

An extract from 'The Twins' for you to read

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The afternoon was looking like it might be a bit of a desert of boredom - until the phone rang. Saskia got there first as usual. After a couple of words, she held out the phone.

"Saskia? David. For you."

"Me?"

"Only other Saskia around here."

I took the proffered phone. "Hello, Saskia here, the other Saskia, not the one who answered the phone."

"Can't confuse me," said David on the other end. "I know which Saskia I'm talking to."

"I'm sorry David. I take back the sarcastic opening line. Happy New Year to you."

"Thanks. That's sort of why I'm ringing. I've had a long talk with that sister of mine and she says you'll be ok with it."

"I'm sure Ellie knows what you're talking about but I don't yet. Can you tell me - or is it secret?"

"Sorry Saskia. Not secret. I want to ask you to go to a party with me."

"Ah. A date."

"Actually no - well - yes - but not like that."

"David, it's ok. I think I know what you mean. You want a friend to go with you."

I could hear the relief in his voice. "Yes. Not really a date, more like when *you* took *me* to lunch. Greg is going to ask Saskia. We want to make up a four. Not a business arrangement like last time. A party."

I knew Saskia had been listening in with super hearing. I looked at her and raised an eyebrow. She nodded. Ok. For the first time ever I was accepting a request for a date from a boy. Scary.

"Ok, David. You're on. Kisses will be rationed, probably a maximum of two, three if you behave yourself. When will this not-a-date take place?"

"Err, tonight actually. I suppose I should have asked you if you were free."

"As it happens I am. Where shall we meet - or do you want to do the right thing and come and collect me?"

"D'you think Saskia will say yes when Greg asks?"

"Mm. Can't answer for her. Greg'll have to ask her himself."

"If she says yes, Greg and I'll collect you. Will that be ok?"

"Perfectly. I'll wait to see what Greg and Saskia have to say to each other."

"Thanks, Saskia. I'll see you later."

"Bye, David, take care."

As I put down the phone I turned to see Saskia grinning. "It's alright for you grinning away over there. Just what have I let myself in for?"

The grin disappeared instantly. "Twin, you're nervous about it, aren't you?"

"Yes! It's a date! With a boy! You might find that ok but ... I'm not a girl!"

"Ok. Think about it. First, it's not a date, not the first in a line of encounters leading to romance and - other stuff. Second, it's not as if you don't know David. You know him really quite well and what he will or won't do - or try to do. Third, the boys just want companions for an evening of partying, probably got girls lined up in massed ranks at uni so they don't really need us, except as interesting partners for

this evening. Look at it this way - they'll be expected to appear with girls on their arms, we can do that for them at least."

She grinned again. "Now we come to four. I keep telling you this - you *are* a girl! You've kissed David before, many times. How do you feel? Is it the right thing to do? Did you enjoy it?"

I thought about it. If I'd kissed David as Richie, I'd have been very uncomfortable. As Saskia? Yes - remarkably - I enjoyed it. Perhaps Saskia had a point. I said as much.

"So you see, you'll have no problem at all. It isn't even a proper date. Oops. The phone. Bet it's Greg."

It was. After a bit of discussion, Saskia agreed to go with him as well. The foursome appeared to be on. We'd be collected about eight pm.

"Saskia? What will we wear? I've never been to a party with a boy, at least not one I have no control over."

She grinned. "What? The party or the boy?"

"Both - neither. You know what I mean."

"What you're saying that every other bash you've been to has either been arranged *by* or *for* us."

"Exactly. So - what do we wear?"

"Ah. I presume you neglected to ask David details of said party?"

"Yes! I was too busy making sure he knew the conditions I'd impose on him. Help me Saskia - please."

"You really are a bag of nerves, aren't you? Come here, I'll look out for you. I always have so far and I don't plan on changing now." She put her arm round my shoulder and gave me a squeeze.

As I let my head drop onto her shoulder I said, "Just what have I done to deserve you?"

"Oh that's easy. You've just been you. That's enough isn't it?"

The hug continued for a while longer then Saskia became all businesslike again. "Right. Unlike you - who didn't know any better and I forgive you - I enquired as to the precise nature of the entertainment planned for this evening. As you no doubt remember, tonight is New Years Eve. The boys wish to take us to a suitable party at the big pub on the riverside. There will some of their male friends there with their girlfriends and the boys don't want to feel left out and so have asked us, being of the female persuasion, to accompany them. There will be dancing, which we shall join in with, and boozing, which we will not. Fireworks are planned for the witching hour of midnight. As to our sartorial arrangements, we shall wear trousers and suitable warm tops."

As Saskia gave this lecture I'd gently pulled away from her and turned to face her. "Have you quite finished. You don't half remind me of a teacher I had at school."

She grinned, "And how do you feel now?"

I laughed. "Much better, thank you. Er - should we tell your dad we'll be out until after midnight - with boys!"

"Blimey. You're right. Don't know what he'll think. Us and boys - and *they* asked *us*!"

"It's even worse than that."

"How?"

"We accepted!"

"Crumbs. That's us on the slippery slope."

We fell against each other in laughter. My worries about the evening had evaporated. I thought I might even enjoy it.

Later, over tea, Saskia told her dad the terrible news.

"You two? Boys?"

"Yes, Dad. Didn't know it was some sort of crime. How long a sentence d'you think we'll get?"

"I'm sorry. I take back the incredulous tone of my comment. What have you asked them to do this time?"

"No, Dad. All down to them. It's David and Greg. They asked us and we said yes."

"Hm."

She sighed. "No, Dad," she said gently. "We haven't changed the way we see boys. They need female companionship for the evening without strings attached. We can do that for them, after all, they've done it for us."

"You're right. Don't mind me, I'm being silly."

"No, Dad. Not being silly. It's the way you're programmed. Saskia and I are just programmed slightly differently, that's all."

"Ok, go on the pair of you. I'll clear up. Go and get ready for your double date."

"Dad! It's a good job you're grinning. Get a thump otherwise."

"Not a thump. Help me cuddle him?" I whispered.

"I'm with you. Go."

We closed in one from each side and administered the relevant cuddle. Rob cuddled back so I knew he was ok with it all.

In our room we set about thinking about getting ready. No point actually doing it yet, it'd only take a couple of seconds.

"Trousers and stuff," I said. "How about the angora sweaters?"

"Hm. Want to do the complete twins thing?"

"I think it might be expected. I reckon same style, different colours?"

It seemed to get to eight o'clock very quickly. We actually had to rush slightly to make sure we were ready and waiting. The doorbell rang bang on eight. I thought the boys had synchronised their watches and waited outside for the precise second. Then I chided myself for such a silly thought.

Greg appeared to be designated driver, not surprising really, he was the one with the car. His car wasn't huge but it was bigger than our mini and it had more doors. Saskia and I both got in the back, the boys seemed happy with that and off we went.

The pub on the riverbank was really quite big. It was a hotel really with umpteen bars and other rooms. What it also had was a huge garden at the back leading down to the river. I noticed movement out in the garden. Super vision revealed people setting up a firework display, presumably for twelve o'clock. Inside, the largest room had been set out as a disco, complete with music system, lights and a DJ.

Greg and David introduced us to their friends. All in all there were around ten of us in our little party. The only one I'd met before was Phil, and of course I didn't know any of the girls.

Saskia and I had agreed that rather than stay together, we'd attach ourselves to the relevant boy, David in my case, Greg in hers. I hoped that wouldn't be a problem, I didn't want to be separated from her. I needn't have worried, the other boys had managed to bag a couple of tables next to each other with enough chairs for all of us.

"So you're the famous Saskias," one of the girls, a tall thin girl with short black hair, called Kirsty.

"Not sure about the famous bit but Saskias certainly," I said.

"Oh I don't know," said Phil. "You're on the telly nearly all the time."

"Not all *that* much," laughed Saskia.

"All that much what?" asked Greg as he and David returned from the bar with glasses.

"The Saskias on the TV," said one of the other girls, Georgia I think.

"Oh, yeah. They do that," grinned Greg.

"It must be nice to have famous girlfriends," said Roger.

David gave me a slightly odd look. Ho-ho. The boys had told people we were their girlfriends.

"*Er, Saskia, we might have a teeny problem,*" I whispered.

"*Let's just play along, we can see what the boys have to say for themselves later.*"

"*Ok. Could be fun.*"

I leaned towards David, pushed my arm behind his and held his hand. I looked up at him and smiled. Was *he* going to owe me a favour later. A glance across the table revealed Saskia doing more or less the same thing to Greg. They both looked - relieved - I think was the word I wanted.

Now we knew about the boys little - deception - I found I was much more at ease. Probably something to do with being back in control of the situation. The rest of the group were easy to talk to and get on with and I began to enjoy the evening. We spent time just chatting and sipping our drinks and did quite a lot of dancing. I'd have liked to spend more time with Saskia but had to make do with David.

At one point, David and I were on the dance floor a little apart from any of the others. I took the opportunity to see what he had to say. "You're a naughty boy, David. Telling everybody I'm your girlfriend."

"But Saskia, I didn't. They just assumed."

"But you were upset when you thought we might tell everybody our real relationship."

"Er - yes - well."

"I take that to mean you're happy with others thinking you have famous girlfriends?"

"Er ..."

"Boys! Honestly! Ok, you will have noticed that Saskia and I are going along with it. We'll not reveal the dreadful truth, and you're getting cuddles and stuff out of it. You're racking up the favours you owe us."

"Thanks, Saskia. You're wonderful really, you know that?"

"Yes, I know. And modest with it," I laughed as the dancing continued.

Eventually it neared midnight. Large doors were opened onto the back garden and the idea seemed to be that we should stand on the patio area just outside and watch the fireworks. We all tramped outside and lined up to get a good view.

I'd noticed Saskia pushing Greg about a bit and she finished up standing next to me on my left with David on my right. To stay in character I was holding David's hand, now I felt Saskia holding my other hand. We stood like that watching the fireworks mark the start of the New Year. It didn't matter that David was holding my right hand, Saskia was holding my left, *that* was what mattered.

"*Happy New Year, Twin,*" whispered Saskia.

"*Yeah. Happy New Year.*"

"*Wonder what it's going to be like to do this thousands of times.*"

"*I have no idea, but I guess we'll find out. Ask me again after a thousand years or so.*"

"*I love you.*"

"And I love you dear Saskia - even if you are holding a boys hand at the moment."

We both grinned. If the boys wondered what we were grinning at, they probably put it down to the effect they were having on us. Little did they know.

Eight

The boys had delivered us home in the early hours of New Years Day. Most of the journey home seemed to have been taken up with them apologising for not telling us we were supposed to be their girlfriends. As they dropped us off we told them to shut up and be happy, and reinforced that by kissing them soundly. They drove off with silly grins on their faces.

Doesn't matter what time we go to bed, we can still get up as early as we like. Saskia's dad seemed incapable of having a lie in so we were all having breakfast together before eight am.

"What time did you get in last night?"

"Not late, Dad. About half past one or thereabouts."

"And you enjoyed your date?"

That question might get him a thump. Saskia surprised me.

"Yes, Dad, thank you. We had a very pleasant evening."

Rob looked at me so I said, "I agree, sir. Very pleasant."

Rob looked back at Saskia who just shrugged slightly but said nothing. He left us to tidy up and went off to the garage.

"Do you think your dad thinks we've decided to start looking at boys?"

"Hm. Don't actually know. What I *do* know is that it might help him to not think of us as being gay, if you understand what I mean."

"But Saskia, we're not gay, you know we're not - not in that way at least."

"Yes but I think about other people's perception of us. I don't care what the rest of the world thinks but Dad's opinion of me - of us - is very important."

"See what you mean. But surely all we've done is confuse him."

"Perhaps that's so but that means he's not certain about us anymore and that's got to be good."

"So we've made him think that perhaps one day ..."

"Yes, and that'll make him happier than if he was sure we were gay. Am I making sense?"

"I think so. All part of the Prime Directive."

"Exactly."

Further discussion was cut short by the phone ringing. Saskia answered. "The Hunt and Chandler residence. Happy New Year to you, whoever you are."

I listened with super hearing. The first thing I heard was laughter. "Hi Saskia. It's Ellie. Happy New Year to you as well, and Saskia too, of course."

For one long moment I wondered how Ellie knew I was listening but then told myself off for being silly again. Ellie was just being polite.

"Good morning, Ellie," said Saskia. "To what do we owe the honour of you being the first phone call of the New Year?"

"Just wanted to see how last night went. David's still in bed."

"Hm. Why don't you come round here and we can tell you all about it, and it'll stop Saskia banging her head against mine trying to hear what you're saying."

I actually wasn't anywhere near her but it made Ellie laugh anyway.

"Ok. Just get my boots on and I'll be with you. It's a bit quiet round here at the moment - apart from the snoring anyway."

Saskia put the phone down with the three of us laughing together. Quickly we tidied away the breakfast devastation and put the kettle on for hot chocolate.

Ellie appeared a short while after that. She seemed to be wearing a lot of coats and scarves and stuff. Then I remembered it was cold outside. I suddenly remembered the previous evening, standing next to David with him shivering in the cold air. I'd been quite comfortable of course, as had Saskia. Not so all the others who'd been glad to go back in out of the cold to sing Auld Lang Syne and other New Year stuff.

"Did you know David had a girlfriend?" asked Saskia when we'd organise hot drinks and curled up in the lounge.

"No. He hasn't told me, but then, I'm only his sister, always last to know, me."

"Ah. All is not as it seems. You could be surprised at who it's supposed to be."

"What d'you mean? 'Supposed to be'?"

I put my hand in the air. Ellie put two and two together and got four hundred. "You, Saskia? You never told me."

Saskia couldn't keep her face straight. She began to laugh. By the time we'd related the events of the last evening we were all laughing.

"And you went along with it?" laughed Ellie.

"No choice really," I said. "The alternative would have had the boys looking stupid. Couldn't have that."

"No. No, you're quite right," said Ellie, then grinned and said, "So I won't be having you as a sister-in-law after all then?"

That set us off laughing again.

Ellie stayed most of the morning, leaving us alone again just before lunch. Apparently the Harrisons were going to visit Grandma Harrison, the one with the Aga, and Ellie was expected to attend. We'd just closed the door behind her when we felt everything slow down to a stop.

"Hello, Voice, Happy New Year," called Saskia. "What can we do for you today?"

"I have a task for you. I will need to translate you some years into your past to attempt to clear up a mystery."

"Sounds like fun," I said. "How many years?"

"Approximately one hundred and forty, to your year 1872 to be precise. I require you to investigate a shipping problem. As you know, time branches due to decisions made as it moves from the past, through the present, and into the future. At this point, looking into your past, there should be only one unbroken track leading backwards into the past. However, there are two, parallel, tracks. As would be usual in such cases, there is a major track and a minor track. The minor track would normally disappear if the two tracks subsequently re-converge, this has not happened."

"So there are two possible pasts," I said. "By re-converge I suppose you mean the tracks become identical again, basically merging together again?"

"Exactly. The two tracks should not exist side by side in this way. Naturally, if we could see what the problem is, or was, we would not need intervention by yourselves."

"Ok," said Saskia. "Where will we appear? You said when, 1872 if I heard you right."

"Upon the deck of a sailing ship. Translation will occur at your discretion. You may take time to discuss your approach to the problem before you leave."

Voice was gone but we were still suspended. "Wow. Doesn't hand out easy problems does it?" said Saskia.

“Mm. It didn’t specify what we should be wearing so I expect it doesn’t matter,” I said. “Let’s just appear in our black gear and take it from there.”

As the thought, so the deed. We were standing on the deck of a sailing ship. The ship was in trouble, all the crew were just lying around on the deck, as far as I could tell - dead. All of them.

Saskia ran to the nearest man and looked for signs of life. There were none. The next man she checked was likewise dead. “Saskia, they’re all dead. There’s no marks on them apart from a blue tint to their faces. That must mean they all died of oxygen starvation.”

I’d been looking around us while she checked the crew. A little way behind the ship I saw a large bubble come to the surface and burst. Now just what was that? As I watched there was another. Engaging my super vision I scanned the sea the ship had apparently just sailed through. There were more of the bubbles, quite a lot more.

“Saskia, look here. What d’you think that is?”

“Mm. Don’t know. We can’t do anything here for the moment, let’s go look.”

We lifted off the deck of the ship and flew back along its course. A few miles behind the ship was a patch of sea that was looked as if it was boiling. Bubbles rose to the surface and burst. As we floated above this strange sight, I noticed something scary.

“Saskia, I’m not breathing! It’s as if I’m in space or underwater. I’m fairly sure I’m not talking, I’m thinking at you.”

“You’re right. Our telepathy is working. What’s ... I know! The air is poisonous. There’s no oxygen. The ship must have come right through the middle of this without realising. That’s what killed everybody.”

“But what’s ... oh. Look under the water with your super vision. There, see? A long way down. It’s an underwater volcano or something. What’s coming to the surface must be gas given off, probably methane or something similar. The sailors didn’t stand a chance.”

“Well that’s why they’re all dead but why is there a problem with the timeline? Come on, back to the ship.”

In seconds we’d caught up with the ship. The name on the stern simultaneously gave me an idea what the trouble was and at the same time made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“Oh Saskia, look. The ship. It’s the Mary Celeste.”