

SIDDHARTHA

3.2

**ALL THE WORLDS AT ONCE
PART 2**

7. Waiting for the Man.

I loved waking up with Debra next to me. No matter what position we went to sleep in we always woke up the same way with Debra's arms protectively around me. I would wake up feeling warm and safe and loved. Debra was stronger than me, not just physically but possessed of a powerful personal sense of morality and justice. She could cut through my bullshit with a word and I loved it that she could. For all my own arrogance I sometimes felt inadequate compared to her.

Now I woke and found myself cuddling her. It seemed as if she had shrunk into herself as she tried to bury into the semi-circle of my smaller body. In the dim light her face appeared as grey as roof slate. She shuddered and uttered a low moan.

"I'm scared," she whispered to me. "I feel so weak and I don't want to be nothing."

"Do you need a shot?" I asked and Debra nodded wordlessly.

I removed the first aid kit from her pack and retrieved the needles and a phial of adrenalin. I'd never done anything like this before but Debra's hands had begun to shake so I stuck the needle into the phial and sucked up the adrenalin.

"In the vein," Debra said, pressing down on the tip of the needle with a finger. "Push now."

I slid it home and Debra gasped as the adrenalin entered her system. When I pulled out the needle it started to bleed, a line of blood rilled down her arm.

"Tissue," Debra said.

I got one, folded it up and held it in place until it seemed the bleeding had stopped.

Debra looked a little better, more colour in her face. "I'll get you something to eat," I said.

In the kitchen I looked for carbohydrate and fat. There were some currant buns. I cut four in half and smeared them liberally with Bertolli, the olive oil based spread. Typical of Colin, the new man, not to have any butter.

When I got back, Debra was sitting up in bed cradling her knees. She smiled when she saw the tray with the buns and two mugs of steaming coffee.

"Now I remember why I love you," she said.

"Eat up. You can have protein later if you want any."

"How are we going to find the Man of Power?" she asked, her voice almost a plaintive schoolgirl whine.

"Not difficult," I replied. "Remember when you slammed my hand down on the map?"

Uncertainly. "Yes."

I said, "You wouldn't accept my suggestion. You were wrong. He's not here, he's in Sunderland."

Debra almost spat out food, catching herself just in time before it sprayed all over the bed.

"How do you know?"

"I'll tell you later. Don't say anything in front of Colin or Maggie."

"There's something going on here," she said.

"Yes," I said, "there is but it isn't part of our story. Colin has to work this one out without us. Trust me."

"Okay, babe," she said. "Sunderland. Why would a Man of Power want to live in Sunderland?"

Good question. Maybe we'd even find out.

We arrived at the Marriott Hotel just before eleven. Maggie had given me good directions. She'd also been right about what I'd seen of Sunderland so far, the sea front at least was highly attractive. Low cliffs on either side of the wide bay swept down to a beach about a mile long. The day was clear, the tide out, the sea sparkled, seagulls wheeled in the air while making a hideous racket, tra la lah.

The hotel itself was clean and modern and more than acceptable despite the quizzical looks from the reception –two leather biker dykes, remember?- though our southern well-spoken (speaking for myself with the southern I should say) accents and our appearance once the helmets and leathers were doffed did much to ameliorate it as did my platinum Amex card. You do take these in Sunderland, don't you?

After dumping our stuff we went for a hand in hand walk along the beach but that soon tired out Debra so we returned to the hotel where we ate a light lunch with a half bottle of wine between us then went to lie down. Well, Debra did. I just relaxed in a chair with coffee and a copy of *The Independent* I'd picked up earlier. The sea air must have done something to me because I nodded off and when I woke it had just turned three thirty and Debra had pinched my paper.

I found it difficult to believe what had happened in my life in little more than thirty six hours. I started cataloguing it and then gave up. It didn't matter anyway. Only what lay ahead in the next few hours held any significance. Languid interludes between dark drama. When this was over I decided I might treat myself to a nervous breakdown.

We showered, dressed, put on a little makeup –eyeliner, lipstick. Debra painted her nails black, I painted mine red. We smiled at each other and then were suddenly on the bed writhing like tigers but never uttering a sound except grunts. For all we knew it could be the last time we made love.

Then we showered again, got dressed again, put on makeup, again. In silence.

The weather had remained cool but pleasant, the sun still beaming down, as it should, as if the world was a normal ordered place, and there weren't any maggots squirming unseen under the skin.

The receptionist had told me we could walk leisurely into town following the cliff top and then drop down to a river path which would provide us with several interesting surprises. So that is what we did.

We left the leathers in the room and both of us wore lightweight jackets, nothing particularly stylish, more functional. Lord, I felt drab. We had jeans and boots and shirts open to expose cleavage –quite easy in Debra's case, I'm more modest in size but not averse to a push-up bra and wasn't that day.

I loved the walk. The cliffs may not have been the highest or most breathtaking in the world but the tide had come in and I felt energised watching the surging waves clash against the rocks below. Even at a leisurely pace it wasn't long before we reached the first pier. It was a functional pier, a long curving structure of brick partially enclosing the harbour and the still extant Port of Sunderland. We followed a winding road down to the mouth of the River Wear, past new housing to a very modern marina packed with boats of various shapes and sizes. Sunlight sparkled on the water. Such a cliché I know but clichés become clichés because they are also truisms. So there.

"I can see why you never came here," I said. "It's such an awful place."

"Shut up," Debra said.

It didn't take long before we came across the first of the surprises the receptionist had mentioned –an artwork, the first of several we would encounter, a room carved in stone but cut in half horizontally from two feet up.

Within half a mile of the river mouth we came across the National Glass Centre (and if I need to explain what that celebrated you can ... oh never mind), St. Peter's campus (part of Sunderland University), a genuine and very old Saxon church also called St. Peter's, green swathes up a grassy slope, modern apartments, and then in front of us a massive bridge. Not as large as the Tyne bridge into Newcastle but impressive nonetheless.

The scenery on the south bank had changed too as we walked. At the mouth had been the actual Port of Sunderland with its remnants of quays but always the signs of modernisation. It was almost impossible to imagine that where we walked and everything within sight had been less than a scant forty years ago a thriving mass of shipbuilding, all fire and smoke and clanging metal and sweaty black-lunged men. Now it looked almost pastoral (if being littered with students and student apartments can be described as such) with only remnants, deliberately left, of the heavily industrialised past scarring the landscape like ancient memories.

We climbed well-worn steep old steps by the side of the bridge, ascending over a hundred feet to reach the main road and if that doesn't sound a lot just try being at the bottom looking up at the top. Traffic on the bridge moved at a crawl. It was just after five thirty and people were heading for home. We walked across the bridge, down an underpass, up again and onto Fawcett Street. At the end of it was Jameson's pub. But we put that off for a while. We turned left and onto a parallel quieter road which had several restaurants on it. We went into one that Maggie had suggested might be acceptable.

After some garlic mushrooms on toast we settled for pasta and a glass of white wine each. We needed a clear head and not a full stomach either.

"Are you going to tell me how you know where to find the Man of Power?" Debra asked.

"Maggie told me," I said simply.

"How does she know?"

"He called her when she first arrived in Newcastle, out of courtesy, and to tell her to stay out of his way."

"And why exactly would he do that?"

How easily I'd come to accept all this. Surrounded by strangeness, the only other option is to deny it. Which way lies madness, I wondered.

I said, "He sensed her. She's an other-worlder, a Shadow, and her family is testing Colin to see if he's worthy of her. It's a con game, much much less than it appears but it is a rite of passage. If anyone interfered with it they would kill him. So we don't interfere, Debra. She loves him."

"Yeah, I know, it is pretty obvious. You made a deal with her." Not a question.

"Yes," I said. "And she told me where to come."

"So?"

"So." I got out a credit card. "It's time to go."

"Thank God," she whispered.

We pushed open the door. Typical Wetherspoon's pub, well lit but not bright, lots of wood all over the place, pictures genuflecting to local culture, high above the bar the large flat screen television they snuck in a couple of years ago, sound still low,

handful of real ale pumps, food advertised prominently. I'd eaten in these places years ago as a student –cheap and cheerful but once I got my first job I vowed I'd never eat there again. We got a bottle of merlot between us and yes we had seen the movie 'Sideways' but I like a merlot now and again and we didn't want anything too heavy.

We took seats at one of those high tables where I have to scramble in a very ungainly fashion to climb onto the high chair where I immediately feel like a baby. Debra does it gracefully. Amazing what wonders three more inches in height can perform. We sat by a wide window where we could either watch the traffic, people passing by, or the Victorian museum over the road with a new extension built on one end and a tall glass garden on the other. I wished we'd come into town earlier and paid it a visit. What? Did you think I was totally without culture? Anyway, it's all gone now.

I glanced at my watch. Ten minutes past seven. The place was half full with a mixture of early arrivals, people who'd finished work but not gone home yet, and heavy long-term boozers with florid faces. The sounds of conversation were animated but, apart from the odd raised declamatory voice, not loud. At the low table near ours, a short grey haired guy in his late fifties was saying to his friend, "How can you not like 'New Dragon Gate Inn'? It's based on the old legend of the inn that cannibalises unwanted guests and it stars Brigitte Lin, not mention Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung." Good heavens, I thought, someone with taste. Debra and I loved movies with Brigitte Lin in them.

I was about to mention the androgynous but gorgeous Taiwanese actress to Debra when a stocky blousy redhead in her thirties stopped at our table and said, "Hi girls. You must be new, this isn't where our sort usually hang." She stared at me and smiled. "But I wouldn't mind hanging around you for a while, cutie."

"Thanks," I said, "but we're exclusive."

"Shame. Well if you have second thoughts I'll be around." And with that she giggled and flounced off.

"Strange," I said softly. "I don't know whether or not to take that at face value."

Debra leaned forward. "I wouldn't," she cautioned.

She was right.

They played a game with us for an hour. The redhead wandered over to a table near the bar and talked to a guy who would then wander off and covertly watch us. Then he would talk to someone else.

We quickly sussed that there were five of them, three women and two men, all pretty much of an age, and they circulated around the room. They were regulars and talked to other people but no-one else joined in the dance. Finally they grew bored and approached us as a group.

Debra stared at them. "About fucking time," she said.

In a low voice, the redhead said, "Why should the Man of Power help you?"

Good question. Why should the Man of Power help Debra? What was she to him?

Rather than answer it, Debra treated the question as a *non sequitor*. "What's his price?" she asked.

One of the two men, dour face and slim, in his mid-thirties like the others, said, "We like it when people cut through the bullshit. He'll tell you himself."

"But for now," said a woman, a tall thin blonde ectomorph, "tell us about yourselves. After all, we're your new best friends. The nigger can buy us all a drink."

I didn't bite. She was winding me up. "Sure," I said, "as long as one of the cocksuckers comes help me carry them."

"That could be any of us, darling," said the ectomorph, "but I'll come with you."

By the time we got back with the drinks, Debra had finished telling them precisely why we needed the Man of Power's help.

As we arrived, the four turned to the ectomorph, Angie, who'd been quite friendly while we'd waited to be served, and the redhead said to her, "We think that he'd be interested. We like her. She deserves to be helped."

Angie said, "The ni.... Sorry, still in character. Rachel here's quite sweet. Pity they're exclusive."

"You mean we aren't?" said the redhead.

"Just teasing, Lori, you know I love you best."

For some reason this amused the other four as they all laughed.

We all chatted relatively inconsequentially as we drank our drinks. I say relatively because almost anything any of the five said could be taken as ambiguous. I had a feeling there was another level of communication under the spoken words. It was a relief to leave.

We piled into two taxis and arrived at their house within minutes. Semi-detached, it stood facing onto a quiet wide road opposite a secondary school's sports field. Inside, what had been two rooms were converted into one. The blinds were pulled down and the lights switched on.

Debra and I glanced at each other uneasily but we weren't in charge. It was their game not ours. I wanted to ask when the Man of Power would arrive but didn't dare. Someone slipped on a Motorhead CD which seemed an odd choice. Furniture was pushed against walls. Debra and I sat on a couch wondering what the fuck was going to happen. We weren't offered a drink.

Then one of the men came up behind Lori the redhead, put his arms around her, undid her blouse and began fondling her breasts. For a moment the other three watched. He slid a hand under her skirt and between her legs. We saw her push her buttocks against his groin and he bent her over, forcing her to her knees. He pulled down her pants, then his own and slid inside her, his hands back to clutching both breasts as he fucked her.

By this time Angie the ectomorph had begun kissing the other woman. It wasn't long before they were on the floor, Angie's mouth buried in black pubic hair. The second man began fucking Angie in her arse. She didn't even seem to notice.

This went on for several minutes until Angie pulled away, got up, semen dripping down her legs and went over to the threesome. She pulled the man off Lori and began sucking his cock. The other two women got up and formed a different threesome.

The permutations went on for at least half an hour. Nothing was said. Hell they barely even grunted or breathed heavily. It almost seemed to be some kind of ritual. They never even looked at us.

And then I screamed.

Without a flicker, the five had gone and in their place was the Man of Power.

He stood at least eight feet tall, his head nearly touching the ceiling. And he was massive. His legs really were as thick as tree trunks, they had to be to support the weight. He was hunched slightly forward, a hairless beer-barrel chest, thick arms that seemed to be reaching for me. His face was like a caricature of a cross between man

and ape, the jaw large and protruding with wide spaced blunt teeth, small eyes were hooded by a jutting brow.

Have I mentioned his nakedness? Not an item of clothing. Nothing to hide his penis, his erect thick purple veined fifteen inch long penis.

In a voice of granite grinding gravel, he said, "I think I shall enjoy myself tonight."

I would have fainted there and then but he changed.

One moment a grotesque ogre filling the room like a nightmare, then a man, clothed in grey suit and tie –a businessman just home from work- relaxing in an armchair, an unlit cigarette held somewhat effeminately in the air between two fingers.

In a light refined voice, he said, "I love watching the expression on people's faces when I do that. Quite stimulating and never the same, though usually shades of terror."

"Where does the mass go?" I asked. "I can understand your previous form, where it came from. But now you're a third of that mass, less even. Where is it?"

"Are you a scientist, my dear?" He sounded almost benign but he didn't fool me. He had been the monster. He could be so again.

"Solicitor," I answered. "But I'm not stupid either."

"I parked it," he said. "Didn't you notice that the chair wasn't here a moment ago?"

I hadn't.

He continued, "Of course it's not exactly a chair though it looks like one, and it's far heavier than any chair of this size has a right to be."

"So they are you," I said, "a fused entity, a gestalt."

I was getting good at this. Wicked witches, parallel worlds, super powers, fairies, bring it on. No matter how outlandish or fucking unbelievable, I can deal with it. I can believe a thousand impossible things before breakfast, chew 'em up, spit 'em out, and ask for more.

"Not quite," he said. "I am in them." He stood up and smiled oh so pleasantly. "We've got plenty of time so why don't we relax. How does wine with cheese and biscuits sound? They always keep an excellent range of cheeses, though their taste in wine is somewhat less refined. Debra, what about you?"

Her voice sounded raw as she said, "Will you cure me?"

"Oh yes," he replied, "most certainly. That's no problem for me at all. It will be, though, for you. You see I am a monster and I enjoy suffering and your suffering is what it will cost you."

8. Me, Monster.

There are many worlds and there are many shapes and forms that dwell therein and all exist in the mind of God. Sometimes I believe he takes his eye off the ball, or perhaps he blinks, or even nods off, or is distracted by the glory of further creations in his infinity of worlds. Or maybe he's just off shooting a few baskets.

I don't pretend to know, though I may speculate, but somehow the walls between the worlds weaken and something from one world will enter another. Perhaps it happens all the time and most aren't even noticed. Perhaps these things are too similar, or even identical. But some are different. From the Shadows may leak magic into a scientific world and permit a symbol –a sigil- to become a living virus that eats away at the mind leaving a zombie behind. From the Shadows come the fairies, the were-creatures, the vampires, the ghosts, the spells, and the demons like me.

I am a demon.

At least that is what the sorcerer who conjured me believed me to be. Truthfully I can't really say as I have only the blurriest of memories from before I came into this world. Suffice to say that I was suited to mine –to its formless chaotic mists and lightnings and constant storms -and had no desire to leave. Heavens above, that sounds like a description of the Red Spot on Jupiter. Surely not? Could I be an extra-terrestrial after all?

I arrived here because a selfish greedy man wanted power. An erstwhile magician by the name of Franklin Kincaid came across an old spell by which a demon could be brought to this world and harnessed into the service of he who brought him. The spell had a name –The Power of the Five- so called because it took the sacrifice of five pre-pubescent children to bind the demon.

Franklin, who came from Berwick in Northumberland, rented a cottage on the outskirts of the Durham village of Pity Me. I do love ironies because most certainly pity was a quality lacking in dear old Frankie.

He readied the cottage. Black curtains on all the windows –which were already double-glazed to cut down on the sound- he emptied the living room of everything but bare walls and floorboards, and those ugly black curtains. He inscribed the pentagram in the centre of the room and placed a variety of magical paraphernalia around it, inscribing numerous symbols on the walls. He sharpened several knives and from several shops across the region he bought rope and those plastic ties you use to tie computer cables together, though this was in the days before desktop computers. The year was in fact 1978, around the time of those little plastic Spectrum computers with 48k of memory, but of course you both would be babes in arms then.

Next he set about obtaining his victims. He found them on the outskirts of Durham, two separate play areas where parents were less vigilant than perhaps they should have been. He knew that what he had to do should be done quickly because he had no doubt that the police, sooner or later, would call on him. He estimated less than a day before a casual door to door enquiry stopped at his. However with a demon to do his bidding, all evidence would have vanished.

Luck was with him. On his first visit after the initial surveillance he had the opportunity and there were four available, all aged between four and seven. He approached them, hit them with a leather sap and bundled them into the boot of his car. He grabbed the fifth off the street a mile away as she walked the few doors from her mother's to her aunt's house.

Less than half an hour later, dazed, bleeding and tied by hands and feet they were bundled together in the centre of the pentagram.

Franklin began the spell.

At this point I should caution you both ever against attempt to use old spells. They are not reliable because translators or transcribers may include deliberate errors or simply make a mistake in the transcribing. Franklin's copy of the spell contained just such a mistake. The children were inside the pentagram, he supposed, as food to bind me to this world.

They should have been outside and he should have been in.

I arrived formless and roaring and hungry and ate him in less time than it takes to speak this sentence. I ate all of him except his fillings. I ate his clothing too, everything that was made of natural fibre, or leather in the case of the uppers of his shoes and his jacket. The rest clattered to the floor.

At which point the police, far cannier than he had supposed or just luckier, broke in. I, satiated for the moment, took a pause to examine what was going on. Someone broke the seal on the pentagram permitting me access to the children.

And for the next twenty-five years I did not exist.

Perhaps that isn't quite true. I had fragments of dreams but that is all. I had no knowledge of what was happening, I had no knowledge of myself. But I do know what happened.

Relatively physically unharmed, albeit psychologically traumatised, the children were returned to their families. There was little they could say to the police. They had been hurt by a man -the eldest two identified him from photographs- been bundled into the boot of car, tied up, dumped in the centre of the room, heard him shouting something, then there was a bang and the police came in. They never saw him leave.

The press were informed that a man named Franklin Kincaid had kidnapped the children for, they presumed sexual purposes but, for reasons of his own, he abandoned them at the cottage shortly before the police arrived. They felt sure he would be caught soon.

They lied.

They, or least senior officers with certain connections, had a pretty good idea what he'd really wanted the kids for and they were quite certain he no longer lived. A man doesn't remove all his fillings and scatter them across the floor along with buttons, zips, shoe soles, and a collection of coins. They closed the case down as quickly as they could, let the PDF keep an eye on the kids, and tried to forget about it.

Years passed. The families nearly all moved away from the area and deliberately didn't stay in touch. The children grew up to become respectable contributing members of society -a library assistant, a vet, a social worker, a tax officer, and a teacher. All in the north east of England, two living and working in Sunderland, one commuting to Sunderland from South Shields.

Then the vet visited the city library and asked the library assistant for help. He helped her and impulsively asked her out. She accepted.

And I stirred in my sleep.

The teacher took her new kitten to the vet's for the first time and made a new friend.

Something formed, not quite a sense of self but more than the nothingness.

In Newcastle a group of social workers were on a pub crawl and bumped into a group of tax officers doing the same thing. Eyes met.

Something called 'I' felt an urge.

The tax officer and the social worker too felt an urge, more than the urge to be together, but to go to Sunderland. They didn't know why, they just took the Metro through to Sunderland and began a pub crawl. At the second pub, the two found the three.

Both had quickly re-discovered their shared traumatic past and when both met, all five intuitively understood what bound them.

And, hidden in five separate subconsciouses, I woke and knew what I had to do which was to protect the five.

It didn't take long before all were living in Sunderland. Soon they rented a house together. The two couples were sleeping together, the vet on her own, and when they slept, I emerged.

I remember the first time that I had become I. I had no identity of my own but five separate memories, five contradicting sets of emotions, but one urge to act. The teacher was being bullied by her head of department so that night I went to the woman's house and slit her throat after first waking her to enjoy her terror. The woman living not far away, I accomplished it all in less than half an hour. No-one saw me except a stray dog which I ate –physically, the combined mass using up a lot of energy.

I quickly came to realise that killing anyone who upset them would prove counter-productive as it would only serve to draw attention in their direction but I was still very much influenced by them and my existence totally dependent on them being asleep. In the end, they solved it themselves.

One evening Lori the vet walked into Angie and Andrew's bedroom without knocking. She hadn't realised they were there and had wanted to borrow a book. She discovered them naked and making love. Lori's appearance didn't stop them and so she watched. As she watched she became aroused, slid down her pants and began to masturbate. Angie saw her, got up from the bed and went to her and kissed her.

Several evenings later the threesome began making love in the living room, slowly undressing and fondling each other. Eventually the other two stripped off and joined them. Only then did the Power of the Five come to its fruition and I was truly born, a fusion of that thing which had been torn from another space and the five humans. What little memory I retained from my origin I remembered and I also became aware of the *othernesses* in this world. The five too became aware of me though they do not know everything I do, only what I wish them to remember. I have my own agenda which I shall keep to myself. I have been in this state for four years now.

So, here we are, the Five in One that is the Man of Power and the use of children as a sacrifice is truly understood by those who were sacrificed. Too long dead to know it, Franklin Kincaid had, after all, succeeded.

I want you to understand something now. I am not evil. I have my own needs and desires, and aims which may not be in accord with yours any more than Islam is not in accord with Christianity; they are just different, alien to you.

The Man of Power relaxed back in his chair that was not a chair and smiled.

"Shall we begin?" he asked.

"I'm dead if you don't," Debra said, getting to her feet. She inhaled sharply and met his gaze.

"You are brave," he said, nodding his head slightly. "Brave in spite of fear. I respect that. Let me tell you what will happen and what you will pay. I will invade

your mind and destroy the sigil-virus, releasing all that it has stolen. Saving the effects of my price, you will be as you were. I promise you that.”

“The price,” Debra said.

“The price,” said the Man of Power, “is your pain. It is an agonising pain that will continue for hours. It will be the worst pain you have ever felt, a pain beyond your ability to imagine. But it will not kill you.”

I blurted out, “Can’t you make it painless?”

“So naïve,” he mused. “Destroying the sigil *is* painless. I inflict the pain because Debra’s agony will feed me like a fine meal. No other price is acceptable.”

“Then do it!” Debra said, her face pale, all bravado gone leaving only a desperation to survive behind.

The Man of Power reached out a hand and touched her on the forehead. She sighed, slumped gracefully to the floor, half-smiled, and then began screaming.

Only no sound came out of her mouth. Her back arched upwards and she began banging her arms and legs against the floor. She tried to stuff her right hand into her mouth but he pulled it away and wedged a rolled up cloth between her teeth.

Tears flooded over her face as she twisted and turned, her face a flushed red rictus mask of agony.

She tried to turn over to bang her head against the floor but the Man of Power pinned her down.

I watched and watched for five minutes, although it felt far longer.

I said, “How long is this going on for?”

“Not beyond her endurance. She will live, but as for her state of mind afterwards... Still, better than the true mindlessness she feared.”

I swallowed and said, “You bastard! Let me take it. Give me her pain. I love her, give it to me instead!”

I didn’t care what it cost; I loved her so much I was really prepared to die for her. I never imagined I’d ever feel that way about another person.

“No,” he said. “You lack her strength; you’d be dead within minutes. That isn’t the deal I made.”

“Then let me share it. You want the pain, it doesn't matter if some of it's mine. Give it to me, half of it.”

“Very well,” he said. “Thank you. You shall have, not half, but whatever you can bear. That may be just enough to keep her as she was. May. You have no idea what an unexpected delight this is.”

And then I too was screaming as pain seared through every nerve like fire and acid and it went on forever but I carried one thought throughout: this is worth it, for Debra.

Free finally from pain, I woke in a double bed with Debra sleeping next to me. We wore negligees which weren’t ours. I suppose at some point last night I must have passed out, I don’t remember, all I remember is the pain. It *was* bearable, just bearable enough to stop me losing my sanity and, I hoped, Debra hers. I’d soon find out but no matter how much I wanted her awake, if she slept then she needed it. So I lay back and dozed and eventually Debra did wake up and her arms went around me, her lips on my cheek.

“You took it on for me,” she whispered.

“Only what he would allow,” I said.

“It was enough. I didn’t think I could take any more and then it eased. Still bad, still very bad but I knew then I could endure it. Thank you.”

“I love you,” I said and started to cry.

“And now I really do believe you,” Debra said.

And for a time we held each other and said nothing and knew that nothing would ever be the same again.

The red headed vet came in with a tray containing two mugs of coffee and some toast and jam.

She didn't go away as we sat up and starting munching on the toast, instead she sat on a chair and stared at us.

Eventually she said, “We're sorry, but he is who he is and we have no control over him. We rather think he controls us when he wants to come out and he uses sex as a trigger. I'm not remotely gay but I'll happily have sex with the other two women as if I was. We're trapped by him. We can't leave each other. It's not exactly bad. I love them all, at least I think I do. We're happy as a group. I... We...” Her voice trailed off as if she didn't know how to explain.

Then she said, almost apologetically, “Your clothes are being dried. They were all soiled, you see. You'd both been sick and you'd ... well, you know. We had to put them in the washer. It's all right, the boys didn't touch you.

“He's very pleased with you both you know. He wrote a note for us to read out to you. I've got it here.”

She pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and read, ***“Thank you for the unexpected pleasure. I did not expect that one would willingly share the pain of the other. This surprise gift greatly enhanced my enjoyment as if a pizza had become transformed into cordon bleu cooking. This delight should not go unrewarded and, therefore. I leave you a gift which will appear first in full in all its dubious glory when it is truly needed. Now, our mutual needs satisfied, you must leave. Come again and I will kill you.”***

9. The Hampstead Set, Game, and Match.

By the time we returned to the hotel it was late afternoon. Had it been up to me I'd have gathered our stuff together, paid the bill and got out of town as fast as we could, but Debra said, "Let's stay another night. We need to make plans."

"But," I said, "a couple of hours and we could be back in London."

Debra hugged me. "First off, we can't take the Road. You have to be attuned to it and I'm not. It's not like catching a bus and I wouldn't have done it this time if I hadn't felt there was no other choice. People don't always come back from it."

I said, "You what!"

"You can't stop on it or you might get stranded," she said. "I'm exhausted, Rae. The only reason I won't stop here more than one night is because I want get as far away from that bastard as possible. But the other thing is I need to get some stuff sorted out and I'm not going to tell you about it."

I looked at her and said heatedly, "You what?" Sometimes I'm just not as articulate as I should be. Maybe I was more knackered than I let on.

"Oh, love," Debra said and kissed me on the mouth, "It's not that I don't trust you because I do, more than anyone I've ever known. But you're vulnerable to the coven in ways that I'm not. Some of their magics do work and I know what to look out for."

"Okay," I said, "you go do what you have to do and when you've done that then what are we going to do?"

Debra smiled in that wry yet coy sexy way she has, something about the way her kissable lips turn up at the edges. "I thought we'd walk along the front, maybe go to an Italian, or whatever you'd prefer, drink lots of wine and then come back here and make love."

"How about we skip everything you said before the last two words," I suggested.

"Sounds tempting, but how about we don't?"

I switched on the television.

We slept late the next day and set off down the A1M for London, arriving home tired and saddle sore five hours later and me vowing never to get on that fucking bike again in my fucking life.

We hadn't been in the flat for five minutes when the phone rang.

"Don't answer it!" Debra screamed, literally diving across the room like pouncing cat to grab it out of my hands.

"Affleck," she said.

"You're brave to come back," said a woman's voice, "and not as a mindless drooling moron. That is a surprise."

"I have friends of power," replied Debra none too subtly, grimacing as she spoke. "Listen, I didn't start this. Yes, I know about the Shadows but I didn't know what you were until I saw the sigil and the others attacked me. I defended myself, that's all."

"You killed one of my girls and the other two are going to be laid up for weeks."

"You'll have to forgive me if I don't feel too upset about that. What would you have done in my situation?" Debra asked. "I was attacked by three witches wanting to kill me. Sure I've got training and I used it. That's called self-defence. Leave me alone and I'll forget I ever went anywhere near you."

“Not good enough, Affleck. We’ve had to go underground because of you. You were bound to set the PDF on us.”

“Except I haven’t. Yet. I was getting out of the game, Mara. I wasn’t looking for you. My research was genuine so why would I want to screw it all up? This only happened because I’ve been involved with the Shadows. If you hadn’t been so damned paranoid and planted the sigil, none of this would ever have happened at all. Walk away, Mara. Leave me alone.”

“Don’t you mean ‘leave *us* alone’, Affleck?”

“Whatever you want. You aren’t gaining anything trying to get revenge on me because of an accidental trigger situation. A vendetta will only hurt both of us. And harm my girlfriend and I swear that your dying will be long and slow. I’m myself again and I don’t scare easily.” Debra said that with such vehemence she scared the hell out of me and I was the one she was protecting.

Mara said, “You talk too much like a warrior, Affleck. But perhaps you have a point. Very well. A symbol started it, a symbol can end it.”

“How so?” Debra asked.

“I want your blood. I want to meet and I want to watch you slit one wrist in front of me and bleed. Not a lot, as I said, a symbol. We both understand the importance of symbols, don’t we? And before you ask, no I don’t want to keep the blood, you wouldn’t agree anyway. I just want to see it spilled.”

Debra replied quickly, “Agreed.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Debra put the phone down and said to me, “We have a deal.”

She explained to me what they’d agreed to and I asked, “How do you know you can trust them?”

“Because they aren’t suicidal. I’ve physically defeated three of them at the same time, and I have contacts who can save me from a mind ripper. They may not know exactly what I am, but they know enough to be wary of me so that they’ll settle for a blood gift. Shedding blood in front of them is an acknowledgment that they are superior to me and that I’m making a sincere obeisance and apology. Then we both walk away.

“What they won’t accept is that it’s their fault in the first place, but I can live with that if that’s what it takes. I really don’t want to take them on. When this is over, Rachel, I’m done with it, I swear. Just us, just our normal lives.”

I went to her and held her. “Promise?”

“Oh yes. I promise.”

“Good,” I said. “Will you marry me?”

Debra looked as shocked as I felt. I hadn’t meant to come out with that. Not that I didn’t mean it because I did, very much so, as it had been on my mind for a while. I couldn’t imagine wanting to be with anyone but Debra.

She pulled back and stared down at me. “You mean as in a civil ceremony? Legal.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, of course I’ll marry you, Rachel.” She kissed me and then said, “Does this mean I’ll have to convert?”

I laughed and began to undress her.

“I’d been thinking about asking you,” she said, “after this was over.”

“I’d have said yes as well,” I said, somewhat redundantly perhaps.

“Nice to know we agree on something,” Debra said and laughed and suddenly looked incredibly sexy. Maybe it was the tilt of her head, the way her blonde hair fell

across her shoulder; whatever, she just made me feel as horny as hell and I wanted to rip her clothes off. Which I did, Debra laughing all the while.

And so to bed for some emotionally intense and extremely passionate lovemaking. I'll leave it to you to imagine the details. Or not, if you'd rather.

Later we had a bath together. Not long after Debra moved in I had a new bath fitted, a semi-circular one with gradually sloping sides. Ideal for two sharing. So, sweaty and more than a little smelly from the long ride, we lay together languidly soaping each other. Our bodies were contrasts, slightly milky coffee and creamy pink, small but perfectly formed breasts and a more voluptuous shape, but both us had taut muscles only just concealed under the skin. I could stare at her for hours and barely believe she was mine. The shock and the strangeness of actually finding another woman sexually attractive had long since gone, disappeared in the well of love. To me, Debra naked (and clothed) was the most beautiful sight on earth. But more than just sex, her personality, her humour, her ...

It doesn't matter. Only if you've ever been totally swamped by another person that you want to drown in them can you understand and if you haven't, all the words in the world can't begin to mirror the feeling.

I loved Debra beyond all trace of rationality. She obsessed me. I couldn't imagine a life without her and I didn't want a life without her and, so wonderfully, she felt exactly the same about me.

She told me so as we lay together in the bath, words between us interspersed with little kisses and gentle touches, warm water lapping against us, the warmth of our bodies together, the complete and utter totality of trust between us.

We fell asleep in the water for a little while, then we got out and dried each other, ate something light and drank a glass of wine, and then went back to bed, and all without losing physical contact at any stage, even if just the touch of a hand, and in bed caressing each other's faces.

Is this the happiest moment of my life? I wondered, and told myself that every moment with Debra since we met had been the happiest, my soul mate, my friend, my lover. Repeat Microsoft Word™, fill the page with loving clichés that say I love her I love her I love her ... Thesaurus fill the page with synonyms for besotted, for love, for passion ... Let me die ere I wake for love of her.

Okay, I had to get that out of my system no matter how mawkish or true it may be. But don't go away, there's some violence coming up. I mean, did anyone expect the dark coven not to make it a trap?

A day later we got a call to be at a particular part of Hampstead Heath just after dusk. Mara, the head witch, would be there with one other as a witness. Debra could bring me for the first aid afterwards.

Yeah, right.

Debra, however, went along with it, insisting to me that it would be a simple exchange –her blood for their walking away- and I went along with her and didn't believe a word of it. If I'd known how to get my hands on a gun, and without my hawk-eyed girlfriend finding out, I'd have done it.

At this point Princess Debra takes control of the narrative again.

Of course I was lying to Rachel. But if I told her what I'd planned her body language would have betrayed her. She had to be surprised when it went wrong. I kept up a façade of normalcy, well as normal as I could possibly be under the

circumstances given all that had happened in little more than three days. When all this was over we'd both completely crash and probably have nervous breakdowns.

Other than that, my physical strength seemed back to normal. I've always kept fit and since I first became aware of the Shadows, it's almost become an obsession. Rachel's mentioned that I often work out separately from her. Until these events, she'd never known the half of it. I didn't just work on strength and stamina, muscle building and running mainly, along with some martial arts classes, but also on speed, reaction times and the use of small weapons such as throwing knives and shuriken, the razor-edged Japanese throwing stars. For these I trained with Jake in his lockup where we would also have fights using wooden knives. He always beat me but that was never the issue so much as how skilled I became in defending myself. A trained killer himself, he wasn't teaching me how to kill but how to survive. The most important thing he taught me, however, wasn't any physical skill but an attitude of mind.

To know when to be totally ruthless.

I checked the area out before we made the rendezvous. Not that I actually visited it, but satellite photos available on the Internet -thank you Google Earth- are remarkably detailed. Enough for my purposes anyway. I had to leave the flat for a couple of hours leaving Rachel alone. I didn't like taking the risk but I had to assume that the coven had taken the bait and were trusting me to fulfil my end of the bargain. Why shouldn't I? I had nothing to lose except a small quantity of blood.

Rachel and I arrived just a little before the appointed time. The ground dropped and trees hid us from the road. We wore our leathers to give us some extra protection and not just from the chill night air. I had a pair of what appeared to be pink lensed glasses but which actually gave me a little extra night vision. In the distance were the night time noises of suburban London, closer an owl hooting, the traditional rustling in the undergrowth, the sound of our feet on the path.

We stopped. Our eyes scanned the darkness. And we waited.

But not for long.

Mara and another woman came out of the trees and moved to within fifteen feet of us. Mara was tall and rangy with a thin face. She looked like a dominatrix which was appropriate I suppose. Her friend was the opposite being short and dumpy but her expression was no less pleasant. These two women hated me.

To no great surprise as I'd already seen them, more women -eight in total- came out of the trees behind them. All of them carried knives and, when I turned my gaze back to focus on Mara, partly brought on by a gasp from Rachel, I realised the two women were pointing guns at us.

"You didn't really think we'd let you live, did you?" Mara asked. "I'm going to shoot you but not fatally. No, just enough so you can't put up much of a fight when we strip the flesh from your body and start to eat it in front of you. I think maybe we'll do your lover first."

So predictable, I thought. They had brought this on themselves and now they would pay the price. I prepared myself for the inevitable.

"Your choice," I said, breathed deeply and made my decision, "Remember, Mara, I warned you not to fuck with me."

I'd spoken her name, given the sign.

A large bright red flower opened up where her left eye had been and the back of her head exploded in a mess of blood and bone and brains.

If I'd called her a bitch, she'd have been shot, not fatally, in the shoulder. But after what she'd just threatened to do I'd decided that I wanted her dead.

As she fell backwards, I pulled a pistol from inside my jacket, calmly raised it in a two handed grip and fired at the second woman's chest. The bullet caught her just under the ribs, spinning her round and knocking her to the ground.

The other witches howled like banshees and, suicidally, insanely, and they were insane, charged forward towards us. I pointed my gun at the frontrunner and ...

And then someone switched the fucking lights on.

A helicopter roared overhead and a voice yelled, "Sergeant McLagen stand down! Your mission is over! The rest of you on the ground with hands behind your heads. Anyone standing in five seconds will be shot. That includes you, Affleck! Five! Four!"

And that was all it took.

Moments later I was handcuffed, blindfolded and roughly dragged along by hands clamped under my armpits for about a hundred yards and then pushed into a van where I was thrown none too gently to the floor. The doors slammed and it moved off. An indeterminate amount of time later but not long enough to have left inner London, it came to a halt, I was dragged out and, still blindfolded, hustled along some corridors until I was finally put in a room, forcibly sat down and left there.

Eventually the blindfold was removed and I found myself in a room bare but for two chairs and was sitting in front of a table opposite a woman wearing a grey military uniform bereft of any insignia. Her square face was stern, handsome rather than pretty, her build stocky, hair a solid cropped brown.

Then she smiled and pushed a steaming mug of black coffee towards me.

"Handcuffs?" I said.

"You aren't wearing any," she replied.

"Oh." She was right. The Preternatural Defence Force liked their little tricks.

I said, "Rachel..."

I didn't get any the further. The woman, who never identified herself or even her rank, said, "Is being debriefed in a much more pleasant room than this one and as our guest. She's a civilian and you're a fuckup. Cigarette?"

"Stopped a while back. No thanks. Jake?" They'd called his name. Known about him. How?

She lit up and blew smoke which had to be illegal in a government building and I felt more than a little tempted to change my mind. But I didn't. I knew from previous failed attempts at quitting that you don't smoke the one cigarette, you smoke the thousands that come after. Besides, Rachel would have been hugely disappointed in me.

She said, "We didn't find Sergeant McLagen. We didn't expect to, we didn't look for him, he was never there. The two women had a power struggle and killed each other, the rest have already disappeared. All the evidence will back this up.

"You're a fuckup, Affleck."

"So you keep saying," I answered. "Say it again and I'll probably agree with you. Hell, I already do, I know I am. But why do you say it?"

"How many people have you killed?"

Certain she already knew the answer, I saw no point in keeping silent on the matter.

I said, "Counting the *were* as human and the woman whom I didn't apparently shoot tonight, three. The middle one is a witch and it happened when I was at the coven a few days ago and it was self-defence. The one tonight, she is dead then?"

"Unluckily for her the bullet caught an artery just under the heart. Bled to death internally. A centimetre either way and she'd have survived. We could have you

done for murder. You went there with a gun intending to use it. You set a trap and had Jake McLagen kill for you –that’s also conspiracy to commit murder.”

“It was self defence, just like the last time.”

“You fired first.”

“You want I should have waited until she shot me?” I asked laconically.

The woman shrugged. “Doesn’t matter,” she said, “we both know I’m going to let you go eventually but I’m going to squeeze you first.”

“Why bother?” I asked. “Apart from bloody-mindedness? I’ve given you a dark coven. Maybe the last one in the country.”

“Because, as I have said twice already, you are a fuckup. And three times is the charm. Confirmed. You are an amateur, a lucky amateur who gets some cheap thrills by meddling in the Shadows then pissing off back to your cosy world of academia, drinking cheap wine and fucking women misguided enough to find you attractive. There is no room for amateurs in this game. You are lucky, extremely lucky, you aren’t dead. Tell where you’ve been for the last three days.”

I said, “With the coven after me, Rachel and I took off on my bike and camped out in the country.”

She smiled crookedly. “Really? Then it wasn’t you up in Geordie land mixing with the fairies and that thing which calls itself a Man of Power?”

“You know about them?” I gasped, also thinking that Rachel had never told me that Maggie was one of the fey-folk. (It had to be Maggie because Col sure as hell wasn’t one.) I had a lot of respect for the PDF but I knew, or thought I knew, their limitations. Clearly I’d been completely wrong and likely deliberately misled.

“The Fey we treat as illegal immigrants we can’t be bothered to get rid of. They are few in number, do no harm, and usually work in professions which help people. The thing in Sunderland is another matter. He is so powerful we dare not move against him. We have a ...” She stopped mid-sentence having caught herself on the verge of an indiscretion.

“Split up his component parts,” I suggested.

“Do you always state the obvious? How about we kill them?” she said. “No, we can’t take the risk that it wouldn’t work. Threaten it in any way and it kills. As things are, he stays where he is, for now, and does little damage.”

“Apart from the occasional murder.”

“Four that we know of and none for a while. Given what we do know of his powers he could commit mass murder in seconds. What did he do to you, Debra?”

The abrupt softening of her voice took me by surprise, made me feel vulnerable. I preferred her aggression. I could deal with aggression. I couldn’t deal with pity.

“He healed me,” I said. “For a price, but he healed me.”

“I see. Not a good price, I suspect.”

I said, “Better than death. Just.”

She nodded. “Tell me,” she asked, “how do you feel when you kill someone?”

I shrugged and told her the truth. There was no reason not to.

“How do you want me to feel? When I throttled the werewolf I felt relieved that I’d survived. I didn’t really think about him. At the coven, they attacked me. I wasn’t intending to kill any of them. I just defended myself, didn’t even think about killing, just surviving.

“Tonight, that was deliberate. Yes, I’d set it up with Jake, you know that already. Yes, I went there knowing I’d probably have to kill people. When it happened, the woman, it was her or me, self defence. She had her gun out but when

Mara was shot, she froze. Long enough for me to shoot first. I wanted to stop her. If she died, she died. If she didn't, fine as long she was down and if she had still tried to shoot me I would have shot her again. But Mara was the leader and she had to die. If your people hadn't turned up when they did, Jake and I would have killed anyone else who didn't have the sense run away. Me and Rachel, or them. You tell me what choice I had?"

"That's what you did, not how you felt. Answer the question." Her gaze never wavered from my face as if analysing every fleeting expression.

I shrugged. "I don't care that she's dead, if that's what you mean. Her and Mara made the rules, I just went along with them and they lost. I warned them not to make it a vendetta. If they had been straight with me I would have slit my wrist as they'd asked and we'd have all walked away. If you're expecting me to say I feel guilt you can go fuck yourself. I did what I had to do."

The woman said, "We want you out of this game permanently. Either that or in it completely. Join the PDF. You'd do well with us, you know. You don't scare easily, you don't take shit, and you can kill when you have to without a qualm. Not many people can deliberately kill someone and walk away without being emotionally scarred. But you need discipline and proper training. We pay better than lecturing too."

"I'm out," I said. "I told Rachel that yesterday. I'm out for good. We're getting married and we're just going to lead a nice normal life."

"If you count married dykes as being normal," she said, a caustic sneering tone in her voice.

"I was just starting to like you," I said. "You going to tell me how you knew about all this?"

What she said took my breath away.

"Jake," she answered. "Jake made a deal. He was worried about Ms Green. Not you, her. He hated the idea of an innocent outsider being involved and he wasn't sure he could protect both of you and you come first with him. No accounting for taste, but he loves you. As a friend."

"I feel the same way about him."

"Then do him a favour and never see him again. He's too useful as a freelance and you, Affleck, you just fuck him up."

This time I didn't reply.

Rachel and I had a tearful reunion, then they took us home.

That was it. All over. All we had to do now was get on with the rest of our lives and live happily ever after. And if we had, the story would end here. But, as you know, it didn't. Not that we knew it wouldn't, after all, we had our wedding and our future to plan.

Strange that. For the first time in my life I actually had a future to plan rather than just following my nose, taking the path of least resistance, or whatever. Now I had a life, a future with Rachel, not just a serious affair any more, an actual life. What one of us did would affect the other in a far more serious way than before. It was both frightening and exhilarating at the same time.

We started making plans like two giggling schoolgirls and then remembered we had to tell our families.

9. **In which we get married and live happily ever after.**

The End.

Mum, being hi-tech (and high maintenance, just ask her boyfriends), appeared on the monitor of our pc. Sure we could have used the phone but I preferred the twenty-one inch monitor. The size made it feel more real somehow.

“Good heavens, Debra, what’s wrong with your usual two sentence e-mail? Hello, Rachel. How are you, dear?”

“Fine thanks, Caroline,” Rachel said.

I said, “Mum, we’re getting married, civil ceremony four weeks tomorrow.”

Mum, who has a wide mouth (sexy, according to her boyfriends which I’d really rather not have known) opened it even wider in delight. “Darling, that’s wonderful. I’m so pleased for you both. I take it that this is an invitation.”

“Well, yes,” I said. “You’re really pleased?”

“Yes, I am. Debra, you’re a long way from stupid, you wouldn’t be doing this if it wasn’t a deep and profound commitment on your part and, given Rachel’s background, I’m sure it is just as much on hers. I also think you’re both well suited to each other. You manage to be competitive and simultaneously harmonious in your relationship and that’s rare thing.”

That was very true, we loved trying to top (sexual pun not intended) each other and always laughed when the other one succeeded.

Mum asked, “Rachel, dear, have you told your family yet or am I honoured to be the first to know?”

“You are as it happens and I’m working up to it,” Rachel said.

“It seems sudden, or is it?”

“Yes,” I said, “but kind of inevitable, now.”

“Now?”

“There’ve been a few crises in the last week, heavy stuff, really heavy, and we’ve come out of it stronger.”

“Did you finally sail too close to the edge, Debra?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

Mum knew nothing of the Shadows but did know that there was something else in my life, something that was probably illegal.

I said, “It’s behind me now though, for good. Rachel couldn’t have stood by me any more than she did and she really knows who I am and what’s behind me. No more lies or evasions.”

“Perhaps one day you’ll tell me what it was you’ve been up to. I’m not judgmental, Debra. I’m hardly a paragon of virtue myself.”

Playing the good daughter, I said nothing. My mother is very refined, intellectual, and sophisticated, but a total slut when it comes to sex. I never, never, call on her unexpectedly. Not that it’s even practical to do so these days, but the last time I tried it I found her in bed with two men and a goat.

Okay, I’m lying about the goat.

(Strange, how I write about her as if she was still here. She is so real in my memories.)

She said, “So, a new outfit and an expensive wedding present. What would you like?”

Rachel and I looked at each other. Truthfully we hadn't thought much about presents. We weren't kids, we had pretty much everything we needed.

"Can we get back to you on that," I said, just as Rachel yelled, "Expensive jewellery!" over my shoulder.

Ignoring her, I said, "We're having the invitations done soon and we will send you a proper one. If all goes well with Rachel's folks maybe you could pop down one weekend before and meet them."

"I'd love too. See you both soon."

"Well that was easy," I said.

"We knew it would be," Rachel replied. "Your mother was never going to be difficult, anything but. After all, who wouldn't want a daughter in law like me? My mother, however, is going to have to come to terms with the fact that her eldest daughter is marrying a dyke."

And not for the first time Rachel's mother surprised her. She did scream of course, and threaten to tear her hair out.

"A month! You give me a month's notice you're getting married. On the cheap! You don't give me the chance to organise a proper wedding for my eldest daughter?"

"Mum, I'm getting married to another woman."

"I'd noticed Debra was lacking certain male attributes, Rachel. Fine, you're a lesbian. At least you're getting married, and to such a good looking girl. Pity she's not Jewish and male but the good Lord sends us these tests to try us."

Rachel's father said, "Do I get to give away the bride?"

At which point we looked at each other. We were doing a lot of that when people asked, to us, stupid questions. I'd noticed Rachel's father never asked stupid questions unless he was subtly making a point but Rachel took the question at face value and went with the flow.

"Um, Dad, there isn't a bride. But you can stand next to me as a witness."

"Can I give a speech at the reception?"

"Yes," she said and I realised he'd been asking if we would have a quote normal unquote reception. Neither of us had wanted a lesbian wedding anyway. We weren't making a statement other than that of our commitment to each other. I wasn't against making lesbian statements –march for gay rights? Sure, any time, just gimme a placard to carry- but this was purely personal not political.

"Can I cry?" her mother asked.

"Could I stop you?" Rachel answered.

"Can I wear a big stupid hat?"

Rachel glared at her. "Does this mean you're both okay with this?"

"Of course not," said her mother. "I wanted you to marry a rich Jewish doctor or an accountant –a male rich Jewish whatever, with prospects- not a blonde Aryan shiksa," adding, after a long pause, "however nice she is. Of course we're not happy, we're making the best of a job so bad it would send a stronger woman than I on a round the world cruise to pretend it wasn't happening." She glanced at Rachel's father and said, "That was a hint, you old fart."

"I expect Doctor Francis will treble my dosage of anti-depressants and counsel me against suicide. I will wear black and a veil so dark it will be impossible to see my tears, though the entire room will hear my heart-wracked sobbing. All through the ceremony I am going to imagine Debra with a moustache."

“If you’re having second thoughts you can talk to Uncle Jonas the rabbi. No disrespect, Debra. I do like you better than any of Rachel’s boyfriends that I’ve met and I love you like one of my family. Oh God, you are going to be one of my family!”

I wiped tears from my face and my chest hurt from trying not to howl with laughter. “I love your shtick,” I said and hugged her bony but elegant frame. “You are so funny.”

“Thank you, dear, I try. Now why don’t you try to tell my lesbian daughter that she has a humour bypass when dealing with me.”

“I noticed.”

“I still meant every word but using levity takes the sting out of it.”

“Welcome to the family, Debra,” said her father and wrapped his big strong arms around me. “Despite appearances, we’re not shocked as it’s something we had anticipated. Perhaps it isn’t the path we envisaged Rachel’s life taking but we always wanted her to find someone who would make her really happy and she has. We’ll do our part to make this a wonderful day for you both. Now, your mother would like to meet us I believe. She can stay here, there’s room.”

“Mum actually likes hotels,” I said tactfully. “If next weekend is free she can be down.”

“Excellent. I’ll arrange a dinner for Saturday for the five of us, my treat.”

What can I say? Everybody loved us.

We’d both manage to sort out stuff with work after our impromptu absences which we’d both claimed as family emergencies of the very sensitive kind. Rachel had built up enough credit at her firm to get away with it without even a raised eyebrow. And just try and take action against a respected lesbian lecturer who has an excellent track record and is very popular with the students.

Summer term finished the week before the big event. Rachel had no problem getting three weeks off for the honeymoon and my Open University summer school sessions didn’t start until two weeks after we got back. All we had to do was decide where to go. In the end, we got hold of a globe, Rachel closed her eyes while I spun it and then she stabbed it with a pencil.

As neither of us fancied the middle of the Atlantic and the Azores were technically the nearest pieces of habitable land, we settled on the next nearest which was Lanzarote in the Canary Islands. Perhaps I might be stretching the truth a little about where the pencil actually landed.

“This isn’t magic is it?” Rachel asked.

“No,” I said, though with hindsight I could have been wrong.

We booked a self-catering apartment in a place called Costa Teguisse and then went back to concentrating on getting the wedding sorted out.

The civil ceremony itself wasn’t a problem. We’d booked it and provided the necessary documents and that was that. The reception was the bummer for, oh at least five minutes, until Rachel’s father suggested we take over a Jewish-owned restaurant for the afternoon and evening which was big enough for a hundred guests and dancing. A hundred sounded about right, large enough for a good buzz, not too many that people got ignored. Sixty of Rachel’s family and friends (her father was paying), and forty from my side.

Memo to some people: Do not make gay or lesbian jokes or I’ll break your fingers. Do not make Jewish jokes or I’ll break your legs.

Memo to other people: This isn’t a dyke wedding. Do not stick your tongue down my mother in law’s throat; *my* mother, however, can look after herself. Do not

grope each other in the middle of the dance floor –go to the ladies loo like the rest of us. Do not pick fights with men, they're our friends and relatives as well.

Sorted!

We lay naked in bed and drank a rather good South African cabernet.

Rachel lazily fondled my right breast which was nice but distracting.

“What next?” I asked. “After all the fuss and stuff is over, what next?”

Rachel sat up, reached for her glass, took a drink, and said, “What were you thinking of exactly?”

“Do we stay here, which is nice, or maybe go domestic in suburbia? Would you like children, cats, a dog, more rats?”

“Would you like children, Debs?”

I said, “Never thought I'd be in a position where it would be a possibility. You must have though.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Yes, I always thought I'd have kids sometime. Would you like that?”

“Yes,” I said, “I think so.”

Lesbian mothers. A decade earlier this would have made front page news. Now, if not exactly commonplace, it was rarely mentioned except among those it directly concerned. Amazing how the once unthinkable can so quickly become part of the societal norm.

Rachel said, “Not immediately, though we are pushing thirty, Debs. I wouldn't like to leave it more than a couple of years.”

I rolled over to face her. “That sounds like you're thinking of insemination rather than adopting.”

“Well unless you can grow a cock, which I wouldn't mind but does seem rather unlikely, I would like to have a baby so insemination it is, unless you have any objections.”

“No,” I said. “I suppose I was thinking the same for myself.”

“We don't want to be knocked up at the same time,” Rachel said.

I stared at her and started laughing, she joined in, grabbed me, tickled me and that soon turned into kissing and then something else which, if one of us had had a cock would have resulted in pregnancy. As it was, I grabbed the strap-on from the bedside cabinet and fucked Rachel until she was screaming, or maybe laughing, with her it can be sometimes difficult to tell.

Always count on Debra to lower the tone of things. Hmm, no, that's usually me, but Debra is more upfront sexually than I am. She also tends to be more serious, though everything is relative. Me, I'll say anything to get a cheap laugh. Perhaps it's a defence mechanism or some other kind of mask, or just me just not all of me. It goes without saying that I take my work extremely seriously. I have my professional face which is genuinely a part of me but one I find easy to switch off. Leaving me... Leaving me with what?

What have you learned of me in this narrative so far? Have I learned anything about me? Whatever it is it isn't enough. It's wrong. You've seen me under stress, swallowing several impossible things before breakfast and then experiencing several more. I've crossed alternate worlds, got drunk with a fairy, endured indescribable agony at the hands of a sadistic monster, and watched my girlfriend kill another woman as calmly as she pours a drink and it didn't affect the way I felt about her for a second.

I suppose it was just one more almost unbelievable event and compared to seeing the other reality of the world, like seeing skin ripped away from flesh, not such a big deal. She had good reasons for what she did. In a way it was the easiest thing to swallow.

I don't, I didn't believe in God. I lived in a mechanistic universe of cause and effect always allowing for quantum physics. I didn't believe in fucking magic or fucking ghosts or fucking flying saucers or the fucking Loch Ness Monster or fucking demons or fucking Hell. I didn't believe in heaven or hell or an afterlife. When you died it was like a candle being blown out. You were gone, and gone forever. You never found out what happened next. You never got to the end of the book or saw the next episode of Eastenders or watched your grandchild get married or whatever it is you wanted. You're gone. The flame that's been blown out, that's you that is and there's nothing there any more for ever more.

In my early twenties my doctor put me on heavy duty anti-depressants. I had become obsessed with death, with an eternity of non-existence and the sheer nihilistic pointlessness of it all. I lay awake for hours into the early morning, my mind churning over and over as I dwelled on the unfairness of it all. I knew total despair. Of course it's stupid. I knew that. But you can't rationalise your way out a depression. Everybody dies. It doesn't even matter how long you live because you're still dead for eternity after that. Everything dies including the universe.

But I wore my mask. And I got drunk. And I had sex with men I shouldn't (catching one dose of clap in the process) and took too much cocaine. And eventually I got better. But there's a whole lot of shit between those last two sentences.

My attitude to death hadn't fundamentally changed; I'd just somehow learned to live with it. I got into kickboxing in a big way and even took up fencing again. (I believe I mentioned that I'd almost made the women's Olympic fencing team for the 2000 Olympics. Almost.)

I went for both to an expensive sports club in north London and hadn't stopped going when Debra moved in. She never came with me, partly because she felt we should both have some degree of separate lives and partly because fencing and kickboxing simply weren't her thing. Debra ran and went to various martial arts classes while we both enjoyed swimming, tennis and badminton together.

Like a recovering alcoholic I had learned to live with my secret despair.

And then my world had been ripped open. But had it been changed? Had what I'd learned offered me any hope in my darkness?

Well, no.

Disconcerting as everything had been, there was nothing which could not be explained scientifically. Debra's mindripper –the psychological equivalent of a computer virus- magical or not? Strange, certainly, but just because something doesn't appear to have a scientific explanation doesn't mean there isn't one. I filed it under doubtful.

Everything else didn't even come that close. Alternate worlds have long been theorised so nothing (relatively) strange there. Maggie the fairy admitted there was nothing magical about her people or what had happened to Colin. The Man of Power, the self-confessed demon who actually didn't really remember what he was. He'd joked about being an alien but he might have been right, or he could have come from an alternate world like Maggie. The werewolves were simply a human variant, scientifically explainable.

Okay, the world did happen to be a stranger place than I'd ever imagined but nothing I'd seen admitted the possibility of the existence of God, of a god that cared about the microbes on the skin of the rotten fruit that was our world.

So, there you have it, in the hidden heart of good-time girl Rachel Green, despair; only now repressed, compressed, and buried.

I wish.

Stuff happened.

Professor Caroline Affleck (world authority on Victorian women novelists, author of several published definitive texts on same) met my family and they seemed to get on. Mum and Dad were impressed with her intelligence and sophistication. "Good bone structure," said Momma. I suspected they would get on really well if they only met for special occasions. Debra was praying she wouldn't try and pull at the reception.

We made preparations, wrote our vows (separately so it would be a surprise which could be a hideous mistake but we'd taken so many chances lately that embarrassing ourselves in front of close friends and family seemed relatively minor by comparison), bought new clothes, went to work, had hen parties the week before. I didn't tell Debra how many blokes I snogged and she didn't mention what she got up to and tactfully ignored the posing pouch I sheepishly pulled out of my bra when I staggered into the bedroom around two a.m..

The night before, seeing as it was my (rented) flat, Debra went to stay with friends. My brother and sister came round without their partners and we had a lovely time reminiscing and getting only a little drunk seeing as I didn't want a hangover the next morning.

And so, here's me on my wedding day and all pretty in pink, a long low cut pink dress with broad brimmed pink hat, pink gloves and shoes and black hair in ringlets framing my light brown face. Scared shitless.

God smiled (not that I believed in her, remember?) and gave us a warm sunny day with only the lightest of breezes. A limo, of course, with proud parents and their fixed smiles secretly hoping I'd change my mind at the last minute, earlier would be acceptable, and scream, "I want a man with a circumcised cock not a dyke with a dildo!"

Not a chance.

Sedately up the stone steps to the registry office, just a little late as Debra had agreed I could be and into the room where everyone was waiting and there she was all in white. She couldn't have looked more beautiful if she'd been wearing a wedding dress instead of the trouser suit cut in an X-shape to expose cleavage and navel with twinkling diamond. I walked up to her and she slipped her hand into mine, our fingers intertwined. We smiled at each other, tried not to laugh.

We went through the formalities of signing the paper then held the brief ceremony.

I said, "I wasn't looking for you, Debra, but you found me and loved me and made me realise there was more to me than I knew. I love you, I will always love you, and that's all I have to say." Which must have surprised a lot of people as I usually never shut up.

Debra said, "There is so much I could say to you and you know why I can't say it, but you are beautiful and you are strong. Whenever you need me, I will carry you and when I need you I know you will carry me. I love you beyond sense and beyond reason and I always will."

And then, to loud applause, we kissed and it was over. Debra Affleck and Rachel Green, legally partners.

Now all we had to get through was the reception.

Just one thing first, however.

As we left the registry office I saw Jake standing not far away. His hair had been cut and he wore a smart casual jacket, pale blue shirt and navy trousers. Even his black shoes were shining rather than scuffed.

I ran up to him and said, "Thank you for being her friend," and kissed him on the cheek. "Come to the reception. Please," I said.

"No. Thank you. You are both lucky people. Have a good life." Then he turned and was gone.

When we got into the limo, Debra found a small gift wrapped parcel which turned out to be five thousand pounds worth of gold Kruger rands.

"An emergency stash," she said. "Always practical."

"Be glad it wasn't a gun. I don't think Jake is the flowers and chocolates type."

Look, you all know what wedding receptions are like and ours wasn't that much different, just a little less structured. Debra's mother made a very witty speech apologising for inflicting her wayward daughter on the respectable Green family while making it absolutely clear how proud she was of Debra's life choices, including having the sense to fall in love with me. My father was his usual dignified self as he professed his love for his idiosyncratic eldest daughter. My mother said that if I had to marry a lesbian it was at least a lesbian who was going to be a professor one day just like her distinguished mother. My brother and sister did a double act at my expense. Then Debra and I stood up and thanked everybody and that was that apart from the drinking, dancing, and socialising which went on till late.

Afterwards Debra and I went back to the flat and just crashed out after making a token gesture at making love before we realised neither of us had the energy. We made up for it the next morning and spent the day in bed.

Ah sod it, let's cut to the honeymoon. No, not for lurid descriptions of passion but because that is where we began to realise what the gift was that the Man of Power had given us and, in keeping with legends concerning gifts from *others*, it was not without ambiguity.

Like a double-edged sword, it cut both ways.

11. Their Lesbian Honeymoon Hell! Desperate Dykes Defy Disaster! Plus exclusive lesbo pix! (The S*n! First With The News That Matters To You!)

We got the nine o'clock in the morning jet out of Gatwick for Lanzarote and the flight took four hours which, the Canaries being in the same time zone, meant one in the afternoon. The plan was for a pleasant, lazy, uncomplicated, and not overly expensive two weeks during which we could give some serious thought as to our joint future together; that and to try and get what had happened to us into some kind of perspective.

I had no reason to think that this wouldn't be the case. The only thing which concerned me, which I hadn't mentioned to Debra, was that I'd begun seeing things. No, not *things* –I wasn't seeing dead people- rather every so often and usually out of the corner of my eye, I'd catch sight of something that looked like golden sparkles. They could be anywhere, near a building, around a person, in mid-air, and then it would disappear as soon as I tried to focus on it. I'd already made an appointment with an optician for after the honeymoon. It probably wouldn't be anything important, something an antibiotic could quickly clear up.

We didn't have much with us in terms of luggage. Yes, I know that might sound strange but both Debra and I were experienced travellers who actually learned from our experiences. Where we were going would be hot and dry and we wouldn't be trying to impress anyone. We didn't need a lot of clothes and even if we did need something we could get it there. This was a major tourist area, not the back of beyond. We had our Ipods and small speakers, a portable DVD player and about thirty movies, plus the usual basic essentials of makeup, first aid kit, and sun tan lotion –hey, I'm black (well, light brown) but I burn.

The flight went smoothly and we had an aisle seat and the one next to it and switched periodically. Getting to the toilet without climbing over people is more important than the view. I mean, what's to see out of the window when you're thirty thousand feet up and flying over the ocean? The answer is clouds, water, blue sky, and bugger all else apart from the wing on fire maybe but that didn't happen to us. Nothing so mundane.

We arrived on time, the luggage came through quickly, we had to wait a little while for a taxi, in fact about as long it took to get from the airport to Costa Teguisse, a little over twenty minutes.

All the photographs and stuff you see of Lanzarote don't prepare you for your first impression of the russet, almost vegetation-free, gravel landscape.

"It's a fucking pit-heap," I whispered to Debra in the back of the taxi.

"There's more to it than this," whispered the know-all back to me. "Besides, it's an acquired taste."

"How would you know?" I asked, neither Debra nor myself ever having been here before.

"My friend Angie told me," Debra replied. "She loves it here, comes twice a year."

"If that's all then maybe she should find a new lover," I said, making a cheap and easy sexual crack.

Debra closed her eyes and didn't speak again until we arrived a few minutes later.

Our apartment lay within a modern complex set back and hidden from the main road in a quieter part of the centre of town. It had a swimming pool but no other sporting facilities which suggested the complex itself would be relatively quiet. The apartment itself was up a flight of steps. It proved to be airy and light with white painted walls, a compact modern kitchen, two bedrooms (one with a double bed, excellent) and a secluded veranda with a table and a couple of chairs. We found the usual notices about leaving the place tidy and leaving any used coffee and whatnot for the next guest, and a complimentary bottle of Lanzarotian rioja on the kitchen table which was a nice gesture.

I looked at Debra who nodded. "Put the kettle on," she said, "I need a caffeine fix."

We unpacked, showered, changed into t-shirt, shorts, and sandals, had coffee and then went shopping. We found a Netto just around the corner, bought a few basics like butter, bread, jam, cheese, chorizos, roasted peanuts, milk, several bottles of wine, some bottled water, and a few pastries to eat now which would keep us going till the evening. Over the road from the supermarket we noticed a car rental place and a cyber-café. Debra's eyes lit up at the sight of the latter so I jerked her hand and said, "No. We phone our families and that is it. We do not check our e-mail, or log on to our various favourite sites. It's strictly you and me, remember?"

Debra cocked her head to one side in that goofy adorable way she has and grinned. "Course I do, babe. Let's go home, eat, and have a lie down."

"A nap?"

"I didn't say that."

Let's have some dots.

Dot. Dot.

"Oh fuck, yeah!"

Dot.

We sussed out the place quite quickly. From our apartment we could walk leisurely to pretty much anywhere in the centre within fifteen minutes. There was pleasant buzz about the place, lively without being claustrophobic. The evening cooled down a bit from the hot day which was generally pleasant until late evening when it started to feel a little chilly.

We hired a car and spent the next couple of daytimes exploring the relatively greener north end of the island where the spectacular cliffs were. Orzola, a small fishing village, wasn't much to look at but it boasted a superb fish restaurant where we ate a rather large lunch with wine and had to go back early to sleep it off. There were two amazing volcanic cave systems and a café built into top of a sheer four hundred metre plus cliff. The café had been designed by the island's world famous artist Cesar Manrique whose name and works are impossible to escape from on the island so we also visited his museum which wasn't far away.

Shopping, of course, at an incredibly lively all day market further inland and a much smaller one on the Friday evening in Costa Teguisse, both good fun with lots of stuff from Africa, including fake label items. We bought t-shirts, ear rings, bracelets, and a couple of carved animals, the final items probably ending up in a charity shop within weeks of our return home.

Oh God, this is turning into what we did on our holidays. Look, I'm setting the scene. Disaster is going to strike very soon. Be a little patient.

From late afternoon we tended to laze on patio, which fortuitously caught the sun around that time, dozing, drinking tea or coffee or soft drinks, chatting idly, just

chilling before a wake up dip in the seawater pool –now that was really chilling- to get the adrenalin going for a night on the town. Sure we got chatted up by guys but always let them down gently without resorting to French kissing each other, though sometimes a firm grip round the balls was needed just for a final emphasis.

All in all we enjoyed a few really lovely days, taking lots of photographs and storing up memories for future fond reminiscences in our later years.

Or so we believed.

The following Wednesday we set off to explore the southern half of the island. We'd done some research and had an idea what we'd find but we decided to play it loose and check out anything which caught our fancy, except for Timanfaya, the volcanic region which deserved a special trip on its own. Pity we never got to see it.

As usual we set off around ten, detouring around the capital Arrecife which Debra had been warned was a black hole. Once you get on the traffic system there you can never find your way out again. We called in at Puerto del Carmen, Lanzarote's busiest resort, which it was so we didn't stay long and stopped off for coffee at Puerto Calero. This proved to be a small expensive place with a large harbour packed with expensive boats and an expensive (to take a trip in) submarine for the tourists. Bars and cafes crowded the promenade and, the sun being extremely hot, we went and sat in the shade and ordered two coffees, in Spanish. I had a fair working knowledge of the language and Debra could get by if I wasn't around. It always impressed the locals, especially if you were English as they never expect us to speak any language but our own.

So we sat there in our shorts and shades watching the people parade up and down in the hot sun and half listened to trite multi-lingual conversations being carried on around us, predominantly in English but with large smatterings of Spanish and German.

"You are such a fucking snob, Rachel Green," Debra said in an amused tone as she read my expression, reaching across the table to squeeze my fingers.

"Took you long enough to work that out," I said. "Raised that way."

"So, you're slumming being with me?"

I looked at her open grin and said, "Fuck off, you cow. No sex for you tonight."

I confess I mouthed the last part.

Debra laughed and so did I. Yes, I was a bit of a snob, probably one of the reasons I didn't really take to Jake. Couldn't understand, at first, what she saw in him. But it's a reflex action on my part. Once I get to know someone and decide I like them I couldn't care less what their background is. Some of my best friends are working class. Well, their parents are.

Sorry. I'm not proud I think that way but I do. After all, how many people judge me by the fact that I'm not white? And then by the fact that I'm Jewish? Snob is, after all, just a relatively polite word for bigot. I know my personality and looks attracted Debra to me but sometimes I wonder what it is that kept her interested when she found out what I was really like.

(Debra: Because I love you, warts and all, you silly cow. Yes, among your many but forgivable faults, you are a snob but you never really let it show. It's a knee-jerk reaction on your part, probably because of the way you were raised. Your mother, adorable as she is, would have had a fit if I'd been a butch plumber rather than an attractive, ambitious and charming academic and intellectual from a respectable family.)

We'd been there for half an hour and were talking quietly when a hand fell lightly on my arm. I looked up and saw a slim fair haired attractive woman in her early forties.

"Hello," she said, "I'm Helena. Look, and please correct me if I'm wrong in which case I apologise most profusely, but you are ..."

"Gay?" Debra interrupted.

"Yes." She smiled, said, "Gaydar," then shook her head and added, "Just observant about body language. To be honest, if you know what to look for, you two stand out a mile –the oblique smiles, the casual affectionate gestures, the lowered eyes."

"Ah," Debra said, "and here's me thinking we weren't obvious."

"This isn't a place that gay women tend to come to. Anyway, my partner and I—" she gestured to an equally attractive brunette a little older than her, "—were wondering if you'd like to join us."

"We're exclusive," Debra said.

Helena made a clucking sound. "Oh, nothing like that," she said emphatically. "So are we. We've been together for ten years. No, it would just be nice to have some company that shares certain attitudes."

Debra looked at me.

"I was getting bored with you anyway," I said.

Helena laughed.

"We'd love to," Debra said and smiled warmly at her.

So we did.

Helena and her partner Maureen proved to be quite charming. In many ways they were almost an older version of us. Both were successful professional people – Helena, a senior editor with a prestigious publishing house and Maureen was a partner in a well regarded public relations firm. They were delighted to find out we'd just got married, something they hadn't got round to doing because, after being together for so long, they felt there wasn't any real urgency.

"How does it make you feel?" Maureen asked.

I glanced at Debra who just shrugged, effectively passing the lead over to me.

I said, "Excited. We're planning our future together. Because we're married or are civil partners whatever the law calls it, we're building our future from the ground up, not just letting it happen."

Maureen and Helena exchanged glances and sweet smiles.

Maureen said, "You are so lucky. Society is so much more tolerant than when we first accepted our sexuality. I'm talking long before we met each other. It wasn't easy but then I don't have to tell you that, especially not a social sciences lecturer. You're both lucky your families accepted you."

Debra said, "It's never easy for any teenager to accept that they're gay, or at least to come out about it."

I wondered if this was a good time to tell them I'd only recently converted. I'd stopped minding when people called me a lesbian but the truth was that I was a Debrasexual rather than homosexual.

Helena said, "If this conversation is going where I think it is, why don't we retire to the boat for some privacy?"

Boat? They had a boat?

Maureen explained, "A friend of ours owns a motor launch which he keeps here and he offered us the use of it. Normally we're a secluded cottage and chianti in

Umbria type of couple but this seemed just too good to miss. Does the sound of pasta and good wine appeal?"

Our four eyes lit up. Every time! What is nicer in the world than pasta, salad, and good wine? And good company, of course.

Debs and I had struck it lucky. The motor launch was spacious without seeming to be huge, enough for the four of us to sit around a table on deck, under a sun shade –that sun was damn hot- eating fresh pasta with fried garlic and prawns and salad drizzled over with top quality olive oil and accompanied by an excellent chianti.

We all quickly became the best of friends as we told each other stories from our past, including my heterosexual escapades. They stated that Debra and I had to be the most romantic lesbian couple they'd ever met and admired me for being so brave to follow my heart rather than take the easy way out. Lord, I love praise, especially when it's deserved.

Before we knew it it was nearly five o'clock.

Helena said, "We were planning on heading over to Tenerife tomorrow, staying the night and coming back late the day after. The boat sleeps four if you're interested."

Sounded good to me. I really liked Maureen and Helena.

"You can bring the wine, if you'd like," Maureen said solving the problem for us of how to show how much we appreciated their hospitality.

Sold.

We went back to Costa Teguse and bought several bottles of the best red wine we could find, mostly Spanish but with some bottles of Australian shiraz. They'd even teach us how to drive the boat. This was going to be fun.

And it was.

Until the disaster.

Until the disaster which put paid to all Debra's good intentions of putting the Shadows behind her.

We arrived at Puerto Calero bright and early the next day carrying a bag of hand luggage each and three heavy carrier bags full of wine bottles. Maureen and Helena were just coming back with some extra shopping –fresh vegetables from the look of it. We all put our bags down for greetings and cheek kissing. It's really nice to make new friends and these two women were delightful intelligent company and it was clear they thought exactly the same of us. This was turning into the best honeymoon I'd ever had.

What?

The weather was typically Lanzarotian or Canarian, hot and sunny with a light breeze. The sea was a little choppy but it didn't bother either of our two friends. Or me come to that. Debra, however, it took by surprise and within ten minutes she was hanging over the rail throwing up breakfast and what looked like the partially digested remains of last night's supper –she'd made the mistake of eating fried squid. I dutifully stayed by her side, making sympathetic noises and sure that she didn't fall overboard.

After about an hour she gave a thunderous and absolutely disgustingly smelly belch right, and accidentally I'm sure, in my face and said, "I feel better now."

"I'm so pleased," I said, trying to show it.

Several hours later we moored at a marina in Puerto Rico on Gran Canaria to top up with fuel. Maureen had shown Debra and myself how to drive the boat which, given

that we didn't need to break, reverse, do a three point turn or stop at traffic lights every two hundred yards, meant it wasn't too difficult to learn and was actually after about ten minutes, and because of the scenery (sea, with odd bumps of islands and the occasional ship in the distance), quite boring. Fortunately it had an autopilot so we four spent most of the time sunbathing naked which felt really quite liberating. And, no, neither Maureen nor Helena made either the slightest inappropriate gesture or spoken word. They were exactly as they appeared, a mature and content lesbian couple with whom Debra and I hoped to build a friendship when we returned to London. Had events taken a different turn then they would have been ideal role models for us.

But, alas ...

An hour on land for coffee and a late light lunch then back on board for the final stretch to Tenerife. It took less than an hour to reach the island which was, more or less, one giant volcano and looped round the northern tip to stop on the western side at Puerto de la Cruz, a quite enchanting place, for the evening. The four of us had a quick look round before, as dusk was falling, finding what looked like a good and expensive restaurant not far from the harbour.

We pigged out on fish dishes and wine. Anyone who goes to the Canaries and doesn't eat a lot of fish and seafood, all freshly caught from the Atlantic, is an idiot. And anyone who doesn't like wine is a moron. Wine is a wonderfully social drink to be shared and enjoyed with other people, to be discussed and argued over –Debra just does not particularly like Italian wines, far preferring the New World vintages from Australia, New Zealand, and Chile. She'll accept Californian and, grudgingly, South African if there's nothing else. I, on the other hand ...

But let's not go there. What we did on our holidays is one thing, especially as it builds up to dot dot dot. But a discussion of wine snobbery begins to seem like gilding the lily. So, suffice to say that we had a great evening, rolled merrily back to the boat and slept the sleep of the well wine and dined in our bunks.

And the next day we went to hell.

I've already mentioned this golden speckling I'd been intermittently seeing. Since arriving in Tenerife it seemed to be getting worse. There was nothing I could put my finger on because it was always out of the corner of my eye. I really would have to visit the opticians when we got back.

Another sunny day and we set sail, or would have had we sails to set rather than an engine to switch on. The plan was simple. We follow the coast round to the southernmost point then head north east back to Puerto Rico, stock up on fuel, take a short break, then full speed for Lanzarote.

The coastline was spectacular, so many tall grey cliffs with sea crashing against them, raw and rugged and speckled intermittently (yes, again) with gold. But they were as nothing to the spectacular cliffs of Los Gigantes which were all of five hundred metres high plummeting jaggedly to the sea.

I had the wheel when we came across them and awesome as they were I nearly lost my breakfast. Depending on how I looked at them, they were being showered with gold. It was the most intense, the most visible display I'd ever seen.

I glanced at Debra who happened to be standing next to me and she seemed as awestruck as I was.

I said, "Debra, do you see what I see?"

"The Man of Power's gift," she answered. "I think we should leave here and leave quickly."

I gunned the engine and the boat surged forward like a giant leaping frog.

“Rachel, what the hell are you doing?” shouted Maureen from the deck. “We’re not in any hurry.”

Holding onto the upper deck rail, Debra said quickly, “We haven’t mentioned this because we thought you’d think we were a bit nuts, but Rachel has psychic flashes. Not very often but they are usually pretty accurate and she’s getting some extremely bad vibes.”

Bad vibes? Bad vibes? I was panicking like fuck! I had to get us away from this place because something really bad was about to happen.

We nearly made it too.

Suddenly there was stillness and then a vibration in the sea. I didn’t look back but I knew what was going to happen.

Hell, of course I looked back, I couldn’t help myself. I cut the power to the engine and let the boat drift to a halt as I turned round and stared.

As the cliffs of Los Gigantes walked into the sea.

“Fuuuuuuck!” I screamed, switched the engine back on and headed south like a bat out of hell. The boat began to judder and Maureen pushed me away and took the wheel.

I was thinking: we’re dead we’re dead we’re fucking dead.

Behind us millions of tons of rock and soil descended into the ocean.

Listen, the Canary Islands are basically fucking volcanoes and not fucking extinct ones either. They are pimples sticking up out of the Atlantic ocean which means the sea gets very deep very quickly so rocks falling into the sea drop down deep which means the sea rises sharply causing a massive fucking tidal wave.

I remembered reading somewhere that there was a good chance a landslide on one of the Canary Islands –and right that moment I was bloody sure it was Tenerife– would cause a tsunami which would be so big as to devastate the east coast of America within hours and then come back and do the same to north west Africa, southern Europe and the southern part of Britain –and that’s after drowning most of the Canaries.

Helena was getting hysterical, clearly thinking what I’d been thinking.

“Where can we go that’s safe?” she yelled as she clung onto a rope while the boat rode the waves.

“Australia would be good,” I said without letting brain connect to mouth. It happened to be true, just not immediately practical.

Maureen shouted down to her, “I’m going to try and get us round the other side of the island which should give us some cover. If we make it that far. Then the eastern side of Gran Canaria.”

Sounded like a plan to me. Only one thing: would the ocean let us do it?

Behind us the rocks still thundered into the sea and, as it turned out, several miles of coastline changed drastically in minutes. Puerto de Santiago had been obliterated at the very beginning with God knew how many dead. Some boats managed to make it out to sea, but very few.

Although we were way past the falling rocks the sea still hit us sideways. We all grabbed onto something to stop ourselves from falling and maybe going overboard. Maureen turned the boat into the swell trying to keep heading south.

Somehow she managed and by the time we reached Playa de las Americas twenty five miles away we could see in the distance ahead a flotilla of boats, launches, yachts, powerboats and the like, all heading south and round the island.

Helena, a little calmer now, had switched on the radio to a BBC station. Nearly an hour had passed.

We heard, "Information is still coming in but it would appear that this will not cause the tsunami which had been forecast to devastate the eastern seaboard of the United States, nor will it return to hit the Atlantic coasts of Europe. It could be a serious danger to any shipping in the mid-Atlantic but it is not, as we understand it, a major catastrophe on the lines of the south east Asian tsunami of Boxing Day two thousand and four."

Just as well as I'd damned near pissed myself.

We headed back to Lanzarote on the route we'd planned. Nothing untoward happened except that the four of us were considerably subdued. Our conversation was muted and infrequent. The radio was on the whole time and we listened to stories of the destruction of several ships. A handful of idiots rowing the Atlantic also died. The wave trashed the eastern coasts of the islands of El Hierro, La Palma, and La Gomera on the way out, then caught the western edges on the way back and had a second go at Tenerife. By then as many people as possible had been evacuated to safer regions but hundreds still died, adding to the thousands already lost. The tides were higher on Gran Canaria's western coast by several feet while Fuerteventura and Lanzarote escaped entirely.

It was after nine when we arrived at Puerto Calero. We said our goodbyes and drove back to Costa Teguisse where, after phoning relatives and friends to let them know we were okay—we didn't tell them then that we'd been caught up in it—we went straight to bed and slept badly.

Bleary eyed, Debra sat down at the patio table opposite me. I'd been up for an hour and was on my second mug of coffee. A couple of tiny ants were foraging on a plate littered with the remains of a croissant.

"You never said," she said, pulling the 'I heart Lanzarote' t-shirt down over her flat stomach.

"Thought I had an eye condition," I said. "And you never said either."

"Ditto."

"So what is it?" I asked.

Debra rubbed her eyes, thrust her head and shoulders back and stretched. She yawned. "Like I fucking know," she said.

"A gift," I said.

"Stopped us getting killed. A gift then. What's on the radio?"

"Nothing much more than we already know. A minor earthquake just offshore triggered it. Not enough to do serious damage. Maybe about three and a half thousand dead including those caught out at sea. There's been footage of the devastation on TV. We were lucky to escape."

Debra breathed heavily through her nose. I could tell she wished she had a cigarette.

"We can see," she said, "something. But what is it? Before, I've seen little bits on people and buildings."

"Me too," I said interrupting her. "None of them seemed to be bad omens."

"Some kind of energy field then?" Debra suggested. "It was fucking intense yesterday."

"What kind of energy?" I wondered.

"I dunno," she said. "Maybe it's quantum particles or something."

“Debra, darling,” I said as if speaking to a slow child. “You can’t see quantum particles because they travel faster than light.”

“I know that. Maybe he’s letting us see what they might look like. Not the thing itself but a reflection, an image, but not the real thing even though that, effectively, it is the real thing.”

Oddly that made sense. I’m not saying I understood it but it made sense. “Not all quantum particles,” I said, “just those having an effect.”

Debra said, “Except quantum particles don’t have an effect on anything. There are probably millions of them shooting through us as we speak.”

“So they aren’t quantum particles. Fine. They’re an energy source which hasn’t been discovered yet but for the sake of convenience we can call them quantum particles.”

I’m not sure if that made any sense either but Debra said, “Okay, we’ll call them quantum particles even though they probably aren’t. After all, what’s in a name?” Then she fell silent and after a little while said, “What if they show magical activity? What if it wasn’t a natural event?”

I left Debra stuck on fantasy island and closed my eyes.

This was Saturday. Unbelievably we had five more days left of our holiday as we weren’t due to fly home until two on Thursday afternoon. We felt listless and not a little depressed.

The atmosphere in the resort was subdued. Wherever we went, conversations were quiet, parents shushed noisy children, televisions in bars and cafes constantly showed pictures of the devastation on the islands and interviews with survivors. Spanish channels in particular were full of it. We’d been there, we were survivors too, but somehow we just didn’t want to talk about it. We called Maureen and Helena to check how they were doing. They were going home, catching an earlier flight even if it meant losing money. They just wanted to leave.

We could have done the same but somehow we didn’t. We spent daytimes lazing around the apartment –sunbathing on the patio, reading, listening to music, watching DVDs, swimming in the pool. We only made love once during that time, slowly, very gentle and tender and reassuring, our climaxes not a violent release but a gentle easing, soft sighs not ecstatic moans. We spent a whole afternoon in bed and we were the only people in the world. Nothing else mattered, nothing else existed, only the tenderness of our touching, only the love.

Afterwards I held Debra as she cried, her soft tears wetting my breasts. She cried out of guilt at surviving, of guilt at not being able to do anything to help, of guilt for being alive and loved. She never spoke these things aloud but I knew how she thought.

How do you perceive her, here in this narrative? Have you understood her nature or seen only her predisposition to violence? Have you attributed the traditional dominant male role to her? If so, you are wrong. It’s Debra who is the nurturer and the protector, her violence is always defence not offence. It’s me who is the more aggressive of the two of us.

What can I say? I’m a lawyer and she’s a teacher and there are good reasons for our choices of profession. They define us as people far more than our social behaviour does. They are who we are at the core. I wish I...

Hell, I don’t know why I’m writing this. I know who I believe I’m writing it to, but do you exist? Will you exist? Will you understand? Who are you really?

Leaving three thousand dead behind us, we fly home and get on with our lives.
As if nothing has happened.