Confusing isn't it? How on earth are we to solve this problem?" He asked.

"We won't. Shirley deliberated. The controller will. I suppose she will think of all of the consequences and make her decision upon them."

"I am afraid. What if it doesn't go in our favour?" Jeffrey then said, "Let's not go back. We have this machine, let's use it."

"We can't, it's not as simple as that. Have you forgotten about my identification number? They can track me any time, anywhere. There is no escape." Wailed Shirley.

"I'll fight for you." Said Jeffrey bravely. "I will go and confront this controller and make her see I need you more than she does."

"No don't, I will and must abide by her decision. We will know soon, whichever way the verdict, promise me you will go along with it, if only for my sake please?" She pleaded.

"Look." she said pointing at her watch. "It is time to go." Jeffrey and Shirley walked the short distance back in silence. Both deep in thought.

Arriving back at the complex, Shirley was summoned by the controller. The handmaiden who had been waiting for their arrival beckoned Jeffrey. "Come she said your meal awaits you. I am here to tend you until number seventeen comes back." She duly led him back to the complex where he had spent the night.

Meanwhile Shirley's meeting wasn't going the way she had hoped. "Therefore," said the controller. "I see no other recourse, but to sever this relationship. Do you understand? It has many repercussions, it can never be allowed. What is more she continued you must never see this man again. Of course you will be able to say your good-byes. In fact you will also be the one to take him back. I feel under the circumstances, I am being very lenient with you. Don't you?"

"Yes controller." Shirley replied, biting back the tears.

"All right you may go now. You will leave at 15.30 hours. I'll expect you back within the hour. Do you understand?" Barked the controller. Shirley nodded in agreement and left. How she thought would Jeffrey take it? How would he react? She hoped he would accept the verdict and not do anything silly.

She went back to her apartment where a meal was awaiting, though she had little appetite, ate some of the food. Pushing the plate away Shirley arose, her mind still in turmoil, she was totally devastated at the thought of never seeing her beloved Jeffrey again. He may not be the most handsome of men, but to her he is. A tall man around six foot with quiet broad shoulders, fair wavy hair, she laughed to herself thinking about his crooked nose and remembering when he told her about the time he broke it playing cricket. She thought about his wonderful winning smile and the way he always dresses impeccably. How she would miss him. Then she exited the building and made her way to the complex where Jeffrey was awaiting her.

Jeffrey looked up expectantly as the door opened. One look at Shirley told him she had failed in her mission. His heart sank. "No need to tell me the gory details." He said bitterly. "I can tell by your face. When do I go back?"

"Oh Jeffrey," she sobbed "what can I say? You can go back to a life, even find another love, have children. I can't, I know this isn't any consolation for you now. Given time Jeffrey, you will forget and I hope you will forgive me."

"I cannot help but forgive you. You are my life, my love Shirley." Jeffrey cried passionately. "I cannot envisage my life without you." "You must," She replied. "I am to take you back in forty five minutes from now. At least I am being allowed to escort you and say my good-byes. I know this is a small comfort to you. It is all we've got." "So be it." Said Jeffrey sadly. "I must make love to you one last time. I don't care if this is breaking your rules. You owe me this much at least."

"Darling, I wouldn't let you leave without." Shirley cried. "I too cannot bear it." Thirty minutes later their passion was spent, Shirley and Jeffrey prepared for the coming journey back in time. "All ready." Said Jeffrey closing the door firmly behind him. Together they walked silently towards the cave.

Chapter 3

Inside the machine once more, Shirley quickly set about working the controls. Jeffrey positioned himself in the seat and concentrated on fastening himself securely. The machine stopped humming. Back to normality Jeffrey thought to himself. Back to being good old reliable Jeffrey, a staunch member of society. He doubted if he could live up to this reputation in the future. Life he mused would never be the same again. What is more he knew what had happened could not be revealed to anyone. They would think he was cracking up or insane. He could hear them now, poor boy he has been under a lot of strain of late. His business isn't going well, his wife has left him. No he would have to keep this a secret. Shirley brought him back with a start. "Are you all right?" She asked. "I will not go all the way back to the house with you. It is too unbearable. Here Jeffrey is the wedding ring; I won't be allowed to keep it. I want you to have it, look at it sometimes and think of me." She added "It might help you if you think of me as having died, maybe then you can grieve and perhaps move on." "Don't worry I will treasure it always. How I will deal with it at this moment I honestly haven't any idea. I suppose I will survive Shirley. Don't forget I'm good old sensible Jeffrey." He said wryly. Shirley hugged Jeffrey tightly to her, tears spilling on to his jacket lapel. "Bye darling." She wept. "Maybe if there is a heaven we will meet up again one day."

She opened the cave with one thrust pushed Jeffrey through, and then the door closed leaving only the rock surface. Jeffrey stood there, for how long he didn't know. Suddenly, it began to rain quite heavily, followed by a loud crack of thunder. He found himself in the middle of a very bad storm. Well he thought at least that I could get out of tonight's open-air celebration, if this continues. I'll cancel out anyway, I can say I suppose I'm ill. This would explain why I didn't surface yesterday. Such were Jeffrey's thoughts, as he hurried home.

Once home, he opted for a quick shower and a change into more casual clothes. He then decided he better phone around to make his excuses. He knew he could not face anyone at this early stage. Having come up with a plausible excuse, himself having summer flu and Shirley being called suddenly to her dying Mum's bedside, Jeffrey was left once again to his own thoughts. He went over and over in his mind, the events of the last couple of days. He knew he would have to come to terms with life without Shirley. He also realised that he would have to think of a plausible reason why she didn't come back home. People around him were all right, but some of them were very prone to gossiping. Now Jeffrey felt suddenly tired, he knew however, once in bed, he wouldn't be able to sleep. His thoughts would definitely keep him awake.

Tossing and turning most of the night Jeffrey was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of the doorbell. He quickly looked at his bedside clock, it read 11.55 am. "Wow." He said to himself he had never, ever remembered sleeping in until this time before. Still he mused these were definitely unusual times. Tossing his dressing gown on, he placed his feet into his slippers and headed towards the front door. Standing at the door was Richard Parkinson, who went to Eton with Jeffrey. He is quite handsome in a rugged sort of way. Though, not tall in stature, he made up for it in charisma. Richard is Jeffrey's underling at the estate agency. "Jeffrey." He said, "I was worried about you. We all were." He added. "I tried to ring you several times yesterday, but I didn't get an answer." "I know, I'm sorry." Jeffrey replied. "I was ill, influenza I think, so I put the answering machine on. I meant to check my messages unfortunately, I have not felt up to it yet." "Sorry did I wake you? Where is Shirley? When are you coming back?" Richard bombarded Jeffrey with questions.

"Hang on Richard, you had better come in. Help yourself to a drink. I'll speak to you when I'm dressed." Chorused Jeffrey on his way up the stairs. Once in his bedroom, Jeffrey's mind began working overtime. What should he tell Richard? Richard was all right, but if you were to tell him a secret the whole village would hear of it by the morning. Jeffrey quickly dressed, then composing himself in the doorway. "Ah Richard." He said jovially. "I'm glad you've helped yourself to a drink. I am sorry you have had this journey for nothing. I meant to ring you this morning, but as you can see I was still asleep when you arrived. I was feeling rather ill last night". He added, "This must be why I slept late this morning. Shirley has unfortunately been called away. Her Mother is very ill, in fact the doctors don't expect her to survive for more than a day or two."

"Oh poor old you." Richard replied sympathetically. "You won't know when she's coming back then?" Without waiting for an answer Richard continued. "Don't hurry back to work old boy. I'll manage, I've sold three more properties yesterday". He said with a wide grin on his face. "You'll soon be retiring to the Bahamas, living it up".

"I wish." Said Jeffrey with a forced smile. "I can't really say when Shirley will be back, as soon as she can I expect. Still it's bad timing with me catching the flu. I should be back at the office in a day or two. If you should need me, don't hesitate to ring me."

"Right oh, I must go now I have a business to run". He said laughingly. "Seriously old boy if I can help in any way whilst Shirley's away, let me know. You must come over for dinner when you're feeling up to it. Now don't get up, I will let myself out." With that Richard took his leave.

Just as Jeffrey had thought, Richard had told everyone of his circumstances within the hour, the phone never stopped ringing. Friends and neighbours offered him support and dinner invites. Two of their closest neighbours,

Ivy from next door and Elaine two doors further up appeared at his front door, both carrying baskets of food. "We thought," Said Ivy. "Seeing you are poorly and Shirley's away, that you'd be needing these." Thrusting two baskets at him. "Must be going." She muttered. "We're off to Mother's Union. Take care of yourself. I'll collect the baskets later." With a friendly wave, the two ladies walked off.

Though well meaning Jeffrey was worried by all this attention. He knew that eventually, Shirley's disappearance would become obvious. How was he going to explain it away? He couldn't just say she wasn't coming back, without the how's, whys and wherefores. He guessed it would be difficult. How right this would prove to be.

After a day or two Jeffrey got his life back into some kind of order. Whilst he was very lonely and missed Shirley like mad, on the surface everything was back to normality. Everyone kept on asking when Shirley was coming back. To which Jeffrey would answer, soon I hope. Jeffrey then noticed subtle changes in the people he knew. At first they would make excuses to hurry away, then he was sure some people were actually avoiding him. He heard whispers as he passed. It took just two weeks of this behaviour, when out of blue a couple of policemen arrived at Jeffrey's door. "Hello." Jeffrey said nervously. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so Sir." Was the reply. "Can we come in?"

"By all means, I hope there's nothing wrong, my wife is away at the moment." Jeffrey answered whilst opening the door further. "Do come in. Can I offer you any refreshments?"

"No sir, but if you don't mind answering a few questions. It has been brought to our attention; the fact of which you have already confirmed your wife is not with you. We also have reason to be suspicious." "Why is that?" Jeffrey asked with a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach. "Well, I believe you know Mr. Johnson, the postman, he delivers your mail. He told us that you definitely have not received any mail, besides the odd bill or junk mail these last few weeks. We also took the liberty of checking your telephone calls over the last week or so and have come to the conclusion she has not contacted you or you her. Would you like to explain this to us?" Jeffrey stammered. "I could, but you wouldn't believe me I'm afraid."

"Do you mind if we look around Sir?"

"Of course not I've nothing to hide." Jeffrey said. The police searched the rooms systematically. "This ring Sir, can you identify it?" Said one of the officers. "Yes, of course I can. It's my wife's wedding ring." "I see Sir, why isn't she wearing it? Would you like to explain what it is doing in your jacket pocket?" Jeffrey looked at the ring. He had forgotten all about it. He remembered now Shirley had given it back to him. He did not answer. "Then Mr. Jeffrey Benson, I have no alternative, but to place you under arrest for the disappearance of your wife Mrs. Shirley Benson. You are not obliged to say anything, but if you do it can be used in evidence against you. Do you understand?" Jeffrey nodded. "May I get my coat?"

"Yes Sir, you might also want to ring your solicitor, as you will be needing one." Came the reply.

Once in the police station, Jeffrey was met by his solicitor. "What's up Jeffrey? Clue me in."

"It seems," Said Jeffrey "That I am being charged with the disappearance of my wife."

"Oh dear me." Replied the solicitor. John Spencer is a tall thickset man, despite his bulky frame he is very agile and fit for his age. He will, he informed Jeffrey on many occasions, retire at fifty five years of age. This will be next year. John or Jack (as he liked to be called). Has been Jeffreys solicitor for the past six years and he thought he knew him very well. Jack is easy going, but has a very shrewd keen mind and was not easily duped. "You'd better tell me all about it Jeffrey and I want the whole truth from you, not" he added "that I doubt your integrity." Jeffrey relayed all the events of the last year right up to his arrest. "Blow me, if this isn't the most incredible story I have ever heard, believe me Jeffrey, I heard some strange stories in my time".

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