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For my partner, Lou. Your help, love and encouragement are my inspiration.

The Dalton Family Saga:

Book One: The Road to Dencotte House

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Ego dilecto meo et dilectus meus (I am my beloved and my beloved is mine)

Song of Solomon 6:3

England - 1950

9:10 Train from Ambleton to London

The lush green English countryside rolled past the train window. Beth looked out, her mind drifting to the circumstances that had brought her to this journey. Elizabeth Bentley was born to Edward and Janet Bentley in a small village outside Cambridge called Middleford. She was young girl when her mother died and Edward was left to raise Beth alone. Edward never got over the death of his wife.

Father and daughter were inseparable. Edward was a professor of ancient history at Cambridge University. As academics were never paid as much as they should be , they didn't have much money, but they were comfortable enough. Unlike many girls of the time, Edward insisted on educating his daughter to a very high standard. Beth was an avid reader, devouring any books her father brought home. She hoped one day when she was old enough, she would gain a scholarship to attend university just like her father. She was 16 years old when she received a telephone call from her father's university to tell her he had been rushed to hospital. By the time she got there Edward had passed away from a massive heart attack. Tears came to Beth's eyes as she remembered the pain of that day.

"Have your tickets ready please!" called the conductor from further down the carriage.

Beth wiped away her tears quickly as she fumbled for her ticket. The conductor looked down at the short blonde; she looked sad and quite alone.

"Going all the way to London Miss?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, not really wanting to get involved in any conversation.

"That's a long journey from Ambleton; make sure you get a hot cuppa tea from the refreshment carriage."

"Thank you but I have all I need here."

"Very good, Miss," he said as he moved onto the next passenger.

Knowing she didn't have money to waste on refreshments Beth had packed sandwiches and a flask of tea. As she poured a cup of tea she thought back again to the day everything changed.

After she left the hospital with only a small box of her father's belongings she felt like the world had ended. She had nothing and no one. Once she got home, Mrs. Nelson from next door had cooked her a meal and sat all evening with her. She couldn't eat; she felt numb. When she lay in bed that night, unable to sleep, she thought to her father's box from the hospital. Beth got up and rummaged through the box until she found her father's gold pocket watch. It was her father's most treasured possession, a gift from his late wife Janet, when they were first married. As Beth lay back onto the bed she opened the watch and read the inscription as she had many times before. It read in Latin - ego dilecto meo et dilectus meus, which meant I am my beloved and my beloved is mine, taken from the Song of Solomon in the King James version of the Bible. As Beth fell asleep that night, clutching the watch to her heart, she prayed there was someone who would feel that sort of perfect love for her as her parents had felt for each other.

Beth's father had left very little money, just enough for the funeral with a bit left over. Of course, Edward hadn't counted on dying in his early 50's. He had assumed that although he didn't have much to leave his daughter, he would see her married to some nice young man she knew from around the university campus. So this left Beth quite alone and penniless. She remembered as the day of the funeral arrived, Mrs. Nelson and her husband from next door had been a great support to her, in arranging the funeral and the ladies of village made sure there was a nice spread for after at the church hall. As everyone was leaving the graveyard a middle-aged couple came up to her.

"Excuse me, you don't know us but we're your Aunt Ada and Uncle Jim."

Beth had heard her father talk of his brother James on occasion. It seemed that the brothers had a falling out in their 20's; something to do with missing money from their mother's house Beth seemed to recall. Although her father wouldn't talk about him much, Uncle Jim was so like her father tall with a dark receding hairline. Edward had always remarked that he was delighted Beth took after her mother who had been short, petite in stature with the most beautiful blonde hair and sea green eyes. Beth wondered if Uncle Jim's personality matched up to her wonderful father's. Aunt Ada was a short, stoutish woman, wearing very old fashioned matronly clothes. She seemed to have a harshness to her face that Beth couldn't put her finger on.

Her newly discovered Aunt and Uncle had offered her a place in their home in the village of Ambleton. Beth talked it over with Mrs. Nelson and it was decided for a girl alone in her position, there wasn't really much choice. And so Beth left her beloved village of Middleton and went to stay with her Aunt and Uncle. They lived in what had once been a lovely country cottage, but it obviously had lacked care and attention for many years. It also became apparent very quickly that Uncle Jim was nothing like her father. He didn't work, he bought and sold whatever he could get hold of, which had usually fallen off the back of a lorry. Aunt Ada took in sewing and the odd mending jobs.

The cottage had a small allotment on which they grew some vegetable's to supplement their rations. Beth was amazed that Uncle Jim could come from the same family as her father. Her grandmother, she knew, had been a very

respectable woman, and her Grandfather an Army officer. Yet they were living hand to mouth and Beth at first did not understand why they had offered to take her in when they had so little themselves. This was very different to the comfortable middle class life she had led.

As she recalled the day she learned of their true intentions, she thought. 'I was such a fool not to see it before.'

Over breakfast one morning Aunt Ada said, "Beth I think it's time we went into town to sort out your banking."

"What do you mean?"

"Well now your living with us it would be best if your uncle and I managed your inheritance, that way your board and lodging can be paid for and we will give you a small allowance every month. A young girl knows nothing of managing money."

Beth was stunned and all at once realised why she was there. They assumed that the young girl had an inheritance. "Aunt Ada, my father left no money. After his funeral was paid for there was nothing left."

She could remember the explosion that then ensued between her Aunt and Uncle, to this very day. They hadn't counted on this. Beth was treated like a pariah after that. She was allowed to stay, but was to become almost like a servant. Beth attended to all the sewing work that came in for her Aunt and she was also sent out to work as a cleaner at the local minister's house. She felt like a modern day Cinderella and felt trapped. Beth had nothing and no one and no other choices.

As the months turned into two years, Aunt Ada became rather too fond of gin to ease her sorrows. This gave her an even crueller streak than she already had. Uncle Jim barely noticed the girl was alive, which suited Beth quite well, but Aunt Ada could say the most cutting things to her and the worst were directed towards her father. She missed him so much, and some nights would cry herself to sleep clutching his pocket watch.

The only bright spot was getting out of the house during the day for Reverend Clement. He was a kindly man who would take the time to talk to Beth through the day. He had heard of the young girl's father and had indeed read a few of his published works. He knew what her Aunt and Uncle were like and the circumstances she found herself in. Reverend Clement did the kindest thing anyone had ever done for her. He paid Beth a little over her wages, so she could save the extra without her Aunt finding out, so when she had enough she could start a new life. Reverend Clement had family connections in London and said if Beth could save enough to start her off he would see about finding her a position in London. Beth could get out, and could be her own person. It took her a year but finally at the age of 19, she finally had enough to leave.

Reverend Clement had found Beth a position as an office junior at his cousin's firm. She had a letter of introduction and all that was needed was to have a quick interview when she arrived then start the next day. He also arranged a room at a boarding house, which would pay for when she arrived. It was run by a former member of his church and would be a very respectable establishment for a young, single girl to reside.

Beth couldn't begin to thank him enough when she said goodbye to him for the last time and promised to write to him when she was settled. That night at home she went to her room early and packed all her things without Aunt Ada knowing. The next morning Beth came down the stairs case in hand.

"Were do you think you're going girl! You'll be late for work!"

"I'm leaving," Beth said with more confidence than she really felt, and marched out the door. Aunt Ada ran after her squawking.

"You have nothing and no one girl! You'll be back! We've done everything for you, ungrateful child!"

Beth kept my eyes ahead as she marched down to the station for my 9:10 passage to freedom.

That is how Beth found herself on the train travelling to what she hoped would be a much better life. Loud shouts broke her from her memories.

"Last stop, Miss!" shouted the conductor. Beth was here finally and London awaited her.

"Get out you incompetent imbecile!" Alex shouted. "You'll be paid till the end of the week. Get out of my sight!" ' Good god! Alex thought. Can anyone save me from idiots!' The now ex secretary, had forgotten to put an appointment in the book, for a meeting with a wealthy supporter. When Alex got a phone call to inquire if a representative of the charity was indeed coming to the meeting, the secretary got a taste of the foundation chairman's temper. Alex hated to be embarrassed like that. A stickler for time and responsibility, Alex expected the same in others. The phone was quickly grabbed out of the cradle and a number dialed.

"Good morning, Woodward residence. How may I help you?"

"May I speak to Mrs. Woodward please? Alex Dalton calling." Her anger was slowly dissipating.

"Of course Lord Dalton, one moment."

Alex waited a couple of minutes then a lilting female voice asked, "How may I help my Lord Dalton this fine morning?"

"Very funny Lotty." Alex replied.

"I need your help; can you look out for a new secretary for me? I'm not using that agency again. They send me nothing but idiots!"

Lotty sighed, "Not another Alex! How many have you gone through. I think you need to be a little more patient with them."

"I can do patience but I cannot work with idiots. You must be able to find someone with connections at the orphanage?"

Her friend, Charlotte Woodward did some work with an organisation that helped find work for young girls getting too old for the orphanage system.

"I'll keep my ear to the ground, but some of my girls I think would find it difficult to cope with you My Lord." Lotty said with a sarcastic note to her voice.

"Well please try, for me?"

"I will of course. Are you still coming to dinner this evening? Poni says she has an old bottle of port with your name on it."

"I'll be there, but I may pop into the club later."

"We'll see you at 7:30 then. Bye Alex."

"See you later Lotty."

Beth marched down the street, suitcase in one hand and a piece of paper with the address details of her interview in the other. Butterflies were whizzing around in her stomach. She didn't have any experience in the workplace but she had helped her father catalogue his work. She was well educated and a very hard worker, but was so glad Reverend Clement had pulled a few strings for her. It was never easy for a young girl to get her foot on the ladder. Beth finally arrived at the address on the paper. She was in plenty of time, and hoped that looked good. Beth watched the workers that were entering and leaving the office building. "They look so smart, I am so glad I took the time to freshen up at the train station toilets!"

Beth plucked up her courage and walked into a large foyer with a large desk directly in front of her. She went forward and handed her letter of introduction to the security guard.

"Elizabeth Bentley to see Mr. Wells."

The security guard looked at her letter and then looked Beth up and down with an air of superiority that made her feel about two inches tall.

"Follow me."

As Beth walked down the corridors she moved past glass cases with model ships in various states of construction. The company was a widely known in the shipping world. Mr. Wells was a middle manager, who was a distant cousin of Reverend Clement and had worked for them for some time. The security guard came to a stop and asked her to sit in a waiting area outside Mr. Well's office door. After ten minutes or so a middle aged rather frumpy woman appeared out of the office.

"Miss Bentley? Please come in." She seemed to almost scowl as Beth walked past her into the office.

'I must be imagining it. Put your best smile on Beth.'

"I'm Mr. Wells' secretary, Mrs. Watson. Please take a seat."

Beth sat down feeling very nervous and out of place. Mrs. Watson remained standing in front of Beth.

"Mr. Wells was called away this morning to an urgent meeting so he asked me to conduct the interviews in his stead." she stated.

Beth suddenly had a bad feeling. 'Interviews? I thought it was only me who was being seen for the job.'

Mrs. Watson continued, "I'll keep this brief so as not to waste your time Miss Bentley. The position was filled earlier today, an impeccable and very experienced candidate emerged who I felt I had to offer the job to before we lost her to another company before the end of the day."

Beth was shocked, and her stomach seemed to fall down to her toes. She tried to grasp some words for a reply. "Mrs. Watson, Reverend Clement from Ambleton arranged this with Mr. Wells." she said as she felt her throat tightening with panic.

"Mr. Wells led Reverend Clement to believe that I simply had to come up for an interview and the job would be mine!"

Mrs. Watson smirked. She recalled this morning's events as she felt a surge of power that she very seldom felt in her employment. That morning Mr. Wells had been called away, some crisis or another over at the docks. As he rushed out the door he shouted, "Mrs. Watson, the interviews for the assistant post are coming in today, could you please handle it for me. I think there are four girls in total but I promised the job to a young girl my cousin wrote to me about. Just give her the once over and if everything is in order offer her the job." With that he rushed away.

'Well!' Mrs. Watson had thought. No country bumpkin is coming up here and walking into a job when young Nancy needs a better position. Mrs. Watson quickly phoned her sister, Nancy's mother, and got her niece in as quickly as possible. She would simply tell Mr. Wells that Miss Bentley was very late and in very shabby appearance. That should do it.

"Miss Bentley, you have zero experience working in an office environment. Mr. Wells left the decision to me. I've made my decision. The job has been filled. Thank you for coming in. Good day Miss Bentley." she said as she held open the office door hoping that Beth would quickly exit the building.

Beth sat there, motionless and mouth hanging open for what felt like an age. Panic consumed her. She had left everything, all security to come for a job that had now been taken away from her. She was all alone in a strange city with virtually no money. The money she had saved had gone for her train ticket, the first month's rent for her lodging, and an outfit for her new job. Suddenly The girl bolted from the chair and was running for the exit of the building in sheer panic, tears running down her face. As she came out running onto the street without looking up, she never saw the Rolls Royce. The driver of the car screeched to a halt. As the chauffeur jumped out of the car to see if he had hit the young girl, she fainted and her world slipped into blackness.

The chauffeur knelt by the young girl trying to ascertain her condition, as a lady appeared from the back of the car just as Beth was regaining consciousness.

"Robson!" the lady shouted. "What happened? Is she alright? "

"We didn't hit her, Mrs. Woodward. I think she fainted from the shock ma'am. She's coming round now."

Beth opened her eyes and found herself in the arms of a tall thin man in a chauffeur's uniform. Above his shoulder a lady was bent over with a very concerned look on her face. The lady was a little taller than her own 5ft 3inch frame. A beautiful woman. Beth thought. She had a perfect hourglass figure. Delicate features were accentuated with perfect make up, just enough to enhance her natural beauty. She wore a classic navy blue suit with her dirty blonde hair pinned up underneath a matching hat. Around her shoulders she wore a real fur stole. The lady's outfit looked as though it cost more money than Beth had seen in her entire life.

"My dear, are you alright?" The lady asked as the driver Robson helped Beth to her feet. The crowd that had formed around them was starting to move away back to their own business.

"I'm so sorry for running out in front of you," Beth said somewhat fearful of the rich lady's reaction.

"Not at all my dear. I'm sure we were travelling a little too fast for these city roads. Come my dear and have a seat in the Rolls until you regain your senses."

Beth was a little nervous but felt she could trust this lady. "Thank you, I don't want to cause any trouble and keep you late for anything."

"We're in no hurry my dear; I was just off for a jaunt round to some shops. If you keep me from spending any money today, I'm sure my other half will be eternally grateful." she joked.

They got into the back of the Rolls and Beth tried to catch her breath.

"My names Charlotte by the way, Charlotte Woodward, but my friends call me Lotty. Please do call me that." she said as she held out her hand to shake hands with Beth.

"Oh thank you, my name's Elizabeth Bentley, but everyone calls me Beth."

As Lotty looked at Beth, she felt an instant friendly affection for the young blond that he young woman looked sad and alone. "Let me take you for a cup of tea? It will calm your nerves. After all I owe you that at least after you nearly coming a cropper in front of the Rolls!"

Beth started to protest, but Lotty continued, "No. I won't hear any refusals! Come my dear and humour me. I could do with the company and you can tell me your story. I have a strong feeling it's an interesting one. Take us to The Grange Robson. They have the best cakes in the whole of London!" Lotty exclaimed as they drove off into the traffic of London.

Beth walked into the grandest tea room she had ever been in. The room was large and had the most wonderful chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, the light sparkling off the crystal making them shine like diamonds. The waitresses all had smart black and white uniforms with hats to match. The Headwaiter met them at the door and exclaimed, "Ah, Mrs. Woodward! So nice to see you again, we have your usual table free. Please follow me."

They were directed to a beautifully set table in front of a large open window.

Lotty asked, "Shall I order for us both, Beth? They have the most wonderful pastry chef here. Even with meager rations, he can always come up with some special treats to tempt us ladies. It's simply awful isn't it? Three years after war and were still rationed! I mean I think we've all given enough to the cause. Don't you agree?" Lotty said jokingly.

Beth Smiled shyly.

"Luckily for us, the pastry chef here is a wonder with a little sugar, a little food colouring and a lot of imagination. Do you trust me?"

"Of course. I'm sure you know what's good here."

After Lotty had ordered up tea and a selection of sandwiches and cakes, Beth inquired. "Do you come here a often, Lotty?"

"Yes. There are a few wonderful places in London, but this place is the best. It has some of my favorite indulgences."

The sandwiches and cakes were brought to the table on beautiful tall cake stands. The tea was served in the best of china cups, Beth observed.

While Lotty conversed briefly with the waitress, who she seemed familiar with, Beth thought about her new acquaintance. Lotty was obviously very well off, as the caliber of the tea room and the quality of her clothes indicated that straight away. Everyone seemed to be very familiar with Charlotte Woodward. 'She must do a lot of socialising in town.' Thought Beth.

But for all her apparent wealth and class, Lotty seemed totally unaffected by it. She was kind and open, and in no way a snob as many ladies in her position could be.

'Lotty had mentioned "A better half earlier;" she was clearly married, but described her husband as a better half. It must just be a term of endearment.' She thought.

"Well Beth, do get stuck in. You must be hungry? Forgive me for ignoring you while I talked to young Mary the waitress. She is a girl I helped place here." Lotty said. "Place here?" Beth questioned.

"Forgive me, let me explain. I am chairwoman of a charity that helps young girls find work as they are about to leave the orphanage system. I managed to get Mary a job here after we got her silver service training. I like to check in with her occasionally and see if everything is going well."

Beth was impressed. "That is just wonderful Lotty! To help young people that have no one, is just admirable."

"I am in a very fortunate position, Beth. Because of my marriage, I will never want for anything. I don't and could never take that for granted. The only way to sleep at night, when you are lucky enough to have so much is to give back as much as you can. Poni and I devote as much time and money as we can towards charitable pursuits"

"Poni?" Beth asked.

"My other half, a term of endearment for our friends and me."

Beth was so impressed with this woman. She had never come across someone so well-off who did so much. Perhaps she was guilty of making assumptions herself.

"So, young Beth, tell me your story. Where have you come from and what had made you so upset this morning?"

Beth launched into her story, right back to her father dying and going to live with her aunt and uncle, her well planned escape, and how it all went wrong this morning.

Lotty listened intently. She felt so sad for this young woman. It seemed like no one had taken care of her since her father, and having her mother die when she was so young. Lotty liked this girl instantly when she met her and even more now that she had heard her story. 'You are going to have someone on your side for once.' Thought Lotty.

"I'm so sorry for the loss of your father, Beth, He sounded like a good man."

"He was. The best of men. I only hope I can find someone who would give me even half of the love and happiness my mother and father had."

"I hope you won't think me interfering in any way Beth, but I may know of some employment for you. Do you have any secretarial skills?"

"Yes. I was secretary to my father for all of his later published books." Beth suddenly felt her heart beat faster, was there going to be a job to save her.

"Poni is heavily involved with a charity run by a friend of ours, lends monetary support and sits on the Board of Trustees with our good friend Lord Alex Dalton.

Alex runs the charity from offices in London and asked me this morning if I knew of any secretaries. I think you would be perfect. But I will warn you, Alex is not the easiest person to work for. Numerous secretaries have been dismissed over the past few months, but I can see something in you that tells me you would be able to handle it. What do you think? Shall I take you over to meet Alex?"

Beth gushed, "Oh thank you! You don't know what this means to me. I can't thank you enough for this and for your kindness today. I'm a stranger to you. Why do you want to help me?"

"I liked you as soon as I saw you Beth. I feel that there is a lot inside for you to give. You are a good, kind girl who hasn't had the best of luck. I want to try and help you along and I hope one day you aren't so alone and you find your champion in this life. At the very least you've made a friend in me. Shall we go?" Lotty asked.

The Rolls pulled up alongside a rather grey bleak building in a more down market area of London and turned down a side alley, coming to a stop in front of a common place looking building.

"We're just up here. I'll lead the way," Lotty said.

Beth followed Lotty up a dirty stone staircase, then down a corridor with a few doors on either side. Lotty came to a stop and opened the door. Beth accompanied her new friend into an outer office. There was a desk and chair against one wall with a typewriter on the desk and various filing cabinets against the wall.

The drawers of the filing cabinets were all pulled out with files sticking out haphazardly, as if someone had been searching for documents. The door to the inner office had a frosted window with the name Alex Dalton printed on it. Lotty knocked on the door and shouted, "Alex! It's Lotty. I have a secretary for you!"

"Come in." A deep rich voice shouted from inside. Lotty opened the door and she and Beth entered. Beth only saw the gentlemen's back, as he was facing the window looking at a file. He stood about 6ft 1 inch and had dark close cropped hair which was immaculately combed back at the sides raised in the middle with slight quiff, as was the fashion with young men of the day. From behind, Beth could see, he had broad muscled shoulders and looked to be a strong well built man.

"Lord Dalton, let me introduce you to Elizabeth Bentley, a fine young women who I believe would make a wonderful secretary."

Lord Dalton turned round to greet them and Beth saw Lord Alex Dalton was a woman! The most handsome woman Beth had ever seen, but a woman none the less. She was stunned, even more so when Lord Dalton's beautiful blue eyes seemed to stare deeply inside her being, and a thousand butterflies tumbled around in her stomach.

As Alex turned she came to look at the most beautiful girl she had ever seen in her 28 years. She stared into a pair of amazing green eyes and something stirred deep inside. She regained her senses, put her stoic mask back on, and moved towards them.

"Miss Bentley, Pleased to meet you and please call me Alex. Only my silliest friends call me Lord." said Alex as she turned to Lotty and kissed her on the cheek. "Looking as pretty as ever my dear Lotty, when are you going to leave that old Poni and run away with me," Alex joked.

Lotty giggled, "That old Poni is more than enough for me, I've put too many long years into her training to start all over again with you! And I'll tell her you called her old."

"I'm sure she'll thrash me to within an inch of my life, when we box together."

"You're like a pair of 8 year old boys!" Lotty replied.

Beth felt bamboozled by the conversation. Lord Alex Dalton was a woman who dressed and seemed to live like a man. She wore a very smart 3 piece pinstripe suit with perfectly pressed white shirt and black tie. She was as smart as any man she had ever seen. Although her features were handsome she could still tell she was a woman. It was a most intriguing combination of both. It had also just struck her that Lotty said Poni, her husband, was a woman as well.

Mrs. Charlotte Woodward was married to a woman and Lord Alex Dalton was a woman who dressed as a man! Beth was sorely confused. She had never heard of women loving other woman before or living like men, but as she looked at Alex dressed in her fine suit with smart short hair, it seemed the most natural thing in world. It suited Alex down to the ground. Alex was more handsome than any man she had ever seen and if Poni was the same sort of person she could understand how Lotty could fall in love with someone like that.

Beth was shaken from her thoughts by Alex saying, "So Miss Bentley, you've seen and heard the kind of people we are. We're not run of the mill. Could you work for me knowing all this? "

"Please call me Beth; I don't have any problems with that. Lotty has been very kind to me today and I have made a new friend in her, so if you are a friend of hers then I would have no problems working for you. Do you want to interview me now?"

"There's no need, if your good enough for Lotty, your good enough for me, but I'll warn you I don't suffer fools gladly. I work very hard and expect any employee of mine to do the same. For this I will pay you very fairly. We are

a charity helping the poor and destitute all over England, but mainly in Northern England and London, where the greatest concentration of poverty exists. You will be organising my meetings, maintaining my diary, and also dealing with my paperwork. How does that sound to you?"

"That sounds fine," Beth said overjoyed. This job had saved her and she couldn't believe her good fortune of stepping out in front of Lotty's Rolls Royce this morning.

"Excellent!" Alex said as she went into her desk drawer and brought out a key. "Your hours will be 9 to 5, but I'm going to give you this office key so you can let yourself in and out. I keep irregular hours at the office so I wouldn't want you standing outside waiting for me to open up. Sometimes I will need you to lock up. So if you have no other questions I will see you tomorrow."

"Thank you, I will see you then." Beth replied.

Lotty turned to Beth, "Do you have any accommodation set up or should I make some calls...?"

"No" Beth interrupted, "That's ok, I have a room set up at a lodging house. It is the one thing I managed to organise properly."

"Very good. Then I'll drop you off on my way. Remember dinner tonight Alex, It's about the only time you eat properly when you come to Grosvenor street!"

Alex smirked and said "I'll remember. Now, on you go before Poni starts pining for you."

Alex kissed Lotty goodbye then took Beth's hand, and said."Until tomorrow then Beth."

Both felt an electricity pass between them as they looked deeply into one another. They were still holding on to the other's hand when Lotty coughed politely to interrupt their private moment.

"Yes, until tomorrow. Thank you so much for this opportunity, Alex. Goodbye."

Alex watched them from her window as they climbed into the car, her heart beating a little faster than normal. 'What a beautiful young woman. She seemed so innocent and pure. Too innocent and pure for the likes of me.' Alex thought sadly. There was something about her though, something she couldn't place. Something that made Alex want to care about what happened to her. Not just another pretty girl. Alex resolved to make sure the walls she had built up were kept firmly in place around this young one. 'She will soon see my reputation for anger and aloofness well earned.' Somehow that thought saddened her and she sighed.

Alex was sad and melancholy most of the time these days. She was a loner. Alex had always been alone. The only bright spots were her good friends Poni and Lotty. Alex and Poni had been in school together and had always been the best of friends. When Poni had met Lotty and fell head over heels in love, Alex was delighted. Lotty became like a sister to her and the three had many fun nights and adventures together.

Alex envied Poni, to find someone and give yourself completely to that one person, to set up home and settle into the comfort of domestic life, was secretly what Alex had craved all her life. To be like her parents, to be like Poni and Lotty, but she would never let herself have those things. She could never give her heart away only for it to be broken. That was something she would never do again.

She thought back to her childhood. Alex was the only daughter of Lord and Lady Dalton, the Earl and Countess of Sheffield, Alex's father Alexander, was Lord of a large estate in the peak district near Sheffield called Dencotte House, and the small village of Dencotte was attached to the estate. The Dalton family had been Lords of the Manor for 200 years, but had really become rich during the industrial revolution through coal mining in the area. Alex's grandfather had also invested some money in a new steel company, based in America. The company took off and became a billion dollar business, which made the Dalton's super rich. They bought up land in the surrounding area and in London and they also had an estate in Scotland, which they used for hunting and holidays. The Daltons were powerful, not only due to the money, but because of the large amount of land they now owned in England and Scotland.

When Alex's father inherited the land and title, he made a lot of changes. He was a kind man with a social conscience and was more interested in helping the poor than trying to make money off of them in coal mining. He used his money to make improvements in the county, investing in schools and hospitals for the community. In Dencotte, he built affordable housing for the workers of the town and set up the Dalton Foundation to help the poor in the surrounding areas and London.

Groups could make appeals to the Foundation for grants involving different projects. The other landowners in England were appalled, but dared not say or do anything because of the power and money of the Daltons. His only open vocal supporter was his good friend Anthony Woodward, Poni's late father. They had been to Eton and Cambridge together and held the same political views, sense of duty, and social responsibility. He was also on the Board of the Foundation, and helped in any way he could.

Anthony was a land owner in one of the most prosperous areas of London. Although not as wealthy as Alexander, he was still very rich but held no title. As Anthony had no male heirs, his daughter Evangeline Woodward (Poni) inherited his estate, on his death at age 22. The two families were inseparable when Alex and Poni were young, holidaying together, and of course going to school together.

Alexander and Anthony both had only daughters but did not believe, as most men did at the time, that ladies should only be educated in matters that would help them get a husband. Both girls had private lessons at home in Latin, physics, mathematics, economics, and any other subjects not deemed necessary at the all-girls school they attended. Later they were two of the very few girls who went on to university at Cambridge.

Alex and Poni had an idyllic childhood; both of them were tom boys who had the run of acres of their families' land. They took part in hunting, shooting, and fishing with their fathers. As they grew older it became apparent neither would grow out of the tom boy faze. Other people in their social circle talked of course, but the families were too powerful to be confronted about it, and quite frankly didn't give a damn what the rest of the upper classes said about them.

Their parents accepted them for who they were, and they were adored. Since both Alexander and Anthony had no male heirs, all the money and land would go to their girls', but in Alexander's case, he wanted to make sure his title didn't go to some male cousin 100 times removed. Alex could inherit the estate and money, but if there was no male heir any title would die out unless it could be shown it would be detrimental to the estate. In order for Alex to inherit his title, Alexander had to apply for what was called a "special remedy", which required an act of parliament to make legal. Alexander managed to do this, by spending a lot of money on the best of lawyers and being very persuasive. He succeeded and knew that in the event of his death Alex would become Countess of Sheffield. Alexander brought Alex up with the same morals and social conscience as himself, and to understand the running of the Foundation. She was devoted to her father, and tried her best to be like him and make him proud.

Her father and mother were devoted to each other and she hoped one day she would find a wife like her mother to become Lady Dalton. She knew from an early age that she didn't want a husband. The thought appalled her. Her idyllic childhood came to a crashing halt when at sixteen both her parents were killed in an airplane accident. Alexander had taken his wife for a romantic weekend away, which ended in disaster. The plane's engines had failed over the English channel, it plunged into the sea and their bodies were never found.

Alex's heart was broken and smashed to tiny pieces. She was inconsolable and vowed never to love like that again. She couldn't take the pain of losing her parents. Alex went to live with Anthony and his wife until she was of age to take on the estate. She became a loner, learning to rely on herself, with Poni as her only friend.

When she reached 18 she inherited the estates and title of her father, so she became Lady Alexandria Dalton, 9th Countess of Sheffield and Baroness of Halwood. She was never Lady material though and all her friends called her Lord Dalton. She took on her Father's legacy and saw the charity grow and prosper. She put all her energy into the Foundation and making her body the best it could be. She had grown up to a tall 6 foot 1 inches and was well muscled with the help of boxing training, and fencing with Poni.

Alex never did give her heart away. She kept the women she had encounters with at arm's length making it clear she was only interested in sex, and never seeing a woman a second time. Lust and sex she could control, and she got an exquisite high from being dominant and in complete control of the women she bedded. She was never cruel and always made sure her sexual partners were more than satisfied with their time with her. She used sex to try and fill the hole in her heart, and though it never worked, she always found herself resorting to that on nights when loneliness was too much for her.

With her money and good looks she was never short of a partner for the evening. Each woman thinking they would be the one to make her fall in love and give them everything. She would pick them up at the all women private members club, in which herself, Poni, and Lotty were members. In the last six months her encounters with women were getting less and less. She was tired of it. The encounters made her feel dirty and soiled and she found after coming down from the high of orgasm she didn't feel pleasure anymore. She felt disgusted with herself and thought if her father and Mother could see her now, they would be appalled.

Poni and Lotty had tried countless times to get her to think about settling down a bit. They worried for her, as she was pulling into herself more and more. Recently, as her encounters with women were declining the more she was throwing herself into her work. She pulled herself out of her memories filled with sadness. 'Maybe I could at least

make a friend in Beth .' Another voice inside her told her she wasn't even good enough to be friends with such a pure, innocent girl. Her walls were again secured.

Lotty had dropped Beth off at her lodgings with a note of her telephone number and a promise that they would meet on Saturday. Beth was taken to her room by Mrs. Baker, the owner. She was a stout, dark haired woman with a kindly smiling face. Mrs. Baker had been left her small two story house in a will and had relocated from Ambleton to London.

She wanted to take in a lodger not only for the extra money, but for the company it would bring as well. Miss Bentley seemed on first acquaintance a pleasant quiet young girl, thought Mrs. Baker, and Reverend Clement had assured her of Miss Bentley's respectability. She was sure they would get along together quite nicely. The room that Mrs. Baker lead Beth to was clean, warm, and cosy.

"I hope you will be comfortable here," Mrs. Baker said.

"I'm quite sure I will be very comfortable." Beth replied with a happy smile.

"You will have your own key, so you can come and go as you please. I don't mind if you are out late. I know a pretty young lady like yourself will have many dinner engagements before long, as long as it isn't all night!" She smiled. "If all that is agreeable with you then get yourself settled and come down and I will put supper on the table."

"That sounds wonderful Mrs. Baker."

Over dinner Beth told Mrs. Baker of her emotional and exciting day.

"Ah! Lady Dalton you say," Mrs. Baker said. "I've heard a lot about her. A very unusual woman I'm led to believe. People talk and say some unkind things, but I don't hold with that. The kindness that her family has bestowed on the poor is truly wonderful and I understand Lady Dalton has taken the Foundation on leaps and bounds. People are born the way they are I think, some good, some bad, and some very different. I'm sure God had a very good reason to make Lady Dalton the way he did and surely a person of such kindness could not be bad. I say each to their own as long as they do no harm. Reverend Clement may not agree though!" Mrs. Baker chuckled.

"Yes I think your right Mrs. Baker." Beth agreed.

"Please call me Agnes dear."

"Thank you. When I met her today I was intimidated to be sure. She exudes power and control and her eyes seem to penetrate your soul." Beth was transfixed in her memory of Alex. "But there was a sense of goodness emanating from her, I don't think she would ever use that power or control for any bad purposes. I felt though underneath it all a sadness within her that I couldn't put my finger on."

"She has been alone for a long time I understand, perhaps that's it." Agnes said.

"Maybe, I hope at least I can help bring some calm to her working life. It feels great that I am going to be working somewhere that brings such help to people and not just a company to make profits for the rich."

"Yes, I think you may have landed on your feet my dear, and you have certainly made some excellent friends and connections. The Dalton's and the Woodward's are very powerful families and I would rather be with them than against them!" Agnes laughed.

Beth made her way up to bed and fell asleep clutching her Father's precious watch with more hope than she'd had in a very long time.

Earlier that evening on the other side of London, Alex arrived at the door of her friends London mansion on Grosvenor Street dressed in a made to measure double breasted dinner suit with a white handkerchief in the top pocket, a crisp white shirt, and a black bow tie. That was one indulgence Alex loved to spend money on, her wardrobe. Alex loved clothes and to be perfectly dressed. Having her clothes handmade always made sure of a good fit on her frame, especially around the chest and hips. All her shirts, jackets and suits were handmade from the finest fabrics in the exclusive shops of Savile Row, one of the finest shopping streets in London.

Poni and Lotty's home was a traditional townhouse mansion with 7 bedrooms and bathrooms, four reception rooms and extra rooms for staff accommodation. The butler let Alex into the hall and took her coat. The grand staircase stretched out before Alex, leading off to the bedrooms and further floors. Straight ahead, was a long corridor with various rooms going off it. All the ceilings and walls were carved and highly ornate. To any other person, the house and the grandeur would leave them gob smacked, but for Alex, the home simply gave off a warm and cosy feeling of family.

Her own estate, although much bigger in both the house and grounds, did not have that feeling of warmth and family, it used to when she was younger, her father always said to her, "You should never take for granted the role your wife plays in your life and in your home. You may bring money and security but they bring the light and happiness to your home, and money is nothing compared to that. Your wife is the centre of the home and should be cherished."

Poni had that with Lotty, but Alex felt she would never feel that joy. She did love her home, Dencotte House, she felt calm there, the grounds were spectacular, but it was empty. She also owned a townhouse in London similar to Poni's that had been the family's town residence when they visited London, but during the war she had given over, both the town house and her country estate over to the military, as barracks for the war wounded. After the war was over she had turned the town house into a sanctuary where the poor could come and get a bed, food, and medical care. It ran in a similar way as it had during the war.

It was fully staffed with doctors, nurses, and midwives for the expectant mothers. Pregnant women knew they could go there and not be judged. They would be cared for till the birth then helped to find employment and childcare, or organise adoption. The others who came for help, men and women who found themselves through circumstance with nothing, would get a short stay until the charity helped them find employment and lodging.

Alex named it 'Alexander Dalton house' after her father. She knew he would be proud. It was always full so the people who came for help had to be assessed as to who was in the greatest need, but not one person was turned away without getting some help to make their life better and given hope. When she had given over her townhouse during the war, she bought a 3 bed room flat in Park Lane, Mayfair. It was not too far from Poni and Lotty, which was ideal.

The butler Henry, led her into Poni's grand drawing room. Poni was standing leaning her hand on the hearth of the fireplace, cocktail glass in hand. Poni, also dressed in a dinner suit, was 5ft 7inches and all muscle. She had a square face and brown hair, which was longer than Alex's but was parted, scraped back tightly and pinned in at the back, giving the impression of very short hair. As soon as Poni saw Alex she moved towards her and engulfed her old friend in a warm hug. Poni was Alex's right hand 'man' both in work and in life. They were as close as if they were blood relations. Although Poni did not work day to day at Dalton Foundation, she was Vice-chairman of the Board of Trustee's who managed the Charity, and was instrumental in the running and financing of the cause. Like Alex, she put a huge amount of personal money into the foundation every year. "Welcome My Lord!" She cried as she bowed at the waist. 'My lord' was Poni and Lotty's pet name for Alex, and they loved to annoy her by cow towing and sending up her heredity status.

"Shut up you old fool!" Alex chuckled. "Where is your good lady?"

"Less of the old, we are the same age as well you know, except I am better looking," Poni said smugly.

They bantered back and forth between each other. "And my wife will be down any minute. You know how long she takes at dressing for dinner."

Just at that Lotty entered looking radiant in a long blue off the shoulder cocktail dress with a silk shawl thrown across her shoulders, her hair fell just below her shoulders in beautiful curls.

"I heard that Poni! If you wish me to come down for dinner in an old sack, I would be very much quicker. Would you like that instead?" Lotty joked.

Alex smirked at Poni, who rushed to Lotty's side to kiss her, quite obviously in trouble with her dear wife. Poni trying to rapidly rescue herself. "My dear wife, you know a dinner party never starts until you have arrived and I would wait forever for the pleasure of your company."

Alex interrupted, "Crawler!"

Lotty, who stood about 5 inches shorter than her spouse reached up and caressed her cheek, kissed her on the nose, "You smooth talker you!"

Alex looked on with a warm smile; her two friends adored each other. They had been together for 8 years and their love and passion for each other never seemed to lessen. Poni turned round and stuck her tongue out at Alex and then broadly smiled at her wife. Alex walked over to Lotty, kissed her on the cheek. "Radiant as always Lotty. Is Kitten Asleep? I was hoping to catch her before bed." Kitten or Kathryn Woodward was the couple's adopted Daughter. She was 8 months old and simply adored her Papi Poni and Alex.

"Nanny and I only got her to sleep an hour ago, the little cold she had has disrupted her routine. So were just glad to get her to sleep. If she'd seen you, she wouldn't have slept tonight at all. You and Poni make such a fuss of her."

"Alright well I'll pop over at the weekend to see her. I'll leave this here for her then." Alex put the brightly wrapped box on the table.

"Honestly between the pair of you, you'll have my girl spoiled rotten!"

"I couldn't resist it. I passed this toy shop and I saw this little kitten soft toy in a pink dress. I knew she'd love it."

"You are so sweet My Lord! I don't know where you get this tough reputation."

"Shush! Don't tell anyone."

Poni, seeing her best friends discomfort at the praise she was getting took her wife's arm and placed it through her own, remarking, "Shall we eat my dear?"

After dinner while relaxing in the drawing room, Poni and Alex were enjoying a Havana cigar and a glass of Port. "So Alex, what do you make of my new friend?" Lotty asked.

"I only spoke to her briefly, but she seemed nice enough. It remains to be seen whether she will be an able secretary for me." she said in a dismissive manner, not wanting to be drawn into conversation about the beautiful girl with green eyes.

"Alex, be nice to this one please! For me. She has had a difficult life up till now." Lotty added and then proceeded to fill Alex in on Beth's story.

As Alex listened she felt the pain of the loss of her parents. She knew that feeling only too well and felt her stomach clench in anger when she heard of Beth's mistreatment by her Aunt and Uncle. She felt she would do anything not to see pain on Beth's beautiful face. She pushed the feelings down replying, "I'll do my best to be as pleasant as possible because she's your friend, but if she doesn't meet my expectations in her work, then I will let her know."

"I suppose that's the best I'm going to get from you, you crabby thing! She is very good looking though isn't she Alex?"

Alex choked on her drink and spluttered "I ... I ... didn't really notice."

"Hmmm didn't you?" Lotty said with a quizzical smile on her face.

"No I didn't," Alex said firmly.

"Well," interjected Poni, "This young lady sounds quite the ticket! When do I get the pleasure?"

"Anytime you like Poni boy!" said Lotty planting a kiss on her lips.

Alex stood. "I think that's my cue to leave. Thank you for a wonderful dinner, I'm going down to the club for a few games of cards and a drink. Poni? I shall see you at our meeting on Wednesday."

Alex leaned over and kissed Lotty goodbye and shook Poni's hand.

"Try and not break too many pretty girl's hearts my friend," Poni said.

"Very funny you buffoon! Goodnight," Alex said as Henry the butler saw her out.

Poni and Lotty sat back on the couch. Lotty leaned back into Poni's arms.

"I worry for her," Lotty said. "She's always been a loner, but I feel she is getting worse. The sadness just pours off her. I know she's always been a ladies woman but these empty encounters with women seem to pull her down lower."

"She needs a wife like you my dear," Poni said nibbling at the back of her wife's neck.

"Luckily for you my Poni boy, there is only one of me and I belong to you," Lotty said as Poni contained to rain small kisses up and down her neck.

Lotty began to moan. "Hmmm ... oh ... I think there is something new round the corner for our good friend if only she has the courage to take it. Oh Poni! Take me to bed!"

"Gladly my little honey pie!" Poni whispered as she pulled her wife to her feet.

Alex sat at the bar of the Alley Cat Club. It was a large club that had a separate large room for dining. The main room had a long bar across the left hand wall and, in the centre were many tables which faced a stage at the back of the room where many musical acts played. The clientele was solely lesbian, in an area where homosexual clubs were often raided and shut down. They paid a huge back hand payment to the local police chief Inspector to overlook the club. This generally did the trick, as the police were more interested in pooling their resources into finding and shutting down the gay male clubs which, like it or not, were seen as more of a concern to society. The women were perceived as less of a threat.

The owner, Mrs. Harrington, was a rather flamboyant woman. She also bought extra insurance by employing a large number of young men that in case of a raid could be strategically placed around various table's to give the impression of a heterosexual clientele. The Alley Cat was a high class club with a closed membership scheme. Guests had to be signed in by a member before they could attend thus giving Mrs. Harrington strict control over who entered.

Alex ordered another whiskey and lit her cigarette taking a long drag from it. The club wasn't busy on a Tuesday night and for that Alex was grateful so she didn't have to make small talk with various acquaintances. She had bowed out of a request for her to join a game of poker as she didn't have the stomach for it. She just wanted to be alone with her whiskey and her thoughts, which, as they had been all day, were centered on a short blonde with green eyes. She couldn't understand it. She had been in this girl's presence for all of half an hour and yet there was something so familiar about her. She had to stop these thought's. 'She's was only 19 for God's sake! A 28 year old is too old and world weary for the likes of her.' Alex thought and resolved to be as aloof and professional as possible so she could keep an emotional distance from her.

From across the room a long legged, Platinum blond zeroed in on her target and moved in for the kill.

"Hello there My Lord," the woman smoldered as she ran her finger down the front on Alex's shirt.

"Don't call me that Sally, That is a privilege only for the select few of my choosing," Alex snarled. She was not in the mood for Sally this evening. She had met Sally at the club about 8 months ago. She was just one of a long line of women she had bedded.

Sally wore a cheap evening dress with too much make up for Alex's taste. She had been very accommodating in bed and it had been a very satisfying couple of hours. Sally was a little surprised when as soon as they were finished Alex had gotten dressed and left her room thanking her for her company. The next time she had seen Alex in the club she was all over her asking why she hadn't called. Alex had explained "I told you when we met I don't revisit the same place twice. I told you it was only about sex and you said you understood that." Sally had been crushed. She knew what Alex was worth and thought if she just had one night more with the well-known womaniser, Alex would fall for her charms and she would be the next Lady of Dencotte House.

Sally kept her distance after that hoping for an opening that would get her in Alex Dalton's affections. She had heard from people around the club that Alex was picking up less and less. Perhaps she wanted to settle down a bit and Sally thought herself the ideal candidate for the task. So the platinum blondes campaign was started in earnest as she sat on the bar stool next to Alex.

"Come on Alex, we had a very hot night, the things you did to my body, the things I allowed you to do. I know you loved it. I'll let you have it again. Anything you want," Sally said demurely. "I know you haven't taken a woman to bed in a while. You must ache to have a woman open and ready below you. Take me back to your flat and I'll let you do anything."

Alex was both repulsed at the reminder of the things she'd done and turned on by the words Sally was using. She felt pressure building between her legs. She hadn't had the pleasure of a woman in two months. Although the frequency of her conquests had been decreasing it hadn't been till two months ago that she decided she just couldn't do it anymore and stopped completely. That was the longest Alex had been without sex since she was 18 years old. The dark haired Lord stood up quickly knowing she had to get out. "You know very well, that no women ever comes back to my flat or my houses."

This was a rule Alex had instigated since she was a young woman, not wanting the evidence of her desires left in her home. That way after she had finished bedding a woman she could get dressed and go as quickly as possible. Alex walked away towards the exit of the club, all the while Sally was smirking watching her.

She hadn't got what she wanted this time, but she had planted a seed in Alex's brain. She had seen only too well how Alex had been affected by her carefully chosen words. Her plan of attack was firmly in motion.

"Remember your sandwiches dear." Agnes cried as Beth was nearly on her way out the door.

Beth had gotten up extra early to prepare sandwiches to take for lunch, so she could save money, until she was paid. She also borrowed a few mugs from Agnes to take in to work. Yesterday she had noticed that there was a kettle and a small gas burner next to the sink in the outer office. It looked as if it hadn't been used in a while and there were no

cups, tea bags, or milk, so Beth decided she would stop at a corner shop on her way in and buy some things to use at tea break. Beth got the feeling Alex didn't give herself much time for breaks or getting something to eat. 'Maybe this is something I can do to lighten her load. She does so much for others and has no one to look after her', she mused.

Beth rushed back in to grab her lunch things and ran to catch the bus. It was still dark as Beth unlocked the door to the office and it would only get darker as it was still only November the 1st and the worst of winter was still ahead. She had arrived at half past 7, even though she didn't officially start till 9 o'clock. Beth had seen what a state of disarray the files were in yesterday, and she wanted to get that in order before she started on the proper work of the day.

Beth put the mugs, tea, sugar, milk, and biscuits over at the sink. She had also bought some cleaning fluid and cloths at the corner shop, in order to tidy up the sink and work surface around the kettle. Beth didn't have much money, but she thought these little things important in the job of being a good secretary.

She set to work cleaning, and the sink area looked shiny and new by the time she finished. Pleased with herself she next made a start on the filing cabinets in the outer office and the one in Alex's office. It seemed to take forever but by the time she finished, they were sitting in perfect alphabetical order. She had even found a couple of cheques in amongst the mess of papers, from people who had donated to the charity through the post. 'What was her last secretary doing all day!' Beth wondered.

Beth next tried to make sense of the diary. She worked out what the appointments for today were, pulled those files out from the filing cabinet and sat them on the side of Alex's desk with the cheques she had found on top of them. 'There! I think I've made some progress this morning. 'She busied herself with tidying up her desk and making a list of items she would need for herself and the office.

At ten o'clock Alex marched through the office door. Beth jumped up to greet her and was cut short. Not looking at Beth, Alex lifted her head and said, "Morning, see that I am not disturbed for the next hour." She was through her door and it was slammed shut. Beth was left opened mouth. 'How rude! I've been slaving away for the last few hours trying to make her workplace more comfortable and she just storms past me! Can't even lift her head to look at me. Her bad reputation was obviously well earned. She looked almost ill!' Alex was white and, her eyes red and bloodshot. 'I wonder if she looks like that often.' She returned to her desk and her list.

Alex sat slumped at her desk with her head in her hands. She had the worst hangover. After she left the Alley Cat she had continued to drink at home alone. She had been so miserable and lonely. 'I can't keep doing this. I can't spend the rest of my life in misery and drink.' She had done the hard part of giving up the women and meaningless sex, although it was very hard and she was becoming increasingly frustrated.

'There must be more to life than this. I need to find something. I don't know what that thing is, but there must be something. I don't even need to be deliriously happy, just to be content would be enough.' The other thing that had driven her to look for answers at the bottom of a glass was Beth. Her face and eyes had haunted her and she hadn't even had the courage to look in her face this morning. There was something about Beth, as if Alex was missing something really important. It seemed to be on the tip of her tongue and then would float away just as quickly. 'At least my work is the one thing that gives me meaning.'

Beth was busy at her desk when Alex burst out of her office shouting. "What have you done to my filing cabinets? I can't find anything and some of my files are missing! I need them today! Your job is not to interfere with my things"

Beth's temper was so close to snapping, but she needed this job so badly. 'Why had did I come in early to try and make things easier for this ungrateful blockhead!' Instead of losing her composure, she got up calmly and walked past Alex into her office and opened the cabinet drawer. "First of all, all the filing cabinets are now in alphabetical order, so things will be easier to find. If you look at the pile on the left hand side of your desk you will find your so called missing files. I checked the diary and worked out what you would need today and left them on your desk so you wouldn't have to be searching for them. You will also find on top of that pile a few donated cheques that were lost in that messy filing system you had before. I would be grateful if you could at least ask me before you launch into a tirade at me!" And with that she marched past Alex, shut the door between their two rooms and sat at her own desk, breathing heavily, she was so angry and needed to calm down fast.

Alex on the other side of the door, stood open mouthed and stunned. She shook herself and checked the files on her desk; they were indeed exactly what she needed for the day. The cheques were from regular donors, who probably now felt the charity ungrateful for not even acknowledging their contribution. Under the cheques were two envelopes. She opened and read them. She couldn't believe it; Beth had typed out two thank you letters to the donors and had obviously left them for Alex to approve before they were posted.

She felt like a bad tempered idiot. Beth had thought of everything, fixed up the office, and she had went off and shouted at her for it. She put her head in her hands.

The Dalton Foundation had never had as efficient a secretary as this. The girl was only 19 and she was a natural. She had to fix this before she lost her to another company. 'This bad temper has got to stop!' Alex thought. 'I know I wanted to keep her at arm's length but at the very least she could be friendly towards the girl.'

She thought about what Lotty had told her about Beth's past. She suddenly felt very guilty. 'The girl is in a new job and a new city with nothing and no one, and you treat her like that!' Alex chastised herself. Alex knew what she had to do. She entered the outer office and saw Beth sitting sadly at her desk.

"Ah listen, I am really sorry. I was out of order. I had a bad night and felt rather low this morning but I shouldn't have taken it out on you. Thank you for sorting out the files and the cheques and thank you letters. You have saved my skin. Those are wealthy donors and they would have been very angry if we hadn't acknowledged them. Could we start your first morning again? Forgive me?" Alex hoped she had said enough.

When Beth nodded and smiled Alex beamed and walked over to her, stuck out her arm for a handshake and said, "Alex Dalton, welcome to the Dalton foundation. I hope you'll be happy working here."

Beth took Alex's outstretched hand in hers. "Beth Bentley, thank you for the kind welcome. I'm sure I'll be very happy."

"Thank you for giving me a second chance at your first day."

Alex glimpsed over at the sink and kitchen area. It was gleaming. She'd never seen it looking like that and there was cups and all the makings of tea. She was even more impressed. "You did that as well as the all the other work? What time did you get here this morning?"

Beth smiled as her work was finally being appreciated. "Half past seven, I wanted to get all those things done early so I could start on the real work when you arrived. I thought if I got these small things sorted out it would make you working day easier. You work so hard for everybody else, I want to make the office as comfortable and smoothly run as possible."

Alex was amazed someone was actually thinking of her comfort. It felt nice. She felt a warm glow in her stomach looking at Beth. She gulped hard and said to herself. 'Need to get rid of that feeling. This is what I was afraid of.'

Beth stood up and asked "Would you like you tea now?"

Alex was confused. "Tea?"

"Tea break. You know, it's eleven o'clock" Beth said.

"I have never had a cup of tea in this building. I don't think I've ever stopped for a tea break, but that would be nice. I feel kind of sick from not eating anything, so that might help. You will have tea as well won't you?" Alex inquired.

"Of course! I couldn't go all through the morning without a cuppa! Did you not have breakfast, Alex?" Beth asked.

"No, never bother with breakfast."

Beth frowned. "Well go sit down and I'll bring in your tea."

"Yes Miss!" Alex chuckled.

Beth began making the tea. 'She doesn't eat breakfast and hasn't had tea and biscuits at work before today!' She recalled Lotty saying Alex only really ate properly when she came to their house. 'No wonder she didn't look well this morning. She doesn't look after herself!' She had to do something about that. Beth didn't know why but she felt a primal instinct to look after the tall woman. She took the tea tray in and set it out.

"Beth, I don't want you to be cleaning like that again. I thank you for doing it, but it's not your job. I see now there's a lot of things in this office I've let slide, but no more. I'll employ a cleaner for our office and the conference room. I see now that I shouldn't be taking people into that room for meetings and expect them to hand the Charity money. We should make a good impression. I'm annoyed I never thought about that side of things before."

"It shouldn't be your job to think of things like that. You work so hard. How about if I spot any housekeeping issues I bring them to your attention and then we can sort them out?"

Alex caught herself staring dreamily at Beth, 'Oh yes Beth, you can look after me anytime you like!' Alex mentally slapped herself. 'No, no, no! Pull yourself together. Be professional!'

"That sounds like a fine idea Beth, thank you. You know, you aren't what I thought you'd be."

Beth smiled. "Oh? And what did you think I'd be like?"

"You look as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. Like you'd burst into tears if someone shouted at you, but I think underneath your made of stronger stuff. You stood up to me. No one stands up to me. I think you're a little bit of a Spitfire aren't you?"

Alex and Beth's eyes met in silent challenge. The young girl smiled demurely and said. "I suppose you'll just have to find out Alex."

"I suppose I will." Alex beamed and gave the girl a cheeky wink.

The rest of the day passed quietly both people learning how each other worked.

The next morning Alex walked to work. She had given her driver the day off thinking the walk in fresh air would do her good. She had done a lot of thinking the night before and resolved to turn over a new leaf. She'd already given up the anonymous encounters with women and she would cut down on the drinking and try to be a lot friendlier and open. Perhaps even Beth could be a new friend, she only had Poni and Lotty after all. As she turned a corner she saw a flower seller on the opposite side of the road. 'Perfect!' she thought.

Beth was at her desk working away at some correspondence when Alex came through the door, looking much brighter than she had seen her, with a big bunch of flowers.

"Good morning Beth. Eh ... these are for you." Alex said suddenly shy. "Thought they would be nice over at the kitchen area now it's looking so clean, and I wanted to thank you for yesterday"

Beth took the flowers and sniffed deeply. "Thank you so much Alex, that was very kind. They have a beautiful scent."

"It's no problem, eh ... well ... I better get on." said Alex feeling like a teenage boy.

Beth smiled as she watched Alex walk into her office. 'Alex Dalton, you are a big softy underneath that stoic demeanor. I hope I can coax it out some more.' Beth went to fill up the sink with water and put the flowers in for the moment until she could get a hold of a vase. 'Perhaps Agnes would have an old one.' Beth thought.

On the other side of the door Alex sat at her desk finding all the files she needed just as she had yesterday and on top was a paper bag with a Danish in it. Obviously it was left for her breakfast. ' Could this girl get anymore adorable!' Alex struggled to remember when last she had felt so taken care of. Perhaps this type of friendship could be what she was missing in her life.

When Beth came in next time, Alex asked her to take a seat. "Thank you for the pastry this morning it was very thoughtful. I really appreciate what you're trying to do for me in order to help the foundation."

"Don't mention it. Of course, I'm trying to help the Foundation by making sure its Chairman is healthy and in a good state of mind to work but it's more than that. I hope you agree, that in the short time I've known you, we are starting to become friends and friends care about each other." Beth said.

Alex smiled. "I would be proud to call you a friend Beth."

The way Alex said her name in that low husky voice of hers made Beth shiver. Alex stood up and walked round to sit on the corner of the desk next to Beth. "I've been thinking, there are things this office is going to need. Things like you have already bought, refreshments, cleaning things, stationary. So I am going to give you a £5 float. You keep it locked in your desk and use it for whatever you see fit. You make decisions for what we need; I'm not very good about thinking about these sort of domestic matters. Think of yourself as a sort of office manager."

As Beth looked at Alex sitting above her on the edge of the desk, she was transfixed by her, Alex radiated confidence and power. It seemed to come so naturally. She had overheard Alex on the telephone to different companies, who supplied food and drink to the various soup kitchens, the Foundation ran throughout the country. She demanded what she wanted and she got it.

To hear her speak and act like that was intoxicating. Beth felt Alex could make her do anything with that smoky voice and powerful demeanor. She had never experienced those sorts of feelings before in her young life and she felt guilty because you weren't supposed to think those thoughts about another woman. But of course, Alex was a special type of woman who seemed to have the best qualities of both a man and a woman.

At the same time power and caring, and from the evidence she had seen so far, she suspected Alex was a big softy underneath it all. Beth was interrupted from her thoughts by Alex saying, "Beth? How does that plan sound to you? When the money is running low just tell me and I'll put more in alright?"

"That's very kind of you Alex and I appreciate the trust your putting in me to handle the money."

"Not at all. I'm a good judge of character!" Alex smiled.

Beth smiled back and they seemed to get lost in each other for a few minutes. Finally Beth said, "Well I'll take my lunch now if you don't mind. Oh and I made you sandwiches for your lunch. I've noticed you not eating anything at lunch and that's not good for you, so I'll bring your sandwiches in everyday, ok? I can't have you wasting away!"

"You're too good to me. Whatever did I do without you?"

Alex realised she'd said too much and became all business again. "Of course, go to lunch now. That's fine. I'll see you later."

"Ok, I'll leave your sandwiches on my desk. Just take them when you want them. They are ham and cheese. I hope you like that?" Beth said hopefully.

"They sound perfect, off you go now." Alex said, wondering where Beth was going to spend her lunch hour.

Beth walked across the street to the park to eat her lunch. She hoped she could do this every day while the weather was good. It was a lovely green space with a large pond in the middle. It had ducks, swans, and geese that she hoped would enjoy her left over's. Beth loved to sit and unwind reading a book and watching the world go by. Beth loved all the books written by Jane Austen. She was rereading her favorite at the moment, Pride and Prejudice . She lost count how many times she'd read it. Beth loved sweeping romance. Mr. Darcy, the quiet, dark, moody figure, was to Beth the ultimate romantic character. For some reason today as she read Mr. Darcy's words she kept picturing Alex. She tried to push the thoughts away.

"Nice to see you again Miss," came a voice from above her.

She looked up and saw the young man who had tried to chat her up yesterday. His name was Albert Pincher. He was about 5ft 6inches, wiry thin body, short red hair that had so much Brylcreem on it; it looked like an oil slick. He gave Beth a creepy, sleazy feeling that she couldn't put her finger on. He had told her he was an apprentice draughtsman at an architectural company further down the street and he thought himself quite the catch.

Beth couldn't be bothered with his pestering today so she stood up. "You must excuse me Mr. Pincher, I must get back early today. My boss is a slave driver." she lied.

"Call me Albert please, if you must hurry off then I hope I will see you soon Miss Bentley." He leered at her ample chest. Albert Pincher had the ability to make Beth feel dirty just from a look. She excused herself and went back to work.

The next couple of weeks went along quietly with Alex and Beth getting along very comfortably. Beth was stamping her personality onto the office more and more and Alex lapped up attention like a puppy when Beth wanted to take care of her food and home comforts. They were both privately becoming fonder of each other. Alex practically bounded to work each day.

She hadn't been to the Alley Cat again, had hardly been drinking, was eating well and looking so much better. Of course, Alex was still terrified of letting herself get too close, but had thought if she allowed herself this friendship and closeness with Beth at work that would be enough to manage her craving for the girl's company. As long as she never allowed the friendship and time spent together to go after office hours then she would allow herself this indulgence. Beth for her part was also enjoying every minute they spent together.

Beth reveled in looking after Alex. She also had been cultivating her friendship with Lotty, and loved the older woman's company. They had met for afternoon tea a few times and had even met in the park one day so that Beth could meet little Kat. Beth was so taken with her, she did wonder how they came to adopt her but didn't feel she knew her well enough to ask. They were due to meet again tomorrow for lunch. It was late Friday afternoon, just about finishing time for the weekend when Alex wandered out with Beth's wage's in an envelope. She handed them to her stating, "I put a little extra in for you."

"Why? You don't have to do that Alex. I understood last week because I bought the things needed in the office, but I have a float for that sort of thing now."

Alex went over and took Beth's coat off the coat stand and helped Beth on with her coat. "You have transformed this place. You have caught up on work I didn't think I would ever get round to. You have made sure I've been fed and watered and you have no idea what a difference that has made to me." Alex said softly as she buttoned up Beth's coat for her in quite an intimate way. "Call it a bonus and I won't hear any more about it, understand?" They were both looking into each other's eyes as Beth said, "Yes, my Lord," in a quiet teasing sort of voice, then she broke away from Alex feeling uncomfortable that she had gone too far. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I know only Poni and Lotty call you that." Beth said almost in a whisper. She gathered her scarf and bag in embarrassment.

Alex's heart soared when she heard Beth use that term of endearment. When Sally used it at the club it felt dirty, but when Beth said it, it made her want to scoop her and kiss her silly. Alex was in deep trouble; she had to get control of her emotions, but had to make Beth feel better, as she was obviously embarrassed. "Never be sorry for calling me that little bit, my friends call me that. So far in life I only have had Poni and Lotty, but I'd be delighted if you'd allow me to include you in my small circle of friends," she said as she lightly caressed Beth's cheek and then pulled away as if she'd been burned. 'What is it about this girl? Every time I make a pact with myself not to get anymore attached or involved I go and break my own rules.'

"I would be very proud to call you my friend, Alex."

Lightening the mood Alex asked, "So what's on the agenda this weekend?"

"I'm meeting Lotty tomorrow for lunch and am looking forward to that. Lotty has been a kind friend."

"Yes she's a good woman and Poni is devoted to her." Before her brain had time to catch up with her mouth she said, "Would you like to go to the picture house with me on Saturday night?" 'Bugger! I promised myself I wouldn't see her out of work.' Alex scolded herself. She consoled herself by thinking that she was simply doing a good deed, as she knew Beth had no other friends in London.

"That would be lovely, thank you!" Beth tried her best to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Excellent! We could get a bite to eat first and that way you can make sure I've eaten something over the weekend! I'll pick you up around 6 o'clock. Does that suit?"

"That's fine. I'll see you then, My lord," Beth smirked testing out the new nickname.

"Goodnight little bit, take care."

Beth giggled Alex's cheeky nickname. "Touché, Alex!"

When Alex was left alone she began talking to herself. " You can't get enough of that girl! Admit it you old fool!" Alex knew she was headed for trouble.

The next morning Agnes and Beth sat at the breakfast table. "What are you going to do today, my dear?"

"Well, I'm going for lunch with Mrs. Woodward at 12 o'clock, but I want to go into town early and perhaps get a new dress. I got a bonus in my pay-packet this week and Lady Dalton asked me to go to the pictures tonight and get a bite to eat first."

Agnes smiled, "You seem excited my dear."

"Well, I've never had friends before and I've certainly never had nights out." She said happily.

Beth set off for town a half an hour later. She had dressed in a smart blue pencil skirt and cream blouse. She was very conscious of trying to dress as well as her pay would allow. She browsed for an hour or so and found a very nice midnight blue sleeveless dress. It was pulled in at the waist accentuating her figure and the skirt slightly puffed out and ended just at the knee. She was able to afford it and no more. She had to leave some money for lunch and for this evening.

Beth arrived at the hotel that Lotty had suggested. It was very grand. It wasn't the Ritz but more fancy than Beth had been in her life. She came to the front desk and the receptionist looked her up and down with disdain, wondering what on earth a girl like her could be doing there.

"Can I help you Miss?" she sneered.

"I'm here to meet Mrs. Woodward for lunch." Beth said nervously.

"Ah yes, Matthew will take you through." She said as she signaled to the bell boy.

The bell boy took her through to a beautiful dining room and over to Lotty's table. Lotty today was dressed classically as always in a brown skirt and jacket with a silk blouse underneath. It was obviously made to measure. The older woman stood up quickly to greet Beth with a kiss as she noticed the intimidated look on the girls face. She had wanted to treat her to lunch at the Ritz but thought it might be to intimidating for her, but even this hotel seemed to be overwhelming to Beth. Lotty thought the small blonde was the sort of girl who should be used to this kind of fine living and if she had anything to do with it she would.

"Beth, am so glad to see you again."

They sat down and Beth visibly relaxed. The waiter brought the menus and as they looked them over Lotty said, "Have you been shopping this morning?"

Beth's eyes widened at the prices on the menu. "Eh ... yes, Alex invited me to the pictures this evening, and to have some dinner beforehand so I thought I'd treat myself to a new dress."

Lotty had noticed Beth's reaction to the prices and wanted to nip that in the bud right away. "Now Beth, I invited you to lunch, so I will be handling the bill so you choose what you like alright?"

"You can't pay for everything every time we are out Lotty, that would be taking you very granted," said Beth.

This secretly pleased Lotty as it showed that if the girl did have any interest in her good friend Alex then it wouldn't be for the money. "Beth I have come to treasure your friendship and I do not have as wide a circle of friends as you would believe. Acquaintances yes, but real friends that I can talk freely to like I do with you none. The class of people that I would be expected to befriend do not always take kindly to how Alex and Poni choose to use their power and wealth, and of course, they do not approve of women living as we do with each other. You have never judged us and I have found a confidante that I can have fun with and make fun of Poni and Alex! So please let me do these things since I don't have to worry about the money. Besides, it's Poni's money we're spending!" Lotty giggled.

Beth smiled. "Well, if it's that important to you then ok, thank you."

They ordered soon after and Lotty asked, "So do you have Alex fully house trained yet?"

Beth smiled, "We've made a lot of changes in the office and it seems to have helped Alex a bit."

"That's not how Alex tells it. She's full of praise for her new office angel! We've noticed such a difference in her and we have you to thank for it. To tell you the truth we had been worried about Alex for a long while. She has had nothing in her life but her work for a long time." Lotty said not wanting to give away her friends secrets of the long string of women. "I think your friendship could be so good for her."

Beth's heart warmed at the thought that Alex was praising her to Lotty and Poni. "I really like her Lotty, and her friendship means a lot to me."

The rest of the lunch passed with idle chit chat. As they were getting ready to leave Lotty had a great idea. "Beth would you come over to dinner next Saturday night? You could meet my big lug of a Poni, please say yes!"

"I'd love to." The young girl beamed.

They said their goodbyes and Lotty wished her a good evening. Beth travelled home to get ready for her evening engagement.

Meanwhile on the other side of London, Alex was standing in her large bedroom, just out of a bath with a towel round her waist. She was debating with herself which suit to wear when the phone rang. "Alex Dalton."

"Good evening, My lord, it's your long suffering Best friend here!"

"Hello Poni, how are you?"

"Well Lotty and I were wondering if you would come to dinner next Saturday night?" Poni had been instructed to telephone by her wife. Lotty felt it would look less suspicious than if she phoned as she could never keep anything a secret.

Poni's better half was going to organise a wonderful dinner for themselves, Alex and Beth. Lotty didn't want Alex to know in case she felt pressured and started pulling away. She thought a wonderful meal with champagne, laughter, and candlelight might bring these two people closer together.

"Of course I will, but why are you inviting me so early? You'll see me on Monday for the trustee's meeting." Alex queried.

"Ah .. well, Lotty just wanted to make sure before the food was ordered. She wanted cook to try a new recipe and you know how hard it is to get hold of a good piece of beef and sugar for dessert." Poni thought on her feet.

"You and I both know, if you wave enough money about, you can get anything you want on the black market. Lotty and your good self eat so well, I don't think you've heard of rationing!"

"Very funny!" Poni, changing the subject, said. "My good lady tells me you are taking young Beth out this evening. I do hope you'll be a gentleman."

"Poni, number one, we're just friends sharing a meal and a film together; and two, she's not that type of girl. She's very innocent and respectable. I will treat her like a Lady as well you know!" Alex said slightly irritated.

"I'm just kidding Alex. I know how you treat your friends remember. You are the best and most loyal friend a person could have, plus you've changed the past month. I just wanted you to know we've noticed and we're very proud of you. Have a good night and I'll see you on Monday."

"Thanks, that means a lot, goodnight pal." Alex said and put the phone down. She had better get moving if she was going to be there on time. Alex was nervous, excited and felt like a teenager when they first step out with a girl. She selected the grey pinstripe suit, splashed on some Floris 89 Aftershave, made sure she had her wallet and cheque book, and picked up her keys. She was driving herself this evening as she often did when in London, not wanting to seem too showy to Beth. She jumped in her red Jaguar sports car and was on her way.

Beth was having a last minute panic about her outfit. Agnes!" Beth shouted down the stairs. "Could I get your advice please?"

Agnes plodded up the stairs. "What is it child? Lady Dalton will be here in twenty minutes!"

"Do you really think this dress is ok? I'm really not sure anymore. I mean, she used to Lady's and countess's and viscounts, and I know not what!" Beth held up the dress that was still on the hanger.

"Calm down child. Lady Dalton is not a snob as well you know, for all her wealth and status. If she wanted to take a countess out for the evening then she would, but no she wants to spend a pleasant evening with you. Now get that dress on and pull yourself together!" Agnes scolded.

"You're quite right. I've no idea why I'm so nervous. I mean it's just dinner with a friend." Beth wondered.

"Do you not?" Agnes smirked as she left the room.

Beth was so caught up in getting dressed that she didn't notice what Agnes had said. She looked herself up and down in the mirror while her stomach was doing summersaults. The thought of being alone with Alex both terrified her and made her feel warm inside. She had grown such fondness for Alex over the short time they had worked together.

Alex was the strongest and most formidable person she had ever met. She felt that Alex could command her to do anything but she also had such a soft side, a side that Alex was letting her see more and more.

Beth had a need to nurture Alex. It gave her such pleasure to make sure she was eating enough and taking care of herself. Having never felt these new and strange emotions before, she couldn't put a name to them.

She heard the doorbell. 'Oh no! I'd better hurry!' She hastily started to finish off her hair.

Alex parked the Jag in front of the house. She was a bit nervous and her heart was beating rather fast.

'Come on Alex! Pull yourself together it's just a pleasant evening with a friend. A friend who is the most adorable creature I've ever laid eyes on! Stop it! Stop it! I can't think that.' She stepped up to the door and rang the bell. The door was opened by a stoutish woman in her fifties.

"Alex Dalton calling for Beth Bentley." Alex said politely.

"Lady Dalton, please do come in," Agnes said, quite in awe of the tall, commanding figure before her.

"Please call me Alex," she smiled.

"Thank you My Lady, oh ... sorry Alex. Do come through to the parlor. Beth will be down in a few minutes. Can I offer you a drink?" Agnes inquired.

"Oh no, thank you. We should be shooting off quite quickly."

Alex instantly liked the older woman. She obviously had no problem with the way Alex lived her life. Just then Beth came into the small parlor and Alex immediately stood. Beth was a vision in a midnight blue dress that showed a teasing glimpse at the top of her cleavage and her honey gold hair hung loosely down past her shoulders. The dress was sleeveless so her shoulders were exposed. 'How I would like to kiss down that beautiful neck and exquisite shoulders.' Alex gulped and suddenly realised she was staring. She moved forward and took Beth's hand, giving it a gentle kiss.

"You look radiant tonight Beth." She said huskily.

At the touch of Alex's lips Beth felt a jolt to her groin. She had felt that a few times now around Alex, but she had no idea what it meant. Alex was, as usual, handsome. Dressed in a grey pinstripe suit, her shirt impeccably pressed and a gold tie pin half down the thin tie. She held her fedora hat in her hand.

"Well shall we go?" Alex asked.

"Of course."

Alex took her arm and escorted her out the door. Agnes stood at the door seeing them off. "Have a good time you two." she called.

Beth smiled at her as Alex opened the car door and helped her into her seat and shut the door, then quickly jumped in the other side.

"Your car is wonderful!" Beth giggled as they tore down the street. "I've never been in an open top before."

Alex smiled. She longed to bring more happiness to this young girl's face. She had no idea why, but she felt a protective instinct around this girl and would do anything to make her smile.

"I thought we'd go to a little restaurant I'm fond of. Have you tried Italian food before?"

"No, never. Italian how exciting!"

"Well I'm glad to be able to share some new experiences with you," Alex replied. She would love to spoil Beth.

Alex pulled the Jag in and parked at the side of the restaurant. She jumped out and went round to open Beth's door and help her out. 'What a perfect gentlemen!' Beth thought. As they walked towards the door of the restaurant Alex stopped and shouted towards a young ragged looking boy standing on the street corner.

"Excuse, young man!" she shouted.

"Yes Sir? I ain't done nothing!" he replied defensively.

"I know. I'm going into this restaurant here, see?" The boy nodded. "I want you to make sure there isn't a mark on this car when I come out. Can you do that? There's a half crown in it for you," Alex said.

"Sure minster! Not a scratch! No problem!" the boy said excitedly. He couldn't believe his luck.

"You'll get it after I come out young man," Alex said as she guided Beth towards the door.

"Is it a bad area to leave your car Alex?" Beth inquired.

"No not particularly. He just looked as if his family needed it and people have too much pride to take money for nothing. So give him a little job and he'll be as happy as Larry and take his prize home to his Mother," she said.

"That's so kind Alex," said Beth as she entered the restaurant. Alex simply shrugged modestly. Beth grew more and more in awe of this kind woman, the more she knew her. She was fascinated with the reaction of the other diners towards Alex. More than half didn't turn a blind eye, obviously not doubting she was a man and some stared right at her with disgust. That was until their eyes met the cold, hard blue stare Alex gave them, they then sheepishly took lowered their heads.

The restaurant was a small cosy place with tables in the middle of the floor and quieter more private booths down either side. The head waiter came towards them and said, "Lady Dalton! So nice to see you again. We have your usual table waiting for you and your delightful guest."

Beth felt a sudden stab of jealousy at the thought of Alex bringing other women here. 'Where did that come from? I'm her friend. I have no right to be jealous!' Beth scolded herself. They were shown to one of the booths right in the corner of the room and were seated. The table was so elegant and to the side of the table a bottle of champagne sat in an ice bucket.

"We have your champagne ready as you requested Lady Dalton," the waiter said as he poured them each a glass.

The young blonde's nose tickled as she took her first sip. "Have you had champagne before Beth?" Alex smiled at Beth's reaction to the drink.

"No, it tickles my nose but it's really nice. You didn't have to go to all this trouble for me. This restaurant, champagne ..."

"Stop!" Alex said commandingly. "You are worth a lot more than this. You're a wonderful elegant woman and you deserve to be treated like a princess."

Beth blushed at this.

"You do realise what a difference you've made to my life in such a short time." Alex thought maybe she had given too much away so thought she would bring it back to work. "You've totally changed the office almost overnight and that has made my life much easier. I'm proud to call you my friend. I know you haven't had an easy time of it and I think it's my right as your friend to treat you as you deserve to be."

"Thank you so much Alex. That means a lot but you must let me pay something towards our evening."

Alex's smile disappeared and she said quite sternly, "Beth, I won't hear anymore on this subject. If I ask you out then it is my job to treat you. I don't want to have to discuss this again. Alright?"

This was the side of Alex she had heard on the phone to clients or dealing with staff. She at once felt chastised, intimidated, and a warmth. A warm feeling of being taken care of and if she was honest she felt something a lot lower which she didn't quite understand.

"Of course Alex, I won't say anymore about it and thank you again."

The waiter brought over the menus.

"Since you've never eaten Italian before Beth, would you like me to order for us both?"

"Whatever you think best Alex" Beth said demurely.

Beth was young, but she had always been an independent, confident young woman. With no mother, she had to look after her father and run the house before most girls would ever have to think about it, and of course her experience with her aunt and uncle where she had to be responsible for herself. Somehow though, Alex had the ability to make her feel like a giggling school girl who would do anything the older woman said. She tried to pull herself together a little. Alex ordered dinner in Italian. Beth suddenly felt the room getting a little hot.

Once the waiter had retreated to the kitchen Beth asked, "Do you come to this the restaurant a lot?"

'Do I detect a hint of jealousy?' thought Alex.

"I do enjoy it here. It's less showy than some of the other places in London. Mostly I come with Poni and Lotty, sometimes some friends of the Foundation."

Beth felt relieved but it was ridiculous to think a woman like Alex wouldn't have lots of women in her life.

They fell into comfortable conversation as they ate dinner.

Beth had never tasted food like it. "This is wonderful Alex!" She had wolfed down each course with glee and the lovely wine that Alex had ordered.

"I'm glad you have enjoyed it little bit. Perhaps you should slow down on the wine; you're not used to it. Switch to water or you'll be fast asleep in the cinema," Alex smiled.

She was amazed how much food this little blonde ate and still have such a wonderful womanly figure. Alex called for the bill. "Shall we make a move to the cinema? I thought we might see that new one with Bette Davis, 'All about Eve'. It's supposed to be very good." She stood as she threw quite a few notes on the table.

Beth was taken aback at the pile of notes, Alex had spent a fortune.

"Yes I liked the look of that. It looks great," she said.

Alex helped her on with her coat and they left, Alex making sure to pay the young lad watching her car on the way.

That night as Beth lay in bed, clutching her father's watch she found herself confused by her feelings. Alex, although she looked and acted like a fine gentlemen, was not. Did that matter? 'I never had feelings for any of the young men in the village. She thought. No one has ever made my stomach lurch or cause the ache between my legs, the way it does around Alex. Maybe it's just because I'm alone in London and she makes me feel taken care off. I truly have no idea. In any case, I am her friend and that's all I'll ever be. Alex will want an elegant woman of her own age. She could have anyone she wants!' Beth mused sadly. 'Well at least I can do one thing. I can be the best friend I can

possibly be and make sure she takes care of herself.' With that Beth fell asleep dreaming of blue eyes and a flashing white smile.

Alex sat on her couch with a glass of brandy and a cigarette, the sound of La Boheme playing in the background. She was restless but had no desire to go to the Alley Cat on her own. It would attract unwanted attention. She had been able to think of nothing else, since she dropped Beth off, but the young woman with beautiful green eyes. It had been a wonderful evening. She was nothing like any woman Alex had ever known. She wasn't interested in Alex's money or power; she wanted nothing more than to be in Alex's company.

Alex looked at the picture on the mantelpiece of her mother and father. 'You would have loved her papa, she is kind, warm, and wants nothing more than to care for me. She is a lot like mama. But she is so young and innocent. I'm old and world weary compared to her. She knows nothing of what it's like to love another woman. She's too good for the likes of me. If she found out the way I'd been with women, she wouldn't want to be my friend let alone anything else. I just wish I could gather her up in my arms and take care of her for the rest of my life.' Alex stubbed out her cigarette and gulped down the last of her brandy. 'Well at the very least I can be the very best friend she will ever have!' And with that she went to bed.

Monday morning dawned and Beth, first in as usual, had everything set up the way Alex liked it and had a pastry on Alex's desk for her breakfast. When she had been in the bakers this morning she bought a couple of boxes of cakes, knowing there was a big meeting of the trustees today. When Alex arrived through the door Alex had a bunch of flowers grasped in her hand.

"I thought the flowers from last week were looking a bit tired next to the sink and to thank you for your company on Saturday. I hope you like them."

"They're wonderful, thank you. You spoil me you know. I don't think anybody else has an employer like you," she said as she sniffed the bouquet.

"You're easy to spoil and you take such good care of me too." said Alex pointing to the pastry on her desk she could see through the open door.

"The meeting's at 10 o'clock to 12 today then I have to take them out to lunch. So just take your lunch and lock up when you like. I'd much rather be eating your sandwiches here than making small talk. At least Poni will be there. If she wasn't there I don't know how I'd cope!" Alex sighed.

"I'll give you a shout when they start arriving. Now go and eat up you breakfast My Lord," Beth said in a mockingly stern voice.

"Anything you say little bit!" she said with a slight bow and a flashing smile.

Beth smiled and shook her head at Alex's antics.

Half an hour later a knock came to the outer office door and Poni put her head round the door. "Miss Bentley?" she inquired.

"Yes, do come in, and call me Beth, please, " she said raising from her seat.

"Then you must call me Poni. So you are the lovely young lady that has become my wife's new best friend? It's a pleasure to meet you," Poni said taking Beth's hand and kissing it like the perfect gentleman.

"Yes. I am really glad to have met your wife. She has been so kind to me."

"Well you must be a fine young woman because my wife is very particular in choosing her friends. Is that old fool in?" Poni inquired just as Alex came out of her office.

"I heard that! You broken down old nag. You're early?"

"I thought I'd come early to make sure I got the time to meet the charming Miss Bentley, and perhaps tell her a few things about you," she smirked.

"Beth don't listen to a word this reprobate tells you," Alex said as they continued their lighthearted bantering.

Beth watched them highly amused. They seemed like siblings, arguing but loving every minute of it.

Poni was lovely. She could see why Lotty adored her and couldn't wait to see them together.

"We had better go through to the conference room and get organised before the rest get here Poni. Could you show them through as they arrive, please Beth?" Alex asked.

"No problem," Beth replied.

Alex and Poni sat at the head of a long oak conference table. There were ink blotters, pens, and paper at each place. They were sorting through some papers when Poni said, "She seems a fine girl Alex. I see a huge difference in the office and in you." Alex grunted only half listening. "She's very beautiful and would make someone a wonderful wife," Poni said hinting. Alex turned and looked towards Poni at this comment.

"Leave it Poni! She's a friend. I don't want you to imply anything in front of her ok!" Alex said forcefully.

"Calm down Alex. I just said she was beautiful. Being a bit defensive aren't you? You like her don't you? That's it, isn't it? Do you have feelings for her?"

"I said to leave it Poni! Whether I like her or not is immaterial. She's 19 years old and I'm 28. She would be appalled if she knew my history with women. She knows nothing of the kind of life we lead and I don't want her feeling uncomfortable around me. So keep your comments to yourself around her," Alex reiterated.

"Ok, it's your call old man, but I think you need to give yourself a break. You've changed recently and you only behaved the way you did because you were afraid. Maybe it's time to stop being afraid and just live Alex."

Just as Alex opened her mouth to reply, the door opened and Beth showed in some of the trustee's that had arrived. While the meeting was going on, Beth was preparing the tea and cakes. She hadn't told Alex she was doing this and hoped she would approve. She had got hold of a tea trolley from the second hand shop down the road thinking it would look better to any visitors to the Foundation. With everything prepared she wheeled the tea trolley to the meeting room and knocked.

"Come," Alex said puzzled as to why Beth would be coming into the meeting.

Beth came through the door pushing the tea trolley. "Tea and cakes as you ordered Alex." Giving Alex the credit she thought would look good to the other board members and she hoped Alex would go along with it.

"Ah ... yes, of course, do come in."

One of the board members, Mr. Rex Davies eyed Beth as she attended to the tea things. Rex Davies was a short balding man, who wore what was left of his hair combed over, in a vain attempt to hide the baldness. He wore a garish tie and his suit was straining to keep him in. He owned a small manufacturing firm, and had only recently become involved with the foundation. Alex barely tolerated him. He was a social climber, and was only involved in the charity to get some brownie points to go towards a knighthood. He thought riding on Alex's coat tails was an easy way to do it. He despised everything that Alex had, money, titles, and her just a woman.

"Alex! You kept this pretty treasure hidden! And who are you my dear?" He leered.

"I am Beth, Alex's secretary." She felt repulsed by the sweaty little man and returned to passing round of the tea things. All the other board were engaged in chit chat while they drank their tea. As Beth bent over the table with the cake plate Rex stared down her blouse and stroked her hand.

"Would you allow me to take you to dinner my dear? I am sure we have a lot in common," he said while licking his lips.

When Alex looked up and observed what was taking place, a ball of rage consumed her being. That greasy, vile little man was touching her Beth! Her Beth she repeated in her mind. She went to stand up to go and throw the vile little man out the building when Poni grabbed her hand and said quietly, "No! Not here. Don't embarrass the poor girl. Trust her to handle it."

Alex sat back down slowly still boiling over.

Beth wasn't sure how to reply or how to get out of it. She finally decided on a small white lie. "Thank you for your invitation sir, but I am stepping out with someone at the moment and I don't think they would take very kindly to me going out with you."

"I hope he realizes how lucky he is. I'm prepared to wait and I'll keep trying. I'm sure your young man can't compare to a gentleman who owns his own business," he said smugly.

Beth just smiled politely and went to leave the room. Rex turned his head and looked towards Alex and was met by eyes of cold hard steel. He quickly looked down to his papers, his hand shaking. As Beth left she looked up at Alex

and saw fury on her face. Had she caused this? She was terrified she had done something to make Alex look like that and rushed out the door.

Half an hour later Alex looked her watch. "Well Gentlemen, I think that's all for this month. If you'll make your way to The Ritz Hotel, I have booked a private dining room for lunch. I'll follow you shortly."

As the men funneled out Alex called out, "Mr. Davies! A word with you if you please"

He turned and came back into the room. Poni stood and said softly, "Alex, think carefully what you do here." As Poni was very aware of her friends temper.

"Poni, please. Everything will be fine. Excuse me and I'll see you outside. Ok?" Alex said firmly. Poni gathered her things and left the room.

Rex had stayed beside one of the chairs in the middle of the table. He was grasping the chair nervously hoping for some sort of support. Alex with her hands in her pockets slowly stalked over like a predator until she was looking down at Rex with cold hard eyes. Rex started to shake. Alex grabbed Rex's tie, which was sitting loose and squint and said as she fixed it for him slowly. "Mr. Davies, if I see you touching or making overtures towards my secretary again it would be extremely hazardous to your health. Do we understand each other Rex?" As she said this she pushed his tie up until it was slightly too tight and choking him.

"Yes ... of course ... Alex, I won't even look in her direction," he stuttered.

"Excellent choice Rex, now I expect you're far too busy this afternoon to join us for lunch, I take it?" She said staring even more directly into him.

"Emm... yes, better get back to work. Lots of matters need attending to."

Alex put a firm hand round his shoulder and then patted him a bit too firmly on the back and saw him out the door. "Good day to you then Rex." She said in the hallway as Poni looked on.

Alex turned to look at Poni and with a raised eyebrow, "See, he is perfectly unharmed."

"Unharmed maybe, but he looked terrified," she smiled.

"Hmm, I have no idea why. Just give me a minute to tell Beth we're going." Alex popped her head round the door. "We're heading off now Beth. I don't know when I'll be back if at all. If not, just lock up ok?" Her tone was a bit sharp from still being angry from earlier.

"Yes, of course, have a good lunch," Beth said meekly.

Beth was left to her own thoughts. What had she done to cause such anger that she saw in Alex's face.

'I thought I had done a good thing by bringing in tea and cakes. Perhaps I had overstepped the bounds of our friendship. Perhaps I presume too much. I must never forget she is my employer.' She decided to take lunch a little early, so she got ready and went over to the park to sit on her favorite bench. She took out her copy of Pride and Prejudice and began reading. 'Mr. Darcy always makes me feel better!' She had been reading for about 20 minutes when she felt a presence and the voice that always gave her a nasty chill down her spine.

"Good afternoon Beth, how are you today?" Albert Pincher asked. He had decided he wasn't going to give up as easily as usual. He wanted this young perfect creature, he deserved her, and she would be his.

"Good afternoon Mr. Pincher," Beth said refusing to use his Christian name.

Albert sat down a little too closely to Beth. The feel of him beside her made her squirm.

"Will you come out with me one evening? I really like you Beth, you're exquisite. I think we would be perfect together," he said as he moved closer and closer to her.

She pulled away as much as she could. "Mr. Pincher, I'm really not interested in getting involved with a young man at the moment. I'm just in a new job and haven't the time for anything else," said Beth, grabbing for any sort of excuse to get rid of this oily weasel.

Albert was turning red as he became enraged. "You would turn me down! I'm a good catch for you! I'm an apprentice draughtsman and in a few years I'll be making good money, enough to look after a wife very well! You're just a secretary. You won't get a better offer!" he spat.

Beth was gob smacked at this sudden outburst of anger and aggressiveness. She felt threatened and wanted to get out there as quickly as possible.

"Mr. Pincher, please don't create a scene. I have given you my answer; now please let me go back to work." She got up quickly and rushed back to the office never looking back.

Albert watched her rush away; the fury he had felt only a minute ago was replaced by a cold determination.

'You will be mine Beth. Have no fear about that. You just don't know what's good for you yet. But you will.'

The young girls fear had made him even more excited to have her. He couldn't wait to feel that young body writhing under him, resisting. Oh it would be exquisite. He felt himself grow hard at the thought. 'Soon my sweet, soon.'

Beth had settled back into her work with a feeling of unease after her encounter at lunch time and it had only made worse her feeling that she had done something to upset Alex. A few hours later Alex arrived back at the office, feeling much better after some time away, a talk with Poni, and a few drinks. The feeling of overwhelming jealousy she had felt at the meeting had frightened her. She had not realized the depth of her growing feelings towards the girl. She thought she had better head back to the office before going home, as she may have been a bit short with Beth on the way out and wanted to make sure she was ok. She entered the outer office and said, "Hello, things going alright this afternoon?"

"Yes ... fine," she hesitated.

Alex cocked an eyebrow and wondered about Beth's worried tone. "Is everything ok with you little bit?" She asked as she stepped closer towards her secretary.

"Oh Alex ... I am sorry. I don't know what I did to upset you but I'm sorry! So sorry!" she cried, tears running down her face.

Alex took Beth in her arms and stroked her hair as the girl's face rested on Alex's chest. "Shhh! Calm down little bit, what's wrong? You've done nothing to upset me," she said as she continued to sooth Beth. The strain of her worry over Alex and the fear she had felt with Albert in the park came gushing out.

"I ...I ... I," Beth spluttered.

Alex pulled her tighter. "Calm down sweetheart, take some deep breaths and tell me."

Beth breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of Alex. Strong, spicy and woody mixed in with aftershave. This calmed her down a good bit. "I ... I brought teas and cakes in and handed them round. I thought it was a good idea, honestly Alex, then that sleazy Mr. Davies was trying to chat me up and then when I was leaving I looked up at you and you looked so angry at me and I must of done something and I've been racking my brains to think what I could of done but I can't think what I've done. I never want to disappoint you! You've been so kind to me and if you just tell me I'll make it right!" Beth cried.

Alex felt so guilty at having given Beth this impression. She would have to tell a half-truth to conceal her true feelings. "Oh no, please forgive me for letting you think that!" she said as she kissed Beth on top of the head and cuddled her as tight as possible. "I saw that cad Rex slobbering all over you and it made me mad! You are such a wonderful, respectable girl," she said as she turned the girl around in her arms and cupped her face in her hands.

"No one should touch you without your permission and take liberties with you little bit. I had a chat with him and he will never bother you again." Alex's hands were covered with Beth's and they stared into each other's eyes, their faces getting closer. Just then Alex regained her senses and pulled away. She cleared her throat and began to light a cigarette. "So you see you have nothing to worry over, ok?"

Beth pulled herself together, astonished at what had nearly happened. They could have kissed so easily. It was going to happen then Alex pulled away. She also knew she couldn't tell Alex about Albert, she was sure it would make her very angry,

"Thank you then, for defending my honour, Alex."

"You can always count on me, now what say we knock off early and I drive you home?"

Alex dropped her off then drove home.

Later that night Beth sat in the parlour with Agnes. They were listening to the wireless while warming themselves by the fire. It was a very cold November night but Beth was filled with warmth as she remembered being taken in Alex's arms this afternoon. "No one should ever touch you without your permission and take liberties with you." Alex had said.

"He will never bother you again." I have never felt so safe, so protected as I did at that moment. Those blue eyes of hers, seem to see something and somewhere in me that no one ever has. She was so angry. Was that anger merely that of defending a friends honour? Or was it more? Is she feeling the things I am?

What is it I am feeling? Am I falling in love? I truly thought she was going to kiss me.!

Then Beth realised. 'I wanted her too. Badly.'

"Beth, Beth are dreaming?" Agnes interrupted.

"Oh sorry, I was just thinking. What did you say?"

"What are you going to wear to this fancy evening on Saturday at the Woodward's?"

"I have no idea? How can I compete in that circle? I know Lotty would never think anything less of me. She's certainly not a snob but I don't know who else is invited and I want to look nice."

"I have an idea. I know a little second hand shop that gets in a lot of designer dresses. We could have a look, and if you find something then I could adjust it for you. What do you think?"

"That sounds like a great idea Agnes, thank you. You're such a good friend." Beth stood up and gave Agnes a warm hug.

I close my eyes I think of you,

I take a step I think of you,

I catch my breath I think of you,

I cannot rest I think of you.

(Looking out - Brandi Carlile)

Alex didn't know what to do with herself she'd nearly ruined everything with Beth. Her feelings were ripping her apart. 'Maybe it's just my libido talking?' she thought. 'I haven't been with a woman in so long and maybe that's why I am so fixated on Beth and can't stop thinking about her.' She decided what needed to be done and rushed home to her flat. She went into her wardrobe and collected what she needed, her strap on rubber dildo.

Rubber ones had only recently become available, before that they had been made of leather. They were hard to get hold of, but of course Alex had her sources. The advantage of rubber meant they were more lifelike. They had a better feel, and of course the colour was closer to skin pigmentation. They were meant to be attached to a leather harness but Alex didn't like the feel of a clumpy leather belt under her trousers and had it made to measure with elastic used instead of leather strap.

The piece of elastic was so thin that it could not be seen through her clothes and when a woman touched her bottom they would hardly notice it. It fit perfectly.

Alex loved her dildo, her cock as she referred to it. This was how she always had sex. She loved to fuck a woman, to feel the power and dominance. She could orgasm with her cock without any clitoral stimulation and had never allowed a woman to be inside her. The very thought made her shiver. The rush she got as she made the woman she was with beg for her cock, beg her to release them, gave her the greatest pleasure.

She was ready and packing as she left to drive to the Alley Cat. She was sure all she needed was a quick encounter then she would be back to normal and able to become Beth's friend. By the time she arrived at the Alley Cat she was throbbing, this wouldn't be one of her long encounters. She would achieve her goal and get out she thought as she walked towards the bar pushing down her feelings of self-loathing. 'You need to do this! You know you do', she tried to tell herself. Stepping to the bar, she ordered a drink and lit a cigarette.

Sally had seen her target entering the club looking agitated. Her heart jumped for joy when she saw the bulge in Alex's trousers. 'You've come prepared, good boy! I knew you'd be back', she thought as she started to wander over to the bar. "Buy me a drink handsome?"

"Sure, whatever the lady's drinking barman." Alex would break her own rule of never going with the same woman twice by choosing Sally, but at least she would know what to expect and they could get quickly to point of the evening.

Sally sipped her drink, put her hand on Alex's knee and trailed her fingers up to the bulge in Alex's trousers. "I haven't seen you in a long while. I see you have come prepared for all eventualities." Her hand lingered dangerously near Alex's crotch.

Alex's clit pounded at Sally's touch near her cock. 'I need this. I need this!' She tried to convince herself. Sally leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Fuck me Alex! Fuck me hard please?" That did it Alex grabbed Sally's arm and dragged her off to the toilets. Sally beamed with a look of victory on her face.

When they got in the toilets, the stalls were empty and Alex pushed Sally into a cubicle and up against the wall. She grabbed Sally's breasts forcefully and gave her a bruising kiss. This would not be a gentle coupling. Sally put her hand on Alex's cock. "I knew you would be back. I was waiting on you my sweet."

Alex stopped holding her. "No talking! Let's just do this." She didn't want to be reminded she was doing this with this woman. Sally wriggled from her grasp and lowered herself onto her knee's. She slowly undid Alex's belt and zipper, and pulled out her cock. She stroked the length of it and started licking and sucking it, taking it all the way into her mouth.

Alex moaned and brought her hands down onto Sally's head holding her and guiding her. As she looked down she saw images of Beth's smiling face before her eyes. Alex felt dirty but she needed to do this. She would just get it done quickly. She pulled Sally up and pushed her back against the wall. Pulling Sally's dress up, Alex was not surprised to see she was not wearing underwear. She looked in Sally's eyes just as she was going to enter her and Alex's mind was filled with more images of Beth laughing across the dinner table when they had went out.

"Stop, turn round and bend over." Maybe if she didn't have to look at Sally's face she could do this.

"Ooooo yeah! I love to be fucked from behind." Sally bent over and spread her legs, she was soaking and she needed to be Alex's so badly.

Alex pushed up her dress again and put her cock at Sally's opening, teasing her before she would thrust into her. Sally knew what would speed Alex up. She turned round, looked her in the eye and said in a pleading voice. "Fuck me My Lord!"

Alex froze. That was what Beth called her. Her sweet, innocent Beth. Her insides turned to ice and her libido deserted her. She felt sick at the thought of what she had nearly done. She pushed Sally away as she was pulling her boxers and trousers up, as quickly as possible.

"What's going on? Why have you stopped?" Sally asked frantically.

Alex ignored her as she finished buckling her belt. She reached to unlock the toilet door when Sally grabbed her arm. "Tell me what's wrong, what did I do?"

Alex pulled back from the door, took Sally's hand off her and stared her right in the eyes. "I told you before. Never call me My Lord! Only people that I love call me that! Don't ever touch me again!" Alex slammed out of the cubicle angrily.

"Please Alex! I'll do anything! I'm meant to be with you!" she shouted.

Alex almost ran out the toilets and out of the club. She threw up in the gutter, Alex was so disgusted with herself and ashamed. She got in her Jag and drove straight to Poni's.

Alex had arrived at Poni's door at 6 o'clock in a panic and needing help. Luckily Lotty was at one of her orphanage charity meetings. Alex didn't think she could face her, in this state. Poni had taken her into her downstairs study for privacy. There was a large oak desk, some bookcases, and a warm fire burning in the fireplace. Poni stood by the fire watching Alex sitting at the desk with her head in her hands.

"I can't live like this anymore Poni. I am so ashamed. I want to be the person Beth thinks I am, not that person in the toilet of the Alley Cat!" She exclaimed after telling Poni the whole story. "But am so scared. I thought I would calm down if I got some companionship but that's not enough anymore."

She went on to tell her what had happened this afternoon with Beth. "I nearly kissed her Poni! I came so close. It's getting worse. She would have realised my feelings and left me. I'm getting in too deep. I've never been in love; I don't know how to handle this!" Alex said desperately.

"Ok, take a deep breath and calm down old friend. Let's think about this logically since the emotions scare you so much. If this was a perfect world, you had no worries over your feelings, and you weren't scared or concerned about bringing Beth into this lifestyle. What would you do? Think about it for a second and answer honestly." Poni said.

Alex took a deep breath. "I would tell her I love her more than anything. She would love me back. I would ask her to marry me and I would take her in my arms back to Dencotte, make her Lady Dalton, and never let go! I would give her everything."

Poni came and sat on the corner of the desk. "It seems to me that the only thing that is stopping that dream from happening is your fear. You are the only one who can control that. I know what losing your parents did to you, but if you live your life in fear of losing the love you have for her, you aren't really living. Up until you met her, you weren't living Alex, merely existing. If you take that leap and give your love then you will know happiness you haven't dreamed of. I know bad things happen, but would you rather live say 20 years in love with that beautiful girl as your wife and then either one of you lose each other, than never to have experienced it?"

We all die Alex, we all have to leave each other but it's what you do while you're here that matters. You could make that girl the happiest woman in the world. I know it's risky and you don't know how she will respond, but life is risky and love is worth taking the chance on. I know, Lotty has made my life complete." Poni said putting her hand on Alex's shoulder.

Alex looked up at her and smiled. "When did you get so wise?"

"I've been learning from my wife while you've been working so hard! She's a knowledgeable woman or so she tells me." Poni chuckled.

This made sense to Alex and her heart started to beat faster at the thought of a life with Beth. Could she allow herself to take this risk for a chance at happiness? As she thought, she finally said "If I were to take this risk, how do I know she feels the same?"

"You don't. That's the chance you take. You ask her, but I saw the way she looked at you at the office. I would say the girl is smitten?" Poni said.

Alex considered all the alternatives but did not think she could continue living, keeping her offer of love away from her little bit of a Spitfire. "I'm willing to try and see if she will accept me, but I must tell her about my past, the womanising, and the immoral ways in which I have behaved. She must know all of me before she can make her choice. I'm so much older than her and she is so innocent. She's never even stepped out with a boy back in her village. I would hate to think she felt pushed into anything. She must come to me. If she comes to me and tells me this is what she truly wants, then I will give her everything and she will have me for the rest of my life." Alex said decidedly.

Poni smiled. "Well then, can I suggest a very traditional course of action? Court her. If you insist she comes to you then court her, take her out, treat her like a princess, have fun and laugh together, woo the girl! It's the basis of a long lasting relationship. That way you're not telling her how you feel outright, but you're giving her an idea that you want to spend your time with her, spoiling her and romancing her. She will come to you I'm sure, and if a relationship is not something she desires it gives her a chance to pull back to friendship. Once she knows you much better then tell her of your past at that time and she can see how you have changed."

"That is an excellent idea. I will show her such a wonderful time she will never want to leave me. I'm willing to take the chance Poni, I can't live without trying. Thank you old friend." Alex said as she stood up and hugged Poni.

"First things first, can I invite her to the dinner you're having on Saturday night?" Alex asked.

Poni smiled with a sneaky smile on her face. "I'm afraid you can't do that. She's already invited. The dinner was originally just for you and her. Lotty's idea to bring you two closer."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why keep it a secret?"

"At that point Alex you refused to even see her outside of work for fear of growing more attached to her. Are we forgiven?" Poni pleaded with a pout.

"Of course, you two truly are the greatest friends one could ever have."

Poni walked over to the whiskey decanter and poured some out for them both. "Well then let us plan the courtship of Miss Elizabeth Bentley!" Poni said triumphantly.

The next day at the office felt as if they were getting back to normal. Alex was a lot calmer now that she had decided on her plan of action. She wandered out from her office and stood behind Beth as she was seated at her desk, Alex pretended to look at the papers she was dealing with over her shoulder, she leaned further in and said into the girl's ear, "Is there anything I can help you with? I'm a bit of a loose end." She felt Beth shiver at her close proximity and smiled as she walked around to the front of the desk and sat.

Beth's heart was racing; her attraction to this tall woman was growing stronger and stronger. She still hadn't had a chance to speak to Lotty about her feelings yet, and thought she better say something quickly so as not to betray herself. "There must be something in that office of yours that can keep you out of mischief my lord?" she asked teasingly.

"Not a thing, little bit. It's because of your wonderful efficiency that I am bored with nothing to do. Ah! I know! I shall make us tea!" Alex said jumping up and clicking her fingers.

Beth laughed. "You! My noble Lord Dalton! Making tea! I doubt you've ever boiled a kettle in your life!"

"You have such little faith in me, dear Beth?" Alex said enjoying the playful banter going back and forth between them. This was exactly what she had planned when she came out to speak to Beth. She wanted to show her a side of herself that normally only Poni and Lotty saw.

"Well perhaps you are right, but there is a first time for everything is there not, my little bit?" she said as she turned towards the sink and started filling the kettle smiling to herself. She had added the word "my" to little bit deliberately again testing Beth's reaction to the boundaries of their relationship.

Beth was astonished at this jovial behavior from Alex and liked it very much. 'Alex should relax more often. Had she said 'my little bit'? She had! She was sure of it. Is that the how Alex saw her?' Beth wished it was.

Alex brought over the tray. "See, I haven't done too badly have I?"

"I'm sure it's fine Alex."

"I would wait until you've tasted it before you say that. Anyway, shall we take our break?"

Beth smiled and started to pour the tea for them.

"I understand you are to be attending Poni and Lotty's dinner party with me?" Alex asked.

"Oh, are you going as well?"

"We are the only guests I believe. I wondered if you would like me to pick you up and escort you there?"

"That would be lovely Alex." said Beth suddenly much more relaxed at the thought of going to this grand dinner party with an ally.

"I am going to buy a dress on Saturday morning. Agnes knows of a shop where they sell evening gowns in excellent condition, and then she can alter it quickly before the party." Beth said excitedly but a bit embarrassed at have to make do with seconds.

Alex knew that 'in excellent condition' meant second hand. This beautiful young woman deserved to be dressed in the finest handmade gowns and silks, but she also knew it was too early in her courtship of Beth to offer to buy her a dress. The young woman was very proud and it marked her out from other woman that she could meet at the Alley Cat. Many of the women who had tried to catch her there wanted nothing more than money and would be delighted to be her paid mistress. Thus another reason why she never saw the same woman more than once. She hoped one day when the time was right she would be able to lavish beautiful things on Beth.

She thought of an idea. "Saturday morning is a bit late to start any alterations. Why don't you take tomorrow afternoon off and go shopping with Agnes? It will give you more time and be less of a panic for you. I will give you your wages for the week early to help with your purchase."

"Oh ... well, thank you. That would be wonderful Alex. You really are too good to me you know." Beth said shyly.

"Not at all? Mind you, I am a wonderful employer aren't I?" Alex asked fishing for compliments with a roguish smile.

"The very best of employers, My Lord!" she agreed.

Alex looked at her watch. "Well time for lunch I think." Alex waited for Beth to get her coat and go for her daily excursion. When she didn't move Alex asked, "Are you not going out today? You always do. Where do you go by the way? If it's not too personal a question, I've always wondered."

Beth did not want to tell Alex the reason why she wasn't going out the office today, fearful that Albert's advances would upset Alex. The encounter with Albert had shaken her up more than she first admitted and she just didn't have the nerve to have another confrontation with him. "I always go to the park and sit on a bench overlooking the pond and read. I just thought I'd have a change today. No reason," she lied.

"If you would change your mind, I would love to accompany you and get some fresh air with my sandwiches for a change."

Beth couldn't very well refuse without telling the truth. "That would be lovely Alex."

"Very well, you go ahead while I sign those last couple of letters you left on my desk and I'll post them on the way out. I'll just be 15 minutes, see you soon."

Beth reluctantly got her things together and started to make her way. She just hoped Albert would not make an appearance today after their crossed words.

Beth sat down on her favourite bench and brought out *Pride and Prejudice*, nervously looking both ways hoping not to see Mr. Pincher. When she saw the coast was clear. She opened her book and read a page, then felt a shadow looming over her. She looked up smiling, expecting the tall presence of Alex, only to find herself looking at the sneering face of Albert.

"Good afternoon Beth, perhaps today you will give me a positive answer to my polite requests for you to step out with me. You know it is inevitable. You will go out with me. You will meet me here at 7 o'clock tonight. I'm fed up pussy footing around you Beth. I've tried to be nice but my patience has grown thin." He said as he grabbed Beth's wrist and tightened it. "You will meet me tonight. You will have the pleasure of cooking for me at my flat and bring a change of clothes, you will be staying." Albert squeezed tighter.

Beth stared into his dead eyes. They terrified her. He looked like he was capable of anything. She snapped. "I will not go out with you and stay the night with you? What do you take me for? A cheap whore!" Beth spat.

The grip on her wrist was now very painful and made her gasp. Albert drew his face down closer to Beth, his stinking breath in her face. "You will be whatever I decide you to be. You are my whore! If you do not cooperate you will disappear. You have no family and no one will miss a little slut like you."

"How do you know about my family?" Beth panicked.

"I know. That's all you need concern yourself with. You flaunt yourself at me every day in this park. I've seen the way you look at me, the way you push your breasts out at me. You want it. You just play this little game with me pretending you don't, but know this, you're going to get it over and over again." He said menacingly.

Beth was crying now. 'He was insane! How did he know so much about her? How did he know she had no family?' Just then Albert was pulled off his feet by his collar, his arm pushed up his back.

"What the hell are you doing! Put me down! You vicious creature! I'm talking to my girlfriend!" Albert said struggling for breath.

Alex ignored him and looked at Beth who had jumped up from the bench. "Beth stay here and don't move ok? I will be back presently. Everything will be fine." Alex said as she frog marched Albert over to the alcove at the bottom of the office stairs. She slammed him against the wall and pouched him in the stomach.

"You want some attention from a lady? Try me for size. Take your best shot," she shouted.

"You unnatural bitch!" he screamed as he swung a wild punch.

Alex ducked and aimed another crushing blow to Albert's nose.

"Argh!!! You've broken my nose bitch! I'll get a policeman!" he screamed.

Blood poured down his face. He squealed and Alex grabbed him again and threw him against the wall. With her forearm across his throat, her cold blue eyes stared into him. "And who do think a policeman would believe? Hmm ... a little rat boy like you or Lady Alexandria Dalton?"

Alex didn't often use her status as a threat but this situation warranted it.

"Now listen to me carefully, you low life bastard! That girl out there is under my protection! If you come anywhere near her again let alone touch her, you will be begging me to put you out of your misery to end the pain! Do we understand each other, Rat boy?" Alex wasn't shouting now but this low menacing voice and murderous look was much worse.

Albert truly believed that Alex would kill him in a minute without a second thought. He developed a wet patch on his trousers around his groin.

"Answer me, Rat boy!" She pushed her forearm further into his wind pipe.

"I ... I ... understand ...pppplease I ... let me go," he begged.

Alex released him and said, "Run along now. It looks like you could use a change of trousers," Alex smirked.

Albert ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

Alex straightened her tie and tried to tidy herself up. She walked as quickly as she could back to the park. Beth trembled as she waited at the gate of the park, frantically looking for Alex. She wanted to go after her, but she didn't want to go against what Alex told her to do. Finally, she saw the older woman walking across the street. Alex bounded over to her and held her tight.

"Oh Alex! Are you alright? What happened?" She said sobbing.

Alex was glad the park had been quiet this afternoon. "Shhh! Now little bit, calm down. Come, let's go sit on the bench." Alex guided her over never letting her go. When they sat Beth cuddled in Alex's chest and began to cry uncontrollably.

"Alex, it was awful. He hurt my wrist and the vile things he said he wanted to do to me!"

"Please, take a breath. I'm here now and, no one will ever hurt you. I will protect you always. I want you to tell me how this came about and then I will tell you how it will be resolved," she said pulling Beth tighter to her.

To any passerby they looked like a pair of lovers canoodling in the park. Beth recounted how she had met Albert at the park on her very first day and how he had bothered her ever since, as his obsession grew she explained how he began to frighten her.

"Why did you not tell me this was going on?" Alex said sternly.

"I didn't want you to be angry Alex, after how it made you so upset when Rex Davies touched me," Beth admitted. "I don't ever want to bring you pain Alex, I care for you too much."

Alex cupped Beth's head in her hands. "I get angry because I feel protective of you and I care Beth. I want to look after you. I want you to promise me you will never keep something like that a secret from me again. You're my friend and the best thing in my life. Promise me Beth."

"I promise Alex. I give you my word." She took Alex's hand from her face and grasped it. She saw blood on her knuckles and her shirt. "Now please tell me what happened Alex"

"Mr. Pincher and I had a conversation and the upshot of that was that he promised he would never come near you again. Your safe little bit," and she kissed Beth on the temple.

"I know there is more to it Alex, but I trust you to handle the situation. I always feel safe with you," she whispered.

Alex stood and pulled her up. "What say we go back to the office and I'll make my second ever pot of tea for you then I'll drive you home. There will be no more work today."

Beth nodded her agreement suddenly exhausted. She took Alex's offered arm and they walked back. They sat around Beth's desk drinking warm tea. Alex had put a bit of brandy in it to try and calm Beth down a bit.

"You've ruined your shirt you know."

"It doesn't matter, I have many more."

Trying to change the subject to more light hearted matters Alex said. "What was the book you were reading in the park?"

"Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen is my favourite author. I've read them all but this one's the best. I've lost count of the many times that I've read it. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy's love story is just wonderful and Mr. Darcy is my ultimate romantic hero." She looked into Alex's eyes. "He's dark and brooding and remote, but underneath it all he is extremely moral with fine principles. He just needed the right woman to see beneath the stoic facade and bring it out of him."

Alex met Beth's eyes and they were caught in a moment together. They both knew she wasn't talking about Mr. Darcy, she was talking about Alex.

"Well I hope you get your Mr. Darcy one day." Alex smiled. "What say I drive you home now?"

Beth knew she had already met her Mr. Darcy.

That night Beth sat in the parlor with Agnes drinking cocoa. She thought back to the events of the day. Everything seemed to happen today, it was almost too much for her brain to process. Alex is such a complex person. She is so gentle and caring with me, but in an instant can turn into a wild beast when something or someone she cares about is threatened. 'It should frighten me, shouldn't it? No she could never hurt me, I know it. How does she care for me? As a sister? with no one else to care for me does she just feel responsible for me? Or as a man would care for a woman?

She was fiercely protective of me today and it always seems to anger her more when someone else touches me. That could be a clue. Maybe she doesn't want anyone else to touch me? Oh I hope so! I f she could only see me as a grown woman and not a girl.

Alex did seem different this morning, as if a weight had been lifted off her. She was positively playful, as if she was trying to get my attention.

I need to find out soon how she feels because just being close to her is driving me to distraction!' Beth thought.

Agnes noticing the faraway look on Beth's face asked."It was very kind of Lady Dalton to let you go early tomorrow, first dinner out and now afternoons off. She must be kind fond of you?"

Beth blushed. "She is very kind. People think she is aloof and driven, but once you get to know her she's a pussy cat!"

They both laughed. "I'm so glad things are working out so for you in London. I enjoy your company here as well my dear."

"I love living here with you. You've been so kind to me. I hope we find something good enough at this shop you're taking me too"

"I'm sure we will my dear, they have some beautiful things. Some of these rich ladies hardly have the dresses on once if that. Don't worry; we'll have you looking like a princess!"

"I think I'll turn in now. I've had a busy day, goodnight." Beth had not told Agnes of her encounter with Albert, she didn't want to worry her.

"Goodnight my dear, pleasant dreams!"

Eyes watched Beth as she opened up the office in the morning. She shivered and looked round, but didn't see anything or anyone as she continued up the stairs. Albert had arrived early this morning to watch Beth. He had been enraged after his confrontation with Lady Dalton. Albert wanted to check what time Beth came and went from her office and make a plan, to catch Beth on her own, away from the influence of her boss. He touched his bruised ribs and winced. She had just been lucky to catch him out like that. 'For a woman to speak to him the way she did and to give him orders!' He took no instructions from a woman, especially one as unnatural as her.

His anger had been growing since yesterday but he had finally snapped when he turned up at work this morning only to be called into the manager's office. Albert looked like a raccoon, his face black and blue and his nose off at an angle. He hadn't wanted to go to the doctor to get it fixed incase questions were asked.

"What happened to your face Albert?" his manager asked.

"I was jumped by a couple of thugs after work, they stole my wallet." Albert shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"That's not how Lady Dalton tells it. She telephoned me this morning to tell me you were harassing one of her employees."

Alex had found out from Beth that he was a local trainee draughtsman and made a few calls to the architectural firms nearby till she found the right one.

Albert lost it. "Look at what that bitch did to me! An unprovoked attack!"

"Lady Dalton says she had to pull you off the young woman and restrain you, I'm sure that's where you got your injuries. I would have done the very same thing if I had caught you doing that. You're just lucky she didn't call a policeman. You can consider yourself sacked Albert and don't even think of asking for references. Our firm cannot afford to anger Lady Dalton. She has influence far and wide, a well-placed word from her to the local council or Government and we could forget about winning anymore public contracts. That is all Albert, gather your things and you will be escorted from the building."

"You can't listen to that bitch!" he screamed.

The manager pressed the buzzer on his desk and a security guard came in.

"I would thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head! See Mr. Pincher out please Samuel."

"I won't forget this. You pansy! You would follow the orders of a woman!" he spat.

The security guard grabbed his arm and pulled him out the office.

These events had brought him to watching the building. Alex had ruined him. He had not only lost his job, but had very little hope of getting another one without references. He intended to take payment back in full from Beth's body. He smiled at the thought of Alex coming into the office to find the whore's body broken and used and only he would ever take that body the way the dyke bitch wanted to. All this could have been avoided if that whore had just done as she was told, he thought. I must be calm and wait for exactly the right moment. He slinked back into the shadows.

Alex came into the office the next morning hoping to find Beth in a much calmer state.

"Good morning, how are we today?"

"I'm much better thank you. He would be a fool to risk your wrath again?" Beth smiled.

"Don't you worry anymore. I'll always be with you when I'm needed and that's a promise little bit. Well we better get some work done before you go flouncing off to the shops this afternoon!"

Beth laughed and saluted. "Yes, My Lord!"

The afternoon found Beth and Agnes in a small charity shop in east London. They had been through rails and rails of dresses. They had seen a few that looked suitable and they had put them aside.

"I think you should try on what we've got so far Beth or you'll find yourself overwhelmed with choices."

"Perhaps you're right Agnes"

She tried on the first and came out from behind the curtain. Agnes just looked and smiled.

"You don't have to say it. I know, too frumpy. It's like something my grandmother would wear! We may be here some time."

She went through another three, but all had one small thing or another that made them unsuitable. She took the last dress off the hanger. She looked at the label inside and was amazed to find it was a Christian Dior. Beth had always read eagerly about fashion from the various celebrity and society magazines. She recognized this simple black dress as a Christian Dior 'new look' dress. A less austere style than dresses designed during the war years. It was sleeveless with a velvet bodice and ruched taffeta skirt. She hoped it wouldn't fit too badly as she really liked it. Beth slowly stepped into the dress and couldn't believe it fit her like a glove. She stepped out of the changing cubicle and Agnes stood and held her hand to her mouth.

"Oh my! You look absolutely wonderful! Every inch the lady about town." Agnes stepped closer to check the fit. "It fits perfectly. What do you think, my dear?"

"I love it! This is it. This is my dress. I just know it! I'll take it."

Beth changed and paid for the dress. They went to find a shop with costume jewelry to add to the glamour of the gown. Beth returned home delighted with her purchases. She felt much more confident at attending Lotty's dinner party.

"I hope I get the chance to speak to Lotty privately. Maybe she can help me understand some of these feelings."

The next few days passed without much incident which made a pleasant change, although Beth did have a strange feeling when she opened up in the mornings. Evenings were fine because Alex had taken to leaving with her and driving her home. They had arranged on Friday that Alex would pick her up half past 7, as they were dining at 8. Alex arrived very promptly decked out in her black dinner suit. Again, Alex had brought flowers for her, hoping to make it feel like more like a date. She was shown to the parlor and Agnes thought she would indulge in a bit of meddling.

"Alex, I wondered if you knew it was Beth's birthday next week? I don't mean to interfere or anything. I just thought, well she won't tell you and you would be annoyed if it past and you didn't know. It's December the 5th. ."

"Thank you, Agnes. I'm delighted you told me. She deserves the best and I'll make sure she has a wonderful birthday."

Alex stood as Beth walked in. She was gob smacked. "Beth, you look absolutely stunning! Words fail me." If she didn't know better! Alex would never in a million years have known that dress was second hand. The young girl had natural class that oozed from her.

Beth blushed. "Thank you Alex, you look rather dashing yourself."

"Well if we're ready shall we go?"

"Yes, I may be late Agnes." Beth said as she took Alex's arm.

"That's fine my dear. You enjoy yourself."

When Alex escorted her outside Beth didn't see the familiar red Jaguar sports car, but a large black Bentley motor car. The back door was been held open by a chauffeur in the full grey uniform and hat to match.

"Good evening Miss," he said as he dipped his head.

"Beth, I'd like you to meet my driver Alfie."

"Pleased to meet you Alfie, thank you for taking us this evening."

Alex just melted inside. This young woman had such charm. To thank the driver was just adorable.

The tall woman helped her into the back seat. The inside was luxurious, leather upholstered seats that you just sank into.

"Why no Jaguar tonight, Alex?"

"I wanted this evening to be special for you. I wanted you to go in style and of course, it means I get to spend more time with you."

Beth realized something at that moment. Was Alex was courting her? It really felt like it. She just knew it and the feeling was wonderful. The car came to a stop and the door opened for them. Alex got out first and took Beth's hand to help her out. When the young girl looked up at the building in front of her, her mouth dropped open. "Is this Poni's house?"

"Yes, it's nice isn't it?"

"Nice? Alex it takes up half the street!"

"The grounds are quite extensive at the back as well; it's quite an exclusive part of London."

"And your family home that you turned over to the Foundation was like this?"

"Very similar, it gives us a lot of room to do the things we want for the disadvantaged."

Beth was astonished. She had known Alex was rich but had never really taken in how rich. If Alex had a house like this and a large country estate then her wealth must be off the scale. How could she ever hope to be good enough for Alex and her friends?

Alex saw the look of doubt that went across Beth's face and went to reassure her and placed her hand on Beth's cheek. "We may be used to different styles of living Beth but were still the same friends you made. Please relax and enjoy the evening. With your class and style you could be at home in a palace or a tenement flat."

Beth calmed a bit. "Thank you, it's just so grand."

"Shall we?"

They walked up to the huge front door past large stone pillars that went from pavement to roof. The door was opened and a butler said. "Ah! Lord Dalton, please do come in."

Once they were through the door Beth looked around the hall of the house. She was mesmerized by the tall pillars, magnificent spiral staircase, high ceilings and chandeliers everywhere. The butler took their coats and directed them into the drawing room. Poni and Lotty were waiting for them. Poni was dressed in a dinner suit, the same as Alex, and Lotty was wearing, an over one shoulder bronze coloured dress. They greeted each other with kisses and were seated.

"It's so wonderful to have you both here." Lotty said beaming.

A young servant was bringing round champagne flutes served on a silver platter. The male servants were dressed in suits with tails and highly starched shirts with traditional yellow and black striped waistcoats while the maids wore traditional black and white with white caps.

"Bollinger and an excellent vintage. I see you got the good champagne out for us" Alex joked.

"Well we thought we had better since Beth was coming. We usually just have the cheap stuff for you, old friend." They laughed.

"Ignore them Beth, their always like this, a couple of children in the playground!"

As they laughed, an matronly looking woman popped her head round the door.

"Is this a convenient moment Ma'am?"

"Oh of course Nanny Brooks. Come in. I asked Nanny to bring Kat down to see you for a few minutes before bed."

Nanny Brooks came in carrying the little blonde headed girl. As soon as the girl saw Poni and Alex, she was straining to get to them.

"Papi! Papi! up?"

The little girl had come up with the name herself as soon as she started talking, putting Poni and Papa together.

Poni scooped up the girl into her arms.

"Come here little kitten. Have you got a kiss for Alex?"

The girl nodded enthusiastically, puckering up her lips. "wix!" Kat affectionately called her.

"Good evening young kitten. I see you got the little present I left for you?" Alex pointed to the toy cat, that the girl was holding and tickled her sides.

"Cat!" she said giggling.

Lotty came over and took hold of her little girl.

"Enough Alex, or nanny Brooks will never get her to settle.

"Mamma." Kat said snuggling into her Mother.

"Now Kitten, Do you remember Mama's friend we met at the park?" The little girl nodded.

"Hello Kat, it's nice to see you again. I had a lovely time at the park with you. Do you think next time we could take Alex with us? She would love to play with us."

Kat clapped her hands. "Wix come! Wix come!"

"I couldn't think of anything nicer." Alex said smiling. "We should all take a picnic at the first sign of spring."

"Alright now. Give Beth a kiss and say goodnight to everyone."

"Ni Ni!" The little girl said as Lotty passed her daughter to the nanny.

"Goodnight Kitten." The group replied.

Poni walked over to give her daughter a kiss on her blonde head.

"Sleep tight my little kitten."

"Ni Papi."

Beth sighed at the look complete adoration on Poni's face for her little girl. Alex also seemed to adore her.

'I wonder if that's something Alex would like.'

She didn't have long to ponder the thought before she was interrupted by Alex handing her more champagne.

The night was progressing marvelously. Poni and Lotty couldn't have made her feel any more at home. They embarrassed Alex by telling Beth some of the tales of her growing up. She certainly had been a tomboy and a scamp. The young woman had never laughed so much in her life. Poni and Alex together were a sight to be seen.

She was like a different person around her two friends, her defenses were down and she was happy. They had caught each other giving looks all evening and during dinner Alex had tested the water by covering Beth's hand with her own between courses while continuing talking to Poni about the upcoming hunting season. Beth had not flinched the first time Alex had held her hand. Her heart was racing. Alex was being so attentive, always making sure her glass was full and she had everything she needed. She was being swept way on a dream with her very own Mr. Darcy.

The dinner was amazing Beth had never eaten food like it, having been brought up on rations. There was a new wine with every course and an abundance of food. She wondered how Lotty could provide such a meal on rations, but guessed money could buy anything. Halfway through Alex had suggested she switch to water when she had complained of feeling a little dizzy.

After dinner they retired to the drawing room again and Poni poured them some brandy. Since she felt a little clearer minded Beth took a small one. When Poni went to open the cigar box and offered Alex one Lotty interrupted, "If you two are going to smoke those smelly things then why don't the pair of you go in to the billiard room, so Beth and I can have a good gossip without you two big numbskulls listening in?"

"Excellent idea my sweet wife." Poni said excitedly at the prospect at beating Alex at snooker.

"Would you mind, Beth?" Alex asked politely.

"Of course not Alex. Enjoy yourself. I wanted to have a gossip with Lotty anyway."

Alex stood and took her hand and kissed it.

"Very well, excuse me."

When they were finally alone Lotty said, "I could hardly wait to get you alone. Alex seems very attentive to you tonight."

"I hoped to talk to you Lotty. For a while, well to tell you the truth since I first met Alex, I've had these growing feelings for her. I've struggled to understand them."

"Tell me what they feel like my dear."

"Well if Alex is near, touches me, or I just hear her low Smokey voice, my heart races, my stomach clenches, and I feel a very warm feeling much lower down." She said blushing.

"Don't not be shy, you are my best friend now Beth, there's nothing you can't tell me. I haven't really had many girlfriends in my life to confide in. You know what I mean, like us? Poni and Alex aren't exactly type this sort of chat. I wasn't born to this you know. I had a normal middle class upbringing. My father was a teacher and my mother looked after me at home. When I was 18 I went to a charity event to raise money for the Dalton Foundation. At the time they were trying to raise money for families, and orphans were who were disadvantaged, because of the nightly bombings or losing fathers and husbands in the fighting. When I was there I saw these extraordinary looking women, handsome women dressed in their Women's Royal Air Force uniforms. I later found out they were both officers working in Intelligence for the RAF. They were different though from the other women I had seen in

uniform. They wore trousers instead of skirts which was unusual. They had influence even then. I looked over to one in particular very often.

Poni was the most amazing person I'd ever seen. She was a woman but strong and muscular. There was something about her that made me feel the things you have described. I couldn't understand it. How could I feel those things for a woman? I'd stepped out with young men before and never felt anything, and I'd never felt that for any other woman, but I had to conclude it was this special type of woman that attracted me. It was the soft and romantic heart of a woman, but with the build, dress, and sensibilities of a man.

"She must have seen me looking at her for she came over and introduced herself, and asked me to dance. I tell you I have never felt anything like dancing in her arms that night. I felt protected, warm, and respected. No one said a word about us dancing closely together, you know what those two are like, a force of nature! No one would have dared. She was a perfect gentleman but a woman. I had no one to guide me as to how I felt."

"She introduced me to Alex and she was wonderful as well. I didn't feel that spark with her, but I understood I was attracted to this type of woman, and I had never known because I had never met any before. There are many others out there and we meet at clubs and parties, but very few have the power to live that life every day. Most go to work as secretaries in dresses and high heels five days a week then get to change into their real selves, suited and booted at the weekend at the various clubs and house parties. Of course, there are the women like me and, I am beginning to think you, who love them.

"Poni and I started stepping out together and we spent a lot of time with Alex and I became to see her as a beloved friend. It was not easy coming into this life of money and grand houses. I did not think I could fit in, but Alex and Poni are not like other rich people. They are down to earth and only place importance on money when it can be used to help others. Of course, they all enjoy fine things, but I think they find they can only do that in good conscience by helping others.

"I fell in love with that big oaf I think as soon as I saw her. She treated me like a princess and only two months later she proposed marriage. We could not be married in the eyes of the law, but we were married in our hearts and in the eyes of our friends and god. I have been blissfully happy ever since."

"That's such a romantic story Lotty, anyone who observes you and Poni can see you were meant for each other."

"I have this experience to share with you and I will help you find your place in this life if that's what you choose. I see in your eyes such love when you look at Alex and I see it in her eyes as well. You have only to admit it to each other."

"Would it be too forward to ask how you came to adopt little Kat?"

"Of course not. I attend Dalton House as often as I can, to help out and such like. I'm not a nurse by any means, but I'm not frightened of hard work and I can change beds and help some of girls with baths and help with the little ones. I'm sure Alex has told you, the foundation gets a lot of young expectant mothers?"

Beth nodded.

"Well I was helping a lot with a young girl who came in, Kathryn Miller, her name was. She was barely Sixteen and her parents had thrown her out when she became pregnant. The poor thing was terrified but I went in to sit with her everyday and she came to trust me, although she wouldn't tell me how she became pregnant, but however it happened the thoughts terrified her."

"That's heartbreaking. So what happened?"

"Well she asked me if I would be with her when the time came and of course I was. The birth was extremely difficult for her. She had internal bleeding. The doctors thought she had suffered injuries when the baby was conceived which hadn't healed properly."

Lotty eyes went glassy as she seemed to be pulled back to that time.

"I'm so scared Miss Lotty. Help me Please!"

Lotty was on her knees at the side of Kathryn's bed. The young girl's blonde hair was stuck to her head with sweat.

The baby had just been delivered and was screaming in the background but the sheets were covered in blood, the midwife and doctor just couldn't get it to stop.

Lotty stroked her head and kissed her clasped hand.

"Shush. It'll be alright. Try and stay calm."

Lotty looked up in desperation at the doctor who simply shook his head in resignation.

Her tears wouldn't be held back any longer and she said. "Bring the baby over and let Kathryn hold her."

The baby was laid on Kathryn's chest with support from Lotty. "She's so beautiful." Kathryn said as she stroked the baby's head.

"I'm going to die ain't I Miss?"

Lotty's heart broke as she met the girl's eyes and nodded her head. "I'm so sorry Kathryn, I'm sorry we couldn't do more." Lotty struggled to speak as her tears engulfed her.

The girl seemed to calm and said. "It's alright Miss. You were so good to me, thank you for looking after me. At least I did one good thing with my life. I brought this beautiful gift from God into this world.

Can I ask you just one thing Miss?"

"Anything! Anything!"

"Please take my baby. I don't want her to have the life I've had."

"What about Your family? What if they....."

"No Miss please! Don't let them know about her! Agh! It's getting cold. Please. Ms Woodward and you are such good people, you would give her a wonderful family. Promise me."

Lotty pulled herself together. She knew Poni would approve, they had often spoken of a wish for children.

"I swear to you Kathryn. We will adopt her and give her the most wonderful life we possibly can, and we'll tell her what a wonder Mother she had and how much you gave for her and loved her. She'll never know the poverty you have felt and she will be surrounded with love."

"Ugh! so cold. Doctor?"

The elderly doctor came over and took her hand.

"Yes my dear?"

"You are my witness Sir, I want Miss Lotty and Ms Woodward to have my baby." The girl was struggling for breath.

"Of course. Rest easy now."

"Cough! Cough! Miss? call he....."

"What is it? What are trying to say?"

C....all her Kathryn."

"We will. I promise you."

The young girl stroked her baby's head once more. "L....ove y...ou Kathryn....."

"And then she was gone."

Lotty came back to the present, the tears were streaming down both the women's faces.

"Oh Lotty, I can't believe you had to go through that and a young girl had to die without her family around her. No matter what my daughter did I could never do that. I'm glad she had you, and at least little kitten has Poni and yourself."

"Yes, we are very happy and Poni simply worships the ground she toddles on." The two women laughed as they wiped away their tears.

"Did her family ever get in touch?"

"Poni and Alex went to their house. Poni was concerned that they might challenge our right to Kitten if they found out we were wealthy.

I don't know what they did or said but when they came back, they had a signed letter giving up any rights to her and we legally adopted her.

Those two can be quite persuasive when they want something done."

"I can imagine. Was Kathryn the families only child?"

"No she had a brother but from what Poni told me, they weren't too concerned about what had happened to her, just what they could get out of it. I believe the father has died since. I've no idea what became of the Mother and Brother and the Father of Kitten? We'll never know. I think that's best."

"Well you have a perfect little girl. She is so pretty."

"Thank you. Now tell me. What do you feel for our Lord Dalton? Do you love her?"

"I think I do love Alex, but how can I know if she feels the same way? I would hate to be wrong and lose her friendship, she means everything to me. Tonight it felt like she was courting me from the moment she picked me up, but why won't she say anything? She is much more experienced than me in these matters."

"That's where your wrong my young friend. Alex has never been in love. I don't mean she has no experience with women but she has never loved. She has been so hurt in her life Beth. Lotty described Alex's parents and what had happened to them.

Her parents being taken from her almost killed her. She pulled herself away from everyone except Poni and myself and vowed she would never open her heart to anyone so it could never be broken. Then you come along and smash through the walls she had built and she was terrified. Still is, but I'll tell you a secret. She confided to Poni she was ready to make that leap, but because of the age gap between the two of you, and because you had never loved a woman before, Alex decided she would court you quietly and not make the first move, in case you felt forced into it in some way. By courting you it also gives you the chance to back away gracefully. You will have to go to her if you want this. She told Poni 'If she comes to me I will give her everything.'

Beth was a little overwhelmed. "I love her Lotty and I will take care of her heart, but I have never been with a woman before. She should be with someone better."

"Beth, it's you she wants. May I suggest you tell her how you feel and continue your courtship, slowly learning to be with each other."

"Yes that sounds like a great idea. Thank you so much for your help and your friendship."

"I will always be here for you Beth. With those numbskulls to keep out of trouble, I think we will need each other. Now, how would you like to have some fun with them?"

They hatched their plan together.

Meanwhile in the billiard room, which was a large oak paneled room with a large snooker table dominating the room, Poni was pouring Alex another whiskey while she took her shot at the table, their cigars burning in the ash

tray on the drinks table. They had taken their dinner jackets off and were now down to their waistcoats. Poni brought Alex's whiskey over as she sunk another ball.

"Do you have to be good at everything Alex?"

"I can't help it if I'm naturally gifted!" she smirked.

"So how goes it with the courting of your Elizabeth?"

"I'm being the perfect gentleman without being over bearing. I hope she catches the drift and tells me how she feels."

"I'm sure she will." said Poni as she missed her shot. "Damn and blast!"

Alex laughed and went to take her shot.

"I've seen the way she has looked at you all evening and you at her, making big puppy dog eyes at her!"

"Shut up you broken down old nag! What do you think their talking about in there?"

"If I know my wife and I do, plotting our doom no doubt!"

They laughed.

"But what a way to go Poni! Eh?"

Just at that the games room door opened and their ladies came in.

"What can I do for you my sweet wife? Were you missing us too much?"

"No not at all Poni boy. Beth and I just thought we'd like to learn how to play snooker and who better to teach us."

Alex and Poni looked at each other, smelling a rat, Alex quirked an eyebrow.

"If you like," said Poni suspiciously.

"Well I think the best way to learn would be to play so Poni and me against Alex and Beth"

Beth smirked. They had decided to drive their respective loves to distraction.

Alex gave Beth the cue and smiled. "This should be fun."

"Spending time with you is always fun."

"Ok, you two can break," Poni said.

She was standing behind her wife with her arms around Lotty's waist, giving her neck little kisses.

"Should I break Alex?"

"Yes, go for it little bit."

Beth bent over the top of the Snooker table making a hash of holding the cue and of trying to take the shot.

"Could you help me Alex? Show me what to do?" She asked demurely batting her eyelashes.

Alex was over there in a flash, like a dog with its tongue hanging out.

"Of course. Will you allow me to place my hands on you?" She asked in a gentlemanly manner.

"Yes." Beth said sweetly.

"Ok, bend over the table and hold the cue. I'll come up behind you and guide your hands."

Beth nodded. When Alex draped herself over Beth she realized what the two women were up to. She moved further forward to take the girl's hands and show her how she should hold the cue, her head resting in the crook of Beth's neck. Alex had to stop herself from moaning as her lips brushed Beth's neck and she inhaled her perfume. Beth pushed her bottom further into Alex's crotch when she felt the touch to her neck. Alex was instantly wet and throbbing. This game of snooker was going to be torture.

Beth was having similar problems. The touch of Alex's lips and the feel of her weight across her bottom and back made her ache for things she couldn't put a name to. Poni and Lotty were playfully kissing as while Beth and Alex took their shot, and so the game continued until finally Alex cleared the last ball.

She turned to Beth and said. "Well ... eh ... that was fun?"

"Yes, quite illuminating." She said huskily.

"I think we should call it a night, what do you think?"

Alex pointed over at Poni and Lotty who were consumed with each other.

"Yes, I'm very tired now."

They interrupted their two hosts and thanked them for a wonderful evening. Once out in the car Alex took Beth's hand and asked, "How would you like to have a walk round Hyde Park tomorrow? Maybe get an ice cream or something like that?"

"I'd love to Alex. I haven't been there yet."

The car stopped and Alex helped her out. "Thank you for your company this evening little bit and I shall see you tomorrow," she said as she kissed Beth's hand.

"I had a wonderful time Alex, thank you. I'll look forward to tomorrow." The young blonde making a quick decision went up on her tip toes and gave Alex a quick kiss on the lips. "Good night Alex." She said moving fast inside the house so as not to leave Alex time to say anything.

Alex was left on the pavement touching her fingers to her lips were Beth's had touched them. She then broke out in a huge smile and jumped into the back of the car. "Take us home Alfie? I think I'm in for a big day tomorrow!"

Beth held one of the flowers from the bouquet Alex had given her and danced round the room. She was full of romance and joy. The evening had been wonderful. Alex had been simply amazing. Even though she was beginning to understand how she felt about her, the talk she had with Lotty had enabled the scales to finally fall from her eyes. She was in love with Alex! Deeply, hopelessly. It felt so liberating to even say it inside.

Beth had to tell Alex how she felt tomorrow and hope Lotty was right that she returned those feelings. They may have only known each other a short time, but it could be a month or one year, it made no difference. She knew they were meant to be together. She looked up at the picture on her bedside table. It was of her father and herself, taken at the boat race celebrations at the university.

"Daddy, I've met someone. Alex is her name. She is the most wonderful, kind person I have ever met. She lives her life in the service of others. I know that probably my being in love with a woman isn't what you would most want for me, but I think you would have liked her. I hope wherever you are you know that this is the right thing for me." She kissed her father's picture and went to bed happier than she had for a long, long time.

Alex was up bright and early getting ready for her day. She chose the black pinstripe suit and a crisp white shirt and black hat . She wanted to look as good as possible. She was sure today would be the day Beth would say something and Alex was more excited than she could ever remember being. She had a lot to plan this week. Today was December the 1st and her birthday was on Friday the 5th. She had some plans to make. She would phone Poni later tonight to get the ball rolling.

Alex arrived at Beth's house 20 minutes later. When she knocked, Beth answered for a change and was all ready to go.

"You look stunning as usual little bit," she said kissing Beth's hand. Beth had on a pretty blue coloured dress and matching wool coat. Alex helped Beth into the car and jumped in. "I thought we'd take a stroll round the park first and then maybe get an ice cream."

"Alex, it's the 1st of December. It's too cold for ice cream," she laughed.

"It's never too cold for ice cream! It's one of my secret vices!" Alex exclaimed as they set off for Hyde Park.

After parking the car, they started off walking round the park arm in arm. It was a cold day but it was crisp and pleasant. They were silent for some minutes when Beth asked, "Tell me about your home. I mean not your flat, your real home at Dencotte House."

Alex smiled. "I have mixed feelings when I talk about it. It's the most beautiful place on God's earth. Poni and I spent idyllic summers there, running wild! Since my mother and father died it feels empty. I go down every couple of weekends and we have house parties there, but if I am there alone it is lonely. The house and parklands are in the Peak district, just outside Sheffield. The peak district is some of the most stunning countryside in Britain. The house was built by my family in the late 17th century. It has a large house and is surrounded by 700 acres of parkland."

Beth gasped.

"Yes, you see, it's a big place to be rattling around in on my own. The parkland and gardens are simply wonderful though. We have deer, and the grounds are very good hunting land. In one part of the grounds there is a small walled off Japanese garden with a teahouse. My mother had that built. She used to go there to read and to have some peace and quiet."

"It sounds wonderful. Even though you say your sad when your there, you speak about it with such passion."

"It's in my blood. If the emptiness was filled by a family, I would never want to leave." She looked at Beth and smiled.

Beth blushing said, "Who looks after the estate when you're in London?"

"My steward Robert Jones looks after the grounds and my butler and housekeeper, Foster and Mrs. McKluskey run the house. They all worked for my father. I grew up with them. Since Mother and Father died Foster and Mrs. Mckluskey have been like parents to me.0azs"

"They sound very nice. Do they accept the way you live your life?"

"Oh yes, Mother and Father never had a problem with me being who I am and all the staff have never questioned it. My Mother used to say God made me this way so that I would have the caring and sentimental nature to take care of the estate and the foundation from my female side, and the strength to carry it out from my male side. She used to say I was just right."

"I agree with your mother wholeheartedly!" Beth smiled at Alex.

"And your father? Tell me about him." Alex asked.

"He was everything to me. We only had each other and I kept the house while he was at work at the university. We didn't have much, as you know academics aren't paid very well, but we were happy. He was a good man and kindhearted. My mother died when I was born, but he told me of her all the time. He loved her deeply; I think he would have liked you very much."

"Do you? That's nice to know. Look at the time! We've been talking for an hour and a half! Are you cold?"

"Time just seems to fly when I talk to you and I had something in particular I wanted to talk to you about, but I am a little cold."

"I have an idea. Would you like to come back to my flat? We could have a drink and a chat in the warm?"

"Yes that sounds good."

When they arrived at Alex's luxurious flat in Mayfair, Beth was amazed at how lovely but Spartan it was. Alex obviously didn't spend much time decorating or adding those personal touches.

"This is lovely Alex." she said as Alex ushered her into the large living room. There were two large couches, a fireplace against the wall, and a sheep skin rug in front of the fire. The kitchen was just off the living room and there were two bedroom doors that she could see.

"Thanks, it's just really somewhere to sleep for me. May get you a drink? Gin and tonic?"

Beth had never drunk spirits before but she thought it might bolster her courage and she had seen that it was Lotty's afternoon drink, so she accepted.

"That would be nice, thank you"

"I'll just be a minute. Let me take your coat and you can warm yourself at the fire."

Alex returned with the drinks. She had her usual whiskey for herself. She took out a cigarette and lit it.

Beth took a sip. It wasn't the most pleasant taste but gave her a lovely warm feeling. They enjoyed the warmth of the drinks and the fire for several more minutes, Beth trying to bolster her courage for what lay ahead. Alex sat knowing that she would have to tell her about her past. They both went to speak at the one time.

"Please do go first." Alex said.

Beth finished up her drink and turned to Alex. "Well here goes! I ... I ... I think the best thing to do is come straight to the point." she stammered and stayed silent.

"Go on please."

"Well, since I first met you and have come to know you better, I ... I have had feelings, em ... feelings that at first I couldn't explain. Whenever you were near or I heard your voice, my heart would race. If you touched me my stomach would do summersaults and I would feel things ... em ... lower. I now realize that what I felt was love. I am in love with you, the way a woman loves a man."

After she had finished she stared at the floor, afraid to look Alex in the eyes. Every second seemed to last an hour. Then she felt a hand on her chin pulling her head up.

"Look at me little bit. I fell in love with you the minute I looked into those big green eyes of yours. I love you with every beat of my heart!"

"Oh Alex! I love you!" she flung her arms around Alex's neck and put her head on her chest.

"I need to know you are certain about this"

"I am cert ..."

"Sh, sh, sh." Alex stopped her and pulled her head up and cupped her face. "I need you to be certain because for me if we go ahead with this, there will be no turning back for me. You are the other half of my soul and there would never be anyone else for me until I die. I need to know you feel the same thing. To do that you need to know some things, before you commit to me, you need to know who I have been before I met you."

"I understand, but nothing will change my mind about you. You truly are the best person I have ever known."

Alex jumped up and began to pace. "I'm not Beth. I'm not this gallant hero you make me out to be! I'm bad Beth, the things I've done. I'm not good enough for you."

Beth was astonished at Alex's sudden outburst of anger. Alex's hand shook as she poured another whiskey. She took a drink. "I will tell you about how I was, then no doubt you will want to leave and I will not blame you. Where to start? I suppose at the beginning when my parents died."

She started to recount her days and nights of meaningless sex with countless women, the drinking, and her need to control the sex, and leaving as soon as she was done. Alex had never felt so ashamed while telling this perfect, innocent young girl such depravity.

"I could never allow myself to love. I thought the sex would fill the hole inside. It never did, but I couldn't stop. With each woman I went with, the more wretched and vile I thought myself. I was lost. The only good thing I had in my life was Poni, Lotty and little Kitten. They kept trying to tell me I was ruining my life. I had my work and I threw myself into it more and more to the detriment of my health. Last year I began to realize I could not go on like this or I would end up dead. The women and the drinking became less and less and about 6 months ago, the women stopped completely and then I met you. You have filled that hole in my heart and now you know the truth. Please go, don't drag it out, I ... it will hurt too much."

Beth was indeed stunned at Alex's story, but where Alex saw depravity and sinful behavior, she saw pain, loneliness, and sadness. Her decision made she stood up and walked over to Alex. She reached out and took Alex's hand. She pulled back but Beth kept hold and turned Alex round to look at her.

"Alex I am so sorry you were hurting so badly for so long, but now I am here. I want to take care of you and your heart. I will stay with you for as long as you want me." She reached up and wiped away tears from Alex's eyes.

"You would stay? You would forgive me after all that I've told you?" Alex said in astonishment.

"I love you and it will be my job to keep light and love in your heart. You've been through enough for one life time. I am yours My Lord, if you want me?"

"Want you, little bit? I will never have another in my life. I will love you and protect you for the rest of my days. Thank you for the gift of your forgiveness."

She took Beth's face in her hands and bent her head until her lips were inches away from the girl's.

"May I?" Alex whispered.

"Please!" she breathed huskily.

Alex brushed her lips lightly against Beth's and when she felt no resistance she deepened the kiss. Beth moaned as she was deeply and softly kissed. Alex began to tease Beth's lips with her tongue, and the girl opened her mouth slightly allowing her to enter. Alex eased the tip into Beth's mouth, but not wanting to scare or push her too far, pulled out and giving her a final kiss on the lips and then her nose before pulling away completely. Beth was left with her eyes closed and her mouth half open. The kiss was the most exquisite thing she'd ever felt, her lips tingled, and her heart pounded. She had never felt so much love and all expressed without the need for words.

"Are you alright little bit?"

Beth opened her eyes and smiled. "I have never felt better in my life, I love you my lord."

"Thank you for such a precious gift. I will guard your love with my life sweetheart."

Taking Beth's hand, she asked, "Shall we sit? Would you like another drink? You've been through a lot this afternoon."

"Do you think we could have a cup of tea and perhaps, if you had a couple of aspirins? My head is pounding. It always does when I feel emotional."

"Tea? No problem, I'm good at that now?" she said proudly. "And I'll get you the tablets in a second."

She kissed her forehead and rushed to the kitchen.

"She loves me, she loves me." Alex sang while she brewed the tea. She had never felt happier.

Beth took her tablets and pulled her legs up on the couch while holding her hot tea. Alex lifted her arm and beckoned her to cuddle in to her. Nothing had ever felt so wonderful to Beth. She felt safe, protected, and warm. For Alex's part she wanted to hold on and never let go.

"I wish this afternoon didn't have to end. I don't want to have to leave you."

"Would you like to go out to dinner? Then I could take you home after?"

"I don't feel in the right frame of mind to go out. Do you have any food in? I could cook us dinner."

"You can cook?"

"How do you think I looked after my father all those years?"

"You sound more perfect by the second, little bit! Yes, I have lots of food. Mrs. McKluskey always has Fortnum and Masons send me a food delivery every week. I don't cook and mostly eat out so I give a lot of it away."

"She gets her food shopping from Fortnum & Masons? Good lord, this really is a different world!"

"Well, let's cuddle for another little while and then I'll prepare something ok?"

"Sounds perfect, my love."

They held each other for another half an hour and shared some more heated kisses until they were both panting. Beth pulled back and said, "I think we need to slow down a bit. You know I've never been with anyone and I..."

Alex interrupted quickly putting her finger across Beth's lips. "Shhh sweetheart. You do know that I do not expect that of you just now? Making love? You are my heart, my love, and I will do nothing to disrespect your honour. Hopefully one day you will consent to marry me and only then would I want to make love to you, as my wife."

Beth's heart swelled at the thought of a future with her Beloved Alex.

"But you and those women ... your used to having that in your life." She said shyly.

"That was just sex, meaningless empty sex. What we will do will be making love and it will fill me with joy like I had never hoped for."

"Those women, Alex, I have to ask, did you bring them here and down to Dencotte House?"

"Never my love. I had that rule from the beginning. No one was ever allowed here or to my home at Dencotte . Of course, some may have been at the house parties we had, but they never went anywhere other than the dining and drawing room or the ballroom. I didn't want to bring that depravity to my home. I've never even slept the night in a bed with another woman. You're the first to ever be here apart from Poni and Lotty."

"That makes me feel better. Now let me prepare your dinner My Lord!"

"Only if I can watch you! I don't want to be away from you for a minute little bit!"

"Come on then, let's see what you've got."

Beth found some wonderful ingredients in the kitchen and pantry that Alex hadn't even noticed. The older woman leaned on the kitchen worktop and gazed at Beth with a silly look on her face.

"You see something that interests you My Lord? I'm only chopping vegetables."

"Yes, but it's the way you chop them." Alex said as moved behind Beth, put her arms round her waist and nuzzled into her neck. "Is this ok?" She asked wondering if she was taking the touching too far.

"It's wonderful" Beth said as she continued chopping.

"What are we having sweetheart?"

"Steak, potatoes and veg. It's about the best thing I can make in the time we have. I meant to ask you how do Poni and Lotty and you always seem to have the things that are so hard to get hold of with rations?"

Alex looked at her and cocked one eyebrow. "Where there's a will, there's a way! No seriously. You can get anything you want, if you know the right people and have the money. We have a lot of contacts in the food industry, suppliers we use all the time. If we didn't spend over the odds we wouldn't get half the things we need for the soup kitchens. Some of these people haven't eaten in days. We can't give them one rationed meal and expect them to survive for another day or so. We have to give them a little more, so we use money with the right suppliers and get what we need. Plus any meat Poni or I have comes from my farms at Dencotte . Mrs. Mckluskey sends it down every week." Alex smiled proudly.

"I think you're a bit of a rouge underneath that fine upper class facade."

"Perhaps." Alex flashed a dazzling smile.

"Well this is the best piece of meat I've ever cooked with. The steaks should be melt in the mouth."

"That's not the only thing that melts in the mouth little bit. There is something about watching you be domestic that makes me hot under the collar!" Alex said as she delivered soft kisses and nips to Beth's neck.

"Aw, oh, hmmm!" Beth moaned.

"I will never get this finished if you keep that up! Go find something to occupy yourself with!" she said batting Alex's hands away.

Alex laughed and grabbed a piece of carrot and popping it into her mouth.

"I know! Wine! I'll get us out a lovely bottle of wine to enjoy while you cook."

"You are like a school boy Alex!"

"Does that mean I can pull your pigtailed?" She said as she ran out the room quickly laughing, Beth hot on her heels.

Beth stopped at the kitchen door and said smiling. "Now don't you come back in here till you set the dining room table and have opened the wine you rascal!" She returned to her cooking and sighed in utter contentment. She had never felt happier.

While Alex was in the other room setting the table she took the opportunity to give Poni a call in private.

Poni came to the phone and said "Alex? How are things?"

"Everything is wonderful Poni! Beth told me today that she loved me and I told her about my past and you know what? She didn't care Poni! She said that I would never be unhappy again! I can't tell you how happy I am."

"I'm so happy for you old friend! We'll get you settled down yet. There's nothing in the world that will make you more content than the love of a good woman, a wife makes it even better." Poni said hinting. "Maybe Dencotte House will have a new mistress yet?"

"Give us a chance Poni. We only declared our love today. I'm trying not to push her. She's never had a relationship before so I'm trying to tread carefully. I found out from Beth's landlady that it is her birthday on Friday. I thought the four of us to go to the Alley Cat for dinner and dancing. Introduce her to our world so to speak."

"Good idea, that will be excellent. Where is she now? She can't hear your plans can she?"

"No, she's in the kitchen preparing dinner."

"Preparing dinner? All sounds very cosy. I thought it was too soon to be domesticated?" Poni said smirking.

"Shut up you old fool! Now listen I need you to help me organise a few surprises for her birthday."

A short time later Beth called, "Alex! Dinner's ready!" She carried the two plates brimming with food to the table.

"Coming!" Alex shouted from her bedroom, finishing up with Poni. The plans all set. She came into the dining room and looked at the full plates and the pretty girl sitting there and her heart swelled with happiness.

"This looks wonderful sweetheart" she beamed as she came round and filled Beth's wine glass with the merlot.

"Maybe you should wait till you taste it my lord." she said taking a sip of the fruity red wine.

Alex took her first bite and it was amazing. The beef was marvelous and the peppercorn sauce Beth had made to go with it was delicious.

"Beth, this is truly fantastic! I had no idea normal people could make food this tasty at home!"

Beth laughed, "What do you mean normal people?"

"Well you know, people like us. I mean, I have a kitchen full of experienced cooks at Dencotte and when I'm not there I eat out in restaurants. This is just superb."

"Alex, you do need looking after! Any good housewife could cook this and better."

"Amazing."

"Well you're easily impressed! If you think this is good then you'll be knocked off your feet by my Sunday dinners, roast beef, roast potatoes, and Yorkshire puddings." She smiled.

"I'm salivating listening to you. You'll make someone a good wife one day." She winked across the table and Beth blushed, grabbing her wine to hide her embarrassment.

"Will you come out with me on Friday night? You, me, Poni and Lotty?"

Beth tried to keep her face neutral. She hadn't said anything about her birthday, never having made much of it. As her father hadn't had much money, they would only ever share a nice meal together and Mrs. Nelson from next door would make a cake for them. Once her father died, her birthday was never mentioned by her aunt and uncle. She had just got used to not telling anyone.

"Yes, any special occasion?" she said nonchalantly.

Alex leaned back in her chair, sipping from the wine glass.

"Yes, I'll tell you soon but I have to tell you now that dinner was just fabulous! Why don't we take these plates and things through and have a seat on the couch and we'll talk?"

"Let me do the dishes first Alex."

"No, please, leave them. I have a cleaner that comes in every day. They'll keep. Come on."

They took the things through and left them soaking in the sink. Beth settled on the couch and Alex poured them both a brandy.

"Just a little one Alex, I'm not really used to all this alcohol."

"Ok, here you go."

She went back and stood at the fireplace, lighting a cigar.

Beth loved the smell; it reminded her of her father. It was comforting and reassuring somehow.

"So Friday? You were saying?"

"Oh yes. Well a little birdie told me it was someone's birthday on Friday? Is that correct?"

"Well yes maybe but I've never really celebrated my birthday before." Beth looked down at her shoes shyly.

"This year you are. You have good friends and someone who loves and adores you and wants to spoil you!"

Alex came and sat next to her. "What I thought we'd do was take you for dinner and dancing at the Alley Cat Club. That's where Poni, Lotty, and I always go. It's for women like us. It's a respectable club don't worry. I want to show you off and announce to my small community that I'm taken, off the market! Now about your present ..."

"Alex, please don't go wild. I'm not with you for presents and money."

Alex took her hand. "That's exactly why you should be spoiled, because you ask for nothing and don't expect anything. So what I thought was I'd get you a new outfit for Friday night, top to toe, everything. Normally if we had more time I would get Lotty to take you to her designer, but since we need it quickly, I've asked Lotty to take you to Harrods on Tuesday, full day out, lunch, and everything. I have an account at every major shop in London so whatever you pick you just tell them to put it on my account."

"Oh no Alex that's far too much! I simply couldn't!"

"Beth, it's only money and I have a lot of it." She leaned in and cupped Beth's cheek. "Your mine now and I get to spend what I want on you. Do you remember the conversation we had at dinner the first time we went out?"

"Yes but this isn't dinner Alex."

Alex's face hardened and took on that commanding look that melted Beth's insides to goo.

"I love you, if I wish to spend my money this way then I will. It makes me happy. I want to take care of you. Let me. This discussion is over, ok?" she said in a tone that would brook no further argument.

"Alex. I love you, thank you. I don't want you to think me ungrateful." Beth cuddled into Alex's chest seeking reassurance.

"That's fine, little bit. You don't ask for anything but you will get it from now on, and no arguments on the day with Lotty, she knows exactly what you need alright?"

"Yes, I promise." said Beth staring dreamily into her eyes.

Alex grasped Beth's jaw lightly and began a possessive kiss that made the young blonde tingle all over. When Alex heard her moan she knew she had to stop the kiss before she couldn't. She pulled away and put her forehead against Beth's. "You are incredible and you don't realize what you do to me. It's late; I think I better get you home."

Beth nodded. She had never felt so alive and the throbbing between her legs was incessant.

They gathered Beth's things and set off for Agnes's. When they arrived Alex turned the engine off and turned to address her new girlfriend, touching her lightly on the cheek.

"I want you to know how happy you have made me today not only by giving me your love, but by forgiving me my past indiscretions. I will keep your heart safe, I will protect you, and I will be by at your side as long as you allow me to be. I love you little bit."

"Thank you, I know it took a lot for you to allow someone inside that walled up heart of yours but I will look after you and you never be alone now. I love you My Lord."

They kissed tenderly then Alex jumped out and saw her to the door.

"Well my dear, you've had a long day." Agnes said as Beth came into the parlor.

"Sorry if I'm a bit late but I've had a wonderful day!" she said plopping down on the chair by the fire. Beth looked different. She was glowing somehow. Agnes had to find out if what she had suspected was true; when she saw the two young people look at each other.

"Did something happen today my dear? You look different lighter, happier."

Beth pondered. 'Should I tell her? I know she told me she had no problem with the way Alex lived her life, but it's different when you have to deal with it personally.' She couldn't lie to Agnes. She had been so kind to her. She took a deep breath.

"I don't know how you will feel about this. I told Alex today that I loved her and she loves me in return. We're together." Beth waited for the reaction with baited breath

"Oh my dear! I'm so happy for you!" Agnes stood up and wrapped her arms around Beth.

"I knew the way you look at each other, but I didn't know if either one of you would have the strength to do something about it."

Beth had tears rolling down her face. "I was frightened of how you would react. Thank you for understanding."

"Beth dear, did I not tell you before? I believe we are made the way God intended for a reason. Alex needs you and you need Alex. Without each other you are incomplete. Anyone who sees you two together can see that."

"I am so happy Agnes. She's taking me out for my birthday on Friday; I wonder how she could have found out about that?" She smirked.

"I have no earthly idea my young friend!" Agnes said innocently.

"I'm sure. I have to go shopping with Lotty on Tuesday for an outfit. Alex is treating me to it for my birthday. I feel bad that she's spending so much on me."

"Oh, she's got plenty to go round. Enjoy being spoiled my dear. You deserve it. You should get to bed, all this excitement and you have work tomorrow."

"You're right, back to normal tomorrow. Goodnight then."

The next morning Alex jumped out of bed full of the joys of spring. She couldn't wait to get into the office to see her beloved. She got ready as quickly as she could and set off for work, stopping off to pick up flowers for Beth. The flowers were fast becoming her Monday morning ritual. Thinking ahead to Beth's birthday, she felt she had so much to do but she had left one of the extra surprises in Poni's capable hands and the other she would get while Beth was out shopping with Lotty. She bounded up the stairs to the office and burst in with great exuberance.

"Alex! Good morning, you gave me a fright bursting in the door like that."

"I am sorry. I was just so eager to see you my love." Alex thrust the bunch of flowers towards her girlfriend.

Thank you! You never forget flowers on a Monday, you spoil me!"

Beth looked up at Alex who was standing in front of her desk casually with her hands in her pockets. She was looking at her with a Smokey, sexy look that made Beth's heart pound. Alex looked hungry as if she could devour her whole, her gaze appraised every inch of Beth lingering over her breasts. She felt as if she was being caressed and she heard herself moan.

"Come here little bit," she said with her head cocked slightly to the side. Beth knew from her tone of voice that it was a command not a request. Her heart pounded faster. "B ... but Alex, we can't, not in the office." She implored.

"Come here." She ordered louder this time.

Beth got up quickly and went straight into her arms. Alex grasped her young girlfriend's head under her chin possessively and kissed her with such passion they both began to moan. The kisses became more frantic as

Alex's tongue pushed, seeking entrance into Beth's mouth. She took Beth's lower lip between her teeth and pulled. The young girl had never felt this sort of passion before; she was losing herself in it, becoming drunk with the feelings of lust for this tall, blue eyed woman. She threw her arms around Alex's neck and began her own attack on Alex's mouth with her tongue. Alex growled in reaction to Beth's new forwardness. She allowed her hands to travel down and grasp the girl's pert round bottom. She pulled Beth into her groin. The feel of her writhing against her was driving her to distraction. She had completely lost herself along with Beth in the sexual haze they were creating.

She lifted her girlfriend's legs up and wrapped them around her waist. Alex walked them over to the desk and sat Beth on it. She attacked Beth's neck with a barrage of nips and bites. The girl was obviously very sensitive around her neck because the noises coming from her were growing in intensity.

"Oh! Oh! Alex! Please! Please! I need ... Ah!" she moaned.

"What? What do you need? Tell me?"

"I don't know ... Ah ... oh ... I don't know what I need."

When Alex began to feel herself start to thrust against Beth, she realized things were going far too far. Her girlfriend didn't know what she needed because she'd never felt these feelings before and didn't know what to do with them. This brought Alex back down to earth with a bang. Beth wasn't ready. She couldn't let herself take her love like this for the first time. They had to wait. Alex pulled away gasping.

"Sweetheart, we have to stop before we can't. You're not ready and I don't want it to be like this. I don't want to take you like this in the office on the desk. You're too special."

Beth was gasping; she couldn't believe what she had nearly done.

"You're right. I'm sorry. You just make me feel so much! It overwhelms me." she said easing herself off the desk and straightening her clothes.

"No, little bit, it is I who should be sorry? I'm older and I have more experience. I should have known we were going too far. I want you so badly, more than I've ever wanted anyone but I want to take you in our bed, our marriage bed. I want to do things properly, for once in my life. I need to slow down for you." She said looking deeply into Beth's eyes watching a tear escape down her cheek.

"Why the tears Sweetheart?" Alex asked worriedly.

"It just feels wonderful to hear you say those things darling, that you love me so much and you see a future for us like that."

"Of course I do. Did you not listen to me yesterday when I said you are mine and I want no other for the rest of my life? When you are ready, when we are ready I want to make you my wife. I love you with all that I am." She playfully kissed Beth on the nose.

The little blonde was filled joy. She would love nothing more than to be Alex's in time. When they had calmed themselves down a bit Beth said smiling, "May I suggest that we have no more passionate kisses in the office? Only pecks on the cheek."

"You're quite right. Do you know what we need? Tea!"

Beth laughed heartily. "You're quite right my lord!"

They drank their tea and settled down. The rest of the day was quiet, but filled with loving glances between the lovers.

Beth was up bright and early even though Lotty wasn't picking her up until 9 O'clock. They had a long day ahead. She heard the beep from Lotty's Rolls Royce and went outside to join her friend. Robson the chauffeur held the door open for her to enter the car.

"My dear! So good to see you." The older woman said as she kissed Beth on the cheek.

"I understand a certain young lady has ensnared the heart of one Lord Dalton?"

"Yes! It's amazing; I can still hardly believe it. I took your advice and told her and she loves me! Just like you said. I feel like I've been floating on air ever since."

"Robson, take us to Harrods please. I'm so glad you had the courage Beth. If you had left it to our Lord you would be waiting forever. Now then prepare yourself for a lifetime of bliss, starting today. Let us go forth and spend Alex and Poni's money!" The two women laughed at first, but then Beth's face grew more serious.

"Lotty I didn't like this idea at first. I think she is spending too much on me. I don't want you or anyone else to think I'm with her only for her money."

"My dear, we are your friends. We know you're not and nobody else matters, so enough of that and lets enjoy our day. Spending your other halves money is a great art and has taken me some years to perfect, but I am willing to teach and share that knowledge with you!" She joked.

"Ok then, I give in!" Beth held up her hands in mock surrender.

"Well done. It'll be less painful in the long run." Lotty smiled at her friend.

Ten minutes later they arrived at Harrods. The doorman opened the car door for them to exit the car. When he saw Lotty he fawned all over her. "Mrs. Woodward, so nice to see you again. Let me see you inside."

Beth was bowled over; he knew Lotty by name and was so attentive to her. She must spend a lot of money here. Could she fit into this role with Alex? Could this be her future and was she ready for it? The young blonde was overwhelmed with the sights and sounds that greeted her as she went through the revolving door to the prestigious store. It was like stepping into a different world. There no poorly dressed people in here. Ladies decked in the finest furs and silks; gentlemen in the finest suits. The decor was like a palace.

Beth felt out of place, how would she ever fit into a place like this? Lotty caught the look of trepidation and knew she had to try and reassure her. She leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Beth do not be deceived, all these people

are the same as you and me. It's all a performance and in that performance all us actors are given different costumes, some fine, some poor. All you need to do is change your costume and you can seamlessly become part of that other world. So just allow yourself to enjoy the costume fitting and the performance will follow my dear." She smiled took Beth by the hand. "All better now?"

"All better, thank you. Lead on!" she smiled.

Lotty took them to the very large Ladies department. As soon as they entered a middle aged rather stuffy looking woman trotted over to them.

"Mrs. Woodward, how pleasant to see you again. Please come and take a seat." They were led to a private room, pleasantly decorated, in the far side of the spacious department. It had comfortable seating and magazines and a large curtained off area for the changing of clothes. Beth wondered why they were going to sit down to shop.

"How can we help you today Mrs. Woodward?"

"I'm not here for myself today Alice, we're here for my young friend here"

Beth felt herself scrutinized as Alice looked at her up and down, apparently displeased with what she saw.

"Miss Bentley is to be decked out from top to toe for an evening engagement. The purchases are to be charged to Lady Dalton's account."

Lotty felt quite satisfied as she saw the look of displeasure for Beth evaporate in front of her eyes. If anything was to be charged to Lady Dalton then Alice or any staff member of any of the prestigious London shops would know that money would be no object.

"Of course, Mrs. Woodward, Miss Bentley. Shall I put together some selections and bring them to you?"

"That would excellent Alice, thank you." Lotty said graciously.

"Size 12 I would believe Miss Bentley, am I correct?"

"Spot on, How did you know?!"

"I have an eye for these things." She said proudly.

"I shall send one of the girls over with tea and biscuits for you ladies." She said setting off on her mission with a slight skip in her step.

"Sitting down with tea and biscuits to shop? This is like nothing I've ever done before." Beth said in wonder.

"Remember it's all a performance. Enjoy the attention my dear!"

"Do you come here often?"

"Yes, but more for odds and ends. I get my clothes made for the season at one of London designers I favour or from one of the Paris fashion houses, but I do get handkerchiefs, underwear, some jewellery, and some household furniture here. Oh, and they do Poni's favourite brand of cigars here! I do love to shop. Alex would have wanted you to go a designer, if there had been enough time. So are you going to try and enjoy yourself?"

So Poni and Alex were in an even richer tax bracket than the people who shopped in here. 'How wonderful, to have your whole wardrobe made to measure!' Beth thought. "I promise, I am going to relax and just play the part!"

"Good girl!" Lotty patted her on the knee.

Alice returned heading up an entourage of girls who were laden down with goods. They hung them up on a rail at the side of the room.

"Miss Bentley, if you'd care to start off by trying on the cocktail dresses, and then we can move on to the shoes and furs? We have also put in some selections of lingerie that would be suitable for this type of gown."

"Thank you." Beth stood and made her way behind the curtain. !This was going to be fun!"

Only a few streets away Alex and Poni pulled up in front of Garrads. Garrads was the oldest jewelers in London and the official crown jeweler, dealing with the care of the crown and responsible for the cutting of some famous diamonds like the Koh-I-Noor.

"Thanks for coming with me Poni. I know I'll need some guidance and you have bought more jewelry for Lotty here than I think Princess Elizabeth owns!" She snickered as they approached the door.

"I make no apologies about spoiling my wife. She gives me happiness. She likes pretty things and I get lots of brownie points, and they such fun to cash in." She winked.

The doorman saw them into the store and a staff member approached them. To anybody off the street it would look nothing like a shop. The old sandstone building had high ceilings and intricate carvings in the cornice.

"Ms. Woodward, how can we help today? We have some new pieces in that Mrs. Woodward would adore!" The shop assistant beamed already calculating her commission. Ms. Woodward's purchases were indeed generous and numerous.

"Not for Mrs. Woodward today I'm afraid. We're here to purchase a birthday gift for a friend of Lady Dalton."

"Of course, please let me show you to one of the private viewing rooms."

Alex and Poni were led through the wide open room. Alex could see a few large desks and comfortable seats and couches spread throughout the room. The desk's assistant's heart sped up, Lady Dalton's purchase was likely to be worth a big commission.

They had only had the pleasure of her custom once when she purchased a wedding gift for Ms. and Mrs. Woodward. She sat them down in the comfortable room. "I'll just get you some tea organised then I'll get an idea of what you're looking for."

"Thank you, eh ... Mrs. Green wasn't it?" Poni suddenly remembered.

"That's right, Sarah Green. Please call me Sarah." she beamed at being remembered.

She didn't care much for their lifestyle. Women pretending to be men was very distasteful, but the customers buying power made her forget her principles, and Ms. Woodward had always been very polite and generous with the tips she left. She left the room to get organised.

Now left on their own, Poni could probe Alex at last. "So what are we looking for today; gold, diamonds, bracelet, a ring?" Poni smiled mischievously.

"Hold your horses there Poni old man. I would marry her tomorrow if I could, but I promised I would go slow remember? I don't want to scare her. I want to get her something to wear with her new outfit that would mean something, you know, a love token something like that, but that she could also wear at work or anywhere. It needs to be special, the best quality, but I don't want it to look as if I went mad. She's a bit funny about me spending money on her. She only thinks she's getting the new outfit."

"You don't want much do you old friend!" Poni laughed.

"I just want it to be perfect for her. Did you get that other item we talked about?"

"Sourced and purchased. You'll be receiving the invoice shortly no doubt."

"Excellent I wonder how they're getting on? I hope she's enjoying herself."

"Alex, she is with Lotty and shopping. I'm sure Lotty's instructing her on the finer points of spending our money." Poni joked.

"Well at least it's not your money today old friend."

"Are you kidding Do you really think my wife can go into a shop without seeing something she just has to have? Even if they are there shopping for Beth?"

Alex laughed. "That's true, she does love to shop. As much as you protest Poni, you love it don't you?"

"Of course I do, there's nothing I like more than to indulge that woman. She gives me so much. I love to make her happy." Poni spoke from the heart.

"I know old friend, I hope Beth and I can be half as happy as you two are."

"You love Beth very much don't you?"

"I could never imagine loving anyone more. I miss her when were apart. When she's not there I feel like I am missing a part of me. I just need to make her so happy she'll never want to leave me."

"I'm happy for you Alex, you deserve it."

At that the shop assistant came through the door with a tray filled with tea and cakes. Alex told her some idea of what she was looking for and she set off again trying to fulfill the very specific demands.

Beth stepped out of the dressing room for about the tenth time. She'd been swept away on a wave of luxury and indulgence. Once she'd let herself go, she had the most wonderful day. Lotty and she had giggled and laughed all morning at some awful dresses and comparing their two respective partners. The dress she stepped out in was a beautiful sleeveless, petrol blue evening gown. She loved it. She had stopped looking at the price tags a few dresses back, the price was shocking but she had promised Lotty and Alex she would just enjoy it. She didn't want to seem ungrateful.

"Oh that's just you Beth, do you like that one?"

"Very much, I think I can narrow it down to this one and the strapless black gown, what do you think?" "They're both perfect my dear, now before you start agonizing over choosing between the two, I have a little confession to make. Alex asked me to get you to choose two dresses. She didn't want to overwhelm you and she knows you're so proud but there will be other engagements Alex will take you where you will need another dress. So what do you think?"

Lotty waited for the argument over money to start. Beth was all set to say under no circumstances would she accept when she thought. 'I don't want to embarrass Alex when we go to any events.' She remembered Alex's words when they first went out to dinner and then again only a few days ago. 'You're mine now; I want to take care of you. Let me. This discussion is over, ok?' 'I don't want to anger Alex and it obviously makes her happy to do this. Maybe I should take Lotty's advice and just go with it.' Her decision made she replied. "I think that's a wonderful idea Lotty, I'll have these two then." Beth said excitedly.

Lotty was shocked; she had given in very easily this time. She must want to please Alex very much.

"Good girl Beth! You're learning very quickly!" She turned to Alice. "We'll have these two please and charge to Lady Dalton's account."

"I'll have everything packaged and sent out to your car, Mrs. Woodward, Miss Bentley" Alice said as she left to charge all this morning's purchases to the account book. Miss Bentley had gotten two evening gowns, two pairs of shoes, lingerie and hosiery to suit both dresses and a real fur stole for her shoulders and Mrs. Woodward had added a mink fur coat to her account.

"Have you enjoyed yourself my dear?" Lotty said after Beth had finished dressing.

"It was wonderful. I've never been so spoiled in my life."

Lotty put her arm through Beth's. "Shall we go to lunch? They have the most wonderful restaurant here." They went off smiling together. As they sat over lunch their conversations went back to their respective partners.

"I wonder how Alex is doing in the office on her own?"

"I wouldn't worry about her too much. I understand from my darling Poni that they were going to meet up for some lunch and mischief!" She looked at Beth's faraway look.

"You really miss her don't you?"

"Very much, I love her so much sometimes I think my heart will burst. I worry as well." Beth confided shyly.

"Whatever for? Surely you know Alex adores you?"

"I know she loves me. It's just sometimes I think I ... I ... might not be enough for her, you know in ... in ...that way, you know with the way she was with women." Beth blushed profusely.

Lotty smiled knowing at once what was troubling the girl. She remembered what it was like to be 20, young, innocent, and in love.

"My dear you have nothing to worry about. You will be enough and more for Alex. You must never be embarrassed to talk about making love. It is the most wonderful thing in the world if you are with someone you love. Has something happened to make you worry?"

"We were kissing in the office the other day, that's all we've done, you know. Alex doesn't want to rush me and she said we shouldn't make love until I am ready. She even mentioned waiting till we were married. I was overjoyed at first because it meant Alex thought we would have a future together, that she saw marriage for us. Then I was worried that if we get to that point and I am a disappointment to her, it would be too late and she would be trapped and would resent me. Now I know what it's like to be loved by Alex, I don't think I could survive without it."

"My, what a lot of worries you have in that little head of yours!" Beth smiled. "First of all tell me what happened in the office, how you felt and so forth."

Beth lowered her voice, anxious not to be heard by the other diners. "Well we kissed and it became rather heated and she touched me and I touched her, and my heart hammered in my chest. All I could think of was Alex, to have her everywhere all at once. Everything became a blur and I asked her for something that I have no words for. We carried on then Alex stopped saying that we must stop before she couldn't."

The waiter approached the table to clear the dessert dishes.

"Coffee, ladies?"

"Yes, please bring a pot rather than two cups please; I so often want a second cup." Lotty replied for both of them.

"Beth, tell me, you haven't kissed or touched anyone before Alex, but yet it seems to have come naturally to you, so will all the rest that comes after. Alex loves you and will guide you. Don't worry; I am sure you will come to enjoy the physical side of life as I did. The connection you feel when you make love with someone that you truly love is indescribable." Lotty smiled as she thought of the love she and Poni shared. Their honeymoon period never seemed to end; they could never get enough of each other.

"Have your fears lessened now my young Beth?"

"Much better! Thank you, I really must thank you for such a wonderful day. You're a good friend."

"It was my pleasure. I'm sure we will have many more days shopping much to the chagrin of our other halves!" They both laughed.

That night Alex phoned Beth at home.

"Oh darling, I missed you so much today, I can't wait to see you at work tomorrow."

"And I you, little bit, did you have a good day?" Alex longed to have her in her arms.

"It was wonderful, I saw such beautiful things and Lotty and I had such fun together!" Beth gushed.

Alex laughed. "I'm so glad you enjoyed it sweetheart. Did you get some nice dresses?"

"Yes, I got the loveliest things, and you, My Lord, are naughty for telling Lotty I must get two dresses."

"I await your punishment little bit." she flirted. "I know we will be attending some more events and I wanted you to have the best. You didn't argue about money did you?" Alex asked with a slightly stern edge to her voice.

"No, not at all." she lied only slightly. "I remembered what you said the last time. I may get a little concerned sometimes, but it's only that I don't want people to think I'm a kept woman or something, but I won't question you again. I promise."

"We are courting with the intention of you becoming my wife one day. It's is my privilege to spoil you. A kept woman would not be courted; she would be setup in a flat somewhere as a mistress so not to worry. But I thank you for doing as I asked."

"Alex I miss you. I wish we would never be apart."

"Soon sweetheart, remember we must go slow for you. You're a young woman and I don't want to rush you into anything, but remember you have my love and commitment always. You're mine now Beth never forget that, just as I am yours. Now go to sleep little bit, I shall see you in the morning."

Beth purred with pleasure every time Alex said she was hers. She wanted to belong to her so much and she knew there was no threat behind the possessive statement, it was said in love. The young women wanted to belong to Alex.

"Goodnight Alex. I thought I might go in a little early to the office, catch up on a few things."

"Alright I'll see you as soon as I can. I have to stop by Dalton House to sign a few papers."

"I'll have your breakfast waiting My Lord! Goodnight, I love you."

"I love you too, Good night little bit."

Today would be the day. Wednesday, the day he would take his revenge. He had watched the comings and goings to the office building for days and days now. He had noticed his little whore had become friendlier with that dyke bitch! the little touches and kisses as they left the office. But not to worry he would have the pleasure of little Beth and every time the dyke looked at her she would have a reminder that Albert Pincher had taken what she couldn't have. She would be reminded that she could never best a man. His revenge would be sweet and delicious. He had

decided the best time to act would be in the morning since Beth was always in first with the Dalton female coming later where she would find her precious little Beth waiting for her. He skulked back into the shadows and waited.

Beth looked forward to work today; one whole day away from Alex had been too much. She couldn't wait to get a cuddle in those strong arms. She walked up the stone steps and towards the outer office door and as she unlocked it she felt a force slam against her back which dumped her onto the office floor. She looked up and saw Albert Pincher enter the room and calmly close the door behind him.

"Albert what are you doing! You could have hurt me!"

"Do you know that's the first time you've called me that?" He said as he circled her slowly, then grabbed her by the back of her coat and roughly pulled her up.

"All the times I would politely talk to you in the park, it was Mr. Pincher this and Mr. Pincher that. All I wanted to do was take you out to dinner, but oh no! That wasn't good enough for you was it!"

He grabbed Beth by the throat and squeezed. "A nice respectable man like me and you whore yourself for that dyke! Have you opened your legs for her?" His grasp tightening.

Beth was terrified as she was struggling for breath. "Tell me! Has she fucked you!" She now couldn't breathe at all and croaked out, "N ... no ..." He let her throat go and Beth stood gasping.

"Good little whore, that's exactly what I wanted to hear. I'm going to take what she wants. I'm going to be the first one who knows your private places Beth."

"No! ... NO!! Please let me go. I won't tell anyone, I promise please!" She pleaded.

She made a lunge for the door but Albert caught her easily and slapped her across the face, hard enough to burst her lip. He forced her down on the floor and started to pull at her clothes.

"I'm going to fuck you and take your precious virginity, then you will always remember me! I am going to cut that beautiful face so every time she looks at you, she'll know I won. I had you! I fucked you!" Growling he started to tear at her clothes.

'Oh please, not like this. Alex please! Alex please I need you!' She mentally called out.

He ripped open her blouse and grabbed at her breasts. Beth started to push and kick with all her might. She managed to scratch him across his cheek and draw blood.

"You bitch whore!"

He punched her in the face; blood was now dripping down her face from her nose and mouth. He pulled up her skirt frantically and rubbed his crotch against her pants. She could feel his erection through his trousers.

"Do you feel that slut? I'm going to fuck you till you scream!"

The young girl was crying hysterically now. 'I'm sorry Alex; I wanted to give you this gift. I love you Alex.' She sent the thoughts out to her beloved as she heard him unzip his trousers.

Alex couldn't wait to see her little bit. She woke up bright and early and went down to the Dalton building early so she could surprise her girl. She would take her to lunch and then maybe invite her over this evening for some cuddling. Who would have thought Alex Dalton would like cuddling? She smiled to herself. It truly was wonderful to be in love. She parked and walked towards the office building whistling.

'That's odd?' She thought. The front door to the building was swinging open. Beth wouldn't be that careless. The hackles on the back of her neck stood up and she bounded up the stairs. She burst into the office and looked down with horror to see Albert Pincher on top of Beth with her skirt up round her waist. Albert had hold of his manhood about to force his way into her. Beth was crying and squirming uncontrollably. She grabbed a hold of the back of Albert's jacket and pulled him off of the young woman and began to rain punch after punch down on Albert.

"I'm going to kill you disgusting bastard." Alex screamed.

Beth looked up at her saviour beating this man to death; her face was one of cold fury. She had never seen anything more frightening. She couldn't lose Alex. Not over Albert Pincher. She sorted her clothing quickly and crawled over to Alex, grabbing her in a hug.

"Please Alex! Please! You're going to kill him! I can't lose you! If you kill him you'll go to prison! Please Alex! Please don't leave me!"

Somewhere in the back of Alex's mind she heard Beth's pleading and began to slow down. The punches stopped and she stood up breathing like she had run a marathon. Albert's face was a bloody mess. He was alive but unconscious. She heard him moan and placed a forceful kick to his exposed genitals.

"Alex!"

She turned quickly and gathered the sobbing woman into her arms.

"Sweetheart! I'm so sorry you had to go through that. I'm here now. Shhh! Shhh! I love you, I'm here little bit." She cooed to the trembling girl.

"You came! Alex You came! I ... I ... I shouted out in my mind for you and you came!"

"I'll always be where you need me sweetheart. Did he ...?" She was almost too afraid to ask.

"N ... no ... no ... he was just about to when you came in. Oh I was so scared Alex!" Beth hiccupped and spluttered.

"No one will ever hurt you again my little bit! I promise you that. Now try and calm down a little, I just need to go over to the phone and call the police." She tried to pull away and Beth gripped her tighter.

"Please don't let go of me Alex. Please!" she cried desperately.

"Alright! Alright! Just come over to the desk and we'll sit down together, alright?"

They shuffled over to the desk and Alex sat in the chair bringing Beth down on to her lap. The little blonde was gripping Alex round her neck like she was a life raft. Alex picked up the phone and dialed.

"Police please. Hello this is Lady Dalton, one of my employees has just been attacked. I had to fight him off her and he is unconscious. Could you send some people please?" Alex said commandingly.

"Of course Lady Dalton! We'll be right with you."

Alex replaced the receiver then immediately took it up again after having a good idea. She called Poni and told her what happened.

"Oh my god Alex! Is Beth alright?"

"She's extremely shaken. Could you and Lotty come over? The police may want to speak to me alone and Beth will need someone to sit with her."

"Of course! We'll be there in 15 minutes."

Alex cuddled Beth in tighter. The girl's tears had reduced to snuffles, but she was just staring into thin air.

"Sweetheart, the police will be here soon and so will Poni and Lotty. I love you my darling."

"I ... I don't want to be alone tonight. Please don't send me home. I need you, only you."

"It's alright; you'll stay with me so I can keep an eye on you. Once the police have been here I'll call Agnes and explain. She'll understand that it's perfectly innocent."

The police appeared in the doorway and immediately checked on Albert.

One of the constables said. "He's alive Inspector. He's coming round now."

"Get him into the van and seen by the doctor back at the station."

"Yes sir!"

"Lady Dalton I presume? I'm Inspector Welding."

The inspector looked at the unusual sight of a woman dressed in gents clothing, short hair and a little blond with a beaten and bloody face perched on her lap. Inspector Welding was a tall man, with salt and pepper hair, a moustache and long trench coat.

"Yes, forgive me for not standing to shake your hand but Miss Bentley won't let go of me, she's too scared. I've called some friends to come and sit with her so that you can speak to me. They'll just be a few minutes."

"Of course, Lady Dalton. Miss Bentley is the victim I take it?"

Alex nodded.

"I'll call a doctor for her. Can you tell me her full name?"

"Thank you. This is Elizabeth Bentley, my friend and secretary."

"I see, well I'll just go and get someone to contact a doctor." He said as he stepped out the room.

"Will they need to ask me things Alex?"

"I'm afraid so sweetheart but I'll be with you. As soon as you get it over and done with we can get back to the flat and get comfortable. Alright?"

She nodded. Beth felt numb, but was beginning to warm up from the inside by being in Alex's arms. Alex had saved her. Alex was home and safety. She tried to burrow even deeper into her Alex's neck as the Woodward's came bounding into the room.

"My dear! Look at you! Are you alright?" Lotty exclaimed.

"Alex saved me." she replied in a whisper.

The couple looked upon the young girl lying pathetically in their friends arms. Her face battered and bruised.

"I'll make some hot sweet tea." Lotty announced feeling the need to help in some way.

"There's some Brandy in the cupboard in my office Lotty, put some in the tea will you?" Alex added.

"What are the police saying Alex?" Poni asked

"Nothing yet. They took him away and the inspector will be back shortly? He was just going to get a hold of a doctor."

The inspector came back in and saw that the friends had arrived.

"The doctor will be here soon. Could we speak to you now Lady Dalton?"

"Yes, I'll take you through to the conference room. I have to go for a little while sweetheart you'll be here with Poni and Lotty I'll be as quick as I can."

"Alright." Beth whispered.

Lotty came over to Beth with a cup of tea, sat beside her and took her hand. An hour later both Alex and Beth had been interviewed. The police were quite satisfied that Alex acted in self defense. Her status assured a speedy investigation.

"Is there anything we can do for you Alex?" Poni asked.

"It's ok now. I'm taking Beth home with me tonight. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know how things are."

Lotty came over and kissed Beth on the head. Her heart broke at the pain and confusion on Beth's face.

"Goodnight my dear, let Alex look after you and all will be well."

Poni kissed Beth as well and patted Alex on the back.

"Telephone us, alright? Anytime."

"I will do that old friend, thank you."

Once they left Alex gathered up Beth's things. "Let's go little bit."

Beth willingly followed Alex out of the door, gripping her hand like a vice.

They entered into the flat and Alex asked, "You're shivering sweetheart, why don't we run a warm bath for you, then we can sit in front of the fire?"

"That would be really nice; I need to wash his stench off me."

On the drive over Beth had calmed down a lot but she was still very quiet. Alex was going to let her speak in her own time.

Alex ran the bath and turned to leave. The young girl grabbed at her hand and tried to pull her back.

"Don't leave me. Please?" Beth said with a pleading voice.

Alex's heart broke at the look of pain on her darling girl's face.

"I will never leave you sweetheart. I'm just going to give you some privacy to wash. I think that's proper. Alright? You can leave the door open a bit if you want. Just yell if you really need me and I'll be right in. I'm going to call Agnes and then I'll make us some roasted cheese; I think I can do that without burning it.

What do you think little bit?" She said hoping the small joke would break the tension.

"I think you might just manage My Lord." She gave a tiny smile.

Alex was delighted at hearing the small endearment Beth used for her. That was progress.

After she finished speaking to Agnes she began making the toast and cheese. Agnes had been very understanding as to why Beth wanted to stay overnight with her. Beth came into the kitchen dressed in one of Alex's shirts that she had left out for her. Alex had nothing else that would suit the girl to wear. The shirt was huge, and hung to just above Beth's knees. Alex thought she looked adorable and it gave Alex a warm feeling to see Beth dressed in her clothes.

"This is ready so let's go through and curl up by the fire. You'll feel better in no time."

They settled down on the big couch and began to eat. Beth was picking at her food and after five minutes put the plate on the side table.

"Are my cheese on toast skills that bad?"

"Oh no darling, I just can't face eating."

"I will get us a brandy. That'll help settle you."

Alex came back with two glasses and handed one to Beth. She took a sip and although it didn't taste too good it gave her a lovely warm fuzzy feeling so she kept drinking. Alex lifted her arm and motioned for her to cuddle into her side. Alex hadn't asked too much, obviously not wanting to upset her, but she felt she needed cuddling.

"Alex, can I tell you what happened? I feel if I tell you and get it out my head then it won't upset me so much because you will have gotten rid of the pain for me."

"You can tell me as much or as little as you want sweetheart. Never be afraid to tell me anything." Alex murmured and tightened her hold on Beth.

Beth stared into the fire for several minutes. "In many ways, I don't think the attack was about me. He wanted to get back at you. He wanted revenge. He must have been watching us and noticed we were together. You know, stepping out together."

Alex could feel her anger building but was determined to keep quiet and let Beth get all this out.

"Carry on sweetheart, don't be scared." She kissed Beth on the forehead.

"Before he started, he wanted to know if I was still a virgin. I said nothing but I was kicking and screaming to get him off me. He started to throttle me and I couldn't breathe, so I told him I was. I thought he would have killed me otherwise. This seemed to make him very happy. He said he would take my virginity from me so you could never have it, and if you ever wanted to touch me again you would never forget that he had me first. That he had beaten you." The tears started to roll down her cheeks. She knew this information would hurt Alex deeply.

Alex jumped up in absolute fury, she punched the wall and burst open her already bruised knuckles.

"Alex! Please! Calm down. You've hurt yourself. Come here." Beth went over and pulled her into a tight hug. "He didn't get me Alex. You saved me. You always do. You're my knight in shining armour."

She felt Alex's tense muscles start to loosen. "If I ever see him again, I will kill him Beth. I wouldn't be able to stop myself."

"Stop and calm down now. He's going to jail. We'll never see him again. Come cuddle me and let's finish our brandy."

As they sat cuddled up Alex said, "I love you so much. I couldn't live without you now little bit."

"You will never have to find out my darling. I will never leave your side. I told, you might be my protector, but you need looking after as well, and that's my job. I feel a bit better now that I told you what happened. How about we go to bed?"

"Of course. You go through and get settled in bed and I'll get some blankets to sleep on the couch.

Beth had no intention of letting Alex go. "Please, sleep with me tonight?"

Alex stroked her cheek. "I don't think that would be a good idea sweetheart."

"Alex, you're so proper all the time! We're just going to sleep. I am sure my virtue will be safe. I just want you to hold me while I sleep so I am not scared!" Beth shouted in frustration.

"Whoa! There's my little bit of a spitfire back! Are you sure you trust me?" Alex smiled and raised an eyebrow.

Beth laughed with all the fractions of the day coming out. "I am sure you can control yourself for one night! Come on."

It was good to see her girl laugh again, perhaps with love and care she could get over this.

"Alright, you win. Let's go." As Alex walked behind she couldn't do anything but eye the way Beth's hips and bottom swayed under her long shirt. She berated herself for having such a thought after a day like today.

"Did I tell you that you look really cute in my shirt, little bit?"

"I like it; it smells like you. Could I take it home? I'd like to sleep in it. It would make me feel safe."

"Of course, If you excuse me I'll just go to the bathroom and get changed. I'll be quick I promise."

Beth got under the covers. She felt instantly relaxed, everything smelt like Alex, the sheets and the pillows. She was so glad and honored that she was the first woman to share Alex's bed. Beth had never shared a bed with anyone before; she wondered how she would feel.

Alex come back into the room and started putting her clothes away. She was wearing a white vest and blue cotton boxer shorts. Beth lay on her side and admired her first look at the body of Alex Dalton. The white vest allowed her muscled broad shoulders and arms to be seen. She had long legs with powerful looking thighs topped off with a tight hard bottom. The young woman had the urge to grab it. She was so attracted to Alex it was unbelievable, even after today's horrors. She was convinced that Alex had been made to her specifications somehow. Alex caught her looking and smiled to herself. She must be feeling better!

"See something you like?"

Beth blushed. "I think I like you in vests and boxers."

"Oh do you now? Well hopefully you'll see a lot more of me in them in the future."

She came over to the bed and got under the covers. She lifted her arm and patted her shoulder, beckoning her girlfriend to lie there. Beth immediately took up the offered space, lying on her side with face snuggled into Alex's neck. It was amazing. There was no awkwardness or nervousness at their close position. It felt right. It felt like it had always been.

"Are you alright there sweetie?"

"Perfect! You make me feel so safe."

"I'm glad, because that's my job."

"Tell me more about Dencotte House and maybe I'll fall asleep."

"I want to take you there as soon as I can. I thought we could go down, not this weekend but the next. I would rather have had you to myself on our first visit, but Poni reminded me that weekend was set for the winter house party. I wish I could cancel it but I can't so I thought we could take the Friday and Monday off, leave straight after work on Thursday and motor on up to the country. We don't see the guests till Saturday evening so that would give us Thursday evening, Friday and most of Sunday. We can travel back on Monday. What do you say? I can't wait for you to see it and to meet Mrs. McKluskey and Foster. They are the only thing resembling family I have. Poni and Lotty will be there of course."

"That sounds wonderful darling. I can't wait to see where you were brought up. One thing puzzles me though."

"What's that Sweetheart?" she said kissing her head. Alex was absolutely in heaven tucked up in bed with Beth in her arms.

"You don't seem one for parties and yet you have quite a few of these big ones through the year and you say you couldn't cancel this one. It seems to me that you're not the type to care about that."

"If it was only for me, I would agree with you, but you must understand something Beth. Life for people like us, who love other woman, is not easy. It's alright for Poni and myself, we have the means and influence enough to live our lives the way we want and out in the open, with maybe only some sniggering or talking around our backs. Nobody would dare challenge us. Very, very few in our small community have that luxury. Most of them have to stick to the status quo. For some of the women like you who like to dress as you do, that's no problem as they can fit into jobs and the wider community without any problems.

"For the ones like me though, they live five days a week going to work, wearing dresses and skirts, feeling out of place, and only getting to be themselves at the weekends when they go the Alley Cat or come to one of my weekend parties. They lead a double life. That's why we have the weekend parties at Dencotte. It's really an open house and Poni hosts quite a few evenings a year for our closer acquaintances."

"You really are a knight in shining armour My Lord, always thinking of others. I'm sure I will enjoy it immensely. I've never been to a party before. It will be exciting."

"Well don't worry. I'll be watching you like a hawk. They're mostly decent people but a few, well when they smell new blood, would try to pounce on you, especially such a feminine girl like you."

"I won't stray far. I'll get to meet some of these people on Friday?"

"What? I didn't think you'd still want to go out after today."

"Well, let's see how I feel tomorrow but I don't want that man to ruin everything. You've put so much time and planning into it and if we don't go he will have won. I never want him to win. Do you know what most upset me most today?"

"No, what was it sweetheart?"

"When I was lying there crying, knowing that he was about to enter my body, I spoke to you inside my head. I told you I was sorry for what he was about to do, for taking something that was rightfully only yours to take. I wanted you to be the first and only one to know me that way. I called out to you and you came.. You are always there when I most need you." Beth leaned up on her elbow and looked down upon Alex, stroking her face gently. "I love you so much My Lord. Please say you'll never grow tired of me." She bent over and gave Alex a gentle kiss filled with all the love that was in her soul. It took all of Alex's inner strength not to turn her love over and ravish the girl. She had never felt a kiss like it.

As the kiss ended Alex said, "I will never leave you little bit. You are in my heart and soul. I could not live without you. Now we've had quite a day. Let's get some sleep, ok?"

"Goodnight darling." Beth said snuggling back in.

"Goodnight sweetheart." Alex stroked Beth's blonde locks and kissed her head.

The sun shone through the window of the room, casting its rays across the bed. Alex opened her eyes slowly. She was aware that Beth had not changed her position, but had, in fact, gotten closer. Her leg was thrown across Alex's legs and her hand had wormed its way under her vest and was stroking her stomach. She started to feel a kissing sensation at her neck. Beth still half asleep had burrowed her way closer into her and was peppering Alex's neck with little kisses and bites. Alex's heart was thumping in her chest and she could feel a pounding between her legs. She moaned. 'Ah! I have to stop this!'

The sensation on her neck and the stroking on her stomach were fueling Alex's libido. The final straw came when she felt Beth's hips begin to rock into her hip. She shot up, breathing heavily and she shook her girl to try and wake her.

"Wake up! Come on sweetie. Wakey wakey!"

Beth rolled over and moaned as she slowly opened her eyes. She stretched "Good morning darling, I have never slept better. It was wonderful being in your arms. I feel so much better!"

Alex groaned then laughed and fell back on the bed, her arm propping her head.

"I, on the other hand feel worse little bit!"

"Why? What's wrong Alex? Do you not like sleeping with me in your bed?" Beth prayed that was not the answer.

"No! Sweetheart, I love sleeping with you." Alex then went on to explain how she had woken up.

Beth was mortified. "Oh Alex! I'm so sorry for taking advantage of you like that! What must you think of me? Accosting you like some kind of floozy!"

"Sweetie! Calm down. It's fine. You were just acting out your desires through your dreams. I'm glad you have those feelings for me." She said smiling and reassuring Beth.

"I may be a little hot under the collar and in need of a cold bath but I'll survive." Alex smiled.

"But I haven't been fair to you. You've been so respectful to me. Being prepared to wait and everything and I go teasing you like that. I know you're used to being with women, you know physically, and it can't be easy for you. I shouldn't be doing that to you."

Beth wrung her hands nervously.

"Beth. Listen, it's called sex. It's not a dirty word. I am in no distress what so ever. This is the happiest time of my life. Of course I can't wait to make love to you because I love you and you are the most beautiful woman in the world, I have never been with anyone I love before and I can assure you the wait and anticipation is delicious! It will make the reality so much sweeter. Don't you think?"

"Yes of course, thank you for saying that."

"Now let me look at that pretty face and see what the damage is like from yesterday." Alex took Beth's face in her hands.

"It doesn't seem to have bruised; only your lip and nose is a little swollen. That should clear up in no time!" Alex gave a small kiss to both the young girl's eyes and nose.

"Now I think that cold bath is calling to me!" She smiled.

"What about the office?"

"We're taking today off. There's nothing pressing and I don't want you to go back there today. I'm going to call the cleaner and ask her to give it a proper going over so everything will be back to normal for you tomorrow. I'll send my driver over to Agnes' to pick you up a fresh set of clothes and we'll have a nice day together, perhaps go to lunch then I'll take you home this evening. Alright?"

"That will be smashing! You go ahead and get washed and I'll make us breakfast."

"Wonderful, little bit!"

Beth went to the kitchen and began to cook up a full English breakfast eggs, bacon, fried bread, and sausages. She thought back to yesterday and was determined to pick herself up quickly from the fear she had felt. She did not want to make Alex feel any worse about what happened and hated to see Alex so angry and out of control. She had been so good to her. Saving her and looking after her. Beth decided she would repay Alex for the rest of her life by taking care of her needs and giving her that warmth and love that she craved.

She was just attending to the coffee while the food cooked when Alex came up behind her, put her arms around her waist, and started kissing down her neck. Beth giggled and squirmed as the kisses sent quivers down her spine.

"This all looks wonderful sweetheart. Do you know how good it looks to come in my kitchen and see you standing in my shirt, cooking me breakfast? I could eat you all up!" She growled and nipped the skin on Beth's neck between her teeth.

Beth laughed and pushed her back. "You do seem to have some strange fetish about me and cooking!"

"Must be my secret need to be mothered!"

Beth smacked her on the behind with her wooden spoon. "Go sit down at the table my lord and stop getting under my feet! Breakfast will be served shortly." Alex was delighted that she seemed to be having no ill effects from yesterday but she would keep a close eye on her young partner. Five minutes later Beth came through with a large tray filled with two large breakfast plates, coffee, and orange juice.

"This looks amazing sweetheart, thank you. It astonishes me what you can do with the food in my cupboard," said Alex tucking into her food.

"As I said to you the last time My Lord, your easily pleased." She smiled pleased at seeing Alex eating her food so heartily.

"It feels strange to be eating breakfast dressed only in your shirt, darling."

Alex looked up and smirked. "It looks good from my point of view!"

"That's because you're naughty!"

"And you love it! But fear not, I called my driver after I finished my bath, to go to your house and pick up some clothes from Agnes. He should be on route by now. Well I'm stuffed!" she said patting her stomach.

She took out a cigarette and lit it taking a long drag.

"What a perfect morning this has been. Now I thought perhaps I could take you to the British Museum this morning then we can get a bite of lunch then maybe a walk? Yes?"

"Lovely, my father always promised me we could visit there. I'd love to share that with you."

They smiled and stared deeply into each other's eyes. The ring of the doorbell broke them out of their lovers gaze.

"Ah! That'll be your clothes. You go ahead into the bedroom and I'll bring them in. While you get ready, I'll phone Poni and Lotty and let them know how things are. Off you go! Scoot!" Alex gave her a light smack on the bottom. "I don't want to have to kill my driver for catching a glimpse of you half naked!" she joked.

They spent a wonderful day together. Laughing and joking and creating new memories to eclipse yesterday terrible events.

The next day at the office went pretty quietly. Although she had been very nervous about returning to the scene of her attack, she took strength from Alex, who insisted on picking her up from now on. She tried to keep her thoughts focused on Friday and her birthday celebrations to get her through. She couldn't wait to go to the club on Alex's arm. Alex had decided to close the office on Friday, giving Beth the day to enjoy getting ready.

Over breakfast Agnes had given her a beautiful picture frame, for a picture that Alex and she had taken one day in the park. She placed it by her bedside. The doorbell went just then and Agnes came back to the parlour with a huge bouquet of a dozen red roses. Beth clasped her hand over her mouth. "Oh my goodness! They are wonderful, I've never gotten roses before!"

"Open the card! I wonder who they are from?" Agnes smirked knowingly.

"To my little bit, I hope these roses get your birthday off to a good start! You have a few more surprises to go! I love you always and forever.

Your Lord Dalton xx'

"How romantic Beth! What's the your lord bit eh?"

Beth blushed. "Just a little pet name I picked up from Poni and Lotty. I am so spoiled Agnes. I don't think I could be happier!"

"I am sure Alex will find a way!"

The rest of the day was spent on little things she normally didn't have a lot of time for. Agnes helped her paint her nails and gave a final press to her dress. Beth had chosen the black sleeveless dress for this evening.

She began to dress putting on her lingerie and stockings. They were so pretty, she hoped one day Alex would see her in them. She knew her partner would love them. She had been so shocked at herself lately. She had never really thought about sex before but since she had met Alex she found herself daydreaming about it all the time. She craved Alex, to feel her weight lying on top of her and her large hands grasping her breasts in passion. She knew without a doubt that once Alex had made love to her, she would never be able to get enough. She had been worried about Alex holding out for a long time, she was now beginning to wonder how she would hold out herself! She finished dressing early and came down to wait in the parlour. She was nervous.

"You look wonderful my dear! You will knock Alex Dalton's socks off!"

Alex had picked up Poni and Lotty in the Bentley, having decided they would all go together.

Both Alex and Poni were looking dapper in their dinner suits and Lotty appeared beguiling as ever in a green evening gown designed by Chanel.

"Lotty, I am worried we'll bump into Sally this evening. You know what she's like with me and how I angered her the last time I saw her. I don't think she will approach us when we are together but will you make sure you go to the ladies room with Beth so she is never alone? I would hate for Sally to say anything about our past. I know I told her everything but Sally is vindictive and could tell her some hurtful things. I can't allow her to ruin this for me. I can't give Beth any reason to leave me."

"Don't worry Alex, you know us girls always go in two's to the bathroom anyway! I won't let her out my sight."

"Thank you, I appreciate that."

"If that woman tries to upset you and Beth, she'll have me to answer to me. You two have had enough to deal with this week." Poni said.

"Thanks old friend."

They arrived at Beth's and they all were coming in since she had to open her presents before they left. Agnes ushered them into the parlour and Alex was astonished to see that Beth was ready and waiting. She walked over and gave her girlfriend a soft kiss on the lips.

"You look ravishing! Happy birthday my little bit."

Alex had this gentle way of turning her to mush with the simplest of actions.

"Thank you, you look handsome and thank you so much for the roses, I've never had roses before."

"My pleasure." She gently stroked Beth's cheek as they got lost in each other's eyes.

"Put her down Alex and let us have some time with your sweetheart," said Poni as she crossed the room to kiss Beth.

"Happy birthday my dear." Lotty gave her a hug and handed Beth their gift.

"Oh you shouldn't have! Thank you." Beth unwrapped the gift to find the most exquisite wooden jewellery box. An intricate wooden carving circled the box in a Celtic design. "Oh it's wonderful! Thank you so much!"

"Well when I saw it I knew we had to get it for you. With the way this old lord here likes to spoil you, I thought you'd need one sooner or later." They all laughed.

"And now for mine." Alex stepped forward.

"No Alex, I've had my presents from you, All these beautiful clothes were your gift to me."

"Just three more sweetie, indulge me please?"

"Sweetie! You are under the thumb already My Lord!" Poni guffawed.

Alex snapped her head round and gave her a steely stare. Lotty saved Poni by interrupting. "Keep your trap shut Poni boy or I'll tell them your special secret name I gave you for when we have a little quiet time." She warned.

"Sorry old friend." Poni snapped a little too quickly.

"Three presents Alex? Really it's too much."

"Please little bit, no arguing ok?" Alex made it clear she didn't expect any more complaints.

She handed over the first one. Beth opened it up to discover a rather old hardback copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. She looked inside the front cover and gasped, "AHHHH! It's signed by Jane Austen. I can't believe it! This is amazing!" Beth was talking so fast, she was short of breath.

"It's a first edition as well." Alex said proudly.

Beth flung her arms round Alex's neck. "Oh my darling! My favourite book! However did you get hold of this?"

Alex looked at Poni and smiled. "I have connections."

In reality Alex had asked Poni to talk to her friend who worked at Christie's auction house, to see if he could ask around for a copy for sale. They had found a Jane Austen collector who at first was very reluctant to sell, but when Poni informed him that he could name any price they soon had one of Beth's birthday gifts.

"You are so good to me. I promise I will treasure this for the rest of my life!"

"I aim to please, but you still have two more gifts and they kind of go together." She handed over one long rectangle velvet box and a much larger rectangle box. Beth opened the large one first it was a gold chain with a gold heart locket hanging from it; the heart had a diamond on the front.

"I'm speechless!"

"It's 24 carats and is the purest of diamonds. I thought you needed some jewellery to go with your new outfits. Open it up."

When Beth opened the heart she found a picture of Alex on one side and one of herself on the other.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "This is just wonderful darling will you put it on for me?"

"Gladly." Alex put it round Beth's neck. It hung perfectly just above the valley of her breasts.

"Now you can always keep me near your heart, little bit. Open the third."

Beth opened the box to find a matching bracelet. Alex took it out straight away and clasped it round her wrist.

"I can't tell you what these gifts mean to me darling. I love you." she murmured she gave Alex a sweet kiss.

"We should be making tracks Alex." Poni reminded.

"Of course, are you ready sweetheart?" Alex said as she picked up the girl's fur stole and draped it over Beth's shoulders.

"I am always ready for you My Lord." she said coyly.

"Have fun all of you young things and I'll see you tomorrow my dear, remember your overnight bag."

"Thanks Agnes, goodnight."

They had arranged that Beth would stay over with Alex as they would be very late. She was taking a change of clothes and some nightwear that the driver would drop off at the flat. They set off for the club.

They pulled up outside a large sandstone building; it had impressive steps leading up to a large impressive looking set of double oak doors.

"It doesn't look like a club, Alex." Beth said as she was helped out of the car.

"It used to be a Gentlemen's club before the owner bought it. It needs to look a little nondescript so as to not attract the wrong sort of attention."

They walked up to the door and Alex knocked three times. A little window on the door opened and a voice said, "Yes? Ah! Lord Dalton!" and the door was immediately opened.

A stocky bear of a man escorted them in. He was dark in skin colour and wore a waiter's dinner suit with tails.

"So nice to see you again, and Ms. and Mrs. Woodward as well."

"How's the crowd tonight Jack?" Poni asked helping Lotty off with her furs.

"A good crowd, we have a lovely jazz singer in from America tonight."

"Marvelous! I can't wait to get this old Poni to trip the light fantastic with me!" Lotty said smiling.

"Mrs. Woodward, looking as delicious as always!" he flirted.

"Keep your eyes to yourself, Jack! This one's all mine!" She grabbed Lotty up and kissed her with a growl.

"Put me down you buffoon." She giggled.

"And who is this pretty young thing?"

"This is my girl, Beth Bentley." Alex said proudly.

"Enchanted Miss!" he took her hand and gave it a gentle kiss.

"You must be a special girl to have snared yourself the elusive Lord Dalton."

Beth smiled shyly.

"I'll take you through to your table and get you all settled."

They were led to a second set of doors and Beth could hear music behind them. Jack opened them and the young girl stepped into a different world. She looked around the room in awe. She could see a large, Smokey room with many tables and the occupants of all the tables were people like them. The dining area was in a room off the main one. As they were led over she felt the eyes of the whole room boring into her. She felt her cheeks flush, but she also felt pride to be the one on Alex's arm. They reached the table and Alex and Poni pulled out seats for their respective partners.

"Jack will you bring us the best champagne you have in the house?" Alex asked.

"At once, and I'll send one of the waiters over with your menu's." He said as he turned and walked away.

"So what do you think, sweetheart?"

"It's fantastic Alex! Like a different world, everyone is the same as us!"

"That's what's so great about the Club and the parties we hold. Everyone gets to be themselves, for at least a while."

"I think I understand now, you get to escape when you come here."

Beth had noticed her three companions visibly relax since they entered the club. So too the others, who had to hide their true nature. It must be a godsend to come here and to go to Alex's parties. Jack arrived with the champagne and poured them all a glass. Alex stood and Poni copied her actions, but Beth followed Lotty's lead by remaining seated.

"I would like to propose a toast to my Beth. You have turned my world upside down and given me the love I never thought I deserved. You forgive my failings and are the most beautiful woman I have ever met. I hope you enjoy your birthday celebrations. You deserve so much more than I could ever give you. Happy birthday Beth!" They all clinked glasses and Beth felt a tear roll down her face. She was so touched and had never felt so loved. Alex leaned over and gave her the sweetest of kisses.

"Alright, sweetheart?" She wiped away Beth's tear gently with her thumb.

"Perfect! Thank you for those words. You have no idea how they make me feel. I love you."

The waiter came over with their menus.

"Let's eat shall we?" Poni asked.

The meal was wonderful and Beth thought she would burst. She had always been a big eater but that was truly a big meal. They had a soup course, fish course, main course, dessert and now they were working on cheese and biscuits

with coffee and liquors. They had such fun with Poni and Lotty. Watching Alex and Poni together was so funny, they competed like a couple of children, but Beth could see they would do anything for each other.

"Did you enjoy that sweetheart?"

"It was wonderful. The steak was melt in the mouth. Can't tell you how good it was." Beth gushed.

"Well get used to it. You'll be eating some truly fine food from now on sweetheart."

"Why don't we head to the bathroom my dear and let these buffoons find us a good table for the rest of the evening," Lotty said standing.

Poni and Alex stood as the ladies made their way from the table.

"Beth!" Alex called her back.

"Stay close to Lotty ok? I don't want you on your own at any point."

Beth thought her protectiveness a bit strange but knew from Alex's tone that there would be no use in questioning her about it.

"Whatever you think is best darling." And the two ladies moved away.

Alex looked worried. "Calm down old man, she'll be fine. Let's get that table so we can have our cigars."

Across the room the table of Lord Dalton had been observed. Sally was fuming. 'Her' Alex was with a woman. She had never seen Alex dine with anyone other than Poni and that wife of hers. This had to be stopped. 'What a little silly girl she looks and hardly the sort that could satisfy Alex.' She would have to scare her off. It seemed like she wouldn't be able to get her on her own. 'That bitch wife of Poni's is going everywhere with her.' Sally thought.

She had heard Alex was hosting one of her weekend parties next weekend. She wouldn't be welcomed on her own but perhaps one of Alex's lovely acquaintances would like a partner for the weekend. But first things first, 'A friendly introduction maybe?'

By the time Beth and Lotty had returned, Alex and Poni had secured a table in a fine spot next to the dance floor. They had ordered another bottle of champagne for the ladies and whiskeys and cigars for themselves. They stood and helped their partners into their seats.

"Everything alright?" Alex enquired worriedly.

"Fine darling, although we did have a good chat about you and Poni, my lord." Beth and Lotty giggled.

"I told you Alex, they're plotting our doom I tell you!"

The friends' laughter was interrupted by another voice.

"Alex! So nice to see you again." They turned to see Sally standing there. Alex's heart sank. She put her arm around the back of Beth's seat in a protective gesture.

"Good evening Sally." Alex gave her a cold hard stare almost daring her to say anything. Beth felt the tension around the table. Who was this woman? She could be one of the group's friends, but they were so uncomfortable since this woman approached the table.

Sally laughed inside; she could see Alex squirming in her seat. This little girl obviously had no idea about Alex's past. This would be fun! "I've missed you Alex." She purred.

Alex felt Beth instantly tense. Upon hearing those words the young woman was shot with a bolt of jealousy. It was making her stomach churn. She hated the way the woman's eyes roamed hungrily over Alex's body.

This must be one of the women from Alex's past and she was obviously still interested.

She was a tall platinum blonde, wearing a silver glittery cocktail dress. She looked like a woman who knew the ways of the world. How could she compete with that? Sally turned her gaze to Beth. "Sally Weston. And you are?"

"Elizabeth Bentley." As they shook hands Sally gripped Beth's hand a little too tightly.

"You look a little young to be in this type of club." She said condescendingly.

Alex had enough. She was just about to stand up and strong arm Sally away from her table when Sally said. "Well, have a good evening. I am sure I'll see you again." Sally stared at Beth, turned on her heel and left. She didn't intend for this to be a confrontation, she just wanted to make Alex feel uneasy. 'I will make my move at the house party. Little virginal Elizabeth would not fit Alex's bill and when she got Alex hot and bothered it would be me she will go to.'

The table was silent. Poni felt she had to break the tension. "Beth, would you be so kind as to take to the floor with me? You don't mind do you Alex?"

"Of course not old man, I think my girl is safe with you." She smiled.

Poni and Beth began to dance. "Do you know that woman Poni?"

"Eh? She comes to the club quite often but she's no friend of ours." She said as she twirled Beth around.

"Oh, ok." Beth didn't want to spoil the evening so she let it drop.

Back at the table Alex looked stressed. "You ok, Alex?"

"I need to go and have a word with Sally."

"Do you really think that's a good idea? If Beth sees you talking with her, it might not look to good."

"She won't see me, when she and Poni come back from the dance floor keep her talking while I take care of this. She needs to back off. I will not let anyone threaten what I have Lotty."

She stood and walked towards the back end of the room. She had seen Sally enter the bathroom area so she waited in a dimly lit alcove. As Sally left the bathroom she was grabbed from behind and pulled into the dark corner.

"Alex! What the hell are you doing! Oh I know, this is a game. You want it rough? Do you want to say no?" She asked seductively.

Alex forcefully pushed her against the wall as she towered over Sally and fixed her steely blue stare directly at her. "I'll only tell you this once. Do not ever approach Beth or myself ever again! If I find you trying to upset her or telling tales, I promise to make life very difficult for you! Do you understand?"

Sally smiled. "Hit a nerve have I, My Lord? Does little Miss Virgin not know what a big bad deviant you are? You are afraid of losing her, aren't you?" Sally laughed. "I can't believe it, Alex Dalton afraid of losing a little frigid girl like that. Your liking them young these days My lord? What is she 16?"

Alex grabbed her by the jaw and squeezed as Sally struggled fruitlessly. "I asked you if you understood!"

"Alex, you're hurting me!" She managed to squeak.

Alex squeezed tighter. "DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Yes! Yes! I understand. Now let me go!"

"Just remember this conversation. That is the woman I'm going to spend my life with and if anyone was to mess it up, I would end theirs!" Alex pulled away from her and straightened her suit.

"Nice speaking with you, Miss Weston."

She left Sally panting and rubbing her jaw. "So you really are in love Alex? How the mighty have fallen. Well I can't allow you just to wallow in domestic happiness. Nobody fucks me and runs! I will not be made a fool of!"

"Where is Alex, Lotty? You said she would just be a minute." Beth was worried after the appearance of that woman. Lotty looked to Poni for assistance.

"She was just going to the bathroom then bringing us some more drinks back I believe."

Just then Alex appeared with a small tray full of drinks. Poni breathed a sigh of relief that Alex had the same idea as her.

"I thought since we were celebrating we should have some cocktails!"

"What a super idea Alex." Lotty added rather relieved that the evening was coming back on track. Alex could see in Beth's face that she was in need of reassurance. She sat very close, took her hand and kissed her softly.

"You alright, Sweetie?"

"I'm fine darling, I just missed you." She felt better now that Alex was close.

"I won't leave your side again." She said giving her girl a kiss."

"Have you ever tried a cocktail before?" Beth shook her head.

"No? Well this is an American Daiquiri. It's rum, lime juice, syrup and crushed ice. Try it?"

Beth coughed. "Oh! It's sweet and strong. I like it though." She said gulping down the rest.

"Whoa! Slow down little bit or you'll be under the table! Now that you have given Poni a trip around the floor, do you think you have time for me?" Alex pouted.

"Come My Lord, let's dance!"

The popular 40's song, Dearly Beloved, began as they took to the floor. Beth rested her head on Alex's chest while they swayed round the room. The song seemed to perfectly match the mood.

Tell me it's true,

Tell me you agree,

I was meant for you,

You were meant for me.

Dearly beloved, how clearly I see,
Somewhere in heaven you were fashioned for me,
Angel eyes knew you,
Angel voices led me to you;

Nothing could save me,
Fate gave me a sign;
I know that I'll be yours come shower or shine;
So I say merely,
Dearly beloved be mine

As they swayed around the room Alex asked. "Have you enjoyed your birthday little bit?"

"This has been the best day of my life My Lord; you make me feel like a princess. I love you." Beth was smiling blissfully. The alcohol of the evening was taking its toll and making her brain woozy.

Alex stroked Beth's blonde hair and kissed her head. "I love you more than life, you are my world and you are mine. I will never let you go!" she said forcefully. She had no idea that Alex was feeling threatened by Sally's presence. Deep down Alex was frightened, if Beth found out she had nearly given in to lust only recently she might leave. She was in too deep now to ever let her girl go.

"You will never have to, I promise My Lord. I adore you. I live for the day we spend our lives together."

"We will my sweetheart. I must court you a little while longer till I know you are ready and then I will ask you to spend your life with me." Alex lowered her lips to Beth's and they kissed passionately. Back at the table the Woodward's looked on. "Poni they are made for one another. Do you think Sally will cause any problems?"

"I'm sure she knows to keep her distance after Alex's little chat with her. If I see her sniffing about I will have a chat with her myself to convince her. Now Alex has found this happiness, I will not allow anything to stand in their way."

Lotty kissed her beloved. "I do love you my old romantic fool!"

They danced the night away. Beth danced with Poni again a couple of times and Lotty with Alex. It was 2 o'clock in the morning when they decided to call it a night. Beth was very giggly and woozy after all the drinking. Alex found it quite amusing to watch her sweetheart and Lotty giggle and tell each other stories. She was so glad that Beth had made this friendship. She would need the older woman's guidance as they progressed in their relationship.

They dropped the Woodward's off before making their way back to Alex's flat. The excess of alcohol had made Beth very amorous. She was plastered to Alex's side in the back of the car and was kissing her way up and down Alex's neck. Alex was laughing softly finding her girl's alcohol induced lust amusing.

"Kiss me darling, I need to feel your lips on mine?" She said huskily.

"When we get home sweetheart, not in front of an audience."

When they arrived back at the flat Alex said, "Why don't you get changed for bed. I'm just going to have a cigarette before I get changed."

"Ok darling, don't be long." She smiled saucily.

Alex took off her dinner jacket and untied her bow tie and left it hanging round her neck. She poured herself a whiskey and lit a cigarette. As she sat on the couch she thought how well the evening had gone despite Sally's antics.

"Alex?" She heard a small voice at her side, then suddenly standing before her was Beth clothed in black lace bra and matching panties, stockings, and suspender belt.

"Do you like the lingerie you bought me My Lord? I wanted you to see it."

Alex sat open mouthed. She put her cigarette and whiskey down.

"They are beautiful little bit, but I don't think you should be standing in front of me like this."

Beth could see Alex's eyes devouring her. She had not forgotten Sally Weston's appearance this evening and Alex's later disappearance. The drink the young woman had consumed was giving her the courage to do this. She had to keep her love. She would give her what she wanted. She swayed her hips as she walked over to Alex. Beth straddled Alex's hips as she sat on her lap and kissed her with all the passion inside of her. Alex ran her hands down her girl's back and her hips then across her lace covered buttocks. When Beth moaned Alex pulled Beth's buttocks further into her crotch.

The amorous blonde began to kiss her neck and Alex let her head fall back and enjoy the attention to her neck.

"What are you doing, little bit? You know we shouldn't be doing this."

"I want you to make love to me Alex, I want you!"

Alex was throbbing; she wanted to bury her head in the young girl's breasts and thrust inside her until she heard Beth scream her name. Then her eyes shot open. This was wrong she had to stop it. She was the responsible one.

"Sweetheart, you are not ready. We decided we would wait. Please don't do this to me. You don't understand how close I am to taking you!"

"I want you to darling. I want to make you happy. I want to feel your hands all over me."

"Your drunk Beth, please stop. This is so hard to say no to. I'm begging you." Alex pleaded as her girl continued to kiss over her jaw and neck.

"I'm ready; I'm so ready for you My Lord. I want to be yours. Make me yours."

This was the last straw for Alex. She quickly flipped Beth onto her back forcing her legs open as she ground her pelvis into Beth a few times before coming nose to nose with her.

"If you are ready, ask me as a woman would not a girl. Ask me to fuck you, ask me to fuck you till you come and I will do it!" The older woman wasn't trying to be cruel, just trying to make Beth realise what would happen if she didn't stop.

Beth's drink addled brain instantly became a little clearer. Was she ready? Her underwear was drenched with need for Alex. It always made her insane with need when Alex was forceful with her, but she was scared. She knew she had to wait.

"Tell me! Tell me you want me to fuck you!"

"I...I can't. I'm not ready, I am so sorry."

Alex got up off her and gulped down her glass of whiskey. She lit another cigarette and Beth could see her hand shaking. She took a long drag and blew the smoke out slowly.

"I'm so, so sorry. I shouldn't have done that to you. It was immature and foolish. Please forgive me."

Alex swung round and pulled Beth into a cuddle. "It's alright little bit. I knew you weren't ready, It was the alcohol talking. I had to shock you into coming to your senses. I hope you understand why I was so harsh?"

"Oh darling, of course I do. I've never thought I could behave like that."

"It won't be long till you're ready. It's just your body is a little further ahead than your brain. When you drink, it clouds your judgment and your body's needs takeover."

I cannot tell her it was because of Sally. She would think me a silly little girl! Beth agonized as she cuddled into Alex's neck.

"I don't want you to think I don't want to make love to you. My body is aching for you little bit. Saying no to you is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I want it to be perfect and right when we make love."

She kissed Beth gently and smacked her sharply on the bottom.

"Aww! You smacked me!" It stung and gave her a fright at first but then it felt good and she moaned quietly. Alex heard the quiet moan, smiled and filed the information away in her brain for another day. She was more and more confident that they would be well suited in the bedroom when the time came.

"That was for being a naughty girl. Now go and put something a little more conservative on for bed. I think for the sake of my sanity I should sleep on the couch tonight."

"Alex please, I told you I was sorry. Please sleep with me."

The tall woman's resolve weakened with one look in those sad eyes. She sighed. "Alright, I don't know, you've got my number haven't you girl?"

Beth sniggered and ran off to get changed. That girl will be the death of me!" Alex mused.

The next morning found Beth, yet again sprawled across Alex's body. Alex shook Beth's shoulder lightly.

"Mmmm, ohh, aww." She moaned in pain. Alex laughed.

"Feeling a little delicate this morning baby? As much as I love being your pillow, I really need to pay the bathroom a visit."

"Awww ok, ok, I'm moving, just don't shout so loud!" Beth whispered holding onto her head as if it might fall off.

"Why did you let me drink so much?" she groaned towards the bathroom.

Alex popped her head round the door. "1- It was your birthday. 2 - I wanted you to relax and enjoy yourself. And 3 - You were with me so no harm could come to you." She counted as she strolled back to the bed.

"I'm never going to drink again! Darling, come back under the covers and snuggle with me." She pouted.

"As tempting as that offer is I am going to make us some breakfast. It'll help settle your stomach."

"Ha! Ha! You are going to cook?" Alex watched her fall back onto the bed laughing hard. She put on her best hurt look. "I'm not that bad! I did make you cheese on toast that other night."

"Darling! The toast was burnt. If you just give me a minute to get my brain into gear I'll do it."

"I wanted to do something nice for you. You always cook for us and I wanted to bring you breakfast in bed." She pouted.

"Ok, if you really want to I'll just lie here and you can go and cook? Off you go then."

Alex looked like a child who'd just gotten its own way. She raced off to the kitchen whistling.

"Now it can't be that hard! What do I need?" Alex mumbled.

In the bedroom Beth was trying to remember last night. She remembered being angry at a blond woman.

"Sally Weston! That was her! the witch. She looked as if she wanted to eat Alex alive!"

"Where are the eggs sweetheart?" A voice came from the kitchen.

"In the fridge. Where else would they be?"

"Oh right, got them!"

Beth shook her head. "I remember a green cocktail and dancing, hmmm. What happened next?" She knew there was something that happened last night; she just couldn't put her finger on it.

"Do I have a whisk?" said the voice from the kitchen becoming more frustrated.

"Oh for crying out loud!" She murmured, "It's in the drawer next to the sink! It is your kitchen Alex!"

"I know, I know, I'll be fine now!"

Beth cuddled down further into the blankets.

"Do you grill or fry sausages sweetie?"

"Arrrh!!! Look, just leave everything Alex! I'll do it!" She said throwing back the covers to get up.

"No! I'm fine, just let me do it. I'm ok now."

Then it hit her, images of her writhing on Alex's lap half naked. "Oh no! What must she think of me?" She went through to the living room to sit at the dinner table. Her stomach was in knots. She had to say something about last night. Maybe Alex would get sick of her immature ways and go to the arms of that woman. The thought of someone else touching her Alex made her want to throw up. Alex came through with two plates of burnt offerings. Her smile was beaming with pride that she had cooked for her sweetheart.

"I thought I was going to serve you in bed Sweetie?"

"I think I feel better sitting up."

"Oh ok, are you warm enough just wearing that old shirt of mine?"

"Yes, I'm fine. It's my favourite thing to wear to bed since you gave me it." Alex's chest puffed up at that comment.

"Well you're very sexy in it. Now eat up. I made sausages and I tried to make an omelette, but it turned into scrambled eggs." she laughed, "Are you ok, little bit?"

"I remembered last night." She murmured sheepishly.

Alex smirked. "Ah, I see. Well you certainly know how to get me going!"

"I'm really sorry. I should never do that to you. You must think I'm some sort of harlot, throwing myself at you like that." She stared down at the table.

"Sweetie, I told you last night that it is fine. Drinking does that to us sometimes and you're not used to it. It makes me glad that you want me so much. Now I don't want to hear anymore about it. Eat your breakfast young lady."

Beth smiled, relieved that Alex was so understanding. "Yes My Lord!"

She looked at her plate with trepidation. The sausages were black on the outside and the eggs looked grey which was not good when you had in hangover. She cut into the sausage and it was pink and still raw. Her stomach rolled. She ran to the bathroom and was sick. Alex popped her head round the door.

"Are you alright?"

"I am now. Just my hangover darling."

"No it wasn't, I'm not daft. I couldn't eat it either." She said, disappointment etched her face.

Beth jumped and cuddled into her. "Aw! Darling it's ok. I really appreciated the gesture. You can't be good at everything can you? And just think if you could cook, it would make my role a little redundant, wouldn't it?"

"I'm sure I could think of some other uses for you my little bit." She waggled her eyebrows and Beth smacked her arm.

"Aww! You beast you! Come on, let's get dressed and I'll take you out for an early lunch to make up for it."

"Great!"

Alex turned to leave her to get washed when Beth stopped her. "Alex you remember you said to me in the park you hoped I'd find my Mr. Darcy one day?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I think I can safely say I've found you, Mr. Darcy!"

Alex beamed at the compliment. "May you always think so Miss Elizabeth Bennet." She said bowing.

They spent the rest of the day together and Alex took her home that night.

The next week at work was very busy. It was three weeks till Christmas and that was always a busy time for the Charity. There was never a more need for food and lodgings for the poor then at Christmas. They had to set up temporary soup kitchens throughout other counties in England to keep up with demand. They were in the process of hiring out buildings in London, that they would squeeze in as many beds in as they could. Alex hated the Foundation to turn anyone away at this time of year. They would try and insure that everyone who came to them would at least get a bed on Christmas Eve and Christmas dinner.

"Alex!" Beth called into the inner office.

"I'm coming, I'm coming, just have to finish this call."

Alex came out of the office running a hand through her dark locks and sighed. "It's never ending. It doesn't seem to matter how hard we work and how much we provide, it's a drop in the ocean."

"But just think of all the thousands of people who wouldn't even get a meal this Christmas without your hard work."

Beth stood up and went round the desk to Alex. She stroked her face gently. "I'm so proud of you. The work you do makes such a difference. Please never doubt that."

Alex smiled, took her hand and kissed it.

"You are so good for me little bit. That was just the tonic I needed. So what did you call me for?"

"Oh yes, I got a call from the toy manufacturer you called. They'll give you a job lot of their products, half price if you'll allow your name to be used in their newspaper advertisement. They'll give you a selection of dolls, cars, Slinky's, Lego and toy guns."

"I suppose that's alright, just once though. I don't generally like my name to be used in such a way, at least the children will get something."

Beth cuddled her. "You just are an old softy, aren't you my lord?"

"Shh! Don't tell anyone. Which reminds me. What are you doing for Christmas?"

Beth had been hoping Alex would ask her for Christmas but didn't want to say anything.

"Nothing, Agnes is going to her sister's." She tried to hide her worried expression.

"Would you like to spend Christmas with us at Dencotte ? I couldn't bear to be without you over the holidays." she said hopefully.

"Oh that would be wonderful darling. Do Poni and Lotty come?"

"Yes they come to stay for the whole holiday at Dencotte . On Christmas morning we go down and help at the village Hall. The whole village gets involved in providing a Christmas lunch for the poor. There is some poverty in the county but nothing like the cities. Most of the people work on my land or surrounding farms. They make a living, but of course there's always some who slip through the net, perhaps the widowed or families without a responsible breadwinner. Some men's wages go straight into the pub and the family is left with very little, so we organise a big meal at the church hall and make it seem more of a party thrown by the local landowner so as to not make people wary of accepting charity. Country people are proud. Then we have our meal up at the house in the evening. I don't think I could enjoy the day if I didn't give something back to the village. Poni and I join the hunt that goes over my land on Boxing Day. So you'll be good company for Lotty. She usually has to entertain herself till we get back. What do you think?"

"It's sounds perfect and I can't wait to see Dencotte House this weekend."

"It will be wonderful to show you. I suppose I better get my Christmas shopping started. I can't tell you how good it will feel to share a Christmas with someone I love." She bent her head and kissed Beth.

"You are so sweet, but I don't want you going mad with gifts for me my lord, " she warned.

"Remember our agreement about money, spoiling you, and such like? I won't hear another word."

"Yes I remember. Well you will be impossible to buy for. You have everything!"

"I don't need anything from you. I get my pleasure out of spoiling you, but if you insist there are lots of small little things I like. I'll have a think. While we're talking about gifts I thought we could get gifts for Poni and Lotty from both of us. Would you come shopping with me and decide what we should get? I never have any idea what to get. Shops and I don't mix. Every other year I've just asked them what they wanted. We usually buy each other small things because of course we have all we need, and give a donation to charity in one another's name."

"So basically you want me to come up with the idea, go and buy it, and you will just trail behind me?" Beth joked.

"Yes, basically. I'll take you to lunch though so it won't be all bad."

"You are too kind my lord." she said sarcastically.

"Well I'll bring you in some tea in a minute. I better phone that toy manufacturer back."

"Thank you sweetie." Alex said as she blew Beth a kiss before heading back to her office.

The rest of the week flew by mainly due to how busy they were but finally Thursday arrived. They were motoring down to Dencotte in the early afternoon. Beth was so excited but nervous about meeting Mrs. McKluskey, the housekeeper, and foster the butler. 'What if they don't approve of me? It really feels like I'm being taken home to meet the parents.'

Their suitcases were all packed and in the Jaguar. Beth went into Alex's office and stood waiting for Alex to stop writing.

"I'll be with you in a minute sweetheart. I just wanted to finish writing this letter then we can post it when we leave." Alex saw Beth shifting about nervously. "You eager to get going, little bit?"

"Yes, I suppose I'm a little nervous at meeting Mrs. McKluskey and Foster. From what you've told me, they sound very protective of you."

"They are, but they'll adore you. Mrs. McKluskey isn't an ogre. She's been going on at me since Poni got married to find a nice girl. Well I've found one and I am taking her home." Alex finished with her letter and stood to get her suit jacket. "You ready to be off then?"

"Yes, just let me get my bag and jacket. How long will it take us to get there?"

"It usually takes me about 3 and a half hours. We'll be there in no time, and once we get out of the city it's a lovely drive. Right let's lock up and get going."

Two and a half hours later they were in the heart of the country.

"Not long now sweetheart!"

"It's beautiful around here Alex. You're so lucky to live surrounded by this."

Even though it was late December they were blessed by a sunny day. The frost and snow covered the fields and trees making it look like a Christmas card. Beth looked across the farmland of rolling hills and dales, the sheep going about

their business in the fields while in the distance she could see the exposed rock of the hills, all of which gave this area its beauty.

"I do love it Beth. It's just been hard without someone to share it with." She looked over at Beth and smiled.

"I'd would love to explore this area, it's lovely. I can't wait to see your village as well, as much as I enjoy living in London, I think I'll always be a village girl at heart."

"I may be biased but I believe you'll find Dencotte very picturesque. My favourite time of year is summer. Poni and I play on the cricket team. It's wonderful. Sun beating down on the village green as we play, with Lotty cheering us on, then lunch we have tea, sandwiches and cakes as we sit lazily by the side of the green. Ah! Bliss. We have all these things ahead to share with one another."

"Sounds wonderful darling." They turned off the main road and came to large black gates, which were lying open.

"This is the entrance to the estate, I own most of the land in the surrounding area and county, but this marks the beginning of the family estate."

It's huge! Beth thought. The drive continued on the winding road through endless woodland, meadows, and fields.

"Will we see the house soon, Alex?" Beth could not believe ten minutes had passed and they still hadn't reached the house.

"Patience! You should be able to see the house just beyond the next turn." As they were rounding the corner the house came into view in the distance. Alex sneaked a peak at Beth as the house came into view. She smiled with satisfaction as she saw the look of wonder on her face. Alex pulled over to the side of the road to let Beth appreciate the spectacle.

"What do you think, little bit?"

Beth was lost for words. Before her lay a large expanse of open green fields and further on sat a large lake. The house in the distance was an astonishing sight. It was big, she couldn't imagine how many rooms it held.

"Beth, can you hear me? What do you think?"

Beth turned to Alex, smiling, "It takes my breath away! I think it truly is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. You are blessed to have grown up here."

Alex cupped Beth's face in her hands. "Thank you sweetheart, I knew you would see the beauty here." Alex gestured around with her hands. "To me though, it's home. Come; let us get up to the house before Mrs. McKluskey sends out a search Party!"

They pulled in front of the large house where there was an imposing stone staircase lead up to the large front door. At the bottom of the stairs, the entire upstairs staff lined up on either side in a v shape. Beth couldn't believe the welcome. Sometimes she did forget that Alex had a hereditary title and was part of the aristocracy. All the male servants were dressed in traditional black suits with tails, white shirts and white bow tie, and black waistcoats. The woman wore black and white maids' outfits apart from Mrs. McKluskey who wore an all black dress with lace collar. Foster stood beside her in black suit with tails, white shirt with upturned collar and an ornate, wide neck tie.

One of the footmen approached the car and opened the door for Alex. She then went round to help Beth out. As they both came forward Mrs. McKluskey and Foster approached. Mrs. McKluskey was about Beth's height with dark graying hair tied up in a bun on the back of her head. She was perhaps in her late 50's, Beth thought. Mrs. McKluskey observed the young woman with the Master. She was petite and very pretty. The girl seemed to radiate an innocence and goodness even though she seemed somewhat skittish and overawed by her surroundings. Going by this, Mrs. McKluskey concluded the young lady was respectable and not as she often feared for Alex a gold digger.

"Come home at last, Master? We have missed you!" she said.

Alex bent over and kissed the housekeeper. "Mrs. Annie McKluskey and Foster may I introduce Miss Elizabeth Bentley."

"Pleased to meet you Miss." they said.

"And you, please call me Beth."

"Welcome home M'lord." Foster said.

"It's good to be back. Foster, how goes things with you?" she said to the butler.

"The house runs as smoothly as ever M'lord."

"Excellent stuff! Beth If you are lost or have any questions please go to Foster or Annie."

"Well, shall we get you settled?" They entered into a huge marble entrance hall. Straight ahead of them was a grand staircase, which peeled off to both the right and left. Some of servants from outside followed them in and some had taken their luggage in through the side entrance. Their coats were taken and Annie said, "I've put Miss Beth into the oriental room. Does that suit, M'lord?"

"Of course. Beth, Mrs. McKluskey will take you up to your room and get you settled? Why don't you have a short rest. I'll send for you when I get back."

Alex kissed her hand and moved off. Annie noticed the girl looking a little forlorn at being left on her own.

"Come Miss Beth, let's get you settled." Annie led the way up the stairs. Beth followed behind and was taken down a corridor off to the left of the half landing on the stairs. The stairs continued up to a third floor above. The sheer scale of the place was enormous. She was taken down a never-ending corridor, past door after door. Even the corridors were beautiful, ornate plastered ceilings, cornice pieces, and deep oak wooden floors. The corridor was bright as there were many windows; she caught a glimpse of the gardens to the rear. They looked immaculate and well tended.

"This is your room for your visit. It's called the oriental room due to the many oriental prints and china vases."

The room was very large and bright; it had a large four-poster bed with a gold coloured throw, curtains to match, and a cosy looking fireplace. There was a seated picture window overlooking the front of the house and lake and a fine looking antique desk in the other.

"What a fine view this room has." Beth said.

"It has Miss Beth. The late Lady Dalton redecorated it herself. She had a taste for the Oriental. Has the Master told you of the tea house on the grounds?"

"Oh yes, I'm looking forward to seeing it and perhaps taking a book down to read there."

"I'm sure you'll have some time. Now a few things. The head maid Laura is assigned to you during your stay. She will help you dress in the morning and for dinner, and give you any other assistance you may need. She is a nice girl of your own age so I'm sure you will get on well together."

Beth was a little taken aback, 'I am to have my own maid' Thought Beth.

"Will Lotty be assigned her own maid as well?"

"Oh no, Mrs. Woodward will bring her own maid with her, Ms. Woodward will bring a valet for her needs."

"Does Alex have a valet?"

"Yes, Thomas is his name, nice boy." Annie realised the young woman was becoming overwhelmed and sought to comfort her.

"Miss Beth, I know a lot of this will be new to you, and somewhat troubling when you don't know what's doing but please come to me Laura, or Foster at anytime with any questions. Don't be embarrassed if it is even the smallest thing. Lord Dalton runs a well-oiled, structured house but we don't stand on ceremony. We want to make you feel as comfortable as possible."

"Thank you so much. I feel a bit more relaxed. I hope I get the chance to talk to you more. Alex talks with such fondness about you and Foster."

"We will Miss. I do believe we will be seeing a lot more of you at Dencotte in the future." She smiled and left the room leaving Beth feeling quite alone.

She sat at the picture window and looked over the lake. The view of the grounds was truly breathtaking. As she looked on a passage from her favourite book, *Pride and Prejudice* came to mind.

'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' Beth laughed to herself. "Jane Austen never said a truer word!"

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes?" Beth asked.

A maid came through the door. "I am Laura and I'll be your ladies maid while you're here." She looked a bright girl. Beth went forward and put her arm out to shake hands. Laura hesitated; guests did not normally behave this informally and friendly. She shook Beth's hand, instantly liking the young girl.

"I have to say Laura, I'm not used to all this so I'll be relying on your guidance. Please don't hesitate to butt in and tell me if I'm doing something wrong."

"I'll try my best. I suppose the first thing you need to know is that there will be a gong at half past six. This is to alert you to start dressing for dinner and as soon as you are ready everyone comes down to the drawing room for drinks. There will be a further gong at eight tonight to signal the guests to come through to the dining room for dinner, It's only four o'clock now so you have plenty of time."

"Oh thank you Laura, you and I will be great friends I am sure."

Laura smiled, "I am sure we will Miss. If you don't mind I will start unpacking you're things. Is there a particular dress you would like to wear tonight? I can make sure it's pressed and ready for you?"

"Emmm, there's a midnight blue dress I think would be best."

"As you wish Miss." Laura then went to sort out the suitcases.

"Knock, knock!" Beth turned round to see Alex leaning against the door.

"Alex! Are you finished with your business?"

"Yes. I see your settling in nicely. Hello Laura, nice to see you. How's your mother doing?"

Laura smiled, "Good afternoon My lord. She is coming on leaps and bounds since she has seen the doctor you sent her to. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure. Now Miss Bentley would you like to take a tour of the house? We won't really have time for the grounds today. I thought perhaps we'd do the grounds tomorrow after breakfast, shall we?" Alex smiled as she offered her arm to Beth.

"Of course, I can't wait to see everything!" Beth exclaimed as they set off down the corridor.

"Do you like your room, little bit?"

"It's lovely and it has the most wonderful view over the lake. I think I would love to sit there and read. Mrs. Mckluskey tells me your mother designed that room."

"Yes, She thought it appropriate to put you in there."

"I missed you." She pouted.

"And I you, but I do believe I won't be out of your sight for the rest of the weekend. I think we should forgo the third floor at the moment there is only more bedrooms and the servants' part of the house."

"Is your room on this floor?" She asked coyly.

"Yeeees, would you like to see?" She purred.

"Oh yes please!"

They had walked all the way back to the staircase and took the right hand turn instead of the left. Alex stopped at a door and opened it for Beth. She went in and observed the large room. It was double the size of the oriental room but much darker in decor, masculine even.

"This was my parents' room. Mrs. Mckluskey is always telling me it needs redecorated, but that side of things doesn't really bother me and I'm here so little."

As Beth looked around the room she had a thought. "Would you like to settle down here one day?"

'Yes with you!' Alex thought. "I would love to if I have someone to share it with, Even though I have painful memories of my parents, this is where my heart truly lives. I would love to have the life my father and mother had." Alex fiddled with her tie nervously.

Beth's heart swelled at the thought of sharing Alex's life here.

"Shall we start downstairs in the portrait gallery? You can see some of my disreputable ancestors."

"Yes Master!" she chuckled.

"Now, don't you be picking up habits from my staff! I've told them often enough not to but it's just what their used to, the way things have always been done. People don't like change."

"I like it." Beth teased as she brushed past her at the door.

'Oh little girl, you're getting to good at this!' Alex thought.

The portrait gallery turned out to be a very long wide room, ornately paneled and gilded walls and ceilings, with very large paintings along both walls of Alex's ancestors through the ages. Halfway down the room was a large fireplace and there were fine tapestry covered and gilded chairs. Some were with horses and some were family portraits.

"Who are some of the painters Alex?"

"That one's a Gainsborough and one of the oldest here." She pointed to a large picture of a family. Father, Mother and child in 17th century clothing.

"It's stunning."

"We also have a Joshua Reynolds, William Blake, a Van Dyke and in the drawing room there's a rather fine Rubens, 'Daniel in the lion's Den'." Beth stopped in front of a tall painting of a very attractive woman who was wearing more modern clothing.

"Who's this?"

Alex smiled. "That's Mama."

"She was Beautiful darling." The woman in the painting was perhaps in early forties, had long golden wavy hair.

Alex must have got her dark looks from her father, but her eyes are all her Mother's. Beth thought as they same piercing blue eyes jumped out of the picture in vivid colour.

"This one is my favourite. It's the three of us together."

Beth smiled warmly as she looked at the loving scene. The painter had caught them down at the lake, enjoying a family picnic. A young Alex, her dark hair longer than it is now, coming down to her shoulders, was fishing with her father while her Mother looked on in adoration.

"You looked very happy."

"We were little bit." Alex said with raw emotion in her voice. She cleared her throat, getting herself back in control and said.

"And I am again. Shall we move on to the library?"

They entered the large library and Beth immediately felt at home amongst the books. The room was sumptuously furnished with sofa's and tapestry covered armchairs, large tables and the floor covering was a rich, thick red and gold carpet, as were all of the living rooms. The room was illuminated by chandeliers hanging from a wood paneled ceiling.

Beth walked round the bookshelf's and glass cases kept some rarer pieces and some antiques.

"I envy your book collection. You have some wonderful first editions and rare books."

"I don't read as much as I should, but look I have a surprise for you."

Alex went up a ladder at one of the bookshelf and brought a rather fingered copy of a book down.

"Look." Alex handed her the book.

"The Ancient Peoples of Britain by Dr Edward Bentley, oh Alex, that's wonderful! You have a copy!" She started to cry.

Alex gathered her up in her arms. "Hey shh! shhhh! I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'll ... it's just that I've been so happy lately. I haven't been missing him as much as I should." She burrowed her way further into Alex's shoulder.

"Now, now. Listen, it's only natural for grief to lessen, especially when you are happy. You never forget those who leave us but you father would want you to be thinking of happier things."

Beth pulled herself together and wiped her tears away.

"Your right, he would be happy to see me doing something with my life. Where to next?"

"Emm, follow me."

"It's seems like a very well-run house Alex."

'It's nothing to do with me; it's all down to Mrs. McKluskey. Normally in a house like this the mistress of the house will run it in conjunction with the housekeeper, but since I have no wife or Lady of the house, Annie does more than her job should call for.'

Alex hoped that one day Beth would be that Lady and bring family to her home.

"Does Lotty do that for Poni?"

"Yes, in large houses or estates, the Lady of the house takes care of all the dealings inside the house. The Master of the house takes care of the financial matters and the care of the land and farming of the land, with the help and advice of the Steward of the estate."

"And you and Poni are the Master's?" she asked coyly.

"Well, we were never going to be ladies of the house were we?" she laughed.

'There is more to being the wife of a landowner than I thought', Beth mused.

On their way downstairs, they met up with Jones, the steward of the estate, who was delighted to meet the young girl that had captured young Alex's heart. Beth was charmed by him and he promised to show her the most beautiful walks on the estate.

They went next to visit the music room. It was a very pleasant light room with piano in the corner, seating for guests, and a beautiful looking harp in another corner. It was the piano that piqued Beth's interest though and she made a beeline for the instrument.

Alex watched with interest as Beth began to tinkle a few keys.

"Do you play little bit?"

Beth looked and smiled. "I used to. We had a piano at home but it was sold when Father died. I've missed it. This is a marvelous instrument."

"I hope you will give us a tune this weekend sweetheart. This room hasn't heard any music since my Mother played it. I never learned. I remember coming through here after Christmas Dinner, the Woodward's and Dalton's together, belting out Christmas carols with great gusto."

Beth watched Alex recount happier times as she leaned against the door, hands in pockets.

'Oh My Lord, you have no idea how good looking you are. I can't wait to get my hands on you!' Beth thought wickedly.

"I would be happy to play for you darling."

Alex looked at Beth amusedly and winked. 'What is going on behind those pretty green eyes little bit?'

"Shall we?"

They entered Lady Dalton's sitting room and study. It had a lovely desk, bookcase and a cosy sitting area beside the fireplace. The whole room was bright and airy and it looked onto the view of the lake at the front.

"This was my Mother's sanctuary. She dealt with all her correspondence here, and met with Mrs. Mcklusey every morning, to give her instructions for the days housekeeping. Poni and I knew this was one place we couldn't just run wild through."

"I can tell. It's a very peaceful room."

They ended the tour Alex's study. It had a very different feel than that of Lady Dalton's room. Where it had been light and airy this room had a very masculine feel. The room had dark oak everywhere, heavy leather chair and oak desk, bookcases full of ledgers and farming journals, and a drinks cabinet. It was quite a serious room Beth observed.

Alex sat behind her desk and lit a cigarette while Beth stood in front. She had always admired Alex's aura of power and found it very seductive. "My Father was a very loving man but if was ever called to his study, I was shaking in my boots, now it's my refuge."

Watching Alex sit in this powerful room behind that powerful desk with this whole house and estate at her command, was making her heart pound very fast. Alex spotted the strange look on her face and asked. "What are you thinking?"

"I feel like I have been called to the Master's study for punishment my lord," she smiled.

Alex felt herself grow hard instantly. She raised an eyebrow and eyed Beth hungrily. ' She is so good at that! So innocent and pure but deep down there is a little vixen waiting to burst out.'"Come here little bit." she commanded.

Beth nearly melted on the spot. She came round the desk and stood at Alex's side. Alex pushed the chair back a little from the desk and said. "Sit here." she pointed to her lap.

Suddenly shy, Beth hesitated.

"I won't tell you a second time little bit." Her voice gaining a harder edge.

Beth lifted her leg and straddled her lap. Alex placed her hands on Beth's buttocks and squeezed. The young girl moaned and dropped her head onto Alex's chest.

"I want you to tell me why you felt like that. Why did it feel good to think of me calling you to the Master's study to be punished?"

Beth was flushed and kept her head down. Alex slowly lifted Beth's chin and turned her steely, commanding gaze right into the girl's soul.

"If you are to become ready for me to teach you and show you about physical love then you must learn to articulate your desires to me." Alex tenderly stroked her hands down Beth's back. "I must know what you like, what's inside your head." Her hands came back to squeeze Beth's buttocks again and began to nuzzle and kiss down her neck.

"Tell me little bit." The kisses and bites were causing her to moan again.

"I like this." She brought her hands down on top of Alex's that were kneading her buttocks harder. The blonde's hands returned to her beloved's neck.

"You like this?" Alex kneaded harder and then smacked one buttock hard.

Beth cried out "Ahh! Ohhh!" It stung but she felt such pleasure, the strike had brought an instant flood of wetness between her legs.

"Yeessss! I like that." She was writhing now in Alex's lap.

"Good girl, now tell me what it was that made you want to be punished by your Master?"

"I ... oh ... ah ... I love your power my lord. It radiates from you. Sometimes I watch you at the office in a meeting telling people just what to do and giving commands. I just want you to touch me when I see it and turn your power on me. When I saw you in this office, behind this big desk, all this land, and the staff at your command, I ... I ...wanted you to be my master as well."

Beth pulled herself back a bit and looked deeply in Alex's lust filled eyes.

"Is that wrong my lord?"

"No, no, never little bit. It is perfect because I like to be very much in control. I think when the time comes for us to share each other's passion; we will be very well suited. I have so much I want to teach you."

They kissed deeply and passionately, their kisses becoming more frantic when there was a knock at the study door.

"My lord! The Woodward's have arrived!"

Beth nearly jumped out of her skin and they leaned their foreheads together sighing.

"I will be there directly, Mrs. Mckluskey."

"Come on sweetheart, we better straighten ourselves up."

"GRRRR!" Beth said in frustration.

Alex laughed. "Come now sweetie, we were going too far anyway. Let's go greet our friends, before I lose any more brain cells! We can finish our tour later."

"I'm ready." Beth smiled. "Let's get to it Master!"

Alex playfully slapped her bottom as they left the room laughing.

Poni and Lotty stood as their friends entered the drawing room, Poni holding Kat in her arms. "Beth, my dear! We've missed you." Lotty said as she opened up her arms to hug Beth.

Alex was delighted to see the affection between the two women. Beth had slipped seamlessly into her life and she was so happy her friends clearly loved the young woman.

"Hello little Kitten. How are you?" Said Alex taking the little girl from Poni's arms. Poni gave Beth a big bear hug.

"You've finally got that old reprobate to bring you home. I'm sure you'll really enjoy the party."

'Home . Beth wondered at Poni's choice of words. Could this be her home? Could she possibly be mistress of all this?' The thought was overwhelming.

"I'm sure she will you old Poni, as long as those women keep their eyes to themselves." Alex said as she nuzzled into Beth sweet smelling hair. She had handed Kat to Beth for a cuddle.

"Oh put her down My Lord! Your forever pawing the girl, you've had your turn. It's time for some girl talk now." Lotty said as she took Beth's hand and pulled her over to the sofa area for a private confab.

Foster came in and asked Alex. "Shall we serve tea M'lord?"

"Yes, if you would Foster, and some juice for Miss. Kat please."

"Certainly M'lord."

Alex smiled as looked over and saw the two women fussing over kitten and gossiping away already.

Poni took out her cigarettes and offered one to Alex. They both lit up and strolled over to the French windows. Alex opened them and they went onto a sitting area just outside. It was cold, bright, and crisp. Alex closed the doors after her, so the cold air wouldn't get into the drawing room. The smoke from the cigarettes billowed up into the air.

"You look happy my friend. How did it feel bringing your girl back home?"

"I am happy old man. When I was showing her round I felt like I was trying to convince her how well the place would suit her and hoping she wouldn't leave."

"I'm sure if you asked the girl, Alex, she would never leave. Do you not want to make her your wife? You don't still have fears about this relationship do you?"

"Nothing would give me more pleasure than to bring her home as my wife Poni but I have concerns. She is so much younger than us. Of course I now believe that she is comfortable in a relationship with a woman but there's a lot more to it. She's so innocent and inexperienced. Is she ready for married life? Could she cope with the responsibility that comes with being my wife and mistress of this house?"

"She can only learn Alex. Whether you ask her in the near future or two years from now, she will always be younger and less worldly wise than you. That's why she needs you, Alex. Beth strikes me as someone who has that aura of goodness and innocence that will be the same if she's 20 or 50. From all I've heard about her from you and Lotty, she's had no choice, but to be independent and look after herself for most of her life, and from what I've seen she's done that well but maybe it's time for someone to look after her. She has no one else in the world but you and myself and Lotty. I'm sure she knows how much you love her but she's never had security since her father died. She could do with commitment, to know she won't ever have to worry again."

Alex cocked an eyebrow. What are you her brother? Are you inquiring about my intentions," she smiled.

"I just feel she needs someone to speak for her. If her father had been alive he would be asking a lot stronger questions than that."

"I promise I have never doubted since I admitted my love that I wanted her to be my wife. It was just the concern over her age and experience. I didn't want to be seen as steamrolling a young girl to suit my needs. What you've said has made sense and I'll think on it old man."

Inside the drawing room Beth and Lotty sat drinking tea, while Kat sat playing with her toys at their feet. "So what do you think of Dencotte, my dear?"

"Lotty it is truly the most beautiful place I have ever seen. There's such a sense of peace here. I haven't had a tour of the grounds yet but from what I've seen it is wonderful. The whole area is picturesque. It's so sad that Alex has spent so little time here recently because of bad memories."

"I'm glad you like it so much. I have always known that, no matter how she behaved to the contrary, all Alex has ever wanted is to live here with a family. This is where her heart is. Do you like Mrs. McKluskey?"

"Oh yes! I was worried about meeting her, but she's been very welcoming."

"She's the salt of the earth. A tough lady but full of love for Alex and Dencotte. I don't know how our Lord would have survived without her or Foster. So are you settling into the way of things here?"

"I was a bit overawed when I first came in. I knew Alex was well off and had a large house but I had no idea it was like this! It's like a palace, I'm glad you're here now! I can relax knowing if I'm unsure about anything, you'll help me."

"I'll always be here for you. I'm so happy to have this friendship with you. We are in an unusual position with unusual partners. I don't think anyone else would understand. I hope to help you with this new world you're entering. I'm so glad it was you that Alex fell for. There are so many women at the Alley Cat who have tried to get her for her money. She is the fifth richest person in Britain you know?"

"Oh my goodness! I hope nobody thinks that I'm after her money! I've never sought for Alex to spoil me like she does."

Lotty took her hand and said. "Don't worry my dear, your goodness shines through, anyone can see that."

"Thank you, you're a good friend." Just at that a loud gong was heard throughout the house.

"Ah. Time to dress for dinner my young friend. Has Alex appointed a ladies maid to you?"

Yes, Laura. She seems nice."

"She is. A good girl and you will get on fine. Well, we better get going. That pair could be dressed in 5 minutes, but to make sure we knock their socks off, we need a little more time!" she laughed.

"Come on sweet pea, let's find nanny and get you some supper."

"Yum! Yum! Mamma." The little girl squealed and the two women laughed.

Beth arrived in her room to find her whole outfit laid on the bed. Laura was at the dressing table arranging the jewelry and hair accessories.

"Erm, thank you Laura for setting out my clothes. I'm not too sure what ..."

Laura could see that Beth was floundering over what was expected of her. This girl was so unlike some of the upper call fools that frequented the Master's parties. She liked her very much and decided to rescue her.

"Miss, if you would like to get washed up in the bathroom, when you are finished I will dress you and fix your hair." Laura smiled reassuringly.

"Oh right, thank you Laura." She went to wash in the adjoining bathroom.

'This is like an alien world I've arrived in. No one has ever helped me on with my dress before! Well perhaps mother did. I wonder what father would think of all this.' Beth sat in front of the mirror at the dressing table with Laura putting the finishing touches to her hair.

"You really don't have to do this Laura. I feel a little uncomfortable with it. I'm just an academic's daughter. I'm nothing special; I'm not blue blood like Alex." Beth caught what seemed to be a look of hurt go across Laura's face.

"Miss, were not slaves. This is my job. We all take great pride in serving the family at Dencotte . Without them we have no livelihood, the village and surrounding area would have no farming industry to work in. I'm sorry if you think I'm speaking out of turn."

"I apologize. I never thought of it that way. I didn't mean to offend. Forgive me? I have a lot to learn about this way of life."

Laura smiled. "Of course Miss. I understand that all this is very different, but be assured everything will be fine. You'll get used to it."

"Thank you. Laura, what are Lord Dalton's parties like?"

"They are loud!" she laughed "But mostly good natured affairs. The people are all different. A complete cross section of society. The Master doesn't discriminate against anyone. She doesn't care what you were born into. Although I will tell you, us staff get the most trouble from the upper classes! They expect service at the snap of their fingers."

"Do they all stay here?" Beth inquired.

"Oh no! The Master never allows anyone except Ms. and Mrs. Woodward to stay in her house. Well that was before you that is. They get lodgings in the village."

Beth had assumed everybody stayed here. Alex appeared to be very protective of her home and only she had been allowed in.

"You all seem to be very comfortable with the way your Master lives her life, you know being a woman and not wanting to be a lady."

"You'll find all the staff here very protective over our Master. The Dalton family has always been very well loved in the village. They do such good work for the village and for the country. We have grown up with, and some of us have watched, her grow up. She is who she was meant to be. I know most would think it immoral but we know Lord Dalton could never have been anyone else. She's had a lot of pain in her life. We all hope she finds some happiness?" she smiled knowingly at Beth.

Beth descended the stairs and began to panic. 'Were we supposed to meet in the drawing room or the music room?' She felt like a fool. "There are too many rooms!" As she reached the bottom step Foster the butler came walking through the marble entrance hall. He looked up to her and saw the confusion on the girls face.

"You will find the Master and the Woodward's in the drawing room Miss." he said with a slight bow of his head.

"Oh thank you Foster." She walked over to the drawing room door. She felt nervous all of a sudden as she opened the door and entered. Both Alex and Poni stood. Alex went straight over to her and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Hello little bit. I've missed you. You look beautiful as always. Come let's get you some champagne."

She guided Beth over to sit on the couch with her. A man servant came into the room with the champagne and glasses. Alex had not let go of Beth's hand, needing to retain contact with her girl. As they chatted Alex constantly was giving Beth attention by hand holding, little kisses, and touches. She couldn't get enough of the girl. After her talk with Poni this afternoon, she had come to some decisions regarding their future and she intended to make her so happy she would never want to leave her. This woman would be her wife and she would put her plan into action over the next couple of weeks. The final dinner gong rang and Alex and Poni escorted their partners into the dining room.

Later that night Alex walked Beth up to her room. When they reached the door Beth said. "Will you come in and talk some more?"

"Little bit, if I came into your bedroom at this time of night, talking would not be on the agenda. I know we've had a few close calls and we both want to wait till you were ready, but I am only human, sweetheart, and tonight I just can't get enough of touching you so I don't know if I could stop." She smiled and stroked Beth's cheek as Beth leaned into the touch and said with eyes closed. "I love you so much My Lord. I don't know how I lived before I met you."

"You've got me now and I will never let you go little bit. I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow and after I will show you around the grounds before the hordes of indecent woman arrive!" she joked.

"Goodnight sweetheart." She gently caressed Beth's lips with her own.

"Goodnight Master." She said playfully. She gave a little wink and with that entered her room floating on a cloud of love.

Alex was left open mouthed and hot on the other side of the door. "Oh you're good little bit! My head is going to explode. I know it!" She pulled herself away laughing to herself, and made her way to her rooms.

Dencotte House was still and quite in the cold early morning. Ella Skinner, the young scullery maid, made her way along the female corridor of the servants quarters, knocking all the doors, making sure all the girls got up.

She knocked on the last door. "Laura! Liz! That's 6 o'clock!"

Laura groaned and opened her eyes. "Come on Liz." She said to the younger housemaid. "It's another day."

"I'm up! I'm up!"

Down in the kitchen Mrs. Read the cook, Ella and the other kitchen maids were turning on the ovens and getting out the breakfast ingredients.

"Ella you better go and get started on the fires."

"Yes Mrs. Read." Ella gathered up her fire lighting implements and white sheet, to cover the carpet, and set off to start on the breakfast room. All the fires in the downstairs area of the house had to be lit before Lord Dalton and her guests came down. Even though the house had central heating, in such a big and draughty house, the fires were still needed.

As Ella made her way from room to room she passed the house maids opening the window shutters and curtains and footmen were gathering up glasses that the master and his guests had used late last night.

Mrs. Mckluskey had walked through the kitchen checking on the mornings progress and was now checking the breakfast room, where the young footman, Charlie was laying out the table cloth and breakfast china.

When Charlie had finished he went down to the butler's pantry where Foster was polishing the silver.

"Mr. Foster, the breakfast room is ready."

"Very good Charlie, get the board out then and get the papers ironed. Start with The Times for the master and Ms. Woodward then perhaps the Daily Mail and the Chronicle for the Ladies."

"Yes Mr. Foster."

Charlie got out the iron and the board set about the daily task of drying the ink on the papers.

In the kitchen Laura takes a seat at the table to join the other servants in breakfast. Mrs. Mckluskey and Foster join them.

"Laura, you're alright looking with looking after Miss Beth?" Asked the housekeeper.

"Yes Mrs. Mckluskey. Since I don't know her morning routine, I'll take up her cup of tea shortly. I'm not sure if she'll no to ring for me."

Ella piped up. "What's she like Laura? The other maids say she's nice but as nervous as a kitten!"

"Ella! They'll be no gossiping in this kitchen." Said the housekeeper.

"Sorry Mrs. Mckluskey."

"It's alright girl and I'll have you no Miss Beth is lovely young lady. I am sure we'll all like her very much."

Lotty's ladies maid Anna, who was well used to staying there said. "Mrs. Mckluskey, Nanny Brooks asked me to remind you that Miss. Kathryn will need some warm milk with breakfast."

"Yes, of course. Mrs. Read, do you have that in hand?" Asked the housekeeper.

"It'll be ready and waiting Mrs. Mckluskey."

"Thomas, is the master in the gymnasium this morning or coming straight down?" Foster asked Alex's valet.

"She's in the gymnasium. I already got her up and ready. She's going to ring when she's ready to bathe and dress for breakfast."

"Excellent. Were in good order then. As soon as everyone is dressed we'll get the breakfast served and the burners lit under the silver servers. Remember we have a lot to do for the party this evening. Let's do things well and not let the master down."

Just then the bell on the wall went and indicated Mrs. Woodward's room.

"Were off and running then." Said Mrs. Mckluskey. "Off you go Anna and Laura."

Beth awoke earlier than normal, excited at the prospect of another full day in Alex's company. She got herself washed and dressed and thought she would have a look about in the gardens as it was some time before breakfast at Nine.

There was a knock at the door and Laura came in with a cup of tea.

"Oh you're dressed Miss? I didn't think you'd be up this early. I'm sorry you had no one to draw your curtains or help you dress." she said worriedly.

"Oh please Laura, don't worry yourself. I couldn't sleep and thought I should just get up. Thought I'd have a look around the gardens."

"Oh of course, why don't you start with the courtyard and stables. I'm sure the horses would enjoy a visit."

"Lovely! Do you think you could get me a few apples to take?"

"Yes Miss, you have your tea and I'll be right with you."

Laura got her the apples, came back and directed Beth out the back door to the courtyard. It was a large concreted area with large stable buildings, with the extensive grounds continuing on behind. Beth could see the heads of some of the horses poking through the half gates, their breath steaming up in the cold air. There was a few staff milling about the stables, shoveling straw and muck, and carrying feed bags.

Beth approached one of the stable boys "Hello there, I'm Beth."

"Hullo miss, I'm John. You be the Master's guest?"

"Yes, that's right. Would it be alright if I fed the horses some treats?"

"That'd be fine miss. That's the Masters horse there, Skylla." John pointed over to a large brown horse in one of the middle stalls.

"Thank you John." He dipped his cap to her and went about his business. She made her way over to Skylla.

"Hello girl, you're my Alex's horse? You're a fine one. Would you like an apple? Good girl." she said smiling and stroking the horse's nose. Skylla was lapping up the attention.

As Beth lavished attention on the big horse she had no idea a pair of eyes were watching her from a window in the building across the courtyard. Alex's heart swelled as she saw her girl laughing and giggling as her well-loved horse slobbered over her hands, eating up the apples.

"Alex! Come on or we'll never get finished before breakfast!"

Alex turned round and left the window.

"John!" Beth called out to the stable boy.

"Yes Miss?"

"What's that building over there?" She pointed to a rectangular brick building over on the other side of the stables.

"That's the Master's gymnasium."

"Thank you." Curious and not thinking anyone would be using it this early; Beth made her way over to the building. She could hear some loud bangs from inside as she opened the door quietly and her breath caught at what she saw. It was a large rectangular room with highly polished floorboards. Around the walls were various exercise machines that Beth thought looked lethal, medicine balls, and weights.

At the far end of the room stood Alex and Poni both in short trousers and white vests. Alex had on boxing gloves and was powerfully hitting into Poni's hands that were covered in larger versions of the gloves.

Beth moved further in through the door and stood mesmerized. She had never seen anything more erotic and was captivated by the play of Alex's muscles in her arms and shoulders as she threw powerful punch after punch. She had never seen a woman do anything like this. Of course, she knew she loved the look and feel of Alex's well-built muscular body but to see them being used like this was something else. Poni spotted and alerted Alex who turned and flashed a toothy grin in Beth's direction.

"Sweetheart! Do come in. We were just finishing up our morning exercise."

Poni and Alex grabbed a towel to wipe down as Beth approached.

"Good morning Beth." said Poni.

"Morning, I ... I ... hope you don't mind Alex. I was just having a look around the stables before breakfast and I didn't think that anyone would be here so early."

"Don't worry; you're a very welcome distraction."

Poni feeling like she was intruding excused herself. "I'll get cleaned up and see you at breakfast. No doubt my wife will be looking for me."

Left alone in the large room with Alex Beth said, "So this is how you get those fine shoulders, my lord?"

Alex's chest puffed up. "I do like to keep myself in tip top condition. Poni and I always exercise together when she's down."

"Some of these machines look like torture equipment!" she quipped.

Alex laughed. "Sometimes it feels like it. Shall I show you round?" Beth nodded.

"I have the latest exercise equipment shipped from America. We also have an outdoor pool for swimming in the warmer weather and tennis courts."

Alex sat on the first piece of equipment and demonstrated.

"This is called a leg extension machine. It builds up the thighs." Beth's libido was further stoked by the look of Alex's muscles as she extended her thighs forwards and up.

"Wow! That looks very heavy."

Alex reveled in showing off to her girl. She moved on to another machine.

"This is a cable pull. You adjust the weight at the back of the seat and pull the weight using this bar."

Beth watched as beads of sweat traveled from Alex's muscled neck down her shoulders and finally her biceps.

"I also have a smith machine and lots of free weights." Alex realized that Beth wasn't even listening to her and caught the lusty looks towards her body. She immediately felt a bolt go to her groin and the throbbing between her legs began. Since Alex had met Beth she was living in a constant state of arousal with no hope of release. It was driving her mad and she had to take matters into her own hands on more than one occasion but it never seemed to relive the ache. She had never gone this long without sex in her adult life, but she was determined to do things properly. She stood and pulled Beth against her, bringing her mouth to the blonde's ear.

"Little bit, I think we should make our way over to the house. I always feel aroused after exercise and you looking at me like that makes me want to pull your skirt up and take you right here against the wall."

Beth moaned against Alex's neck at her words. "Let's get out of here before it's too late! I need a cold bath."

Alex pulled them out of the building and as the cold December air hit them, it seemed to calm things down and they laughed at their predicament." Go and get washed My Lord. I'll see you at breakfast." They parted at the top of the stairs and went their separate ways.

Foster stood at the breakfast sideboard, which sat at the top of the room, watching over the servants going backwards and forwards with the breakfast things.

Beth sat and watched as Lotty, who stood at the breakfast sideboard, was preparing a plate with for Poni and herself and Kat. Poni sat beside Kat, who was in her high chair, at the dining table, with her nose stuck in the newspaper. Lotty came with Poni's breakfast plate and placed it in front of her and gave Kat a bowl with scrambled eggs and toast.

"Thank you baby." Poni said kissing her wife's cheek. "Are you sure you don't want me to feed her while you eat first?"

"No darling, I'll get her fed, you must be starving after all that exercise. You can keep kitten occupied while I eat after."

"Egg! Yum!" Said Kat.

"Yes. Nice egg. Open up for Mama. Good girl."

Lotty looked up at Beth. "I'm sure Alex won't mind if you go ahead and eat my dear."

"It's ok. I'd like to wait."

The door opened and Alex came in with newspaper under her arm. She was dressed as casually as Beth had ever seen her. Grey slacks, a white shirt open at the collar with no tie, and a dark blue cardigan with light blue edging. Even dressed casually, Alex was immaculate. She was so dapper and took such pride in her appearance.

"Morning all." She said coming over to Beth's chair and kissing her head then Kissing Kat.

"Morning little kitten. You got eggs?"

"Egg! Egg!"

"Good girl." Alex smiled, so happy to have all her favourite people together at her home.

The room was alive with staff filling breakfast platters and bringing more coffee and tea.

"Sit down darling and I'll make up your plate." Beth said as she stood.

"That would be lovely, sweetheart." Alex took her seat at the head of the table. She looked over at Lotty who smiled eagerly back at her. Alex purred with pleasure as she saw Beth pile the food up on the plate. Nobody in her life, since her Mother, had ever taken care of her. She had watched Poni with envy over the years as Lotty catered to her every need, not out of compulsion or duty, but out of a deep love that compelled her to nurture and take care of Poni and create a comfortable home for her. Beth returned with the plate and placed it before her.

"Thank you little bit." Alex lifted the girl's hand and placed a light kiss on her knuckles.

Once Beth was back in her seat eating her own breakfast Alex asked, "Did you enjoy meeting Skylla?"

Beth looked up. "You saw me?"

"Yes, I love to see a young woman lavish attention on my horse!"

"Why is she called Skylla?"

"It's from Greek mythology. The Greek Gods had immortal horses called the Hippii Athanatoi. Skylla was one of the eight horses that drew Poseidon's chariot. I've always loved Greek Mythology and that name just seemed to fit my horse."

"That's a lovely story, darling."

"Do you ride, little bit?"

"Oh please! Not more talk of horses! Beth, that is all I hear about when these two numbskulls are together! Don't try and infect my only friend and ally with this obsession with riding."

Poni popped her eyes above the top of the newspaper. "Depends on what kind of riding!" Alex and Poni exploded in laughter.

"Owww!" cried Poni as her wife smacked her on the back of the head and they all joined in the laughter.

"Bad Papi! Bad Papi!" They all laughed as kitten chastised Poni.

Alex and Beth strode out of the front door of the house.

"I think we should start down at the lake. It's very pretty and a calm place. I often go down there to sit and think."

"I love the water. Do you have boats?"

"Yes, the boathouse is over there. Let's walk over. The boats are all tied up for the winter. I'll take you out in the spring."

"I'd love that darling! I've never been in a row boat." she said full of enthusiasm.

"I must also take you for a picnic down to the trout stream. I go down with Poni whenever we have the time."

Alex said as they passed by the boat house.

"You have a stream as well?"

"Yes, Poni and I love to have a day's fishing when we can. Lotty doesn't like it. She just has to sit there and watch. Perhaps now you're here to keep her company, old Poni and I will get some more days with the fish!" she smiled as they walked further on. Beth was overwhelmed at the beauty of this place.

"What are you thinking, little bit?"

"I was thinking how wonderful and magical this place truly is and how lucky you are to live here."

"I am lucky but it's not really mine. I'm only a custodian, a caretaker if you will. It's my job to care for the estate and the village. The people look to the family estate for leadership and guidance. In the past, the landed family of a county was judge, jury, and executioner. Although that time is past, the people still look to us. I have a responsibility to them and to the land. It is a duty of care which I and my father before me took very seriously. The estate gives employment, housing and means everything to the community. I know I have luxuries here but I also have duties to perform for that. Duty is very important to me. I'm only here to take care of this place until my heir takes over."

"I had no idea there was so much to it. Who will be your heir?"

"Ah well, that is still to be decided. Obviously I am not likely to have a child myself. I never even thought I would fall in love, but I have. We will see what the future holds. At the moment as I have no family, my will leaves the estate to Poni. As we are not related though, the title will die out. Which pains me a great deal but even adopted children can't inherit a title so my heir will have to content themselves with my land and assets." she smiled at Beth as if she had a plan but Beth had no idea what.

They walked for 10 minutes when they came to the Japanese garden that Beth had seen from her bedroom window. They sat in a small tea house that sat at the back of the walled garden that was filled with oriental flora and fauna. Rocks and stones and placed artfully and statues of Buddha spread around the garden. Beth breathed in the peace.

"This is peace Alex. I love this. I would love to read here." Alex lifted her arm and invited Beth's head to rest on her shoulder. Alex smiled pleased at how comfortable Beth was here. "This will be your garden my little bit. If you will be my wife I would give you the world."

"I wanted to speak to you about tonight. When you are ready, instead of you coming down yourself, will you please wait until I call for you and I'll escort you?"

"Yes, whatever you think best, but can I ask why?"

"Hmmm, I told you before that the guests that come to my parties are a good bunch of people, but I'm afraid they will take one look at your sweet face and see fresh blood my little bit. I want it to be very clear your taken and under my protection."

Beth lifted her head. "You make them sound like vultures!"

"It's not that. It's just we're a small community and new faces are eagerly fought over, especially some cute girl like you." Alex grasped her chin possessively and drew her in to a deep demanding kiss. Beth moaned and Alex pulled away and touched nose to nose with her.

"You see, I have a lot to protect."

Beth looked her in the eyes. "I'm yours My Lord and will never let anyone think different."

"I'm so lucky. I'm as much yours, you do know that?"

"Of course I do darling. I love you."

"I love you my little bit of a spitfire! Shall we go up to the house and see if that old Poni is still annoying her wife?"

Beth smiled and nodded.

"When we have more time I'll take you around the farm land, meet the staff and down to the village. They're good people. But that's for another day. Come on."

Alex pulled her up and they slowly made their way back arm in arm.

Beth sat in her room in the late afternoon reading. Alex and Poni had gone riding and Lotty wanted a lie down before tonight. There was a knock at the door and Annie McKluskey came in with a tea tray.

"Hello dear, I thought you could do with a cuppa and we could have a little chat."

"That would be nice. Will you join me in a cup?"

"Thank you but no. Staff only sit and take tea below stairs."

"I'm sure Alex wouldn't mind."

"I know the Master wouldn't mind, but standards must be maintained and that's my job."

"Oh, ok then." "Wow she does take her job seriously!"

Annie poured out the tea. "So tell me all about yourself."

Beth gave her a potted history of her time until she came to work for Alex.

"My goodness. You have been through a lot for one so young."

"I suppose but I can't tell you how my life has changed since I met Alex. At last there is someone on my side. She has saved me. My knight in shining armour. The love she has shown me has given me such strength."

"I always knew Alex had such a large capacity to love but she kept her heart locked away. Losing her mother and father changed everything, the entire course of her life, and of course the war came and changed everything. I don't know all the ins and outs of what she did in the war but it changed her even more. She came back harder, more detached. For Ms. Woodward it was different, she came back, had married life to look forward to and was very much in love. Whatever horrors she saw, the love she had waiting healed her. The master had no such luxuries. I'm glad she has found someone to love her as she deserves, but I will say this, be careful with her. You may think she is experienced and a woman of the world but with her heart she is no more than a child. Take care of her heart, please."

"I will, I promise. I will look after her as long as she wants me in her life. I love her dearly."

"I'm glad to hear it. She has changed so much since you have come into her life. I could tell in her voice when she would phone from London, something was different. She lighter, happier. I can see the sparkle that died with her parents coming back into her eyes. Thank you. Well I better get on. Laura will be up to help you dress soon. I need to get ready for the hordes of women due to land on us!" They laughed.

Laura was putting the finishing touches to Beth's make up. The sounds of the band warming up in the ballroom drifted up the stairs, causing butterflies to jump around Beth's stomach.

"There miss. You're ready. You look perfect."

Beth had her hair pulled up into a chignon. She wore a midnight blue gown and the jewellery she had received on her birthday.

"I don't feel perfect Laura! I'm so nervous. These women will be so sophisticated and, don't think I can match up."

"Miss, may I speak freely?" Beth nodded.

"None of the women down there will be able to match up with you. The Master has never brought anyone home before you. A lot of women who will be there tonight have tried to catch her, but none have succeeded. You have by being yourself. You won. You will be the one on the Master's arm. Just remember that when you walk in the room."

Beth hugged Laura. "Thank you for that pep talk! It's just what I needed."

"Anytime miss," she smiled. There was a knock at the door and Alex's voice came through the door.

"Are you decent?"

Laura took Beth's hands. "It's time. Now go and knock them dead miss!"

Laura opened the door to admit Alex to the room.

"Sweetheart, you astonish me with your beauty every time I see you. You look ravishing!" Alex took her hand and kissed it. "You ready to face the hordes?"

"As I'll ever be!"

Alex led her down the stairs. The hall of the house was full of staff taking the coats of the arriving women. The double doors to the ballroom were open as Beth and Alex approached. Staff were moving around with trays of champagne and finger food. As they entered the ballroom Beth gripped Alex's arm tighter. Alex felt her tension and gave her a kiss on the forehead for reassurance. The room was full of couples talking and laughing down the sides of the room. There were couples dancing in the middle of the room while the band at the back on a slightly raised stage played.

All the couples were like Alex and herself. Ladies in evening gowns and cocktail dresses and their partners dressed in dinner jackets like Alex. It seemed strange to Beth that this sight was so normal and natural to her now, when before she came to London she had no idea women could even be together.

As they walked further into the room Beth could see all eyes turn on them, some amazed that Alex had a partner and some envious. A few faces she recognized from the Alley Cat. Lotty and Poni came towards them.

"Another good doo old friend," Poni said.

"I hope so. Kitten all tucked up?"

" Yes, although we had to promise a visit to the horses tomorrow. She hates to think she's missing out on fun." Replied Lotty.

"Poni and I could take her out for a trot with us. "

"Top notch idea Alex." Said Poni, always eager to spend time with her little girl.

"Shall we have a dance, little bit? And then I'll get you a drink."

Alex led her to the centre of the dance floor and pulled her close. Beth rested her head against her partner's shoulder. She could feel the eyes of some of the women boring into her back with venom. Alex was announcing she was off the market.

"You settling down now sweetie?"

"Yes darling, I'm sorry I was so nervous. I'm just not used to being the centre of attention."

Alex whispered in her ear. "You will always be the centre of my attention little bit. I love you." The husky voice sent shivers down her spine and she appreciated the reassurance that partner

was giving her. Alex remained as attentive as ever. She was stuck like glue to her side all evening.

Although it was a cold crisp December night, the heat generated in the ballroom was great and so the French windows that led out to a balcony area were open. The four friends stood out on the balcony for a breath of fresh air. Alex and Poni enjoying a cigarette while keeping an arm round their partners to keep them warm.

"You're not too cold sweetheart?"

"I'm fine for now. I needed some fresh air. The heat and the champagne were getting a little too much for me."

"No wonder! Alex never let you off the dance floor!" Lotty said smiling.

It was true. Beth had hardly missed one dance. If she wasn't up with Alex then Poni was taking her from a spin.

"I loved it Lotty. I've never had the opportunity to dance so much in my life!"

A lot of appreciative glances came Beth's way during the evening, but they were soon snubbed by Alex's cold hard stare. Beth was oblivious to it all.

From across the room Sally Weston observed the happy foursome. 'It makes me sick! Look at them pawing each other like a pair of dogs in heat! You don't deserve to be happy my lord. I may not be able to convince you that we're meant to be together. But if I can't have you then I'll make sure your little innocent virgin will never want you!' Sally had not received her usual invitation to the house party after her recent confrontation with Alex. She had latched onto an older woman who went to the Alley Cat. She always got an invitation and since all the invites included a partner, Jack, as the older woman was known thought all her Christmas's had come at once when this leggy blond had turned her attentions to her.

Since they arrived at the party Sally had virtually ignored her, her use now almost complete. Alex hadn't spotted her and that was the way she wanted it, for now.

It was getting a bit too cold for Lotty on the balcony. "Beth my dear shall we go to the buffet and bring a couple of plates back for us and these reprobates?"

Beth smiled. "Sounds like a plan."

"Don't be long, little bit. I'll miss you."

"I won't My Lord" They parted with a kiss and Lotty and her young friend made their way towards the other side of the ballroom where an adjoining room was set out with food and drinks of all kinds.

"Poni, I forgot to tell you. I got some of those Cuban cigars we were looking to try. Shall we partake after we have a bite to eat?"

"Capital idea old man."

"Excuse me and I'll run and get them from my study. Won't be long."

Alex entered her office and used a key to open a desk drawer. She heard her office door open and knew without even looking it was not Beth. She turned to see Sally Weston standing there.

"What do you want? You shouldn't even be here!"

"Yes for some reason my invitation was lost in the post. How are you and your little virgin getting on? Ready for something more yet?"

Alex came round to the front of her desk. "I'm quite content thank you."

Sally knew she had to keep Alex talking. "I could help you," she said getting closer. "You could fuck me and your little virgin would never know. I promise."

Beth and Lotty were coming back from the buffet when a woman Lotty knew from the Alley Cat, Jack, came up to them. "Hello, emm, Alex asked me to tell you she just popped to her study and if you would join her for a few minutes."

Sally Weston had promised a night she would never forget if she helped in her plan.

"Oh, ok. Lotty could you manage this plate too?"

"No problem, see you soon."

Beth made her way to Alex's office excited at the thought that maybe Alex wanted some private kisses.

"I will never want anything from you Sally! Why can't you get that through your head? It makes me sick that I ever even touched you!"

Sally heard the movement at the door and immediately thrust herself into Alex.

"Oh yes please, fuck me My Lord! You know you always can do anything. You don't have to ask! You know I'll never tell Beth."

Sally threw her arms around Alex and clamped her lips to her. While this was happening Beth had opened the door and was standing there witnessing Alex's apparent infidelity. The young blonde looked in horror at Sally and Alex kissing and Sally's words were ringing in her ears. She turned and ran from the room, tears running down her face. It all happened so fast Alex had no idea what was happening. She saw Beth running from the room. She pushed Sally off her and shouted. "Beth, wait! Please!"

Sally laughed."You really thought you could have a normal happy relationship, Alex? The likes of you don't deserve it. You use women and throw them away. I won't allow you to suddenly decide you're going to be good, have a mature relationship and settle down!"

Alex felt utter fury as she realised the implications of Sally's actions. She turned and looked at her with cold venom. Sally had never felt fear like it when she saw the cold hatred in Alex's eyes. Alex came towards her, backing Sally up against the wall.

"Go on Alex. Hit me. Show Beth the real you!"

Alex's fist balled up, the rage coursing through her body. She brought it up and slammed her fist into wall beside Sally's head. "If you have ruined my one chance at happiness I will kill you! Get out of my house and never set foot here again!" She screamed. She went out to the hall where some guests had gathered. Lotty and Poni came to her.

"What has happened Alex? Is Beth alright?" Lotty asked.

"Could you please get everyone back into the ballroom and ensure the party carries on and Poni could you see that Miss. Weston leaves the house straight away?"

"Of course no problem Alex, go and see to Beth."

Alex raced up the stairs and found Beth's bedroom door locked. She knocked the door.

"Beth, let me in. Please I can explain. It wasn't what it looked like. Please."

Inside Beth was sprawled across the bed crying uncontrollably. When she heard Alex's voice she sat up and pulled a pillow to her chest. She felt like her heart had been broken in two. Beth had believed in Alex with all her heart. She thought her honourable and had put her complete trust in her. Beth also felt panicked. She poured everything into Alex, her job and the life she had built depended on her. Without Alex she was alone and had nothing.

'Maybe I shouldn't have held back so much about sex. If I hadn't been such a nervous virginal little girl then Alex wouldn't have gone looking elsewhere. But Alex had insisted we wait as well. I don't know how I'll live without her!'

The knocking got louder. "Little bit, please. At least let me explain. Just give me one chance!"

The door unlocked but wasn't opened. Alex took a few deep breaths and opened the door, her hands shaking. She found Beth sitting on the edge of the bed cuddling into her pillows, her eyes staring off into the distance.

Alex stepped forward. "Sweetheart, can I sit down?"

She received no response. Alex went to stroke the side of Beth's face. She pulled away sharply. "Don't touch me!" she said coldly.

"Ok! Ok! I promise I won't touch you. Just please listen." Alex paced back and forth in front of her. She pulled her bow tie off and loosened her collar. Alex had never felt such panic. In one moment she could lose everything. This was her one chance to try and appeal to Beth. Alex was starting to sweat under the pressure. She took off her dinner jacket and threw it on the chair.

"What you saw, what you think you saw was not what you think. I've been set up."

Beth showed no response. "I should tell you from the beginning. Sally Weston was one of the women I had been with. Well I told you how I was before, but I always made it clear there would never be anything more than that one time. When I saw her again at the Alley Cat she pursued me, saying we were meant to be together. I never gave her what she wanted. I never went with the same woman twice. She obviously harboured some sort of feelings towards me or more likely my money.

"Not long after you came to work for me, I found myself falling in love with you, but as you know I was frightened to feel it, to tell you. I thought I could never deserve someone as pure as you and I thought you too young. It was becoming harder and harder to come to work every day and you not be mine. Whenever we would touch it was almost painful I wanted you so much. I thought if maybe I did what I always used to then my brain would stop thinking of you so much. Perhaps because I hadn't been with a women in so long, that maybe if I had sex then my feelings wouldn't drive me so mad. I went to the Alley Cat with the intention of finding someone to relive that tension. Sally made a bee line for me and because she knew how I liked things I broke my cardinal rule and decided she would be the one."

Beth looked up. The pain and disappointment etched on her face. It broke Alex's heart to see. She dropped to her knees before Beth.

"But when push came to shove I couldn't do it. I kept thinking of you. I wanted no one but you. I knew there would be no one but you for the rest of my life. I left the Alley Cat immediately. Sally felt spurned and then when she saw me with you at your birthday she realized why. She tried again and when I refused she threatened to tell you all about me. I warned her off and made sure she didn't get an invitation to the party.

She has obviously come with one of the other guests. I went to the study to get cigars for Poni and myself. Special ones I had just got from Cuba. She came in behind me. She propositioned me, but the way she said it made me think

she didn't really mean it. It was as if she was playing for time. When she heard a noise at the door, which must have been you, she smiled and launched herself at me, said those vile things you heard, and started kissing me. I didn't have time to react before you were through the door.

"I swear I never kissed her back. I would never ever betray your love. I know it looks bad but I am asking you to trust in me and us. Please little bit! I didn't do this! Don't leave me. I can't go back to living without you."

Tears were now rolling down Alex's cheeks. Beth was shocked, both at the story and at the sight of Alex crying. It just seemed so wrong. Beth wiped away a tear with her thumb. Alex leaned into her touch.

'Can I believe what she's telling me? My whole being is screaming out to believe. I love her.'

"Some woman called Jack came and told me you asked to see you in your study straight away." She whispered.

"I never sent that message." Alex grasped Beth's hand. "I swear on my word of honour I did not kiss her or carry on behind your back. The thought of losing you terrifies me."

Beth didn't speak. Her face remained like stone. Alex dropped her head into Beth's lap. She started to cry harder.

"I love you. I would never do anything to dishonour you. I knew one day my past would come back to ruin what we have. Sally was right. I don't deserve you or the happiness you brought me."

Alex felt a hand clap the back of her head.

"I believe you." Alex thought she heard. She raised her head and looked Beth in the eyes.

"What did you say?" she croaked.

"I believe you. Sally is wrong. You deserve love and more. I told you once I will never leave you and I would look after you for as long as you want me. My wishes remain the same. I will never leave you. I love you."

Beth was crushed by the strength of Alex's hug.

"Oh sweetheart! Thank you for believing in me! I love you. I love you so much!" Alex kissed all over Beth's face.

"It just hurt so much to see you that way! Alex, I love you. Please don't let that woman near us again." Beth gripped Alex tightly.

"No, little bit. You will never see her again don't worry. I'm so sorry you had to see that. I give you my word, I will never ever let you down."

"Will you sleep by me tonight? I don't want you to leave me."

"Of course I will. Let me go and let Poni know we are well and I will be straight back. I love you."

Alex kissed Beth once more and left the room. She stood out in the hall and let out a long breath. She had come so close to losing everything. She would never allow that again.

Alex awoke the next morning plastered to Beth's back. When she came back to the bedroom last night there had been no more words. Beth had slipped off her dress and lay in her underwear. Alex slept in her vest and boxers and grasped Beth as closely as she could. A shiver passed through her as she looked down at Beth's face asleep. She realised how close she had come to losing everything as she stroked the young girl's honey coloured hair.

"I will never stray from you or disappoint you little bit. You are my life." she said as she lightly kissed her head.

"I know."

"I thought you were sleeping?" Alex said, continuing to stroke her head.

"I was but I heard you." She turned onto her back. "I don't want you to be walking on eggshells round me. I believe in you. You're loyal to the bone. I would have realised that if I had more time to think last night. It was just the shock of seeing another woman on you like that. My whole world collapsed in a second, but I know you wouldn't do that to me."

"I'm sorry my past has done this to us sweetheart."

"You always talk about that part of your life as if you were this bad person. I don't think that so. You were a very sad and lonely person, looking for someone to care for you. I will do that. I promise I will always do that."

Alex felt the tears start again. It was the release of tension overwhelming her. She wiped them away frantically.

"I've never cried in front of anyone before in my life, before last night. Sorry you have to see me like this."

"You don't have to be the strong stoic one all the time. I'm honoured you would show me this side of you. Remember, when we are alone, this is the one place you can truly show yourself. I would never tell anyone. You are safe with me. I promise."

Alex buried her head into Beth's neck, seeking comfort like a child. She had never felt so vulnerable and safe at the same time.

"You like Greek Mythology?. Have you ever heard their story of soul mates?"

"No. Tell me."

"My father told me this story when I was a little girl. He believed my mother and he were soul mates. He told me to remember this when I fell in love and never settle for anything less. The Greeks believed that humans originally consisted of four arms, four legs, and a single head made of two faces, but Zeus feared their power and split them all in half, condemning them to spend their lives searching for the other half to complete them. I know I have found you."

"That was a beautiful story. I know we were meant to be together. You know sometimes I think you're much older than 20. You seem wise beyond your years."

"Only about us and our love. The ways of the world on the other hand, well, I need you."

"You'll always be safe and I'll always take care of things for us."

'And soon I will ask you to be mine forever little bit.'

"Now my lord, you mentioned something yesterday about Poni and you going riding?"

Alex laughed, the serious mood now broken. "Of course, Poni will be delighted and we did promise kitten."

"Lotty and I will have a lovely time gossiping about you both! Now let's get ready for breakfast."

The rest of the weekend was spent in quiet companionship with their two friends and Kat. Poni and Lotty had been delighted that Alex was able to reassure Beth after the events with Sally Weston and no harm was done. Alex was even more attentive than normal, never letting Beth out of her sight. Finally it came time to return to London and reality.

Alex dropped Beth off at home. They were both anxious about leaving each other, but for Alex at least she had plans to put in action. Monday morning came and they were back to work. Beth had noticed that Alex seemed preoccupied, but she tried to push the thoughts away. Alex came out of her office to speak to Beth and seemed very fidgety. Something was definitely not right.

"What day did you want off to go Christmas shopping with Lotty?"

"We thought tomorrow, before it starts getting too busy. We also have to go shopping Alex, Remember? To get some things for the Woodward's. It's less than two weeks to go now."

"Ah, yes em." Alex ran her hand nervously through her hair. "Tomorrow is good for you to go. Could you clear the diary for me for tomorrow and Wednesday, Thursday afternoon, and then maybe we could go on Friday? How about that?"

Beth eyed her somewhat suspiciously. ' She is hiding something.'

"That sounds fine. Your diary was pretty clear anyway. The soup kitchens and the foundation building had everything set up for Christmas last week. There will only be a few odds and ends to clear up."

"Ok fine, I just have some personal business to see to over the next couple of days." And with that she was back inside her office with door closed tight.

'What was that all about? Personal business, what can that mean? Stop it Beth! She doesn't have to tell you everything! Mind your own business!'

"I don't know how you can do it Lotty, but I need to know. I'll be with Poni at Garrads. Phone there and let us know. Please Lotty? I know you can do it. Yes, yes, I'll direct Poni to the most expensive jewellery for you while we're there. Oh thank you so much! Speak to you tomorrow. Goodbye." Alex rubbed her hands together. 'Everything is going perfectly!'

The next morning Lotty picked up Beth and they made their way to the shops.

"Good morning my dear, where shall we go first? Do you have some ideas for Alex?"

"I thought maybe a tie pin and some cuff links but I think we'll need to go somewhere a little bit different than Harrods's to suit my budget."

She and Alex had a discussion about Christmas presents. Beth worrying that she could never compete with Alex's gifts. Alex assured her that any gift from her, no matter how small, would mean the world to her as she'd never had a partner to buy her anything before. 'You know me Beth, I'm not a snob, I enjoy nothing better than a rummage around any shop! Some of best purchases have been in more down to earth shops.'

Lotty had been racking her brains trying to find out how she could get round this but could only come up with the one idea. She had to go with it.

"Emm, Poni talked about getting my engagement ring resized. She says this one looks too tight on me. What do you think?" She held her hand out for inspection. The young girl was always dazzled with Lotty's jewels. Poni certainly knew how to pick for her wife.

"It looks perfect to me."

"Hmmm, I'm not sure. You have smaller fingers than me. Why don't you try it and if it fits you then Poni is probably right and I've just gotten used to it being tight."

She pulled off the ring and handed it to Beth who put it on her engagement finger.

"It seems to be a tiny bit too big for me, maybe one size too big. It's so beautiful. You're very lucky."

Beth looked at it longingly. The older woman smiled. 'You are going to be one happy woman Elizabeth Bentley! Now I just have to find a way to phone Alex.'

Lotty's driver dropped them at a more reasonable priced jeweller's. Lotty spied a phone box.

"Beth my dear, could you excuse me a moment? I forgot to tell my housekeeper that Poni wouldn't be requiring dinner this evening. She and Alex are dining out this evening."

"That's fine, I'll just wait here ." 'Funny, Alex never mentioned dining out this evening. I suppose I won't see her then.'

"I'll just be a minute."

Lotty lifted the handset in the phone box.

"Garrod's the jewelers please." she told the operator.

"One moment please." said the voice at the other end.

Alex and Poni were in the private room at the jewelers. Engagement rings of various types were laid out in front of them.

"I don't know Poni; I think Beth would prefer something simple."

They were comparing a simple square set diamond to a more elaborate ring with clusters of stones. A sales assistant entered the room. "Ms. Woodward, we have Mrs. Woodward on the phone for you."

"Excellent, I'll be right with you. Excuse me Alex, looks like Lotty's succeeded in her mission!"

"Go to it then."

Alex was left with a senior sales assistant. "Is there anything you haven't shown me? Remember price is no object."

"The only thing we haven't shown you is a diamond that has yet to be mounted. It could be mounted as simply as you wish. It is called the Rutherford diamond, named after the mine in South Africa. It is 40 carats and internally flawless. If it were to be put in a ring setting, it would need to be cut down to around 33 carats. I couldn't give you a price until we decided on the setting."

"Show me."

"Certainly Lord Dalton." The older man left the room high as a kite. If he could sell this gem, he would get the best commission of his life. Poni came back in and sat next to Alex.

"One size smaller than Lotty. They will have the exact size in their records. Where's our helper gone?"

"He told me about a special diamond that they have gotten in. The Rutherford diamond from a South African mine."

"The Rutherford diamond? I saw a piece about that in the Times a couple of weeks ago. It said that a famous London jeweler had bought it, but it didn't say what one for security reasons. It must be worth a pretty penny."

"They haven't told me yet. I'll know if it's the right one when I see it."

The salesman came back in with a locked jewellery box and sat it on the table. He unlocked it and turned the box towards them. "This is the Rutherford diamond. It is unique and flawless."

Alex's face beamed, Poni just looked shocked.

"That is the most amazing jewel I have ever seen. That's it Poni .That's the one. It's perfect for Beth. How much if set in a plain square setting in 24 carat gold?"

The assistant did a few calculations on his pad and said. I estimate £400,000 Lord Dalton."

"I'll take it! Can you have it finished for Christmas?"

"Of course M'Lord, if I may be so bold, you're young lady must be very special."

"She is special and as unique as that diamond. Send me the account and I'll have my bank transfer the money."

"Of course, if you'll just give me a moment to return it to the safe then we will sort out the details."

After he left the room Alex turned and gave Poni the cheesiest smile.

"Wow, my friend, that's all I can say. You do realise I'm going to have to come up with something pretty amazing for Lotty's Christmas now you've bought that."

"I did promise her I would steer you towards the more expensive jewellery for helping me with the ring sizing."

"My bank account is not going to know what has hit it!" Moaned Poni.

"Don't you give me that! You love spoiling your wonderful wife."

"You know me too well old friend." They laughed together and counted themselves extremely lucky in their chosen partners.

Beth had a wonderful day shopping. It wasn't easy. What do you get someone who has everything? But she was pleased with what she had gotten and the gifts came from the heart. It was Friday and Beth was dragging Alex round some of the more expensive shops in London.

"Sweetheart, how can you enjoy this? Lotty and you go away for the whole day. What do you find to do?"

"It's the looking, the talking, the lunches, the afternoon tea, finding that one unusual thing you don't need but will make you happy. It's the whole experience!"

"Well I'm just glad you have a friend to go with and I only have to come on special occasions!"

Beth took Alex's hand and pulled her on. "I saw Lotty looking at a particular vase in this antique shop the last time we were out. Are you sure about the money?"

"Anything! I'll pay anything if we can just get this done and get some lunch!"

"Darling, it would be less trouble taking a 4 year old shopping, come on."

Alex pouted, but followed obediently.

The next week and a bit seemed to take an age to Alex. For the first time since she was a child, she couldn't wait for Christmas. Christmas was on a Saturday this year. They had shut up the office on Tuesday and that had given them the whole of Wednesday to get packed and ready. They wouldn't be opening the office again till after the New Year. Alex was to pick Beth up on Thursday morning so they would have the whole of Christmas Eve to enjoy setting up the tree and their presents.

Alex had called ahead to instruct Mrs. McKluskey to only get the tree up and ready for decorating. She and Beth would supervise the final dressing of the tree. From her conversations with Beth, this seemed to be very important to her. She had spent many a happy Christmas with her father doing just that and Alex intended to make this the best Christmas she had ever had. Alex came to pick up her at 9 o'clock. Agnes had left the day before to go and stay with her sister in Ambleton, so Beth had to lock up. They made good time and were soon pulling into the estate.

"No matter how many times I see it, I don't think I'll ever get used to how beautiful Dencotte looks!"

Alex beamed with pride.

"Come on, we've got decorating to do!"

The staff was waiting at the door as usual. Mrs. McKluskey ushered them through the door. Laura, the house maid, and Alex's valet Thomas immediately came forward to take care of their respective charges. Beth saw the huge undressed Christmas tree in the entrance hall. She had no idea how they would ever get an angel on top of it.

"Nice to have you back Miss." Laura said as she took Beth's things.

"It's lovely to be back. Will you be with me again for this visit?" Beth asked hopefully.

She liked Laura very much and didn't know how comfortable with someone new.

"Yes, the Master has assigned me to you permanently. As long as you have no objections."

Beth looked over to Alex and gave her a grateful smile.

"That is just fine by me. Thank you Laura."

"Thomas, can you have Foster brought to my study as soon as he is free."

"Right away M'lord."

Alex then turned to the housekeeper. "Mrs. Mckluskey, if I could have a word with you straight away."

"Of course M'lord."

Alex came over to Beth. "I have a couple of estate matters to deal with. Could you go with Laura and get settled and I'll come and get you?"

"Yes, see you soon then."

Alex leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Foster and Mrs. Mckluskey stood in front of Alex's desk in her study.

"Is everything prepared?"

Yes M'Lord, everything is as you requested," said Foster.

"And the special surprise?"

"All taken care of."

"I'm just nervous that's all, I want it to be perfect."

"It will, you have nothing to worry about." said Foster.

"Thank you both. I couldn't have managed all this without you."

"You know My Lord? You've come a long way. The change you have made in your life is remarkable. I knew you'd find happiness one day. Mrs. Mckluskey and I are so proud of you and I know your Mother and Father are looking down, at you, as proud as punch. "

Alex got up and gave them both a hug.

"Thank you, you don't know what that means to me. I just hope she says yes!"

"Oh I have no doubt about that. She's a good girl. You couldn't have picked better. It's about time this estate had a mistress again. I'm getting too old to be running after you so much!" Mrs. Mckluskey joked.

Alex could hear the laughing and joking from behind Beth's bedroom door. She was so glad the two young women got on so well. It would ease the transition for Beth into Alex's life.

"Knock! Knock! Can I come in sweetheart?"

"Yes darling."

Alex popped her head round the door and said. "Hello, you ready for some lunch?"

"You know I'm always ready for food!"

Alex laughed as she put her arm round Beth's shoulders and steered her out the door.

"I thought we'd have lunch and then start decorating the tree since Poni and Lotty aren't here till tomorrow. I asked Mrs. Mckluskey to serve us an intimate supper in front of the fire instead of in the dining room. Sound good?"

"Sounds perfect!"

The rest of the afternoon was spent in fun and good humour fixing the tree. At one point Alex looked over at Beth sharing a joke with Laura as they put baubles on the branches. She had never been happier. This young woman had brought warmth and family back to this home. She remembered her Father telling her a wife was the heart of a home and he was right. This young woman was the key to her future and she would never let her go.

Later that evening Beth sat on the rug in front of the fire, her back leaning against Alex. The room was dark and they were staring into the flames.

"Darling, this has been one of the happiest days of my life. There is such joy to be had in anything I do with you, but to share this special time at Christmas is magical."

"Your right, I can't remember when I've had so much fun. You've given me such love since I met you. You've changed my life. Thank you, little bit."

Beth cuddled in tighter to Alex and sighed in utter contentment.

Christmas Eve arrived and the Woodward's along with it. Alex whisked Poni off for a strategy meeting explaining to Beth they needed to talk about the Boxing Day hunt. Beth was more than happy to be left with Lotty and little Kat. They gossiped over all the presents they had bought. Lotty appeared very excited to Beth. She had no idea what the older woman knew what was coming and couldn't wait!

Kat didn't quite understand Christmas fully yet but she picked up on the excitement and knew she was getting some new toys and was as high as a kite.

Later that evening everyone was dressing for dinner. There seemed to be an energy and excitement about the house that Beth couldn't put her finger on. 'Must just be excitement for Christmas.'

Over in Alex's bedroom things were much more frantic. Thomas was helping Alex dress. As he was putting in her cufflinks Alex asked. "The forecast was definitely for snow?"

"Yes M'Lord. I'm sure it will come later in the evening."

Alex had been overjoyed that snow had been forecast for this Christmas Eve. It would be that final romantic touch that she needed. Unfortunately the snow had not started yet and this along with the other preparations was making Alex insanely nervous. She pulled at her collar nervously.

"This is too tight! How am I expected to enjoy my evening with this collar throttling me all night?" She combed her hair for the 50th time since she had gotten ready, thinking it was out of place but in reality she had enough Brylcreem in it that her hair might never move again. Thomas stopped trying to fix her bow tie as she was moving around too much.

"May I speak freely M'lord?"

"Of course, Thomas. We've known each other long enough."

"I think you need to take a few deep breaths, light a cigarette and I'll bring you a brandy. You'll feel a lot better. You have organised a wonderful evening for Miss. Beth and I don't think you have to worry about her answer. You only have to see the way she looks at you to know how she feels. I think I can speak for all the staff when I say she is a wonderful woman who will make you happy. We all like her very much M'lord and she will make a wonderful Mistress of this house."

Alex clapped Thomas on the back and said. "Thank you. That was exactly the pep talk I needed. I think you should order me that brandy all the same!" They laughed.

"Right away M'Lord."

Alex looked across the table at Beth. She looked radiant. She had chosen her black evening gown to wear. The young woman seemed to have a natural elegance whether she wore expensive clothes or cheap. Alex couldn't wait until Beth would be frequenting London designers for her wardrobe. She knew Beth and Lotty would have such fun filling up her wardrobe with the latest designer creations.

Beth looked up and caught her adoring look and smiled. Dinner had been wonderful. Earlier in the meal Alex had looked nervous and looking back and forth to the windows, then exclaimed. "It's snowing!"

Poni had chipped in. "A toast to the snow!" and the three friends laughed.

Beth was lost but let it go. Alex had relaxed a great deal after this for some reason. After dinner they all retired to the drawing room. That was unusual. Normally after dinner Lotty and herself would excuse themselves and go to the drawing room, leaving Alex and Poni to enjoy a brandy and cigars.

Before they sat down Alex said, "Would you like to get a breath of air on the patio sweetheart and look at the snow?"

"You are very excited by snow all of a sudden! It'll be very cold."

"Please, humour me for just a little while."

"Alright, you joining us, you two?"

"I think we'll just cosy up together here," they smirked.

Alex took her hand and steered her out of the fresh widows onto the patio. Beth gasped as walked out. The patio and surrounding walls had candles everywhere.

"This is beautiful darling. What's all this for?"

"Oh, just to make our first Christmas Eve special. Do you think it is?"

"It's so romantic! The candles and the snow! So pretty."

"There's more. Come here." Alex pulled her into her arms. Alex raised her arm and music began to play. From round the corner a violinist and woman singer appeared. Beth was gob smacked as they started to play the first song they danced to at the Alley Cat, Dearly Beloved .

"How ... wh ..."

Alex pressed a finger to Beth's lips. "No questions. Just dance with me."

Beth laid her head against Alex's chest as Alex danced them around the patio in the candlelight with the snow gently falling around them. The singer started.

Tell me it's true,

Tell me you agree,

I was meant for you,

You were meant for me.

Dearly beloved, how clearly I see,

Somewhere in heaven you were fashioned for me,

Angel eyes knew you,

Angel voices led me to you;

Nothing could save me,

Fate gave me a sign;

I know that I'll be yours come shower or shine;

So I say merely,

Dearly beloved be mine.

As the chorus started up again, Alex stopped dancing. She went into her pocket for the box she would need and dropped to one knee. She looked up at Beth and smiled. She opened the box. "Miss. Elizabeth Bentley. You have brought love and joy to my life. Please say you will be mine forever and consent to be my wife? Will you marry me?"

Beth's hand was clamped over her mouth. She was in shock. She had never experienced anything as perfect and romantic in her life. The stunned silence went on for what felt like hours to Alex then finally she heard Beth say.

"Yes! Oh yes Alex! I would love to be your wife!"

Alex released the breath she was holding, slipped the ring onto Beth's finger and stood up to scoop her into her arms and spin her round.

"Thank you so much sweetheart! You will never regret this. I will treasure you each day of our lives together!"

They kissed long and deep. Alex raised her arm again and suddenly fireworks were exploding over head in the night sky. It was an amazing sight.

"Alex, this is the most wonderful moment of my life. Thank you for making it so special. I love you."

"I love you little bit."

Just then Poni and Lotty joined them on the patio bearing glasses of champagne. Mrs. Mckluskey, Foster, Thomas, Laura, Charlie, Liz and Ella also joined them. Kisses and congratulations were shared between the friends. When Beth got a chance to properly look at her ring she was astonished. The diamond was big, but it was set in a simple manner. It was just how she would have picked herself. She kissed Alex.

"Darling this ring is out of this world! You have spoilt me too much again."

"Nonsense! Only the best for my future wife. You're only going to have one engagement ring this lifetime so it has to be the best!" Alex went on to tell her of the special nature of the diamond.

"The Rutherford diamond? Goodness me! I love you more than anything in the world. Thank you for this special evening. I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

"I propose a toast." Poni said. "To the future Lord and Lady Dalton!"

"Lord and Lady Dalton!" the staff and friends replied.

The celebrations continued into the night.

Later that night Alex escorted her new fiancé to her room. When they reached the door Beth said. "Can you come in for a few minutes? I have something I want to give you."

"Of course."

They stepped into the room. Beth went into the dressing table drawer and retrieved a small gift wrapped box.

"I was going to give you this with your other gifts tomorrow, but after tonight I think it's appropriate that you have it tonight. Open it."

Alex looked at her quizzically and started to open it up. She took Beth's father's watch out of the box and looked up.

"I can't accept this. This is all you have left of your father."

"My mother gave this to my father when they were married. They were soul mates and I only dreamt about finding that sort of love but I have with you. Read the inscription, I know you must have studied Latin at that fancy boarding school of yours."

"Ego dilecto meo et dialects meus." Alex read. "'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.' That is beautiful little bit, from the Song of Solomon isn't it?"

"Yes, that says what you are to me and you have completed my life. It's the most precious thing I can give you and I would love you to wear it and use it every day as a sign of my commitment."

"Then I would be honoured. I will treasure your gift. I can't wait to start my life with you, little bit and tomorrow we will start to plan for our future."

They kissed sweetly. A perfect end to a perfect night.

The End.

I would be delighted to hear your comments about this story at jennyframe91@yahoo.com

Also please take a look at my website where you can listen to the soundtrack to 'The Road to Dencotte House' and find information on my future stories. www.jennys-storybook.com