



(Not So) Mad About You

Author: *Sienna Waters*

Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Anger management just got a whole lot harder...

Alli Williams does NOT have a problem. Well, other than the fact that she's been snatched away from her high-powered job and forced into an anger management program.

Bea Thomas does have a problem. Well, two, no, make that three. Her ex-boyfriend has moved his new girlfriend into their shared flat, and Bea doesn't even have a job to take her out of the house during the day.

But when Bea's friend Liz gets a dose of cosmic Karma, Bea finds herself set up as a yoga teacher at an anger management retreat. Where she runs into Alli. Literally.

It's hate at first glance. Alli thinks Bea is spineless, and Bea thinks Alli's just plain rude. Except things keep getting hot and steamy, and there isn't a sauna in sight. And when Bea's devious boss starts to show his true colors, maybe there's someone who can teach Bea to stand up for herself...

Total Pages (Source): 93

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Chapter One

The only person Alli Williams counted on was herself. She certainly wasn't about to count on a snot-nosed little barista with an attitude problem.

"Oat milk with an extra shot and a sprinkling of cinnamon," she said, narrowing her eyes at the barista. "Sure you've got that?"

The barista smiled. "Not a problem, ma'am," she said.

Alli glared at her but didn't say anything. As much as she hated the stupid Americanisms that had seeped into her life over time, and as much as she hated the implications behind the word 'ma'am', the barista simply wasn't worth her time.

Nor, Alli knew, was she in any way correct. Thirty-two was not 'ma'am' territory. Thirty-five, maybe. But definitely not thirty-two. And by thirty-five she'd be making so much money that she'd have her own damn barista and wouldn't be patronizing coffee shops, no matter how upscale or trendy they might be.

"Your coffee, ma'am," the barista said with a smile.

Alli took it with a muttered thanks and turned to leave, almost hitting a tall man in a dark suit as she did so.

"Watch where you're going," she growled, skipping a step backward. The last thing she needed was scuffs on her new Blahnik's.

He smiled easily. “That could have been a disaster.”

“You’d have been paying the dry cleaning bills,” she said tartly before striding out of the coffee shop.

It took a minute for the irritation to die down. She wasn’t the type to take long deep breaths, and definitely not the type to take whatever poisons her doctor had prescribed to calm her down. Calm her down. As though she was an over-anxious labrador.

Calming, in Alli’s world, was not a good thing. Being eager, sharp, aggressive when necessary, all those were good qualities. All those were qualities that had put her firmly on Warren and Colman’s executive track. A track that one day would mean an office at the very top of the glass and steel building she was now walking into.

She pushed her way into the lift and pressed the button for thirty-two. Same age, same floor. It wasn’t quite the top floor, not yet, but it was some kind of sign, she was sure of that. She’d been working her backside off and this was her year, she could feel it. A vice president spot was opening up and it was going to be hers.

Which was definitely going to make the late nights and early mornings and skipped lunches and boozy dinners and all the rest of it all worth it.

Not that she had anything else to do with her time.

Pets, boyfriends, kids, they were all for suckers and Alli was no sucker. She was confident, skilled, and very happy alone, thank you very much.

“Morning, Ms. Williams,” chirped her assistant as she walked past.

Alli didn’t bother to reply. The girl would be gone within the month, they always

were. There was no work ethic these days, that was the problem. People couldn't just grit their teeth and get on with it. She dumped her bag on her chair and looked at her desk. And people definitely couldn't follow instructions.

"You, in here," she barked.

The assistant appeared in the doorway, looking like she was entering the dragon's den. "Is there something I can do, ma'am?"

Fucking ma'am again. "Yes," Alli said. "You can put my damn mail in the inbox where it's supposed to go rather than splaying it across my desk like it's a prize on a game show. Think you can handle that?"

With trembling hands, the assistant gathered up the post and slid the bundle into the tray beside Alli's computer. "Yes, sorry about that. It won't happen again."

Probably because she'd be working for a crappy little bakery or baby toy company by this time next month, Alli thought. Some place that prided itself on being a family business, where the only hopes for advancement were an extra week of holiday. "Out," she barked.

The assistant scurried off and Alli dumped her bag on the floor and was switching on her computer when there was a brief knock at the door. She looked up, ready to scowl, and switched to a smile when she saw a lanky, dark-haired man leaning on the doorframe.

"Scaring the peons off already?" he said, lifting an eyebrow.

"Incompetent," Alli said, leaning back in her chair.

"Terrified is more like it," said Darren. "Which might work in the army, but it's not

the recommended management style in the corporate world.”

“I was never in the army,” said Alli. As if. All that marching around and shouting. Actually, put like that, maybe she should have considered it. She could shout. She could probably march, given different shoes. The pay would be awful though, she assumed.

“Shame,” said Darren, sliding into her office. “You’d make a cracking sergeant major.” He sat in the chair on the opposite side of her desk and eyed her. “What time did you get out of here last night? You look like death warmed up.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“Is looking like cold death preferable?” asked Alli. “I mean, I suppose I could take another cold shower, if that’s what you’re after. But I didn’t realize we had a ‘not looking like warm death’ rule in the company handbook.”

“You know what I mean. And you didn’t answer the question. What time did you get out of here?”

“Gone midnight,” Alli said sharply. “But the Morgensternreport is finished and I’ll be meeting with Halen-Price after lunch.”

“Impressive,” Darren admitted. “Killer diligence, I suppose I shouldn’t complain about that.”

“Since when have I given you anything to complain about?” Alli asked.

He grinned at her. “You’re a go-getter, Al. And my best hire. I just don’t want you burning yourself out, that’s all. I don’t know what we’d do around here without you.”

“It’s called having a work ethic, and I won’t be burning out.” She took a gulp of her coffee and felt a twinge of sourness in her stomach as it went down.

“Alrighty then, I’ll leave you to it. Keep me updated on the Halen-Price meeting. I saw Jim Halen at the club last night, he won’t be coming in himself. He’ll send an underling to get the details, so no need to go over the top, just fill whoever it is in and let them go running back to report.”

Alli felt a bubbling of anger in her stomach. Underling. After all the work she’d put

in, the man himself wasn't even going to bother to turn up. "Right," was all she said. After all, Darren was her boss.

He grinned at her again and disappeared out the door.

Her boss and perhaps her friend. If pushed, Alli would say that he was, if only because she couldn't think of anyone else that could hold the title. Not that friends were important in her world. She'd have time for that stuff later if she ever decided she wanted some.

She took another mouthful of coffee, felt the same sour spike in her stomach, and ditched the half-full cup in the bin. Little Miss Assistant could clear that up. That stupid barista had probably forgotten to put oat milk in. The regular stuff always gave her a stomachache.

Alli's attention went back to her computer and her day really started.

THE UNDERLING, AS Alli thought of him, was powerfully fragrant in a way that made her nose itch. He was impeccably dressed and shod, it was just the cologne that was letting him down. He may well have cracked the bottle open over his head and stood under it like a shower.

She narrowed her eyes, trying to imagine him in the shower, and came up cold. She tried every now and again, just to see if she could feel those hot, spiky feelings that you were supposed to feel. But she never did. There was probably something wrong with her, she knew that, but she'd never admit it. Never admit that even the thought of what was an objectively attractive man naked did nothing at all for her.

"What if we change the font?" he asked now, looking up from the screen.

"As I said, the font used has tested well with young audiences, which is what your

firm is really looking to target.”

He looked back at his screen, considering this.

Seriously. This was supposed to be a big meeting. The kind of meeting that got contracts signed and her name on the right people’s lips. Not a nit-picking ‘we can’t decide on a font’ kind of meeting.

“And if we center these images?” he asked, pointing at the two images that graced the advertising materials.

“You’ll throw off the entire rest of the design,” Alli said, cooler now, trying to keep her patience like she was talking to a toddler.

“Yes, but I do think it would look better,” the Underling said.

Alli gritted her teeth. “It’s not possible.” His boss had already approved the ad material. She didn’t know what the hell was happening here now. She did know that her stomach was sour after lunch and she was starting to feel the familiar ache in the back of her neck and the warmth rising to her cheeks.

“I thought your job was to make these things possible,” Underling said, looking directly at her.

Which was really just about enough.

“My job is to get contracts signed,” Alli said through gritted teeth.

“Once your client is satisfied,” said Underling.

“My client, presumably your distant boss, was very satisfied at our last meeting.” Her

blood was starting to boil, her teeth were hurting from being gritted.

“Yes, but—”

“Enough,” Alli said, getting up. “I’m happy to discuss details with people who are qualified to make decisions. I’m not sitting around talking about fonts with a glorified secretary. Tell Mr. Halen that I’ll set up a meeting with him directly and in the meantime I’ll have a copy of the marketing materials couriered over to him personally.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

The Underling's face turned red and he was opening his mouth but it was too late. Alli was picking up her papers and sweeping out of the room.

Talk about people who weren't worth her time.

She needed an antacid for her stomach and an aspirin for her head and some kind of vaccination against idiots. Failing all that, she could use a very large drink.

Her phone rang before she'd even got back to her office.

Chapter Two

Bea stepped out of the bedroom and promptly tripped over a box.

"Oh gosh, I'm so sorry," Marilyn said. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes, of course," said Bea, sitting on the floor and rubbing her stinging shin. "I should look where I'm going."

"I'm really sorry," said Marilyn. "I didn't think you'd be up yet and, well, Rob's gone to buy milk and I thought I could get some of this stuff moved around and out of the way."

Bea surveyed her once minimalist living room. There were boxes piled up in all the corners, garment bags slung over the couch, a collapsible treadmill by the coffee table, and a stack of IKEA plastic containers leaning precariously on the armchair. "Out of the way," she repeated softly.

Marilyn pulled a face. "I know, I know. I'm so, so sorry. It's all just temporary, just until we find a place. It's such an imposition."

"It's fine," Bea said, standing up. "Totally fine. I agreed to all of this."

"I suppose you did, didn't you?" laughed Marilyn. "Little saint that you are. I'm not sure I'd have done the same in your shoes."

Bea wasn't at all sure that she should have done it either, but then, she hadn't really known what else to do when Robbie came pleading. In the end, it had all been easier just to give in and let him stay than it had to demand anything.

"What about some tea?" Bea said, anything to get the conversation away from boxes and moving.

"Sounds lovely," beamed Marilyn.

She wasn't a bad person, Bea reminded herself. A person was not, after all, a simple sum of their actions. And even if she were, she was vaguely sure that Marilyn had done many things in her life, of which stealing Bea's boyfriend was only one.

"Oh, except Rob's gone out for milk," Marilyn reminded her.

Bea gritted her teeth and then forced herself to smile. Paint the smile on and the attitude will follow, she told herself. She also inhaled deeply and thoroughly through her nose, counting in her head before breathing out. Cleansing breaths.

"I'll get us some herbal tea then, shall I?" she said cheerfully as she dodged boxes in the hallway to get to the kitchen.

"I'll be off to work in an hour or so," Marilyn said, following her. "Out of your way, I

mean.”

“Oh, okay then.” Bea pushed aside a box of pans to open a cupboard.

“I just mean, um, you know, if you wanted privacy or something.”

Privacy in her very own flat. How lovely. Nope, that was uncharitable and unkind. She was doing a good thing. Robbie and Marilyn could hardly live on the streets, could they? If she practiced kindness, then the world would give kindness back to her.

“I’m actually going out tonight,” she said, filling the kettle. “Speaking of privacy and all. You and Robbie will have the place to yourselves. I’ll be back around ten, I suppose.”

It would probably be better if she had a job to go to. A place to spend all the hours of the day, and then she wouldn’t have to look at Marilyn’s boxes. Or think about what went on in the spare room. It would definitely help on the financial front.

“Oh, that’s lovely,” smiled Marilyn. “Someone nice? I do hope that...” She trailed off a bit.

“Just Liz,” Bea said, saving Marilyn her embarrassment. “Don’t think I’m quite ready to start dating again, to be honest.” Nopoint in saving her that much embarrassment.

“Yes, yes.” Marilyn cleared her throat. “Um, Rob’s told me about Liz. She sounds nice.”

Liz was nice. Liz was a fellow yoga teacher and a good, kind human being. She also had a string of jobs lined up and a lovely husband and a dog and a flat and a life that was even and calm and so lovely that Bea couldn’t help but be a bit jealous of it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Marilyn was also nice. Nice and blonde and chirpy and not always terribly smart or diplomatic, but then all people can't be all things. She did have an annoying little habit of calling Robbie 'Rob' which Bea didn't particularly like. But she supposed that was what happened when you met a man as an adult, rather than having known him since he was fourteen.

"Oooo, lovely," Marilyn said when Bea handed her a cup of tea. "Just what the doctor ordered." She took a sip and, to give her credit, controlled her expression quite well. She was rescued by the front door banging closed. "That'll be Rob," she said, looking relieved as she put her cup down, and she ran out to meet him.

Bea sipped her tea thoughtfully. Rob. He almost sounded like a different person really. Except when he came into the kitchen two minutes later he looked exactly the same as he'd always looked, with his chipped front tooth and his hair that never lay flat.

"I'll move all the boxes out of the way," he said, putting milk on the table. "Sorry about the mess."

"It's alright," said Bea even though it wasn't at all alright.

Robbie reached over like he was about to take her hand, but then didn't. "It won't be for long."

Bea nodded. "Take as long as you like," she said politely.

Robbie's face cleared a little bit. "Thanks, Bea. You're a star." He grinned at her and

went off to find his new girlfriend and Bea found herself drinking two cups of herbal tea and trying not to hear what was happening in the spare room again.

“HE’S YOUR EX,” Liz said, rolling her eyes. “He cheated on you. Worse, he cheated on you with the woman that he’s now moved into your flat. Jesus, Bea, I’m not sure things could get much worse.”

“It’s not bad,” Bea said, picking at her salad. There were onions and she hated onions.

“Not bad?” Liz took a long drink from her wineglass. “My love, you can’t live like this. Why don’t you come and sleep on our couch?”

“Because sleeping in my own bed is better,” Bea said. But she smiled. “Thanks for the offer, though.”

“You can’t do this,” Liz said. “It’s not... normal.”

“Normal? It’s kind. They can’t afford another place right now, they’re saving up. Besides, with the housing market the way it is...”

“Then you move out.”

“With what money exactly?”

Liz sighed. “Still no sign of a job, huh?”

“I pick up a few classes at the sports hall down the street,” said Bea. “And I’ve had a few interviews.”

Liz rubbed her face. “Okay, listen, I just signed up for a new gig at some health resort

or something. It's only for a couple of weeks and the pay isn't brilliant, but it's enough. I'm hoping that it's going to turn into a regular thing. Who knows, maybe they'll expand and need more teachers. I'll put your name in. It won't be for ages, of course, and that's only if they do expand, but it's something to look forward to."

"Thanks," said Bea. "That's kind."

"And kind is important," Liz said with a sigh. "But so is not being a walk-over. You can't just—" She broke off as the waitress came over to their table.

"How is everything?"

"Lovely," Bea beamed. "Delicious, thank you."

The waitress was about to walk away when Liz spoke up. "Actually, whilst the food is very nice, I'm afraid you got the order a bit wrong. My friend ordered the tuna salad without onions."

The waitress blushed. "Oh god, I'm sorry. Did the kitchen forget? Here, let me take that, I'll just be a minute." She swooped the plate from under Bea's nose and left.

"See?" Liz said. "You can be polite and kind without having to sacrifice your own needs. There's nothing wrong with standing up for yourself and what you want and need, Bea."

Bea looked down at the empty table in front of her. "Well, I'd already picked most of the onions out. And now that food will probably be thrown away and go to waste."

Liz groaned. "Babe, come on. You see what I'm trying to say here."

Bea closed her eyes. "I know, I know. I let people walk all over me."

“Bea, you’re such a lovely person. You’re kind and generous and pretty and a million other things, but you can’t live your whole life letting everyone take everything from you. You’ll end up getting hurt.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Bea opened her eyes again. “No one’s getting hurt. It’s just... a bit uncomfortable right now.”

Liz picked her wine glass up. “Alright, I give up. We’re not ruining our night over this. You’re a grownup and get to make your own choices. But can we drink to independence?”

“Yes,” Bea said with greater certainty than she felt. She picked up her own glass and clinked it against Liz’s. “To independence.”

“And cheating lying boyfriends falling down the stairs and breaking their legs,” added Liz.

Bea cringed. “You can’t say something like that. The universe is listening.”

“Well, let it listen to this.” Liz blew a raspberry. “Now drink up and let me tell you about this new client that I got. She can literally bend over backward, it’s amazing.”

And Bea listened as she kept drinking. Hopefully, the wine would send her to sleep fast enough that she wouldn’t hear anything from the spare room at all tonight.

Chapter Three

Darren looked like he might either throw up or explode, one or the other.

“What’s the emergency?” Alli asked. Maybe he was sick. And if he was sick, maybe he needed an account covered. Given that he was the boss, his clients were big-

hitters. This could be her chance.

“What’s the emergency?” he stuttered. He glared at her.

“What?”

“Jesus. You. You’re the emergency, Alli.”

“Me?” She took a second to take this in. “What have I done?”

She saw his jaw tense. “Did you or did you not just call Jim Halen’s son a glorified secretary?”

“Obviously not,” she said, relaxing a little. “That would be pretty stupid, wouldn’t it? I mean, come on, Dar, you’ve known me for a while now, since when have I been that...” Oh shit.

“Al.”

“That was his son?” Anger bubbled up inside her. “How the hell was I supposed to know that? He introduced himself as Jamie. He smelled like a Parisian hooker. And you said that Halen was sending some underling to get the presentation. There’s no way in hell that I’m responsible for this.”

“Really?” Darren said, still pale. “Really? No way in hell, Al? Because from where I’m standing, if you’d have just treated the man with some simple respect, regardless of whether he was an underling or not, then this wouldn’t be happening.”

“This? What is this exactly?” She put her hands on her hips.

“This,” he said, pointing toward the conference room. The blinds were all closed and

she couldn't see inside. "You know who's in there?"

The anger was still bubbling but starting to be replaced with something else. Something cold and sticky. "Who's in there?"

"My boss and his boss and Jim Halen, that's who." Darren clenched his teeth.

"Shit."

"That about covers it."

She took a breath. "I can fix this." She could. She could talk her way out of this. An apology, obviously. Probably she could have been a little nicer. She'd made a mistake though, and mistakes were forgivable, surely?

"No," Darren said. "You are absolutely not fixing this. In fact, you are not to open your mouth unless I give you the nod, do you understand?"

"But—"

"But nothing." He pressed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Al, you're the best in my department and you know it. I don't want to lose you. The way this is going, this is looking very much like a fire-able incident, do you understand that?"

Her legs started to wobble. Fire-able? "I made a mistake," she said.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“You lost your temper. Again. With the son of a very important client.” Darren held up both his hands, palms outward. “Just let me do what I can to mitigate this. You’ll come in with me, but you’ll sit there and stay quiet until I tell you not to.”

“I—”

“I will fire you myself if you so much as utter a syllable without my permission.”

She clamped her mouth shut.

“Better,” Darren said. He looked her up and down, obviously finding her presentable. “Right, let’s get in there then.” He took her arm and stopped her for a second. “Listen, I’ll do what I can, but no promises.”

Her mouth went dry and her stomach flip-flopped. She wasn’t sure how it had all come to this. How had she gone from a normal day to suddenly having the threat of losing everything over her head? It seemed like such an over-reaction.

Darren let go of her arm and she followed him into the room.

IT HELPED IF she looked at the table. It helped if she tried to block out what was being said. But then, she’d always had good hearing, and Darren wasn’t exactly keeping his voice low.

“Ms. Williams has proven results,” he was saying now.

“There’s no room for a loose cannon,” said Hawkins, Darren’s boss and a man that

Alli rarely saw.

“Ms. Williams has been putting a lot of work in and a lot of hours in,” said Darren.

“And now she’s having a mental breakdown?” asked Hawkins.

Alli looked up at this, ready to jump down his throat, but she caught Darren’s eye and saw that he was about to grasp what he saw as a lifebelt. She cleared her throat. Screw this, no one was about to throw her under the mental health bus, she wasn’t going to stand for this, she—

“Perhaps we could ask Ms. Williams to wait outside for a few moments?” Darren said.

Hawkins grunted, but Alli stayed where she was. Darren kicked her under the table. “Al, if you wouldn’t mind?”

She very much did mind. She minded so much that she thought she might burst with it. But she looked at his face and then she looked at Hawkins’ face and Halen’s face and, god help her, Colman’s impassive face, and she froze.

“We’ll call for you when we’re ready for you,” drawled Colman. A partner. The man who controlled everything. Well, half of everything.

Ali found herself standing up and walking out and closing the door and collapsing into one of the waiting chairs outside.

This couldn’t be happening. Not over a mistake. She’d be the first to admit that she’d lost it a little. Okay, she could probably be a bit more patient. But how was she to know who the damn man was? It wasn’t like she wasn’t polite to his father.

He'd been asking stupid questions and she had a limited amount of time.

Still though, she couldn't lose it all over this, over something so small that it practically wasn't anything at all.

Apart from anything else, what the hell would she do all day? She tried to imagine a day without an office to go to and couldn't.

Of course, there were weekends. But she mostly worked. Or did laundry. Ordered her shopping in. That was pretty much it.

How was she supposed to fill hours and hours without going to work?

Her stomach felt acidic again and her mouth tasted bad and the more she thought about things, the more angry she got. This was all a stupid mistake and now Darren was in there calling her a hysterical woman and pretending like she had mental health problems and...

And then the door was opening and the men were walking out. Colman and Hawkins didn't look at her. Halen gave her a sympathetic glance. Darren waited for them to leave and then slumped into the chair beside her.

"You can thank me by taking on my shittiest client," he said.

"What?"

"I'm kidding. Sort of."

"Thank you?" she said, seething. "Thank you for what, exactly?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“For keeping you your job,” he said, staring at her as though she’d gone mad. “Not that it was easy, and not that there aren’t strings attached.”

She kept her voice low and level. “Strings? What sort of strings, exactly?”

“Anger management,” he said with a sniff. “Still, could be worse, you—”

“Anger management?” she spat. “So just to be clear, not only have you gone in there and lied about my mental health status, you’ve also agreed to send me to some sort of course or something without my permission?”

“Do you actually want your job?”

A flicker of acid in her stomach again. “Of course I do.”

“And I didn’t lie, Al.”

“You didn’t lie? About me being hysterical and whatever else you told them?”

Darren turned to her. “I didn’t tell them that you were hysterical. I told them that you were stressed and working too hard and that you had anger problems that hopefully could be sorted out with a bit of help.”

“Anger problems?” She sat up straighter in her chair, unable to believe just what she was hearing. “Anger problems?”

Darren shook his head. “Al, you’ve had five assistants in the last year. They keep

quitting because you keep losing your temper with them. The mail guys are afraid to come into your office, and I removed you from the mandatory mentoring program because you turned interns into quivering wrecks. I get that you're a hard worker and that you have certain opinions, and that you want things done a certain way. I agree that you get results. But I also think that you've got a temper, and it's starting to get out of control."

Ali opened her mouth and then closed it, then opened it again. "I can't fight against that, can I?" she said, feeling pressure building up in her chest. "Anything I say makes it look like I have an anger problem, even if I don't."

Darren laid a hand on her leg. "Listen, this isn't a bad thing. You're keeping your job, you're keeping your clients. All you have to do is go to some wellness retreat for a couple of weeks and get them to sign you off as having completed an anger management course. It'll be nice. A bit of rest."

"Nice? Nice?" She almost choked on the words.

"Fine," Darren said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. "It won't be nice. But you will be doing it because that's what the company says you have to do to keep the job that you say you want."

He started typing and Ali leaned over his shoulder. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Booking you in," he said, hitting a random search result from the page he'd brought up. "Here you go, this one will do. Two weeks, certified, the office will pay for it."

Before she could stop him, he was keying in her information and all she could do was watch, furious, as he signed her up for something that she neither wanted nor needed.

"I won't go," she hissed.

Darren shrugged. “Then you’ll need to pack up your desk today, please.”

She glared at him and he simply looked back, phone in hand. “Well, I won’t like it.”

He sighed. “No one’s asking you to, Al. Just go and get it done, please, so that we can all go back to work.”

She wanted to punch him but managed to restrain herself. See? She could control herself. She didn’t need anger management in the slightest.

Chapter Four

Marilyn put the coffee jug on the table and Bea cringed and got up to get a plate to put under it.

“It’s not that we’re trying to kick you out of your room or anything,” Robbie was saying, cutting into a sausage.

“God no,” said Marilyn. “We’d never do that.”

Which was odd because that sounded like exactly what they were doing to Bea.

“It’s just that there’s two of us and one of you and, well, with all Marilyn’s stuff, it might be a bit easier,” continued Robbie. “We could get some of those boxes out of the hallway, for example, and just store them in the bedroom if we’re using it. And then you can use the spare room. You always said you liked the mattress in there anyway.”

“It’s harder than the one on our bed,” Bea said. There was a moment of stillness as everyone recognized her slip-up. “I mean, the big bed. The bed in the other room. My bed.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“Obviously, it would be a bit easier,” said Marilyn, helping herself to bacon. “But only if you want to.”

“Right,” Bea said, staring at her crackers and hummus. “Right.” She really didn’t want to move out of her room. All her things were there. It was comfortable. It was the one place she could close the door and know that Marilyn had never been.

Which was unkind because Marilyn was nice really. She’d made breakfast. She was trying so hard to make her way through what had to be a very uncomfortable and difficult situation. They all were.

“You don’t mind though, do you, Bea?” Robbie asked, looking up at her with those big blue eyes that had always used to make her heart feel funny. “It’d be easier, and it’d make more sense and it’s only for a few weeks until we get things settled.”

Idly, Bea wondered if she’d ever feel the same way about someone else as she’d felt about Robbie. Not that she felt that way now, she most certainly didn’t. From the second she’d found out that he’d been with someone else every ounce of love for him had leaked out of her pores. But it had been a nice feeling, a comfortable one, when it existed. One she wouldn’t mind sharing with someone else.

At least she was starting to think about the possibility of someone else. That had to be a start. Still, she’d have to be careful. She couldn’t have anyone else moving into the flat. Four of them here would be... practically an orgy, wrong on so many levels and a nightmare when it came to bathroom scheduling.

“Bea?” Marilyn was saying.

“She gets like this sometimes,” said Robbie. “Kind of spaces out.”

“I’m not spacing out,” said Bea even though she kind of was.

“So, about the bedroom situation?” asked Robbie.

Bea bit her lip. It did all make an awful lot of sense. She would prefer to be able to walk down the hall to the toilet without risking breaking her neck tripping over boxes. And Robbie so obviously wanted her to do this, and Marilyn so obviously wanted things not to be weird.

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” Bea said. “Of course. I’ll move some stuff around this morning when you’re both at work, alright?”

“You’re a star,” beamed Robbie. “See?” he said, turning to Marilyn. “I told you she wouldn’t mind.”

“You’re a star,” parroted Marilyn with a pleased little smile that gave her dimples.

Bea had a sudden image of what their children would look like. All big blue eyes and sweet dimples, and she suppressed a shudder. Not that children made her shudder. It was more the idea that Robbie would have them, and have them with someone else.

“Right then,” Robbie said, standing up and wiping his hands on his trousers in a way that always made Bea want to hand him a paper towel like she was his mother. “I should be off. I’ll see you both tonight.”

It was the first time that Bea could remember actually not wanting someone to come home. Or perhaps wanting not to be home herself.

She was being kind, she was doing the right thing, but a tiny little piece of her was

awfully upset about losing her home. That's what was happening here. This place didn't seem safe anymore, didn't seem cozy or... or hers. It made her sad.

Robbie leaned over and kissed Marilyn and then leaned in and almost kissed Bea before, rethinking very quickly, patting her on the shoulder and leaving.

For a long minute or two, Marilyn and Bea sat at the table, then Marilyn cleared her throat. "I'll, um, I'll be getting my things together too, then."

"It's a bit early for you to go, isn't it?" Bea asked, looking at the clock on the microwave.

"Want to get an early start this morning," Marilyn said, even though it was perfectly obvious that all she wanted was to not be sitting at the kitchen table with Bea.

Bea let her go. After a while, she heard the front door close, and then quiet blanketed everything and she was finally alone.

Alone to do what? To move her belongings out of her own room? To search for a job that no one wanted to give her?

She sighed. Maybe it was time for a complete rethink. Like Robbie diverting himself from kissing her cheek and patting her shoulder instead. Maybe she needed to move on from cheek-kissing, or yoga teaching in this case, and head more toward shoulder-patting, whatever that might be.

The thought of sitting in an office all day made her feel a bit sick.

All had been fine and dandy until three months ago, when the gym chain she'd taught for had gone bankrupt. And then Robbie had come home with his... his news. And then life had sort of crumbled away.

She took a bite of cracker and wondered if she could maybe retrain to do something else. And if she could, where she'd find the money to support herself doing it. Then her phone rang and she picked it up quickly in order to stop thinking about changing her life just one more time.

“Lo,” she said, mouth still half full.

“Bea? It's me.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“Liz?”

“Um, I need to talk to you. Can you come? I’m at St. Elizabeth’s.”

“The hospital?” Bea said, mouth falling open. She gathered herself. “Er, why? Are you alright?”

“You’re not going to believe this,” Liz groaned. “But... I’ve broken my leg.”

LIZ WAS LYING in a bed with one heavily bandaged leg raised by a pulley system when Bea rushed in.

“I told you,” Bea wailed. “I told you that the universe was listening. You can’t curse ex-boyfriends to fall down the stairs and break their legs and then expect that there won’t be repercussions.”

“Calm down,” said Liz, looking pale but otherwise better than Bea had expected. “Did Robbie break his leg?”

“No,” said Bea.

“Well then, I didn’t curse him, did I? And I didn’t fall down the stairs, just for info.”

Bea pulled a chair up beside the bed. “What did happen then?”

Liz sniffed and looked away. “I was changing the bathroom lightbulb and... fell off the ladder.”

Bea groaned. "That's practically the same thing," she said.

"Oh, quit your superstitious clap-trap," Liz said. "I didn't ask you here to fill me with doom and gloom. I'm in hospital, I've got quite enough of that already."

"When can you go home?" Bea asked, thinking of Liz's husband and their adorable dog.

"They're operating tomorrow morning once the swelling's gone down a bit. After that, it should just be a day or so. They can't keep me down for long, you know how I am," grinned Liz. "And then I'll be back to Pina Coladas and watching Loose Women."

Bea frowned. "Um, just how stoned are you right now?"

Liz beamed. "High as a kite, my little friend. Practically a satellite at this point. It's terribly lovely, you know. Want to try some?" She began to fiddle with the IV in her arm.

"No, no," said Bea, putting her hand over Liz's.

"Please yourself, more for me," Liz said, settling again. "Anyway, I've asked you here..." She giggled. "I sound like Hercule Poirot inviting all the suspects together in the drawing room to reveal the murderer, don't I?"

Bea sighed. "Maybe we should try and stay on task? You need my help with something, right?"

"Right," said Liz solemnly. "Very helpful that you are." Another giggle. "And now I sound like Yoda."

“I’m not a fantastic cook,” said Bea. “But I can go around to yours and whip up a few things to put in the freezer for Den. He’s not vegan anymore, is he?”

“Oh no, he eats all the little animals now.”

“Right. And do you want me to take Brandi to my place? I can make sure she’s walked and fed and—”

Liz suddenly clamped a heavy hand over Bea’s. “Why are you acting like my husband’s an imbecile? He’s very capable of taking care of himself and the dog. He’s a grown man. You don’t need to be running after him and looking after him, I certainly don’t.”

“Ah,” said Bea. “Right. Yes.”

Liz struggled to push herself up on her pillows, wincing a little as she did so. “No, no. Den’s fine.” She took a deep breath, like she was trying to sober herself up. “Den’s fine. Brandi’s fine. I’ll be fine. It’s the yoga that’s not fine.”

“Hard to do yoga with a broken leg,” Bea agreed.

“Exactamundo,” said Liz, looking serious. “Which is why today is your lucky day, my lovely little friend.”

“I wish you’d stop calling me little,” Bea said. “And lucky how exactly?”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“Because... Because of the retreaty relaxy place.”

Bea searched her head to decode this. “Ah, right, the retreat that you’re supposed to teach at.”

“Exactamundo,” beamed Liz again. “And you’re just the job for the person. The person for the job. The... You can do it.”

“You want me to take your place?” Bea asked.

Liz smiled beatifically. “Exactamundo.” She closed her eyes, then opened one and glared at Bea. “And don’t be a push-over, no letting people walk all over you, my little friend.” Then she closed the eye again and fell asleep.

Chapter Five

If Alli knew one thing, it was that there had to be a way out of this. Alright, so she was sitting in the car with a case on the back seat driving toward whatever hell-hole this was going to be. But she still knew that there had to be a way not to waste two precious weeks of her life learning... what? How not to be a go-getter? How not to stand up for herself? How to let people walk all over her?

Which was not the point, as Darren had pointed out when he’d escorted her to her flat.

“I’m not a child,” she’d said.

“I’m not treating you like one,” he’d said reasonably. “I’m just making sure that you’re doing what you need to do so that we both keep our jobs and life can go back to the way it was.”

“Just with me being less myself.”

“Less angry,” he’d said.

She’d rolled her eyes and taken a deep breath because seriously, this really couldn’t be happening. And then she’d done something which even she had to admit was crossing the line.

She’d taken a step forward, pushing Darren toward the wall, then taken another one, until she was close enough that she could see the whiskers on his chin and could hear him swallow.

“Come on,” she’d said, lowering her voice to practically a purr. “We don’t really have to do this. I can just work from home for the next two weeks and we’ll tell no one about it.” She’d raised her hand to cup his cheek.

And he’d slid out of her grasp, brushing his suit off as if she’d been dusty or infectious. “We don’t have to do this. You have to do this,” he’d said. “And I think we should both pretend that that shameful little display didn’t just happen.”

It wasn’t that she liked him. She didn’t. Not like that, anyway. It had been, looking back, pure desperation. She already knew that she didn’t function that way, that whatever this mysterious sexy feeling was supposed to be she was incapable of feeling it.

The incident had left her feeling dirty and shallow and disgusted enough with herself that she’d silently packed a bag and let Darren walk her to her car in the car park

under her building.

“Sorry,” she’d mumbled as she opened the driver’s door.

He’d reached over and turned her head so that she was looking at him. His eyes were kind. “It’s fine,” he said. “Really. You were exploring every avenue, I get it. It’s one of the things that makes you so good at your job, that drive to do anything to get the results that you want.”

“If it’s such a good thing, then why are you forcing me to go into therapy or whatever?”

He smiled a little. “Because a little of something is good and a lot of something generally isn’t. Drink a glass of whiskey a night and you’re cultured. Drink a bottle and you’re a drunk. You need to learn to limit yourself, to draw boundaries, and, god forgive me for saying this, you need to learn how to switch off. You can’t work all the time. And you can’t be this angry. At this rate, you’ll have a heart attack before you’re forty.”

None of which meant that she’d play ball. She’d got in the car and driven off and was well on her way by now. Almost there, in fact. But she would find a way to get out of this. She just wasn’t sure how yet.

And now there was a stupid light blinking at her from the dashboard. She peered at it and realized that it was the low petrol light. Shit. All this bother and she’d forgotten something as simple as a fill up.

She saw the familiar lights of the petrol station coming up. Better to take care of this now. She’d need a full tank for when she broke out of this stupid wellness prison. She smirked at the idea of a getaway car running out of petrol.

Indicator on, she turned into the forecourt.

???

In the end, it had been the best plan for everyone involved. Liz got to rest in her sick bed without worrying about letting a client down. Marilyn and Robbie got the entire flat to themselves for two weeks. And Bea herself got a job, with hopefully enough money to save up for a deposit for a new flat on the off-chance that Marilyn and Robbie really weren't planning on moving out. And a potential long-term gig if the retreat liked her work.

So who said that the universe wasn't listening now?

Everything had turned out fine, at least for the short term, and Bea was even smiling as she pootled along in Benny, her ancient Renault.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“You might not be fast, but you’ll get me there, won’t you?” she asked, stroking the dashboard.

Benny grumbled in response.

This had to be her life changing for the better. In fact, Bea was determined that this was definitely her life changing for the better. Even if she had to make things happen that way. Her problems seemed to be solving themselves for the time being, and the only thing really bothering her was what Liz had said.

Don’t be a push-over.

Of course, Liz had been doped up to the eyeballs and half asleep.

Still though, she might have had a point. Had Bea actually been acting like a push-over? She supposed that she could see why it looked that way. Most people didn’t live with their exes and their new girlfriends.

She’d thought she was just being kind. But maybe she could have a little more backbone now that Liz mentioned it. A bit of... not courage exactly, but a bit of... oomph. Maybe that was what she needed to get her life back on track, to propel all of these changes into something more sustainable.

Benny grumbled again.

“Ugh, what’s wrong, Ben?” Bea glanced down at the four flashing lights on the dash. Three of them were just the normal, everyday flashes that she was used to by now,

the fourth was new. “Ah, crap, did I forget your juice?”

She peered out of the windscreen and saw the red and yellow lights of the petrol station.

“Not a problem, Benny-boy,” she said, shifting gear. “Let’s get you filled up. It’s not far now.”

She put her indicator on, changed lanes, and pulled off the road into the garage forecourt. She was just pulling around to the pump, turning Benny in a tight circle, when a car appeared out of nowhere.

It was like a film in slow motion and there was nothing she could do.

One second there was the bright glowing neon of the petrol station, the next there was a sleek black monster pulling out in front of her and Bea knew that Benny’s brakes weren’t good enough to stop in time.

She stomped on the brake anyway and squeezed her eyes shut. A millisecond later, there was a crunch and a crash and she juddered against her seatbelt.

Bea’s eyes flashed open. “Oh, Benny, poor Benny,” she said as she hurriedly unbuckled her seatbelt.

She climbed out of the car in time to see the driver’s door on the other car open with a smooth whir. Some rich city boy, no doubt. Bea pulled herself up to her full height. If there was ever a time to stand up for herself, it was now.

She was momentarily thrown off when a tall, leggy blonde climbed out of the swish car. Tossing her hair over her shoulder, the woman looked angrier than Bea thought she’d ever seen anyone look. “What the hell were you doing?”

Which stung, because Bea had just been turning to get to the pump. “Driving. What were you doing?” she said. Good start. She hadn’t apologized yet, anyway.

“Driving with your damn eyes closed?” snarled the woman.

A stray thought sprung into Bea’s head. This woman would be very, very good at yoga. With those long limbs and strong, toned muscles. She shook her head. Not the time. “Absolutely not,” Bea said stoutly. “It’s very obvious what happened.”

“Oh, is it?” said the woman, coming closer.

Bea forced herself not to take a step back. “Yes, just look. I was turning to pull into the pump and you came around the corner too fast. You didn’t have time to see me, so you hit me.”

“Bullshit. You were turning, how could you have seen me?”

“You were behind the corner,” Bea said. Her heart was throbbing in her chest and she felt sick. She really didn’t like this standing up for herself business.

“For fuck’s sake.” The woman stepped back again and looked at the damage to the two cars.

“Look,” Bea said, craning her neck to see for herself. “It’s just a scratch. It’s not like anything awful happened.”

The woman glared at her. “That’s because your car is worth all of a fiver,” she said. “Mine’s a Mercedes.”

Bea swallowed. “Right. Well, um, I suppose we’d better swap insurance details.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “I don’t have time for that.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

And something in Bea snapped. It was something about the way the woman spoke to her, like she wasn't important enough to waste time on, like Benny didn't matter, like Bea herself didn't matter.

"Oh, piss off you stuck-up, snotty little excuse for a woman," Bea said. She slammed her mouth shut quickly. She had no idea where those words had come from.

The woman was staring at her. And then, with a shrug, she pulled a business card out of her suit pocket. "Have your people call my people. We'll get the insurance sorted." Then she climbed back into her car and reversed out of the forecourt and whizzed off down the road.

Bea looked at the card in her hand, not even reading it, just amazed that she had it at all. She'd stood up for herself and look what had happened. She'd got the woman's info. The petrol station cameras would have everything else she needed if the woman decided to kick up a fuss about paying for Benny's damage.

She grinned as she pulled out the petrol nozzle and unscrewed the cap on Benny's side. Things really were looking up, weren't they? She looked down at the card again. Alli Williams. This Alli Williams was not going to walk all over her.

Chapter Six

Maybe today was just a cruel joke and she was going to wake up any minute. Alli pulled her car up into a parking space and took a deep breath. Getting pranged in her car was just the icing on the damn cake.

Still, if the woman bothered to follow up, Alli would just get her lawyer to handle things. She didn't have time to waste on little people with little problems. Though, to be fair, the woman had been attractive in a strange sort of way. All smooth skin and shining hair so that Alli wondered what someone like that had been doing in a car that so obviously needed to be scrapped.

"Hello?"

She jumped and turned. A man was bending down and looking through the driver's side window. The tinted glass must mean that he couldn't see much. "Hello there?"

Alli took a breath. Alright. Fine. She could do this. She could be charming when she needed to. All she had to do was talk her way out of things. She buzzed the window down. "Hi," she said with a smile.

"Well hello there," the man smiled back. He was blonde and rough-shaven and had, at some point, had that messy surfer-boy attractiveness. He'd aged out of it now and looked twenty going on forty and the look wasn't a good one.

"I'm Alli, Alli Williams."

"Ah, our late addition," he beamed. "Come on out, we're all anxious to meet you, of course."

He stepped back and Alli got out of the car. There was enough dim light in the evening to see that she was parked in front of what looked like a cheap boarding school, or maybe a starless hotel. She frowned.

"Ah, yes, St. Hilda's. Up until last year, this was a teacher training college," the man said, bending to pick up the case that Alli hauled out of the back seat. "And now we've taken it over for our own nefarious purposes." He laughed at his not-at-all-

funny joke.

“Right,” Alli said, still frowning.

“Luke, Luke Bradshaw. I’m the director of the wellness program. Let’s get you inside, shall we?”

“Do you greet all your inmates at their cars?” Alli asked.

Luke smiled again. “Clients, not inmates. And speaking of which, the others are waiting for you.” He turned to go into the building.

Alli followed. “As I’m sure you’ve guessed, there’s been some sort of mistake. I’m not really supposed to be in a place like this.”

Luke laughed again. “On the contrary, you’re exactly the type of clientele we hope to attract.”

“I don’t have an anger problem,” Alli said. Which was true. Alright, sometimes she got angry. But it wasn’t a problem. Not to her. It got the job done. It kept people out of her way. She had no problems with either of those things.

Again, Luke laughed and Alli thought that she might get pretty tired of his chuckle if she were to stick around.

“We are a wellness program and a relaxation retreat, as well as dealing with anger issues,” he said as he mounted the steps. “So you have no worries on that front.” He opened a large door. “In we go.”

Alli tried a different tack. “I had rather hoped that I could speak with you about possibly speeding this process along. A sort of fast-track, if you will.”

He stopped in a cold entrance hall. “A fast-track?”

“Mmm. Maybe I just stay for the program tonight and perhapstomorrow and then...”
She lifted an eyebrow.

“Oh no, I’m afraid that won’t do. We do need heads in beds, I’m afraid. Something to do with our funding. You’ll have to speak to our finance person on that.” He was looking around and finally, a large man loomed out of the shadows. “This is Josh, he’ll show you to your room.”

“Evening, ma’am.” He was approximately the size of a double decker bus and looked like he might eat her swish Mercedes for breakfast. He also called her ma’am. Again.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“I’m sorry, I really do need—” she began.

Luke waved her off. “My door is always open,” he said as he walked away.

“Now listen here,” she began. Then she caught herself. Luke hadn’t turned. And even she could see that losing it with the man she needed to convince that she didn’t have an anger problem probably wasn’t in her best interests.

“If you’d like to follow me, Alli, isn’t it?” said the bus. Josh. That was his name. Said Josh.

Alli gave him a look. The kind of look that usually sent assistants screaming for the hills.

Josh simply smiled at her. “I’ve been in prison,” he said. “A look like that can’t scare me.” He picked up her case. “I’m all rehabilitated now, of course. So nothing to worry about.” He eyed her. “Mostly.”

Jesus. Uncharacteristically unsure of what to do, Alli followed him as he mounted the stairs.

“It’ll do you no good trying to get the boss to sign you out of here,” Josh said calmly as they went up. “He’s right about the heads in beds. Half our funding comes from a government program and that means we need to keep places full. He’s more likely to try and persuade you to stay longer than to let you out early.”

“Not even for good behavior?” Alli said. The paint on the banisters was flaking and

the old lino on the stairs was curling at the corners.

“Come now, the place isn’t as bad as you might think. There’s a lot of time for reflection and relaxation. You might even enjoy the quiet, some of our clients do.”

“I couldn’t give a damn what the other inmates think,” Alli said tartly, starting to regain her balance. There were piles of dust in the corners of the stairs and the whole place smelled of wet cabbage and powdered mashed potatoes.

“That’s not the sort of attitude that will graduate you from the program,” said Josh as he took four huge steps down a corridor and stopped in front of a door.

He looked like some kind of troll guarding a bridge and Alli snorted in frustration. “What will get me graduated from the program then?”

He threw open the door. “Completing it,” he said simply. “This is your room.”

She looked in to see a slim single bed, a desk, and a tiny window. “No.”

“No?”

“Just no,” she said. “Not up to standards. I’m not staying here.”

Josh shrugged. “There’s not much choice, I’m afraid. None of the other rooms are any better, if that helps.”

“Not in the slightest.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m going to have to ask you for your cell phone, please.”

She just stared at him.

He looked slightly shame-faced. “All part of the program. If you could just hand it over, it would be better for both of us.”

“What’s the alternative?”

He just looked at her.

Oh. Wrestling with a bus wasn’t on her list of things to do. But then, neither was staying in a decrepit insane asylum. She reached into her pocket without thinking and pulled out her phone. She didn’t hand it over.

Josh sighed, but didn’t look angry. “Listen, I get it, being here can be a shock. But I assume you’re here for a reason? Very few of our clients make their own reservations.”

Alli thought about Darren. Thought about her job. She was walking a line here. She loved her job and she didn’t want to lose it, didn’t want to lose the life she had. Neither, though, did she want to be here. She weighed her options.

Josh rubbed his face. “Alright, how about this. Give me the phone and any other electronics you might have and then I’ll take you down to Mr. Bradshaw’s office and you can make your official complaints.”

“Official complaints.” She did sort of like the sound of that.

“You’re not the first, believe me.” He held out his hand.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

To her surprise, Alli found herself handing over her phone.

“And the laptop that’s in your bag, please.”

She hadn’t been about to hand that over. But before she could kick up a fuss about it, he’d already opened the bag and slipped it out.

“Excellent. Now how about meeting your fellow participants?” Josh said, with a wide, patient smile.

“That won’t be necessary.” What had happened to official complaints? She had the distinct feeling that she’d been taken advantage of.

“They’re having coffee and waiting for the program to begin,” he said. “There’s cake. Sandwiches too. Celine whips up a very satisfying Victoria Sponge, light as air.”

Alli’s stomach grumbled. But she said nothing, just stared.

“Fine, fine,” Josh said finally. “We’ll wander through and have a look on the way to Mr. Bradshaw’s office, alright?”

Alli said nothing but stepped out of the dreary room and let Josh lead the way back downstairs.

IN A COLD room with damp air, a sad group of people gathered around a coffee urn and Alli’s patience was wearing thinner by the second.

“Coffee?” Josh asked.

“No,” snapped Alli. “Get me out of here.”

“No time to meet your fellow participants?” asked Josh.

A row of sad faces looked around at her and Alli could see immediately that they weren't her kind of people. Not that she was a snob just, well, she could tell these things.

“Let's see,” Josh said cheerfully. “We've got Julia.” An older woman. “Charles.” A sadder than average looking man. “Izzy.” Younger and slightly brighter than the others. “Marcus.” Probably a serial killer, or headed in that direction. “And Leslie.” So beige she was practically invisible. “Now, how about that coffee?”

“No,” Alli said, patience finally snapping. “Absolutely not. You've taken my personal electronics, you've practically kidnapped me, I'm not at all sure that I'm not a prisoner here, you are going to take me to see your boss right this instant or I'm going to be calling my lawyer.”

There was a stunned silence.

“You've got no phone,” pointed out one of the others. Probably Marcus. He looked like he had a death wish.

“Now!” Alli barked at Josh.

With a sigh, he turned and walked out. Alli stalked after him. She wasn't staying here. Not in this cut-rate holiday camp. There was no way in hell.

Chapter Seven

The place looked like a haunted convent, or perhaps one of those abandoned mansions that kids filmed themselves breaking into. But Bea was in too much of a hurry to pay attention to the details. Bag over her shoulder, she raced up the stairs and had just enough time to wonder whether she was supposed to knock or ring before the door opened.

“Are you the yoga teacher?”

Bea’s mouth opened but words wouldn’t come out. The man who’d opened the door looked like a giant. And not the nice BFG kind of giant, but the other kind, the kind that crunched children’s bones and drank their blood.

Then he smiled and his eyes lit up and he was holding out a hand. “The name’s Josh, I’m general dog’s body, security when necessary, and, um, I teach mindfulness.” He blushed a little at this.

“That’s amazing,” said Bea, grinning up at him. “I mean, the breadth of qualifications there is pretty impressive.”

He grinned back. “And you’re yoga?”

“Yes. Well, no. I’m technically Bea. But I’m here to teach yoga.”

“Brilliant, in you come,” Josh said, taking a step back so that she could slide in.

Bea’s nose wrinkled. Cold cabbage and instant mashed potatoes. The place smelled like a bad primary school.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

“Och, it’s just because it used to be a teacher training college,” Josh said, noticing her look. “The food’s much better now. We’ve got Celine, she’s the housekeeper, dusts the spider webs, that sort of thing. And she keeps up all fed.”

“Us all?” Bea asked as she followed Josh down a long corridor.

“Well, there’s the six clients that we’ve got for this session, you’ll meet those in a few minutes. Then there’s me and you, Luke Bradshaw, he’s the boss. Um, Lex is the main therapist and overseer, then Daria, she does meditation and relaxation. And that’s about it, I suppose.”

“Where is everyone?” Bea asked.

But before Josh could answer, an attractive blonde man popped out of a door to her right. “You!”

Bea stopped in her tracks.

“That’s Bradshaw, the boss,” Josh hissed.

Bea pulled herself up tall. He looked angry, but that was alright. She could stand up for herself. Look at what had just happened. Okay, crashing Benny wasn’t great, but she’d handled the situation and no one had walked all over her.

“You’re the yoga girl?” Bradshaw asked, face red in the cheeks.

As he got closer, Bea could see that he really wasn’t as attractive as she’d thought. He

looked out of place in his own face somehow. Yoga girl. She wasn't sure she appreciated that. "Yoga teacher, yes," she said calmly. "Beatrice Thomas, pleased to meet you."

"You should have been here hours ago," he snapped. "This hardly bodes well, does it?"

"I'm so sorry. Obviously, there's been a change of plan here and I've stepped in at the last minute—"

"I'm not here for excuses. Pull yourself together and get on with the job that you're being paid to do." He turned back toward the door he'd come out of.

"But, I—"

The door slammed. Josh pulled a face. "Ignore him. You'll have to do some paperwork, but you might want to leave that for later. See him when he's in a better mood. Why's there been a change of plan then? What happened?"

As he took her up the rickety stairs she told him about Liz and her broken leg.

"Oooh, sounds like the universe answered her questions then," Josh said.

"That's what I said. She said that it's superstitious clap-trap."

"I say that we need to be careful what we put out into the world, because you never know what it's going to bring back to you," said Josh, pointing toward a door. "That's your place, throw your bag in and we'll get downstairs. There might be time for a cuppa before you need to meet the clients."

Bea pushed open the door to see the world's skinniest bed and something that might

be a desk if you were five years old and could fit your legs under it.

“Bathroom’s down the hall,” Josh called from outside. “Can’t miss it. I’d advise getting up early though, else the hot water’ll be gone.”

“Lovely,” said Bea, staring around the tiny space. She wasn’t sure she could fit in the bed and she was hardly large. Still, she supposed she wasn’t going to be hosting guests in it. And a room of her own was debate-ably better than sharing a flat with Robbie and Marilyn.

Wasn’t it?

She thought about her own comfy bed and then remembered that she wouldn’t have been sleeping in it anyway. She’d have been in the spare room with a pillow over her head, trying not to hear the love birds next door.

Yes, this was better than that. Plus, she needed the money. Plus plus, she needed the job that might get her future jobs. So she shouldn’t look gift horses in the mouth.

“It’s lovely,” she said as she went back out to Josh. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

“I’ve seen better looking prison cells,” Josh said. “Literally.”

“Ah, been inside?”

“I have indeed. I try not to keep it from people, I don’t like hiding things. I’m on the right road now, and I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of.”

Bea looped her arm through his. “Glad to hear it,” she said. “Now, I think you mentioned a cup of tea? I’m parched.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

THE STAFF ROOM was filled with armchairs and couches that had long ago seen better days. It was dark outside now and unflattering fluorescent lights lit the room.

“Alrighty,” Josh said. “Here we’ve got Daria, she’s meditation.”

A limber, attractive, dark-haired woman looked up from a magazine and smiled. Bea smiled back.

“There’s Celine, our chef extraordinaire,” he said, pointing out an older woman who raised her hand in greeting. “And this is Lex, our therapist and head of the program.”

Lex looked up from her notes. She was young, far younger than Bea would have expected. She had short, blonde hair and gray smudges under her eyes that made it look like she hadn’t slept for weeks.

“Everyone, this is Bea, the new yoga teacher,” Josh said, grabbing a cup from the coffee table and filling it from the tea urn in the corner.

“Wait, aren’t you supposed to be Liz?” Lex asked, looking confused.

“Liz had a message from the universe,” said Josh, handing the tea to Bea.

“I’m the stand in,” Bea said. “But I’m very happy to be here, even if I’m a bit late.”

“As long as you’re on time for your sessions,” Lex said. “Here, take a look at this, it’s your schedule.” She handed Bea a piece of paper.

Bea scanned the sheet and then frowned. "I'm alright with the yoga, obviously, but you've put me down for group therapy as well."

"Is that a problem?" Lex asked.

"Well, I'm... I'm not really qualified for—"

"We all step up where needed," Lex said. "And there wasn't anyone else available, so I'm sure you'll muddle through."

"Yes, but—"

"Listen, I'll be honest, Bea, was it?" said Lex. "We're shorthanded, short staffed, and the whole budget is on a bit of a shoestring at the moment. You're going to have to step up."

Bea took a breath. She didn't want to do this. Stepping up was one thing. Providing therapy to potentially sick or violent people was quite another. There was no way she was qualified to do that. And she wondered if Lex was in any way qualified to do what she was obviously doing. She looked all of fifteen.

"Is that a problem?" Lex asked.

Bea felt every eye in the room on her. She cleared her throat and thought about standing up for herself, thought about saying the right thing, but everyone was looking and she didn't want to make a scene.

One step at a time. Maybe standing up for herself once a day was enough to be going on with.

"No, no problem," she said. "I'm sure I'll... get used to it." She'd have to pick Lex's

brains on this, get some pointers, but therapy was essentially just listening, right?

“Excellent,” Lex said. She clapped her hands together. “Alright everyone, it’s time to get this show on the road.”

Bea thought she didn’t sound as confident as she would have wanted. In fact, she sounded an awful lot like a student intern. But she paid attention anyway.

“We’ve got six clients for this session,” Lex was saying. “We need to ensure that they have a good experience and will be recommending us.”

A good experience? From Liz, Bea had an overview of the program. As far as she knew, the place was part of a mandated anger management program.

“A good experience?” she whispered to Josh.

He rolled his eyes. “Bradshaw wasn’t getting enough clients through the courts and social services. So he opened the program up and advertised it privately, made it look like some kind of relaxation retreat for people with temper tantrums.”

“Right,” said Bea. That sounded like a match not at all made in heaven.

“Put on your best smiles and let’s go and meet the clients,” Lex was saying, standing up.

Bea followed along behind, starting to think that maybe this program wasn’t quite what she’d been led to believe. She could say something, of course, but then... then she might not be working here tomorrow, and that hardly seemed like a good thing.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

This was all new. She was probably just getting the wrong end of the stick. She was here to teach yoga. She just needed to buckle down and do her job, that was all.

Lex led them all into what looked like some kind of assembly hall. Five people were sitting in seats right at the front.

“We seem to be missing one,” she said.

“Yeah, um, there’s one kicking up a fuss with Luke,” said Josh. He leaned closer to Bea. “Probably why he was looking so cross earlier. For someone who runs an anger management program, he does get pissed off quite a lot.”

Bea bit back a smile.

“Well, we’re not starting until we’re all here,” snapped Lex, looking like she might cry at the disruption to her plans. “You,” she said, pointing at a tall, sad looking man. “Run and find our straggler, please.”

“I’ll go,” Josh said.

“No, I need you here,” said Lex.

And for the first time, Bea realized that Lex was afraid. Afraid of the clients, afraid of what might happen if they turned all that anger on her.

She kept a close eye on Lex as the tall client slipped out of the room to find whoever was missing.

Chapter Eight

There were two options here. Throw something or walk away. Alli was veering very strongly toward the throwing option. In fact, she was already eyeing a bronze paperweight as Luke tried to calm her down.

“It’s all out of my hands,” he was saying.

“Like it’s in mine?” she snapped back.

“Alli, please.”

“Please what? This place is a cut-rate, disgusting excuse for a retreat. There are no amenities, the bathrooms look like Churchill himself has showered in them, and there’s no excuse for a bed that small outside of a child’s nursery.”

Luke sighed and rubbed his temples. “Listen, Alli—”

“I’m neither your friend nor your equal. I am a client and you will address me as Ms. Williams.”

“Ms. Williams,” Luke said, looking like he’d rather be anywhere than right here in his office. “Look at things sensibly.”

“And now you’re implying that I’m not sensible. Excellent customer service as well.”

He took a deep breath and Alli could see that she was getting to him. Perhaps this was all she’d needed to do, get him angry, be angry herself. The irony of that was not lost on her.

“Ms. Williams,” he tried again. “I’m sure there are many reasons that you’re here—”

“Not particularly valid ones,” she interrupted. She did not like this man. Obviously, she was currently arguing with him. But there was more than that. There was an undercurrent to him that she just plain disliked.

“I’ll admit that this is not quite the luxury retreat that we have envisaged for the future. But that doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t thrive under our guidance.”

“If you do not stop speaking like a tourist brochure, I’m actually going to vomit on your desk.”

He breathed in deeply again. “Ms. Williams.”

“You’re using my name like you’re going to wear it out. There’s no reason for me to be here, there’s no reason you should be keeping me prisoner, and I demand my personal effects back.” His head cocked slightly as though he’d just thought of something and Alli internally cursed herself. She’d been on a winning streak there, what had she said wrong?

“Ms. Williams, you did not make your own reservation.”

She shrugged, no point in denying that.

“So whilst there may be no reason for you being here that you can see...” He coughed. “No reason that you and I can see, there may be an underlying reason that you’re not considering?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

She said nothing, squinting at him, thinking about Darren and trying not to think about him all at the same time.

“Perhaps the right move under these circumstances should be to contact whoever made your reservation and communicate through them,” he said, licking at dry lips. “Being sure to remind them that there are no refunds.”

Her eyes narrowed further, thinking about this. Fine, alright, Darren thought he had a good reason for sending her here. On the other hand, he’d also thought this might be fun. He’d obviously had visions of beach yoga and steamy saunas, not cold cabbage and stale single beds.

“There is a telephone in the entrance hall,” Luke said now, as though sweetening the deal.

Okay, this she could work with. She lifted her chin slightly as though she were thinking about things, then shook her head. “Won’t work.”

“Why on earth not?” he asked in surprise.

“Because it’s not nineteen-fifty-four and I don’t have anyone’s number memorized,” she said. “Give me my phone and I’ll phone him.”

He studied her. “I’ll take you to your phone and you can make one phone call,” he said finally. “On the condition that if you’re staying here, you then put the phone back into my custody and this conversation is over, you go back to the program.”

She sucked on her teeth, then nodded. She knew enough to recognize a final offer. “Deal.”

“Very well,” he said with a sigh, standing up and coming around the desk. “Follow me.”

She followed him out into the corridor and then through into a dim back room. A large, locked chest was sitting in a corner. He bent over it and put in a code. Alli glimpsed the first three numbers before he moved. Alright, three out of four. She could brute force the rest and get her phone back whenever she wanted. Not a bad result.

She schooled herself to look angry as he pulled out a bag marked with her name and took out her phone, handing it to her.

“A little privacy?”

He scowled, re-locked the chest, and stood up. “I’ll be right outside that door.”

“Please yourself.”

She waited until he was gone before she scrolled to Darren’s name.

“Alli, I’d have thought you were busy settling in. Wait, you are at the program, aren’t you? Not on a plane to Tahiti or anything?”

“I’d rather be on a plane to Birmingham than here,” she hissed. “This place is a nightmare. There’s dust everywhere, the building is practically falling down around my ears, and I’m not at all sure that anyone’s qualified to do anything.”

There was a stunned silence on the end of the phone. At least Alli interpreted it as a

stunned silence.

“I can’t stay here, obviously,” she added.

“Oh, Al.”

There was a pause, and she was already thinking that if she left now she could be in her own bed before eleven, plenty of time to get some sleep before an early morning run to the office to check on her clients. Her stomach twisted sourly.

“Al, you’re there for a reason. You’ve no idea how hard it was for me to negotiate this for you. In the end, it doesn’t really matter if it’s paradise or paradise lost, does it? It’s only for a couple of weeks.”

“What are you saying?” she felt cold inside.

“You have to stay there if you want to keep your job. I can’t put it more simply than that, Al.”

She hung up without saying another word, cradling her phone in her hand and scrolling desperately through her contacts.

But the truth was, there wasn’t a single other person that she could call.

Yes, there were plenty of clients, and her hairdresser and manicurist, her doctor, and a handful of service workers. But no one else. No one who would care that she was trapped in Miss Havesham’s house from Great Expectations. No one who would rescue her from death by cabbage smell and damp sheets.

“So, done in here, are we?” Luke said, sticking his head around the door. The rest of his body followed and he held out his hand for the phone. “I’ll take that.”

Alli handed it over because there was no reason not to. For the first time all day, she really, truly understood that she had to stay here.

Or leave her job.

“Take a right out of the door and follow the corridor around,” Luke said. “You’ll hear the others.”

Silently, she nodded, going out of the room like she was sleepwalking.

This couldn’t be happening.

She always managed to get what she wanted. How could things be different now? But she honestly couldn’t see any other choices. Nothing at all. She stayed or she lost her job, end of story.

Not only that, she had to stay and complete this stupid program. She couldn’t make a mess of things or... she’d lose her job.

She wandered slowly down the corridor. Two weeks. Could she handle two weeks of this? She shuddered. It all reminded her far too much of boarding school. Those first few days when all of seven years old she’d walked around lost and shy and alone.

Of course, she’d found her voice pretty damn soon. And once she had, there’d been no shutting her up. But she still remembered those first days.

“Hello there, are you Alli?”

She groaned as the tall, sad man greeted her. Charles. She’d always had a good head for names. “What of it?”

He stopped. “Just, well, er, they’re all waiting for you is all.”

She blew out a breath and shook her head. “You know, I’m not supposed to be here,” she said. It made her feel better to say it out loud.

Charles sniffed. “Me neither. I’m not sure anyone is, to be honest.”

Alli wasn’t particularly interested in why he was or wasn’t there. He looked sad and harmless enough, but then she supposed that there’d be a lot less serial killings if all serial killers actually looked like serial killers. “Got a plan to break out?” she asked hopefully.

“Going to do my two weeks and walk out the front door.”

“Oh.” Fantastic. Two weeks stuck with boring people. That made this all so much better.

She turned around and laid her forehead against the cool paint of the wall. She felt trapped, like she had no choices, and it wasn’t a good feeling.

“Are you alright?” Charles asked. “Do you want me to get someone?”

Deep breath. She was no quitter. Alright, she might get angrysometimes. Okay, she might not always be polite. But she was not a quitter. If this was what she had to do, she supposed she’d just have to do it. Lie her way through and be charming until they let her out and she could go back to work.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she said politely, straightening up. “Now, how about you show me where I’m supposed to be?”

A look of relief crossed Charles’s face. He wasn’t the type of man that liked a fuss,

she could see that. “Yeah, um, it’s just right down here.”

She followed him down the corridor until he stopped in front of a set of double doors.

“Do you need a minute?” he asked nicely.

Alli shook her head. If she was going to do this, she might as well get on with it. He opened the door and she stepped inside.

It took a moment to place the first face that she saw. But when she did, a slow smile spread across her face.

Chapter Nine

Bea’s first thought was that the woman had chased her down to apologize. Her second thought was that she’d chased her down to get some sort of revenge. The evil-looking grin spreading over the woman’s face didn’t particularly help matters.

Bea felt her stomach drop as she tried hard to listen to Lex’s introductory speech.

“... completion of the program will earn you an official certificate,” Lex was saying.

It wasn’t like she had the money to pay the woman off right now. Bea shuffled in her seat. It wasn’t like she was going to have that money soon either. And anyway, she reminded herself, she wasn’t at fault.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

The woman stood in the doorway and Bea's insides clenched. Any minute now she was going to say something, do something, and what was Bea going to say or do in return? Her mouth felt dry.

But the woman just stood there. Alli, that was her name. Alli Williams. With her long blonde hair and her porcelain skin and hooded green eyes. Bea looked her over, just a quick glance. She was definitely sporty looking. Again, Bea had the impression that she'd be good at yoga.

That she'd be good at curving that spine and bending over backward. Good at twisting and flexing herself.

The room was suddenly hot and Bea tugged at her collar.

"...the rest of the staff here," Lex continued. "Please remember that we're only here to help you. Aggression or anger directed toward staff members won't be tolerated."

Bea side-eyed Alli again. No aggression, no anger. She wondered if those rules applied to random strangers that walked into the program, or if they only applied to actual participants in the program.

Except now that she thought about it... why had a random stranger been let in?

"...quick introductions," said Lex. "But I'm sure staff members will do a more thorough job of introducing themselves once their sessions start. You'll find the first page in your handout is a list of sessions and your daily schedule."

Surely they wouldn't let people just walk in off the street, would they? As Bea watched, Alli looked around and then someone else, a harried, young-ish woman was handing Alli a buff envelope and Alli was taking out paperwork and suddenly blending in with the rest of the people in the room.

Bea's stomach sank into her boots.

Surely not?

But Alli was reading the papers now and Bea's hot flush turned into a cold shiver. There was only one explanation. Alli was a participant. Bea had a flash of a memory, the pure anger on Alli's face at the petrol station. It made sense, didn't it? The woman obviously needed some help. But why here?

Bea was sweaty now, stomach churning. This wasn't right. Couldn't be right. She stood up for herself one time, she lost her temper a little one time, and the results had to follow her? How was that fair?

Clearly, she was being punished by the universe for letting her anger show, this was some kind of divine retribution.

"And this is Bea, our yoga teacher, who you'll also be seeing in group therapy sessions," Lex said.

Bea turned at the sound of her name and managed a weak smile as her legs wobbled and she seriously considered fainting. Or perhaps running away. No, that wouldn't work. Not with legs as wobbly as hers. She'd just fall flat on her face and then what? She'd already be down and she wasn't entirely sure that Alli wouldn't take the adage about kicking someone while they were down seriously.

She breathed in sharply, held it, breathed out slowly. She needed to calm down.

There was going to be some explanation for all this, she had to calm herself down. Maybe Alli was here to apologize. Maybe she'd tracked her down, signed up for the course, just to get her foot in the door so she could tell Bea how sorry she was.

An hour ago, Bea had been proud of standing up for herself. Now she was having serious doubts.

If Alli was here to apologize, she'd gone to great lengths to do so. Which made Bea think that probably she was wrong.

"And finally," Lex said. "We'll have a quick introduction. Just your name is fine, no need to go into details." She smiled, and it looked scarily unsure. "You'll have plenty of time for in-depth glimpses into each other's lives in therapy." She pointed at the younger woman that had handed Alli her papers. "You first."

"Um, Isabelle, Izzy."

"Next," barked Lex.

Unless, Bea thought, unless this wasn't the same person at all. Maybe it just looked like her. Or, or maybe the incident hadn't happened at all and had been a dream and... and what? And she'd suddenly taken a nap whilst driving here? That didn't exactly make her feel better. But then she was holding her breath as Lex pointed to the next person in line, then the next, until finally she reached the woman by the door.

"Alli," said Alli, smiling pretty brightly for someone that was enrolled in an anger management program, Bea thought.

So much for the dream theory. Bea did not feel good about this. In fact, now that she thought about it, she didn't feel good about St. Hilda's at all. The building was old and decrepit, the staff didn't seem particularly qualified, and... and she had her past

looming up to confront her.

Honestly, stand up for yourself one time and look what happened. She'd have to make sure to tell Liz about this. And to ignore all future advice from Liz about not being walked over. Being walked over sounded a lot better than being chased down by someone she'd stood up against.

“And I'll let you go,” Lex smiled. “You'll see from your schedules that dinner will be served in half an hour. So spend a little time getting to know your fellow participants.”

The other staff members stood up and made a bee-line for the door. The group participants milled around for a few moments, but also drifted toward the door.

Until Bea was left standing by the small stage. And Alli was left leaning against the wall by the door.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Alli lifted an eyebrow and Bea's heart skipped a beat.

???

Things could not, in Alli's view, have worked out better. Well, obviously they could have. She could be at her desk right now and not standing in some dump in the middle of nowhere and smelling of cabbage. But on the whole, the fates had turned in her favor and she couldn't help but smile just a little.

"So," she drawled. "We meet again." It sounded appropriately dramatic and Alli gave a satisfied sigh. How had she ever doubted that things would turn out her way?

"What are you doing here?"

"Bea, wasn't it?" Alli said, sounding calm and almost cheerful. She smiled at the dark-haired woman.

"Yes," said Bea uncertainly. "But—"

Alli sighed. "Let's get to the point here. Long story short, I'm an inmate and I obviously shouldn't be here."

"I think participant might be a better word," began Bea.

"Details," Alli brushed her off.

"And why shouldn't you be here?" Bea asked. Her eyes were dark, her eyebrows

marked, cheekbones high, lips plump and pink.

Alli tore her eyes away from Bea's mouth. "Well, just look at me," she snapped. "Do I look like the kind of person that should be here?"

Bea opened her mouth. "Well..."

Alli growled at her. "Enough. I'm here, you're here, and this is a bit of a happy coincidence, isn't it? Because I think we can really help each other out here." Of course they could. She'd known the second she'd seen Bea's face that everything was going to turn out alright.

"Can we?" Bea frowned.

Alli looked over both shoulders, checking that the room was empty. "You can get me certified out of here," she said. "I can be back at my desk tomorrow."

Bea took a step back. "I can't do that."

"Really?" said Alli, stepping forward to match Bea's step back. "What was it again? Oh yes, 'piss off you stuck-up, snotty little excuse for a woman.'"

"What?"

"Wasn't that what you said?" Alli said sweetly. "And I have to say, I was shocked. Shocked that someone as calm as a yoga teacher, as controlled as a group therapist, could say something like that."

Bea audibly swallowed. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about going to your boss and telling him that one of the teachers in his

anger management program has an anger management problem,” Alli said, still smiling sweetly as all the pieces fell into place.

Bea shook her head. “I can’t,” she started.

Alli rolled her eyes. “Then you’ll get fired—”

“No, you don’t understand,” Bea said quickly. “I can’t get you certified out of here, I’ve no idea how that works. I literally just started here. I have zero authority.”

“Fuck.” Alli collapsed down onto a chair. “You sure?”

“Dead sure.”

Alli sucked on her teeth for a second. This could still work. Kind of. She might not be escaping tomorrow, but there were definitely possibilities here. “Alright, then you can get me my cell phone back.” She crossed her legs. “And an upgraded room while you’re at it.”

“But—”

With a sigh, Alli crossed her legs. “I’m not entirely sure that you understand how blackmail works,” she said. “See, I can get you fired. I assume you don’t want to be fired?” Who would? She herself certainly didn’t want to be.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“No, no, of course not.” Bea was paler now and Alli almost felt sorry for her.

“Right, so if you don’t want me going to your boss and telling him what happened earlier today, then you have to do something for me. You know I could get my hands on the surveillance tapes from the petrol station...” Probably. She really couldn’t be bothered to try, though.

“Fine,” Bea said hurriedly. “Fine. Better room, get your cell phone, got it.”

Alli grinned and jumped to her feet. This really was the first good thing that had happened all day. She held out her hand. “Deal then.”

There was a long second when nothing happened. Then Bea held out a warm, long-fingered hand and Alli grasped it, a flood of heat surging up her arm so that she immediately broke contact.

“Good,” she croaked, then cleared her throat. “Good.” She grinned at Bea. “This is going to be fun.”

Chapter Ten

Against all expectations, Bea had the best night of sleep she’d had in months. She woke up chirpier than she had the right to be, considering she was now being blackmailed. There was a lot to be said for not listening to your ex-boyfriend having sex with his new girlfriend.

As for Alli, well, she’d just have to figure things out, wouldn’t she? It wasn’t like she

was asking the impossible. And maybe she was right, maybe she didn't belong in the program and it was all a big mistake.

In the shower, Bea wondered if that could be true. She'd seen Alli lose her temper with her own eyes. But then, wouldn't most people get angry after damaging their car? Even Bea herself had been a bit cross.

Mind you, if she hadn't stood up for herself, if she'd meekly apologized and done what she normally would have done, she'd be worry-free right about now.

She sighed as she toweled herself off. Okay, yes, she was being blackmailed. But it could be worse, couldn't it? And obviously this was all just a lesson from the universe about not breaking character. She wouldn't be standing up for herself again anytime soon.

Dressed in yoga pants, sports bra and t-shirt, she went downstairs. She had plenty of time before her first class and was on her way to breakfast when she noticed that Luke's office door was open. Deep breath, alright, better to take the bull by the horns.

"Ah, yes, Bea, you'll be wanting to fill out your employment paperwork," Luke said when she tapped on the door.

"Right, yes," she said, having forgotten all about it despite Josh mentioning it the night before. Being caught up in criminal endeavors didn't really focus the mind. Was this a criminal endeavor? Blackmail was a crime, wasn't it? All Alli wanted was a better room and her own cell phone back though, was that such a big deal?

"Here we go," Luke said, pulling out a sheaf of paperwork from a file. "Fill out here and here, sign at the bottom, bank info on the next page and you'll be done."

Bea sat down at his desk and took the pen he offered. "So, this is a pretty new

program,” she said as she started writing.

“And?” snapped Luke. “That doesn’t make it any less effective.”

Bea looked up. She’d just been making conversation. “Of course not,” she said with a smile. “I just meant that it was nice to see someone starting up a program like this.”

Luke grunted. “Right, yeah.”

“Thinking about the community, thinking about rehabilitation rather than punishment for those with anger issues,” she said, signing her name.

“Yeah, well,” Luke said with a sniff. “We’re really trying to move into the relaxation sphere, to be honest.”

“Oh?” She turned the page, scanning the information there.

“More money, better clientele,” Luke said.

“Sorry,” said Bea. “Sorry, but there must be some kind of mistake here?”

“Where?”

“Um, here, the uh, the payment section?”

Luke took the paper from her, looked at it, then handed it back. “No, no mistake.”

For a second, Bea thought about saying more, but she clamped her mouth shut. No. She’d learned her lesson. No arguing. No standing up for herself. She added her bank info and passed the papers back to Luke with a weak smile.

“Good, all done then,” said Luke.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Bea stood up and cleared her throat. Might as well get this over with. “I was just wondering, um, the room situation?”

“What of it?” He wasn’t looking at her, was locking the paperwork away again.

How to put this? “Is there any...” Then she had an idea. “I was just wondering if you had luxury suites, you know, for the better class of clientele that you’re hoping to attract?”

He looked up and snorted. “As if. This place is a dump. It’ll take a sight more money to provide that sort of thing. Everyone’s got the same as of now. Still, I’m thinking about marketing it more as a monastic retreat sort of thing. Simplicity and all that.”

“Ah,” Bea said. No chance of a better room for Alli then. She couldn’t be blamed for that though, not when a better room didn’t actually exist. “That explains why you’re taking all their electronics, I suppose.”

Luke eyed her, then shrugged. “Nah, that’s more because if we don’t, they’re just on them all the damn time and it drives Lex crazy.”

“Oh.” Bea swallowed, feeling her skin tingle. She didn’t like this. It wasn’t lying really, it just wasn’t being as honest as she liked to be. “You must have a bank vault to lock all that expensive stuff away.” She tried for a laugh and it came out more as a squeak.

“A secure trunk that’s padlocked inside of a room that’s locked. Only one key, and that’s on my person at all times. Or at least on my desk.” He narrowed his eyes. “So

no chance of a heist, if that's what you've got in mind."

Bea gave another squeak of a laugh. "Oh no, no. No, of course not. No." She backed out of the room as she spoke. "I'll, uh, be going, gotta get ready, got a class..."

Then she turned and fled, smacking into Josh as she rounded the corner.

"Woah, slow down there, speedy," he said.

Bea stopped and caught her breath. She was not cut out for a life of crime, not even the white collar stuff.

Josh put a meaty hand on her shoulder, then looked down the corridor. "Ah, I see. Coming from Luke's office?"

She nodded.

Josh sighed. "If it helps, it's the same for all of us. He advertised a decent salary. But then, when you look into it, he knocks off payments for accommodation, food, anything he can think of. At the end of the day, we'd probably all be better off working at McDonald's."

"So why don't you?" Bea asked, breath now caught.

"Why don't you?" he asked her. "I mean, this is a step on the ladder, right?"

"For everyone?" she asked in disbelief.

He chuckled. "Well, I'm an ex-con, that doesn't make getting a job particularly easy. Lex is a new graduate, I'm sure you've noticed that she's young and, well, let's just say she hasn't found her confidence yet. And let's see... Celine just likes a job where

no one bothers her, and Luke lets her do as she likes as long as there's no rat poo in the corners and she doesn't go over budget on the food."

"And what about... Daria?" asked Bea, remembering the dark-haired meditation teacher.

Josh looked thoughtful. "Dunno. Haven't figured her out yet. What about you?"

"I wasn't meant to be here, remember?"

"And there's a sentence I hear at least once an hour. No one's meant to be here," Josh said with a grin.

Bea puffed out her cheeks. "I need a job. This is a job. It might not be all that, but Luke obviously has plans to expand. I could use some job security in this market."

"Couldn't we all," said Josh, patting her shoulder. "Come on, it's breakfast time and you might as well take advantage of the food since you're paying for it and all. It's the one good thing about this place."

Bea followed him down the corridor, wondering just what the hell she'd gotten herself into.

LIGHT STREAMED IN through the windows as the 'programmers', as Lex had informed her patients were to be called, stretched and bent. Well, most of the programmers. One was very obviously not stretching or bending. In fact, she was leaning up against the wall, looking exceptionally bored.

"And come back to child's pose," Bea said.

There was a collective sigh and Bea smiled. She loved this part, the part where people

were so clearly relaxed, in such a better position than when they walked into the room. This is why she did the job, even when people, like Robbie, made fun of her. She wanted to help people.

She glanced at Alli, still propping up the wall.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“And you’re all free to go,” she said to the class. “Unless you’d like to stay and drink in the atmosphere for a little longer.”

No chance of that, it was lunch time now. The room was empty inside of thirty seconds. Well, empty except for Alli, who was raising that eyebrow again. Bea’s stomach turned over.

“It’s no good,” Bea said.

“What?”

“There are no better rooms. We’re all in the same position,” said Bea. “As for your phone, it’s in a locked trunk.”

“That I have the code to,” Alli said. “Well, most of the code.”

“And the trunk is in a locked room,” added Bea.

Alli huffed in irritation. “Honestly, you’re completely hopeless at this.”

“I am not!” Bea said, stung.

“Yes, you are. You’re weak, it’s obvious in the way you speak to people. Spineless.”

“Spineless enough to call you stuck-up and snotty,” Bea said. She regretted the words as soon as they came out of her mouth. What was she doing?

She'd come over here all intent on helping Alli like she'd helped everyone else, because maybe Alli was supposed to be here, in which case she needed help. And now she was rising to the bait and calling the woman names again.

"Just get the job done," Alli said, scowling at her.

"How exactly?"

"I don't know, think of something," said Alli. "Otherwise, I go and talk to Luke."

There was silence for a long second as Alli stared her down. Bea looked into her green eyes for as long as she could, but she started to feel oddly hot and had to look away. "I'll try and come up with something." Maybe she could borrow the keys off Luke. Maybe Josh would know how to get them.

"Good," Alli said, pushing back off the wall. "Thanks for the class, teach."

"You should have participated," Bea said.

Alli snorted. "Right."

"No, I just meant..." Bea took a breath. "I just meant that you'd be good, is all."

Alli stopped and turned back to look at her. "You think?"

Bea nodded. "Yes, I really do. You've got the body type for yoga. You could be really good. It's not just for relaxation, you know. It improves muscle tone and strength, it's an excellent way to keep fit and slow down the aging process."

Alli squinted at her and then perhaps decided that she was being honest, so she nodded. "Yeah. Yeah. Maybe next time."

“I’ll look forward to it,” Bea said without thinking about what she was saying.

“If there is a next time,” Alli said as she walked out of the room.

Bea’s heart rate was far too high for someone who’d just spent an hour doing yoga. Must be all the caffeine. She vowed to cut down to just one cup of coffee in the mornings.

Chapter Eleven

“So, Joachim was screaming and then Janelle jumps right out of the airing cupboard and scares the bejeezus out of him so badly that he just stops, mouth wide open,” Izzy said.

Alli wondered just what it was that other people did with their lives. Her every waking minute was so full of work, thinking about it, doing it, preparing for it, that suddenly her life seemed very, very empty.

Which was completely ridiculous because obviously she had a lot to fill her life with. Just... just here time seemed to be standing somewhat still.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“And ever since,” Izzy went on. “Joachim won’t go near the airing cupboard.”

Alli puffed out a breath. “Right,” was all she said. Mostly because she hadn’t been listening in the slightest to what Izzy had been saying. But also because at least speaking a word gave her something to do.

“So, you want to, I don’t know, explore the grounds or something?” Izzy said.

Finally, Alli turned around to look at her. She looked better than she had the day before. Her face was less pale, the bags under her eyes less pronounced. She looked like she’d slept for the first time in years, which given that every single story she told was about her kids could well be true.

“No,” she said shortly.

“Oh,” said Izzy. Her blue eyes looked unsure. “Well, um, maybe we could see if there’s a TV or something?”

Alli breathed out through her nose. “No.” This was her keeping her temper. Proving that she didn’t need to be here.

“Well, why don’t you tell us all why you’re here, then?” Izzy pressed.

Alli sucked at her teeth and then figured what the hell. It wasn’t like Lex the interfering therapist was around to eavesdrop on everything. “No and no,” she said. “What part of no exactly is it that you don’t understand?”

Izzy's mouth flapped open and closed. "Um, okay, I was just trying to be friendly."

"Well don't," barked Alli. "We're not friends and we're not here to be friends."

"I don't think that's true," piped up Julia. She was perched on the edge of a couch. "I think we can be friends. It would probably be easier if we trusted each other."

Alli rolled her eyes. "Trust. Right. Well, why don't you trust us with the reason that you're here?" she asked. "You look like my grandmother, and barring bodies under the bed, I don't see a reason why you should be here at all. What did you do? Tell your milkman that you wanted blue top not red? Ask the bingo caller to raise her voice?"

Julia blushed. "I'm not sure now's an appropriate time to discuss that."

"Why not? If we're all going to be friends, then at the very least we should share our darkest secrets," Alli pushed. "Isn't that what friends do?"

"Come on now," said Charles, who was sitting at the other end of the couch. "Let's all calm down."

"Calm down? Look at you, you little peace-maker. It's easy to see why you're here. You couldn't stand up against whoever it was that dumped you here," Alli said. She felt a familiar acidity in her stomach, rising up to her throat. It hurt, but in a pleasurable kind of way, the kind of pain that reminded her that she was still herself.

"That's not what happened," Charles said quietly.

"Don't pick on him," rumbled huge Marcus from an armchair.

"Or what?" Alli asked. "You'll pull my arms off and hit me with the soggy ends?"

Marcus scowled at her but didn't move.

"See? That's the problem with programs like this," Alli said. "They assume that anger is a problem when it doesn't have to be. There's nothing wrong with standing up for yourself, with getting what's yours, making your voice heard. But all these programs do is teach you how to lie down and be polite."

"Not a problem that you're having then," Marcus said.

Alli eyed him and then half-smiled. "There, at last, someone who can speak a truth. No, it's not a problem that I have. I know how to get what I want, which is more than I can say for the rest of you."

"I don't think you should be talking like that," Julia said from the couch.

"And why not?" asked Alli.

"Um, because it does sound a bit like you're giving us anti-therapy," Izzy said doubtfully. "We're all here to work on our issues, I'm not so sure you should be talking like that in front of us, pushing us in the other direction, if you know what I mean." She laughed. "You sound like Joachim trying to get Janelle to steal a biscuit after I've already told her no."

Alli rolled her eyes. "Honestly, not everything's about your children."

"Enough." The word was short, sharp and loud and it took everyone a moment to realize that it was sad Charles that had spoken.

"The dragon awakes," Alli said, half to herself.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“You’re being rude,” Charles said to Alli. “You do not insult a person’s children. And if you can’t be nice and try to be a part of the group, then you need to take yourself away and give the rest of us some peace.”

Alli stared at him for a second, then grinned. “Nicely done. I wouldn’t have thought that you had it in you to say something like that.”

“You don’t know any of us,” Charles pointed out. “Just like we don’t know you. You obviously don’t want to be here, but then I don’t think most of us do.” He looked around the room. “How about we go and find ourselves something productive to do? I think there were board games in the dining room. Or we could make biscuits?”

There was a murmur of appreciation at the word biscuits, and the others started to stir themselves and leave the room.

“Ignore Charles,” Izzy said, sliding down from the windowsill where she’d been sitting. “Children are a sore point with him.” She looked around to make sure they were alone. “He’s in the middle of a divorce and his wife has started throwing accusations around. He’s here by court order or else he won’t be able to see his kids again. Not that he’s done anything to them. Out of all of us, he really doesn’t deserve to be here.”

Alli didn’t say anything. She wasn’t a monster, even she could see that someone lying about you would make you angry, sad, hopeless even. Darren had lied about her, about her anger problem, had made it seem like there was something wrong with her in front of people that were important to her. She imagined Charles was feeling much the same way as she was right now.

“You coming to make biscuits, then?” Izzy asked.

“Not now,” said Alli.

EACH MINUTE SEEMED to take hours to pass. She’d explored all the ground-floor rooms of St. Hilda’s and found nothing of interest. What she really needed was to be back at her desk. She tried not to think about the emails piling up in her inbox.

Eventually, she was lured by the smell of baking to the kitchen. By the sounds of it, the others were having fun.

She leaned in the doorway and watched. Maybe if she could find pleasure in such small, stupid things, then she wouldn’t be so bored.

Not that bored was going to be a problem for much longer.

She’d spent a full day here. Soon, Bea was going to get her phone back, and then she’d call Darren, apologize profusely, and be allowed to leave. He just wanted her to learn a lesson, that was all.

Speaking of Bea, she was fully entrenched in the baking process, laughing with Marcus as he crushed an egg with one hand and had to pick out shell fragments with the other. All the others were busy. Even quiet Leslie was mixing a bowl, a look of calm contentment on her face.

Bea was leaning over now, her dark hair brushing her shoulders, her dark eyes half closed as she sampled one of the newly baked cookies that Izzy was offering her.

It was as she was leaning back up again that she noticed Alli. Bea wiped her hands on a towel and picked up a biscuit.

“Have one,” she said, walking over to Alli.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“There’s no need to be a grumpy pants about it,” said Bea, smiling. “Go on, they’re good.”

“Not interested,” Alli said. Bea was close to her and she smelled like baking. It was a weirdly comforting smell. “Did you get my phone?”

Bea lowered the cookie. “Not yet. I’m working on it.”

“Are you really? Because it looks to me like you’re making biscuits.”

Bea looked at her and Alli noticed that there was a tiny scar on her hairline, a bright white against the peachiness of her skin. For an instant, she truly thought about reaching out to touch it.

“I’m working on it, okay? I can’t go sneaking around in a striped burglar shirt and a mask all day, can I?” Bea said.

Alli smirked. “I suppose not.”

“Well then, just leave me to it.”

“Fine. Don’t leave it too long.”

“I won’t,” Bea said.

She was getting cross, Alli could see it, could see the faint flush of pink on her cheeks and something about it made her want to push harder, want to see Bea lose her cool.

She was about to do it, about to say something caustic and cutting. Then Bea thrust the biscuit at her.

“Take this, don’t be a spoilsport.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Automatically, Alli took it, it was so close to her face that she thought Bea might just push it into her mouth if she didn't.

"You'll get on better if you try to be a bit friendlier," Bea said.

"I don't want to get on better," Alli said. "I want to get the hell out of here."

Bea regarded her for a moment, then shrugged. "Alright then, it's your funeral." And she turned back to the others as Julia started to complain about no more sugar and Marcus lifted another batch of cookies from the oven.

For a second, the scent of her lingered. Alli took a bite of the cookie. It was good. Really good.

Chapter Twelve

After three increasingly worried texts from Liz, Bea finally had the chance to call her late in the afternoon. The light was growing orange as she snuck into one of the side rooms downstairs and placed the call.

No one had specifically told her that she wasn't allowed to have her phone, but she didn't want to be seen with it, just in case.

"Finally," Liz said when she picked up the phone.

"Finally?"

“I was starting to think that I’d sent you to some kind of cult or something and they’d kidnapped you and taken away your phone. And then you were going to ignore all my messages until I finally persuaded a documentary team to take on the story and we’d hunt you down on an abandoned farm complex somewhere in East Anglia.”

“Liz?”

“Yes?”

“Have you been watching a lot of TV?”

There was a pause. “A bit.”

“Alright, maybe you could get Den to bring you some library books or something instead?”

Another pause. “Alright, that’s probably a good idea. So how is everything?”

Bea had debated with herself just how much to tell Liz and in the end had decided that there was no point worrying her while she was laid up. She could tell the whole truth at some later point when Liz was feeling better.

“It’s great,” she said with a smile in her voice. “Small class size, just a couple of sessions a day, not a problem at all.”

“And the accommodations?” Liz asked. “I was worried about that. I mean, I didn’t want to be away from Den for so long, but the potential client-base made it worth it, rather than the money.”

Bea needed to skirt the issue of money. “The accommodations are... spartan. But that’s fine. It’s the way they should be, helps to focus the mind and all that.”

“Right, right, obviously,” Liz said. “And, well, at least there’s some money, that should make up for it.”

Bea couldn’t talk about the money. Not when she was getting paid less than half of what had been promised to her. Okay, so accommodation and food were included. But still. This couldn’t be a sustainable job, not for long. Unless, of course, she got a raise before the next session. Assuming there’d be a next session.

Could she work here that long?

It was all so new, she was just getting used to it, wasn’t she?

Maybe it would all turn out alright.

“What about the clients?” Liz was asking.

“Oh yeah, they’re fine, no problems.”

Fine. They were baking biscuits and completely lovely together, which, given the fact that they were all supposedly angry people, was somewhat of a surprise. Still, she shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, should she? Everyone seemed to be getting along nicely. Well, other than the usual suspect.

“Really? There’s usually at least one troublemaker at these things,” laughed Liz.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Bea had an image of Alli leaning against the doorframe, bright green eyes slanted and suspicious, luscious blonde hair draped over one shoulder.

She smelled, somewhat strangely, of guava. It had taken Bea a long time to pin the smell down, but now that she had, she couldn't unsmell it.

"No, no, no troublemakers," she said, because she couldn't tell the truth.

What was she supposed to say? That she'd had a crash, lost her temper, let someone blackmail her into betraying the program that she was supposed to be trying her hardest at in the hope that maybe they'd pay her enough to live and give her a job with stability and let her move out from under her ex-boyfriend's feet so she didn't have to listen to him screw his new girlfriend?

Her heart started pumping too hard and she had to take deep, calming breaths.

"You alright?" Liz said.

"Fine, fine," said Bea.

"Good, because I've got some great news. There's a flat opening up in the building opposite mine. It's small, but nice, and I put in a good word for you and the owner is really enthusiastic. Plus, the people aren't moving out for another two weeks, so the timing is almost perfect."

Bea felt herself get lighter. "Really? That's amazing. I mean, it sounds perfect." Living across from Liz would be perfect.

“It is, so, um, I did something that maybe I shouldn’t have done?” Liz sounded uncharacteristically unsure.

“Like what?”

“Listen, don’t be angry, you can say no,” Liz said. “But, um, I put down the deposit for you. You can pay me back. I just didn’t want you to lose the place. I’ve got pictures, I sent Den over to take some, and I’ll email them to you so you can see how good it is. I just wanted to give you a chance, Bea. You deserve this. You don’t deserve to be living with Robbie and whatever-her-name-is.”

“Marilyn,” Bea said faintly. “This is too much, Liz.”

“It’s not. Please don’t be angry.”

She was on the inside. There was a little piece of her that was angry that now she was in a position where she had to pay the money back. But she was also grateful at the same time. Liz was trying to help. She had helped.

“Listen, look at the pics right now, I just sent them through.”

Bea pulled her phone away from her ear and clicked on the email icon. She started to smile. The flat was small, but it was also light and beautifully finished. She could immediately see herself living there. “It’s really beautiful.”

“I know, and I know the owner. He’s a good guy. I realize that I probably stepped over a line, but then I was thinking that the only reason you’re there and not here is because of me, and if I hadn’t broken my leg, then you’d be here to see the flat for yourself.”

“I get it. No, I completely understand. It was really kind of you, Liz.”

“Don’t mention it. Are you sure you’re not a bit cross?”

She took a second to think about it. Cross? No. She needed a new place, she needed to be away from Robbie and Marilyn. The money was a different issue. “How much do I owe you?” she asked carefully.

Liz told her.

She felt it like a blow to the stomach. It was almost exactly as much as she’d be taking home from the program. And she’d have to hope that she got hired on for the next session too so that she could actually pay the rent.

“Thank you,” she managed to say. “It’s really nice.”

“You’re welcome,” said Liz. “Now I’d better let you get back to work.”

Bea hung up the phone. She could manage this. She really could. And the benefits of moving into a place of her own had to outweigh whatever inconveniences there were working here.

She opened the door and practically bumped straight into Alli. “Were you listening at the door?” she said without thinking.

Alli’s eyes widened. “Of course I wasn’t. I wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Are you sure?” Bea wanted to take the words back as soon as she’d said them. It was clear from the look on Alli’s face that she hadn’t been listening. But she couldn’t help herself. There was something about the woman that made her lose her temper. Some kind of trigger mechanism or something.

She just couldn’t figure out what it was. She was never like this, not with anyone.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“A phone,” Alli said, ignoring Bea’s beginning of an apology.

“It’s my phone,” Bea said.

But Alli was still looking at it. Bea shrugged. Maybe this was the easiest solution.

“Here,” she said, holding it out. “Call whoever you want.”

Alli took the phone and held it in her hand, weighing it.

Bea sighed. “Look, this is as good as it’s getting right now. If you need to make a call, then do it. I’ll do my best to get your phone back, but I can’t promise anything, and it’s not going to happen in the next few hours, so you might as well.”

“You know, I’m not entirely sure what I’m getting out of this deal and that’s really not the way this is supposed to work,” said Alli, coming in closer, phone still in hand.

“Do you... do you smell of guava?” Bea had no idea where those words had come from.

Alli blinked. “Uh, yes.”

Bea swallowed. “Um, it’s nice. That’s all. A nice smell.”

“Is it not a little weird that you can identify the smell of guava?” asked Alli.

“Yes,” Bea said, grinning. “But I had this lip gloss when I was a teenager that was guava flavor. It took me ages to figure out what the smell was.”

“I like it, it’s refreshing and unique,” Alli said. “It’s Korres, a Greek brand. Surprisingly affordable.”

Which brought Bea back to earth. Affordable. Money. Job. Right. She cleared her throat. “So, um, do you need to make a call, or...”

Alli looked down at the phone. Then slowly she raised her hand. “No, not just now.” She lifted that eyebrow. “And I want my own phone back. Is that clear?”

Bea nodded.

“You’ve got until tomorrow.”

Right. This was blackmail. How could she have forgotten? She nodded again.

Alli thrust the phone toward her and Bea reached out to take it.

Their fingers brushed and Bea clutched her phone, taking Alli’s hand at the same time.

For an instant they were locked together and Bea’s breath came faster and she could feel the hairs on the back of her neck start to prickle. She wet her dry lips and looked up to find that Alli’s green eyes were staring into hers a look of... something there. Fear? Something else?

The Alli was snatching her hand away. “Until tomorrow,” she said again.

“Right,” Bea said, as Alli walked away.

It wasn’t until later that Bea thought maybe Alli hadn’t had anyone to call.

In the moment, she was far too busy getting her breath back.

Chapter Thirteen

Bea's dark hair fell over her face, her strong thighs gripped Alli's waist as she straddled her. Alli could feel herself straining, pushing upwards, needing, wanting, as Bea smiled and teased her, bending lower to kiss her and then arching upward so that her lips were out of reach.

Alli's breath was coming so fast that she was on the edge of panic as Bea reached for the bottom of her t-shirt, lifting the hem and slowly, oh, so slowly stripping it off and up, revealing swathes of tanned, soft skin, ridges of muscles, the curves of her breast. Alli thought she might explode then and there.

Then Bea was running long fingers along Alli's torso, eyes glittering with wanting. Tracing fingernails over her ribs, down to her stomach, sliding her body downward until she was astride Alli's legs.

She reached cotton underwear, her fingers just sliding around the waistband, and looked up with pleading in her dark eyes. It was all Alli could do to nod. The need was filling her, subsuming her until it was the only thing she could think about.

With careful hands, Bea slid down Alli's underwear and Alli parted her legs unbidden as Bea lowered her head and...

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Alli shot up in bed, sheets tangled around her, breath catching in her throat, sweat trickling down her back.

Jesus Christ. What had happened?

She was burning all over, her skin longing to be touched and it was dark, so dark. She lay back down again in sweat-dampened sheets, sliding her hands over her own stomach, over her hipbones, down so that she parted her own legs and her fingers dipped inside wetness.

Then she was arching up to meet her hand with barely a touch, barely a movement, her hips bucking as her breathing stopped and her heart pounded and her left hand flew to her mouth, teeth biting down on skin as she pulsed and gasped and came all in the same instant.

For a long minute she lay there, her body calming itself in the cool of the night, seeing stars beneath her eyelids, letting her breath come more slowly now, recovering.

Until her brain finally caught up with what was going on.

Bea.

Bea?

Christ, she must be in bad shape. All this time to think and no work. Her brain was turning on her, becoming a traitor, teasing her with new and exciting images to try

and make up for the boredom of the day.

That was it, wasn't it? That had to be it.

And Bea of all people. She snorted into her pillow. As if.

Her limbs were heavy with tiredness.

As if anything like that would happen, could happen.

Except... except it had never been like that before, had it? She bit her lip. The urgency of it, the power of it, the heat of it. Never. She wasn't that person. She was broken. She wasn't designed to feel things like that.

She'd accepted that for so long that it had become a part of her. She was great at her job, ambitious, strong, so of course she had to be lacking in other areas to make up for those strengths. Surely everyone had their pros and cons.

She just wasn't a sexual being. End of story.

There was a throbbing between her legs, a deep ache that made her long for more. A flash of Bea's face and a clenching of muscles and her blood was starting to pound again.

Alli threw herself out of bed, marched herself into the coldshared bathroom and splashed water on her face. She waited until she was shivering with the cold and then took herself back to bed.

This was some kind of anomaly. Just further proof that she needed to get back to work. That was all it was.

TO BE FAIR, the breakfast buffet was fairly impressive. Alli looked up and down the long table, waiting for the twinge of sourness from her stomach that always came when she looked at fruit and coffee and thought about her day.

When it didn't come, she picked up a plate and helped herself to whatever it was she wanted, finding that she was starving. She'd picked her plate clean by the time anyone else was up, and decided that she'd have a walk around to burn off some of the inexplicable extra energy that she had.

She'd slept heavily, like the dead once she'd gone back to bed.

She came out of the dining room and ran bump into Izzy.

"You look cheerful," Izzy said blearily. Alli sniffed and tried to look sterner, obviously failing because even Izzy pulled a face. "Too early for this," Izzy said, disappearing into the dining room.

The next person she met was Josh, his bulk filling the corridor as he headed to breakfast. He peered at her suspiciously. "Are you planning a breakout?" he asked.

Ah, that must be it. Alli straightened her shoulders. She was getting her phone back today. At which point, surely Darren was going to take pity on her and let her out of here. She must just be responding physically to the idea that she was going back to her life.

"Not quite," she said to Josh.

"Please don't. I'm the one that would have to chase you down."

"I'm not a prisoner here," she said.

He sighed. “Luke takes participation very seriously.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Right.” She eyed him, but he was already turning toward his breakfast.

“Just don’t do anything silly. And don’t forget, group sessions start today.”

“I won’t, and it won’t matter to me,” she said cheerily, walking in the opposite direction.

The yoga room was at the end of the corridor and she went in, thinking it would do her no harm to stretch. The door closed behind her and suddenly she was face to face with Bea.

Not quite as close as in her dream, but close enough. Close enough that she could smell Aloe Vera shampoo and see that little scar on her hairline.

“You’re early,” Bea said chirpily.

Alli took a step back, feeling her back hit the door. “No, I’m not,” she said stupidly.

Bea lifted an eyebrow. “Um, you really are.”

Alli swallowed, the pictures from her dream coming back to her, the ghost of sensations tickling along her skin. Then she shook herself. This was stupid. She was stupid. “Yeah, well, I didn’t know you’d be here,” she said, pushing herself back off the door and holding her head high.

“I’m just getting warmed up,” Bea said. “You don’t have to leave, you’re welcome to stay.”

Why was she being nice? Why had she given Alli a cookie the other day? Why was she smiling? It made no sense. Alli felt a spike of anger in her chest. If it weren't for Bea herself then she'd never have had that dream, she should be long gone by now, Bea should have got her out of the program, at the very least should have got her better treatment and a phone.

"Actually, I'm glad to run into you," Alli said, taking control of the conversation. "Do you have my phone?"

"No... no," Bea said. "But I assumed I'd have until the end of the day."

Alli rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right. Are you actually going to get this done? Because to be honest with you, I'm getting sick and tired of this. You lost your temper with me, I have a hold over you, you need to be giving something back if I'm not going to Luke about your little anger management problem."

"I'm trying," Bea said. She swallowed and her cheeks reddened. "Though actually, whilst we're talking about anger management, I think you should give a little thought to the fact that you should be here, that this isn't a mistake. You've obviously got issues."

Alli's blood pumped harder. "I what? I've got issues?" She laughed bitterly. "I'll tell you something, I'd rather have my kind of issues than yours."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, at least I'm not a failure of a yoga teacher stuck in some crappy retreat. You probably don't even get paid what I make an hour for the entire program, do you?" She walked closer. "And you know what's worse? Not being able to stand up for yourself, not having the courage, the backbone to walk away from a situation where you're being taken advantage of."

“I... I...” Bea started to stutter.

“Oh, give it a rest,” Alli said. “It’s not like you have anything of importance to say.” She was gearing herself up now, ready to go into another rant, ready to really scare Bea off, when she saw the glitter of tears in Bea’s eyes.

Bea was crying.

Alli’s heart stopped for a second.

“Wait, wait, are you crying?”

“Why would you care?” Bea said, furiously wiping tears away with her sleeve.

“Because...” Alli’s stomach flipped over and now she did feel the sourness. “I didn’t expect you to cry,” she said.

“Then why would you say such horrible things?”

Alli stared at her. This had never happened to her before. Granted, she generally yelled at shop clerks and corporate men, but she’d never actually had someone break down in tears. She didn’t really know what to do.

“I, um, I didn’t mean them,” she said, her anger fizzling away to nothing. “I was just cross because you said I had anger problems.”

Bea sniffed and wiped her eyes again.

“Jesus, I’m sorry.” Alli stepped in and without thinking, put her arm around Bea. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

And Bea was coming in closer, and Alli could smell her, could feel her warmth, could remember the touch of her dream body, could just about lose her breath all over again as...

“Bea, there you are.” The door swung open. Alli and Bea jumped apart just as Luke walked in. “Lex was looking for you. Something about this morning’s group sessions.”

Alli took a breath. Whatever that had been was... nothing. A distraction and one that needed to be forgotten. There was a job at stake here.

Though looking at the way Bea looked at Luke, there were two jobs at stake.

She turned and walked away. There’d be no more dreams. And definitely no more touching.

Chapter Fourteen

“The point is mostly to get them bonding with each other, to test their boundaries, trust issues, that sort of thing,” Lex was saying as she walked toward the group therapy session with Bea.

“So... I just let them talk?”

“Pretty much. Try and steer the conversation in safe directions, stay on topic. Initially, it might be good to discuss why they’re here in the first place if they want to share, and you’d be surprised how many do. Most programmers don’t think they

should be here, so sharing those stories promotes sympathy in the others, or occasionally forces the others to look at their own actions.”

“Right.” Bea could see an inherent problem with this. “Um, and what about if they get, well, angry?”

“Josh will be in the vicinity,” Lex said. “You have nothing to worry about. You might get shouted at occasionally, but nothing worse.”

Shouted at. Normally, that might not be so much of a problem. Except just this morning Alli had shouted at her and quite inexplicably, Bea had ended up crying. Maybe it was hormones or something. She just couldn’t understand it.

One minute, Alli had her all up in arms and ready to defend her own honor, which was completely out of character. The next she had her in tears, which was slightly more in character, but not by much.

It really didn’t help that for some reason every time Alli came close enough for Bea to smell guava, Bea felt a little hop of electricity, like she was about to be shocked, like her hair might stand on end.

“You’ll be just fine,” Lex said now.

“You say that with authority,” smiled Bea.

“I’ve done this before,” Lex said, suddenly looking very young.

“How many times?”

“In training? Plenty,” said Lex. She coughed. “Here, just one set of sessions. But I really need to concentrate on the individual sessions, that’s where I can be most

helpful.”

Bea nodded thoughtfully. “I’m sure everything will go wonderfully,” she said with more confidence than she felt. Not that she had much choice. She had a job to keep, a paycheck to get, and a flat deposit to pay for.

“Best of luck,” Lex grinned at her.

The programmers were seated in a circle of chairs and they looked at Bea expectantly when she walked in. All except one. Alli was seeming to find the floor particularly interesting. Oh well, there were worse things. Bea swallowed to wet her mouth and then sat down in the one spare chair.

“Welcome,” she said, just the same as she did when she started a yoga class. “Is there anyone that has any concerns or something they’d like to say before we begin?”

Lex had told her to say this, but she was greeted with silence and more expectant looks. She swallowed again.

“Alright, then why don’t we begin with a little self-introduction. We’ll start with...” She looked around and saw Charles. He’d so far proven to be obedient, questioning nothing, and seemed harmless. “We’ll start with you, Charles. Would you like to share why you’re here?”

“For group therapy,” he said, looking puzzled.

“I mean, more in the big picture sense,” Bea said helpfully.

He frowned harder. “Um, like the meaning of life sort of thing?”

There was a shuffling in the room. “No,” said Bea. She blew out a breath. “Alright,

let's start over. Why are you in an anger management program, Charles?"

Charles's face cleared at the prospect of a question he could actually answer. "Easy, I'm getting divorced, my ex wants custody of the kids so she can move them up north, so she's told her lawyer that I've got a temper. The court ordered me into a program so that I can prove that I don't have one and hopefully I'll get to see my kids."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Bea's heart cracked a little bit. If Charles's story was true, he really didn't need to be here.

"That's a shit deal," Marcus said. The others agreed with him.

Bea eyed his tattoos and bulky arms before deciding she might as well jump in at the deep end now that she'd got her feet wet. "How about you, Marcus? What brings you here?"

He squinted as though trying to remember something, then said: "I was in a fight in a pub and my parole officer recommended the program to make a good impression on the judge."

Bea considered following up the parole officer issue but then rethought things as Julia and Izzy both slid their chairs discreetly further from Marcus's. "Okay, thank you for sharing. Julia?"

The older woman smiled brightly. "Oh, thank you for asking, dear. Let's see. Right. I got into an altercation with someone at bingo." Her expression darkened slightly. "Not that I normally play bingo, it was a one off, you understand."

For a moment, Bea paused, thinking that perhaps there was more to the story, but apparently not, since Julia just sat there beaming. Bea found it hard to picture Julia in any kind of altercation, though to be fair it was a lot easier to picture her in a bingo hall. As far as Bea had seen, Julia was kind and gentle, and had been a patient teacher when the group was baking biscuits.

“Right,” she said finally. “Okay. Izzy?”

Izzy went red. “I don’t want to say.”

“You don’t have to,” Bea said immediately. “But it might make you feel a bit better.”

“We all had to say,” Marcus grumbled.

“Yeah, it’s only fair,” put in Charles.

“Fine,” Izzy said. She took a deep breath. “I get angry with my children and my husband and I thought it best that I complete a program before anything gets out of hand.” She sounded like she was talking through gritted teeth.

“That sounds...” Bea really wanted to say that it actually sounded like a lie. Izzy talked incessantly about her kids, and in a way that made it obvious that she was crazy about them. But then, Bea wasn’t a therapist. What did she know? “That sounds like a very considerate plan,” she went with in the end.

She turned to Leslie, the quietest member of the group. So quiet that Bea often found her eyes glided over the woman like she wasn’t there. “How about you?” she asked gently.

Leslie shrugged. “Get angry,” was all she said. Which was fair enough, really. Bea decided not to dig any further into that one.

Which left just one.

“Alli?”

“What?” Alli said, glancing up but very much avoiding eye contact.

“Would you like to share with the group why you’re here?”

“By mistake, obviously,” Alli said.

All eyes were on her and Bea found herself feeling bad for Alli. “Could you maybe tell us what kind of mistake?”

Alli sighed and rolled her eyes. “Obviously, I get angry, but I have to. It’s a part of my job. If I didn’t get angry, people would just walk all over me, and no one wants that, do they? So I really shouldn’t be here. I don’t need to stop being angry. It’s... productive anger.”

“Ah.” Bea didn’t quite know what to say about that. She decided to turn things over to the group. “Can anger be productive, do we think?”

Surprisingly, the others calmly conducted a discussion about when anger was and wasn’t appropriate, and what benefits it could have. Alli included. Bea sat back in her chair and listened. There were some fair points being made about repressing feelings being bad for your health, and about the repercussions of losing your temper and how that might be different from just feeling anger.

“You can’t just never get angry,” Alli said. “That’s impossible.”

“But you could never lose your temper,” Marcus countered. “Like it’s alright to be angry, but you shouldn’t take it out on someone that doesn’t deserve it.”

“I tell my kids that all the time,” Izzy said.

“What if someone does deserve it, though?” Alli asked.

“Like a serial killer or something,” Charles said.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Or a rapist,” put in Julia. “You could definitely be angry with someone like that.”

“And it would be deserved,” Alli agreed.

“Maybe anger isn’t the problem, it’s just an emotion like other emotions,” Izzy said carefully.

“It’s probably more how it’s directed that’s the issue,” agreed Charles.

“How does anger feel?” Bea asked, wanting to move things on.

The others looked at her.

“Hot?” hazarded Charles.

“Um... out of control?” Julia said.

“Like an animal inside you,” Alli said. “A wild animal, one that you can’t control, one that takes over everything like it’s controlling your body and all you can do is watch. It’s like... like having a demon.”

Everyone was silent.

It occurred to Bea that Alli seemed to be the only one with a grasp on what anger really felt like. Or the only one honest enough to describe it. She smiled. “Thanks, Alli, that was excellent.” She checked her watch. “And it’s about time for you all to move on to meditation. Thank you all.”

The programmers started to stand up and chat, filtering out of the door. Bea moved to stop Alli in her tracks.

“That was really good,” she said. “Really good. I’m impressed that you can put words on things so easily, impressed that you can be so logical about things.”

For an instant Alli looked like she might smile. Then the dark descended over her face again. “Whatever. It’s not like you asked difficult questions or anything.”

Bea breathed out and tried again. “Listen, about this morning.”

“Whatever,” Alli said again. “It’s not important. We’ve both got a job to do. The difference is that I’m not doing mine currently. Something that needs to change. Just get me my damn phone back.” She stepped around Bea and strode out of the room.

So much for progress, Bea thought as she watched her go.

It would be nice, she thought, if just for once she could have a conversation with Alli without losing her temper, crying, or being threatened in some way.

Chapter Fifteen

Alli sighed and re-crossed her legs. Lex just watched her, eyes curious, but not speaking.

“Well, it’s just plain weird to sit here and say nothing,” Alli finally said.

Lex smiled. “It’s your session, Alli.”

“Jesus Christ, then ask me something. I can’t sit here for an hour with you staring at me like I’m some kind of circus attraction.”

Not exactly the plan. But it did feel weird. And Alli felt on-edge for some reason that she couldn't define.

"Alright," Lex said. "It's not a question, more of an observation. Many people that come through this program deny that they get angry at all, or say that they don't get angry enough for it to be a problem. You're not like that."

Alli shrugged. "I get angry, I know that. I'm not going to deny it."

"And you see anger as... a tool?"

She shrugged again. "Sure. Just like any other emotion. You've never pretended to like something or be happy about something to please someone else?"

"Have you?" Lex asked.

Alli bit her lip and looked away.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“I do have a question, as it goes,” Lex went on. “You were ‘sent here,’ your words, by your boss. Was there anyone else in your life that thought you might have a problem?”

The little room was warm and Alli crossed her legs again. “No,” she said shortly.

“Friends? Family? No one close to you expressed any concern about your anger?”

“No,” Alli said shortly again.

“I see.” Lex looked at her again. “Is that because they don’t think you have an issue? Or is it because you don’t let anyone get close enough to experience your anger?”

Alli didn’t answer this. She didn’t need cut-rate therapy. She needed out of here. She was just counting the minutes until she’d get her phone back, going through the motions so that if Darren called she’d get a good report.

“Okay,” Lex said after a few seconds of silence. “A different question then. Anger as a tool. Where do you think you learned this?”

That seemed a less revealing question. “I think I’ve always known,” Alli said. “I mean, all children throw tantrums, don’t they?”

“And your parents were... easy to manipulate in this way?”

Alli snorted. “My parents weren’t around. But if you mean my teachers, then yes, some of them.”

“Teachers? You went to boarding school?”

“From seven until eighteen, the whole time.” Alli glared at her. “If you’re about to blame everything on that, you’d be wrong.”

“Boarding school has many advantages,” Lex said calmly. “An excellent education, teaching independence and yet strengthening bonds through co-living.”

“Right,” Alli said, slightly mollified.

Lex scribbled something down in her notebook, then looked up. “How do you think people feel when you get angry with them?”

Alli opened her mouth to answer, then realized she’d never actually thought about it before.

“Angry in return?” Lex offered.

She saw Bea’s face crumple, saw the tears start to glint in hereyes. “Scared,” she said without thinking.

“Perhaps,” agreed Lex. “Is that how you’d like people to feel when they see you?”

“Perhaps,” mimicked Alli. She sighed. “Dunno. Maybe. Sometimes. It depends on the person.”

Lex nodded. “You’re a woman, you work in a male-dominated field, I can see how anger can be a useful defense mechanism.”

“You can?” Alli looked at her with more interest.

“Of course,” Lex said. “When it’s used in a controlled way. When it’s out of control, that’s another issue, isn’t it? Presenting an uncontrolled picture to the world can’t be something that a person as self-contained and independent as you can want.”

“Huh.” Alli leaned forward a little. “I can’t say that I’ve ever thought about that.”

“Think on it,” Lex said. “Give it some thought before our next session. Think about how anger might be reined in and used as a tool, rather than letting it overcome us and use us instead.” She narrowed her eyes a little. “Is there anything else you’d like to talk about?”

“No,” Alli said quickly.

“Are you sure? Nothing that’s changed since you’ve been here? No comments from the others? Nothing in your program experience that you think might be important?”

The only thing that had changed since she got here was her lack of work.

Oh, and... and the dream.

But that was surely nothing. A mental glitch. A moment of stupidity. Or something. She could feel it in her bones, could feel the heat of it, could almost feel her hands running over her own skin, could almost imagine that they weren’t her hands at all, that...

“Alli?”

She took a breath. “Yeah?”

“You look a little flushed, that’s all.”

“I’m fine.”

“Sure?”

She puffed out a breath. “Fine. Completely fine. And frankly, I really don’t need to be psychoanalyzed by someone who’s all of twelve. Are you even old enough to drink?”

“Do you drink?” Lex asked.

“What the fuck? What? That was not a segue into potential alcoholism. It was a dig, an insult,” Alli said, getting angrier by the second.

“I know,” was all Lex said in return.

“Jesus, I give up.” Alli stood up. “I’m done here.”

“It’s the end of our session anyway,” Lex said calmly. “You can see yourself out.”

Which just made things worse, because someone not responding to anger just made Alli seethe inside.

She was bubbling and boiling as she marched out of the room and down the corridor. So angry that she almost missed the low whisper of her name.

“Alli!” hissed a voice. “Alli!”

She looked around and finally saw a face in the crack of a door. The door opened further, and Daria beckoned her inside. Curious, Alli went in.

Daria was... not around much. They’d had meditation and relaxation classes with her. But given that neither of those things required much talking, Alli felt that she didn’t really know the woman. She was attractive enough, small and dark, with quick eyes and long fingers. Her voice was low and soft, but that was as far as Alli was prepared to go in her descriptions.

It wasn’t helped by the fact that she’d never seen Daria outside of class until now. She seemed to scurry away elsewhere when she wasn’t needed.

“Um, hello,” Alli tried.

Daria looked up and down the corridor before closing the door quietly behind them. “I might be able to help you.”

Alli rolled her eyes. “No and no. If you think that extra meditation is what I need then you’re dead wrong. I’ll be honest with you, I don’t really meditate even in class. I just sit there and think about Game of Thrones or something else equally epic until you let me go again.”

“I’m not talking about meditation,” Daria said. She was leaning back against the door.

“What are you talking about then?”

“Helping you,” said Daria, looking slightly shifty. “With your little problem.”

“What problem would that be?” Alli was starting to get angry again, starting to move toward the door.

“Jesus, do I need to spell it out for you?” Daria also looked... not exactly pleased.

“Well, yes, probably,” Alli said. “Since I’ve not got the first clue what you’re talking about.”

“Do you want to get out of here or don’t you?”

Alli stopped in her tracks. Ah. That sort of help. “I want out,” she said cautiously, because she wasn’t entirely sure that Daria was to be trusted.

“I can do that. I can get you out for five thousand.”

“Pounds?” It sounded a ridiculous amount of money. “Are you dazzling Josh with diamonds so he doesn’t see me leave?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“No,” Daria said somewhat patiently. “I’m getting you out. With a certificate that says you’ve completed the program.”

That was different. Alli’s heart started to beat a little faster. But she was a businesswoman. “A thousand.”

Daria squinted at her, chewing the inside of her cheek. “You want out or not?”

Five thousand pounds to not have to spend the next week and a half here. It wasn’t that much, she supposed. “Three thousand.”

“Four.”

“Deal.”

There was a moment of silence, as though they were both thinking about what they’d agreed to.

“So, when do we start? Now?” Alli asked hopefully.

Daria sniffed. “We start when the money’s in my account. You can put the cash on a pre-paid Visa and have it sent to my email.”

“Right.” Alli waited a heartbeat. “Um, I’ll need my phone to do that.”

“That’s your lookout,” said Daria, turning to the door. “Get someone on the outside to do it for you and pay them back.”

Which she would if she thought anyone would actually do that for her.

“Otherwise, deal’s off,” Daria added, turning the door handle.

“No, wait, I’ll get it,” Alli hurriedly said.

Daria pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. “Here’s the email. I’ll come get you once I see the money.” And she slipped out of the door.

Alli breathed deeply, the paper crumpled in her hand. Alright, this was what she’d wanted. She could get out, she could go back to her own life, not have to worry about this anymore. It was almost like a dream come true.

Even thinking the word dream made her legs feel weak and her center feel hot and liquidy.

She swallowed. Alright. She could do this. She could be out and putting all of this behind her by tonight.

Opening up the door, she went out into the corridor. Out tonight. As long as Bea came through and got her her phone like she promised. Alli grinned to herself. Bea would do it. She thought back to the session with Lex. Bea would do it because she was afraid of Alli.

Yet somehow that thought didn’t make her feel an awful lot better about things. How odd.

Chapter Sixteen

It was five o’clock, which meant that technically, Bea had seven hours left in which to get Alli’s phone. Otherwise, well, the otherwise was too awful to think about.

Trying to imagine telling Liz that she couldn't pay back the deposit on the flat made Bea feel a little bit sick. Actually, a lot sick.

Which was why she was pulling on a pair of gloves that she'd taken from the kitchen. She'd been a bit worried about that part, but Celine, the cook, had just shrugged in disinterest and pointed her to the box of gloves on the counter.

Her hands felt dry and strange in the plastic. Once she had them on, she realized that she had absolutely no idea what she was supposed to do now. She'd covered the leaving no fingerprints part. She had most of the code to the padlock on the trunk, thanks to Alli's observance. Getting into the locked room was another matter entirely.

The programmers were meditating, so the halls seemed empty as she made her way to the room. She got there, looked over both shoulders, then tried the handle. Locked. Obviously. Why had she thought any different?

She peered at the lock like she might be able to magically open it. No such luck. She needed the key and Luke had the key. Which meant—

“What on earth are you doing?”

She looked up to see Josh with his hands on his hips. “Um...”

He rolled his eyes. “You know it's locked, right?”

“I know, I know, but...” She had precisely zero excuses.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

He sighed. “You should have taken your phone out when Luke was busy putting away the clients’ electronics like the rest of us did.”

“Wait, what?”

“Except you weren’t here, were you?”

She had no choice but to go for it again, since the conversation was spiraling out of her control. “Wait, what?”

He grinned. “You don’t think we’d all let Luke take our phones for real, do you? We let him take them and then, when the programmers come in, we sneak in and get them back before Luke locks the door again. But you, obviously, were late, so you didn’t get the chance.” He twisted his mouth in thought. “There’s no getting through that door.”

“Right,” said Bea, finally catching up. He thought her phone was in there. She didn’t correct him, not when it looked like he might help.

“Okay, the keys are in the brass pot on Luke’s desk. You just need to distract him long enough to grab them, come back here, get your stuff, and replace them before he notices. Easy.”

“Easy?” Her stomach felt all hiccuppy at the thought.

“Yeah, just go tell him, I don’t know, tell him Daria wants him for something. He’ll go off looking for her.”

“He will?”

Josh’s eyes sparkled. “Not figured out that they’ve got a thing going on yet?”

“Uh, no?”

“Well, they do. Go tell him that, get the keys, and then rush back here. I’ll keep an eye out make sure no one comes near. Go on, off you go.”

Could it really be that easy? She looked at Josh, who wiggled his eyebrows at her. Alright, if she was going to do it, it might as well be now.

She hurried down the corridor to Luke’s office, knocking on the door and then sticking her head around it.

“What?” Luke said, absorbed in some sort of paperwork.

“Uh, Daria wants you?”

He looked up and then grinned the grin of a man who wasn’t thinking with his brain. “Right, cheers.”

He practically ran out of the office, leaving Bea in the corridor outside. She took three deep breaths before she went in. She went around his desk and easily found the keys before being distracted by the papers on his desk. They were some kind of financial statements. The numbers were impressive. More impressive than she would have imagined. She didn’t think that the program could be making that much money.

A sound out in the corridor reminded her of what she was supposed to be doing. She pocketed the keys and rushed back to where Josh was waiting.

“Told you it would work,” he said. “Go on then, in you go. I’ll stay out here and be lookout. If I see someone coming, I’ll knock twice on the door and you’d better hide yourself away in there, just in case. Got it?”

Bea nodded breathlessly and then tried to unlock the door with hands that were shaking so much that Josh had to take the keys from her and do it himself.

Once inside, she had a millisecond to think about what exactly she was doing. Breaking into a locked room. If she got caught doing this, she’d be fired for sure. But then, if she didn’t do it, she’d be fired for sure. She took a breath. Alright, she’d better not be caught.

She went to the trunk, dialed in the first three numbers that Alli had given her, then went through the cycle of the fourth barrel until she hit seven and the lock sprang open.

She hurriedly searched through the ziplock bags until she found the one with Alli’s name on it, all the while listening for Josh’s knocks.

And then she had a dilemma. Did she leave the empty bag in the trunk or take it with her? Which would look more suspicious? Take it with her, she decided. Alli’s phone was heavy in her hand and one tiny little piece of her brain told her to check it, to look and see. But she didn’t. Alli made her feel funny in ways she couldn’t define, and what she really wanted was the woman out of her life for good.

“All done,” she said brightly to Josh as she slipped out of the room and handed him the keys to lock up. She hoped she looked innocent enough.

“Not so fast,” said Josh.

So she looked guilty. Great.

He held the keys up. “You’re not done yet, you’ve got to put these back.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Right. She grabbed the keys and tore off back down the corridor to Luke's office, dropping them in the dish, leaving, and closing the door behind her. She took a second to lean against the corridor wall and get her breath back.

"Waste of my damn time," Luke said as he strode around a corner.

Bea straightened up.

"You, yes, you, what were you thinking?" he said as he saw her.

"I, uh, I, um..."

"Stutter away," he said, coming closer. "Daria had no idea what I was talking about and said that she'd barely swapped two words with you. What the hell do you think you were doing? Lying to me? Really?"

"No, I..." She shrank back against the wall. She really hadn't thought this through. A life of crime was definitely not for her. Luke looked furious.

"Do you not think that I do anything? Running this place is a nightmare. All needy people and running around after staff who don't know any better." He was close enough that she could see the pores on his skin.

"I don't think it's easy," she said quickly.

"Good, because it's fucking not. It's people like you that make my life more difficult. Arriving late and then sending me on wild goose chases like you think I'm some kind

of idiot. Do you think I'm an idiot?"

That final T sent a shower of spit on her cheek and Bea closed her eyes. "No, not at all."

"That's not the way it seems to me." His voice got lower, more threatening. "Open your eyes."

Bea did as she was told.

"Listen carefully. You are on very thin ice, understood?"

She nodded.

"Tell me you understand."

"I... I understand."

"Good, now get out of my way and don't let me see your face for the rest of the day."

He banged into his office and Bea fled down the corridor, not stopping until she turned the corner and her legs threatened to give out. Only then did everything catch up with her.

She'd robbed a locked room, lied to her boss, been yelled at. Her face grew hot and to her embarrassment, her eyes filled with tears, and then she was sobbing, either in relief that it was all almost over or because... because this whole place just filled her with weird emotions that she couldn't handle.

"There you are."

Could this all get any worse?

“I’ve been looking for you,” Alli said, drawing nearer.

Bea sniffed, tried to blink away the tears, and failed miserably.

“Why are you crying?”

Bea shuddered. “Nothing. It’s nothing. Just... Luke.” It seemed the most honest thing to say.

“Christ, he’s a wanker, isn’t he?” Alli said, leaning against the wall beside her. “I don’t know how you work for him, I certainly couldn’t.”

“Yeah,” Bea said, feeling a little better. She sniffed again, blinked again. The tears were starting to dry up.

Alli was so close that their shoulders were touching. It was warm. Warm and enticing in a way that made Bea sort of want to get closer. It made her sort of want Alli to wrap her arms around her, to take her.

Just in a hug, of course. A friendly hug.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Not that Alli would be the person to do that. Bea struggled to take a breath. It had been a while since she'd had any kind of... intimate contact. Perhaps, once all this was over, she'd get back on the apps, try and find someone new. New flat, new boyfriend.

"Mind you, I wouldn't work here at all," Alli said now. "Far too important and well-educated for that, thank you very much."

Which reminded Bea of just how not nice Alli really was. All images of hugging or any kind of contact left her head immediately. She straightened up. "Are you implying that I'm not well-educated?"

Alli's green eyes widened in surprise. "Uh, no, not really. I hadn't really thought about it."

Bea rolled her eyes. "Well, at least I'm smart enough to get this," she said, pulling the phone out of her pocket, still wrapped in its plastic bag.

"Mine?" Alli said suspiciously.

"Yours," said Bea. She pushed it into Alli's hands. "So now you can buzz off and get back to your important job and leave the rest of us alone."

She walked off down the corridor, forcing herself to walk slowly and not to look back.

The way Alli saw it, she might as well try and save herself four thousand pounds. So the very first thing she did was to sneak into the now dark yoga room and call Darren.

“Al,” he said cheerfully when he picked up. “Haven’t heard from you in a couple of days, hard at work there?”

“What do you think?” she snapped.

“I think that I’m very proud of you for sticking it out,” he said with a smile in his voice. “It takes guts to do something like that, like going to rehab, you know.”

“I’m not in rehab,” she said, stung by the implication.

“That’s not what I meant, I just...” She heard the sound of a deep breath being taken and slowly exhaled.

“Alright, fine,” she said grudgingly. “You didn’t mean it. But I think you’ve had your fun now, don’t you?”

“My fun?”

“I’ve been stranded here for three days, I’ve been a good girl and gone to all my classes, I think we can say that I’ve learned my lesson and I won’t be shouting at clients anymore. So it’s time for me to get out of here.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“Darren?”

Another long inhale and exhale. “You’re not a prisoner there, Alli,” he said finally. “But just to be clear, if you leave, you will not be coming back to Warren and

Colman.”

“Oh, come on, you’ve made your point.”

“Have I though? Have I really? Because it very much sounds to me like you haven’t understood the point at all. Yes, partly this is to satisfy the higher-ups. But mostly, this is about you, Alli. You can’t go on living life the way you’re living it, something has to change. You need this help and if forcing you to get it is the only way you’ll get it, well, then I’m alright with that.”

“I thought you were my friend.”

“I am.”

“That’s not how things sound.” She started to pick at the wood around the window, looking out onto the cold, dark grounds of the building.

“Alli, just complete the program. Just keep your head down and do what you’re supposed to do and then we’ll talk. If you need to hate me to get things done, then fine.”

“Fine—” But he’d already hung up.

Alli rubbed her face.

Maybe he did think he was helping her. Or maybe he was just being an asshole. Either way, being treated like a child sent off to boarding school wasn’t doing her any good at all.

Was it?

The door opened. “Oops,” Izzy said, making to close it again.

“No,” said Alli. “Come in for a minute.”

“Do you want to do something?” Izzy asked hopefully. “We could play cards if you like. Or... I don’t know, make some hot chocolate?”

“What’s with everyone’s obsession with making things here?” Alli shook her head. “If you want hot chocolate, just ask for some. And I’m sure there’s biscuits too, you don’t have to make your own.”

“It’s something to do with the time, I suppose,” Izzy said.

“Do you feel different here?” Alli said.

“What?”

“Do you feel different here? Like, has something changed about you. Are you feeling some effects after all this hocus pocus and meditation?”

Izzy shrugged. “I feel more relaxed, better rested.” She laughed. “I feel smarter, but I think that’s from being surrounded by adults all day.”

Alli thought about this. It was true that she also felt better rested, sexy dreams aside, she was sleeping well. That wasn’t much of a change though. Although, now that she

thought about it, she hadn't taken an antacid in days. Her stomach seemed more at ease. Probably just because she was eating three meals a day instead of surviving on coffee.

"What about being angry?" she asked. "Do you feel less angry?"

Izzy flushed and sniffed. "Yes, obviously, of course."

"Huh." Alli didn't think that she felt less angry.

She felt less tired and she felt more... more sexy, maybe. But that wasn't quite the word she was looking for. She felt more aware of her body, perhaps. Something like that. All of these things seemed normal for someone who wasn't working though. She had more time to think and feel things, that was all it was.

"Right," she said. "Go on then, off you go, find yourself some hot chocolate."

"You're not coming?"

Alli sighed. "I'll catch up."

Izzy grinned and left, and Alli pulled her phone out again. Might as well get this done. Bea had really come through for her, which was surprising. For an instant she thought about Bea's hands touching her phone, thought she could feel warmth in it. Her insides got all jumbled up at the idea of Bea's hands.

Good lord. The faster she was out of here, the better.

She keyed in the ID for her online banking and pulled the paper Daria had given her out of her pocket. Pricey, but worth it if she got to go home.

“IT’S NOT THAT I don’t miss them, I do, but having a little time alone is quite wonderful,” Izzy was saying when Alli got to the kitchen.

“I wish I could see mine more often,” said Charles.

Eugh. Great, they were talking about their kids.

“There’s a lot to be said for being comfortable alone though,” added Julia, spraying whipped cream on top of a cup.

“I don’t know, I’ve always liked having someone else there,” Izzy said.

“Because you’re happily married,” said Charles.

“In love,” added Julia.

“There’s no better feeling,” Marcus said.

“What does it feel like then?” Alli asked.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Everyone turned to look at her. Julia smiled. “You know, I’m sure you’ve been there yourself.”

“Nope,” Alli said. Quiet Leslie appeared at her elbow and gave her a mug of hot chocolate. “Never fallen don’t really plan to. What’s it like?”

“You get... warm inside,” Charles said.

“And you can’t stop thinking about them,” Izzy said. “Like they’re the only thing you can think about.”

Julia smiled. “That’s falling in love, not being in love.”

“Alright then,” said Alli. “What is being in love like?”

Julia smiled again. “Like coming home. Like sliding on a comfortable pair of shoes. Like feeling more yourself.”

“That makes no sense,” Alli said, somewhat glad that she didn’t have to go through this.

“It does,” Julia said. “You know how sometimes mixing two foods together makes one taste stronger. Like mixing balsamic vinegar and strawberries, it just makes the strawberries more... strawberry-y. It’s like that.”

“Huh.” Alli sipped at her hot chocolate. It was fresh and good. She wondered how long it would be until Daria came for her. Maybe she should go up to her room and

get her things together. “It all seems like a pain in the backside to me, having to consider someone else all the time.”

“It’s not like that,” Marcus said. “You don’t mind considering them, you want to consider them. Their emotions and feelings matter to you more than your own. Like when you see them cry, you can’t help but put your arm around them, like you want to soak in their sadness and take it away from them.”

Alli had a sudden image of Bea crying. Twice now she’d cried. And twice, Alli had touched her because of it. Which was odd because she wasn’t normally a toucher.

“The falling in love part is the best part though,” Izzy said. “That wild, exciting part when you can stay up all night and still dance away the next day.”

“I always found it slightly terrifying,” Charles said. He had a whipped cream mustache.

“Here,” said Izzy, pulling a tissue from her pocket and dabbing Charles’s mouth with it.

“Wait,” said Julia. “Are you two...?”

Izzy and Charles stared at her in horror. “N-n-no,” stuttered Charles.

“I’m married!” Izzy cried.

Julia looked sad. “Oh well. I suppose someone else will.”

“What are you talking about?” Alli asked, curious even though she didn’t want to be.

“In situations like these, there’s always at least one love affair,” Julia said. “I don’t

suppose it'll be me. I'm far too old for that sort of nonsense." She turned to Marcus. "What about you?" Then her eyes went to Leslie. "And you're always so quiet, dear. Do still waters run deep?"

"Julia," Izzy said. "Stop it, you're embarrassing people."

"I don't mean to," said Julia.

"Just as long as it's not me," Alli said, taking another big gulp of chocolate. "I don't have time for that sort of thing, nor do I have the inclination."

"You're a bit young to be an old maid," Julia said.

"Never had an interest in men," said Alli. "Don't have the time."

"What about women?" Izzy asked.

Alli froze for a second. "What?"

"Sorry," Izzy said. "But we are supposed to be inclusive. Inclusivity and representation are important."

"Right." Alli shook her head. Izzy was... special. Having all those kids had dislodged a few brain cells, obviously. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll have an early night." Better to go and prepare herself.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Night, Al,” Charles said, more cheerful than she thought she’d heard him before.

“Night,” Izzy said. “Shall we have breakfast together tomorrow?”

Alli, who wasn’t planning on being there tomorrow, just shrugged. “Let’s see.”

Izzy seemed happy with this and it struck Alli that this would be the last time that she saw them all. Which shouldn’t be that sad and yet was just a tiny bit. She’d spent every waking hour with these people for the last few days.

“Good night then,” she said, lingering for just a second.

When she finally went upstairs, she packed her things and sat on her bed to wait. It was long after midnight, and far too late to do anything about it, by the time she realized that Daria wasn’t coming at all.

Chapter Eighteen

Bea was awoken at six twenty-three by someone banging on her door. She shook her head, trying to clear away sleep. “What?” she shouted.

“Can I open the door?” It was Josh.

She looked down and found herself fairly presentable. “Yes.”

He came in, closing the door behind him, taking a quick look around. “Daria not here?”

“You know I don’t have a class until nine, right?” Bea asked, sitting up in bed. “Also, why would Daria be here?”

“Sleepover?” he guessed. “Or maybe the two of you had a thing going on, I’m not one to judge.”

“Oh, you’re not, are you?”

He looked stung. “Do you mean you haven’t guessed I’m gay? I’m insulted. I thought it was obvious. I’m not hiding it or anything.”

“Nor are you walking around in rainbow t-shirt with a him-bo on your arm,” said Bea. “And can we get back to the matter in hand? I thought Daria had a thing with Luke.”

“She does. Did. I don’t know. He’s going spare.” Josh parked himself on the end of her bed. “And Daria’s just gone.”

“What?” Bea yawned.

“She’s gone. She was supposed to do a pre-breakfast meditation session with a couple of the programmers and she never showed up.”

Bea felt a shiver of something inside her. A disappeared woman was never a good thing. Josh saw the look on her face.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think anything terrible’s happened. I checked her room first thing and she’s cleared it out. Most likely she’s just done a runner. The question is where to. And what are we supposed to do now, I suppose.”

“Just... left?” Bea asked. Maybe it was shocking to her because she’d never

considered it. Or maybe just because she needed the job so badly.

“Looks like it,” said Josh. “Keep an eye out for Luke. He’s not a happy camper right now.”

“His girlfriend’s walked out on him.”

“Yeah, fair enough. Don’t suppose you’ve got any idea where she might have gone?”

Bea shook her head. “Honestly, I’ve swapped maybe five words with her since I got here. She wasn’t exactly welcoming.”

“Hmm. Kept herself to herself, didn’t she?” Josh said. “I always reckoned it was because she was sleeping with the boss, thought she was above us and all that. But maybe she had her own thing going on.”

“Maybe indeed,” said Bea. “Listen, I’ll get up and come down for breakfast. What time’s the whole group meditation thing supposed to start?”

“Not until after lunch.”

“You need me to do it?”

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Maybe,” he allowed. “I might be able to take it on myself. You’ve got your group therapy to handle.”

“Right.” Bea reached out and took his hand, squeezing it. “We’ll figure it out. I need this job. We’ll have to.”

“You’re not the only one,” Josh said. “But thanks, I appreciate your help. Phone working alright?”

She frowned and then remembered just in time. “Yes, just fine.” Which made her think of something else.

Alli had her phone. Was it a coincidence that she was planning on leaving at the same time as Daria disappeared? God, she hoped Alli hadn’t done anything stupid. Maybe she’d taken Daria hostage or something.

“You alright there?” Josh asked.

“Yeah, fine, totally fine,” said Bea. “But if you don’t get out of here, you’re going to get a free show.”

He held his hands up. “I’m going, I’m going.”

“So flattering,” Bea grinned.

“Nothing personal, love,” he said, getting up. “Wouldn’t know what to do with it if I saw it.”

“Again, not incredibly flattering.”

He was laughing as he left.

She waited for the door to close and then sprang out of bed. She needed to check on Alli, see if she was really gone. And if she was... Well, Bea thought she might have some explaining to do. She couldn't think of a single earthly reason why Alli would have taken Daria with her, but she couldn't stay silent on the matter, not if something bad might have happened.

???

“I. Will. Fucking. Kill. Her.” Alli threw open another door to another empty room. Not here either.

In her heart of hearts, she knew that the search was futile. Daria was gone. Gone to god knows where and taking Alli's money with her. It had been a scam and Alli had fallen for it. She hated herself for that. Hated herself for being so desperate that she hadn't even considered that Daria might be lying to her.

She slammed the door and went to the next one on the corridor. The entire third floor of the building was very clearly empty, but she wasn't going to fall for any other cunning plans. She was going to search each and every room on the off chance that Daria was hiding out in one of them.

Maybe slamming all these doors would make her less likely to put her hands around the neck of the next person she saw. That was a big maybe though. Anger was seething inside her, roiling and rolling around her stomach, making her grit her teeth and breathe through her nose.

She didn't know what she was going to do. She wanted to hunt the woman down,

make her pay for all of this. But first she had to find her.

???

Bea pasted a smile on her face and walked into the dining room. The normal buffet was laid out and her stomach grumbled. She didn't have time for food though. Izzy was eating a hard-boiled egg at the table, and Charles was reading a newspaper.

"Good morning," Bea said brightly.

"Morning," Izzy said.

"Morning," said Charles.

"Um, any sign of Alli?" asked Bea.

"Why?" Izzy said, scooping up a spoonful of egg.

"Um... no real reason. Just... something about group therapy." Jesus, if she was going to start lying she was going to have to forward plan a bit better.

"We were supposed to have breakfast," Izzy said, seeming to accept Bea's excuse.

"But she didn't show up."

Bea's stomach sank. "Oh well, I'll, um, I'll check upstairs for her."

"You can," said Izzy. "But I don't think she's there. I knocked and she didn't answer."

“Maybe she overslept,” Charles said.

But Bea had a horrible feeling that she hadn’t.

She made her excuses and went as fast as she could without running up the stairs to the wing where the programmers were accommodated. The first few doors had names on them, the fifth didn’t. Alli had been a late addition, she remembered.

She threw open the door without knocking and then drew a full breath to calm herself. Clothes were strewn over the desk. The bed hadn’t been made. If Alli had left, she’d taken nothing with her. And that didn’t seem like Alli at all.

If she was still here, where was she?

Bea sat down on the edge of the bed to think, unconsciously sniffing, drinking in Alli’s guava scent. The smell calmed her and excited her at the same time. She found herself smiling and promptly wiped it off her face.

Which was when she heard noises from above. Doors slamming. She grinned. She knew where to find Alli.

???

Alli turned at the end of the corridor. She was all out of doors. Which was when she saw the figure coming toward her. She growled. “What do you want?”

“What are you doing?” Bea asked.

“Looking for Daria, what are you doing?”

“Same,” Bea said, but she was obviously lying.

“Right. Looking for me, more like it. What are you up to?” asked Alli suspiciously.

“Why aren’t you gone?” Bea came a little closer.

“What business is it of yours?”

“I was just wondering,” Bea said. “Since Daria seems to be gone, I thought you might have gone together, or maybe...” She trailed off.

Alli laughed. “You thought I’d kidnapped her? I might if I ever see the bitch again. She stole my money.”

“What?” Bea stopped about a meter away.

Alli hadn’t meant to confess this, hadn’t wanted to tell anyone. She was ashamed now, and the shame made her angry. “The bitch made me pay her to get out of here and then ran off with my money. Happy now?”

“No,” Bea said slowly.

“Going to cry about it, then?” asked Alli. “You do a lot of crying.”

“I do not.”

Alli stepped closer. “I’ve seen you cry twice and I’ve only been here three days.”

“I don’t cry a lot,” Bea said. Her cheeks were starting to flush, she was getting angry

too. The thought pushed Alli forward.

“Do you not? You look like a crybaby to me. And now you’re interfering with my life. Why don’t you get out of here and leave me alone?”

“Why don’t you ask nicely?” Bea said.

Alli took another step forward and Bea blinked but didn’t move. “I don’t get you. You seem all meek and mild and yet you don’t seem to have a problem snapping at me, do you? Why is that, do you think?” Alli kept her voice cool, calm. She was going to snap soon, she was sure, she could feel the anger in her belly, the heat of it.

“You bring out the worst in me,” said Bea, taking one step back now and finding the wall behind her.

Alli stepped in so that she was centimeters from Bea’s nose. “Oh, I do, do I?” she purred.

And Bea was just standing there, her eyes dark and flashing, her cheeks pink, her hair tickling at Alli’s nose and suddenly Alli felt a shift inside her. Suddenly she felt a heat building that had nothing to do with anger and everything to do with... something else.

“Piss off and leave me alone,” Bea said, her voice tight with anger.

But Alli didn’t.

It was like she was being controlled by something or somebody else. It was like she couldn’t help herself, like she was pulled forward by some kind of super-magnet. Because in a millisecond she was crushing her lips against Bea’s and then, unthinkingly, Bea was responding and the heat was building and Alli’s hands were grasping Bea’s waist and pulling her in and Bea was scrabbling hot fingers under the hem of Alli’s shirt and for just a moment, Alli understood the world.

Chapter Nineteen

For a long moment, everything seemed to come together. Everything just seemed... right. The taste of Alli on her tongue, the feeling of Alli against her skin, the deep pounding inside her that told her just how much she wanted this.

Then Alli was jerking away. Pulling back until Bea could see her green eyes gleaming, could see the wanting in her swollen lips, the flush on her cheeks.

“Fuck,” Alli said slowly. “Fuuu-uck.”

Then she turned on her heel and stalked away down the corridor, leaving Bea leaning against the wall breathless and not quite as confused as she might have expected.

So that was it. Bea bit her lip in wonder at it all. So that was what the problem had been. A smile started to spread across her face because now she knew why she’d been

acting so strangely, why Alli had this effect on her.

Her legs were still a little wobbly as she walked herself back to her bedroom. She needed to shower and get ready for work, and she needed a little time to digest all this. To decide what to do about it.

Her phone beeped just as she was grabbing a robe and preparing to go to the bathroom. She glanced down at the message, saw that it was Liz, and figured she could cut her shower short by just five minutes.

“Hi,” she said when Liz picked up the phone. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, I didn’t expect a call, I was just checking in that everything was going okay,” Liz said. “Well, that and I’m going stir crazy with Den running after me. He even got me a little bell to ring, like he’s my servant or something.”

“He just cares,” Bea said, perching on the end of her bed. “And, um, something happened.”

“What?” Liz’s voice sounded concerned.

“I kissed a girl.” It had never occurred to her to keep it to herself.

“Did you like it?” asked Liz.

“Zero cherry chapstick, other than that, um, yes, actually, I think I did. I definitely did.”

“Katy Perry references aside, Bea, I can’t see your face, I have no idea how this is impacting you. What happened?”

So Bea told her the whole sordid story, well, most of it. The parts that counted anyway. Right up until Alli pushed her against the wall and kissed her and Bea's breath escaped and even now, telling the story, she felt herself grow warmer.

"Jesus, Bea, why didn't you tell me any of this?" Liz said at the end.

"Because you're not my mother, it's not your job to fix my mistakes, and because I didn't think it was that much of a problem."

"You didn't think that being blackmailed was a problem?"

"It's not like she'd got pictures of me robbing a bank or anything," Bea said. "It was... a thing. An accident. I don't know. But anyway, it's over now, she can't blackmail me anymore, not after kissing me like that."

There was a second of silence on the phone. "Bea, I love you. I just... I want to know that you're alright. After all of this stuff with Robbie, I don't want anyone to treat you badly again. I don't want people to walk all over you at all, but especially one who's supposed to love you."

"But... she doesn't," Bea said, smiling. "That's the weird part. There's something about her. I can stand up for myself around her. I don't know how it works. I just know that she doesn't walk all over me, I don't let it happen."

"You let her blackmail you," Liz put in.

"Yes, fine, I did. But mostly that was because I was worried about doing a good job and not making a bad impression in case it looked bad for you, you know, since you set me up here and all. Other than that, though, she really hasn't taken advantage of me. Not in the way you might expect. I don't know, Liz, I think there's something here. Something I want to explore."

“I’m glad you’re not having a gay crisis of conscience,” Liz said slowly. “I mean, love is love and there’s no reason you shouldn’t fall for a woman. But are you sure about this, Bea?”

“It was one kiss,” Bea said, falling back onto the bed. “One kiss, but I felt... All warm and gooey inside, I felt like someone in a romance novel. I’m not saying I’m in love with her, I’m just saying... I don’t know what I’m saying. This is new, different, it literally just happened. I... I’m curious. And there’s feelings there. Big ones. I think.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Big feelings,” Liz said. “About someone with anger problems? About someone who is supposed to be in therapy?”

Bea swallowed. Okay, that was a fair point. “We all have our weaknesses though, don’t we?” she said. “And opposites attract, right?”

“Attraction and relationships are two different things,” Liz warned her. “Just try not to confuse the two.”

“I’m not a child.”

Liz laughed. “I know, I know. And I’m sounding like an interfering aunt. I’m sorry. I want you to be okay, Bea. I worry about you.”

“I don’t need looking after all the time.”

There was another minute pause. “Don’t you?” Liz said finally.

And Bea knew she meant it in a caring way, knew that she wasn’t being patronized too, but at the same time she didn’t want to be the kind of person that needed looking after. She wanted to be independent and strong. Like... like Alli.

“I’ve got this,” she said to Liz quite calmly. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Okay,” Liz said. “But I’m here if you need me. Always.”

Bea hung up the phone and wondered if she should have told Liz all that. But then,

she hadn't been able to help it, she'd been bursting with the news. She still was. She could still feel Alli on her lips.

Alli.

She hadn't exactly sounded thrilled about what had happened. That long, drawn-out 'fuck' hadn't sounded like someone who wanted more.

Well too bad. For once, Bea was determined to get what she wanted out of life. If Alli needed a little persuasion to see what this thing was, then Bea was going to persuade her.

She went off to shower and to think of a plan for what she was going to say to Alli the next time she found her.

THE TINY STAFFROOM was full by the time Bea pushed her way in to make some coffee. And the air was abuzz with chatter.

"Luke's mad as a snake," Josh was saying.

"Well, he would be, wouldn't he?" Celine said. "The two of them were doing whatever it was they were doing."

Which made Bea think about sex and then about Alli and then... her mouth got weirdly dry.

"You don't know where she might have gone, do you?" Celine asked, turning to Bea. "Daria, we're talking about." Like there was someone else who'd disappeared in the night.

"Not a clue," Bea said cheerfully.

“Well, I heard that she’d come into some money,” sniffed Celine.

Bea blushed, thinking of Alli’s money, thinking that Alli had been desperate enough to pay the woman to try and get out of here. Which was stupid. Stupid because Alli so clearly needed to be here. Stupid because Bea wanted her to stay.

“Glad that someone’s got some money,” Josh grumbled.

Bea suddenly thought about the figures she’d seen on Luke’s desk.

How much money was this place making, she wondered.

It couldn’t be that much. No, it shouldn’t be that much. And yet... She paused, coffeepot in hand. And yet something just wasn’t right. Something about the numbers she’d seen on Luke’s desk. Something about the way the programmers talked in group therapy. Something just didn’t add up.

It was like a mosaic with one tile just a little out of kilter.

“You alright over there, Bea?” Josh called.

“Yes,” she said quickly. “Fine. Anyone want coffee?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

No one did. They were all too busy wondering what had happened to Daria, and Bea certainly wasn't going to tell them. She wasn't going to say that Daria had taken money from a client and then gone.

"I'd stay out of Luke's way," Josh was saying.

"We should stop gossiping," said Lex, finally piping up.

"You're the psychologist," Josh said. "What do you think went on there?"

"I think it's none of our business."

Bea looked at her and she thought how out of her depth Lex looked. Like she was a child pretending to be an adult. Like she really shouldn't be in charge of a program like this.

And then there was Josh. Lovely but with a prison record.

And Celine who... who could cook like an angel and yet was making buffet meals for a cut-rate anger retreat.

And Daria. A meditation teacher capable of fleecing a woman out of thousands and disappearing.

And finally, finally, Luke. Suspiciously handsome and more angry than his clients and just a little scary.

“You’re no fun,” Josh was complaining to Lex. “You’ve got no psychological insights at all?”

“I’ve got professional standards,” Lex said, standing up. “And I won’t speculate about things I know nothing about. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

She left and then Celine went to start cleaning up the kitchen and Josh followed to start sweeping the hall. And Bea was left alone.

She felt like she’d had an entire week in just a couple of hours. So much had changed in just a short time.

Maybe she shouldn’t feel this way, maybe she should be more careful, maybe Liz had a point. Yet Bea couldn’t help but think that something instrumental had happened, something that made her life better and more interesting and more complicated all at the same time.

Alli was beautiful, there was that. But there was more. Alli was angry. Alli was occasionally frightening. She was also not the big, bad, scary wolf she pretended to be, Bea was quite sure of that.

She was quite sure that there were depths to Alli that she couldn’t even begin to understand. She was also sure that something about Alli changed the way she behaved. Something about her made Bea herself more spiky, more confident, more able to snap back. Something about Alli gave her strength.

She sighed and got up, it was time to go to work. And at some point during the day, she was going to have to confront Alli.

She just hoped that Alli wasn’t going to be unreasonable about all this.

Chapter Twenty

Alli's heart was beating through her shirt. She had no idea why she'd just done that. It had happened, like she was being controlled by something other than herself. It scared her in a way, and yet at the same time there was a tiny ball of peace in her stomach. Things made sense and didn't make sense and she didn't know what to do about that.

Probably, almost certainly, she shouldn't have kissed Bea like that. She shouldn't have just grabbed her and thrown her against the wall and pressed herself against her. Even though she thought it might have been impossible not to do those things. Even though the very thought of those things made her feel hot and breathless.

Still, it had been inappropriate.

She shouldn't have done it.

She was confused enough about it that by the time she was sitting opposite Lex, it was pretty much all she could think about.

"Have you lost your temper since the last time we met?" Lex asked.

"Huh?" Alli tore herself from her thoughts.

"I said, have you lost your temper since the last time we met?" asked Lex patiently.

Alli cocked an eyebrow. "What do you think? I'm at a stupid anger management program, aren't I?"

"That doesn't mean that you've been angry," said Lex. "The program might be working."

Alli snorted and crossed her legs.

“Alright, why don’t we start with what made you angry.”

Okay, there was an issue she really didn’t want to get into. Not only because she was embarrassed that Daria had taken her for a ride, but also because she was fairly sure that she’d get into trouble in all sorts of ways. And as much as she wanted out of St. Hilda’s, she had to admit that she’d already done three days and she didn’t relish the thought of having to start anew somewhere else.

“Why don’t we not,” she said now.

“Okay,” Lex said reasonably. “Why don’t you tell me what’s at stake here?”

“What do you mean?”

“People tend to come to programs like this because they stand to lose something. What do you stand to lose, Alli?”

“My job,” Alli said, crossing her legs in the other direction.

“And what does your job mean to you?”

“Everything.” The word slipped out before Alli had thought about it. But it was at least the truth.

“I see.” Lex studied her. “I’d like to ask you what else is in your life? Friends, family,

a pet perhaps?”

“Nope,” said Alli. “Just me and my job.”

“And are you happy like that?”

Alli blew out a breath. “What does happy have to do with it?” she asked. “I’ve got a job I’m fucking brilliant at. I’ve got a boss who thinks I’m a star. I make more money than you can imagine a year. What else do I need?”

“Some people don’t measure their lives in financial successes.”

“Right.” Alli rolled her eyes.

“Some people measure their lives by the number of friends they have, or the number of people they’ve helped, or by how happy they are to get up in the morning.”

“Those people are losers,” Alli said.

“You’re not a loser.”

“Definitely not.” She was pleased that Lex was seeing her point.

Lex tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. “You seem distracted today. More distracted than usual. Is there something that you’d like to talk about?”

Alli considered this. “Everything in here is private, right?”

“As long as you don’t tell me that you have plans to physically harm yourself or someone else, yes, anything you say is between you and I.”

An opportunity that didn't come along often. Alli swallowed before she spoke the words. "I kissed a woman." Another swallow. "Is that normal?"

Lex's eyebrows raised a smidgen. "We prefer to avoid words like 'normal' in therapy."

"I don't mean like normal normal," Alli said. "I'm not a homophobe. I don't particularly care who kisses who."

"What did you mean then?"

What did she mean? Good question. "I mean... I'm over thirty years old and I just kissed a woman, is that... I'm too old, aren't I?"

"Your previous sexual experiences have been with men?"

"What there's been of them, yeah," said Alli. There'd been a handful, just to check. Just... She found herself speaking again. "I thought I was broken. No, I knew I was broken. I just... Didn't feel those things."

“What things?” asked Lex.

“Those pulse-pounding stupid things like you see in the films. I never got that. It wasn’t that I couldn’t...” She had to take another breath. Screw it. She’d started now and she was never going to have another chance like this, was she? Someone who couldn’t tell anyone else anything.

“Couldn’t what?” Lex prompted.

“I can orgasm,” Alli said, jumping in with both feet. “I mean physically, I seem to be fine. Not that I have much time for that sort of thing. I just never felt the things I was supposed to feel around men, and I sort of figured I was broken. Like how not everyone can be good at maths. I was good at maths but bad at men.”

“I see,” said Lex. “And then you kissed a woman. That concerns you?”

“Concerns me?” Alli frowned.

“I mean, how do you feel about it?”

“Hot,” Alli said. “Hot and sweaty and like my legs don’t work properly.”

Lex let a small smile escape. “Like you might not be so broken after all?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Alli turned to look out of the window. “I don’t know why her, though. She’s the opposite of me in every way that counts.”

“Opposites attract, I’m sure you’ve heard that,” Lex said. “But in a relationship sometimes opposites benefit each other, fill in the gaps in each other in a way.”

“Who’s talking about relationships?” snapped Alli, bringing her attention back to Lex.

“You kissed,” Lex said. “There’s a natural progression from there that could potentially lead to a relationship. Is that not something that you’d like?”

“Someone in my home? Someone complaining because I’m late home from work? Someone constantly needing my attention when it should be focused elsewhere?”

“Ah.” Lex nodded. “Relationships look different for different people. There’s no fixed way that these things have to go. The only thing that I would counsel you on is the fact that communication and understanding are important.”

“Okay,” Alli said slowly.

“I mean that it’s important that you’re both on the same page. If this isn’t going to lead to anything more serious for you, then the other person involved should know that.” Lex cleared her throat. “And, um, it’s not especially advisable for programmers to be involved with each other in the program. This is a difficult time for many people.”

“Yeah, that’s not a problem,” Alli said, distracted by the thought of what Bea might want, what she herself might want. She stood up. “And my time’s up. I’m getting out of here.”

“Before you go,” Lex said. “I am supposed to ask you if you have any idea what might have happened to Daria?”

“Not a clue,” Alli said as she breezed out of the therapy room.

“WHAT A MORNING,” Izzy said as she bought her lunch and sat down next to Alli.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Alli, not thrilled at the prospect of lunch with Izzy, but also slightly worried that someone might have seen her kiss Bea. Or even that Bea might have told someone.

Shit. She’d been the one blackmailing Bea and now she’d turned around and given Bea blackmail material right back. Maybe Bea was going to report her for harassment. She hadn’t thought about that.

“First Daria disappears, then Charles kicking up a fuss like that,” Izzy said as she picked up her sandwich.

Alli squinted at her. “Charles kicking up a fuss?”

“Oh, right, you were in therapy,” said Izzy, putting the sandwich back down again. “Charles went off to make a phone call after breakfast, you know, like he always does.”

“Does he?” Alli was beginning to tune her out already, starting to think about her own problems. One thing was becoming quite clear to her. She shouldn’t have kissed Bea. And she definitely shouldn’t do it again. Even if the thought made her feel warm and oozy inside.

“Yes, obviously,” Izzy said. “He calls his kids and then he calls his solicitor to see how his case is going. Seriously? We’ve been here for days already.”

“Get to the point.”

“Well,” Izzy said happily, picking up her sandwich again. “He comes back from the phone and he’s seething, demanding to know where Luke is, angrier than I’d ever imagined he could get.” She took a mouthful and chewed thoughtfully. “I didn’t think he really belonged here at all, but now that I’ve seen him get angry...”

“What was he angry about, though?” asked Alli.

Izzy shrugged. “Not a clue. He didn’t say. I assume it was something someone told him on the phone, though. Probably his solicitor, since his kids are pretty young still. Haven’t seen him since either.”

“Huh.” Alli was about to say that it’d be good riddance if Charles had actually left, wet weekend that he was, but she was stopped in her tracks as Bea walked into the dining room.

In a moment she was short for breath, she was pulsing inside, and the room started to shrink and get awfully warm.

There was, she realized, a pull there, something that made her want to do the whole thing over again, even though she knew it was crazy and stupid.

Bea turned and saw her and gave a half-smile and Alli steeled herself, forced herself not to smile back.

Instead, she dumped the rest of her sandwich on her tray and got up, slamming her chair back to the table, and walking out without a word of goodbye to Izzy or anyone else.

Chapter Twenty One

Bea caught sight of Alli’s face, saw her green eyes flash and her mouth almost smile. Then she saw her wipe her face clear, put her sandwich down, and stalk out of the

dining room.

No time like the present, Bea thought, taking a deep breath before she followed Alli out of the room.

Alli was striding along the corridor and Bea had to run a little to catch up with her. So her breath was coming a little faster and then she slid as she was approaching her and reached up and then... Then she was pushing Alli against a door and the door was opening and they were both tumbling inside.

Laying on top of Alli, there was clearly only one thing to do. Bea couldn't help herself. She gave in to everything she wanted and tangled her fingers in Alli's hair, pulling her closer until their lips were crushing together, until she felt Alli's body relax into hers, until that breath-taking, heart-beating rush was upon her again.

Then Alli pulled back and cool green eyes were looking into Bea's.

"I promised myself this wasn't going to happen again," Alli said, breath warm on Bea's face.

"To be fair, last time you kissed me, this time it's me kissingyou," said Bea, staring down into Alli's face in wonder.

"I'm not sure that was my point in not doing this again."

"Hmm." Bea gave this a second of thought. "Are you saying that you didn't want to?"

"It seems inappropriate."

"We are both adults."

“Again, maybe not exactly what I was going for.”

Bea shifted minutely. “You’re very confusing, do you know that?”

“And you’re not?” Alli countered. “I mean, I blackmailed you, do you remember that part?”

“You also ran into my beautiful car, shouted at me, and refused to participate in my classes,” Bea said. “And I snapped at you and tried very hard to hate you. So why did you kiss me upstairs?”

Alli shrugged, biting her lip and looking anywhere but into Bea’s eyes.

“Was it because you wanted to?” Bea asked. “Was it because just in that moment it seemed like the only thing that you could do?”

“What would you know about it?” asked Alli.

Bea took a breath. “My best friend Liz says that opposites can attract. And there’s something about you. Something that makes me want to stand up for myself, that makes me somehow stronger and more confident and I don’t know what it is, but it makes me want more of you.”

Alli squinted. “What would you know about that?”

“I just kissed you, remember?”

Alli shifted and Bea sat up. “We have nothing in common.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“We don’t know each other,” said Bea, now sitting astride Alli’s thighs. “Which is something that could be easily corrected.”

For once, Alli had nothing to say. She just stared up at Bea from the ground in a way that made Bea want to do unspeakable things to her.

“Listen, if you’re not interested, just speak up and I’ll leave you alone,” Bea said, wondering once again where this confidence was coming from.

“No,” Alli said quite quickly. “No, that’s not what I said.”

“What’s the problem, then?”

Alli lifted her hands as though to gesture at everything around her. “All of this.”

Bea considered this. It was a fair point. She didn’t want to lose her job, though she was starting to suspect that there was something else going on around here. On the other hand, she couldn’t remember having felt like this before and that seemed like a gift from the universe, something she couldn’t let go.

“We could be discreet,” she offered. “If you want to.”

Alli firmed her jaw. “You’re annoying. You’re weak and annoying, and I don’t want to be here.”

“You’re irritating, bossy and verging on criminal,” Bea pointed out.

“Fair,” said Alli.

Bea allowed one hand to trail along Alli’s side, to trace the curve of her waist. She wanted this. No, she needed this. She deserved this. For once, she was going to take what she wanted and be damned with everything else.

It had been so long. She’d been with Robbie as long as she could remember. She’d missed these feelings. And... and there was a growing certainty inside her that she had given enough. That if the universe was offering Alli up on a plate, she’d be stupid to turn her down.

“What’s the problem, then?” Bea said more gently.

Alli turned her head. “I just...” She took an uncharacteristically shaky breath. “I just... I thought I couldn’t do this.”

“Okay, that’s what we’re discussing.”

“No, no, I mean in general.” Alli breathed again. “I thought I didn’t feel these things, okay? That I was broken, that I wasn’t meant to feel things like this and then... And then all of a sudden you’re standing there in that corridor and... And it’s like I was exploding inside.”

Bea reached out, stroked her cheek. “You’re not broken.”

“Yes, I can see that now,” Alli said, breath starting to come faster.

“And I’d never have dared,” said Bea quietly. “I’d never have dared touch someone as beautiful as you. Except you did it first and it’s like you gave me permission.”

“You don’t need permission,” growled Alli. “Take what you damn well want.”

And that might just have been general life advice, but for Bea it was far more immediate than that. She leaned down again, pressing Alli against the floor, pressing her lips against Alli's, feeling her tongue slide into Alli's mouth and her body start to respond to Alli's.

And this time, Alli was giving it all back and more, was clutching at her, wrapping her arms around her and turning her until Bea was the one on the floor and Alli's thigh was between her legs and Bea was pushing up against it and groaning into Alli's mouth and...

And this time Bea was the one pulling back. "Jesus."

"I didn't tell you to stop," Alli breathed.

"You don't tell me anything," Bea said pertly. "We're in the middle of an unlocked room right before classes are supposed to start. Hardly the time or the place."

Alli licked at her lips. "Fine," she said, sitting up, then standing and offering Bea a hand.

Bea let herself be pulled up. "We're not done here, though."

"Are we not?" Alli arched an eyebrow.

"We have things to talk about," said Bea. "And things to... to do."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Uh-huh.” Alli’s mouth curved at the corners and for a moment Bea needed to kiss her again.

“But I wanted you to know that I was interested.”

“Message received and understood,” Alli said. She looked around the room. “This isn’t like real life, anyway.”

Bea shook her head. “I suppose not,” she said. It was a fair point, a good one. It seemed like whatever happened here wouldn’t impact the outside world. Like this was a safe space to try things.

Alli reached out tentatively, took Bea’s hand, wrapped her long, strong fingers around it and squeezed.

Bea smiled. “Later,” she said, the word full of promise.

“Later,” said Alli, smiling back.

And then the door opened and Alli was dropping Bea’s hand like it was a hot coal.

“Everyone’s looking for you,” chirped Izzy.

“We were just... going over some yoga moves,” Bea said weakly.

“Oh, well, we’re all in the classroom across the hall,” Izzy said. “Well, all except Charles, of course. He’s been taken away somewhere.”

“Like where?” Alli asked.

Izzy shrugged. “Dunno. We haven’t seen him since he started demanding to speak to Luke and asking for answers.”

“What?” Bea asked.

Izzy filled her in on what had happened.

“But why would he react like that?” Alli said when she’d heard the story for a second time. “Charles is the most un-angry person I’ve ever met, and I should know.”

“Dunno,” Izzy said again. “But he was definitely angry. His lawyer must have told him something. Maybe something about his kids? I can’t imagine why else he’d be so het up.”

“Or maybe anger takes different people in different ways,” Bea said. “Just because you’ve never seen Charles angry doesn’t mean that he doesn’t get angry. He is in an anger management program, after all.”

Izzy shuffled her feet and looked at the floor.

“Iz,” Alli said sternly.

“What?”

“Something you want to say there?”

She looked for an instant like she might be about to say something, but then she shook her head. Even when Alli glared at her, she still said nothing.

“Izzy,” Bea said. “If there’s something you know, then you should spit it out if it could be helpful.”

“I don’t know anything,” Izzy said. “But I don’t think Charles deserves to be here. Not like you,” she added to Alli.

“Thanks so much,” said Alli.

“She has a point,” said Bea. “You know, you could just buckle down and complete the program, maybe work on some of those issues and improve yourself. You’re here anyway, you might as well take advantage of it.”

“I’m not staying,” Alli said firmly.

Bea almost crumbled, almost said something pathetic. But then Alli looked at her and instead she did just what Alli would have done. She lifted one eyebrow. “Are you not?” she said, the implications very clear in her voice.

Alli flushed and didn’t answer.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Izzy cleared her throat. “Um, we are all sort of waiting for you. All except Charles, obviously.”

Bea nodded at her. “We’ll be right there. Please tell the rest of the class to get into child’s pose and start their breathing exercises.”

Izzy scuttled off.

“We’re not finished with this,” Bea said. “Don’t think that you’re going to escape this easily.”

“I can still tell your boss that you lost your temper with me,” said Alli.

“And I could tell him that you harassed me,” said Bea with a grin. “So I’d say we’re pretty even on that score.”

Alli regarded her for a moment and then grinned. “I’m starting to like you more.”

“Good,” said Bea. “Because I’ve got a feeling we’re going to be seeing a lot more of each other.”

Chapter Twenty Two

Alli watched Bea’s body move into another pose, saw the grace of her legs, the curve of her arms. It might be playing with fire. No, strike that, it definitely was playing with fire. But since when had that ever bothered her?

Okay, she shouldn't have just pushed herself on Bea like that. But Bea had proven herself equally interested and now... Now there were more important things to explore. Like the fact that apparently, she could feel things.

She'd be lying if she said she wasn't curious. She was, very much so. It was like suddenly discovering that she spoke a foreign language, or that she could play the piano or something. She wanted to know what this was, what she could do.

She leaned back against the wall and Bea showed the class another move and Alli could imagine what she'd be like in bed, all long muscles and firm grip. There was a hiccup of heat inside her.

"Alli," Bea said. "Would you care to join us?"

"Alli never joins in," Marcus said, hands pressed together solemnly under his chin. "She's not a joiner."

"Doesn't play well with others," teased Izzy.

"Oh, leave her alone," Julia said. "She'll come into herself, won't you, dear?"

Was this what it was? Her coming into herself? Her suddenly realizing that the world wasn't as harsh a place as she had first thought?

"Alli is just as much a member of the group as everyone else," Bea said.

"Then why doesn't she do yoga with the rest of us?" asked Marcus.

"It's a fair point," Izzy said. "I mean, we all want to graduate from the program. We can't graduate if we don't participate."

Alli rolled her eyes. “You use the word graduate like it actually means something.”

“Dunno, you want to keep your job?” Marcus asked. “Because in group it sounded like you kind of did and if spending a few days doing yoga is what it takes, then I don’t think that’s a huge sacrifice.”

Alli treated him to another eye roll.

“It is fun, dear,” Julia said. “You could give it a try.”

“It’s calming,” added Izzy. Even silent Leslie nodded at that.

“And a requirement,” said Bea. “Why don’t we all get into our favorite positions and hold them for ten deep breaths, please.” She let the class move and then came over to the wall where Alli was standing.

“What now?” Alli asked.

“You don’t have a hold over me anymore, remember?” Bea said.

“Do I not?” Alli lifted one eyebrow and Bea gave a satisfactory blush.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“You know what I mean. You need to participate in class. You know that I have to write reports and things, right?”

Alli huffed a sigh. “Yeah, but no. Not going to happen.”

“Oh, come on,” said Izzy, who was standing on one leg. “You might even like it, come on, do what I’m doing.”

Before Alli knew what was happening, Bea’s firm hands were on her waist, pulling her away from the wall and... And as much as she didn’t want to do a stupid yoga class the feeling of Bea touching her was just too much to resist.

“Put your hands like this,” Izzy said encouragingly. “And then one leg like this.”

“Stand firm on your other leg, like you were trying to push it down into the earth,” advised Julia.

“And don’t close your eyes or you’ll fall over,” added Marcus.

Bea’s hands moved her, pushed her in different directions, until Alli felt herself stable on one foot. “Now breathe,” Bea said in her ear, close enough that the little hairs on the back of Alli’s neck stood up. “Breathe deeply.”

It was all Alli could do to take any kind of breath at all, let alone a deep one.

“That’s right,” said Izzy. “Now do what Marcus is doing, his is harder than mine.”

Alli looked over and then attempted to move her arms into the position that Marcus was holding.

“Press your palms into each other,” he said. “Really use some force there.”

“Not too much, though,” Julia said. “You don’t want to fall. You’re doing a lovely job.”

“Very nice,” Bea hummed in her ear. “Very nice indeed.”

A pulse was starting to beat between Alli’s legs. One she hadn’t felt before. Jesus, was this what a stroke felt like?

She put out a hand to steady herself on Bea’s shoulder, but the beat just got harder and faster and now her mouth was getting dry and... And other places weren’t dry at all. She took a shaky breath and then another.

“Is she alright?” Marcus asked.

“She does rather look like she’s going to faint,” said Julia.

“Maybe she should sit down?” asked Izzy.

Alli put her other foot firmly on the floor. “I’m fine,” she said, even though her voice was trembling a little and she didn’t feel fine at all. She felt all hot and sweaty and like parts of her body had swelled up without her permission.

“You don’t look fine,” Izzy pressed.

“I’m fine. And I thought yoga was supposed to be relaxing, which isn’t the case when you’re all staring at me like an animal in the zoo.” Now this was better. This was the

familiar burning in her stomach, the beginning of anger, an old friend that she absolutely knew how to deal with.

“We weren’t staring,” said Marcus.

“Bullshit,” spat Alli.

And she was feeling it now, feeling it growing inside her, so when the door opened and Luke came in, she was all primed and ready for what came next.

???

Bea jumped just about as far away from Alli as she could get in one leap and then cursed herself. Luke must have noticed something.

“Bea, a word, please?”

She was trying to come up with excuses in her head, reasons why she should have been so close to Alli, justifications for why she’d jumped away like she was guilty. But in the end, it was all unnecessary.

“I’m going to talk to the group in a minute,” Luke said, pulling her to one side. “But before I do, do you have any information on a telephone call that Charles might have received?”

“No,” Bea said. “But—”

Luke was already moving away from her. That was apparently all he’d needed. He was clapping his hands so that everyone turned to him, so that everyone was paying attention to him.

“I do want to apologize for the chaos this morning,” he said with a wry smile. “I assure you, it’s not at all what we expect from this program. As I’m sure you’ve heard already, one of our staff has left. Daria has had a family emergency and will no longer be participating in this session of the program.”

There was some mumbling at this, and Bea didn’t dare turn to catch Alli’s eye. A made up family emergency wasn’t going to fool anyone.

“And then there’s Charles. I’m aware that a few of you sawhis... outburst this morning. Let me once again assure you that this is not normal for the program. Though, as I’m sure you can imagine, some of our programmers do respond better to treatment than others do.”

“Where is he?”

Bea did turn now because the voice was Alli’s.

“I’m sorry?” Luke said.

“Where’s Charles?” Her eyes were flinty, her tone cold as ice.

“I’m afraid that Charles will be leaving us. Has, in fact, already left us,” Luke said.

“In that case, I want out as well,” said Alli firmly.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, not if you want to complete the program.”

“Did Charles get a little graduation certificate?” demanded Alli.

And it was clear from the rising flush on Luke’s face that Charles had, in fact, been given the precious certificate.

“That’s bullshit, it’s all bullshit,” spat Alli.

She was drawing herself up now, Bea could see it. Could see the fire in her eyes, could see how truly angry she was, could see it flowing over her skin, could feel it crackling in the air. She found that she was clutching her hands together, that she was afraid of what Alli was going to do next.

“Unfortunately,” Luke began.

But Alli was having none of it.

“Unfortunately, my arse,” she said, dripping with venom. “Unfortunately, you, Mr. Smarmy, are nothing more than a shill artist, a con man, a liar, and a cheat.”

Luke blanched. “Whatever would make you say such a thing?”

“Your staff are liars and cheats. And you... how much exactly did Charles have to pay you to get out of here? Huh?”

“N-n-nothing.” Luke cowered back as Alli stalked toward him.

“Nothing? Really? Then he had something over you, did he?” Alli said, threateningly quiet. “What did he hear then? What was he told that meant he was allowed out of here?”

“Nothing,” Luke said again.

Alli rolled her eyes. “Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. You’re an odious little man with hateful little eyes and I’m going to uncover whatever little secret it is that you have, and when I do, you’ll wish that you were dead. You’ll wish that you were anywhere other than on the same damn planet as me. Because I will make sure you suffer and you will pay for whatever—”

Josh charged through the door. “Come on, then.”

“What?” Alli said, shocked.

“You can come with me or I can carry you, your choice,” Josh said. “No inappropriate behavior in the classroom. That’s the rule.”

“But... but,” Alli began.

But Josh was already wrapping his arms around her and physically carrying her out of the room. All the anger left with her. The other programmers slumped in relief. Luke looked like he was catching his breath.

And Bea.

Bea had just seen what Alli could really be like. Had seen that temper, had seen how tenuous Alli's control on it really was.

And as much as she might want the woman, as much as her body might cry out for her touch, it had scared her.

She wasn't at all sure that she wanted to deal with something, someone as uncontrollable as that. Wasn't at all sure that she could.

Chapter Twenty Three

Alli was fuming. How the hell had weak Charles talked his way out of this when she hadn't been able to? The only thing she could think of was bribery. And now Josh was clinging on to her waist, carrying her down the corridor like she was a toddler having a tantrum.

"Put. Me. Down."

"If I do, are you going to try to hit me?" Josh asked calmly.

"No! Why would I hit you?"

"Because you're angry."

"I'm not angry with you, idiot," she snarled. "It's that Luke that I want to get my

hands on.” Josh put her down and looked at her speculatively. “Purely metaphorically, of course,” she added. “I might get mad, but I don’t get violent.”

“Mmm,” Josh said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “Although if you were going to punch someone, I suppose Luke wouldn’t be a bad choice.”

Alli eyed him. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No, just being honest.”

Which could be somewhat useful. “What do you know about Charles?” she asked.

“What do you know about Daria?” he countered.

Alli sucked her teeth and considered things. “Fine, she offered to get me out for money, I gave her the money, she ran off. Happy?”

“Makes sense,” Josh said thoughtfully. “We’re all dead broke here. As for Charles, really, your guess is as good as mine. His lawyer told him something on the phone, but I don’t know what. He came looking for Luke like he was going to crucify him. Luke talked to him, Charles left. Still not looking very happy, in my opinion.”

“Can you get me his phone number?” Alli asked.

“Charles’s? I can try, we must have it somewhere.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Josh said. “Just do me a favor and keep the sparring verbal. I don’t need to be called into every class just to carry you out of it.”

“Fair enough,” Alli said. “Um, sorry?”

“I’m probably not the one you should be apologizing to. Try Bea, it was her class. And maybe your classmates too.”

“Yeah, yeah, I will.”

But as it turned out, she didn’t see Bea for the rest of the day. In fact, by teatime, she was starting to think that Bea was avoiding her. And by dinnertime, she was sure that Bea was avoiding her.

“What’s wrong with you?” Marcus asked, mouth full of chips. “You look like you’re going to lose it again. Are you?”

“No,” Alli said rudely. “Are you?”

He held up huge hands. “Hey, I’m not the one that got carried out of yoga.”

“She’s apologized for that, haven’t you, dear?” Julia said, patting Alli’s hand.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Right,” said Alli. She’d given a half-hearted apology at lunch and everyone had seemed to accept it.

“Seems odd without Charles here,” Izzy said. “Like we’re a limb missing or something.”

“Seriously?” Alli said. “We haven’t even been here a week yet. We’re not a bonded band of brothers or anything.”

“I loved that show,” Marcus sighed.

“Me too,” said Izzy.

“Two angry people loved a program about fighting, what a surprise,” said Alli.

“No,” said Marcus. “No, not at all. It wasn’t a show about fighting. It was a show about love, compassion, about friendship and sacrifice.”

Izzy sniffed and looked like she was blinking away tears. “It was beautiful.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not like that,” Alli said. She looked over at the place where Charles normally sat. “But it is a bit weird,” she added.

“Maybe he’ll come and visit,” Julia said.

Alli scraped her plate and then stood up. “I’ve had enough of this. Josh is getting me Charles’s phone number. If you lot want it, you can have it. That way you can ring

him, alright?”

“Really?” Izzy said, beaming. “Thanks, Alli. That’s really nice of you.”

Alli sighed. She wasn’t trying to be nice, not really. She just wanted them all to shut up so she could think. She couldn’t see Bea and it was pretty obvious that she wasn’t coming to dinner and Alli was starting to think that she might have really screwed up.

Alright, she shouldn’t have lost her temper like that, probably. But she hadn’t been angry at Bea. Surely Bea could see that?

She took herself out of the dining room, checking all the classrooms and finding them empty.

It was only now that she had a thought. A dreadful thought. The thought that maybe Bea had changed her mind. Given that just this morning Alli had no intention of touching the woman again, the idea that Bea might not be interested anymore was more painful than she’d expected.

She sighed, leaning on the banister at the bottom of the stairs, wondering where Bea could be and what was going on.

Dare she go upstairs to the staff quarters? She closed her eyes. As far as she could remember, the rest of the staff were in the dining room. With the exception of Luke. He hadn’t been seen all day.

Okay, so she was going up.

She paused when she got to the corridor, listening for any sound she could, but there was nothing. So there was nothing she could do except walk down the corridor and open doors until finally, inevitably, she opened Bea’s.

And there she was, lying on her bed, reading a book. She looked up as Alli opened the door. “Don’t you knock?”

“Don’t you eat?” countered Alli, leaning on the doorframe and feeling more relieved than she’d thought she would.

Bea sighed and swung her legs over the edge of the tiny bed until she was sitting. She patted the bed next to her. “Alright, I’ve hidden away enough. Close the door, sit down, and let’s talk.”

“About what?” Alli said, a weird twisting starting in her stomach, like she was being sent to the headmistress’s office or something.

“About this morning,” Bea said calmly.

Alli swallowed. This was not a position she was used to being in. She closed the door. “Yeah, right, I’m sorry about that. I wasn’t angry at you, you know.”

“I know that,” Bea said. “But I didn’t like it. It worried me, scared me even. That anger was real, hot, frightening, surely you can understand that.”

Alli sat down on the bed, a sudden chill inside her. “I didn’t mean it to be,” she said.

“But you did,” said Bea. “And, frankly, seeing you like that made me have some serious second thoughts.”

Now the anger was coming, warm and liquid inside her and Alli almost, almost let it go. But Bea’s hand was on the bed next to hers, close enough to touch and as she took a deep breath she saw it out of the corner of her eye and the anger stilled itself. “Right,” was what she said in the end, a little sadly.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Bea's hand crept a little closer but didn't touch hers. Alli's heart felt heavy. She wasn't used to these feelings, didn't particularly like them. She'd broken things already. What a surprise.

"You look... sad," Bea offered.

"Because I am," Alli said. "I, uh, I can only apologize." She hesitated. "Is there anything else I can do?"

Bea sighed. "Why do you get so angry?"

"Dunno."

"You're going to have to try harder than that," Bea said.

Alli took a breath, closed her eyes, swallowed, thought. "It makes my voice heard," she said finally.

"Do you need to try so hard to make your voice heard?" Bea asked gently.

Alli's eyes flashed open. She snorted. "Do you have any idea?" she said, the anger starting to build up again.

"Hey," said Bea, letting their hands touch now. "I'm here. I'm listening. You don't need to get angry, I'm already hearing you."

The warmth of Bea's hand tingled through her. Instinctively, Alli knew that as

unpleasant as this was, it was her only chance at getting Bea back. Because she had lost her that morning, she realized. Losing her temper like that had scared Bea off and without some kind of sacrifice, Bea wasn't coming back to her.

"I went to boarding school when I was seven," she said, not looking at Bea. "I hated it. I was the smallest one there. I didn't want to go, but my parents didn't listen. My dad was in the army, he was being posted abroad, my mum wanted to go with him."

"So they didn't have much choice," Bea said.

Alli shrugged. "I was left alone and I was so lonely, so scared. And one of the other kids kept making fun of me, poking me, testing me." She took a shuddery breath. She hadn't thought about the incident for years. "Then one day I lost my temper, yelled at her, and everyone backed off and left me alone and I wasn't the weak one anymore. I was strong, I was scary."

"You learned that anger protected you," said Bea, letting her fingers twine with Alli's.

"It does though, doesn't it?" Alli said, turning to look at her. "I mean, it just does. All my life it's been like that. I work surrounded by men, I need to make sure my voice is heard and it is. If I have to look like a bitch to make that happen, well, that's the way it is."

"Except you're not just using your anger on people who deserve it," said Bea. "You're using it on everyone. It's out of control. Anger is a tool, certainly, but you don't use the same tool for replacing a window as you do for replacing a door."

"Right," Alli said, letting herself be drawn in by Bea's dark eyes. "Right. You're right. I see that. I need to do a better job of directing my anger. Message received."

“You need to do a better job of controlling your anger,” said Bea. “That’s what all this is about. Meditation, yoga, therapy, they’re all supposed to help you temper that anger and make it a tool that you use, rather than something that uses you.”

Alli nodded. “Yeah, yeah. I can see how that might work.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, I just wanted to find you to... to apologize.” She realized as she said the words that they were the truth.

Bea had felt bad, she’d made her feel better. She felt warm with that knowledge. Like she’d done something good.

“You’re in my bedroom to apologize,” Bea said with only slight emphasis on the word bedroom.

Her hand tightened on Alli’s.

Alli eyed the closed door, her breath coming faster. “Yes?” she tried, but it definitely came out as a question.

Chapter Twenty Four

It had been the honesty that had changed her mind.

Okay, she shouldn’t have avoided the issue, but she hadn’t wanted to see Alli, hadn’t wanted to be persuaded by lust alone to forgive her. And when Alli had sought her out, she’d been sure that she’d get only the barest of apologies.

Yet Alli had really tried, had searched inside herself for answers. Bea had had a glimpse of who she’d been, who she could be, and that had overridden how disturbed she’d felt at Alli’s anger. There was room for improvement, sure, but Alli had taken a step, she’d seen it.

For a second there, everything had been good, perfect even. Then she realized that Alli was sitting on her bed. That Alli was holding her hand. And her libido had perked up, had started to ask questions, until Bea hadn't been able to stop herself.

Now Alli was looking at her, her green eyes starting to narrow speculatively.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Are you saying that I should take advantage of being in your room?” Alli said.

“It’s not taking advantage if I’m offering,” Bea said, hardly believing that she was saying the words. Her mouth was starting to get dry.

“Ah, you’re offering, are you?” Alli said with only the slightest break in her voice.

Bea got up from the bed, her legs wobbly, and went to the door. A little voice in her head was asking her what the hell she thought she was doing. But everything else in her body understood exactly what was happening and thoroughly agreed with it. She put her back against the door so that she was facing Alli, looking her directly in the eye, and then with one hand she flicked the lock closed.

“And now you’re imprisoning me,” Alli said, stretching her long, long legs out. “Bold move.”

“You’re free to leave any time you like,” Bea said, voice husky. She leaned back against the door. “Of course, you might need to get through me first.”

“Would I?” Alli stood now, just a couple of centimeters taller than Bea, took a step until they were face to face. “I think I could get through you.”

“You’d be surprised,” said Bea. “All that yoga...”

Alli’s tongue darted out and wet her lips, her eyes sparkled and Bea’s center melted until the door was holding her upright. “All that yoga,” Alli said. She lifted one eyebrow. “So, are we going to talk about yoga then? That’s why I’m here?”

Bea shook her head.

“Why am I here then?” Alli asked.

It was important, somehow, for them both that Bea made the first move, that Bea had the courage to do it. She lifted one shaking hand, used it to tuck a lock of Alli’s hair behind her ear, and then...

Alli was on her like a flash, their lips meeting, teeth crashing, Alli’s full weight pressing Bea against the door until Bea was moaning in her mouth, until Bea’s pulse was pounding through her veins.

And Alli’s hands were pushing Bea’s shirt up and over her arms, breaking the kiss for a painful second to get it off over her head. Bea returned the favor, pulling Alli’s bra off with her shirt, struggling to get her own sports bra off.

Breast to breast, the soft smoothness of it, the unfamiliar shape of everything. Bea’s wanting grew stronger, harder, she was gasping now as Alli’s breasts rubbed against her own. And Alli was gripping her waist, pulling her closer, inserting a leg between Bea’s thighs and Bea’s hips were thrusting and she was groaning and... Alli pulled away.

“What?” Bea said, opening one eye so breathless that the word barely had a sound.

“This,” Alli said gruffly. She snapped the waistband of Bea’s yoga pants. “Off.” Her fingers fumbled with the button of her own jeans and then she was stripping them off, hopping on one leg as Bea kicked her pants to the other side of the tiny room.

Bea grabbed Alli’s hair, pulling her back up, wanting more of her mouth, wanting to taste her, to devour her. Alli obliged this time their full naked bodies crushing against each other as Bea felt wetness pooling at the top of her thighs. Until Alli pulled away

again.

“What now?” groaned Bea.

Alli grinned and hoisted Bea by the hips, turning and depositing her on the bed. Bea gasped, but Alli was already above her, already parting her legs, already smiling like a demon. “Like this,” she said, fingers stroking the skin on the inside of Bea’s thighs.

Bea nodded, swallowing, trying to control her breathing, trying to stop herself inching down to meet Alli’s fingers, trying to be patient.

“Not a clue what I’m doing,” Alli said, eyes heavy-lidded, breath coming faster.

“Wouldn’t have guessed,” panted Bea, eyes closing now as Alli’s fingers reached higher.

There was movement and Alli’s tongue circled Bea’s nipple and Bea cried out just as Alli’s fingers thrust inside her and a thumb pressed against her clit. She lifted her hips and Alli pushed her back down again, fully in control of something that Bea had no hopes of controlling.

Fingers slipped in and out of slickness, a tongue flicked at a sensitive nipple, a thumb circled a swollen center and all Bea could do was try to breathe, try to keep up, try to take in the sensations until she couldn’t anymore. Until her body took over and her mouth cried out and Alli’s fingers were trapped inside her, her thumb pressed against her, the pounding, pulsing rushing through her.

“Jesus Christ,” Alli said.

Bea opened her eyes. “Not bad for a first attempt.”

“Cheeky now, are you?” asked Alli, slowly starting to slide her fingers out of Bea.

Bea growled at her, stomach still twirling with need, with want. She put her hands on Alli’s waist, saw the look on Alli’s face change, saw her eyes darken, her lips part, and knew that if the world was ending right now, she simply wouldn’t care.

“Up,” she ordered as she slid down the bed, pulling Alli up the bed at the same time.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Until Alli's hands were grasping the bedhead and her thighs were parted over Bea's face and she could smell her, the rich, earthy scent of her, could see glittering, gleaming wetness.

She pulled Alli down, forcing her tongue upward, and began to lick as Alli rode her, pressing down harder and harder until Bea couldn't breathe.

But it didn't matter.

Not in the slightest.

She tasted every millimeter of her, felt every pulsing contraction, could barely hear as Alli moaned out her name. And none of it mattered. The only thing that was important was this, this action, this climbing, building need, this complete immersion in something so unfamiliar and yet familiar.

She scrambled an arm up between their bodies, slid her fingers into Alli, pushed her tongue up and over the smooth bump above her, and then held on as Alli bucked and trembled and shook like an earthquake was overtaking her.

And when she collapsed, Bea slowly slid out from under her.

"You've done this before," Alli accused, breath still panting, only one eye open, staring suspiciously.

"No," Bea said. "But I'd do it again."

“I might die if you do it again right now,” Alli groaned.

“I wasn’t offering to skip my turn,” said Bea, rolling over, so that they were face to face.

Alli said nothing as she slid her hand between them, as she contorted herself so that she could touch Bea in the way she needed. She said nothing as she touched, corrected herself, then touched again. Nothing as Bea’s breath caught in her throat. Nothing as the soft movements between them started to rock the little bed.

And nothing as Bea gasped, climax taking her by surprise it was so fast, eyes looking straight into Alli’s, disappearing into the greenness just as every nerve in her body contracted and then expanded and exploded.

“My second attempt seems to be just as successful as my first,” Alli drawled finally.

Bea let herself smile. “Just think how much you’ll improve with practice,” she said without thinking.

She saw the fleeting look that passed over Alli’s face and understood immediately that she’d made an assumption.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have...”

But now Alli was starting to smile, starting to push her body closer. “No,” she whispered. “No, it’s fine. I—” She swallowed. “I’m not averse to... to practicing.”

WHITE MOONLIGHT SPARKLED through the window and Bea stroked Alli’s hair. They were crammed together into the tiny bed, their limbs entangled, and Bea didn’t think she’d ever felt so relaxed. So... at peace.

“If the rest of them could see us now...” Alli said lazily.

Bea laughed. “I’m glad they can’t. I’d prefer not to get fired just at the moment.”

“Need the job, do you?”

Bea sighed. “Yes.”

“Why?”

And Bea told her. The whole story. From meeting Robbie all the way down to him moving his girlfriend in and by the end, Alli was sitting up, shaking her head. “Jesus, Bea. Why are you such a walkover?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t like confrontation. I like doing the right thing. I just... It’s complicated.”

“So he gets to live in a nice flat with a new woman and you get to work some crappy job in a horrible old haunted shit-hole?” Alli said, getting warmer with anger. “I hope you’re getting paid well at least.”

“Not exactly,” Bea said.

“Explain yourself,” Alli said, eyes glittering in the moonlight.

So Bea did. Not only did she tell Alli about how pathetic her paycheck was once Luke had made his thousand deductions, but she told her about the figures she’d seen on Luke’s desk, about the strange feeling she had when other participants spoke in group therapy.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“I don’t know,” she said at the end. “It all feels just a little bit off, you know what I mean?”

“Mmm,” Alli said thoughtfully.

Bea, who hadn’t realized how heavily all this was weighing on her until now, stroked Alli’s arm. “Not that you need to defend my honor or anything.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Alli said.

“You wouldn’t?” Bea felt oddly hurt at this.

“Nope, your honor is yours to defend, just like mine is mine,” Alli said. “If you want to get paid more then you can stand up for yourself, it’s not my job to do that for you.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Bea pulled her back down.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t look into the other stuff, though,” Alli said.

“Hmm. That might mean sticking around,” said Bea, her voice muffled by Alli’s hair. “And if we don’t get some sleep we’ll collapse tomorrow.”

Alli slid her hand comfortingly between Bea’s legs. “How about we let tomorrow be tomorrow,” she said.

Alli leaned back against the wall, waiting. Her legs were pleasantly achy. Her stomach muscles hurt from tensing up. And every time she closed her eyes, she could practically taste Bea on her tongue.

Not broken, she thought, as she waited. Nope. Definitely not at all broken. In fact, if anything, she was more working than she'd ever imagined. Who would have thought that number of orgasms possible in just one night?

There would be a second night. And a third. She carried the weight of that thought, the warmth of it, in her stomach. It made her feel... different. More relaxed. In a better mood, maybe. So much so that when Josh walked around the corner, she hooked her arm through his to pull him into the meditation room.

"What?" Josh asked, looking over both shoulders like this might be some kind of trick.

"I just wanted to ask you something," Alli said. What Bea had told her was weighing on her mind. Maybe because she hated this place, maybe because she thought Bea deserved better. She didn't know which, and she didn't want to think about it too hard.

"Fire away," said Josh, leaning against the windowsill.

"Yesterday, you said that everyone around here was broke."

"Yeah." He scratched his head. "Seems like we all are."

"But surely there are like... minimum wages or something?" She was guessing there. Like she'd ever had a minimum wage job.

"Yeah," he said again. "But by the time Luke's taken out money for food and

accommodation, that doesn't add up to much."

Huh. Same story as Bea then. She frowned. "Have you ever thought that there's something odd going on around here?"

"Someone been telling ghost stories again?" Josh asked.

"Not that kind of odd. More... I don't know, something weird about the participants, something like that?"

"You're all mad as hatters," he said. "And other than having to carry the odd crazy woman out of a yoga class, no, I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary."

"What about anything else?" she pressed.

He shrugged. "I don't know what you want from me. I keep my head down and do my job, that's it. I'm not going around looking for trouble."

She held up both hands. "Okay, okay, just asking." She paused, waiting for the familiar warmth of the anger to boil up in her stomach, waiting to move into professional mode, waiting to demand answers. But nothing.

Josh sniffed. "If anything, I'd say we all work hard and don't get paid enough. Even Daria, before she, um, left."

"Except Luke," Alli said.

Page 63

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Josh cocked his head to one side. “He’s in his office a lot.”

“Doesn’t mean he’s working, does it?”

“S’pose not.”

She nodded. That was all she needed, not like it had been particularly helpful.

“Thanks.”

“Oh, by the way, here you go.” He handed over a small slip of paper with a phone number on it. “Charles.”

“Cheers.” She put the paper in her pocket and went off to continue her investigation.

LUKE MIGHT BE shut up in his office a lot, but he didn’t miss lunch. Ever. Well, not for the few days that Alli had been there. She waited around the corner until she heard his office door close and then she peeked around, seeing Luke disappearing toward the dining room.

Her stomach rumbled as she sneaked into the office. She’d have to hurry. She didn’t want to miss lunch completely.

Looking around, she didn’t know where to start. There were no papers on the desk, just a slim laptop and an old landline phone. There were two filing cabinets by the window. The top drawer of one was open, but it held nothing other than a set of emergency phone numbers and an empty whisky bottle.

She rattled the next drawer down. Locked. So were all the others. The laptop on the desk was open, but the screen was blank. When she pressed a key, a password slot popped up.

Right. A place to hide a filing cabinet key, or a place to write down a password.

She picked up the brass paperweight on the desk. Nothing there. The desk didn't even have any drawers.

She was so busy trying to think of hiding places that she didn't hear the door open. One minute she was alone, the next, she felt eyes on her. She spun around.

Leslie was standing in the doorway.

"I'm not... I wasn't..." Alli started.

Leslie shrugged and held the door open wider.

"Right, yeah... Um..." Alli slid through the door and out into the corridor. "I was just, um, looking for Luke and... Yeah..." She started to walk backward. Leslie just stared at her.

Then she turned and made her escape. So much for that. She'd found out precisely nothing. But when she looked back, Leslie was still standing in front of Luke's office door, watching her go. Weird.

"DO YOU THINK there's anything weird about us?" Alli asked, as she took a late seat at the lunch table.

"Like what?" asked Izzy.

“Dunno,” said Alli. “Something... not quite right.”

“We’re all full of anger and seeking to control something that currently controls us,” Marcus said. Alli stared at him. He blushed. “Well, that’s what they said in the introductory meeting.”

“Anything else?” asked Alli.

“I shouldn’t think so, dear,” Julia said. “I mean, we all have our foibles, don’t we? Look at poor Leslie, barely utters a word.” She frowned and looked around the table. “Where is she, now that I think of her?”

“Probably busy,” Alli said hurriedly. She didn’t want to admit where she last saw the strange, silent woman. “Um, doing extra yoga or something. So nothing odd about us?”

“Not as a group, I don’t think,” Julia smiled. “In fact, I think we’re all getting along quite well after a few hiccups, don’t you?”

“I suppose,” Alli said. But she was thinking. She picked up her sandwich, then put it down. “We don’t get angry a lot though, do we?”

“What?” asked Marcus, his mouth full, spraying crumbs.

“You said we’re all here to try and control the beast that’s controlling us or whatever,” said Alli.

“Seeking to control something that currently controls us,” Marcus said after he’d swallowed.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Right. But given that... Well, we don’t seem to get angry a lot, do we?”

“You do,” Izzy said. “You got carried out of yoga class yesterday.”

“Right, I know I do. But I meant us as a group.”

“Charles did,” offered Julia. “Well, at the end, he did.”

Alli sighed. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right.” Her stomach rumbled again. She was starving. She bit into her sandwich. It wasn’t like she was getting any answers anyway, was it?

THE PHONE WAS under her mattress, exactly where she’d left it. Not that Alli would know, not having slept in her own bed last night. Not that she was planning to sleep in her own bed tonight.

It was getting on toward evening. She wouldn’t have to wait long now. But every time she saw Bea, every look they shared, every word that came out of Bea’s mouth... Alli burned with wanting her.

She hadn’t known it was going to be like this. So all-consuming. In fact, Bea might have been the only thing she thought of all day, or she would have been if she hadn’t mentioned her suspicions the night before.

Not that anything had come from that. Alli had decided that investigating was not for her. St. Hilda’s was weird, but then she supposed most places like this were weird. She’d asked around and found out nothing odd. Okay, so the staff weren’t getting

paid well, but that seemed like their problem.

She was just picking up her phone, about to check her messages, when it started to vibrate in her hand. She picked it up automatically.

“Hello.”

“Alli? Is that you?”

“Darren?”

There was a short crackling on the other line. “I, uh, I was going to leave a voicemail.”

“About what?” She started flicking through her suitcase, trying to decide if wearing fancy underwear would be too much for tonight.

“I just haven’t heard from you for a while. I mean, I usually get at least one call a day begging me to break you out of there, so I thought I’d better check that you haven’t been locked up in a padded room or anything.”

“Tactful,” said Alli, deciding just regular undies would have to do. It wasn’t like she’d be wearing them for long.

“Yeah, right, sorry. I, uh, I was just trying to make light of the situation. Probably not very tactful, you’re right.” He cleared his throat. “So, um, are you alright then?”

“Mmm.” What about a change of clothes? Or would that be too obvious?

He sighed through the phone. “I know it must be horrible for you there, Al. I’m really sorry. But I really do hope that they’re helping you. I hope that you’re learning

something.”

“Right.” Not a change of clothes. Way too obvious. She’d just show up. Like she had the night before. Her legs quivered with anticipation.

“Al?”

She stopped, standing upright. He sounded serious. “What?”

“Is it really terrible?”

She sniffed. “It’s... it’s alright.”

He chuckled. “So you don’t need a rescue mission, then?”

One heartbeat. Two heartbeats. She could hear what he was offering, could hear that he was starting to feel guilty, that he was beginning to think that she’d paid her price. But... But Bea.

“Actually...” Was she really going to say this? “Actually, it’s quite calming. Restful.”

“Ah. Right. So... you might stay then?”

Outside, the evening was dark now, the grounds of the house wreathed in shadows. Twenty-four hours ago, she’d have ripped Darren’s head off for an opportunity like this. And now? Now things had all turned upside down.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“I’m thinking of it like a retreat,” she said softly, looking out of the window into the darkness. “Like a place to chill out, calm down, you know?” Not that she had an anger problem. “You might have been right that I needed a break,” she conceded.

“Nothing wrong with taking a holiday,” he said, sounding relieved and happier.

“Yeah, right. A holiday.”

“Great. Well, have fun, I suppose. I’ll see you in a week or so.”

She hung up and, for a second, was paralyzed with what she’d just done. Then she remembered Bea’s warm, dark eyes, the touch of her hands, and began to shiver. The decision was made. And weirdly, she thought it was quite a good one. She was staying.

Chapter Twenty Six

Bea nudged the sleeping form next to her. Alli’s legs were wrapped around hers and an arm was slung over her waist and an alarm clock was vibrating wildly under the pillow. “Wake up,” she hissed.

Alli groaned and pulled Bea closer to her.

“No, you have to wake up,” Bea said.

“Don’t make me get angry,” muttered Alli.

“Not even funny. Come on. It’s five already. You need to go back to your own bed.”

With a long sigh, Alli stumbled out of bed and pulled on her robe. Then she bent over Bea, kissing her, pressing her to her body. “Tonight,” she whispered in a voice that made Bea shiver all over.

When she was gone, Bea lay down again, trying to get another hour of sleep. She was tired, she needed the sleep, but it was like this every morning after Alli left. It was hard to sleep without her here. More than a week of cuddling and sharing a bed had made the suddenly empty-seeming mattress less comfortable.

Bea sighed. More than a week. It sounded like no time at all and like so much time. What it did mean was that the program was almost over, that in just a couple of days Alli and Izzy and the others would be going and then...

And then what?

It was all very well thinking that they had time to experiment, time to figure things out, that the time they were here was time outside of reality. But at some point, reality was going to rear its ugly head again, and that point was getting nearer and nearer.

Two nights from now, she’d be back in her little bed in her own guest room, trying not to hear Robbie and Marilyn closed up in her room, thinking of all the things she could be doing with Alli.

It wasn’t a pleasant thought.

It was particularly unpleasant because Bea was actually pretty certain about what she wanted. Alli. That was what she wanted. Alright, they were just at the beginning of things, just getting to know each other, but there was something there and she knew that given a chance they could make something.

Given her dreams, Bea would just move straight into her new apartment in the building opposite Liz's, bringing Alli with her so that they could sleep in each other's arms every night.

Whether or not Alli would be amenable to this situation was another question. Mostly because Bea had lacked the courage to bring it up in any way. She was afraid. Afraid that Alli would say that this was all there was.

Which was stupid, she knew that. She sighed and sat up. She might as well get up and do some exercise. She wasn't going to sleep again. And, she promised herself, she was going to talk to Alli. Time was running out and there was a conversation that they needed to have. A big one.

THERE WAS JUST time after breakfast and before her first yoga class to grab coffee in the staffroom. The place seemed empty now that it was mostly just her and Josh. Lex popped her head around the door every now and again, but she was so busy that she barely had time to eat.

"Morning," Josh said blearily. He rarely made it to breakfast.

"Morning. Coffee?"

"Please." He yawned and stretched. "So, big day, eh?"

Bea filled up her cup and another. "Big day?"

"It's contract renewal day," said Josh, accepting a cup. "Today's the day that Luke goes around and asks everyone if they're coming back or not. Are you joining for the next program if he'll have you?"

Bea blew out a breath. She'd been so preoccupied with Alli she honestly hadn't

thought about it. A week ago this was all she'd wanted, a steadier job, the possibility to make some money. Alright, the money wasn't a lot, but it did mean that she didn't have to live with Robbie and Marilyn.

Plus, there were going to be moving costs too. She could probably use the cash.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Do you think he’ll ask me back?” she asked.

“Probably,” said Josh, waking up more with his coffee. “If you’re willing to work for what he’s willing to pay, he’d be an idiot to turn you down, wouldn’t he?”

“I suppose.” She took a drink of her own coffee. It tasted burnt. “When does the next one start?”

“A week break, then back to it,” Josh said. “But he’s thinking of making the programs after that back-to-back, one straight after the other.”

“Enough people want to do this to make it profitable?”

“I suppose so,” Josh said. “But there’s heaps of government funding. Anger management is considered part of some paroles, and can be a punishment in its own right. So there’s money to be made there even if we’re not massaging wealthy clients.”

“Which is what Luke wants to do.”

“Probably the end point,” agreed Josh. “But he’ll need to clean this place up a whole lot before we get to luxury retreat status.”

Bea checked her watch. “Got to run,” she said.

“Alright, have a good one,” said Josh.

It wasn't until she left that she realized she hadn't answered Josh's question. Would she be coming back?

ALL DAY SHE'D been steeling herself to talk to Alli. So when she saw her walking alone toward the dining room at dinner time, she hurried her step to catch her up. Until Luke popped out of his office.

"Ah, Bea, a quick word."

In despair, she stared after Alli. "Right, sure."

Luke pulled her into the office. "Just making plans for next session," he said. "You'll be returning, I suppose?"

It wasn't exactly a graceful job offer. But now that she'd had time to think, it seemed sensible to take it. Liz wouldn't be well enough to teach still, and she could use the money for her new place. "I'd love to," she said with far more enthusiasm than she felt. She really, really wanted to talk to Alli.

"Perfect, of course there'll be a small reduction in salary," Luke said. "And I'll email with further details. That's all." He nodded at her.

"Um, excuse me, a reduction in salary?"

"Just a small one," he agreed. "Cost of living and all that. Food bills are going up. It's unavoidable, I'm afraid."

Bea bit her lip and closed her eyes for a second. Then she sighed, opened her eyes, and smiled. "Of course. Thanks." And she left.

Because a job was better than no job, right?

IT WAS EVENING before she finally caught up with Alli alone. Alli came rushing into her room, crushing her in her arms, kissing her face, and bending to whisper in her ear. “Almost got caught by Josh out there.”

Bea let herself be held for just a second, just one warm second, and then she pushed Alli away. “We need to talk.” This was by far the worst and scariest thing she thought she’d ever done.

“Uh-oh,” Alli said, perching on the side of the small bed.

Bea sighed. “Al, you know what I’m going to say. Two days from now, you’re going to be leaving.”

Alli frowned. “Right, and?”

“And? I mean...” Bea exhaled. “I mean, this, us, um, what...” This conversation was going fantastically, wasn’t it?

Alli’s face went pale. “Oh, right. Okay, I see. Um, wow. I can’t say that I was expecting this, but I respect your right to say no and if that’s what you want...” She stood up again.

Bea suddenly realized what was happening. “No, wait. Shit.”

Alli stopped. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you swear before.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Only because I’m ballsing this up so badly.” Bea took a deep breath. “Sit down?”

It took a second, but eventually Alli sat.

“Okay, what I meant to say was, well, you’re going to be leaving the program and that changes the circumstances between us. But actually, I’d, um...” Deep breath. “I’d really like to continue seeing you if that’s something you’d be interested in.”

For a few seconds, Alli just sat. “You mean... have someone?” she said finally. “Someone who complains that I work all the time and wants me to come home and who’s in my space all the time?”

Bea wasn’t too sure what to make of that. “Well, um, I’d be away teaching at least every other week, so I won’t be too much in your space. And I have my own flat. But, um, in terms of having someone, well, yes, sort of. If you want.”

But Alli was already smiling. “I think I might like that,” she said. “In fact, I’ve got a flat too. I mean, if you didn’t want to move more than once, my place is pretty big and...”

“Maybe we take things a little bit slower?” Bea suggested. Her heart was hammering in her chest, adrenaline was pumping through her.

“Yes, yeah, of course. Just, the offer’s there if you want it. And...” Alli looked up again, bright green eyes. “And did you really think I’d say no?”

“Did you really think I was about to dump you?” Bea asked in return.

“I don’t know. All of this has been so sudden, so unexpected. But... But it feels good,” Alli admitted.

“I think this program’s been helpful to you,” Bea said, sitting next to her. “You’re calmer. Nicer.”

“I think you make me that way.”

Bea shook her head. “I’m not sure I do.”

“I am,” Alli said. “But I’ll admit that this all turned out a lot better than I ever hoped.”

Bea cleared her throat. “About all that. Um, this is a process and, well, I’m not sure that a simple two-week program is really all a person needs—”

“No,” Alli said immediately. “No more anger management. I get what you’re saying, Bea. But I’ve done this even though I didn’t think I needed it. And honestly, I do feel more in control now. I’ve got you to help me if things get dicey. But the truth remains that I really shouldn’t have been here in the first place. I make my voice heard. That’s not the same as having an anger problem.”

Alli’s fingers were wrapped in hers and her voice was hypnotic and her body was so close. So Bea nodded. “Alright,” she said. “Alright. I get it.”

“So... this is being in a relationship, huh?” Alli looked around the little room. “I’d have imagined it slightly more spacious, but I’ve got to say, having someone is nicer than I’d have thought.”

Bea laughed. “It is quite nice, isn’t it?”

Alli's arms snuck around her and Bea leaned into it and smelled guava and Alli. And thought that finally, she was getting her happy ending.

Chapter Twenty Seven

She wasn't going to lie. Waking up without Bea was a strange sensation. Even stranger was the fact that she'd only had a week of waking up with her. Missing her after such a short amount of time was an odd feeling.

But Alli wasn't about to complain. Things had changed, she could see that. She had a better view of life, a more balanced feeling about things. And while she wasn't going to say she wasn't going to get angry, she was definitely going to be more in control.

She jumped out of the shower and started to get ready. She missed Bea. But she'd missed working as well and she couldn't wait to get back. In the back of her mind, she was already thinking about her inbox, about potential meetings, about projects that were unfinished.

But, she'd promised herself, she was going to leave the office by seven at the latest. She was going to eat better. And she was going to see Bea just as soon as she was done. They were having dinner and, if Alli played her cards right, Bea was going to be spending the night.

Who said you couldn't have it all?

When she walked into her normal coffee shop, she graced the barista with a smile. "A latte with oat milk, an extra shot, and a sprinkle of cinnamon, please."

"Coming right up," beamed the barista.

Alli waited patiently, took her coffee, and put a healthy tip in the tip jar. When she

turned and almost caught the arm of another woman, she apologized and moved on.

Walking up to the big glass office building, her stomach had a twinge of sourness, but she was used to that. What she wasn't used to was greeting the reception staff when she walked in, but she did it anyway. There was nothing wrong with being nice to people, she told herself. It was not a show of weakness to be friendly.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Not that she was planning on being a walkover. She wasn't. And she was damned if she was going to let Bea be one either. They could teach each other, she figured. She'd be calmer, Bea would be more confident. They could learn, improve each other. After all, wasn't that what relationships are about?

It wasn't until she walked into her office that she had the first hint that something was wrong.

Her assistant's desk was empty.

She peered over at it. Empty and cleared. She sighed. Another one gone then. She'd have to get HR to send someone else up. Someone that she was going to be nicer to, she swore to herself. Someone she was going to smile at and be polite to. Someone she could count on to help her, not someone terrified of her.

Mostly.

A little fear would be okay. Just a little would add respect, and she definitely needed respect.

She went to her desk, flicked her computer on, and dropped her purse into one of the drawers. Then she sat down, flexed her fingers, and got down to work.

Except her login didn't work.

She growled under her breath and tried again. And again, she got an error message. She sucked her teeth and took a deep breath. Okay, mistakes happened. She'd been

away for two weeks. Maybe there'd been some kind of reset or something.

She picked up her phone and barked for her assistant to puther through to IT before remembering that there wasn't an assistant. She slammed the phone down. Her stomach took an acid twist as she slammed back the rest of her coffee and then hurled the cup at the rubbish bin.

Fine. Alright. So she'd go down to IT herself and get someone. She couldn't look up the phone extension without access to her computer. It was a glitch. A tiny little unimportant thing that wasn't worth losing her temper over.

Then Darren appeared in her doorway and Alli finally breathed out. Okay, here we go. Things were going to be alright now.

"Miss me?" she asked.

"What are you doing here?" Darren said.

"Um, being your most productive employee," she countered. "Although from now on I'm leaving at seven. I've learned a little something from this enforced holiday and you might not like all of it. I can keep my temper, but I'm also going to start prioritizing my personal life a little more."

He swallowed and looked confused. "That's... that's great, Al. I'm proud of you. But what are you actually doing here? How did you get in?"

"What do you mean, how did I get in? Through the door, idiot. And what's up with the computers? My password isn't working and—" She stopped herself, her brain catching up. "What do you mean, how did I get in?"

Darren took a tentative step forward. "Alli, you're not supposed to be here."

She looked around. “Am I early? You’re pale. Am I dead? Is this one of those things where I died in a car crash or something and now I’m just here and...” She shook her head. “What’s happening?”

“HR was supposed to call you,” he said, coming a little closer.

She thought about this. She’d ignored a couple of calls last night. She’d been face-timing with Bea and then she’d wanted to get an early night, get enough sleep. “About what?”

He put his hands on the desk. “I think you know about what.”

“About what?” she repeated.

“Al...” He licked his lips and tried again. “Al, I did everything I could. Everything, I swear.”

Her stomach did a full-on somersault now, swirling around in her torso and making her feel sick. “Everything about what?” Her voice sounded high and more panicky than she’d like. “What are you talking about?”

“Al, you’re going to have to leave. You need to get out of here before someone calls security, before things get worse for you.”

She could feel the scratchy cushion of her chair under her thighs. She forced herself to laugh. “Why would I leave? I just got here.”

“Because you don’t work here anymore,” he said gently. “Because you’ve been fired, remember?”

There. There it was. The small spark that started it all, the heat that was going to build

any second now. “Fired?” Her mouth was dry.

“The condition was that you graduated from an anger management program. You didn’t graduate,” Darren said.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

The spark flared and with the greatest difficulty, Alli tamped it back down. Losing it now would be a bad plan. “There must be some mistake.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know how. I fought for you, Al. I swear I did.”

She was reaching down, taking her purse. “No, there’s definitely a mistake. Let me deal with this and I’ll be back. Just give me the morning and I’ll make up the hours later.”

“You don’t have hours to make up.”

“I will.” She gave him a rictus grin. “I will. Just wait. I’ll get this sorted.” She stood up, walked around her desk, but Darren caught her arm as she passed him. “What?”

He loosened his fingers. “Nothing,” he said. “Just... Be careful, Al. Call me if you need me.”

“I’ll be back before you know it,” she said, shaking his hand off. “I’ll deal with this and I’ll be back.”

SHE COULD FEEL the anger bubbling away in her stomach and swore that she wasn’t going to go back to the coffee shop. The stupid barista had used regular milk, she could tell. It was making her feel acidic and sick.

She kept to the speed limit as she drove.

At first she’d wanted to call the center. But after a second of thought, she’d decided

to actually drive back to St. Hilda's. Doing this face to face was the best way to get this sorted out. And... and if she needed to make her voice heard, she could do that better in person.

When she pulled her car up into a parking space, she forced herself to take ten big, deep breaths before she got out, keeping her control. She controlled the anger, not the other way around. She had this. She could do this. Everyone made mistakes.

The front door was unlocked and she showed herself inside, walked calmly to Luke's office, and found him feeding papers into a shredder. He looked up as soon as she came in.

"Ah," was all he said.

"Ah?"

"I had a feeling you'd be back." He straightened up.

And it was in that second that she realized that this hadn't been a mistake at all. That this was all true. A black wave of fear overcame her and she had to hold on to Luke's desk until it had washed over her.

"What happened?" she said through clenched teeth.

"You didn't play by the rules," said Luke with a sniff. "And, let's face it, I'm hardly likely to make concessions for a trouble-maker, am I?"

"So, this is personal?"

"Not personal," said Luke. "All above board. I might want it to be personal. But in this particular case, I didn't have to twist anything, didn't have to fudge the details.

It's all there in black and white."

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't pass the course."

Alli gritted her teeth. "I was here for the full two weeks. What are you talking about?"

"You were here," Luke said evenly. "But every course leader writes a report. Simply showing up isn't enough, you have to participate."

"I did!"

Luke smiled as he shook his head. "Oh, no you didn't."

"But I was here," Alli said desperately.

"You were here," agreed Luke again. "But unfortunately, you didn't participate in more than half your yoga classes. I have the report from Bea around here somewhere if you'd like to see it?"

Alli was shaking so badly that she'd never be able to read a report. She stared hard at Luke and with the very last shred of her control, she turned around and walked out. This wasn't his fault.

It was Bea's.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Bea stared at her phone, trying to work out what was going on. The message just said to stay at home, that Alli was on her way.

Why? She wondered.

She missed Alli, missed seeing her every day, missed being close to her, seeing her smile. But she was adult enough to realize that real life had to intrude at some point. They both had adult lives to get back to, and they'd talked about this, talked about how to compromise, how to make this work.

And at lunchtime on a Monday, Alli very much should be at work. Unless, Bea thought, unless something had happened. Maybe Alli had lost her temper again. Or, and this looked a little more possible, maybe Alli had quit.

Yes, that was it. Maybe she'd gone back to work and discovered that it wasn't what she wanted at all, that it was too stressful or... or something.

She was pacing around the living room, still stumbling over boxes. Marilyn and Robbie were both at work. She and Allie would have the place to themselves. She should be happy about this, excited, but... But she wasn't. There was something wrong. Something she couldn't put her finger on.

And when the doorbell finally rang, her stomach was twisting itself into knots and she was shaking as she walked to the door.

She took a deep breath and opened it. Alli was standing there, her face almost unrecognizable, her skin flushed, her eyes fiery. Bea swallowed. "Hi."

"Don't 'hi' me," spat Alli. "Don't even... How could you? How could you do this to me? You know how important it is, you know what I had to lose and then you go and do something like this... like..." She stumbled, stuttered, the words not able to get out fast enough.

Next door, a door opened and Bea's neighbor stuck his head out. "You alright, Bea?" he asked.

"She's fine," Alli said.

Bea made a judgment call. Perhaps the wrong one, but she still didn't know what this was about, still didn't know what was going on. "I'm fine," she said. "Totally fine. Thanks though." She smiled at him and opened the front door wider. "Come in," she said to Alli.

Alli practically barged past her. "I can't believe you'd do something so fucking stupid. Or so cruel. How could you?"

Bea closed the front door. There had to be some mistake here. "How could I what?"

"And now you're going to play innocent," said Alli. She was standing in the middle of the living room floor, hands on her hips, cheeks flaming red. "I trusted you."

"Of course you can trust me," Bea said, offended at the thought that Alli might think she couldn't. "What's going on here?"

Alli rolled her eyes and looked like she was going to spit. "I got fired, that's what's fucking going on. Fired. Do you understand that? Fired as in I've got no job, as in the

thing that I've worked for my whole life is over. As in my career is down the toilet. As in, I've lost everything. So thank you so much, Bea."

Bea just stared at her.

"Nothing to say for yourself?" Alli said. "Not surprising. There's no defense really, is there? You're either colder and crueler than I expected, or you're actually stupid."

"I'm not stupid," Bea said automatically. "And I still don't understand what the hell's going on here. Why did you get fired?"

Alli snorted. "Yeah, right."

Bea stood her ground. "I don't understand."

???

For a second there, Alli almost bought it, almost fell for it. Then she remembered the look on Darren's face, remembered the burning shame in her stomach, remembered that there was no way anyone else could be responsible for this. And the anger took over all over again.

"You don't understand?" she screamed. "You don't fucking understand? What is there to understand? You got me fired. You lost me my job. You and your stupid report."

"What report?" Bea asked.

Alli closed her eyes, took big, deep breaths, but they did nothing to calm her. Nothing to change anything. The whole drive over, she'd tried to think of another explanation, tried to find a way to calm the anger inside her, to direct it at someone else. But she

just couldn't.

The job hurt, but Bea's betrayal hurt more. How could she have done this? The one time she let her guard down and trusted someone, the one time she let someone in, and then this happened and Alli just realized all over again why she was better off alone.

She might not be broken, but she was definitely an army of one.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

And somehow Bea had to pay for this.

“Your stupid fucking report,” she said again. “Telling tales on me, saying that I didn’t go to your stupid little classes, saying that I hadn’t completed the program.”

“Wait, you mean my attendance report?” said Bea, looking confused.

Alli’s stomach burned with acid. “Yes, you idiot, your stupid fucking attendance report.”

Bea turned ashen. “But... but...”

“But nothing,” said Alli. “Your stupid report meant that Luke didn’t graduate me from the program. Just like you knew it would. And guess what? Now I don’t have a job anymore. So thank you so much for that.”

It was shame, that was part of it. The shame of turning up that morning all bright and ready to work, ready to change things, ready to compromise a little just for Bea. And then to have that all dashed, thrown in her face, to have everything snatched away from her in a moment. It made her blood boil.

“Alli...”

“Don’t. Don’t even say my name,” Alli said. “I don’t want to hear it. Don’t want to hear you. I’m just here to let you know that you’ve ruined my fucking life. Ruined it. Understood? So whatever conscience you have can hold that over you for the rest of your life. If you even care.”

“Of course I care,” Bea said. She was white and looked sick. “Of course I care.”

“Yeah, right. That’s why you did it, because you care.”

“I didn’t do it,” said Bea. “Well, I did. But not intentionally. Well, kind of. I mean…”

“Yes, what do you mean?” Alli asked, super saccharine sweet. “Why don’t you explain everything, if you can? Go ahead, try and talk your way out of this.”

Bea took a shuddering breath. “I just filled out the report,” she said. “I filled it out honestly like I was supposed to. I did tell you, Alli. I told you that I had reports to file, I told you that participation was important.”

“And I fucking participated!”

“I know,” said Bea. “I know you did. The second half of the classes you participated in. I put that in the report. And I put that you participated in group therapy, that you shared and did everything you were supposed to. I didn’t lie, Alli. I didn’t. All I did was tell the truth.”

Alli shook her head. “All you did was ruin my life.”

Bea took a step forward.

“No,” said Alli, holding out her hands to stop Bea coming closer. “Don’t even think about it. I don’t want you near me.”

“What did you expect me to do?” Bea pleaded. “I was doing my job, telling the truth. I had no idea that Luke wouldn’t graduate you from the program just because of that. Of course I didn’t.”

Alli balled her fists at her side, trying to hold on to something, trying to find some other way that this could all work out, some other explanation or justification or anything.

“What would you have done?” asked Bea. “This is my job. Wouldn’t you have done the same? I know that you love your job, that you wouldn’t risk it, that—”

“Loved,” Alli growled. “Loved as in past tense. As in, I no longer have a job. As in you made me lose it. I just can’t...” She trailed off, lost for words, and Bea tried to come closer again.

“Alli, I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say, I don’t...”

“Stay the hell away from me,” Alli said. She could see Bea’s warm dark eyes, she could practically feel her skin, could see her as though through a veil. She wanted so much for this to go away, all of it, for it to be just her and Bea, but that was over now, it was all over now.

“Alli, please.”

“No,” said Alli. “No. Stay away from me. Stay the hell away from me. This is all your fault. I’ve lost everything. Do you get that? Could you even begin to understand?” She shook her head. “Of course you can’t. How could you?”

“I do,” Bea began.

“No, no, you don’t. You with your crappy little teaching job, you who wants nothing more than for everyone to be happy, you who sacrifices herself every hour of every day like you’re some kind of modern martyr. You couldn’t possibly understand what it’s like to lose something this important, this integral.”

“Alli, please, let’s talk about this.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Alli said. She turned back toward the door of the tiny flat. “Nothing at all. You’ve ruined my life. That’s the end. There’s nothing more to say.”

“Alli—”

“What? You were just doing your job? You were just following orders? You were just trying to avoid confrontation with Luke? I don’t care what your excuses are, Bea. You’ve ruined my life. Destroyed it. All because you can’t think for yourself.”

“All because I did my job and told the truth,” Bea said stubbornly.

For a second, Alli saw fire burning in Bea’s eyes. She laughed. “So now there’s something you’re passionate about, huh? Now you can stand up for yourself. Forget it, Bea. Just fucking forget it.”

The anger was boiling up again, rising until it filled her from head to toe, until it was all she could think about, until it was all she was. And with the tiniest piece of herself that was left she managed to open the front door, managed to walk out, managed to leave before she did something she’d truly regret.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The couch cushion was soaked with tears and Bea’s head hurt, her nose was swollen, and she could barely see. No more tears would come. She was dried up and dehydrated and didn’t know what to do.

She'd only been doing her job. And, honestly, she'd had no idea that Alli would fail the program just from one silly attendance report. Bea had been careful to include that Alli had participated in the latter half of the program, and she'd assumed that would be enough to get her through. Never for a second had she dreamed otherwise.

And now this. Now Alli's temper so hot and frightening had come into her flat and Bea knew that things couldn't be the same. She knew that things had changed. But she was just getting used to the last set of changes. How could she handle this now?

She miserably pulled out her phone and texted Liz an SOS message. She couldn't deal with this alone. But just as the text sent, the front door of the flat opened.

For a second, quite stupidly, Bea thought Alli might have returned. She leaped up, desperate to explain herself. But it was Marilyn that walked through the door.

"Gosh, you look a bit rough," Marilyn said cheerfully. "Are you alright?"

"No," Bea said more sharply than she'd intended.

"Alright, alright, no need to snap," said Marilyn. "I just bought home some shopping for mine and Robbie's dinner. I'll just put it away and then I'm back off to work."

"Fine." Bea said dismally.

Marilyn stopped by the kitchen door. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine," Bea said again.

"You don't look fine."

"I'm fine," said Bea through gritted teeth. When was Liz going to text her back? She

had a broken leg, for God's sake. It wasn't like she could be out doing anything. She started pacing again.

"Only," started Marilyn.

She was interrupted by Bea tripping over one of the Ikea boxes that were stacked against the couch. "Jesus Christ," Bea said.

"Whoops," said Marilyn.

And something snapped inside Bea. "Whoops? Whoops? That's all I get? These boxes have been stacked here for weeks now, and there's been no attempt to move them."

"God, I'm sorry," Marilyn said, moving over to re-stack the boxes.

"No, enough is enough. Sorry means nothing. Do something about them," Bea said. She was standing with her hands on her hips, knowing that she was mimicking Alli and unable to stop herself. "Either find somewhere to put them or throw them away, one or the other."

"I know," Marilyn said. "I'm sorry. I'll put them in our room."

And another thread snapped. "No," Bea said firmly.

Marilyn paused, boxes in hand. "No?"

"No. It's not your room."

Marilyn frowned. "Right. Okay. But, you know, you sort of said..."

"I know what I said," said Bea. "And I don't care. That's my room. The two of you move into my flat after you've cheated with my boyfriend, and then you steal my bedroom. And it's noton. I've been too nice, that's the problem. I've been too nice and you know what? You're going to give me my room back."

Marilyn swallowed and nodded. "Sure, yes, of course."

"And more than that, you're going to be moving out," said Bea.

"We're looking," Marilyn said. "We really are, I swear."

"Well, look harder," Bea said. "Because I'm moving out, I've already given notice to the landlord and I've already found a new flat. So the two of you will have to be out by the end of the month because the lease is in my name."

"The end of the month?" wailed Marilyn. "But..."

"But nothing," said Bea. "You've had long enough. Find somewhere. Or find some other idiot that will let you take over their entire flat with your things, who'll let you cook dinners in their kitchen, who'll let you have sex in their bed, who'll let you move into their lives and just hijack them."

Marilyn dropped the boxes and picked up her bags. "Yes," she said. "Yes, obviously. Right. I'll get on that." She hurried into the kitchen, shoved her shopping bag straight into the fridge without even unpacking it first, and then practically ran out of the flat.

Bea was left open-mouthed both at her own audacity and the fact that it had worked. She had her flat back. That was all it had taken, just a little truth-telling, a little standing up for herself, a little confidence.

A little of Alli's influence.

It was only then that her phone rang. Liz. Bea picked it up, her hand still shaking.

THERE WAS TEA on the table and screwed up tissues next to it. A bottle of wine had been opened, and Bea's eyes stung even more. She hadn't thought that there'd been any more tears. Turned out, she'd been wrong.

"She sounds like a real piece of work," Liz said.

"She's..." But Bea couldn't do it. She couldn't speak badly about Alli, even though she was torn up inside with what had happened. "She's upset."

"Don't make excuses for her," said Liz. "She's an adult, and she lost her temper. She had no right to speak to you like that."

Silently, Bea nodded.

Liz reached out and patted her leg. "I'm sorry, Bea. I really am."

"I just thought I'd found something. Someone," said Bea, her voice sounding a million miles away. "It was... different and fast and a whole bunch of things that I'd never imagined having in my life. Yet it felt right somehow. Comfortable. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was with someone who was my equal. Someone as flawed as me, someone who I could give to and take from."

Liz picked up her teacup, shuffling around the couch until her plastered leg was

comfortable. “That’s what it’s supposed to be like,” she said. “That’s what I’ve been trying to explain. A relationship has to be a balance, a meeting of equals. If it’s not, there’s always going to be someone suffering.”

“I babied him, didn’t I?” asked Bea sadly.

“Robbie?” Liz snorted. “You ironed his football shorts and made him hot milk before bed.”

“There’s nothing wrong with looking after someone.”

“No,” said Liz. “Except remember that time that you got the flu? He pissed off to his mum’s because he didn’t want to catch it.”

“You caught it instead,” Bea said. They’d spent a week cuddled up on her couch in a duvet, feeling like they were dying and sharing all the things they wished they could have done.

“Yeah, do you see what I mean there?”

Bea couldn’t imagine Alli curling up with her sick on the couch. But equally, she couldn’t imagine her leaving her like Robbie had done. Then again, she probably had no right to imagine Alli doing anything, did she?

Her heart sank into her stomach. She just couldn’t get her head around this.

“Listen, Bea, did you do the right thing?”

Bea nodded.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Then maybe Alli will realize that,” Liz said. “Maybe she was just angry and she’ll come to her senses and come crawling back. Because you were just doing your job. The way I see it, it doesn’t look like you had much choice. If she doesn’t come back, well, then it wasn’t meant to be.”

It made sense. Sort of. But there was something growing inside Bea, some certainty, some sense of something that she couldn’t quite put into words.

“You can’t let her walk all over you, though,” Liz said now.

Bea laughed bitterly. “She’s the one person who hasn’t. And besides, that’s over now. I’m going to stand up for myself more, get more of what I want out of life.” She looked over at Liz, who looked disbelieving. “I got my bedroom back from Marilyn and Robbie,” she said, as proof. “And told Marilyn that they need to move out.”

Liz looked suitably impressed. “What brought all that on?”

Bea thought back. “Alli,” she admitted. “She’s taught me a little something about making my voice heard, about taking care of myself because no one else will and no one else should have to.”

“Seems like a sensible way of looking at life.”

“I can’t go on the way I am. The way I was,” said Bea. “I’m over thirty. I’m living with my ex and the woman he cheated on me with. I don’t have a real job. I need to start living for me, not for someone else, not just to make other people happy.”

“I agree,” Liz said. “It seems like a healthy change. And sometimes people come into our lives just to teach us lessons like that.”

“And then they leave,” Bea said, her heart crumpling again, tears threatening again. She was thinking about the way Alli held her, the softness of her. She was thinking that she missed her, even now.

“She might come back,” said Liz, reaching out to hold her leg again. “She might.”

Bea shook her head. “I lost her her job. It was the only thing in the world that was important to her. Even though it was killing her. Even though she was stressed by it. She’ll never forgive me for that. She won’t come back, Liz.”

Liz sighed. “She taught you something. Maybe you taught her something in return.”

“Like what?” muttered Bea, rubbing her eyes with her sleeve to stop the tears leaking out.

“Something about forgiveness, about intentions, something about being caring and loving.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Bea sank down in her seat. “It doesn’t matter even if she did.”

“Why on earth not?” asked Liz.

“Because you’re right. I can’t have someone talk to me like that. I can’t be with someone who could lose her temper any second. I can’t put myself in that position. If I’m going to look after myself, then I have to do just that. I have to put myself first.”

“Even if that means being without her?”

Bea closed her eyes. “She doesn’t think she has a problem. I think she does. I don’t see how this can work out, Liz. I really don’t. And...” She hiccuped a sob. “And it hurts. It hurts so much.”

“Why?” Liz asked quietly. “Why does it hurt so much?”

“Because I think I was starting to love her,” Bea said. “It was fast and soon and I’d never say the words to her so early. But there was something there, something in the way we improved each other, something about how she made me feel. Not like she’d look after me, but like I could look after myself. I think I was falling for her.”

“Oh, Bea,” Liz said softly. “Oh, love.”

There were no words that could make this better. And Bea was sobbing again.

Chapter Thirty

Days were so long. Too long. Alli could swear that someone had put at least six extra hours into every day. And given that she didn’t know what to do with the usual twenty-four hours, she certainly didn’t know what to do with six extra ones.

Three days since she’d been fired and she had no idea what to do with herself. Other than think, of course, and that wasn’t something she particularly wanted to do. So when Izzy rang, she found herself accepting an invitation to coffee.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” was the first thing that Izzy said when Alli showed up at the small cafe.

“I can leave again if you like,” said Alli.

“Please don’t.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“I’m not entirely sure why I’m here myself,” Alli admitted as she took a seat. “Other than that I’ve got nothing else to do.”

“Don’t you have some high-powered job?” Izzy asked.

Alli sighed. “I did. Now I don’t. I got fired.” She glared at Izzy as though expecting her to say something.

But Izzy just shrugged. “That’s bad luck, I’m sorry. Interviewing for something new?”

It occurred to Alli that perhaps not everyone thought in the same way she did. Her job had been her life, and her life was now empty without it. Yet for someone like Izzy, a job was just... a means to an end, perhaps. “Not yet.”

“What about Bea?” Izzy asked as the waitress brought over two cappuccinos.

Alli frowned, both because she hadn’t ordered anything and because she wasn’t exactly sure what Izzy meant about Bea. “Sorry?”

Izzy snorted. “Do you really think that none of us knew? We’re not idiots. You two were staring at each other like Romeo and Juliet, and you snuck out of your room every night. Those rooms had thin walls, you know.”

Alli stopped stirring her coffee. “What?”

“It’s fine. Nobody cared. You’re adults. We all thought it was cute. So where is she?”

Why didn't you bring her along?"

"We, uh, we broke up." A weird, full feeling in her chest made Alli catch her breath. Probably the coffee. Probably made with real milk. Except she hadn't drunk anything yet.

Izzy put her spoon down. "Oh, Al, I'm sorry. What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay, but we're friends. If you wanted to talk to someone, you could talk to me. I wouldn't mind," Izzy said.

And Alli cracked a little bit. Just a tiny fraction. For an instant, she imagined telling Izzy everything. Telling her about her whole life. Telling her that she thought about Bea every minute of the day. Telling her that she didn't think she'd ever regretted something as much as losing her temper that day. Telling her that Bea wouldn't answer her calls.

Then she remembered that the last time she'd opened up it had been to Bea, and look how that had ended.

"It's nothing," she said sharply.

Izzy shrugged. "If you say so." She took a sip of coffee. "Except I remember breaking up with my Ken. It was right before we got married and we had a horrible argument, and then it was like the bottom had fallen out of my world. Like I didn't know what to do with myself and I couldn't even take a full breath."

That sounded familiar. "So what happened?" Alli asked suspiciously.

Izzy grinned. “He apologized for losing his temper, came over with a big bunch of flowers, talked about how it wouldn’t happen again and I forgave him, didn’t I?”

“Wait, he lost his temper with you? I thought you were the one with anger management issues,” Alli said.

Izzy looked away. “It was a one off. Anyway, it never did happen again and we’ve been happy ever since. Sometimes you just have to forget and forgive, you know?”

Alli wasn’t entirely sure she could either forget or forgive what Bea had done. Except the little bit of happiness she’d let into her life with Bea had left a hole that nothing could fill. Except, she had to admit to herself, she missed having someone. She missed a whole lot right now. She had no idea what she was doing with her life, other than sitting at a table with a practical stranger.

“Actually,” Izzy was saying. “There was something that I wanted to tell you. I don’t want you to be angry with me or anything, but then there’s the chance that you might be in the same boat, so I wasn’t sure whether to say anything or not.”

Alli shook her head. “We’re not in the same boat,” she said. “I can tell you that right now. I don’t really know why you asked me out for coffee, and I’m not sure why I agreed.” She was lonely, she realized. She’d thought that maybe meeting someone would make her feel better, make her miss Bea less. But it wasn’t working.

Izzy had gone pale. “Oh, right, well then...”

“Well then I should leave,” Alli finished, standing up. She put money on the table. “I shouldn’t have come.”

Izzy looked up at her. “Not everyone hates you.”

“What?”

“I said, not everyone hates you. You don’t have to be on the defensive all the time. You treat everyone badly so that you don’t have to be disappointed by them, to protect yourself. My kids do the same thing sometimes. But you’re not a child, Alli. And believe it or not, some people actually would like to be friends with you. And you do deserve friends, even if you act like you don’t.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Alli closed her eyes. She wasn't sure how to deal with this. She didn't want therapy right now. "People don't like me."

"Because you treat them like shit," countered Izzy. "If you were a bit nicer, maybe they would."

For a long second, Alli looked at her, then she gave up and walked away. She couldn't deal with all of this. All of this change, it was like losing pieces of herself at every turn, and she didn't know what to replace the lost pieces with.

She should never have agreed to meet with Izzy and she was going to block her number as soon as she got home, she decided. And then, then she was going to start looking for a new job and she'd put all of this behind her. Work made her happy, therefore work was going to be the solution to whatever this blackness was that she was feeling.

DARREN WAS LOUNGING against the front door, phone in his hand when Alli returned. She wasn't sure whether to spit at him or slap him.

"I come in peace," he said, holding up his hands when she saw him.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm your friend. I'm here to check on you."

"My friend?" Alli spat. "You fired me."

Darren sighed. "Can we just go inside, please?"

Alli let him in and then promptly wished that she hadn't. Her usually pristine flat was a mess, with blankets on the couch and half empty cups on the table. Darren took it all in.

"Taking it well then?" he said.

"How was I supposed to take it?" Alli asked. "You fired me. I lost everything, I had a job and then I didn't and I had a girlfriend and then I didn't and—" She stopped, realizing what she'd just said. And then, to her horror, her eyes began to fill with tears.

"Jesus, Al." Darren took her hand and led her to the couch, sat with her and then, finally, put his arm around her.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Ali sobbed.

"Right, yes, very fine," Darren said, handing her some tissues from the table.

"I am," she hiccuped.

"You're not," he said. "And you haven't been for a very long time."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's supposed to mean that as great as you were at your job, it was killing you, Al." He looked at her. "You think that I didn't see the bags under your eyes, the massive amounts of antacids that you took? That I didn't notice the missed meals? The anger that was always there?"

“But that... That was all part of it,” she said.

“No, no, that was someone working their way to a heart attack,” he said softly. “And whilst I wasn’t happy that you lost your temper in front of a client, I did sort of hope that it would be a chance for you to relax, maybe learn to handle the stress better.”

“Then you fired me.”

“No, then you didn’t complete the simple thing that you were asked to do in order to keep your job,” Darren said reasonably.

“But that wasn’t fair!”

“How?” She told him and he shook his head. “The woman made an honest report about you and was just doing her job. Who are you to criticize that? You’d be the first person to say that doing your job well was an important attribute to have. And frankly, it sounds like this woman cared about you.”

“Cared about me?” screeched Alli. “She was my girlfriend and she stabbed me in the back.”

Darren laughed. “She didn’t stab you in the back. She didn’t need to. You did that yourself. She was doing her job. It sounds to me like you need to apologize to her.”

“Yeah, well, she won’t answer my calls,” Alli muttered, balling the tissues into her hand.

Darren sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It must feel like you’ve lost everything.”

Page 77

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Alli looked out of the window, wheels clicking into place inside her head. “I did. I have.”

“But you need to stop blaming other people for that,” he said. “You’re the one to blame for all of this, and you know it. You and your temper.”

She closed her eyes. “I know.”

“Do you? Do you really? Because nothing’s going to change until you can admit that.”

With the greatest effort, she opened her eyes again and turned to look at him. “I have a problem.” The words hurt.

Darren took her hands. “Okay, that’s the first step. Is this a problem that you’re willing to try and solve?”

She’d lost her job. She’d lost Bea. What else did she have to lose? She took a deep breath. “I think I need to go into an anger management program.”

Chapter Thirty One

“Come on now,” Liz said. “I thought we were being a big girl and standing up for ourselves?”

“I am,” Bea said, looking around the bright, empty flat. It was small, but clean and the light was wonderful. It was also more expensive than the flat she was sharing with

Robbie and Marilyn.

“Listen,” said Liz. “I can lend you a little cash if that would help?” She was balanced on her crutches with her bum on a windowsill, still learning how to get around.

Bea took a deep breath, then shook her head. “Nope, but thank you for the offer.”

“Well then, you’re going to have to go and talk to Luke, aren’t you?” Liz asked, dropping a crutch. “Bugger.”

Bea bent down to pick it up. She could stand up for herself. She could make her voice heard. She’d learned that now. It didn’t mean she relished the thought of asking for a raise, but it needed to be done. She took a deep breath, handed Liz her crutch back, and nodded. “Right, I’d better go now then.”

“No time like the present,” Liz grinned. “Want me to come with?”

Bea shook her head. “Nope, I’ve got this.”

“Good girl,” said Liz. She hesitated for a second. “Um, anymore calls?”

“No.” Bea wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. Alli calling had been painful. It was hard not to pick the phone up. But at least it was a connection. Alli not calling, that was... more painful. She’d given up, Bea supposed, which she had every right to do.

“Any regrets?” Liz asked.

Bea bit her lip, then shook her head. “No. I can’t be with someone who treats me like that, who can lose her temper at any point. I can’t be with someone who doesn’t think she has a problem. I need to put myself first.”

“Good girl,” Liz said again. She reached out and Bea had to move to take her hand and squeeze it. “I’m here if you need anything.”

“I know,” Bea said. “And I’d better be going if I’m going to try and catch Luke.”

BENNY HAD DEVELOPED a strange creaking noise whenever she drove over thirty miles an hour. Bea tried hard not to think about garage bills. Actually, she tried hard not to think at all. This was a new life, she told herself. A new start, a new her, a better way of living. She was a strong, independent woman.

Which meant she could stand up for herself and put herself first and all the rest.

But she was sweaty and feeling a bit sick when she pulled up in front of St. Hilda’s. In fact, her legs were shaking so much that she worried for a second that she might not be able to walk inside.

“It’s like going to the dentist,” she told herself. “You’ve just got to get started and then it’ll be done and you’ll feel better.”

She got out of the car and really, really wished Josh was there to greet her. She’d feel better with someone friendly on side. But he was off enjoying his free time, like everyone else. She didn’t look up, she didn’t want to see the window of her room, the room where she and Alli...

It was no good, though. The second she walked inside all she could see were places where Alli had been, places she’d seen her smile, places...

She groaned. She needed to get over this. She was going to have to work here, for god’s sake. She took a breath, looked straight forward, and marched her way to Luke’s office.

But when she knocked on the door, there was no answer, despite the rustling noises she could hear coming from inside. A grinding started, like a waste disposal or a bin lorry. Bea opened the door.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“What...” began Luke, looking up from the papers he was feeding into the shredder on his desk. “Oh, it’s you.”

Bea took a breath. She could do this. Slow, loud, clear and simple, that was what Liz had said. “Good morning,” she said.

“Morning.” Luke was eyeing her suspiciously, half-shredded papers in his hand. “What do you want?”

“I would like a raise,” she said as confidently as she could. “I’ve worked a full program, during most of which I was doing two jobs and I feel that—”

“Fine, fine,” Luke said, waving a hand.

“Fine?” asked Bea uncertainly. She’d had a whole speech planned, a whole big thing, full of arguments and justifications. She’d expected Luke to put up at least a little bit of a fight.

“Yes, fine,” he said. “Um, you see anyone on your way in?”

“No.”

“No one in the car park, that sort of thing?” he asked.

“No.”

“Right. Good. Well then. I’m quite busy, as you can see.” He shook the shredded

papers at her.

“Yes, right. Okay then.” Could it really be that easy?

“Right, off you go.”

“Okay, yes, um, see you next week,” she said, backing toward the door.

“Of course, yes, next week, obviously...”

And then she was pushing out of the office and back into the corridor, lightness in her heart. She’d done it, really done it.

Was this what she’d been missing her whole life? She couldn’t believe how easy all of this was. All she needed was a little courage, the ability to step forward, to make her voice heard. She’d gotten her bedroom back, just like she’d wanted. And now she’d gotten the raise that she’d needed, just like that.

Her heart was skipping beats as she walked along the corridor to the main doors, and she was pulling her phone out of her pocket.

When she got out into the sunshine, she looked at her screen. Maybe she should call Alli, tell her what she’d done. Alli would be proud, Alli would tell her that that’s all she needed, just a bit of anger, just a bit of get up and go.

She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and stuck by her principles.

No. She couldn’t do this.

She dialed Liz instead.

“Hey stranger,” Liz answered.

“Hi, guess what?” said Bea, a smile in her voice.

???

“Are you sure about this?” Darren said.

“Deadly,” said Alli, staring out of the windscreen of the parked car toward the low, beige building in front of them.

“Good for you.”

“You didn’t have to drive me,” Alli said, turning to him. “I’m not a child. I can drive myself. I’ve got a rather nice car, actually.”

“I know,” Darren said. “I’m being supportive. That’s what friends do.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“You know I’m gay now, right?” she asked, tilting her head a little.

“Christ.” Darren sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger for a second. “Okay, I have to keep reminding myself that you’re new at this friends thing. Right, I don’t want to sleep with you. That’s not why I’m here. I’m here because I’m your friend and I care about you.”

“Why?” Alli asked.

“God knows.” He sighed again and then smiled. “Okay, because you’re smart and I like being around you. Because you’ve got a lot to offer the world. Alright? Now stop fishing for compliments.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were. We’re here for a reason.”

She nodded. “I’ve got this. I’m going. Any second now, I’m going to get out of the car.”

“Take your time, you’re early.” He looked toward the building now too. “You sure about this place?”

“It’s got good reviews and it costs a bomb,” Alli said. “And it’s not residential. Evening classes only. I think I’ll stay out of trouble if I sleep in my own bed.”

“Fair point,” said Darren. “And when you’re ready, I can make a few calls. I’ve got

contacts, we'll get you a few interviews and I'll write you a brilliant letter of recommendation. You'll get a new job in no time."

Alli nodded, stomach twisting a little. "I need to concentrate on this right now."

"Understood." He patted her hand. "Go on then, off you go. I'll come and pick you up in a couple of hours. At eight, right?"

"I can take a taxi."

"No, I'll pick you up. Friends, remember?"

Alli grunted. "I suppose that means I'll have to take you to the hospital when you fall drunk down the stairs or whatever."

"No, it means that you'll be there when I need you," said Darren. "That's how all this works. Now, are you going to get out, or do I have to use the ejector seat?"

Alli managed a laugh at this. "No, I'm going. And... thanks."

It was a pleasant evening. The sun was warm and she could hear the traffic from the main road behind her. But there were flowers here and she could smell them as she walked up the path to the building.

Her hand was in her pocket and she could feel her phone. Every fiber of her wanted to call Bea, wanted to tell her that she knew, that she had made mistakes, that she was trying to fix things. But she couldn't.

She didn't deserve Bea. Not the way she was. Not until she had tangible proof that she'd changed, that she was worthy.

She'd had a long time to think. A long time to wonder why she'd never loved anyone before. A long time to wonder why she'd fallen for Bea, what it was about her. And she'd come to the conclusion that Bea was the only person who'd never wanted anything from her.

She'd also come to the conclusion that losing her temper with Bea was the worst thing that she'd ever done.

It took a second before she could open the door, a big deep breath before she could push and walk in. There was deep carpet on the floor, a reception desk, discreet lighting. It looked like a hotel. But Alli knew why she was there.

She walked up to the desk, put both hands on it, took a breath and then said what needed to be said. "My name's Alli Williams, and I have an anger problem."

The receptionist smiled. "Then you're in the right place, Ms. Williams. Let me get you checked into our system and then your journey can get started."

Alli bristled at the word 'journey'. But she kept her mouth closed. She was going to do this right, with an open mind and an open heart.

Chapter Thirty Two

On Saturday morning, Alli woke up and made herself some green tea. She then did a series of yoga stretches and attempted to meditate. She was not especially successful, but the meditation guide in her anger management program had told her that these things take time, so she didn't force the issue.

One day, she might be able to clear her mind. But today was not that day. Even the greatest relaxers in the world couldn't have cleared their minds after just two sessions, she told herself. She took a few deep, cleansing breaths though, and decided

that she'd go out for a walk and get some exercise in.

Exercise was important. Not just to be healthy, but also to work off any aggression that she might be harboring. Being angry was normal. Showing anger wasn't. It was alright for her to feel things, but she needed to control her impulses better. That was the theory.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

She was walking back to her flat through the park when her phone rang.

It was silly, but every time it rang Alli thought it might be Bea. Every time she woke up, she thought Bea might be there beside her. Sometimes she turned around and almost caught sight of Bea out of the corner of her eye.

It was like being haunted by someone who wasn't dead and she didn't really understand it. She knew that she had feelings; she knew that those feelings probably went deeper than she thought. She didn't know what she was supposed to do about them now that her calls weren't being answered. There was every chance that she wasn't going to see Bea again. She tried not to think about that.

"Hello." She picked up her phone but kept walking. The sun felt nice on her skin.

"Alli?"

It took her a second to place the voice. "Charles?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry it took me a while to get back to you. I know you called me. But what with the kids and the investigation and everything, I've been up to my eyeballs in it. It's not that I didn't want to talk to you."

Alli laughed. "Are you sure?"

"Are you laughing?" He sounded suspicious. "That doesn't sound like the Alli I met."

"Well, some things are a bit different now." She took a deep breath of fresh air. "I'm,

um, trying to be different. Be a bit healthier, less intense.” She had to have another deep breath. “And, um, working on the anger.” It still didn’t feel quite natural to say that out loud, but she was working on it.

“God, yes, it must be even worse for you. But I’m glad you’re getting the help you need. Was there something I could help you with?”

Alli’s first call had been long before all this. It felt like years ago, even if it had only been a couple of weeks. In fact, she could barely remember why she’d called Charles at all, unless it had been another escape attempt. “No, actually, I think I’m doing alright. It’s nice to hear from you, though. I had a coffee with Izzy the other day.” She should call Izzy, apologize, do better by her. She would, she decided.

Charles laughed. “Kind of like war veterans. You’ve been through something. Though I suppose we’ll be seeing more of each other at some point.”

“We will?” asked Alli, confused.

“Obviously. With the investigation and all, you know.”

And things started to fit together a bit better. She remembered why she’d called Charles. He’d had a phone call and lost his temper about something, and she’d wanted to know what. And now, now, he was acting oddly too. He’d mentioned an investigation twice now. “Charles, what’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

Okay, let’s start at the beginning, she thought. “You had a phone call at the program, and then you left. Can I ask you what that phone call was about?”

“The investigation, obviously,” Charles said. “Well, the beginnings of it, anyway. It

wasn't being investigated right then, but my lawyer got things rolling."

Alli stopped in the middle of the footpath. "What investigation?"

There was a pause. "You mean you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" She was getting a little irritated, and she made herself breathe more evenly.

"It's all a scam," Charles said. "A kind of benefit fraud, I suppose. Or maybe just government aid fraud. There's a lot of money in it, apparently."

"In what?" Alli asked, afraid that she already knew but wanting to be sure.

"You might want to sit down," Charles told her.

In the end, it all came out. Luke was a conman, a scam artist. The program was a slightly elaborate form of fraud. The government sponsored a certain amount of the money to run the program and then paid a certain amount per person who attended. Luke was pocketing that money, running up costs on credit cards and banking the actual cash.

"That's not the worst of it," Charles said.

"I don't know, that's pretty awful," said Alli. She could feel herself getting angry. She'd done the stupid program, she'd lost her job because of the stupid program.

"The other participants? They were fakes," Charles told her. "Luke needed to pad the place out to claim the maximum amount of funding that he could. So he paid people to come and do the program."

“They were lying? Izzy? Marcus? The rest?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

“Some of them. I don’t exactly know who,” Charles said. “Some of us were real. People like you and me, we happened to stumble on the place and enroll. But the rest, they were stooges.”

Alli sat back on the bench she’d found. It made sense, she could see it. Izzy, who never seemed like she could be angry at all. Julia, who’d never lost her temper. The fact that they were all together and yet no one ever got aggressive.

And Bea. Bea had thought there was something weird going on. She’d said as much and Alli had dismissed it.

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” Charles said. “But you’d find out sooner or later. I mean, the police are involved now, so...”

“Jesus,” Alli said. “Thanks for telling me.”

When she’d hung up on Charles, she tried to digest the information. She was angry, but in control, a good sign. More than that, though, the only person she could think of was Bea. Bea was losing her job. Did she know already?

Alli looked down at her phone. Then, coming to a decision, she called the number. Her heart beat in her mouth as she waited.

But in the end, it was like every other call. Unanswered.

DARREN POURED HER a glass of wine. “I can’t believe it,” he said.

“Neither can I. What a nightmare for everyone involved. And Bea’s going to lose her job and I know she needs the money. I hope she’s not going to get into trouble.”

“She’s the one you’re worried about, isn’t she?” Darren asked.

“Of course.” Alli picked up the wineglass. “But I can’t get in touch with her.”

He cleared his throat. The restaurant was a small one, nice and quiet. “What happens if you never see her again?”

Alli took a shaky breath. “I... I have to accept that.”

He leaned closer. “What I’m worried about is that all of this, the therapy, the improving yourself, you’re doing it all to get Bea back. To prove yourself worthy.”

Alli took a sip of wine, rolled it around her mouth, seriously thought about her answer. Then she nodded. “Yes, you’re right, partly anyway. If I can in any way prove myself worthy of someone like Bea then I’m going to try. I... I miss her.” Talking about emotions wasn’t something she did easily. Wasn’t something she was used to doing.

“I know you do, Al.”

“But...” Another sip, another breath. “But this is bigger than that. I’m not doing all this for Bea. I’m doing it for me. I’m doing it to save myself, Darren. At the end of the day, if Bea never picks up a phone call, if I never see her again, I have to change things for myself.”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say,” he said with a smile.

“Why?”

“Well, because all this, this lying and cheating and fraud, it changes things, doesn’t it?”

“Does it?” Alli asked, picking at her salad. “I mean, it changes things for the people who worked there. People like Bea and Josh.” She paused. “I suppose it explains a little better why Daria ran off with my money. She and Luke were in things together.”

“Someone ran off with your money?” Darren asked. Alli told him what had happened and he shook his head. “The lengths you go to to get what you want.”

“I’m lucky, though, aren’t I?” she said, spearing some cucumber. “I mean, in the end, it’s all worked out pretty well for me.”

“That’s sort of what I’m talking about, though,” Darren said. “The program was a sham, a fake, so you not graduating from it shouldn’t really be an issue. This is my fault. I enrolled you in it. You’re now in a decent program with a good reputation.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that there’s a good argument for you getting your job back, if that’s what you want.”

The day was a quiet one. The sun was warm and the side street was almost empty. Alli could hear birds, could smell the heat on the pavement. And she could see that she was being offered her old life back.

It was a life that she’d loved. And maybe she could go back. Maybe she could change and still do her job. Maybe she could work fewer hours and be more in control.

There were a lot of maybes.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

She could fight for this, make her voice heard, regain all that she'd lost. All except Bea.

Or she could go on the way she was, groping blindly toward something new, something she hadn't identified yet, but something that could end up being better if she had enough faith and strength to get there.

She smiled at Darren and loaded her fork with salad. "No," she said. "Thanks, but no."

Chapter Thirty Three

It was Josh that told her. He just phoned her up out of the blue on the Saturday before she was supposed to start work again and told her everything.

"You have to be kidding," Liz said when Bea told her.

"I wish I was. How did you get this job in the first place?"

Liz shrugged. "I applied online like I do for most jobs. There was no sign of anything fishy, I swear to you, otherwise I wouldn't have applied."

Bea blew out a breath, trying not to think of all the things that had depended on her finally having a steady job.

"My offer of a loan is still out there," Liz said.

Bea shook her head. “Nope, I got this. But thank you.”

Liz pointed with her crutch and Bea grabbed the coffeepot and poured some more in Liz’s cup. “You’re going to have moving expenses and all sorts,” Liz said. “Are you really sure? There’s nothing wrong with accepting help.”

“I know that. And if you weren’t lethal with those crutches, you’d be carrying boxes for me,” said Bea. “But I’ve got this. If I need help, I’ll definitely let you know.”

Walking home from Liz’s house, Bea tried to come up with a new plan. This wasn’t the end of the world, she told herself. It was a small hiccup, that was all. And she supposed it explained the phone call she’d got from Alli, not that she’d answered it.

Alli must have found out before she did and wanted to tell her. Which was kind, she supposed. But then, Alli must have been pretty happy. She’d gotten what she wanted. With the program being investigated, she’d have a good argument for getting her job back.

Bea was happy for her. Not the happiest, because she had a feeling that Alli’s job wasn’t doing her any favors, but happy because she knew it was important to her. She hoped that one day Alli would find out that real happiness came from something other than a job. Like people, good people.

She thought about Luke agreeing so readily to her raise. He must have known already that things were going wrong. That was why he was shredding papers, why he’d seemed so jumpy about other people being around. She’d had a bad feeling about him from the start.

The real problem was everyone else. Josh and Lex would be out of a job, too. She didn’t know what to think about the others, about Izzy and sweet Julia, big Marcus and quiet Leslie. It would be easy to blame them, she supposed. They had all been

lying.

But then, Bea was more charitable than that. They'd been paid by Luke to fill out the numbers. They must have needed the money, or why do it? Why shut themselves away from their families for two weeks?

It must have been hard on them too, she decided. The whole thing was just a good example of how one bad person could ruin things for everyone. Still, she supposed, as she walked up to her front door, at least no one had been hurt in the process. That she could be glad about.

And glad that she wasn't even more involved with the place. She'd worked there for two weeks, not enough time to be asked to do anything untoward. Things could have been a lot worse, she thought as she climbed the stairs to her flat.

THERE WERE PLENTY of freelancing sites that advertised for yoga teachers. And a fair few job sites as well, she found as she sat in front of her computer. What had stopped her applying for all these jobs before, she wondered.

Lack of confidence, probably. That and lack of motivation. Things were different now, though. She was applying for everything that she could find, not even looking at the qualifications required. She'd deal with those if they became a problem later.

She was, however, getting more than slightly annoyed by the online application process. Jobs that required an attached CV and then proceeded to ask questions that could be answered by reading said CV should be illegal, she decided.

She was filling out yet another series of questions when Robbie and Marilyn came home, giggling at something as they came into the hall.

"Afternoon, Bea," Robbie said, poking his head around the kitchen door. "Just going

to catch the football. You alright?"

"Fine," she said, not looking up from her computer. "Have you got time to watch football? I'd have thought you'd be spending your time looking for a new flat."

"Yeah, well, er, we looked at a couple already today, and one more lined up for tomorrow afternoon. I think we might have found what we're looking for today, but keeping the options open, you know how it is."

"Good," she said.

Marilyn bustled into the kitchen. "Afternoon, Bea. I'm going to get started cooking dinner. Robbie told you about the flat?"

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Bea looked at the kitchen table, strewn with her papers, then back at the application she was filling in. Her computer showed six more tabs open with jobs she wanted to apply for. Marilyn was sure to make noise and mess making dinner.

“Actually,” Bea said. “I’m busy in here at the moment. Would you mind waiting an hour or so until I’m finished?”

Marilyn grinned. “Yeah, no problem. I’ll go and take a shower and do my nails while I’m waiting.” She left the kitchen and Bea noticed that Robbie was staring at her.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Robbie said. He sniffed. “Nothing only... are you alright?”

“Fine.”

“You sure?” His blue eyes looked concerned. “You seem... different, kind of.”

“Different how?” asked Bea, going back to her application.

“Just... different. Like more... bossy maybe?”

She looked up now. “Is that a problem?”

He shook his head. “No.” Then he grinned. “Actually, it’s pretty attractive.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Don’t go getting any ideas.”

“I’m not.” He pulled out a chair and sat down. “I’m really not. I’m just glad to see that you’re starting to grow up a bit, starting to look after yourself. It’s nice.”

“And not really any of your business.”

He looked hurt. “I know things haven’t been easy, Bea. But we’ve known each other a long time. I could have handled our break up better, but we both know it had been a long time coming. We weren’t working together anymore. That doesn’t mean that I don’t care for you.”

She softened. He was right. “I know. I do know that.”

“So, seeing anyone?”

“Not your business,” she snapped.

“Alright, alright. I was just wondering. Since you seemed all confident and stuff, I thought there might be someone in the picture.” He scratched his nose. “Just so you know, I wouldn’t mind or anything if you wanted to bring him over. I know you don’t need my permission, but don’t hide him away ‘cos of me.”

Bea bit her lip. “Actually, there was someone. But we, um, we broke up. It was just a fling, really, I suppose.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Robbie said staunchly. “Having a bit of fun. Not everything has to be serious.”

She sighed. “I know. Except for a little while there, I did think it was serious.”

“Want me to chase him down and punch him?”

“No. Apart from anything else, he was a she. And she doesn’t deserve that. It was all a bit complicated. And it was my decision in the end.”

“A she? Alright,” Robbie said. “Well, she doesn’t know what she’s missing.” He got up but paused.

“What?” Bea asked, ready to get back to work.

“Nothing, just...” He took a deep breath. “Just, if she’s the reason that you’re different now, well, that seems like a good thing. And maybe, maybe things aren’t as complicated as you think they are. If you like her enough to think it was serious, maybe you should give her a call.”

Bea shook her head. “No, thanks for the advice, Rob, but I don’t think so. She needed to make some changes in her life, and I’m not sure she could see it. I don’t want to force anyone to change. That’s not my place.”

He gave her a sad smile. “That’s the first time you’ve called me Rob,” he said. “Not Robbie. Just Rob.”

“Well, we all change, don’t we?” she said. She hadn’t even noticed that she’d done it. “You’re more of a Rob now than a Robbie, I can see that.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

He nodded. “That I am. And it happens like that, doesn’t it? Changes just sort of happen whether you want them to or not. They creep up on you. Maybe the same will happen to whoever she is. Maybe she’ll change and then you can have each other the way you’d like.”

Bea smiled at him. He was trying to make her feel better. “Maybe,” she said. But she doubted it. Alli had specifically said that she didn’t want to change, that she didn’t think she had a problem and that she was in control.

“I’ll be off to watch the footie then,” Rob said.

“Enjoy,” said Bea, bending back down to her computer and starting to write again.

SHE’D ALMOST FINISHED her applications when the banging on the door came. “Can you get that, Rob?” she called through to the living room.

She heard noises in the background, the door opening, the sound of voices. Then Rob was sticking his head around the door.

“Um, Bea?”

“Mmm?” She didn’t move her eyes from the screen.

“It’s the police,” he said carefully.

She did look up now. “Yeah? What do they want?” she asked.

He swallowed and looked pale. “To arrest you.”

Chapter Thirty Four

“Itold you we were in the same boat,” Izzy said.

“Not quite,” said Alli, shifting on the uncomfortable plastic chair. “I mean, one of us was actually at St. Hilda’s because they were supposed to be there. And then one of us was being paid to be there.”

Izzy pulled a face. “I was going to tell you, but...” She sighed. “Honestly, we needed the money. It wasn’t that much, but with the kids and everything, we needed it. I answered an ad online and when Luke offered, it seemed... almost like a holiday, I suppose.”

“Well, I did it to meet people,” Julia said from next to her. “And I did meet people, so as far as I’m concerned, Luke could have kept his money.”

Alli squeezed the bridge of her nose. “And now we’re all sitting in a police station, lovely.”

“I don’t think any of us planned on being here,” Marcus said. He was sitting on the opposite side of the corridor, facing the three women.

“And we’re only giving evidence,” pointed out Izzy. “It’s not like we’re arrested or anything.”

“Not like Josh,” said Alli. She shook her head. “He’s going to be in some real trouble if he’s not careful. He’s already got a record,that doesn’t seem fair.”

“We all know he had nothing to do with this,” Marcus said. “We’ll stick up for him.”

It wasn't really Josh that she was worried about. She was pretty sure that he was clean and that the police would figure that out soon enough. Bea, on the other hand... Her stomach twisted in a little knot as she thought about Bea being interrogated by a police officer. Bea, who was always so anxious to please, who could barely stand up for herself.

"Do you all want to go out for a drink when we're done here?" Julia asked.

"Yeah, maybe," said Marcus.

Alli crossed her legs and tried not to think about Bea getting the third degree.

???

"I had nothing to do with any of this," Bea said. "Surely you've all figured that out by now."

"It's a complicated case," said the policeman opposite her. "We can't take anything for granted, you must be able to see that."

"I can," Bea said. "But on the other hand, I only worked there for two weeks. I had no idea what Luke was doing."

"You didn't notice anything a little strange or off?"

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

Bea closed her eyes. “I told you. Things seemed... strange, but I’d never worked anywhere like that before. I had no idea what to expect.”

“What about this Daria character?”

Bea shook her head. “I know literally nothing about her. She barely said two words to me the entire time that I was there.”

He was about to ask another question when the door of the little interview room opened and a woman came in. A woman that it took Bea a moment to recognize. When she did, her mouth opened into an O of surprise.

“Ah, yes, surprised to see me,” said Leslie with a small smile.

“Surprised that you can speak at all,” said Bea.

Leslie shrugged. “It’s better to observe when you’re undercover. The rest of you all did enough talking, I didn’t need to join in.”

“You were police the whole time?”

The smaller woman nodded. “We’d had a tip-off, but we needed to know more about what was going on. That was where I came in.” She turned to the other officer. “She’s clear. She can go.” And then back to Bea. “You’ll probably need to come back for some questions later and we might need you to give evidence.”

“Anything, as long as I’m not under arrest.”

Leslie grinned at this. “You’re certainly not. And just for info, none of the rest of you are either. Luke hasn’t been found yet, but we’ll get him. When we do, there might be a trial. But the rest of the staff seem to be in the clear.”

“What about Daria?” asked Bea.

“Haven’t found her and can’t even track down her real name,” Leslie groaned. “But that’s a problem for another day. Just make sure you leave contact info at the front desk and set up an appointment to come give a statement in the next week or two and you can get off home.”

Bea’s heart started beating in normal time again. She’d seriously thought that she might be spending a night in jail.

???

“We’ll get you to sign a statement and then you can be on your way,” said a young policeman to Alli.

Alli looked around the tiny interview room. “So I’m not spending the night here?”

The policeman shook his head. “You’re free to go, ma’am.”

The ‘ma’am’ grated on her nerves, but she held her smile. “Great, that sounds perfect. Just tell me where to sign.”

She waited for the paperwork, signed her name where it needed to be signed, and stood up. Thanking the policeman, she made her own way out into the main reception of the police station. But she didn’t see any of the others, so she sat down to wait for them.

It was about three minutes later that Bea walked out of one of the corridors leading to the front desk.

Alli froze in her seat. Froze because she didn't know what to say, what to do, all she could do was sit there, watching, feeling the thrill of being in the same room as Bea.

Bea didn't see her and Alli didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. Part of her wanted to stand up and yell to the rooftops and beg Bea to give her another chance. The more sensible part of her was still frozen in place, not quite remembering how to move.

"We're going to need better than that, ma'am," the desk sergeant was saying to Bea.

"I'm afraid I can't do better than that," said Bea. "I'm moving, and that's the best contact information I can give you at the moment."

"You're a witness in a police matter."

Alli frowned, ready to get up and say something. But she didn't have to.

"I'm a witness, not a suspect," Bea said primly. "Now, I've given you both addresses, new and old, you have my phone contact. That should be more than good enough. I'd also like to set up an appointment to come and give a sworn statement."

The police officer grumbled beneath his breath, but Alli was smiling. So Bea had gotten a backbone in the last few days, huh? It was nice to see her standing up for herself. Nice to see her taking control of her own life.

"That sounds fine," Bea was saying now. "But I'm currently out of work and applying for jobs, so I may need to reschedule. I'll ring if it's necessary."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:02 pm

She didn't even wait for an answer. She turned around and her eyes widened just a fraction. "Alli."

Alli stood up, suddenly feeling like she didn't know what to do with her hands. Any hope that she had of her feelings for Beafading flew away. "Bea."

???

Maybe she should have expected to see Alli there, maybe she would have if she'd have given the matter any thought. But she was busy being arrested and Alli hadn't been at the front of her mind.

She was now, though. Standing there like she owned the place, looking too beautiful to be there. And Bea felt a shaking inside. She didn't know what to do, what to say. Most of her wanted to rush at Alli and take her in her arms. But there was the little, sensible part that told her to hold back.

"You're here," she said finally.

Alli nodded. "Not arrested or anything, though," she said quickly.

"Right," Bea said. "I was." Then she reconsidered. "I mean, I was arrested because I was staff, but they know I didn't do anything and I'm not arrested anymore."

Alli nodded. "Right. Good. That's good to know."

Bea opened her mouth to say something else equally inane when a man barreled

between them to get to the reception desk. His elbow hit Alli and she staggered. The man turned and Bea held her breath, waiting for Alli to snap.

Alli's face was red, her eyes glittered, and then her chest heaved with a deep breath. "Are you alright?" she asked the man.

"Yeah, sorry about that, in a bit of a hurry," he said.

She smiled politely. "No problem." And the man went on his way.

Bea lifted an eyebrow.

Alli coughed. "I'm, er, working on it. I'm part of a program now. A real program," she added hastily. "I decided to take a break before looking for a new job and, well, it's a good use of my time. I've got anger problems and they'll hold me back. It's something I need to deal with. Something I am dealing with."

"That's great," Bea said. "Fantastic." Alli was working on it. She recognized her problem. She wasn't hiding anymore.

"Right, well..." Alli took another deep breath. "I suppose I should be going. Can't hang around a police station all day."

"Right," Bea said. "Yeah, probably not."

"Definitely not," Alli said. "It's not a good look."

"No." Why wasn't she saying something? If not something dazzling, at least something interesting.

Alli looked at her for a long second and Bea could feel herself disappearing into those

eyes. Then she blinked. “Goodbye then,” she said softly.

And she turned and walked away.

Bea watched her go, watched her disappear down the stairs, watched her open the door and walk away. And every fiber of her being clenched together, every muscle tensed, every nerve tingled. In that second, she knew that this was a defining moment, knew that she could let Alli walk out of her life forever. Or...

In one smooth movement, she sprang into action, sprinting across the tiled floor, pounding down the steps, crashing into the front door, and escaping out into the evening sun.

Chapter Thirty Five

She'd just walked away. That simple. That easy. But Alli's heart broke a little more with every step that she took. With every inch she moved away from Bea, her chest tightened until she was swallowing, trying desperately, and futilely, to stop herself crying.

This was so ridiculous, she told herself. So stupid. It was one person, one woman. How could it mean so much?

And if it did mean so much, why hadn't she said anything? Why hadn't she made her voice heard, spoken her truth?

Hot tears escaped from her eyes and she stopped in the middle of the pavement, trying to get control of herself. Trying so hard to make sense of this new world that didn't have Bea in it any longer.

Trying so hard to contain herself that when something rushed at her from behind,

when someone pulled at her shoulder, when someone wrapped her in warm arms, she didn't understand for a moment what was happening.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:03 pm

Until she smelled the scent of Bea and finally, inevitably, lost control.

She didn't know how long she spent sobbing on Bea's shirt, clinging to her like a life raft, shuddering and trying to catch a breath.

"I'm here now," Bea breathed into her hair. "It's alright, I'm here."

Alli pressed her closer, like she was trying to meld herself to Bea, like she never wanted her to leave again.

"I'm here," Bea said again. "It's okay. I'm here."

???

Bea held her until she could finally breathe, until Alli raised her head and Bea had to laugh. "Don't you look a sight?" she said. She fumbled in her pocket and found a tissue, handing it over so that Alli could wipe her face. "Here, come on."

She took Alli's hand and led her over to a bench, sitting them both down. In truth, she was afraid. Seeing Alli like this had frightened her. Not because of her feelings. Those were, for once, glitteringly clear. But because she hadn't quite realized how fragile Alli was.

"Deep breaths," she said, taking Alli's hand.

"That's what my anger coach always says," said Alli. "You'd think that deep breaths were the solution to all the world's problems. Nuclear threat? Deep breaths. Religious

war? Deep breaths.”

“Break your girlfriend? Deep breaths,” Bea said.

Alli looked at her. “Don’t,” she said, pain raw in her voice.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t use that word if you don’t mean it,” said Alli. “I can’t take it, I just can’t. I know that I’m angry and bossy and loud and confident and all the rest, but honest to god, Bea, I’m so close to being broken right now that I’m afraid I won’t ever be fixed again.”

“You will,” Bea said. “You’re in the right place, with the right people. You’re getting therapy. It’s all a part of the process. You need to break everything down so that you can build it all back up again. Better and stronger this time.”

Alli sniffed. “I wish I could be done with the breaking bit and start on the fixing bit.” She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, Bea. Truly sorry. Sorry that I lost my temper with you, sorry that I blamed you for something that was my fault. I can’t undo those things. But I can try and make sure that they don’t happen again. I’m trying.”

“I can see that,” Bea said. She looked at the cracked pavement by their feet. “I’m sorry that you lost your job, I know it meant a lot to you.”

“Don’t be,” said Alli. “It was too much. It was feeding into my anger. I needed to lose it, needed to start a new path. I can see that. But none of this was your fault, I know that.”

Traffic hummed along the street and the sun shone down warm on their skin.

“Bea,” Alli said, at the exact same time that Bea said, “Alli.”

“You first,” said Alli. “I’ve spilled enough tears for a minute. I need to restock the reservoir before I start pouring my heart out.”

Bea took a deep breath. She hadn’t planned any of this, had no idea what she wanted to say. All she could do was open her mouth and hope that the words that came out were the right ones.

“You’ve changed me,” she said. “Something about you makes me want to be stronger, better. Meeting you has changed my life in so many ways that I don’t think I’ll ever be able to thank you for all of them.”

“You don’t need to,” Alli said.

Bea smiled. “But the way you’ve changed me most is that I’ve seen what could be. I’ve seen what it’s like to be loved and to love in return, equally, without giving too much or taking too much. We spent such a short time together, but I feel like I’ve seen what life could be like if I wanted it to be like that.”

“And do you?” Alli asked, eyes cloudy with tears again.

“Hey, I thought you were all cried out?” Bea teased her.

Alli sniffed. “Alright, I’ll do my best.” Another sniff. “Here’s the thing, Bea. I could say exactly what you’ve just said and it would be equally true. There’s something about you that makes me a better, calmer person. When you’re around, I want to be better. But more than that, I thought for so long that I was broken, that there was something wrong with me, and to have you show me that I’m not, that there’s not, I won’t ever be able to thank you enough for that.”

“So we’re both equally grateful. That’s a good start,” Bea said.

“I’m supposed to be the snarky one,” said Alli.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:03 pm

“Well, you’re taking a turn at being the soppy one right now.”

Alli smiled. “Right, then I’d better give it my best shot.” She took a breath. “Bea, I understand why you didn’t answer my calls. I understand why you didn’t want to speak to me or be with me, and I respect your decision.”

“Alli...”

“Let me finish. I want you to know that I’m changing. I’m working on all of this. And it’s not for you, or not just for you, it’s for me. I need to do this. But I can’t lie and say that a little piece of me doesn’t want you to look at me and see that I’m a better person.”

“Al...”

Alli held up a hand. “Here comes the soppy part. Bea, I have feelings for you. If you can’t reciprocate them, that’s fine. But I can’t carry them around alone any longer. I have to let them out. I want to wake up with you, Bea. I want to see your smile before I go to sleep. I want to hold your hand and argue with you, go on holiday with you. I want to smell your t-shirts when you’re not home because I miss you so much.”

“Okay, that’s soppy verging on creepy.”

Alli laughed a little. “I mean it though, Bea. I mean that a little piece of you will always be with me. I’ll walk away right now if that’s what you need. But I’ll take that little piece inside me for the rest of my life. And there’ll always be a hole inside me, because a little piece of me will go with you too.”

Bea's heart swelled in size until her chest was so full it hurt to breathe. "Al, you know that I have feelings for you, too."

"And I know that I scared you, that losing my temper with you was the biggest mistake of my life," Alli said. "One that I'm not going to repeat. One that woke me up to how I needed and wanted to live my life. So much has changed around me, so much is still up in the air. I don't even have a job. The only thing that I know for certainty is that my life is better, brighter with you in it."

"Al..."

"You don't have to answer now. You can wait, have time to think," Alli said.

Bea blew out a frustrated breath. "Al, will you let me speak?"

Alli clamped her mouth shut and nodded.

With a grin, Bea said: "When can we start?"

"Start what?"

"This, us," Bea said simply. "I'm not complete without you and I don't want to be. My life is better with you in it, and I want to see where all this goes. I want to know what we can be. Because if I make you a better person, and you make me a better person, just think how incredible we can be together."

"We can," Alli said, scarcely believing what Bea was saying.

"I feel like I haven't taken a deep breath since you walked out of my flat," Bea said quietly.

“Well, we can’t have that,” said Alli. “Especially since we’ve already decided that deep breaths are the answer to all the world’s problems.”

Bea smiled a little. “In that case, I think the world’s going to be a bit screwed for a minute or two. I hope it can look after itself.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m not about to let you take a deep breath for at least the next sixty seconds,” said Bea. She leaned in and brushed Alli’s lips with her own.

“Maybe longer,” said Alli.

“Maybe a lot longer,” Bea agreed.

Epilogue

Alli surveyed the hole in the wall with her hands on her hips. “It’s just not good enough,” she said.

Sid the builder sniffed and scratched his head. “Dunno how it happened, to be honest.”

“It looks an awful lot to me like one of your lads swung a ladder around and punched a hole with it,” said Alli, pointing at the ladder that was propped up next to the hole.

“Yeah, well.” Sid sniffed again. “Gonna take a few days to fix that. Let’s say by the end of the week, just to be safe.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:03 pm

Alli took a deep, cleansing breath that tasted slightly more of fresh paint than she might have liked. “No,” she said patiently. “We’re opening tonight and this wall will be perfect by then.”

Sid wrinkled his nose. “Dunno about that.”

Another deep breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth. She could feel the heat in her stomach, could feel the tantalizing creep of it as it tried to rise up. “No,” she said quite calmly. “We’re having an opening party tonight. You will need to stay for the rest of the day and get the hole patched up.”

“I’ve got other jobs to go to,” Sid moaned.

“You have this job to finish first,” Alli said. “And, just as a reminder, there is a no-finish clause in your contract and you will be fined per day until this job is done.”

Sid glared at her. “Fine. I can try. But—”

“No buts. Get it done,” said Alli, turning on her heel and walking out.

Only when she was out in the little reception area did Alli let out her breath. Eighteen months of anger management training and she was sure that Sid had been sent as some kind of final test. There was something about him that just got on her last nerve.

But her anger drained away as the sunlight shone through the high windows of reception. Those eighteen months hadn’t been wasted. She never had gone back to work. Not the kind of work that she’d left.

Bea had. She'd continued to teach during the days as they worked on their plans at night, and hadn't given up until just last week. She didn't have a choice now. If she was going to be running the relaxation and meditation side of the business, she had to be working full time at Moonshine Retreat.

Alli grinned. The name had been Bea's idea, and it was tacky and she loved it. Even more though, she loved being her own boss. She loved that together they'd created something, a high end relaxation retreat with full psychological services too. Just what the busy businessman and woman needed. Just what she had needed a year and a half ago.

"Al, you know that Sid is still here?" Lex said, coming in from the therapy rooms.

"Did you see that huge hole in the wall by the massage rooms?"

"No." Lex pulled a face. "Is it going to be fixed in time?"

Alli shrugged. "It's out of my control. All I know is that at six o'clock tonight, a hundred people are going to descend on us for champagne and canapés. Including all our investors."

Lex grinned. "We can put a poster over it if we have to. Where's Bea?"

"Picking up the new towels, she should be here any second."

Alli breathed in the smell of fresh paint again. They'd come a long way in such a little time. But there was one thing that hadn't changed. Just the thought of Bea walking through the door made her heart beat harder.

???

“No, no,” wailed Bea, stomping on the accelerator.

But Benny didn’t respond. He gave a grumble and then shuddered to a stop.

“Not now, Ben, come on, please.”

No answer.

She turned the key then turned it again. Absolutely nothing. Why her? Why now? Why today of all days?

She pulled out her phone and called AA, trying not to think about the load of linens in Benny’s boot.

Then she could do nothing but wait.

She laid her head back on the headrest and closed her eyes. She was tired. The last few weeks had been exhausting. But every time she tried to go to sleep, she had an idea, or thought of a new paint color, or just got overcome with the scale of everything that they were doing.

She couldn’t have done it without Alli, she knew that. Alli had planned and met investors and had overseen everything. Alli would be the one technically running the business side of things. But it was their place, a place they’d dreamed up together, and just the idea of it made Bea smile.

There was one small issue though. She loved Alli to death and trusted her wholeheartedly. But the closer they got to opening night, the more stress that there was, the more worried she got that Alli was going to lose her cool.

And this wasn’t going to help.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:03 pm

She contemplated calling her, but decided that it was better to present her with a fait accompli. She'd wait for the tow truck, then she'd call a taxi to carry her and the towels back to base. That was the best plan.

???

"Where is she?" wailed Alli. "Do you think she's been in some kind of accident?"

"No, of course not," Lex said. "Be sensible. She's not even been gone that long. If you're worried, then call her."

"I don't want her to think that I'm checking up on her."

They were standing behind the reception desk so they had a good view of something coming toward the glass front door.

"Is that her?" Lex asked, tilting her head to try and understand what was happening.

Alli looked at the large box that seemed to be walking itself toward the door. "Um, I don't think so?" She tilted her head in the opposite direction. "Unless towels come in big boxes?"

The box bumped into the door, stopped, turned, bumped again, and finally settled on the floor. Josh walked out from behind it, pushing the door open. "Don't help or anything," he said. "It's fine."

"What's that?" asked Lex.

“New massage table,” Josh beamed. He’d finally found his calling and had trained in record time to become the retreat’s massage therapist. “The best money can buy.”

“It’s still in a box,” observed Alli.

“Yeah, but it only arrived today.” Josh grinned at her. “I’ll have it up and running in no time. In plenty of time for the party, don’t you worry.” He eyed the door. “Well, providing it’ll get through the door, of course. Fancy giving me a hand?”

Alli was propping the door open as Lex and Josh struggled through with the box when Sid appeared from the back. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Lunch break,” sniffed Sid.

“It’s ten thirty and you’re not leaving this building until that hole is fixed,” Alli said. “Get back to it.”

He grumbled, but disappeared back to his work. Josh stood on Alli’s foot.

“Sorry!”

“I wish Bea was here,” Alli said. “This’d be easier if she were.” Everything was always easier with Bea around. Bea calmed her, made her laugh, made her smile.

She was smiling even now, just thinking about her. Thinking about how she of all people was starting a relaxation spa and how she’d never even have imagined something like this. Not without Bea around.

“She’ll be here,” Lex said, voice muffled by the box. “Now, can you get that door open a bit wider?”

???

The mechanic sucked air over his teeth. “Oh, I wouldn’t think so,” he said, shaking his head. “No, no, not today. Might have it done by the end of the week.” Another suck of air. “Best say Monday, though, just to be on the safe side.”

“But I need the car,” Bea said.

He looked at her. “You doubting my abilities?” he said.

“No,” said Bea quickly. “I’m really not.”

“Good, because I’ll have to take her apart, you know. Then there’s labor, it’s just me and Gary today, and I’ll need to get parts in.”

“Right,” Bea said. “Alright.” She was starting to feel faint. What were they supposed to do? They needed Benny. Alli’s expensive Mercedes had gone back to her old company at the end of its lease. They needed transportation.

“Gonna cost you a few hundred as well, I’d expect,” the mechanic said, looking over Benny.

“Right.” She felt even more faint.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:03 pm

“Well, you’d best leave me to it,” he said.

She took a breath. “Um, I really need a car,” she began.

“Not my problem, is it love?” he said.

And he was big and oily and, to be truthful, she was a little bit scared of him. So she started pulling the bags of linens out of Benny’s boot.

“She’s in good hands,” the mechanic said cheerfully.

“It’s a he,” said Bea, getting the last bag out.

“What’s that?”

She shook her head and sighed. “Nothing.” She looked around. She’d called for a taxi twenty minutes ago but it still wasn’t here.

There was nothing to do but wait.

She sat on the curb with her bags as the mechanic winched Benny onto the back of a truck. Why did this have to happen today?

???

“Where have you been?” screeched Alli as Bea stumbled through the doors with bags under her arms and more in her hands.

She rushed over to help.

“There’s a problem,” said Bea. “Um, slight problem.”

“What is it?” Alli knew that her voice was too high, could feel that her stomach was starting to turn acidic, her mouth tasted bitter.

“It’s fine,” Bea said. “Just, um, there’s been an issue with Benny. He’s at the garage now.”

“Oh god,” Alli said, just as Sid came around the corner.

“Hi, Sid,” said Bea. “What are you doing here?”

“Starving to death,” he muttered. “I’m going to get a sandwich.”

“No.”

Bea looked around.

Alli felt hot and flushed. “No,” she said again. “Absolutely not.” The words were on the tip of her tongue. “Get back in there and fix that hole.” There was so much more that she wanted to say, and she was struggling not to say it, struggling to keep herself together. She hadn’t felt this way for a long time.

All that therapy, all that work, and it was all for nothing. She was still angry, she could still lose her temper, she could still...

“Deep breath.” Bea’s hand caught Alli’s, squeezed it. “Deep breath,” she said calmly, almost hypnotically.

Alli breathed.

“You’ve got this,” whispered Bea. “We’ve got this.”

Another breath. The air around her was cooling.

“Now, what’s this about a hole?” asked Bea.

Alli told her.

Bea turned to Sid. “Go finish fixing it,” she said evenly. “It won’t take that long. Once it’s done, you can leave. Simple. If you’re hungry, I can order something in.”

Sid eyed her. “Burger?”

“Done,” she said with a smile. “Back to it then.” Sid went off quite happily and Bea squeezed Alli’s hand again. “Sorted.”

The grip around Alli’s stomach loosened a little. “Thank you.” Then she remembered Benny. “But what about the car? What about the canapés that you need to pick up? What about—”

“I’ll deal with it,” Bea said. She raised Alli’s hand to her face and kissed the back of it, her lips soft and warm. “I’m going to deal with it right now. You put away these towels and I’ll be back in an hour. No stress.”

Alli looked into her eyes. “No stress,” she agreed. And amazingly, she felt no stress. She felt calm and in control. Bea always had this effect on her. It was part of the reason she was so happy that they were going to be working together.

Six months ago, Bea had moved into Alli’s flat when her lease was up. Having Bea around every evening, every night, was better than Alli could have imagined. But when they’d started talking seriously about the retreat, Bea had worried that spending too much time together would be bad for them.

Alli couldn’t have disagreed more. Being with Bea made her feel like a better person. Spending all day with Bea was going to make her into the best person she could be.

She pulled Bea closer to her now, pressed her body against hers. “Just don’t be long,” she purred.

Bea's eyes sparkled. "Think we might have a little spare time before the party?" she whispered.

"No, no, and no," Josh said, coming around the desk. "You two need to be business focused. Not like two teenagers sloping off to the bike sheds for a quickie when the rest of us are working our fingers to the bone."

Bea laughed. "Fair enough, I'm out of here." She blew a kiss at Alli. "Don't forget Sid's burger."

"Ooo, burgers," Josh said.

And Alli watched Bea disappear back outside, confident that she'd take care of things.

???

"I need a car," Bea said.

She was fully out of her element in a dirty garage full of loud equipment. The mechanic was wiping his hands on an oily cloth and she could see Benny parked in a corner of the car park, abandoned and alone.

"Didn't I just tell you back at the tow site that I can't do anything about that?" he said.

Bea took a deep breath. "Okay, I need you to take a quick look, see if it's something that's easily fixable. If it is... maybe we can come to some arrangement."

He glared at her, then sighed, and waddled over to where Benny was parked. A second later, he had the bonnet open and his head was inside Benny's engine.

Bea crossed her fingers and hoped. She'd been terrified walking in here, so scared that she didn't know what she was doing, what she was talking about. Then she thought about Alli's face, the way her nose screwed up when she was fighting to control her temper, the way she worked so hard to change herself. And she'd known that she had to do this, had to fight a little bit every day to be the kind of person that Alli deserved.

The kind of confident and independent person that Alli deserved.

"Nah, it's no good," said the mechanic, standing up again. "You're going to need a good overhaul here. It's a two, three day job, even if I start now."

Bea wavered a little. "Right," she said. "Um, can I get a second opinion?" Her insides felt watery, he was going to lose it with her any second, she was pushing her luck, he'd think she was stupid or weak or demanding or something and then—

The mechanic started to laugh.

"What?" Bea asked, surprised.

He shook his head. "You really need some help, don't you?"

"Well, yes, that's why I'm here."

He recovered himself. "Alright, well, you can get a second opinion if you want one, there's nothing wrong with that. But you'll need to get the car towed somewhere else and it won't get done any faster than it'll get done here, you've got my word on that."

Bea groaned.

"But let's see what we can do," he said. He beckoned her with his head. "Come over

to the office.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:03 pm

She followed him to a grimy office piled high with papers. He pulled a set of keys off a rack by the door and handed them to her.

“Now, that’s our run around car. She’s no great beauty, but she runs like an angel. We usually reserve her for our VIP customers, but since you’re in need, you can take her for two days. Bring her back Thursday morning and your car’ll be ready by then. What do you say?”

“Thank you,” gushed Bea. “Thank you so much.”

She felt the thrill that she always felt when she successfully stood up for herself. And it surprised her, like it always did, that it was so easy.

“Just don’t crash it,” the mechanic said with a merry gleam in his eye.

???

“Look at this place,” Izzy said, spinning around in a circle. “It’s as posh as anything. I’d never be able to afford to come to a place like this.”

“You’ve got an open invitation,” Alli said. “Any time you need a break from the kids, you just pop by for a massage.”

“Hey, what about me?” Charles asked.

“The two of you can share a babysitter,” said Alli. “And you’ll be in good company.”

“We will?” asked Izzy.

“I’ve already signed up for an old fogies weekend,” Julia said, joining them.

“I think you mean our mature person's relaxation package,” said Alli.

Julia rolled her eyes. “Fancy words, that’s all. Where’s Marcus?”

“Trying out Josh’s massage skills,” said Alli. “And Leslie’s around here somewhere. She’s bought half the police department with her.”

“She deserves a night off,” Julia said. “Did you hear that Luke got sentenced last week?”

Alli nodded. “No more than he deserved. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got investors to wine and dine.”

She looked around the room, searching out Bea and finding her almost immediately. She was shining in a dark blue sparkling dress that clung to every curve and made Alli’s mouth water. She made her way over to her.

“I told you everything was going to be fine,” Bea said as Alli leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“Because of you,” Alli said.

“Because of you,” countered Bea. “You put in all this work. This could never have happened without you.”

Alli looked down at her and suddenly knew something in the very depth of her being. She could see them, could see them getting old together, could see them chasing their children together, could see them lying on the couch, walking on the beach, could see

every moment of a life shared.

“What is it?” Bea asked.

Alli blinked away a tear. “Nothing,” she said. “Nothing and everything.” She looked out at the crowded room. “Look at what we created together,” she said.

“Together,” agreed Bea.

Alli looked back down at her. “And think of all the beautiful things we’re going to create together.”

Bea reached up and cupped her face. “Do you mean that?”

“I can’t wait,” Alli whispered. “I can’t wait to see what we’ll do.”

Bea pulled her head down and brushed her lips against Alli’s. “It might be a wild ride.”

“I’m ready for it,” Alli said, wrapping her arm around Bea’s waist. “I’m mad about you.”