

Brainstorming

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She lifted her glass, sipping the juice, and watched him over the rim. He was listening attentively to one of her young engineers speaking, slight movements of his head a quiet encouragement.

She glanced at Curtis. She watched, fascinated, as the young man's eyes moved around the table as he spoke, but inevitably rested longer on Doug's face, clearly wanting his approval, and taking strength from the subtle non-verbal support.

"Damn him." she almost spoke the words aloud, though her eyes went back to his face – this time to meet his across the table.

He smiled at her, picked up his glass of wine and raised it in a subtle, silent salute, and she lowered and raised her glass to him, finding herself smiling back, looking into his deep brown eyes. A slight dip of his head toward her, and his attention turned again to the young man speaking.

The brass had gone, and Alice looked around at her team relaxing. Apart from the small group involved in technical discussion, several other conversations were evident – faces animated with good humour at their success and the free booze.

She sat back in her chair, letting the good-humoured murmur wash over her, feeling herself beginning to relax, for what seemed the first time in many months.

She knew that their success had been almost entirely engineered by him, and although her gratitude towards him was heartfelt, part of her resented him, even hated him, for the apparent ease with which he had turned her to-hell-in-a handcart project into an astounding success. Perversely, most of all she hated the quiet, unassuming manner in which he had operated – praising those around him, taking no apparent credit for himself.

She hadn't interviewed him for the job – that had been left to her Team leader and Technical architect, but over the first two weeks, they had only exchanged nods and smiles, whilst he had been given time to bring himself 'up to speed'.

He wasn't at the meeting where, yet again, she had felt frustration and anger as an aching acid in her belly, at the apparent non-progress currently being discussed. Several of the production engineers had asked for an explanation of the DRM, and no-one, especially the Architect himself, had been able to give satisfactory answers.

Feeling numb and lost, she had asked with cold fury “Does *anyone* understand the system we are trying to implement?”

Her gaze had gone around the room, from face to blank face, until Richard, a young software engineer who shared workspace with him had said. “Doug does. Doug understands.”

All eyes had turned to him, and she turned to Chris, her team leader. “Then where is he? And why isn't he here?”

He had blushed. “I'll get him.”

Twenty minutes later, everyone had filed out of the meeting room, leaving her alone with the Architect.

“How is it..” she began.

“I'm sorry.” his face was flushed, his brow creased with anxiety.

“You're sorry! I don't want your fucking sorrow.”

He had sat up in his chair. “Don't talk to me like that.”

She exhaled and shook her head. “Go – just go.”

With a few deftly drawn diagrams on the white board, and a quietly-spoken, confident, though unprepared dialogue, Doug had explained the DRM to everyone, and answered every question that had been put to him. The relief in the room had been tangible, and she had picked up on the friendly and respectful relationship he had apparently already made with her young production team, and the small team of software consultants.

She had left the building quietly, and walking quickly, made her way to the pub – a now-familiar journey. The rest of the day had become a blur, only recalled and understood by having the events related to her by her partner Samantha, and the following day by her PA at work.

She had vaguely remembered him lifting, then carrying her, putting her gently onto her office sofa – his face above her concerned and anxious. She remembered his

lifting her feet up onto the sofa. A delicious cool dabbing of her forehead had opened her eyes again, and he had smiled at her, encouraging, but enquiringly. She had heard her PA's voice, a worried tone, and his quiet reassuring, replies.

She had woken up again to the sound of Sam and him talking quietly. She was stretched out on her own sofa at home, a blanket over her. Her head hurt, and she had reached up, feeling the sutures above her left eyebrow.

They had both turned to look at her, then he had stood up, extended his hand to Sam, then nodded, smiling to her, before turning and letting himself out.

They had rowed of course, but Sam had finally relented and after making her some supper, had helped her to bed, only to greet her at breakfast the following morning with what amounted to an ultimatum. With quiet resignation, she had answered Alice's questions, finally to remind her of the enormity of the situation of having to explain to Alice once again, what had happened to her the day before.

Finally, Sam had left for work, leaving Alice shocked and bewildered. She had dressed and left the house, dreading what she might find at work, but everyone had appeared to be unaware of what had happened, only one or two of the engineers making concerned enquiries about how she had hurt her head.

She had stood just inside her office. It looked subtly different. She realised the short filing cabinet was now behind the sofa, not next to the door. A quick scene flashed through her mind. She was falling, she couldn't stop falling, and the sharp grey edge of the filing cabinet was rushing towards her. She sat down, shaking.

The outline of the heavy cabinet was imprinted in the carpet near the door, and just in front was a slight, but distinguishable stain. She shuddered, closing her eyes. Another flash of light, strong this time, and the sound of low, concerned voices. She was cold. Why didn't they know, and cover her up? Then his face, smiling calmly down at her. She felt his arms under her, and the motion of him carrying her.

There was a knock at her door. Shakily she said "Come in."

Her PA, Janice, was obviously embarrassed, but had been persuaded reluctantly, to relate what she had seen, praising Doug, it seemed, with every breath, before finally leaving.

Alice had realised her rescue had been a close call. Her meeting with the brass had been cancelled of course, but they weren't aware of the real reason for her accident. She walked over to the filing cabinet, opening the bottom drawer, but the bottles

and glass were gone.

She had sat back down in her chair, thinking long and hard, before picking up the 'phone and calling him.

"Close the door, Doug." she had said, after he had knocked and entered.

She motioned to the sofa. "Please, sit."

She sat down in the easy chair opposite him. He smiled at her as she looked for the courage to speak.

"I want to thank you for taking care of me yesterday."

He shook his head. "You are welcome. I'm sure you would have done the same for me."

There was a pause as they looked at each other.

"Yes, but it wasn't you who was drunk, was it? It was me."

She had felt a tear trickle down her cheek.

He had waited, saying nothing, as she composed herself, before speaking again.

Then he had leaned forward saying quietly. "You are troubled – if you think I can help, just say so."

She looked into his dark brown eyes, feeling strangely calmed and reassured by his gentle words.

"I think you already know what, or should I say who, the problem is."

The words had seemed to come from nowhere, and she was aware of her hand going towards her face in an involuntary attempt to stop them from being said.

He had sat back in the chair and simply nodded, again waiting for her recovery.

"Can I assume his position has been thrust upon you?"

In a daze, she nodded. "I can't be seen to act, without a really damn good reason."

He looked at her thoughtfully, but did not pry.

"Then let's leave it to him." he said, after a short pause.

She looked at him sharply. "He won't go voluntarily."

He had nodded. "Yes, I believe that is so. But he is impulsive, and arrogant."

He had waited while she considered his words. She looked at him. There was no trace of bravado, just the calm, assured and friendly face she had seen over the last two weeks. But she believed she understood.

She nodded. "Yes, he is. Perhaps that may be his downfall?"

She had caught his brief nod in reply, and a shiver ran through her whole body, to be followed by a strange feeling of deep relief.

He had asked quietly "Anything else Alice?"

Her eyes had gone to the filing cabinet. He didn't smile, as she might have expected, but simply nodded. "The stuff is in my desk. I thought it best to hide it."

She nodded. "Thanks."

A tremor was in her voice as she thought of what might have happened yesterday. He seemed to read her mind, saying quietly. "No-one other than your PA knows, Alice."

"I don't know how to thank you." she began.

He smiled. "You'll think of something." Then more quietly he added. "I've been there, it isn't the answer. If you need to talk, talk to me instead of the bottle."

She nodded. He made to get up and she reached out and touched his arm, before gripping it hard. He had looked steadily into her eyes. She couldn't look away, but felt strangely calmer. She relaxed her grip. He was gone before she was fully aware of what she had done.

"Damn. Damn. Damn." she repeated to herself, over and over.

Two days had gone by, and she was looking forward to the weekend, planning to continue her attempts to convince Sam about going on the wagon. Two days in which she hadn't touched a drop of booze, despite being intensely aware that nothing had apparently changed in the direction of the project.

Loud voices broke into her office despite the heavily soundproofed door, and she opened it and stepped into the corridor.

They stood face to face, her team leader and the architect. Spit was issuing from the architect's mouth as he yelled profane abuse at Chris. She looked on in horror. Chris was a big man, powerfully built, clearly very angry, and she expected the worst. Then just as quickly as it had started, the architect strode off, ignoring her, and the several engineers who had been watching.

Chris looked at her – he was clearly furious. She nodded at him, beckoning with her hand, and re-entered her office. He followed, closing the door behind him and began. She sat down and listened. As she heard Chris threatening to leave, the feeling of dread she had felt initially had fallen away, to be replaced with one approaching a guilty glee, as she realised what had taken place.

She reassured Chris that his grievances would be addressed instantly. He was somewhat surprised.

"You always defend him." he had said accusingly.

She shook her head. "Not this time. Not for this outrageous behaviour. He's stepped over the line once too often."

Chris had looked at her puzzled. She reassured him. "Everyone. In the meeting room in one hour. I have an announcement to make."

He looked at her, still disbelieving, before shrugging. "OK. Will do."
After he left, she picked up the 'phone and called the CEO.

Later, after a dry lunch, she had come back, and looking through the meeting room windows, had seen Doug in front of the white board, dry marker in hand, together with the other software consultants and several of the production team. He had seen her through the glass. He smiled at her, and nodded briefly, before turning once again to his audience.

In the weeks that followed, Sam had relented, seeing Alice drink only juice, and arriving home sober each night, but there was an edge to their relationship that hadn't been there before. Then it was Sam's turn to get drunk. Alice had been kind and forgiving, but this had only irritated Sam. The argument had persisted after dinner and then finally Sam had blurted it out.

"Why don't you just fuck him, and get it out of your system?"

Alice was aware her mouth had fallen open.

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

Sam had scowled at her, then sneered. "Just do it. You know you want to, and I know you want to."

Alice looked at Sam in disbelief. "Why do you think that?"

"Because, dearest little Alice, you never shut up about him."

Alice was quiet, looking at her partner's angry face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "If I do go on about him, it's because he's plucked the project, and me, from disaster."

"Thanks a lot Alice. I did nothing for you? You're a fucking smitten kitten." Samantha snarled.

"Please Sam, don't talk that way." Alice was close to tears.

"Oh what the hell, I'm going to bed." Samantha got up and left her.

The next morning it was Sam's turn to apologize. Both of them were subdued. For the first time since her 'accident' weeks before, Alice asked Sam about the afternoon she had come home and found him watching over her sleeping, injured partner.

"He said that he smuggled you out of the building, driving you to the hospital in your car, where you were given a scan and stitched up. The medics realised you were simply very drunk, not unconscious, so he was allowed to bring you back here and watched over you like a mother hen until I arrived home."

"You talked to him?"

Sam looked across the table, mildly irritated.

"Of course I bloody talked to him, you mad cow. Do you think I sat in silence?"

"Sorry." Alice had said. "I meant.."

"Yeah. I know what you meant. Yes, I told him about your bloody drinking and that bloody project and it's effect on you."

Alice reached across the table and touched Sam's hand.

"I'm so, so, sorry Sam."

"Yeah? Me too." There were tears in Sam's eyes.

Alice looked at her. "He feels more like a father to me, honest."

Sam shook her head. "We both know that's not true."

Alice stared at her.

Sam gripped her hand. "I love you. Soon, he will leave to rescue other maidens in distress. If you've already done it, or intend doing it, please don't tell me. I'd rather not know."

With that she had got up and left.

She reached forward and picked up her glass, sipping the remains of the juice. The guys were starting to drift away, leaving for an early start to the weekend, a reward for a job well done. A few stragglers still sat with Doug, who was talking quietly, his eyes moving from face to face, engaging each of them.

"Damn him." She heard herself saying inwardly. She understood. As much as she understood she resented it. The man was a bloody Pied Piper – he had the precious gift of making a person he was speaking to, feel like the only person in the room, very special and important. What was so irritating to her, was that it appeared to be genuine, and she couldn't, wouldn't, believe that.

She listened as he spoke, and felt herself being drawn in. She tried to analyse what it was that drew her in – it couldn't be the subject matter – that was technical and completely beyond her. She stopped trying to analyse him, and instead concentrated on examining what she felt. She felt a warming in the pit of her belly as she listened. She let herself stare at him, unblinkingly, though aware that he was including her with brief, facial acknowledgements.

The warmth in her belly grew. She'd felt it before when listening to him. She felt it as though it was a caress. She wanted to be angry at him, to tell him she knew his game, but she couldn't. The warmth had become an ache, then mild contractions. She felt the blood filling her face, felt the back of her neck growing warm. "Shit!" She thought. "What the Hell?"

All the time the sound of his voice, cadences rising and falling, washed over her ears. As she looked at him, the others around the table seemed to fade from view. She was breathing heavily now, and was no longer angry, didn't want it to stop. She leaned forward, propping her elbows on the table top as the contractions peaked and she came. Wave after wave. She put her hands over her face, feeling it's heat, barely able to stifle her long moans.

A gentle hand touched the top of her arm.

"Are you OK Alice?"

It was Janice. She turned to look up at her PA's concerned face, and gave her a lop-side grin. "Sure. I'm a little tired, that's all."

"Well, OK then. If you are sure. I'm off now, see you on Monday." and Janice left.

Alice looked across the table. If anyone had been aware of her special 'moment', then they gave no sign of it. She picked up her empty glass and headed for the bar. He followed her.

"Let me buy you a celebratory drink." he said.

She turned and looked up at him.

"You know I can't."

"OK. A juice then?"

She paused. Then made up her mind.

"I want to thank you."

He looked at her and smiled gently. "You already have – several times."

"You are leaving shortly?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Job's done, clearing up, then leaving at the end of next week."

"I won't see you again." She blurted out, a sadness in her voice she hadn't meant to show.

"I suppose not." he said softly.

"Can I ask one more thing of you?" she looked up at him.

"Please do."

"Well, remember what you said when I asked 'What ever can I do to thank you', and you replied 'You'll think of something'?"

He smiled. "Yes, I do."

"Well I've thought of something."

He looked down at her waiting, his kind dark eyes watching.

"Will you make love with me?" she said softly.

He took her right hand and squeezed it gently.

"Alice. That is a lovely thing that you ask."

She waited but he said no more, just held her hand and looked at her.

"Will you answer?" she said.

"I will. But not here. My hotel is two blocks away. Walk with me to my room, and talk to me. If you still want to make love then, we shall."

Being close to him had re-awakened the warmth in her belly, she didn't want to wait. She nodded briefly. "I'll get my coat."

He poured her some Perrier water, and they both sat down on the bed.

She looked across at him. "You wanted to talk?"

He smiled and took her hand. "I think you do."

"Damn you," she retorted. "Do you ever stop controlling people?"

She expected him to laugh off her outburst – he didn't.

"I'm not sorry to give you the opportunity to consider carefully what it is you say you want to do," he said quietly.

She felt angry, and drew her hand away. "Do you know, that I sat in the pub and orgasmed, just listening to you speak and looking at you?"

"No. I didn't" he said softly.

She looked at him. "Liar. You're a bloody liar."

Suddenly he laughed. "You don't really like me, do you?"

"No." She blurted out, and lifted the Perrier to her lips.

"Good. I'm glad."

"What the fuck do you mean? Why would you be glad?"

"Because it means that your future is with Samantha, irrespective of what happens here, this afternoon."

Suddenly, all her anger fell away. "I'm sorry. I had you wrong. I thought you were playing with me."

"Never, Alice."

"You play other people," she stated it as a fact.

"Yes. You know I do."

She waited, knowing he would say more.

"I do what I have to do. Despite what you think, I like people. I enjoy engaging with them, I enjoy being with them."

She nodded.

"What they feel about me is entirely their doing. I do not mislead or lie."

He waited.

"And Charles? What about him?"

It was the first time she had referred to the architect by his first name.

"He was destructive and negative. He was responsible wholly for the mess things were in, and partly for the events leading up to your accident. His removal was a necessary evil, and I have no regret at the part I played in it."

She shook her head and laughed. "No. On that I do agree with you."
She held out her glass. He picked up his, and they clinked together.
She put down her glass and moved across the bed to him, putting her arms around his neck, and kissed him tenderly. He responded, wrapping her in his arms.

She was unused to his power and size, feeling the hard muscles of his chest against her and the large biceps across her upper arms. She felt weak - knew she was weak compared to him, but instead of her usual ready resentment toward men, she gave in and bathed in a wonderful belief that his only instincts were to protect and love her. Someone who would proudly stand or fall by his actions, not on what he said.

As they kissed, she remembered her words to Sam about him being more of a father to her. She understood now why she had found that so easy to say, because he *had* protected her, *had* stood by giving unquestionable, non-judgemental support. *Had*, done what was necessary, unpleasant as it might have been. He couldn't have done so if he'd been some squishy, touchy-feely, man-boy of the type she usually preferred as male friends.

She felt her heart pounding in her chest, her breath coming in gasps. He continued kissing her, his tongue probing around and deeper into her mouth, his strong hands stroking her head, neck, shoulders and back, in gorgeous sweeping caresses. She broke away, her head going back, her hands pushing his head to her breasts and she moaned out loud. He reached around and undid her blouse, taking the nipple of her left breast in his mouth. Her moans turned to gasps, then low keening, and finally short screams, as her belly exploded again and again. He didn't stop his caressing until she herself pushed him back onto the bed.

She unbuckled his trousers, pulling his shoes off, and then standing up, she pulled off his trousers and boxers, ripped off her knickers and sat astride him. She moaned slightly as he sank inside her, then there was a brief pause as she looked down into his dark, dark eyes. He smiled at her. "Are you sure?"
She nodded, vigorously falling forward and kissing him. His hands went to her buttocks, lifting her easily forward and backward, and she fumbled with his shirt buttons, finally freeing a view of his magnificent chest.

Her mouth greedily sucked and nibbled his right nipple as they moved together. He acted as though she was weightless, lifting her effortlessly, though gently, when they changed position. She was almost frantic with desire, wanting more and more of him. Finally she ended up on her belly as he thrust deeply inside her, moving hard and firmly against her buttocks as she screamed into the pillow. Only when she

begged him stop did he come, a primeval scream escaping from his mouth before he buried his face in her hair, holding her, enveloping her in his powerful arms.

They lay awhile before he gently rolled off, cuddling her from behind.

She broke the silence first. "That was exquisite, thank you."

"You too." he said gently in her ear. "You are truly beautiful."

She turned slowly to face him. He brushed away the red curls hanging over her right eye.

"I lied to you about not liking you – I didn't want to like you, disliking myself for what I felt about you."

He nodded. "It must be strange for you."

He wasn't prying, she knew that. He acknowledged her sexuality and accepted it.

She looked at him and nodded. "It is – very. The few men I went with earlier in my life did absolutely nothing for me, and hated me as a result."

She leaned forward and kissed his nose. He reached up and stroked her cheek.

Suddenly she was in tears. He said nothing, but held her as she sobbed.

Finally she was able to look at him again. "I don't want you to go. I want you to stay and love me."

He looked at her, his lovely dark eyes now sad. "You must know it will not work. You will lose your partner. Her love is important to you, more than I believe you understand. I cannot be an instrument in the destruction of your relationship."

"She already knows what I feel about you."

He looked at her sharply. She nodded her head. "Yes, you don't know *everything*."

Even as she said the words she regretted them.

"Christ Alice." he said, "This isn't a game of one-upmanship."

"I'm sorry." she felt mortified.

"What has she said?" he asked softly.

"She told me to fuck you, to get it over with, but not to tell her."

He shook his head slightly. "She will know – whether you tell her or not."

Alice nodded. "Yes, I know."

"And you are ready for any consequences?"

She reached up and touched his cheek. "I will accept whatever happens, because today, here, with you, has been the most wonderful few hours I have ever spent."

He kissed her on the lips gently.

Sam was making supper in the kitchen when Alice arrived home. Despite her afternoon of blissful carnality, she felt no guilt, which surprised her. A calm and tranquillity about her set Sam immediately at ease, and they embraced gently.

"Good Day?" Sam asked.

"Yes. You?"

"I'm fine." Sam smiled and they sat down to supper.

The following morning was different. An aching awareness that he would be leaving the following Friday, made her nervy. She spent the morning at the supermarket and rang him just after noon.

"Can I see you?" She asked nervously.

"Yes. Of course." He said softly, no question or criticism in his voice.

"This afternoon?"

"Come when you're ready. I'm in all afternoon."

After a quick lunch, she announced to Sam she was off shopping. A quick foray, and several bags later she was standing inside his room held in his arms.

It was different than yesterday. She found a confidence she hadn't been aware she possessed. He seemed to know. She was literally lifted off her feet, supported by his strong arms and they made love, him standing, her wholly supported by him, sometimes straddling his belly, sometimes like a baby in his arms. When it was over, they lay together, with her curled up against his powerful chest. He spoke to her, softly and gently, and she drifted, half-hearing, half-listening, as his soft voice seemed to caress her very core.

She woke, still in his arms. The exhilarating feeling of well-being she had felt yesterday was back, even stronger. He gently caressed her temple, kissed her neck, until finally she had to leave.

She called on him again on the Sunday, then at work on Monday had telephoned him – just to touch him and be held by him in her office. Each evening after work, they had made love. By Thursday, the feelings of anxiety and doubt about his leaving had gone, and she was at peace. More tranquil and calm than she had ever felt in her life. That he would soon be gone didn't seem to matter – she felt his closeness even when they were apart.

On the Wednesday evening, after making love with him she had arrived home, finding Sam standing in the lounge, a glass of red wine in her hand. Sam had said nothing about her absences, but neither had she been catty or nasty. Alice dropped her coat on the sofa and walked across to Sam, taking her head in her hands and kissed her softly on the lips. She had then put her arms tightly around

Sam and kissed her neck, then stood back and gently undressed her, fondling and touching her as she did. Sam was enthralled. She moaned with pleasure, and they sank onto the sofa together.

Then it was Thursday. Again she lay in his arms, listening, as he talked. She drifted, until finally she fell asleep.

Waking with a start, she realised it was dark. She reached across the bed finding a warm, soft back. A delicate scent confirmed she was lying next to Sam. She moved a little closer and ran her left hand down Sam's back, across her buttocks and back up her side, touching the beautiful soft tissue of Sam's left breast. Sam moaned softly. Alice kissed her between the shoulders, then pushing Sam's hair up gently kissed and caressed her neck.

"Ooh!" exclaimed Sam. "I like that! More please?"

It was several weeks later, as she was tidying up a drawer in their bedroom that she came across the envelope addressed to Sam.

The handwriting was familiar, intriguing her, then she knew. He had written it. She ripped out the single page of notepaper, trying to devour it's contents all at once. She realised her hands were shaking and she sat down on the bed. With her heart banging in her chest she read the beautifully handwritten note.

"Dear Sam,

You probably hate me, but that doesn't matter to me as long as you don't hate Alice. She loves you more than anything, or one, on this earth. I know you belong together.

There must be many questions in your mind about me. Some I can answer, some I cannot. We have a mutual friend – a friend you spoke to several months ago about your concern over Alice's well-being. That friend spoke to me, and the rest, so it is said, is history.

You were very right to be concerned. Because of the actions of a certain individual, Alice's very existence was being threatened. I had to act, was glad to act, because an old enemy of mine was involved. Unfortunately to be of help, I needed to get very close to Alice, and she found something in me that she didn't want to let go of – despite my warnings.

I think you know the rest.

Be assured she is yours Sam, she will always be yours.

You will be happy together, I know you will. You will probably never see or hear from me again, but believe that I will be thinking fondly of you both.

Best wishes always from Doug."

The letter was on the coffee table when Sam came in, laughing and loaded with bags of new clothes.

She had sat down heavily on the sofa before seeing the open letter in front of her.

"Oh!" she said.

Alice kissed her and sat down opposite.

"So it wasn't a co-incidence him turning up then. You had a hand in it?"

Sam shook her head.

"Alice, I swear I don't understand what he's talking about."

Sam picked up the letter and read it out loud. "It's pretty plain to me. You talked to someone, that someone talked to him, and somehow he got himself hired to settle his old score with Charles."

"But you said they had never met!"

Alice dropped the note on the table and swore. "Christ, I don't know. Who did you talk to Sam?"

Sam reached across and took her hand. "No-one. I swear."

Alice shook her head and they both lapsed into silence.

Finally, Sam spoke. "How do you feel about his going?"

Alice smiled at her. "I'm fine, you know I am. How do you feel about me?"

Sam grinned. "I love you."

Alice picked up the letter again. "He knew, somehow he knew we would be fine."

Sam nodded. "I have a confession."

"Oh?"

"That day, that awful day you hurt yourself, when you were out of it, and him and I talked. I felt all of the things you have told me since. My knickers were wet when you finally woke up."

Alice looked at her, mouth falling open. Then they both started shrieking with laughter.

When they had calmed down Sam said. "There's something else – something a bit spooky."

Alice felt icy fingers run up her back.

"Oh?" she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"I got curious after his letter, so a couple of weeks ago I enquired at the hospital where he said he'd taken you. There is no record of anyone of your name being treated."

Alice shrugged. "He probably booked me in under a false name, given the circumstances, that's what he was good at – thinking ahead."

Sam nodded "Yeah. I thought so to. But I looked into it further, persuading a friend of mine down there, to go through the records for that afternoon." she paused, looking dubiously at Alice.

Alice nodded. "Go on."

"There was only one admission matching your description, with a head wound that afternoon. The girl died in Casualty of a brain haematoma."

"Oh dear." said Alice, "What a shame. But.."

Sam snapped irritably. "I haven't finished."

Alice waited.

Sam was having difficulty talking. "Her body was mysteriously lost after being taken to the morgue, but no relatives registered her as missing."

Alice looked at Sam, her eyes widening. "You can't possibly think.."

Sam shivered. "I try not to."

Alice again picked up the note. "He says you spoke to 'a mutual friend'. Why would he say that if it wasn't true? I never caught him lying."

Sam shrugged. "I was desperate, but not desperate enough to make matters worse by blabbing my mouth off about your drinking. I was so fucking desperate I even got down and prayed – perhaps he heard that?"

They both laughed, then suddenly they were both very quiet as they looked across at each other.

Alice got up and kissed Sam on the forehead. "Come upstairs, I want to hold you."