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Twenty Years Is Not Long Enough

by Lesley Dawson

No-one was supposed to know. It had been hidden for twenty years. It only came to light when Pete came back to the village. I hadn't seen him for so long that I almost didn't recognize him. He came into the pub and I saw his reflection in the mirror. I thought he looked vaguely familiar and plastered on my best barmaid smile as I turned to face him.

"What can I do for you sir?" My smile faltered as I saw who it was. It couldn't be, could it?

"Hello there. Can I get a pint and a gin and tonic?" I had obviously changed more than I thought. Granted in those days I had been slim, almost to the point of skinny and had long blond hair. Time and good living in a public house had added the pounds to my frame.

As I realized who was standing before me, I wondered whether he would, or would not, recognize me. Did I want him to know who I was, or did I hope he had forgotten all about those long distant days.

I cast my mind back to the last time I had seen him, climbing out of Big John Cavern, dripping wet, exhausted and terrified by what we had done.

He had looked through me, almost as if I had not been there. "You must forget what you saw down in the tunnel. You can never tell a soul."

I nodded my head in dumb agreement. After all, what could I say that would not incriminate me too? I agreed to say nothing but knew subconsciously that someday the truth would come out. It always did.

Three of us had abseiled down into that tunnel, the one the experts told us was impossible to exit from. Of course, we knew better. After all we were local kids who had grown up exploring this cave system. The day started out well. We were able to make good progress and encountered no unseen obstacles. I had learnt to overcome my fear of enclosed spaces even where I had to wriggle through slowly and inch my shoulders and then my hips into unanatomical positions. Pete was the front man, with me in the middle and Trudy as backstop. I had just stopped to recover my breath from navigating a particularly tortuous bend when I heard a yell and a splash behind me. Turning round seemed to take an age as I wriggled into position. Horrified, I saw Trudy hanging on to a ledge, but I couldn't see where her legs and feet were.

“Quick, grab my arm. I am falling down this hole and there is water down below.”

I reached out my left hand and gripped her wrist. Her weight felt like a ton as I braced myself to prevent both of us going over the edge.

By this time Pete had realized there was a problem and had managed to turn himself around. His head appeared by my boots, and he began to give me advice. We spent hours trying to pull Trudy to safety with all the physical effort being mine as there was no way for Pete to crawl over me to take some of the strain. Pete held onto my legs and reversed up the tunnel and I tried to crawl backwards away from the drop, pulling Trudy with me.

Eventually our sweating and heaving were getting us nowhere and I was slowly being dragged over the edge. Pete whispered in my ear “Let her go, she is dragging you down with her”

“No way. I can't leave her to die”

“Do you want all three of us to die down here? Nobody knows where to find us”

“You didn't tell anyone we were coming down here?”

“You know that we were forbidden to try this. Let her go. Otherwise, I will leave you both here to die”

I don't know if my strength gave out or if I obeyed his instructions, but I let go and heard Trudy scream as she plummeted into the underground lake.

Now it had all come back to haunt me.