



You Spin Me Round

Author: *Natasha West*

Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Alex Walker is a ruthless and ambitious PR agent, navigating the tumultuous seas of celebrity scandal with a knack for turning the tide in her favour. Securing hot actress Isabelle Kane could propel her business to new heights, but winning the spin war in Isabelle's impending divorce is crucial. However, what could trip up Alex, a master at the game?

Representing the other side of this high-profile split is Leigh Calloway. She's a passionate advocate for integrity in the world of PR, and when she signs rising star Erin Porter, she is determined to ensure Erin's perspective on the troubled marriage is the main narrative. With the truth on Leigh's side, what could go wrong? Well, Alex and Leigh's romantic history might cause one or two problems. Because under the glitz and chaos that define their professional lives, Alex and Leigh share a hidden decade-old secret—a passionate one-night stand gone disastrously wrong. When Alex and Leigh find themselves pushing up against each other in the media frenzy surrounding the high-profile split, they both know it's vital that they maintain a fierce professional rivalry. But amid traded barbs and hilarious one-liners, it's undeniable that the chemistry between Alex and Leigh is back with a vengeance. From staged paparazzi moments to orchestrated social media campaigns, the two PR agents are determined to beat each other. But will their past throw a spanner in the works, or is it destined to open the door to a second chance at love?

Total Pages (Source): 102

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

One

When Alex Walker was knee-high to a Jack Russell, she decided that when she grew up, she would be successful and fancy. Broke kids often do. But Alex actually managed it. It didn't quite happen the way she planned, but if Alex was good at one thing, it was a pivot.

The road to Alex's future career started with a bake sale when she was twelve. She and eight other kids selling their wares for cancer research. Now, Alex couldn't bake for shit, but she was determined to sell the most cakes. Competition ran through her very blood. But how the hell was she gonna beat the other kids with no skill?

The answer came when she was drifting around the supermarket, trailing after her mother. She saw an icing pen, and a brainwave hit her. She asked her mother for five quid (it took a little haggling as her mother wasn't flush at the time, but Alex swore to her she'd see a return) and purchased three dozen basic supermarket cupcakes, along with the icing pen.

She took them to the bake sale the next day and laid them out with a sign. 'Personalized cupcakes.' All she did was write people's initials on the cakes for one-fifty a pop. Nothing more. But she sold out in less than an hour, while kids who'd baked their little hearts out went home with a surplus. Alex gave her mother double her investment and gave the rest to the charity.

The next day, Alex got a special mention in assembly and a lot of glares from the other bakers. Only the first thing mattered to her.

The experience taught her something essential that she took into adulthood. The thing itself is not the thing. The only thing that mattered was how you sold it. Branding was all.

When Alex was older, she decided to get a marketing degree, with a plan to snag a brand manager job for a global product after she graduated. She didn't care what the product was. High-end couture, biscuits, cars, it didn't matter. Selling was selling, and she knew in her heart she could work her way up to the top of any chain.

But things turned out to be a bit harder than she'd thought. Two years after graduation, she was still stuck in an entry-level marketing job, Tweeting, Facebooking, and Instagramming for a company that made novelty socks.

She posted ads for the company along with captions like, 'Sock it to me, Baby!' and, 'Be a sock star!' It was a heavily pun-based position.

Alex was stalled and frustrated. Until the day she was texting with an old friend from uni, Ben. He happened to mention that his sister was in a bad way.

Oh dear, Alex commiserated.

It's rough because of the whole reality TV aspect, he texted her.

Just like the icing pen, Alex smelled opportunity. She called him.

'You called me?' Ben said, confused.

'Your text vibe was sad. I thought you might like a call. Reality TV?' Alex prompted.

'Yeah, you know about my sister, don't you?' Ben said.

‘No.’

‘Oh, could have sworn I’d mentioned it. Anyway—’

Alex googled ‘Winter’ and ‘reality tv’ before he could hang up. ‘You’re not Holly Winter’s brother, are you?’

He didn’t hang up. ‘You’ve seen Love Prison?’

‘Sure,’ Alex lied. ‘So, what’s up with your sister?’

‘You know how she started in all that, don’t you?’ he asked conversationally. ‘She used to be overweight.’

Alex didn’t know where the hell this was going but took the detour. The sock puns were not exactly pressing. ‘Oh?’

‘Not like there was just a little more to love. More like her heart was in trouble. She couldn’t seem to sort it by herself. We were all worried she’d die young. So she went on that show, Drop It!’

‘I don’t know it.’

He sighed. ‘Anyway, she did. Drop it, that is. Got down past her goal weight. It was one of the show’s big success stories. And if it had ended there, it would have been great. But after that, she was offered a makeover show, Plain Jane to Insane.’

‘I don’t know it.’

‘It’s massive.’

‘I usually only watch shows about bidding on storage containers,’ Alex admitted.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Ben sighed. ‘So, anyway, she’d been on two shows, and she was thin and TV quaffed. She started getting endorsements, modelling stuff, and then more shows... You know how it goes. Anyway, then theLove Prisonthing happened.’

Alex searched her memory banks for what he might be talking about. Nothing.

Jake’s voice dropped. ‘The Chunk Junk incident.’

It hit her then. Her housemates laughing their arses off about someone onLove Prisongetting very drunk and getting intimate. But before it could progress to its logical conclusion, the woman had gotten sick all over the man’s still-clothed crotch. And he’d stood and yelled, ‘You blew chunks on my junk!’ It had trended under #ChunkJunk.

‘Ah,’ Alex said.

‘Yeah. People love a catchy rhyme. So, anyway, that made her very, very famous. Took her into the stratosphere.’

‘I see.’

‘Yeah. Booking after booking. It seemed like she was set up. But then she got married two years ago to this tanned tosser she met on the set ofCelebrity Serial Daters. Sam Manning.’

Alex took a swing. ‘Does he have blinding teeth and orange skin?’

‘You’re describing half the pillocks on that show, but yes. He was obviously bad news, but Holly’s self-esteem never really caught up from her big days. Men were horrible to her then. It messed up her man-picker. He definitely married her for her money.’

Alex could fill in the gaps from there. ‘So, now they’re getting divorced?’

‘Yes. He spent all her cash, the tangerine twat, and now he’s decided he “Needs some time to think about his own needs.”

‘What a dick,’ Alex said sincerely.

‘She knows she’s been used. She’s paranoid. She’s worried about what people will think. If people blame her for this divorce and public opinion turns against her, she could lose a lot of money in endorsements. She’d be back to square one. And we’ve had all these sharks begging for her business, publicists, and all that. But she doesn’t trust anyone.’

‘Publicists?’ Alex looked around her at the crap hole she currently worked in and made a decision. ‘Did you know I’m in PR now?’ she asked Ben.

Ben was stunned. ‘Are you?’

Alex was, but only as of five seconds ago. ‘Yes, and I happen to have a friend rate, which is free.’

Ben was surprised, but he took the hint. ‘Oh, well, maybe you could...’

‘...Meet with Holly? Absolutely.’

That very afternoon, Alex got some cards printed with Alex Walker - PR

Consultant on them and went to see Holly, who did not look like she did in *Heat* magazine. She was in stained sweats, her hair unwashed, roots grown out, nails chipped to shit. She explained how Sam had walked out the minute her bank balance was at zero and left an STI as a parting gift.

Alex thought the answer was simple. He just needed to be exposed as the shitbag he was. People could only sympathise with Holly when they knew conclusively that she'd married a rat.

'You don't think people would think I was an idiot?' Holly asked anxiously.

'He's the idiot. And everyone's gonna know it when I'm done,' Alex assured her.

Holly gave Alex Sam's new address, and Alex called in sick to work so she could stake the place out. It took three days of living in her car, but Alex was right there to see not one but two girls leaving his place for a walk of shame one morning. Sam kissed both of them on the doorstep. Holly captured the beautiful moment and sent the shots to the tabloids. People left, right, and centre called Sam a scumbag and Holly a saint for putting up with him. It was a nice cherry on the cake that it was true.

Holly was thrilled with Alex's work. She offered payment, but Alex asked only one thing.

'If any of your friends need PR help, could you direct them to me?'

Holly did better. She sold her story to *Heat* magazine and talked about Alex and how she was a 'Feminist hero.'

That's when it started. Calls from moderately famous women in the middle of damaging relationship drama. It started with a couple of C-list actors, as well as an influencer, all trying to get out of bad relationships without losing face.

Alex ran with it. She didn't want to marketstuffanymore. She was pivoting to market people, with a specialism in 'crisis communication.' What that roughly translated to was that C-listers knew who Alex Walker was and that she would do anything it took to wipe the shit off their name.

She quit the day job, got a business loan, rented a nice office in a well-situated building, and got herself a fancy and effortlessly cool, twenty-two-year-old receptionist/social media manager/whatever called Baker. Baker was a sour guy, but he was good at his job and his fashion-forward approach to business casual brought a certain something to the vibe of the office.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Alex looked at what she'd achieved by thirty, and she was kind of amazed. She had a growing business, she had a little money, and people knew who she was. She was winning. So what if she never got any sleep, and constantly worried about the business? So what if she was always at work?

One day, she'd slow down and find the time to do something other than work. Maybe after she'd gotten a few more clients and felt a bit more established. But more clients was more work, wasn't it?

She supposed she could do what bosses did and hire more people, work less, and delegate more. But she didn't want to do that. She didn't trust other people as much as she trusted herself. She'd made this place, and it needed all she had to give it. So many new PR firms went into administration in the past few years. Walker PR strategies could not be one of them.

And then, one sunny day, Baker poked his head around Alex's office door and said, 'You're not going to believe who just called.'

'Probably not,' she agreed.

'Steven Edmonton.'

'If I may be so bold, who the hell is that?' Alex asked him.

'He's the PA to... Are you serious? You don't know who that is?'

'I don't know people's PA's, Baker. There's a limit to the information my brain can

hold.'

'He's basically famous in his own right at this point. I'm kind of shocked,' Baker sneered.

Alex quickly googled the name on her laptop. The results threw her. 'He's Isabelle Kane's PA?!'

'Googling is cheating.'

'I'm OK with that.'

Baker seemed disappointed he couldn't spin out his news a bit longer. 'Well, she's getting divorced.'

'The PA used that wording?' Alex asked, excited.

Isabelle Kane was an actual movie star and had been for quite some time. But that wasn't the only thing that made this case a big deal. The person she was divorcing was also a famous actress, Erin Porter. A very high-profile married couple. It would be a serious coup for the business.

'He didn't say she was thinking about it or reviewing her options?' she checked.

'Getting divorced, those were his words.'

'Set up a meeting immediately,' she said, aware she sounded a touch desperate.

'OK, boss,' Baker grinned.

Alex was buzzing at the thought of the step-up her business was about to take. She

was completely unaware that she was taking the first step toward throwing her life into total and utter chaos.

Two

Leigh Calloway was at work on the phone with her boss, Jack Allen. But they weren't chatting. She was listening to him have what she was pretty sure was a heart attack.

'JACK!' she screamed. The reply was a groan. She was wasting time and needed to call an ambulance to his house. But she couldn't hang up on him—just in case.

She ran into the first office she saw; she barely knew the guy sitting in there, but she yelled, 'Call emergency services and get an ambulance to Jack's house.'

The guy (Will? Bill? Phil?) looked up and said, 'What—'

'7, Caster Street. NOW!'

He picked up his phone without further delay.

Leigh put her phone back to her ear. 'Jack, can you hear me?'

The groaning was quieter now, but it was still there.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Will/Bill/Phil asked. ‘They need to know.’

‘He called me about work, and while we were talking, he said something about his chest, and now he can’t talk. He’s just groaning and gasping.’

Will/Bill/Phill relayed the info. Leigh ran out to the multi-storey car park and jumped into her car, heading straight over to Jack’s house. She was somewhat reassured to see him being wheeled into the back of an ambulance as she pulled up. The door of his house was hanging off its hinges. They’d gone in hard, thank god. Jack lived alone and hadn’t been in any position to let anyone in.

‘Jack!’ she yelled, jumping out of the car. ‘You’re alive!’

He gave her a weak wave as he breathed through an oxygen mask.

‘We’re taking him to St Paul’s,’ the paramedic told her, sliding Jack into the back of the ambulance.

Leigh nodded and got back in her car, heading straight to the hospital. She sat in the waiting room all day until she was allowed to see him.

He looked exhausted and ashen, but just watching him drinking a cup of tea was a relief. She wasn’t personally close with Jack; he wasn’t the kind of guy to get chummy at work. But listening to that terrible strangulated sound coming down the phone, Leigh had been terrified for him.

Jack put his cup down and made a disgusted face. ‘Weak as piss.’

‘I could go to the Costa downstairs?’ Leigh offered.

He smiled. ‘You’ve done enough today.’

‘Oh, well...’ Leigh began awkwardly.

‘This has been a wake-up call,’ Jack said suddenly. ‘I work too much, and I don’t take care of myself.’ He took a small, solemn pause and added, ‘And there was no one at home to make sure I did. I’m quitting before I drop dead at my desk.’

Leigh was taken aback. ‘But you’re on the verge of partner. Isn’t that the finish line?’

‘It is if you’re here. Can’t enjoy it if you’re dead.’

Leigh’s eyes bulged. ‘But you rep Erin Porter. You’re just gonna drop her?’

He sighed through his nose. ‘I’m passing her to you.’

‘What?’ Leigh almost yelled.

‘I know what you’re gonna say. But I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t think you were capable. You’re long overdue for the move up to senior associate, anyway. I’ve probably been holding you back, if anything.’

Leigh didn’t agree. ‘Jack, I’ve been under you for five years, and nobody in the firm ever made that move in less than six, bare minimum. You’ve just had a heart attack. Wait, OK? Don’t do anything hasty.’

He shook his head. ‘This isn’t hasty. This has been coming for a long time. Your promotion and my heart attack. I’ve been ignoring warnings for a while, Leigh.’

‘You have?’

‘My doctor told me to slow down, that the stress and workload were dangerous, and I didn’t heed her. So now, here I am. I’m lucky this wasn’t it. I’m only fifty years old. I could live into my eighties if I take care of myself, or I can work myself to death in the next year.’ He took another sip of bad tea. ‘I’m choosing life, Leigh. And I want to know you’re set up. I want you to take my place.’

Leigh was stunned. Jack never talked like this. It was compelling, but she was not ready for the promotion.

But the way Jack was asking? How the hell did you say no to someone who’d slipped death’s net only hours before? Because if she said no, it might stress him out. Stress (alongside butter fat) had put him in this position.

She had to agree for the time being. This wouldn’t happen, anyway. It couldn’t.

‘It’s up to her, then,’ Leigh conceded.

‘So, you’ll do it?’ Jack asked, eyes shining.

‘I’ll do it if Erin agrees, but I don’t think she will. I mean, who am I? Just someone sitting next to you in meetings. You’re the one that built trust with her.’

‘I’ll explain the situation to her,’ Jack said. ‘If she doesn’t go for it, she doesn’t. It won’t matter to me either way because I’m moving to Costa Rica.’

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Costa Rica?’

‘Yes. Beautiful place.’

‘When did you decide that?’

‘It’s always been a dream,’ he told her, a tranquil smile on his lips.

Leigh was glad he was happy, but she was shitting a brick. There had to be more obstacles to her career progression than one fucked ventricle. ‘You know what? We’re jumping the gun, anyway. My promotion would have to go past the senior partners,’ she noted.

‘With my recommendation, which will be glowing, I don’t think that’s going to be an issue,’ Jack assured her dismissively.

‘This is happening too fast,’ Leigh said, her heart banging loudly in her chest. Was she going to have a heart attack now? ‘You nearly died a few hours ago. You’re just panicking.’

‘No, you’re panicking,’ Jack smiled. ‘I’m feeling good. I mean, I feel like shit. But this feels right. Give it a minute to sink in. You’ll be glad this happened.’

‘I would never be glad you nearly died, Jack. I can promise you that.’

‘Well, maybe you should,’ he mused. ‘You’re talented, smart, hardworking, and you’ll go the extra mile for any client. But for yourself? You can’t seem to do it. You

sell yourself short. It's your only flaw, but it's a big one in this business. You need to be cockier. Be bold.'

Leigh was a bit shocked that Jack knew this about her. But she couldn't argue. She didn't like to ask for more than she felt due. She saw people outpace her all the time as a result.

She liked to think she ran her own race. But now? The race felt like it was running her.

Three

Isabelle Kane was on a massage table in the centre of her enormous, lavishly furnished living room.

'I'm sorry to do it like this, but the stress of this situation... I'm positively brittle from it. If someone knocked into me, I'd shatter into a million pieces,' Isabelle murmured through the gap in the table while her shoulders were aggressively kneaded by a silent, muscly woman.

Alex nodded. 'Sure.' When you dealt with the wealthy, you had to adjust your expectations of how things would go. And how they would go was however the hell the rich person wanted them to. 'So, let's start at the beginning.'

Isabelle moaned, long and deep, enjoying a particularly deep tissue rub. 'It's confidential, yes?' she managed to utter.

'Between you and me? Yes.' Alex threw a glance at the masseuse, who raised an eyebrow.

'No need to worry about Greta. She's like a sister to me,' Isabelle moaned.

A sister you pay,Alex thought. But it was Isabelle's call.

Greta removed her hands from Isabelle. 'Actually, we're about done.'

Isabelle sat up, and Alex had to swivel her head quickly not to get an eyeful. Isabelle was basically naked. Then she came over and sat on a chair, and Alex was relieved to see she was in a robe. Greta had slipped out.

It was Alex's first time getting a good look at the actress up close. She was in her early fifties, but some very good surgical work had her more in the early forties range.

Her hair was a brilliant white blonde, shoulder length and slightly wavy. She was a fox, it had to be said. Not that Alex cared too much. She met beautiful people regularly and had developed a good immunity to gorgeous women.

'Right, well, I'm not sure what you already know...' Isabelle began.

'Even though you're obviously famous and your relationship had been very reported on, I find it best that clients assume I know nothing,' Alex told her, a practised line of hers.

'That's probably best. The media makes it all up anyway,' Isabelle said tiredly.

'I'm sure,' Alex smiled. 'So, start where you think is pertinent, and I'll ask questions if needed.'

'I'm about to go through a divorce, and I would rather like it if my reputation didn't suffer as a result. And I've got a feeling it will. So I'm getting ahead of that now. That's where you come in.'

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Isabelle looked into the distance and said nothing.

‘When did you meet your wife?’ Alex prompted.

‘Well, we met a long time ago, maybe twenty years. We were on the same TV show. I was established by that point, and she was... less so. She was practically an extra.’

Someone entered the room with a tea set and placed it on the table, pouring a cup for Isabelle and asking with a discreet look if Alex would like one, too.

She nodded, ‘Please.’

Isabelle took a fortifying sip of her drink and went on. ‘She was younger than me, and I was married at the time to another actor, Michael. So nothing happened then. It was about three years later, after I divorced Michael, that we were cast together again. And well, you know...’ She left the implication in the air.

‘So, she was less established than you at the beginning of your relationship?’ Alex asked.

‘Very much so.’

‘And presumably less financially stable.’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘When did you get married?’

‘Fifteen years ago. And I don’t need to tell you that it was risky for me to marry a woman at that point,’ Isabelle said.

‘Of course. And there was a prenup?’ Alex asked.

Isabelle nodded. ‘Of course. I was in love, but I wasn’t out of my mind.’

‘I’m glad you’re protected.’

‘Only financially. But in here...’ She clutched her chest dramatically. ‘I thought I knew her. I never thought she’d...’ Isabelle began to cry.

Alex pushed a tissue box on the table a little closer to her. Isabelle took one and mopped up her tears.

After an appropriate amount of time had passed for Isabelle to gather herself, Alex asked gently, ‘If you’re OK to continue, can we talk more about the reason the marriage broke down?’

Isabelle’s tone hardened. ‘Yes. I found out she was cheating.’

‘I see. Talk me through how you discovered that.’

‘A friend warned me.’

‘What friend?’

‘I’d rather not say,’ Isabelle said quickly. ‘She’s a known person, that’s all I can tell you. But she doesn’t want to get dragged into this mess. I can’t blame her.’

‘Alright, what did your friend say?’

‘That she’d been in a private club in Soho and spotted Erin...’ It was the first time Isabelle had said her name out loud, and it caused her to pause as though something was caught in her throat. ‘Erin was there with some young woman, and apparently, they were being touchy. She was supposed to be meeting her agent.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘Well, I checked her phone.’

‘Did you find anything incriminating?’ Alex asked.

‘She’s not so stupid as to leave a trail.’

‘What did you do then?’

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I confronted her. She didn’t admit it, but she was clearly lying. I told her to go. That was six months ago. She’s begged me to reconsider, but if she can’t even admit what she did, how can we have trust now? So I’m filing for divorce this week. That’s why I asked for you. Things are about to get sticky.’

Alex mulled. ‘Yes, sticky. You want people to know this wasn’t your fault, though, right?’

‘Right. I’m the victim.’

‘But if this gets out, people on social media would probably say it’s a bit strange that someone as famous as her would cheat in a public place,’ she said carefully.

Isabelle smiled. ‘You’re thinking my friend lied or got it wrong?’ She took a phone from a side table and tapped it open, handing it over. There was Erin, sitting very close to a pretty young woman whose face was mostly obscured by her long blonde hair. ‘My friend managed to get a snap,’ Isabelle told her.

Alex was pleased to see the concrete evidence. As the internet liked to say, if there was a pic, it happened.

‘Did you show this picture to Erin?’ Alex asked, handing the phone back.

‘Yes. She said she was a friend of a friend who she barely knew, who stopped to say hello while her agent was in the toilet. But look at this picture.’ She held it up again. ‘You can see it, right?’

‘It’s iffy,’ Alex admitted. ‘But it’s good it exists. It’s proof that we can use.’

‘I can’t reveal it.’

‘What?’

‘My friend asked me not to involve her. She asked me never to show the picture to anyone. I promised her.’

‘OK, then,’ Alex said evenly like that wasn’t very fucking annoying. ‘So, aside from what you’ve told me about Erin, what are your concerns going forward? What do you need protection from?’

‘I don’t know exactly, but I don’t want to get caught by surprise. Not a second time. I thought I knew her, and now I don’t. She could make up anything,’ Isabelle said worriedly.

‘But you don’t know, in particular, what she might say?’ Alex asked carefully.

‘I mean, no one’s perfect.’

Alex nodded. ‘Of course.’

‘Can you handle surprises if they come?’ Isabelle asked.

‘I’ve dealt with similar cases, and the client was satisfied with the outcome,’ she said. ‘I can’t name names, of course.’

‘Of course.’ Isabelle smiled. ‘Let’s sign, then.’

Alex was slightly taken aback. ‘Oh, you’re ready now?’

‘I’ve talked to people you’ve represented. They said you’re good with crisis stuff. This was a formality. A vibe check, as the kids say. I want to get the ball rolling quickly.’

Alex smiled. ‘OK, well, if you’re certain.’ She pulled out the sheet, and Isabelle signed. Alex watched, smiling evenly like it was just another day and just another client. But truthfully, she was thinking, ‘Shit! I’m about to represent the client of my career!’

Four

It was official. Leigh had been promoted that morning. And she was now on her way to see Erin Porter to sell her on staying on under a less experienced publicist. Her new PA had called ahead to set up the meeting.

Though Leigh’s doubts had not passed, she had to do this. Because Jack was right. How could she ask anyone to put themselves in her hands if she couldn’t even promote herself?

She knocked on the door of a small, ground-floor flat. A woman in her forties answered, looking drab and tired. Not the glamorous creature seen on the screen at all. Her long, dark hair hung lank, her green eyes were ringed, and her forehead was lined with worry. Leigh felt for her the moment she saw her.

‘Hi, I’m Leigh Calloway...’ she began.

‘So, you’re handling this now?’ Erin cut in.

‘Oh, wait, you know?’

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I just got off a Zoom with Jack. Live from his hospital bed.’ She sighed. ‘Come in. I’ll put the kettle on.’

They walked down a tight hall to a living room with a kitchenette. Erin went and filled the kettle while Leigh perched her bum on a shabby sofa. She looked around her, a little shocked. This was a known actress, and she was living worse than Leigh.

Erin brought over two cups of tea and put them on a worn coffee table. ‘I know what you’re thinking. How have I ended up in this shit hole?’

‘I wasn’t thinking that,’ Leigh lied.

‘My money is... Our accounts were joint, which was never an issue until a few months ago. Isabelle got her shitbag lawyer to freeze me out. I didn’t even know she could do that. Now she pays me an allowance. And as you can see, it’s a pittance.’

Leigh was horrified. ‘Jesus. She sounds...’ Leigh stopped, realising she was about to cross a line.

‘Please say what you were about to say,’ Erin pled.

‘Like an asshole,’ Leigh said hesitantly.

Erin smiled. ‘Thank you. No one else will say it. I reckon they’re worried I’m gonna get back together with her and report back what they say.’ She paused. ‘Does that sound a bit paranoid?’

‘Not really,’ Leigh replied honestly. ‘I guess people are kind of scared of her?’

‘I always thought it was just professional intimidation. Now, I wonder.’

Leigh nodded. ‘I find you really get to know someone in a breakup.’

Erin nodded. ‘You said it.’ She seemed sad for a moment but shook it off. ‘Right, so. What’s the deal here?’

Leigh thought of everything she’d rehearsed in the car, how to sell herself, and a list of her accomplishments. But the thought of giving some speech about how great she was felt absurd. She threw the plan out the window.

‘Well, I’ve been Jack’s assistant for five years, and I’ve just been promoted. But only because Jack’s heart gave out. So that’s the deal. I’m here, I’ll do my best, I’ll work hard. But it’s your call.’

‘What I need around me right now are people I can trust,’ Erin said. ‘People have been disappearing as of late. And I recently lost a job that had been booked for a long time. I feel... Nervous. I haven’t felt nervous like this in years. I thought I’d gotten far enough that it couldn’t just all go away. And now, I don’t know.’

‘What job did you lose?’

‘A period drama, I was third billed. I was excited to do it. It was such a great role.’

‘You think she had something to do with it?’ Leigh asked.

‘Maybe? I don’t know. But the timing is just a bit suspicious.’

‘But no one knows yet. About the split.’

‘Friends do. People who work for us... For her. They know. And people talk, so... It’s probably an open secret at this point.’

‘So, you think the job fell through because people know...’

‘That I’m about to have a reputational disaster,’ Erin finished.

‘But it’s just a divorce. I mean, not just—’

‘She thinks I cheated,’ Erin said flatly.

‘But you didn’t?’ Leigh asked carefully.

‘No,’ Erin said, a little anger slipping into her tone. She took a moment to calm down and continued. ‘But she wouldn’t listen to me. A friend told her some bullshit, and that was all it took. She took a picture of me having a perfectly innocent conversation with someone, and that was it. Fifteen years down the drain.’

‘A picture? Do you have it?’ Leigh asked.

‘No.’

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Can you tell me who was in it?’

‘Also, no. She’s an innocent party. She doesn’t need to get dragged into this.’

‘I can assure you, I won’t drag anyone,’ Leigh said.

‘I won’t say her name, Leigh,’ Erin replied bullishly.

Leigh nodded. ‘OK, I understand.’

Erin was relieved. ‘Thank you.’

‘So that’s what we need to get ahead of. The affair rumour. You need people to know your character, that you wouldn’t do this.’ Leigh thought it over. ‘Actually, what you want people to know is that Isabelle is Goliath and you’re David.’

Erin clicked her fingers. ‘Exactly.’ She paused. ‘But, well, the thing is, I don’t have any money for your services anymore.’

‘But you paid your fee for the month?’

‘Yeah, I guess Isabelle didn’t get to the card in time. But she will. I wouldn’t assume that bill will be paid next month, though.’

‘Then we better make the time we have count,’ Leigh said with a smile. She wasn’t trying to sell. A lot could be achieved in this short time.

Erin was relieved. 'You've made me feel a lot better,' she said. 'I talk to Jack all the time, but I never really talk to him, if you know what I mean. I like him, but he's a bit slick.'

Leigh laughed. 'You won't have that issue with me.' She paused. 'Does that mean you're good with me handling your PR?'

'In truth, I don't have a choice,' Erin shrugged. 'But I would have been, anyway.'

Leigh smiled. 'I appreciate your honesty.' She stood. 'OK, I'm going back to the office to put together a strategy. Then we'll talk about it.'

'OK,' Erin walked Leigh to the door and let her out.

Out in the car, Leigh wasn't jubilant as such. It was clear that Erin's choices were not exactly vast. But it didn't matter because she needed help, and Leigh wanted to do everything she could for her.

Five

Alex was on the phone to a journalist she knew, Ivy Coulter. Alex knew a lot of journos, but Ivy was particularly keen on celebrity breakups. 'Ivy, do I have something for you!' she began. 'Let's take a long boozy lunch, and I'll lay it out for you.'

'I can't today. Too much on,' Ivy replied. 'And if it's another reality divorce, there's been a drop off in interest.'

'Has there?' Alex replied, filing the info away.

'I think people are starting to think these marriages are not entirely on the up and up.'

‘Ivy, I want you to assure me that you haven’t stopped believing in divorce,’ Alex joked.

‘God no. I just need some longevity, that’s all. The kind of marriage that makes a nice big mess when it ends.’

‘Then you’re gonna love this.’ She paused for buildup. ‘It’s a couple that were together for fifteen years, and both of them are big act—’

‘Is it Erin Porter and Isabelle Kane?’ Ivy broke in.

Alex’s stride was thoroughly broken. ‘How did you know that? Did someone file for divorce?’ she asked. She thought she had a few days before that happened.

‘Are you working for Isabelle?’ Ivy asked, ignoring the question.

‘Yes,’ Alex admitted.

‘Other camp beat you to it.’

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Alex had checked around and knew who did Erin Porter's PR. Some old school type who did deals on the golf course or over brandy at the club. 'Jack Allen, is that the guy?'

'Oh, no. Not him. He took early retirement. Erin's got fresh blood now.'

'Who?'

'Uhhh, Leigh Calloway? I spoke to her about an hour ago.'

Alex's body stiffened. Her vision went weird. 'Did you say Leigh Calloway?'

'Yeah. You know her?'

Memories hit Alex. A dull thud of bass, the stench of old beer, a sticky rock club floor. The shape of a girl in the distance.

'No,' Alex said.

'Really? Because you said her name like you did,' Ivy noted.

Alex cleared her throat. 'Excuse me a second.'

She put the phone on hold and set the receiver down. She gripped the edge of her glossy oak desk and bent her head for a second. This wasn't that big of a deal. She just needed a second to absorb it, and then she'd be fine. She took three deep breaths, collected herself, repressed her feelings like a motherfucker, and took Ivy off hold.

‘Ivy, look, I don’t know what your slant on the story is, but I’m willing to bet Leigh didn’t mention infidelity.’

‘She did, actually,’ Ivy said.

‘Erin admitted it?’

‘The way Leigh put it, Isabelle was looking for an out, so she made up this infidelity thing, which she has no proof of at all.’

Alex snorted, impressed. If she’d been spinning this in Erin’s favour, she might have said the same thing. ‘What about the picture?’

‘This photo? Do you have it?’ Ivy asked immediately.

‘They, err, Leigh mentioned the photo?’ Alex said, pushing the name out despite her mouth’s resistance.

‘Yeah, she said it’s a pretty pathetic piece of proof,’ Ivy said. ‘She’s just sitting in a restaurant with a woman. If that was proof of infidelity, you can tell my boyfriend I’ve had a lot of lesbian affairs. I think he’ll be quite shocked. I can’t even look at my own vagina.’

Alex laughed. ‘Ivy, you know as well as I do that Erin Porter wouldn’t have been stupid enough to get caught in public doing anything more than gazing into this woman’s eyes with a look of utter lust, which is what the pic shows.’

‘What woman? Do we have a name?’ Ivy asked.

Alex was still working on that. ‘She’s not in the biz, just a civilian.’

‘You don’t know.’

‘Not yet,’ Alex confessed.

‘But you have the picture.’

‘Yes,’ Alex lied.

‘And were you planning on sharing?’ Ivy asked.

‘Not yet. Isabelle has not given permission to reveal it, that’s all. But we will if needed.’ Alex felt it was nearly certain that pic would come out, whether Isabelle wanted it to or not. ‘Look, what’s your angle?’ she asked, trying to move away from the picture stuff.

‘You want to know whose side I’m taking? Well, the thing is, Isabelle Kane’s the big name, isn’t she? And Erin’s not quite up there.’

‘Right...’

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I’m just saying, professional jealousy exists within marriages.’

‘Oh, now it’s jealousy? Are you kidding? Isabelle’s got Oscar buzz this year,’ Alex improvised. ‘Her performance as Amelia Earhart got a standing O at Caan.’

‘Hmm, not quite what I heard.’

‘What did you hear?’

‘That people were leaving early.’

‘That comes from Leigh, does it?’ Alex asked.

‘It comes from Erin. Who was actually there.’

‘Check the press release,’ Alex said.

‘The one written by the producers? Oh yeah, I’m sure that’s a great source of facts,’ Ivy said with a small snigger.

Alex did not like the way this conversation was progressing. She was on the back foot. This was the trouble with being beaten to the punch. Ivy had already heard an angle, and the first thing people hear tends to stick as the truth. Not that Ivy had ever cared all that much about the truth. She only ever wanted the most salacious angle that wouldn’t get her sued.

‘Look, it seems there’s two spins on this,’ Alex said. ‘So if you want to write a story

about a nice actress who married a monster who lied to leave her marriage without fault, that could be click-worthy, sure. But I have to tell you, Ivy, I'm not sure if people would enjoy that as much as a story about a gold-digging cheat.'

Ivy barked a laugh. 'Wow. Bit early to come in all guns blazing, isn't it?'

'I'm just telling you how it is. You do what you're gonna do.'

'I will. But I think you should keep me on speed dial because this is going to get ugly.'

'I don't do ugly. Isabelle just wants people to know the truth,' Alex said, and she kind of meant it. Erin Porter had been a naughty girl, and even people like Isabelle, who had everything, deserved to be respected in their marriages.

'Thanks for calling,' Ivy said. 'I'll be in touch for fact-checking.'

'Please do.' They hung up.

Alex turned straight to her laptop and googled Leigh Calloway. She was newly promoted to senior associate at Carter and Simon. She'd been there for five years, according to the site. So that's what she'd been up to.

Alex hadn't googled her before, intentionally. She didn't want to know what had happened to Leigh. She'd worked very hard not to think of her.

That was no longer a possibility. They were each other's direct opposites and in each other's orbits. Meeting was inevitable.

Alex cursed the universe. She didn't need this complication. She was on the rise, and she could ride Isabelle's divorce to the top. It would be like Holly Winter times a

million. She couldn't do that if she was thinking about beating Leigh, of all people.

Alex decided it was fine. Alex was doing well, and she had nothing to be ashamed of. When she came face-to-face with Leigh, it didn't have to be a big deal. This didn't matter. It was Alex's moment to shine. She couldn't afford to be distracted by bullshit.

The spin war had begun, and Alex was ready to fight for her client, no matter who stood on the other side.

Six

Leigh sat in her new office, Jack's old one. She'd been shown in by a senior partner this morning after he'd gathered the staff of Carter and Simon and officially announced her promotion and Jack's retirement. Everyone already knew about the heart attack, so no one was very surprised. People had been coming in all morning to wish her hearty congratulations. Some of them might have even meant it.

Outside sat a PA, Henry. Henry was young and eager, and Leigh liked him. The only problem with Henry was that he was shockingly clumsy. He'd already spilled tea on himself and exploded a pen in his pocket, and it wasn't even lunchtime. But Leigh found his ineptness quite comforting because she was suffering from serious imposter syndrome.

Here she was, in her own office, taking the next step in her career, but she couldn't shake the feeling it wasn't fully earned. It had been an accident. Whatever Jack said, a part of her was waiting for him to come back and tell her he'd changed his mind, and would she get the hell out of his seat?

But she was here, and he wasn't. So, there was only one thing she could do: operate on a policy of WWJD—what would Jack do?

Well, first of all, she needed to seed the narrative. Get ahead. To start, Jack would call some journalists (loosely defined) who sold celeb gossip to the bigger publications. Jack had a Rolodex, a real paper one, and it had a list he'd continued to update.

When there was time, Leigh needed to transfer the information to digital. Wait, she wouldn't do that for herself, would she? It would fall to Henry. Not today, though. The way it was going, he'd probably end up flushing the Rolodex down the lav.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Her first call was Ivy Coulter, introducing herself as Jack's replacement, and giving her the scoop at the same time. Ivy, of course, was thrilled that the marriage of Isabelle Kane and Erin Porter had gone to hell. She didn't even try to hide it.

Leigh explained it as she knew it had happened, all the while googling Isabelle and Erin frantically. The internet didn't know shit, so she was breaking the news, which was a good start at least. Ivy thanked her and hung up.

But not an hour later, Ivy called her back. 'Hi, Leigh. Vis-à-vis our earlier call, would you like to go to lunch?'

Leigh had a few more calls to make, actually. Ivy wasn't the only trashy journalist in the world. But this was the job. Schmooze or be schmoozed. If Ivy wanted to do the schmoozing, it might be a good sign.

'Absolutely. But I'm paying,' Leigh said.

A company credit card had been given to her this morning, and she was happy to break the seal on that puppy—within limits.

'As a freelancer with no company account, I accept,' Ivy replied, delighted.

In the light, airy, high-ceiling restaurant, Leigh was picking at a pomegranate salad. She didn't know if she liked it because she couldn't seem to pick up a proper forkful. But in a business lunch, Jack always told her to order something that couldn't cause

an issue. Nothing oily, crumbly, greasy, slippery. You couldn't look professional wrestling with spaghetti. And it had to be easily swallowable in case you had to say something important. So Leigh was chasing pomegranate seeds around the plate with little success.

'So, you're in Jack's office now?' Ivy said. She was a little younger than Leigh's twenty-eight and coifed. No millimetre of her had been left to chance.

Leigh felt a little underdressed by comparison. But Leigh would never be that person, and she knew it. It exhausted her just to think of the effort that went into fake eyelashes, never mind the rest of it.

She did simple, presentable. Still, when she was around people like Ivy, it was a bit intimidating. Sometimes, it felt like everyone was getting dressed up for the last days of Rome just to go to the shops.

'Yes, Jack's office. My office now, I guess,' Leigh answered.

'And you were his PA?' Ivy asked, forking salad into her mouth.

'I was his junior,' Leigh clarified.

Ivy chewed and swallowed. 'So he's trained you up in his ways?'

'He certainly has.'

'Is what people are saying true? That he had a heart attack?' Ivy asked.

Leigh felt stuck. He might not like his health problems getting around. 'It wasn't... I don't... Err...'

Ivy smiled and ate more lettuce. 'Don't worry about it.' She smiled. 'You need to get better at lying.'

'Oh?'

'It's in the job description, right?' Ivy smirked.

Leigh decided right then that she really didn't like this woman. 'That's not how I see it,' Leigh told her.

'How do you see your client?' Ivy pressed.

Leigh paused, flummoxed. They'd already talked about that this morning.

'Look, let me ask a different way,' Ivy tried. 'Have you seen the infamous photo?'

'No, why?'

'Because I hear it's quite damning.'

'That comes from Isabelle's team?' Leigh checked.

'Yep, spoke to her PR person right after you. She's using words like "Gold digger."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh sighed. 'It's a shame they've chosen to take the low road.'

'The low road is fine if you can prove it,' Ivy mused. 'The low road is what people want. It sells.'

'That's not what we care about.'

'What do we care about?' Ivy asked snarkily.

'Erin simply wants to maintain her deserved reputation as a skilled and hardworking actress and a person of integrity,' Leigh responded, trying to stay even.

'So why does she need a PR person to spin things?'

'Every famous person has PR if they can afford it. It's a full-time job managing someone's profile, as I'm sure you know,' Leigh frowned.

That was a weird question. What was this?

'So, can I speak to Erin herself?'

'Not right now.'

'Why not?'

'She's going through a divorce. She doesn't want to deal with this. That's what she pays me for.'

‘Look, we all know that photo’s coming out, sooner or later, so my question is, if she wants to get ahead of it, will she name the mystery woman?’

‘She’s not any kind of mystery. She’s a casual mutual acquaintance. Which is exactly why Erin won’t name her,’ Leigh explained, trying to keep her tone neutral.

‘But she will be named. The second that snap goes viral, which it will, someone’s going to know her. She can’t avoid this. Better she comes forward now.’

‘That’s not how we want to handle this.’

‘You want her to be blindsided?’ Ivy asked like it was a casual question rather than clear bait.

‘It’s not in my power to release the photo. I’m not the one that would be blindsiding her.’

‘Have you been in touch with her to let her know? Warn her of the impending, potentially life-ruining thing that’s about to happen? I mean, if Isabelle’s truth is the prevailing one, and this woman is the reason for the celebrity split of the decade...’

‘Erin doesn’t know her well, as I said.’

‘Erin could get to her, though, right? Through these mutual friends they have. Assuming someone has her number.’ Ivy raised an eyebrow. ‘I mean, you’ve had this conversation with Erin?’

Not really. Erin had been quick to shut it down, and Leigh hadn’t wanted to piss her off. But Ivy did have a point. Eventually, the woman in the snap needed to be tracked down. Whether it was before or after she became famous was the only question.

‘What is it you’re asking for?’ Leigh questioned, tired of this dance.

‘I’m just asking to be the one to interview this woman when it comes out. I could help her,’ Ivy said.

Bullshit, Leigh thought. ‘I’ll be sure to let you know if that’s something we decide to do,’ she said.

‘Oh, OK,’ Ivy said. ‘Because I do want to help Erin, as I said. Isabelle’s a lot less sympathetic than her.’

That was interesting. ‘Oh?’

‘Of course. Erin has more of an underdog thing in this. But then again, if it turns out Erin married Isabelle for the considerable bump in profile, that’s going to lessen how sympathetic people will find her.’

Leigh had at last managed to follow Ivy’s shit-crumbs trail. She put her fork down. ‘Is this your way of saying that if I don’t share the name of this woman, you’re going to write unfavourably about Erin?’

Ivy burst out laughing. ‘Oh my. Wow, wow, wow. You have got a lot to learn.’

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh realised she had said what was supposed to go unsaid. If Jack could have seen how this was going, he'd probably start googling 'Black market pig heart replacement.' Leigh wondered how big that mistake was and what its cost would be.

'Look, I'm sorry. I retract that. I... It's my first day.'

Ivy raised an eyebrow. 'Well, it ain't Alex Walker's first day, so you better get...' The sound trailed out there.

Leigh didn't hear anything else she said for the next few minutes. Once she heard the name of Isabelle's PR person, everything shut down.

Alex Walker. Alex. Walker.ALEX WALKER!

No. Please,no.

Seven

Alex was sitting in her office with her phone in her hand, trying to decide if she should make a call. Correction, shewasgoing to make it. Any second now. Or was she? No, she was. Shortly.

The phone rang in her hand, startling her. It was Isabelle. 'I just saw it. It's out. It's out.'

Alex refreshed her laptop to see that, yeah, there it was. The impending divorce was reported. It had gone live about six minutes ago, from the look of it.

‘It’s not good, Alex. I’m not happy,’ Isabelle said.

Shit. Alex had only been dormant for six minutes, and she was already playing catchup. Not great. She scanned the article. It was neutral, from what she could see.

‘What is it you don’t like?’

‘It’s supposed to report that she’s a cheat. It doesn’t say that,’ Isabelle growled.

‘It doesn’t say a lot of anything from what I can tell. Which isn’t surprising. She didn’t need to say much initially. Just the fact you’re splitting up is clicky enough for now.’

‘Clicky? Erin was supposed to be exposed!’

‘I’m just telling you what Ivy’s probably doing. My guess is she’s building some suspense. But she’s not the only one who got the press release today. Other newspapers and sites—’

‘But you told me that she’s the one that matters,’ Isabelle burst in.

‘One of the ones that matter is what I said. And she’s probably writing a second article as we speak.’

‘My agent just called me. Already, she’s telling me she got a call to say that they’re thinking of going with someone else for Marie Curie!’

‘It only came out a few minutes ago. I would imagine that was a coincidence,’ Alex said calmly.

‘Oh, you would, would you!’ Isabelle roared, going up a decibel or six.

She was a bit terrifying when she was angry, it had to be said. But Alex did her best not to be cowed. ‘Give me time to do what I do. We haven’t even started.’

‘If my reputation is damaged, Alex...’ Isabelle broke off, and Alex wondered if she’d slung the phone at the wall or maybe lobbed it at a staff member, Naomi Campbell style. But then she heard sputtering and sobs. Isabelle was crying.

‘I’m sorry,’ Isabelle managed to choke out. ‘This was too much.’

Alex wasn’t shocked at the change. She dealt with people in crisis all the time. She accepted this part of it. Yelling and crying, it was all par for the course.

One time, a member of a girl band that had been big about fifteen years ago had gotten a major stress nosebleed in Alex’s office after her husband published a tell-all. Which wouldn’t have been an issue if she hadn’t violently sneezed all over Alex. Alex had been wearing a pure white Chanel suit at the time, so she looked like she’d been in a tussle with a Bengal tiger. The girl-band member was so embarrassed that she had bought Alex a brand-new suit and then sent a food hamper to Alex’s office that was large enough to block out the sun.

‘Isabelle, do you want to talk in person? I can visit you right now,’ she said.

‘Yes, maybe. No, I can’t, actually. I have to be on set in an hour.’

‘Where?’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘It’s outside London.’

‘Send me an address and tell security I’m coming.’

An hour and a half later, Alex was watching Isabelle perform in a scene from an upcoming whistleblower thriller. It was quite a privilege to see her go. When the director called cut and told everyone to go to lunch, Isabelle immediately took her to a trailer and locked the door.

‘Thanks for coming.’

‘You were great in that scene.’

‘I don’t think this is going to be any good, but I appreciate it.’

‘You don’t?’

‘I’m in the wrong role, for a start. I should have been the lead.’ She paused. ‘I know that sounds...’

‘No, no, I’m sure you’re right,’ Alex said.

‘It’s... I’m ageing out of certain kinds of lead roles, you see. This is what worries me.’

‘How the hell are you ageing out of anything? You look the same as you did ten years ago.’

Isabelle sat down in a chair and rubbed her temples. ‘Thank you. It’s water and rest.’

Sure, Alex thought. But she wouldn’t have dreamt of calling her out. She knew the pressures on actresses were preposterous.

‘But it doesn’t matter how I look. People know my age,’ Isabelle said. ‘There’s nothing I can do about that. That’s what worries me about all this. A divorce? Now? My career already feels like it’s winding down.’ She sighed. ‘Look, I know what you’re thinking. She’s rich, what does it matter?’

‘I wasn’t thinking that, but go on,’ Alex said.

‘I love what I do. I need to keep doing it.’

‘And you will. It’s just a divorce, Isabelle. It happens to a lot of people.’

‘But it wasn’t supposed to happen to me.’

Alex ran into this a lot. Success was a strange thing. It didn’t just apply to careers. It was everything. Marriage, kids, the lot. Everything had to look right. Alex was glad at times like this that she didn’t have any of that to lose. She didn’t have relationships, not proper ones, anyway. She was strictly in the casual section of dating apps. It was what worked for her.

Still, she empathised with Isabelle’s plight. She was getting divorced in front of the whole world. It had to suck.

‘Look, I know you don’t want people to see this and think you failed at something,’

Alex said carefully. 'Which is why the next stage is to get you seen, out and about.'

Isabelle looked very unsure. 'How will that help me?'

'Because if you're seen having fun, it will look like Erin's been holding you back,' Alex told her.

'Where, exactly?' Isabelle asked warily.

'Movie premiers, parties, the stuff you haven't gone to in a long time,' Alex explained.

Isabelle's face fell. 'I hate that shit.'

'I'm sorry about that,' Alex said apologetically. 'But I promise you, it'll help. We put you next to some other famous faces, looking like you're having a whale of a time, and you know what people will say? "She's living her best life."'

Isabelle raised an eyebrow. 'They will?'

'They will.'

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I like the sound of that,’ Isabelle admitted.

‘Of course you do. You’d be winning the split. And that’s what we want to do, right?’

Isabelle cracked a smile. ‘I’ll tell my manager to start saying yes to that stuff, I guess.’

‘That would be great. Tell her to liaise with my office about your schedule,’ Alex said, wondering in the back of her mind what Leigh was doing right now. She still needed to make that ‘No hard feelings, see you on the battlefield’ phone call to Leigh.

Maybe tomorrow.

Eight

Leigh was back in Erin’s tinpot flat, sitting on her dumpy sofa.

‘Gold digger,’ Erin was saying. ‘Gold digger?!’

‘No one said that word in the press.’

‘They didn’t have to. You hit the hashtag with my name, and it’s what people are using.’

‘It’s just a few tweets,’ Leigh assured her.

This was Ivy’s fault. She’d published a follow-up article with quotes from some

mysterious source that Leigh thought didn't exist, talking about 'The disparity in incomes' and how Erin had benefited from the press attention, bumping up her career considerably. It also heavily implied infidelity, though it didn't say who. It wouldn't take a genius to connect the dots.

Leigh was livid. She had spoken to a lot of journalists, and many of them had printed articles that were far more neutral. But Ivy's article had hurt Erin, it had to be said. She couldn't afford a further blow, so it was time to tackle 'That Which They Did Not Speak Of.'

'Look, I know you don't want to talk about this,' Leigh said. 'But I want to get ahead of the next thing.'

Erin was confused. 'What's the next thing?'

'The photo. First off, I need to see it.'

Erin sighed irritably. 'I told you, I don't have it.'

'But can you get it?' Leigh asked gently.

'Probably not.'

'Probably?'

'Look, I know who took it, alright?' Erin admitted. 'But there's no way she'd share it with me.'

'Just give me the name. I can deal with that,' Leigh told her.

'You think so?' Erin asked, deeply uncertain.

‘Who is it?’ Leigh pressed.

Erin took a deep breath. ‘It’s Helen Archer.’

Leigh’s jaw dropped. ‘What? Really?’ Helen Archer was an actress from a different era, huge in the seventies and eighties. Now, she was an eighty-year-old recluse, fully retired and as rarely seen as a snow leopard. ‘Shetook the picture?’

‘Yep. Good luck prising it out of her.’

‘What was she even doing at the club?’

‘It’s a media hang-out type of place. She was probably getting her arse kissed by someone who wanted to lure her out of retirement. Which they won’t do. But Helen still likes an ego boost.’

‘Of all the people...’ Leigh muttered. ‘So, they’re friends, her and Isabelle?’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘She was Izzy’s... Isabelle’s mentor, back in the day,’ Erin explained.

‘You got an address for her?’ Leigh asked.

‘She has a security guy. You won’t get in,’ Erin told her.

‘I’ve got to try. I need that photo.’

Leigh was so focused on the drive out to Helen Archer’s place that when her phone rang on the motorway, she didn’t even check who it was before she answered. She just hit answer on the car’s Bluetooth and said, ‘Leigh Calloway.’

There was a pause before anyone said anything, during which Leigh’s stomach had enough time to develop a small ache. Her brain didn’t know why yet, but apparently, her body had been waiting for this and was way ahead.

Eventually, the caller spoke. ‘Hi, Leigh. It’s Alex Walker. Not sure if you remember me, but we met a while back. At uni.’

‘I remember you,’ Leigh said, wishing to god she wasn’t driving. She felt like she might crash the car. She needed to pull over. She saw motorways services coming up and began to turn in. ‘Give me a sec. I’m on the road.’

‘Sure,’ Alex said.

It was so ordinary that it made Leigh feel crazy. Alex Walker was a creature of myth. Leigh had half convinced herself she'd made Alex up. But here she was, calling and saying normal shit like, 'Sure.'

Leigh found a space in the car park and filled it badly. She unclipped her belt and turned to the phone. She needed to be calm and casual right now.

'So. Been a while. How's tricks?'

'Good, thank you,' Alex said jauntily. 'I thought I should give you a call. Now that we're opposites on this Isabelle Kane thing.'

'Right, of course,' Leigh said.

After that, no one said anything for several terrible seconds.

Alex was the first to get her groove back. 'So, you just got promoted, I saw.'

'Yeah. My boss's heart exploded, and it made some space for a step up,' Leigh said glibly.

Alex laughed, delighted, but Leigh didn't give herself the chance to enjoy it. 'But you didn't wait for permission. Started your own place, right?'

'Yes, that's right. Been going about six years now.'

'Seems like you're doing well.'

'I do OK,' Alex said.

'Better than OK. Didn't Holly Winter call you a feminist icon?'

‘That was a while ago. You’ve been doing your research,’ Alex observed.

Damn. Now Alex knew Leigh had been cyberstalking her off and on for the last few years. ‘I asked my PA for press clippings. I needed to know who I was dealing with,’ she lied.

‘Ah, yes.’

‘Though, obviously, I had some idea,’ Leigh said, the sentiment loaded.

‘Well. Quite.’

Another one of those heavy pauses befell the conversation. Leigh told herself she would not rush to fill it. But her mouth made a different decision.

‘Of course, no personal stuff in the clippings. So, how’s that area? You married now?’ God, no, why had she asked that?! It sounded like she was interested. And by god, she was not.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘No,’ Alex said and did not expand. ‘You?’

‘No,’ Leigh said. ‘I was in something for a few years, but it didn’t work out.’ That was a bit too much detail. Leigh supposed she had wanted Alex to know she’d moved on from their little moment.

‘Sorry to hear that,’ Alex said, her tone hard to read.

‘It happens. As well you know,’ Leigh said.

What she meant by that was that Alex would know because she worked a lot with celebrities embroiled in difficult breakups. But the second Leigh said it, she knew how it could sound. Like Leigh was bitter about what had happened, permanently marked by it.

That wasn’t how Leigh wanted to be. Even if that was true. Especially if it was true.

‘Right, yeah,’ Alex said, breezing right past the awkwardness. ‘Well, just wanted to say hi since we might be bumping into each other soon, and I wanted it to be... cordial.’

‘Cordial?’ Leigh heard herself repeat. She didn’t mean to. But it was such a strange word. ‘Why wouldn’t it be cordial?’

‘Because... You know what? I’m being silly. Of course it would be fine,’ Alex said quickly.

‘If you’re worried about the past, we were kids. I’d forgotten it.’ My god, if ever Leigh had told a bald-faced lie, that was it.

‘Great,’ Alex said, pleased.

Leigh felt suddenly angry. Really fucking enraged, as a matter of fact. Alex thought she was off the hook. Mainly because Leigh had been the one to let her off it. But still, it pissed her off righteously. How dare Alex sound so relieved? She should have been whipping herself much more in this conversation.

Leigh needed to switch the topic back to work. She could direct her anger into that just fine. ‘Oh, while I’ve got you, can I check that you’re the one that’s been feeding Ivy Coulter all this gold digger rubbish?’

Alex gave a small, shocked laugh. ‘Rubbish? That’s what you think?’

‘I mean, obviously.’

‘You think she just happened to marry someone with more money and fame than her? And then cheat with someone significantly younger than her wife? It’s straight out of the gold digger playbook,’ Alex said easily.

‘She didn’t cheat. Your woman just wanted out of the marriage and found a convenient scapegoat that would leave her the blameless victim in it all.’

‘You do know there’s a picture of the infidelity?’ Alex said.

‘Which I’ve heard is pretty weak,’ Leigh retorted.

‘You haven’t seen it?’ Alex asked smugly.

‘No. I will soon, though,’ Leigh said.

‘Only Isabelle has it. And the person who took the picture. And you’d have to prize it out of Isabelle’s cold dead manicure, so that must mean you have the name of the photographer,’ Alex observed.

Leigh paused. Should she admit it simply for the high ground? That might be a mistake. It woulddefinitelybe a mistake.

Fuck it.

‘Yes. I’m going to see her right now.’

‘Oh, well. Give her my regards.’

Something about Alex’s tone intrigued Leigh. ‘Who?’ she asked.

‘Youknowwho,’ Alex replied quickly.

A smile crept onto Leigh’s face. ‘I do. But I’m starting to wonder ifyoudo.’

There was a pause that was so satisfying that Leigh wanted to take a bath in it. ‘Maybe Isabelle doesn’t trust you enough to tell you? Oh well. I’m sure you’ll get there with her,’ Leigh said cheerfully.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘She’s protecting that person’s anonymity,’ Alex said, her tone rather tight.

‘From her own PR person? Why would she do that? She trusts your ability to keep a secret, doesn’t she?’ Leigh asked.

‘I don’t need to know, so I won’t press,’ Alex said haughtily.

Leigh chuckled. ‘I see. Well, it’s been great catching up, but I must go. I’ve got someone to see.’ Leigh hung up. She had to. She wasn’t going to get a better one-up than that.

She pulled back onto the road and headed onwards, a smile in her heart. Now all she had to do was squeeze a photo out of an octogenarian movie star, and she was set.

Nine

Alex was steaming with rage. Leigh had just one-upped her and hung up the phone. What the hell?

The call was not supposed to go like that. It was supposed to go more like, ‘Hello, we’re both in this, so let’s acknowledge that, and while we’re at it, no hard feelings about the past.’ That was the general script Alex had been reading from. But Leigh wouldn’t go along with it, and now Alex felt completely foxed.

Years and relationships and career stuff had passed under the bridge since their little moment together. But the second Leigh started talking, it was like being pulled through time, reset to an earlier version of herself. Alex 1.0.

Ten Years Ago

Alex was standing in a rock club. She was not dancing. The closest she came was shuffling her feet occasionally to unstick them from the disgusting floor. Her friend Orla was a few feet away, snogging a rando. That would have been fine, except Alex had to wait until they finished so they could walk back to their shared house together. Or until she was officially released to go home solo.

It amazed Alex just how easily Orla would find someone to suck face with. She'd once seen her start kissing some bloke on the dance floor without ever exchanging a word.

Not that Alex was a virgin. She'd had her fun. But she never let it be more than that. She kept it brief, simple, and brutally truthful. Wham, bam, thank you, Miss—not like Orla.

Orla was smart in many departments, but not this one. She would spend the next month believing she was in love with this guy until he did something that turned her off, and then she'd hide every time she saw him on campus. It was a joke.

Well, Alex wasn't laughing. She wasn't a fool. She didn't believe in love. It was a lie told to sell shit. Desire was only a biological drive. Alex was grateful she'd learned that early. It would save a lot of time and energy.

Alex wondered if she could maybe give Orla a little kick. Just a light tap, a hint to get on with things, one way or the other. She wanted to go to bed. She'd had a long day, and this music sucked.

Alex was mulling that when she saw her.

On the edge of the dance floor, caught occasionally in the strobe, a girl. She was

beautiful, with eyes the size of saucers, shapely as all get out. But that wasn't exactly what caught Alex's attention. It was... What was it?

Vulnerability. That was it. Everyone else that Alex met put on a show of confidence, of belonging. Alex included herself in that. But not this girl. She looked sad, apart, and indifferent to the party atmosphere everyone else was soaking in. She didn't appear to care if anyone knew it, either.

Alex couldn't say what about her that was drawing her in. But she suddenly forgot about Orla or about getting home to bed. She felt her feet moving, swerving around dancers, dodging fallen plastic pint glasses, fixed on this girl.

She stepped in front of her. The girl didn't notice. She was in her own world. Up close, Alex saw she wasn't just beautiful, she was striking. Her face was framed by red waves of lustrous hair, her large dark eyes were surrounded by the most unbelievably long lashes, her nose was just crooked enough to be interesting, and her mouth screamed sex.

'Hi,' Alex said.

The girl noticed her at last. 'Hello?' she said warily, as though she thought Alex was about to pants her and run off.

'Can I buy you a drink?' Alex asked. She wasn't usually quite this direct, and she wasn't sure what was happening exactly.

'What?' the girl asked.

Alex realised it was too loud, and she was gonna have to repeat herself. 'I want to buy you a drink.'

The girl frowned. 'Why?'

Oh no. She was straight. Why hadn't this occurred to Alex on her trip across the dancefloor? Why had she done this at all?

Well, she was here. She had to say something. 'You look sad. I wanted to cheer you up,' she said.

The girl looked at her in astonishment. 'You can see that?'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘You can’t miss it,’ Alex said, leaning in to say it directly into her ear.

She didn’t want to have to keep repeating shit. It was horribly unconfident, and Alex wanted to project confidence at all costs.

But then something happened that made her feel like a scared little child. The girl looked at her, and her mouth transformed into a smile that took Alex’s breath away. And Alex knew, right then, that something terrible was happening. She was about to become like every other idiot here. She was going to fall in love with this sad stranger.

‘I’m Leigh,’ she said.

‘Alex. Let’s get that drink.’

Now

Modern day Alex was climbing into her car and calling Isabelle at the same time. She was going to need to apply some pressure on Isabelle for the name of the photographer. When (and if) she got the name, she would be ready to gun the engine.

But Isabelle didn’t answer. It was her PA, Steven.

‘I need Isabelle,’ Alex told him.

‘She’s on set right now. Is there something I can help you with?’ he asked.

‘Possibly. Do you have the name of the person who took that snap?’ Alex asked briskly. There was no time to fuck around.

‘What snap?’ Steven said, sounding nervous.

‘I think you know what snap.’

Steven’s tone grew weary. ‘Oh. That.’

‘So, you’ve got a name?’ Alex pushed.

‘If Isabelle didn’t tell you, I obviously can’t.’

‘OK, but the thing is, Erin’s camp does have the name, and they’re headed to see that person to procure the picture. Once that happens, we lose control of the narrative. They can release it with their own story.’

Steven didn’t say anything.

‘Time sensitive, Steven,’ Alex pressed. ‘She’s headed there now.’

‘Who? Erin?’

‘Nope. Her PR person. Leigh Calloway. If she gets to her before I do, she’ll talk your mystery photographer into giving it to her.’

Steven was sceptical. ‘I doubt it. She won’t even get past the front gate.’

‘You don’t know Leigh,’ Alex said.

She knew she was kind of implying that Leigh was some kind of master salesperson,

and that wasn't the way it was. If she were to get in, it would be by doing her whole thing. That thing was drawing you in by being straight up, kind, all that stuff that Alex didn't do. Sometimes, people responded to that—the chumps.

‘Steven, I need the name now. Isabelle will thank you; I can promise that.’

‘You’re putting me in a difficult position, you realise that?’ he said anxiously.

Alex said nothing. She knew better than to talk past a yes. Which she was about to get.

‘Fine. It’s Helen Archer,’ Steven said.

Alex laughed out loud. ‘Seriously?’

‘Yes. You want her address?’

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Text it to me,’ she said. ‘Oh, and call Helen to let her know I’m coming.’

‘I’m not your PA,’ Steven said irritably.

‘Steven,’ Alex laughed. ‘I’m sorry. I swear, I’m usually less brusque than this. But it’s honestly a PR emergency. I’m putting out a fire before Isabelle even knows there was smoke.’

Steven sighed. ‘Fine. I’ll call her now. Can’t swear she’ll let either of you in, though.’

‘We’ll see,’ Alex smiled to herself as she started the car.

Ten

Leigh had been sat in her car outside the gates of Helen Archer’s palatial country estate for about twenty minutes. A grey-bearded man sat in a little security booth at the estate’s edge. He was glaring at her whilst he went back and forth with someone on his walkie.

Eventually, he came out of the booth and took a leisurely stroll over to her car. Leigh wound the window down.

‘Sorry, Madam. It’s appointment only,’ he smiled.

‘That’s what you said twenty minutes ago.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘But you said you were going to talk to someone?’

‘Yeah, that took about ten seconds. It was a no.’

‘You were in there talking for a lot longer than that,’ Leigh pointed out.

‘Well, then the cook wanted to take my lunch order, and he was having a look round the kitchen to see what he had in,’ he smirked. ‘He found some nice ham, so I’m having a sandwich.’

OK, so the situation was that this guy had a little bit of power, and he would stretch it as far as it would go. And he didn’t give a shit who Leigh said she worked for either. How the hell was she going to get past this guy? She couldn’t give up. She just needed five minutes with Helen Archer, and if it was a no, it was a no. But this guy’s no was not going to cut it.

‘Look...’ she began, starting to get annoyed. That was when she saw the other car driving up behind her on the private road. It was a nice car, a silver BMW, and before Leigh saw the driver, she knew who it would be.

The car pulled up alongside her, and Alex Walker was looking right at her.

‘Hi, Leigh!’ she called, with a cheeky finger waggle wave. ‘Great to see you.’

Leigh found herself frozen for a moment, trying to figure out how to respond to Alex’s physical presence. Especially when she had the temerity to look incredible. Coiffed to the nines, her glossy dark hair was cut in a sharp bob, her makeup almost professionally perfect. Any puppy fat from her twenties was gone, and her cheekbones were now of the cut-glass variety. And the eyes, oh those eyes. Grey, intense, deep-set, and as hypnotic as ever.

Yep, the years had been just a little too kind to Alex. Leigh was as furious about that as much as anything else.

Eventually, she found herself able to respond to Alex's brazen greeting. 'Alex,' she nodded, trying to sound cool.

Alex continued to smile at her wordlessly for a moment before turning to see the security guy. She got out of her car. She was wearing a black lambswool maxicoat that looked like it cost more than Leigh's whole wardrobe.

'Brett, is it?' Alex said.

An hour ago, Alex hadn't even known who the photographer was. And in that time, somehow, she'd not only found out but turned up only twenty minutes after Leigh did, with the security guy's name. Fucking unbelievable.

But this was Alex, wasn't it? This was how the whole thing had started in the first place. That famous sales ability had worked its magic then and now.

Ten Years Ago

Leigh stared in horror at the state of her bathroom. She'd cleaned it twelve hours ago, and now it was a mess again. Wet towels on the floor, toothpaste spit all over the sink, clumps of hair that Leigh could only hope came from people's heads were, well, everywhere. Worse, someone had dyed their hair purple over the bath, so the tub looked like someone had murdered a Smurf in it.

She was sick of this. Her housemates were disgusting children. People had warned her not to move into an all-male household. But she had been desperate and convinced herself that living with males couldn't be that bad. But every last one of them seemed to be under the impression that when she moved in, she would be

assuming the role of mother, there to take care of them and clean up after them. And they were pigs, to a man.

Leigh didn't need this. She was having a hard enough time as it was. She was in her first year of business and marketing, and she didn't know if it was really for her. Everyone around her seemed so confident and driven, and she didn't feel that way at all. She didn't feel close to anyone in her class, and of course, she had no friends in her house share. She was lonely and lost.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh left the bathroom and went downstairs to see if anyone was about. She had to talk to them. She was scared, but she needed to put her foot down. In the grubby kitchen, all three guys were in various stages of toast production, banging on about some night out.

‘Joe was on a winner with that one with the blonde hair,’ said Jamie, popping bread down in the toaster.

‘No, that was my one,’ frowned Jacob, pushing back his newly purple shoulder-length hair and buttering his round.

‘She wanted me, mate,’ Joe told Jacob smugly, eating a jam-loaded slice. ‘I thought the brunette was yours.’

‘I don’t even remember a brunette,’ Jacob complained.

Leigh cleared her throat, and everyone turned to her.

‘Leigh! You missed a blinder last night,’ Joe said. ‘I was this close to pulling.’

Leigh smiled, knocked immediately off track. This was the trouble. The boys were quite nice to her. It made it hard to talk to them about their thoughtlessness.

‘Yeah, man. You should come out tonight. I could do with a female wingman,’ Jacob added.

Jamie nodded enthusiastically. ‘Right! You could be chick bait!’

‘I don’t think I want to do that,’ Leigh said.

‘Why not?’

Jamie tutted. ‘We’ll pay it back. Get you some man meat. And if we don’t, I’m sure one of us could...’

She couldn’t let this sentence get any further. ‘Umm, I don’t like man meat.’

Jamie, Jacob, and Joe all swapped looks. ‘Oh,’ Jacob said. ‘You like girls? Like we do?’

Leigh nodded nervously.

Joe jumped up. ‘Guy’s! She likes the boobies! Awesome! Let’s go out tonight and get boobs!’

Leigh, as a boob-haver, wasn’t keen on hearing it put like that. But she appreciated the support. ‘Yeah, OK.’

‘Yeah! Boobs all round!’ Jacob yelled.

‘BOOBS! BOOBS! BOOBS!’ the boys chanted.

Leigh realised she’d gotten completely sidetracked from the talk about cleanliness. But maybe it wasn’t the time. Maybe things had turned around now? Maybe they’d start seeing her as a person like them. Treat her with some respect.

Leigh was at some filthy rock club. The boys were nowhere to be found. They’d all

found girls to talk to and left Leigh to it. She'd never felt so alone.

She kept thinking, 'Just go home.' But somehow, she felt that would be even worse, alone in the silence of that house. So she watched everyone dance and snog and drink. She wasn't sure how much time went by. She had to go soon. She didn't belong here. Not at the university, not with these people, not at this club, not in her own home.

Feet had been going in and out of her vision for a while, but she suddenly realised that a pair had stopped in front of her. She looked up at their owner.

It was girl about her age, with long raven hair. She was cute, but she had a lot more going for her than that. If she had to say what it was, it was in her eyes. She had the kind of eyes that could make you join a cult. But cute girls with hypnotic eyes didn't approach Leigh, and she was suspicious right away.

'Hi,' the girl said.

'Hello?' Leigh replied anxiously.

'Can I buy you a drink?' the girl asked.

Now Leigh was sure this was a prank of some sort. Maybe the boys had sent her over to make her look silly? 'Why?'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘You look sad. I wanted to cheer you up,’ she said.

‘You noticed that?’

The girl leant into her ear and spoke quietly but intensely. ‘You can’t miss it.’ Her breath in Leigh’s ear caused her to feel an electric charge run up the entirety of her spine.

‘I’m Leigh,’ she said, pulled in despite her apprehension.

‘Alex. Let’s get that drink. But not here. It’s way too loud.’

Leigh let herself be led out.

They headed to a bar down the street that offered cheap student deals. Alex did the ordering, Leigh watching in slight amazement. She still didn’t quite understand what was happening. Was this girl just trying to make friends? Leigh wasn’t convinced of that. She wouldn’t have needed to. Her confidence and magnetism were off the charts.

Which left the other option. Leigh was getting pulled. A hot, confident girl had found her alone and miserable and decided to try and sleep with her. Leigh could only pray she was about to get sexually used. The possibility of more didn’t exist to her.

Alex handed her a drink. ‘You look kind of familiar. You at Medford?’

‘Yeah, business and marketing.’

Alex looked surprised. 'What year?'

'First.'

'I'm on that course, too. Third year.'

Leigh was shocked. 'We must have seen each other around.'

Alex shrugged. 'I don't know. I don't always notice what's going on around me.'

'You noticed me tonight, though,' Leigh said. The second it came out, she thought, Oh no, you cocky idiot.

But Alex smiled at her. 'I did.'

Leigh felt hopeful and then slightly panicked. 'Whatisthis?' she found herself asking.

'I don't know, exactly,' Alex said.

'I guess I want to know if you're trying to...' Leigh felt too nervous to finish the sentence.

'Yes, I'm trying to chat you up,' Alex replied easily. 'But you knew that. So what are you really asking?'

Leigh was taken aback. It was true. She had known. It was just insecurity standing in the way. Of course, that was what this was. 'I guess I just want to know what you want. Like, exactly.'

Alex nodded and smiled. 'That's a fair question. Am I trying to get you into bed and then sneak out tomorrow morning? Or am I gonna walk out of here in twenty minutes

because I was offered a safer bet? Maybe I'm just looking to get my ego stroked by pulling the best-looking person in that club. Maybe I won't even want anything to happen if I know I've hooked you,' she half-smiled. 'Am I looking to use you? Or do I want to connect? That's what you're asking, right?'

'I wasn't the best-looking person in the club,' Leigh said with a laugh.

'Well, if someone had you beat, I never saw her,' Alex said.

Leigh moved around that, still not buying it. 'Look, I'm not... Yeah, I guess I'm trying to...' Leigh finally stumbled into what she wanted to say. 'I don't do one-night stands,' she declared.

That was true, but only on a technicality. The chance hadn't come up yet. She'd had one sexual partner, a proper girlfriend, Mara. It had ended when they'd left school, and Leigh had been a bit relieved. Mara was sweet but not exactly the love of her life. Even so, Leigh hadn't felt ready for anything since. Well, until tonight.

Alex nodded. 'Look, I saw you and...' She stopped and pondered it, in no particular hurry, it seemed. Then she looked Leigh in the eye very directly. 'I just saw you, and something happened to me. I was pulled to you. It was like you were a north magnet, and I was a south magnet.' Alex grinned. 'You need to know; I don't normally talk like this.'

Leigh still felt very unsure. But Alex's words and her way of expressing them were compelling. And it had to be said, Leigh had felt something happen the moment she looked up to find Alex in front of her. Was she right? Was this how it happened? Could this be how love at first sight felt? Were they magnets?

It was a lovely idea. That Leigh would have had this terrible, shitty year and find herself at her lowest, and then someone would say, 'Hey, it's me. I'm finally here.'

You're not alone anymore.' Leigh wanted to believe.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘What do we do with that, then? The magnets?’ Leigh asked.

‘I don’t know. But what I do know is that I want to know you,’ Alex said.

‘How long do you have?’

‘All night,’ Alex smiled. ‘I want everything.’

Leigh didn’t know if she truly meant it. But Alex was an irresistible force. So Leigh talked.

She explained how her housemates made her feel crazy. They all seemed so happy in the chaos. But chaos unnerved Leigh. She couldn’t deal with it. And not because she wasn’t used to it, but because she was.

Her parents were, in her grandmother’s words, ‘A volatile combination.’ Leigh’s definition ran more along the lines of, ‘Immature nutjobs with no sense of boundaries.’

What that meant was screaming matches, doors slammed, crockery broken, peace shattered. Her parents had broken up and gotten back together beyond the count. Leigh woke up never knowing if both parents would be there or if she’d find one or the other bemoaning the latest row to her, explaining their unimpeachable innocence in the whole thing. Leigh just wanted someone to hand her a bowl of cereal before she went off to school. She did not have the time or the inclination to let adults cry on her shoulder.

She'd left hoping to find something better. Somehow, now? She was even more adrift.

She told all this to Alex that night. With every word coming out of her mouth, she felt like she was showing Alex that she was a loser. She felt sure that Alex was going to understand that she'd made a mistake attaching herself to this sad sack.

But Alex's bright, sharp eyes were fixed on her, searching, intrigued, interested. She listened that night. Leigh didn't think anyone had done that in a long time. She wasn't sure anyone had ever done it, actually.

'God, sorry. I didn't mean to go on,' Leigh said, breathless, embarrassed.

Alex smiled. 'No, no. It's OK. It's good. I liked it. I mean, I don't like hearing how bad it's been for you. But I like...' She stopped and reassembled herself. 'It's cool that you're telling me this is what I'm trying to say.'

Leigh blushed, stunned. 'Oh, well... You! Let's talk about you.'

Alex flashed a quick grin. 'There's not much to tell.'

Leigh couldn't have that. She needed to hear Alex's emotional wounds, too. 'Come on, I know you're complicated. I can tell.' Leigh practically demanded, surprised at her own confidence. Perhaps it was infectious.

Alex looked surprised and then pleased. Leigh couldn't wait to hear exactly who this charming stranger was.

Now

Ten years later, Leigh was watching Alex work her magic on Helen Archer's security

guard. She could see that it was working because Mr Stick-up-his-arse was smiling. Charmed. But ofcoursehe was. This was Alex's great talent. And now she was going to win.

Fuck.

Eleven

When Alex pulled up alongside Leigh's car in Helen Archer's driveway, she was ready to be smug. Leigh had not penetrated Helen's sanctum, which meant she probably never would. Alex was ready to revel in her delicious victory.

Until she saw Leigh, and her breath caught in her throat.

She'd been a beautiful girl back in the day, but with womanhood on her, it was a little ridiculous. Her red wavy hair was a little shorter now, but it framed her face better. Her large dark eyes had lost none of that irresistible vulnerability. Her mouth had retained its sexy, natural pout. And her crooked nose, her one flaw, still charmed the bejesus out of Alex. All in all, the extra decade on Leigh Calloway suited her very nicely.

Alex felt like her thoughts were going to show all over her face if she wasn't careful. And she wasn't giving Leigh that. So, she put on her usual mask: Alex Walker, confident, successful, cool as a cucumber dipped in liquid nitrogen.

She gave Leigh a little wave to sell her indifference. Like, 'Oh, it's you again, how annoying to see you.' And itwasannoying that Leigh was at Helen Archer's place, ready to compete for the prize of photographed infidelity.

But it also kind of wasn't.

‘Hi, Leigh!’ Alex said as breezily as her voice would allow. ‘Great to see you.’

Leigh didn’t say anything back. Just nodded. Alex was furious to find she felt small in the light of that nod.

Alex turned away and got out of the car, heading for the old guy standing in front of the big, ornate gate. Steven had texted her his name, but that’s all the prep he could do. Helen wasn’t taking calls right now. But that was fine. For now, Alex only had to block Leigh. Anything else was a bonus.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Hi, Alex Walker. I’m here because I work for Isabelle Kane,’ she said to the old guy.

‘Yes, of course. Miss Kane,’ he said, dipping his words in self-satisfied familiarity with the famous woman.

‘She mentioned you’d met,’ Alex lied. ‘She said there’s a lot of trust between you and Mrs Archer.’

Brett was brimming with pride. ‘Twelve years I’ve sat on this gate. No one gets past without my say-so. Mrs Archer knows I wouldn’t let her down.’

‘Well, I’m afraid Mrs Archer is possibly about to get caught in a bit of a sticky situation,’ Alex explained.

Brett’s bushy eyebrows flew up in alarm. ‘Oh?’

‘Yes, well, I’m sure you’re aware of Isabelle’s impending divorce...’

From the look of it, he was not. ‘Of course,’ he said quickly.

‘Well, Mrs Archer had a photograph in her possession, and it’s... I’m not gonna lie to you, Brett. It’s the crux of the whole thing.’

He nodded fervently, and Alex could tell that he was pleased to be taken into her confidence, just as she’d intended. This man’s Achilles heel was his ego. Alex could exploit that.

‘I see,’ he said, stroking his beard.

‘Yes. And that lady over there...’ Alex turned and pointed at Leigh, still sitting in her car, watching. Alex wanted her to see the gesture. ‘She works for Erin Porter.’

‘She mentioned that, yes.’

Alex smiled. ‘Right. She wants that photo. And I know I don’t need to tell you this, but we must make sure she never even gets the chance to ask Mrs Archer for it.’

‘Of course,’ Brett nodded. ‘That’s exactly what I said. She’s not getting in while I’m breathing.’

‘I knew I could rely on you.’ Alex felt confident he was set up. Now came the punch. ‘And obviously, I’ll need to see Mrs Archer to get a copy.’

‘Oh. Oh, I see. Have you called her?’

That would have been a trick because Alex didn’t have the number. ‘Yeah. Can’t get through. Is something wrong with the landline?’

‘Landline? Mrs Archer doesn’t use the landline. She uses her mobile. Her staff should pick it up, though.’

Alex had made a mistake there. She’d thought that an eighty-year-old woman would be old school. Wrong.

‘You know what? Why don’t I just pop in and see her?’ Alex said smoothly.

Brett’s arse kissing stopped short. ‘Oh no, Miss. Appointment only. No exceptions.’

‘But...’

Alex heard a car door slam. She turned to see Leigh standing next to her Ford Focus, looking admittedly very cute in her little black suit. What was she still doing here? She’d gotten the knock back. She should have been driving off with her tail between her legs, defeated. Not walking over to see Alex about to be told to fuck off, too.

‘Yes?’ Brett asked coldly.

Leigh flashed a smile. ‘Hi, sorry. I just wanted to check. Could you call the house again?’

Brett looked at her and laughed. ‘I just did. And like I was just telling this lady...’

Brett, don’t fuck me here.

‘...It’s appointment only. You both need to leave.’

Leigh looked at Alex. ‘Oh? You couldn’t penetrate the gates? I’m shocked. You’re such a great salesperson.’

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Alex gave a light, tinkling laugh. 'That remains to be seen. And I'm not selling anything.'

'The way I remember it, you're always selling something,' Leigh said with a raised eyebrow.

Alex was momentarily lost for words. She wasn't used to that.

'Look, no one's going in, alright?' Brett said.

Leigh gave Brett a formal smile. 'Look, I was just on the phone to a friend who got through to Mrs Archer. She should be receptive to me now,' she said.

Alex's head whipped to Leigh. 'What?'

'Yeah. I guess it pays to be a cog in the machine sometimes. It means you have access to other cogs who know Helen Archer,' Leigh explained smugly.

Alex was pissed. Though she was a hell of a saleswoman, Leigh had a point. Every connection Alex had, she'd personally forged. But Leigh? She knew people who knew people. You couldn't beat that.

Brett looked cynical but went into his booth and made a call. He poked his head back out. 'Miss Calloway? If you want to drive through, I'll open the gates.'

Leigh gave Alex a victorious smile and headed to her car. Alex had no choice but to do the same, walking back to her BMW. The heavy gates parted slowly, and Leigh

trundled in.

Alex got her car started, intending to turn the beast around and bugger off from whence she came. She could regroup, strategise, come back stronger.

But as she watched Leigh pushing up the driveway and noted those slow, heavy gates grinding back to position at a snail's pace, Alex lost her marbles. She put her foot down and shot through the gap after Leigh.

Even as it was happening, Alex knew it was stupid. She could only blame her awful competitive streak for the madness. Which also caused her to zip right around a shocked Leigh. Alex found herself laughing as she did it.

She arrived at the big house a few seconds later and climbed out. 'What the hell am I doing?' she muttered to herself.

Twelve

Leigh was stunned. What in the hell was Alex doing? She was seriously just gonna break and enter?! But also, she was winning the race? Leigh wasn't doing this. She was only putting her foot down a bit because she was in third gear anyway.

She pulled up at the manor house and was unshocked to see its hugeness. Helen Archer had been big in the eighties, the posh leading woman of choice. She'd been rescued from disaster by just about every male action star of the time. She'd begged Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, and Jack Nicholson to find her daughter. She'd also done a lot of Merchant Ivory films, stuffed into a bonnet on many an occasion, so she had the cachet of a proper actor. But this place looked like it was built on the back of the bang-bang kiss-kiss movie money.

Alex's BMW was parked up on the gravel, and she was already out of the car. The

doors of the house were opening, and she was dashing to meet the person behind them. Even though Leigh had an appointment that she'd had to call her old boss to get, she still felt like she was behind. She found herself running to chase Alex. She felt fucking ridiculous as she did it, but she couldn't stop.

The door opened, and a young guy in a suit, sporting a very groomed moustache, answered just as Leigh and Alex reached the door together. He looked back and forth between them, slightly thrown. 'Leigh Calloway?'

'That's me,' Leigh said, throwing Alex an irritated look.

Mr Moustache looked to Alex. 'And this is...'

Alex threw a confident smile on her face. 'I'm here to see Mrs Archer, too. I've been sent by Isabelle Kane.'

'But she doesn't have an appointment,' Leigh was quick to point out.

Alex's smile widened. 'I think if I could just get a second with her...'

'You don't have an appointment?' the young man sniffed.

'Hugo, what on earth is all this noise?' someone said and then she was standing next to the young guy—Helen Archer.

Leigh was briefly taken aback at seeing the woman that her grandad had once called, 'High-class arse.' For some reason, Leigh had expected her to have turned into your average little old woman, but not a bit of it. She was as sharp and imposing as ever, almost six feet of no-nonsense beauty.

Once she'd regained herself, she managed to say, 'Hi, I'm Leigh. I think you spoke to

Jack Allen about me just now.'

'OK, and who are you?' she said, turning to Alex.

'I'm Alex Walker. I work for Isabelle.'

‘Kane?’

‘Yes. She sent me to talk to you.’

‘Did she send you to storm my gates? Because I just got a call from my security man who told me some maniac drove through at a hundred miles per hour while he was letting in Miss Calloway.’

Alex was immediately repentant. ‘I’m sorry about that. He was being a bit obtuse, and I didn’t have your private number, and I couldn’t get ahold of your staff. I did something a bit crazy; I know that. But I needed to speak to you. I know how much you care about Isabelle. Things are getting quite heated, and she needs your help.’

‘I see,’ Helen said, somewhat appeased.

Leigh knew that was it, Alex was in. Having a real appointment didn’t count for shit now. It was a straight contest, and they were neck and neck—at best.

Helen looked back and forth between them and raised an eyebrow. ‘So you work for Erin, and you work for Isabelle. This puts me in a difficult position.’

‘You understand what we’re both doing here,’ Alex said, but it wasn’t a question. She was trying to flatter Helen. But Helen was not Brett.

‘Yes. And I don’t like it. I asked Isabelle to keep me out of this,’ Helene barked.

Alex smiled. ‘If we could maybe just chat in private...’

‘I’m not standing on the doorstep all day. Both of you come in.’ Helen looked over her shoulder at Hugo. ‘Tea.’ She vanished from the doorway.

Leigh couldn’t help but look at Alex, who looked back at her in bemusement. ‘I guess we’re gonna pitch together.’

Hugo stepped back and gestured for them to come in. They stepped into the large reception hall. Hugo pointed to a room with an ornate oak door. ‘She’ll see you in there.’ He walked off.

For a small moment, Leigh and Alex were left alone, and they looked at each other in the dim light of the reception hall. ‘Well, let’s do this, shall we?’ Alex said with a half-smile that made Leigh just about want to strangle her.

Alex strode into the room, Leigh hot on her heels. She found herself in an Art Deco living room. Geometric wallpaper, velvet sofas, and Tiffany wall lights everywhere. Leigh didn’t think she’d ever stood in so much money in her life.

‘Lovely room,’ Leigh breathed.

Helen sat in an emerald tub chair and looked around her as though she’d forgotten what it looked like. ‘I don’t come in here much, actually.’

‘No?’

‘No, a TV breaks the period feel. And I like to watch *Death in Paradise* in the afternoons.’

Leigh smiled. ‘Of course. Well—’

‘You know why we’re here,’ Alex interrupted, sitting quickly on a cream-and-walnut

sofa.

‘That is an original Jacques Ruhlmann if you could sit a bit more gently. It cost an arm and a leg to get it restored,’ Helen said unpleasantly.

Alex’s confident smile was briefly wiped from her face.

Leigh tried not to grin as she sat down next to her, lowering herself with care. ‘So, I’m here because you took a photo of Erin.’

‘I did. And I’m not going to apologise,’ the woman said.

Leigh shook her head. ‘No, of course not. I wouldn’t ask you to. We just want the opportunity to be able to explain it when it comes out. Which means we need to see it.’

‘Erin hasn’t seen it?’

‘Well, yes, she has,’ Leigh admitted.

‘So what you mean is that you haven’t seen it. And as her PR person, you want it in your grubby little paws so you can start spinning it before anyone can make up their mind.’

Leigh’s stride was thoroughly broken. ‘Umm...’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘That’s exactly what she wants, Mrs Archer,’ Alex jumped in, capitalising on the moment. ‘Because it’s very obvious what the photo means.’

‘You have it, do you?’ Helen asked her.

‘No, but I’ve seen it. It’s pretty clear what’s going on.’

‘But Isabelle didn’t let you have it. So, I’m wondering what you’re doing here rather than simply going to her for it.’

Alex nodded. ‘Yes, well, if I could explain, I only just found out that Leigh, here, was on her way to ask for it and—’

‘You didn’t want her to win.’ Helen looked at both of them and sighed with disdain. Leigh felt like she was in front of the headmistress for tardiness. ‘Good god. You people. I haven’t had to deal with your sort for a long time, and that’s been a blessing, I can tell you.’

Leigh was a little bit winded by the comment, but not so Alex. She smiled like she agreed. ‘Yeah, I get it. But you know the game. You know it better than anyone.’

‘You’d better believe it,’ Helen said.

Hugo swept in with a tea tray and placed it down. He started to pick up a teapot and Helen shot him a sharp look. ‘Hugo, what have I told you about steeping?’

Hugo went a bit red-faced. ‘Sorry, Gran.’

Leigh looked at the boy anew.

Helen threw a look at Leigh. 'Yes, he's my grandson. Useless in the extreme, so I have him around to do things he can't fuck up. Which does not include a decent cup of tea, apparently.'

Hugo was blushing to his very roots. Leigh was sympathetic to him, the poor soul. Access to wealthy surroundings probably didn't mean much when you were regularly getting cut off at the knees. Leigh decided then that she didn't like Helen Archer. It was fine to rake her and Alex over the coals, but embarrassing family in front of a stranger was bully business.

'Anyway, I don't know what either of you expects from me. I'm staying out of it,' she declared.

'You didn't, though, did you?' Leigh said.

'I beg your pardon?' Helen asked sharply.

'You started the whole thing,' Leigh continued, feeling ever more steamed. 'You saw something, and without really knowing what it was, you took a photo of it and sent it to a friend, with your opinion attached, and it wrecked trust in a marriage and caused a divorce. So I'd say you're very much in it.'

Helen was shocked. 'How dare you!'

'You're offended by that?! You sabotaged my client's life in quite a deep way. I'd say you were due a bit of a talking-to about it.'

Alex turned, genuinely horrified. 'Leigh!' she cried. 'Don't talk to Mrs Archer like that.'

Helen waved a dismissive hand at her. 'I don't need defending. I can speak for myself.' She looked at Leigh. 'I saw what I saw. I know what it was. I couldn't ignore it.'

'Well, the way Erin tells it, it was nothing. It was someone she didn't even know.'

'How could it be nothing if it caused Isabelle to divorce her?' Helen demanded.

'Because you told her it was something,' Leigh retorted. 'And she trusted you.'

'Leigh, stop,' Alex said. 'This is not why we're here.'

'I don't know why you're here,' she told Alex before rounding on Helen. 'But I've decided I'm here to say that what you did was destructive.'

Helen was enraged. 'That's it.' She turned to Hugo. 'Show her the photo, now.'

Hugo shrugged and went to a Rosewood bureau. He pulled a phone out of it and tapped it. Two beeps sounded, one from Leigh's pocket, the other from Alex's.

Leigh pulled out her phone to find an Airdrop notification, which she accepted. And there was the photo. Leigh didn't quite know how she'd done this, but the high was astonishing. She'd beat Helen. And Alex. But only kind of because she was checking her phone and had the photo, too.

'Why are they looking at their phones?' Helen asked Hugo, alarmed.

‘Because I sent it to them,’ Hugo said.

Helen was horrified. ‘You did what?! I meant for you to hold it up on my phone so they can see!’ She turned to Leigh and Alex. ‘Delete that immediately.’

Leigh smiled. ‘Sure.’ She stood. ‘Well, thanks for the tea. I need to go now.’

Alex stood as well. ‘Yeah, me too. Places to be.’

‘You’re not going to delete it, are you?’ Helen asked, livid.

‘Kind of surprised you care,’ Leigh said. ‘Not your problem, is it?’ She was shocked at herself. She was being so bloody bolshie with Helen Archer. It was utterly unlike her. She was usually passive in the presence of the rich and famous.

But something was changing in her.

Leigh headed for the door, Alex behind her, Hugo at the rear of the party. ‘I’ll see you out,’ he said.

They walked back through the airy reception. Hugo opened the main door to release them.

‘Thanks for the photo. I’m sorry if you’re in trouble,’ Alex said, back outside with Leigh.

‘Like she said, I’m incompetent,’ Hugo said with a sly smile. ‘What did she expect?’

He shut the door.

Alex looked at Leigh. 'Well, I guess we can call this one a draw.'

Leigh looked back at Alex. 'Today,' she said. 'But only today.' And she went and got into her car, realising what the difference in her was.

It was Alex.

Thirteen

Alex drove home utterly befuddled. Fucking Leigh, man. Alex had imagined that she was going to walk right over her at the Helen Archer meeting. But that was not what had happened by any stretch of the imagination. Leigh was different now. Bolder. And if she'd meant to trick Helen Archer into showing the photo, then she was sharper, too. She'd played that woman like a fiddle. Leigh had been playing 3D chess while Alex was playing snap.

Alex couldn't remember she'd been so surprised by a person. Not since... Alex thought about it and concluded the last time that had happened, it had been Leigh herself, back in the day.

Ten Years Ago

The bar was closing. Alex didn't know how she was still here. She'd been intending to go to bed several hours ago. Now, she was sitting here with this beautiful, sensitive creature, and they were really talking.

Alex didn't understand it, and she didn't trust it, either. It couldn't be as easy as this, could it? You couldn't just see someone and know them, could you? Because it kind of felt like that was exactly what had happened to her.

Alex had looked at Leigh and known something about her. And everything that had happened since had proven that initial gut feeling to be correct. Leigh was good and right.

Still, this wasn't life, was it? Not Alex's life, anyway—which Leigh wanted to know all about. Anyone else, Alex could have fobbed off. It was easy to play simple, charming, and shallow. Most people accepted that persona.

Only Leigh wasn't giving up so easily. 'Come on, I know you're complicated. I can tell.'

'How?' Alex asked.

'Because your eyes have that "I've seen some shit" look.'

Alex laughed. 'Wow. That's my look?'

Leigh sat back, regarding Alex carefully. 'You're edgy, all right.'

'Edgy?'

'Yeah, but what's interesting is that it sort of contradicts the way you talk. You talk like everything's easy,' Leigh said.

Alex was floored. Leigh had her pegged, alright. She took a sip of her drink, wondering where to start.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘When I was a kid, you know who my hero was?’ Alex asked.

Leigh smiled. ‘Who?’

‘Dolly Parton.’

Leigh laughed. ‘Seriously? You a big country music fan?’

‘I can’t stand country music,’ Alex told her. ‘But the thing about Dolly Parton is that she grew up dirt poor. Literally. She lived in a shack with no running water or electricity. You can’t get much poorer than that. And she sang her way into millions and millions of dollars. It sounds impossible. But she did it.’

‘And you want to do that? Can you sing?’ Leigh asked.

‘I’m tone deaf,’ Alex told her. ‘But that’s not the point. When I was a kid, I heard about her, and I thought, I want to do that. I want to spin gold out of straw. Take nothing and turn it into something.’

‘Nothing?’

‘I mean, yeah, kind of. We had taps with running water in them. But not much more than that. My dad... Well, Mum made money, and Dad spent it,’ Alex said.

‘On what?’ Leigh asked.

‘Horses, mainly. Greyhounds sometimes. He even went through a stage of betting on

camel races.'

Leighs frowned. 'That sounds stressful.'

'My mum's blood pressure was through the bloody roof. She should have just left him.'

'Do you know why she didn't?'

'I don't know. I kind of always felt like she didn't want to break up the family. Her parents got a divorce that was quite rough. So, instead of leaving him, she would hide money and pretend it was all gonna be fine. But he always found it. She was kind of a gambler, too, I guess. She bet on him and lost big.'

Leigh let out a long sigh. 'They still together?'

'Nope. They split about three months after I left home. She really was just seeing it through,' Alex said. It was crazy. She never talked about this. But Leigh made it easy somehow. 'I wish she would have just kicked him out and been less unhappy. I think that probably would have been better.'

'Yeah, probably. Same in my house. They should have just called it quits. Would have saved everyone a lot of trouble.'

'Why didn't they?' Alex asked.

'Addicted to the drama? I don't know,' Leigh shrugged.

'They split?'

'Last I checked, it was still going. They moved to a new house for a fresh start. As if

a building could make them both grow up. It's still them living in the bloody thing.'

Alex smiled. 'We didn't have good models for adulthood, did we?'

'No. Think we're screwed?' Leigh asked.

Alex didn't know if she was kidding or not but decided a glib answer was best. 'Yeah, totally.'

'You don't think we can learn from them? As cautionary tales, I mean?' Leigh asked.

Looking at Leigh in the cheap, loud bar, Alex wondered. This was supposed to be settled for her. She was supposed to be cynical and dead inside. She didn't want love. It was a lie, a trade-off people made because they were frightened to go it alone.

But Leigh's smile, her eyes, the way she talked, open and honest... Alex could feel herself getting stupid for her. It scared the hell out of her. But she couldn't have backed away from it if she tried.

Now

Alex's trip down memory lane was interrupted by her phone ringing through the car's Bluetooth. It was Isabelle. Alex knew what the subject of the call was going to be, but she reluctantly accepted it.

‘Isabelle, hi—’

‘What the hell did you do!?’ Isabelle demanded.

‘I know what you’re about to say.’

‘What am I about to say?’ Isabelle replied sharply.

‘You’re about to fire me,’ Alex said. ‘Which, of course, you have the right to do.’

‘Well done,’ Isabelle said. ‘You finally got something right.’

‘Look, you didn’t want to tell me who took the picture, and you didn’t want to share the photo. You wanted to keep Helen out of it because that’s what she asked you to do, and you agreed.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Well, here’s the good news,’ Alex told her. ‘You did that. But your asshole publicist went rogue and got the photo anyway. I can put it out right now. You’re free of moral quandaries and you get what you want.’

There was a pause. ‘Helen’s livid.’

‘Yeah, because Erin’s publicist read her for filth. I just happened to be there.’

‘Erin’s publicist?’

‘Yeah. She’s a bit of a bleeding-heart type, so I guess she bought Erin’s slant.’

Isabelle gave a haughty laugh before switching back to her original topic. ‘How didyoueven know it was Helen, anyway?’

‘Can’t say,’ Alex said simply.

Isabelle was freshly incensed. ‘Someone close to me talked? Do I need to fire staff today?’

‘Aside from me? No. I got the information elsewhere,’ Alex lied.

There was no sense throwing Steven under the bus. He’d done her a solid, and anyway, she might need him later.

‘I’m not firing you,’ Isabelle said regretfully. ‘Because you’re right. I was stuck, and you’re not. And now I can call you all the names under the sun to Helen if you’re good with that.’

‘Totally good. So, time to release the pic, yes? It’s time-sensitive. If the other side decides to put it out now with their angle....’

‘Pull the trigger.’ Isabelle hung up.

Alex pulled over to the side of the road and checked around the usual places to see if the pic was up. Nothing. She rang Baker while she looked at the picture. He picked up quickly. ‘I’m about to send you something, and I want you to release it ASAFP,’ she told him.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s that picture.’

‘Is it good?’ Baker asked, interested.

Alex wasn’t sure, but looking closely, she would say it was reasonable to see someone behaving flirtatiously and very possibly about to get nasty.

‘It’s debatable. I want to shut that debate down before it even starts. Send it from one of the Instagram accounts. The most credible one.’

Baker ran a few sock puppet accounts for just such a moment as now, when a bit of distance might be required from some gossip. Not strictly ethical, but Baker never seemed to mind, bless his dubious heart. One of them was a woman claiming to be a lowly extra who loved to spread gossip about whatever set she was on. She had about thirty thousand followers, which was plenty to get started.

‘I’m gonna feed you a quote, OK?’

‘Sure.’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Here it is, word for word. “I can’t believe I saw Erin Porter going to town on a random girl.” Hashtags at your discretion.’

‘Send the snap. It’ll go out in the next two minutes.’

Alex sent it and opened Instagram to wait and refresh. The post came out exactly as she’d asked a couple of moments later. The sharing started quickly, mounting speed by the minute. It wasn’t half an hour later that several news sources started to report it.

Alex laughed to herself. For the blinder Leigh had played, she hadn’t been able to capitalise on a scoop. Alex had won.

Fourteen

When Leigh saw the photo, she knew it wasn’t going to be enough to just get it out with her own spin. It would be torn to bits. Because Erin wasn’t making any physical contact with this mystery girl, but it didn’t matter. The body language was damning. Erin was leaning into her and smiling with a look in her eyes that said, ‘I’m gonna rip your clothes off the first chance I get.’

It wasn’t concrete proof, but it didn’t need to be. If you wanted to look at it and see two people who were either sleeping together or about to be, you could see it.

Leigh called Erin from the road. ‘We need to talk.’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s the photo. It’s going to get released any minute.’

‘Oh. OK. I thought I had a bit more time.’ She paused. ‘Have you seen it?’

‘Yes.’ Leigh took a breath. ‘The other person in the photo will probably be found soon. I need to know... What would they say?’

‘Can we talk about this in person?’ Erin asked.

Leigh was back in Erin’s flat. Erin was crying. ‘I’m sorry I lied!’ she was wailing. Erin was not feeling quite as sympathetic as before, so she was simply watching the tears and waiting for them to be over. ‘But you must understand, I couldn’t leave Isabelle. I haven’t loved her in a long time. But she made it clear she’d ruin me. Like she’s doing right now.’

‘So, you did cheat. Because she’s emotionally abusive.’ Leigh rubbed her temples. She had a headache coming on. ‘If you’d told me this at the start, it would have made my life easier. We could have told your side right away. You might have come out of it all well. But now... We’re playing defence.’

Erin nodded snottily. ‘Yeah, I know. But it was hard, you know? Do you know how embarrassing it is to feel like you’ve been fooled?’

Leigh sat back in her chair, irritated. ‘Yes. Which is why I’m pissed off that I defended you today.’

‘What? To who?’

‘Helen Archer. I called her out for getting involved in something she didn’t

understand, and it turned out she was right. I'm expecting Jack to call me any minute now to read me the riot act. He exploited a relationship to help me, and I've probably burned it.'

'Your boss is retired. What the hell does he care?' Erin said dismissively.

'I don't think that's the point,' Leigh said impatiently.

She was seeing a new side to Erin, a not-very-honest side, a self-serving side. Leigh was trying to adjust. Actors, she thought. Should have known.

But Leigh would have been lying to say she didn't understand her. She knew what it was to get the wool well and truly pulled over your eyes.

Ten Years Ago

Leigh put the key in the door and jiggled it. Nothing happened. 'Oh no. The deadlock is on.'

'Who did that?' Alex asked.

'The three idiots I live with. I hope they're still up.' Leigh knocked on the door nervously.

She was bringing Alex back to hers, at her own terrified suggestion, and she hoped that meant they could keep this night going, maybe take it to the next level. And now the three stooges were going to have to be dealt with.

The door swung open, and there was Jamie. His mouth fell open at the sight of Alex. 'Dude! You pulled!'

Leigh wanted to die. 'Jamie...'

Jamie ran from the door. 'Guys! Leigh bagged one!' she heard him say. A cheer went up.

Leigh turned to Alex. 'I'm so sorry.'

But Alex only smiled that cheeky smile of hers. 'What? He's right.'

Leigh laughed and looked away shyly. 'Come on.'

They entered the shabby house. 'If we rush up the stairs, we might not have to interact with them,' Leigh said.

Alex nodded. They headed down the hall, but the living room door was wide open. Jamie, Joe, Jacob, and three girls Leigh had never seen before were all lounging on the sofas, soft rock on in the background, beer cans in hand, waving her in. Apparently, everyone had been successful tonight. But Leigh's night would be cocked up if she entered that room. She just knew it.

'Guys, we're just gonna...'

'Hey, come and meet the girls,' Jacob said.

Leigh wanted to say no. She wanted to say, 'Hell no,' actually. But she struggled with rudeness. Even though these bastards had ditched her tonight, she still didn't quite have the will to give them exactly what they deserved.

She turned to Alex. 'Quick drink?'

Alex smiled like she didn't care either way. 'Cool.'

In they went. Jamie tossed Leigh a lukewarm beer, which she duly opened. She took a sip. It tasted like cat piss.

'Mmmm,' Alex said, sipping hers. 'How the hell do they get the cat to aim into the can?'

Leigh let out a delighted snort.

'Hey, man. It's free,' Jamie complained.

'You gonna introduce us?' one of the girls said.

Jamie smiled. 'Sure. This is Sarah.'

'Sara,' she corrected.

He pointed at a dark-haired girl. 'Joan.'

'Jade,' she said.

Jamie looked at the third girl. 'Umm...'

'It's Amy.'

'Sorry, but that's tough to remember,' Jamie apologised.

Jacob laughed. 'Dude, that's half your name.'

Leigh needed to get out now. These dummies were gonna take her down with them if she wasn't careful. And she wanted to be alone with Alex. It felt like a miracle they'd found each other. And miracles were fragile things.

While the boys swapped names with Alex, Leigh scrambled for a reason to get her out of the room. She had nothing.

'Right, drinking game,' Jamie declared, clearly trying to shift the narrative from his idiocy. 'Truth or drink?'

'Yes!' Jacob said. He ran off into the kitchen and came back with a half-empty litre of whisky and as many mismatched shot glasses as he could carry.

'Really?' Leigh said unsurely.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Ooh, someone’s got some juicy shit to hide!’ Jamie declared.

‘No, it’s just...’

‘Yeah, let’s get the goods on Leigh,’ Joe said.

‘I just don’t like drinking games,’ Leigh said uncomfortably.

She was aware of how this might sound to Alex. Like she was a buzzkill. But she just didn’t see the point of this.

‘Let’s just play for five minutes,’ Jacob said. He looked around. ‘Yeah?’

Everyone nodded, including Alex. Leigh was stuck. ‘Fine. Five minutes.’ How much could go wrong in five minutes?

Now

‘OK, so let’s move on,’ Leigh said to Erin. She was still angry, but she’d have to get over it. PR people got lied to a lot by their clients. She should probably get used to it. ‘We need a strategy.’

‘Yes?’ Erin snivelled hopefully.

‘I mean, first off, you can’t hide during this time,’ Leigh told her.

‘I can’t?’

‘No. Are you working right now?’

‘I’ve got something booked in a few weeks.’

‘We need to have you out way before that. If you hide, you’re guilty.’

‘But I am guilty,’ Erin sniffed.

‘Yes, I know. But there’s a difference between guilt and shame,’ Leigh told her.

That seemed to blow Erin’s mind. ‘Wow. Right. Totally.’

‘So let’s get you out, living your life. Shame-free. OK?’

Erin blew out a breath. ‘I can try.’

Fifteen

Alex was standing at the edge of a party at a fancy hotel. It was a party to release... Actually, Alex didn’t care. Some movie or a TV show. Hell, it could be to promote Pampers for all the difference it made to Alex. The point was the famous people milling about, as well as the photographers. Isabelle was to see and be seen at this shindig. If she ever turned up, that was. She was an hour late. Alex was pissed about it.

Not that she wasn’t making use of the invite she’d snagged. She’d been making herself known to every remotely wealthy or famous woman in this room, pressing her card into their hands and saying, ‘Alex Walker, Crisis PR. Feel free to google me.’

A few people wanted to know more. Purely for edification, of course. Alex expected calls in the next few days from at least two people at this soiree.

A palpable rise in the excitement of the room occurred, and Alex knew before she turned that Isabelle was here, Steven trailing behind her. Even amongst this crowd, she was a big deal.

The crowd parted enough for Alex to confirm Isabelle's presence. Alex had to admit, she looked elegant as shit. Her style team had been hard at work. That was good. Isabelle could not afford to look even a little bit tired. Her job tonight was to be a social butterfly, free at last from the suffocating cocoon of her marriage. Because if she seemed happy now, people would think that she wasn't before. It wasn't rocket science.

Isabelle moved through the room, smiling and saying hi before landing at Alex.

'You're late,' Alex told her.

'I was making an entrance.'

'This thing ends in an hour. You missed fashionably late by quite a way.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I’m here, aren’t I?’ Isabelle said through a strained smile.

‘Yes. Now mingle and smile and hug people in photos, OK?’

‘Everyone in this room knows my marriage has combusted. I don’t know how you think I’m going to be able to keep it light.’

Alex raised an eyebrow at her, and she sighed. ‘Fine. Do things however you want.’

Isabelle moved off, silent Steven hovering at her back. Alex exchanged a brief nod with him.

‘Go on, little butterfly,’ Alex muttered to herself. She was starting to realise that the more you tried to tell Isabelle what to do, the more she would fight you. People had been saying yes to her for too long. But if you stepped back and didn’t engage, she’d stop battling you. This was why she was being a good girl now and whirling around the room, glad-handing strangers who were pretending not to know too much about her personal life, just as Alex wanted.

Alex bided her time, looking for the right partygoer for a photo op. And there she was. Rose Anderson. She and Isabelle had starred in several things together and were known old friends. Wait, Isabelle had just moved around her. Had she seen her? Hard to say. But Alex was going to have to be more proactive if she wanted this particular Kodak moment.

She went up to Rose. ‘Hi!’ she said. ‘How’s it going?’

Rose turned, surprised. She was quick to slap a polite smile on her face. 'Oh, hello.'

'I'm sorry to interrupt you. I'm here with Isabelle, and she's desperately trying to get to you, but everyone wants to talk to her tonight.'

Rose's smile vanished. 'I doubt that.'

Uh oh.

'You two aren't friendly right now?' Alex asked.

Rose sighed. 'No. I'm afraid not.'

'Can I ask why?'

'Askher,' Rose said and walked off.

Alex wasn't doing that. Easier to find someone else instead. And there was Simon Belford, a famous director. Based on the research, he'd also worked with Isabelle.

'Simon! Hi. Alex Walker. I'm Isabelle's PR.'

He instantly pinched the bridge of his nose. 'I thought she stopped coming to these things.' He looked around like Isabelle might swoop on him any second. She happened to be a few feet away. 'Right, that's me done.' He nearly ran out.

Jesus Christ, how had Isabelle pissed off this many people at one party?

Alex decided it was not going to work if she kept warning people. She was going to have to take a more direct intervention here. She approached Isabelle, who was talking to Steven. 'Isabelle? Can I have a word?' Alex interjected.

Isabelle turned to Steven. 'See if they have anything remotely drinkable,' she said, and he left swiftly.

'What have I done now?' Isabelle asked Alex wryly. 'Should I have brought a dry ice machine to make my entrance suitably dramatic?'

Alex ignored her barb. 'I'm trying to find someone to pair with you in a photo, an old friend, and, well...' Alex paused, trying to find a nice way to put it. She couldn't think of one. 'No one wants to talk to you.'

Isabelle was unconcerned. 'That's the way it goes. You win, other people feel like they lost.'

Alex sighed. 'Isabelle, Jesus. You know what tonight is, don't you? It's your re-entry into the world. That's not going to work if everyone you know is avoiding you like a fart.'

'Then I'll make a new friend. There's a lot of people here I don't know. How about that?'

'Great, good.' Alex glanced around the room, her eyes looking for treasure. She found it quickly. 'How about Li Zhang? Huge in China. Just got cast in a big European co-production, probably about to break the other markets. It would be great to be pictured with her. The newbie getting advice from an established star?'

Isabelle balked. 'Oh. No. She's too...'

'What?'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I don’t want to be pictured next to anyone too young,’ she spat.

Alex nodded. ‘Of course.’ She looked around again. A playwright named Lena Jones was sniffing a canape suspiciously. ‘There, perfect. Your age, totally a member of the lesbian theatre mafia. That would work, right?’

‘I took a risk marrying a woman. I can’t be seen with people like her. It reduces my accessibility. Theatre people? Lesbians? It won’t play in Peoria, as the Yanks say.’

Alex couldn’t help but laugh. ‘Isabelle—and I mean this as a compliment—you’ve never been remotely accessible. And that’s exactly what people like about you.’

Isabelle smiled despite herself. ‘I take your point.’

‘So...’

‘Still a no. Try again.’

‘The party is gonna wind down in a minute, and people are gonna start leaving,’ Alex warned her.

Isabelle rolled her eyes. ‘Fine. Whoever you mention next, I’ll take, OK?’

Alex scanned the room, looking through the non-famous faces for just the right person. ‘Hmm, well, how about... Erin!’

Isabelle looked at her in horror. ‘Have you lost your mind?’

‘No, sorry. I didn’t mean... She’s here!’

Isabelle turned in wild panic to see what Alex had just spotted. Erin Porter swanning in with Leigh.

And here Alex had thought the evening was winding down.

Sixteen

It had taken forever to drag Erin to the party from the dive bar around the corner. It had also taken a lot of booze. Leigh practically had to smack drinks from her hand toward the end to keep her from getting completely smashed.

But they were here now at this shindig for... What was it again? Leigh couldn’t quite remember, but it didn’t matter. The place was stocked with media types, actors, and a photographer. It fitted their needs.

‘Just mingle,’ Leigh told Erin. ‘Don’t worry about anything more. We’re just letting people know you’ve got nothing to be ashamed of.’

Erin nodded. ‘Where’s the champagne?’

‘Maybe stick to OJ?’

‘Fine.’

Erin walked off, and Leigh nervously watched her go. Had she forced her out too early? The picture had only come out two days ago. Leigh had been fending off the press ever since. She was rejecting all of them until the firestorm had died down a bit. Cool heads were needed now. Leigh was determined to keep hers fridge cold.

Leigh was mulling her next move when someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to see Alex. It was quite the jump scare. 'Jesus!' she exclaimed too loudly. Several people looked around.

'Lovely to see you, too,' Alex said, power suited to the nines.

It made Leigh wonder if she was overdressed in her black gown. The trouble was, Alex never looked out of place anywhere. It was a confidence thing, not a sartorial thing. You couldn't buy that off the rack, that was for sure.

Leigh realised something. 'Oh my god, if you're here...'

'That's right. Isabelle's right over there. And I don't think either one of us wants them to have any interaction whatsoever tonight.'

'God, no,' Leigh agreed.

They looked at each other expectantly. Leigh realised what Alex was waiting for. 'Oh, you think Erin's leaving?'

'Of course.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘But she just walked in.’

‘Exactly. So now she can scarper before anyone even registers that she was here.’

Leigh snorted. ‘Yeah, right. Erin might not get the paydays that your woman gets, but no one is going to miss her presence. I can assure you of that.’

Alex rolled her eyes. ‘Well, I can’t ask Isabelle to skulk out just because her soon-to-be ex is here.’

Leigh crossed her arms and regarded her nemesis. ‘Then we’re in a quandary. Because neither one of us wants to get them photographed being weird with each other. It’s not good for either of us.’

Alex opened her mouth as though to agree but then closed it again. A slow smile spread across her face. ‘You know what? Don’t worry about it. Stay. Enjoy.’

Alex walked away. Leigh watched her go, partly because she was hypnotised by Alex’s swagger but also because she was trying to figure out what the bloody hell Alex was up to. If she was good with them staying, she had some scheme in mind.

Leigh quickly changed her mind. She needed to get Erin and get the fuck out of here, stat. No good could come from them being here now.

Leigh looked around, but she couldn’t see Erin. Shit. She was here, she was tipsy, and she was about to fall into a spiderweb.

She moved around the room, trying to look casual while she frantically looked for Erin. It took several minutes before she found her, chatting to a woman she didn't know. She kind of looked like Erin.

'Hi,' Leigh said. 'Erin, can we—'

'Oh, great, you need to meet Jenny,' Erin said, barely slurring. 'I can't believe it. I just found her. Amazing.'

Jenny waved. 'Hi.'

'She was my stunt double in Tomorrow and Tomorrow,' Erin explained.

Leigh gave her a polite smile. 'Cool.' She turned to Erin. 'Erin, can I grab you for a sec?'

Erin's mood dropped. 'What? No. Why?'

Leigh gave her a stained smile. 'I just need a quick chat.'

Erin raised an eyebrow. 'Anything you want to say to me, you can say in front of Jenny. She's a friend.'

Jenny looked at Erin. 'I haven't seen you in four years.'

Erin shrugged and smiled, and Leigh could see she'd managed to sneak in a couple more drinks since they'd come in. She'd been at about a six on the drunk idiot scale before. Now it was about an eight.

'Yeah, but you were basically me for six months. That doesn't end,' Erin said, her eyes struggling to keep focus.

Jenny, who was a rather straightforward type, replied evenly, 'It does. When I get a new job.'

Erin was shocked. 'Jenny! You almost broke your back for me. Are you telling me you'd do that for anyone!'

'Yes. That's my job. Though not for that director again. That shoot was dodgy. That's the last time I take a job in Vladivostok.'

'But the movie was good, though, right?' Erin said.

'I wouldn't trade it for my spine,' Jenny said philosophically.

'Spines come and go, Jen,' Erin said. 'Good cinema lasts forever.'

'The movie has forty-three percent on rotten tomatoes,' Jenny informed her.

Erin clutched her chest. 'It does?! But I spent six months perfecting my accent. Do you have any idea how hard it is to learn a Louisiana Creole accent?'

Jenny's eyes widened. 'That's what that was? I thought you were German.'

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Erin was agape with horror. ‘Sweet Jesus,’ she said. ‘I’m going to find that voice coach and kill her.’

Leigh couldn’t take anymore. ‘Erin, you’re drunk. We need to get you home.’

Erin groaned. ‘But you just spent two hours trying to get me in here.’

‘That was before I knew Isabelle was here.’

Erin sobered up quickly. ‘What?’

‘Yes. With her goddamn shark of a PR woman, Alex Walker. And Alex is planning something. We need to get the fuck out. Now.’ She turned to the stuntwoman. ‘I’m sorry about this.’

Jenny shrugged. ‘I jump off buildings for a living. This doesn’t faze me.’

‘Let’s go,’ Erin said. ‘Jenny, till the next time I drive a motorbike off a plane.’

‘Sure.’

Leigh took Erin by the hand and led her through the room, keeping an eye out as she went. She couldn’t see Isabelle or Alex. The exit came into view. They were mere feet away.

‘Hey, Erin!’ someone called. Erin stopped and turned to the sound of her name.

‘No, Erin. Bad girl. Come. Come now!’ Leigh called to her, no idea why she was talking to her like a dog.

She didn’t seem to hear. Leigh went back into the fray just in time to see a waiter handing a glass of champagne to a slightly confused Erin. Leigh rushed towards her, sensing disaster. She heard the waiter say, ‘Sorry,’ but he didn’t do the thing he was apologising for until after he’d apologised.

He took a step closer, ‘fell’ and pushed into Erin. Erin dropped her drink, champagne spilling down her beautiful dress.

A camera flashed.

Leigh knew it was too late. Alex had orchestrated her little dance. But she was getting Erin out, nonetheless.

‘ERIN,’ she said loudly. Erin turned. ‘Let’s GO,’ Leigh ordered.

Erin listened this time and ran—soaked with booze—back to Leigh, who took her hand and pulled her out of the venue. Outside, Leigh flagged down a cab and put Erin in the back, climbing in behind her.

‘I’m a mess,’ Erin said.

Truer words were never spoken. But Leigh wasn’t about to pile on. Erin was too drunk, and it was too late to fix anything now. What would be, would be.

Seventeen

Alex was talking to the clumsy waiter in the kitchen. ‘Fifty, as promised.’

The kid took the cash and left. Alex went out to find Isabelle leaving. She followed her out, high from her success.

‘That went great,’ she told Isabelle.

‘You think?’ Isabelle asked. ‘I tried to do what you asked...’

‘Wait and see,’ Alex promised.

The next morning, it was all over the most basic gossip websites, as well as a couple of print publications. A photo of Erin looking drunk, spilling all over herself. But that was only half of what Alex had wanted to get in the picture. It had been tricky to ensure it, and Alex also had to grease the event photographer to make sure he framed it exactly right. But in the top left of the photo, Isabelle was in the background, talking to some rando, but most importantly, looking beautiful and elegant and laughing, looking like she was having the bloody time of her life, just as Alex had asked her to. It was an important juxtaposition.

People were loving it on social media. The phrase Alex had been looking to provoke was all over the posts.

‘Isabelle looking gorgeous and living her best life while her ex looks like the trash that took itself out,’ one Instagram post said.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Alex screenshotted that one and sent it to Isabelle. And then, as an afterthought, she found Leigh's LinkedIn account and DM'd it to her.

It didn't take long to get a response. Well, aren't we clever?

Your move, Alex responded. And she meant it. She wanted Leigh to fight her, push back.

That was when Alex realised something. She was having fun. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt that way. Work had been by the numbers for quite some time.

But Leigh made it interesting again. Weird.

Isabelle called, and Alex picked up on the first ring.

'Amazing!' she greeted Alex. 'You did it. Exactly what you promised.'

'Yes, I'm good like that,' Alex said breezily.

'So, what's next?'

Alex had expected that question and had a pretty good answer. 'Next? We get you every major award in the UK. Once that's done, you'll get that Oscar you should have had years ago.'

Isabelle laughed. 'Not this year, not a chance.'

‘No?’

‘A nom isn’t out of the question, but Rachel Adebayo had a hell of a role this year. I can’t beat a homeless drug addict with sepsis.’

‘I didn’t see that.’

‘It ticked the boxes,’ Isabelle said bitterly.

Alex didn’t like that comment but decided to move around it. ‘You played Amelia Earheart. Awards love a biopic.’

‘My other PR people seemed to think it wasn’t going to happen. You think you can do better?’ Isabelle asked.

‘I don’t make promises I can’t keep,’ Alex said.

‘That much is clear. OK, well, I would certainly not be averse to an award sweep if you think you can do it.’

‘It’s going to cost you,’ Alex warned.

‘If you’re confident, I can shoulder it.’

‘OK, a few questions. Did the movie struggle to get made?’

‘It was in development hell for about seven years, I believe.’

‘Perfect. And why did you choose it?’

‘Because I’d never died on screen before,’ Isabelle answered.

‘Let me rephrase that. How did you personally connect to the role?’ Alex asked.

‘Ah, I see. Hmm...’

Alex realised she was going to have to do the heavy lifting here. ‘She was born into quite a wealthy family, right? Though there’s a lot of privilege, there’s also a lot of expectations. Women like her were not supposed to be adventurers. That click for you?’

Isabelle laughed. ‘It doesn’t seem like you need me for this.’

‘You can leave it in my hands,’ Alex assured her. They hung up.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Alex called Baker in. 'I need a full address list for every voter for the National Guild of Actors Award, the Lawrence Griffin Award, and the MOKDA'S.'

'You campaigning for Isabelle? Should I get DVDs made?' he asked.

'Get them made, but don't send them anywhere. People will get them in gift bags, along with the story of the little movie that could.'

Audrey raised an eyebrow. 'Gift bags?'

'Yes. I'm going to throw a disgustingly lavish screening party.'

Baker laughed. 'Do we do that here? I thought that was a Hollywood thing. And also, can I go?'

'It is, yes. And no, you can't.'

Baker tutted. 'But isn't it a bit brazen?'

'Yeah, it's gross. And it works.' She thought it over. 'And find out who's doing the high-end gift bags. A budget of five grand a bag.'

'Jesus. You could put an iPhone in them at that price.'

'If that's what a bribe costs,' Alex shrugged.

'Wow,' Baker said in sheer amazement at Alex's gall.

‘No one just wins a best actress award,’ Alex told him. ‘There’s a system. I’m simply planning to be a bit gauche about it. But watch if it doesn’t work.’

‘You’re so corrupt,’ Baker said. ‘I love it.’

‘I try. Oh, and by the way, make sure to put Leigh Calloway on the invite list,’ she said.

Baker looked at Alex like she’d gone mad. ‘Erin Porter’s PR person? Why?’

‘I just thought she’d like to come and see what she’s really up against,’ Alex said. ‘Hopefully, it will intimidate her and shatter her confidence,’ she added quickly.

Did Alex believe that? Almost. Because she was pretty good at denial. But the truth couldn’t be held at bay forever. And the truth was that Alex wanted to impress Leigh. Same as before.

Ten Years Ago

Alex didn’t know how she’d ended up sitting with this trio of idiots who were never gonna get any of these girls into bed. She should have been upstairs, alone with Leigh. She didn’t even care whether they slept together tonight. She just wanted to kiss her. Or touch her hair. Inhale her. Anything, really.

The whole thing made Alex feel just a little crazy. She felt like she was walking willingly into her own madness. She’d never understood anyone else’s need to make someone else the answer to life until right now. Because there was simply something about Leigh that seemed like an answer to a question Alex hadn’t known how to ask.

‘Right, Leigh, you’re up first,’ said one of the guys, the purple-haired one. Alex couldn’t be bothered to memorise his name. ‘Tell me about the first time you had

sex,' he said, looking pleased with himself, like there was any originality to his question.

'Oh, Jesus, really?' Leigh said, looking adorably embarrassed.

'You can take a drink if you don't want to...'

Leigh necked a shot before anyone could say further. 'That's me done. Next.'

'Alex, same question.'

Alex necked a shot. She then watched as everyone did the same thing except for one girl who seemed pretty keen to describe a tryst when she was seventeen.

'I lost it on holiday, with my family,' the girl said.

'Youwhat?' the purple-haired guy asked worriedly.

The girl realised what she'd said. 'No, I mean, I was on holiday with my family when it happened. I shagged a barman at the onsite pub. I mean, obviously, you creep!'

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Several sighs of relief were heard.

‘Right, next question. What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?’

The question went around the room, and now that people were starting to drink, they were loosening up, ready to get into it.

Purple-hair boy confessed that he had strung two girls along at the same time, though the way he told it, you could tell it was more of a confession than a brag.

Then, one of the girls said she’d cheated on an exam. Everyone was a bit more impressed by that one.

Another girl confessed to stealing money from her parents to buy a super soaker when she was eleven. Everyone laughed at that and called her a choir girl.

When it got to Alex, she thought it over and remembered something she supposed she could share. ‘I accidentally murdered the school hamster when I was eleven.’

‘What?’ Purple-Hair asked.

‘It was my turn to have him for the weekend, and I left his cage open while I went to the bathroom. Well, he crawled onto the windowsill and fell out. My mum discovered him outside. He was a pancake.’ Alex sighed. ‘Poor Romeo. He never stood a chance.’

Leigh put a gentle, soft hand on Alex’s shoulder. ‘You couldn’t have known that

would happen.'

'I guess, but I've always felt bad anyway,' Alex admitted. Though she was a little sad about Romeo, Leigh's touch drove her slightly wild.

'Maybe it was suicide. Did he seem despondent before it happened?' one of the girls asked.

Alex looked at the girl in wordless amazement.

One of the other boys—Alex thought his name was Jacob—cleared his throat. 'Well, tough to top. Leigh, what you got?'

'Pour me a shot,' Leigh said instantly.

Alex looked over at her with interest. What had she been up to?

'Whoa! The good girl's been naughty,' Jacob said.

Leigh still didn't speak.

'What was it?' Alex heard herself say.

'This is truth or drink. And I'm gonna drink,' Leigh said quickly.

'Was it that bad?' Alex said.

She didn't know why she suddenly felt stuck on this. She'd been no angel in her life. But if Leigh didn't tell the room what she'd done, then there was darkness waiting to jump out and surprise Alex. That scared her. She wanted Leigh to be better than her.

Leigh looked at her freshly poured shot. But she didn't pick it up. 'OK, then,' she sighed. 'I'll tell you what I did.'

Eighteen

Leigh looked at the fancy invitation she'd found in the pile of post on her desk this morning in astonishment. 'She's got to be kidding me!' she exclaimed.

Her assistant, Henry, walked in. 'Sorry?'

'Sorry, I was just talking to myself. But since you're here, look at this!' She held up the invite. 'She's taking the piss!'

'Who? What piss?'

'Alex Walker. She's doing an award campaign party at some swank hotel. I mean, she's calling it ascreeningof that Amelia Earhart thing Isabelle did. But it's obvious what itreallyis. It's got to be against the rules.'

He shrugged. 'I can make some calls and find out?'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh nodded. 'Yes, do that. She can't get away with this.'

'What if she does? You gonna go?' Henry asked, slightly titillated.

'Not a chance,' Leigh exclaimed. 'She thinks she can rub it in my face, and I'll just take it. She can think again.' She took a break from her rant, realising something. 'Wait, did you come in to tell me something?'

Henry nodded. 'I was coming in to tell you that journo you hate, Ivy Coulter, just called. She wants to get an interview with Erin.'

Leigh shook her head quickly. 'No chance. I've got arealjournalist lined up for Erin, Selma Haynes.'

It had been a serious get to procure a slot on Haynes' show. She did in-depth interviews that could get pretty uncomfortable for the interviewee. But Selma's interviews came with a shine of respectability. She was trusted. That was what they needed right now. A credible journo who would go into the shades of grey in Erin's affair.

It had taken real work to get her in with Selma. Leigh had many,manyconversations with her producer to convince her it wasn't just celeb gossip that Erin could provide but a meaty exposé of a high-profile marriage gone wrong. But she'd gotten there, and she could only hope now that Erin would use the interview wisely.

'You can tell Ivy she can have a press release and be happy,' Leigh told Henry, pleased to be in a position to tell that viper where to go.

Henry grimaced. 'Ivy said that she thought you might say that, and she wants you to know she found the girl in the photo.'

Leigh's eyes nearly flew out of her head. 'She said what?' She paused. 'Did she give you a name?'

'She did, actually. She said to say that if you need proof, the girl's name is Amanda Bradley. Some old friend recognised her, even from that bad angle, and responded to a tweet of Ivy's asking for info. Sold her the name.'

Leigh smiled. Ivy thought she knew the name. Well, now she did.

'Set up a meeting,' Leigh said.

Henry went away to make the call and came back a few minutes later. 'She won't meet you. She says that time has passed. She wants Erin. Today. Or she's writing up what Amanda Bradley said. But she says if Erin gives her an honest interview, she'll print that instead.'

This was bad. Part of the Selma Haynes deal was exclusivity. But if this Amanda Bradley person had talked, she could have said anything. And they would be none the wiser until it went viral.

Leigh didn't know what to do. And she didn't like that she didn't know what to do. Jack would have known what to do. He would have been three moves ahead of Ivy at any given time.

Leigh decided to do the only thing she could. She called him. 'Hey, Jack! How's Costa Rica?'

'No idea. I'm still in England,' he said glumly.

‘Oh.’

‘Yep. I can’t sell up right now because the market’s down. I’ll probably go in a year,’ Jack explained.

‘Ah well. Umm, the thing is...’ Leigh began.

‘I’ve been meaning to call you. What the hell happened with Helen Archer? She called me and told me you were the rudest person she’d met in her entire life. Which is probably an exaggeration, but still.’

Leigh was distraught. ‘She did? Jack, I’m so sorry.’

‘No, Leigh. Don’t apologise. You gave it to one of the biggest arseholes in the business. I wouldn’t necessarily recommend it as a strategy going forward, but you spoke up for yourself. I like hearing that.’

‘You’re not mad?’

‘I told you, be cocky, make bold moves.’ He laughed. ‘And that was bold.’

‘You don’t know what a relief it is to hear you say that. I feel like I’m failing. I could do with your advice,’ Leigh told him.

‘I’ve been keeping tabs on the situation. You’re on the back foot, no doubt,’ he said without judgment in his tone.

‘I had managed to get Selma Haynes an exclusive interview with Erin to talk about the affair and what led to it.’

‘Very good,’ Jack said.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I thought so, too. But then Ivy Coulter—’

‘Oh, Christ. Nother. She’s an absolute scumbag.’

‘Yes,her. She got the girl from the picture, and she wants Erin to give her an exclusive or whatever that girl says goes out with no counterpoint whatsoever.’

‘But you don’t know what this girlsaid?’ Jack checked.

‘Nope,’ Leigh admitted.

‘So she offered a trade? The mistress for Erin?’ Jack sighed thoughtfully. ‘Then you have to follow her lead.’

‘How?’

‘Trade Erin for something else. Give her something better than Erin and the girl. Juicier.’

‘That’s a good idea, Jack. But I don’t have anything...’ Leigh trailed off. She did have one thought. ‘What about Isabelle trying to buy awards with a lavish screening party?’

‘It’s not bad,’ Jack mused. ‘But I don’t think it’s quite gonna get you there.’ He paused. ‘How do you feel about fishing?’

Leigh was confused. ‘What? Like, trout?’

Jack tutted. 'No, I mean... Do you remember that thing I used to do? Take out the opposition, wine them, dine them, get them good and loose and then fish for ammunition?'

'Oh,that? I don't know. That's kind of... I mean, I don't know if I'm up to it,' Leigh told him honestly.

'You never know until you try.'

Leigh sighed. 'Well, I don't have anything better. I suppose it's worth a shot.'

'Keep me updated.'

She got off the phone and rang Alex, taking deep breaths as the phone rang. She needed to feel ready and confident. But the second Alex picked up, Leigh felt nothing but fear. She did her best to bury it in a cheery tone.

'Hi, Alex. Just wanted to thank you for the invite to your bribe party.'

If Alex was surprised by such a bold accusation, she didn't reveal it. Her tone was one of pure delight. 'Of course. Can I count you as attending? Or are you busy that night watching Erin cry about losing her golden goose?'

Leigh smiled and pulled the trigger. 'Let's talk about that over lunch, shall we? One thirty at Bouchard's work for you?'

Alex paused. 'I'm kind of busy.'

Leigh felt panic. She couldn't accept the rejection; she needed this chance. She had nothing else. 'You don't have an hour to talk about our clients? I promise it'll be worth your while,' she lied.

Alex chuckled. 'You sound desperate, Calloway.'

'Desperate isn't the word I'd use,' Leigh lied. She was getting nowhere. She was gonna have to take quite a big swing. 'But look, if you can't do it, I guess I'll just let you hear what I was going to tell you the old-fashioned way. In the news, when it's too late to do anything about it.'

There was a silence, during which Leigh was sure she'd utterly fucked this. But then Alex said, 'I guess I have to eat. Might as well get free entertainment while I'm at it.'

Leigh laughed despite herself. 'Yeah, we'll see.' She cancelled the call there and then.

Was it a bit much to hang up like that? No, it was in line with the vibe. They were enemies who were not afraid to say it. Rudeness was encouraged. And sort of fun.

'Henry, can you please book Bouchard's at one thirty?' she called through.

'You got it, boss!' he called back.

Bouchard's was insanely expensive, but Leigh didn't want to come off as the poor relation in this. She was going to abuse her company credit card hard today. She wanted to make Alex feel intimidated if such a thing were possible.

Nineteen

Alex wasn't excited to see Leigh; she was simply jazzed to dip into a stimulating professional rivalry. She was letting Leigh amuse her, and nothing more, she assured herself.

She managed to believe that right until Leigh walked in that tight grey pencil skirt and turned to the host, giving Alex a side view of her perfect rear. Alex practically had to rip her eyeballs away from it.

Get ahold of yourself, Alex told her libido sternly as Leigh wiggled over to the table.

'You beat me,' Leigh said, sliding into a seat opposite Alex in the hoity-toity restaurant.

'Thirty quid for a salad?' Alex greeted her. Alex wouldn't blink at that for a business lunch, but she wanted to put Leigh on the back foot.

'Well, it's on the company credit card,' Leigh said quickly.

'You're out to impress today, then?' Alex said with a cheeky smile.

Leigh tried not to smile back, but she wasn't fully successful. 'It's just protocol. I asked to meet. I pay.'

'Yes, you do,' Alex agreed. 'And I'm going to exploit it. Most expensive main, bottle of wine, dessert. I will feast like a sultan.'

Leigh was still trying not to smile. 'I'd expect nothing less.'

The waitress appeared, and Alex ordered a steak, along with an eighty-quid bottle of red. She didn't fancy wine right now, but she was making a point. But then Leigh ordered lobster, and Alex felt rather one-upped.

She should have done that, seafood allergy be damned. Though it might have undercut her power position to be taken out of the restaurant by an ambulance crew, her head the size of a pumpkin.

The wine came quickly, and Alex poured a glass for each of them. She held up her glass. 'To Isabelle's impending awards,' she toasted.

'Why not?' Leigh said with an eye roll, clinking her glass against Alex's.

Alex took a sip and remembered the last time she'd drunk with Leigh, ten years ago. A less refined drink, to be sure. Alex felt rather maudlin all of a sudden. Christ, the wine couldn't be taking effect that quickly, could it?

'So, let's hear it. What's this big news?' Alex asked, pushing away the blues.

Leigh sipped her wine unhurriedly. 'Bit hungry. Think I'll wait till my food comes. I'll spill the beans later.'

Alex shook her head at Leigh. 'Oh, this is how we're gonna play, is it? You're gonna make me wait for... well, it's gonna be nothing, isn't it? Let's be honest.'

'If you thought it was nothing, you wouldn't have come,' Leigh said haughtily.

'Maybe I just wanted the pleasure of your company,' Alex said, letting a drop of lasciviousness slip into her words.

Leigh took another sip of her wine, glancing around the restaurant as though Alex hadn't spoken. Alex was taken aback. Whatever game Leigh was playing, Alex wished she'd get on with it. She was starting to feel... unsettled? Scared, even? No, not that. Alex wasn't afraid of anyone. She wasn't gonna start with Leigh.

'Well, let's warm up, shall we?' Alex said. 'I mean, lobster takes a minute. Gotta pass the time somehow if you're playing your cards close to your chest.'

'Sure. Let's get warm. Why don't you tell me what you've been up to for the last ten years?'

'Well, making a boatload of money for a start,' Alex said casually.

That was technically true, even if most of it went straight back into the business.

'Good for you. I remember that was a big deal for you, being solvent,' Leigh said.

Alex couldn't read the comment. Was it a dig? Surely, it had to be. Because this wasn't a friendly conversation. 'You remember that?'

'Sure,' Leigh said. 'Your parents were... No, your dad? He had a problem, right? Addiction issues?'

This wasn't snarky, Alex decided. Leigh was really asking.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘That’s correct,’ Alex told her. ‘Gambled the housekeeping away regularly like the bloody cliché he was.’

‘How’s he doing now?’ Leigh asked earnestly.

‘He’s in GA, so... We’ll see.’

‘That’s positive. And your mum?’ Leigh asked.

‘Remarried,’ Alex said briefly.

‘Great,’ Leigh smiled.

Alex didn’t want to keep talking about her parents. ‘How about yours?’

Leigh let out a little sigh. ‘They got divorced a few years ago.’

‘Ah, OK.’

‘I was thrilled.’

Alex nodded. ‘Yes, I can imagine.’

‘Yeah. But then they told me they’re getting remarried this June,’ Leigh went on.

Alex was shocked. ‘They are?’

‘Ain’t love grand?’ Leigh said sourly.

Alex felt a flash of sympathy. ‘Shit. No chance that’s gonna work out, I assume?’

‘Deeply unlikely.’

‘So they’re getting remarried because...’

‘At a guess, they miss the drama. I literally can’t imagine any other reason at this point. By the time they got divorced, my dad was casually calling my mum Fuckface on a daily basis. Her pet name for him was Micro-dick.’

‘How do you come back from that?’ Alex exclaimed, more drawn in than she meant to be.

‘I’m not qualified to explain that. But I don’t have to. Not my problem anymore.’

Alex nodded. ‘I get that.’

Leigh frowned and took a larger sip of wine than usual. When she’d put the glass down, it seemed like her entire mood was different. Peppy. ‘Speaking of acrimonious divorces, how’s Isabelle doing?’

Alex was jarred by the mood shift but tried to roll with it. ‘Oh, she’s great. Freedom looks good on her.’

‘She dating yet?’ Leigh asked like it was off the top of her head.

But Alex knew better. She laughed. ‘When her divorce isn’t finalised? That would be a bit silly, wouldn’t it?’

‘People have needs,’ Leigh countered. ‘Especially after a bad breakup.’

‘Isabelle is not a cat in heat. She has control of herself.’

Leigh snorted. ‘That much we know.’

Alex decided to let that one go.

The food arrived. It looked good. Alex realised she was pretty hungry. She began to dissect her food into small bites, the better to be prepared for curveballs. She wouldn’t be caught chewing like a goat if Leigh tried to trick her again.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

But a minute passed in silence while both of them tucked into the food. Alex made a firm decision not to break the silence. Leigh could take it from here, and eventually, she did.

‘So, yeah, let’s talk about what happens next.’

Alex finished chewing her bite, swallowed, and smiled. ‘What happens next is that Isabelle leaves your girl exactly where she found her—which is to say in the doldrums of mediocrity—and goes on to have the career she should.’

‘That’s the narrative, is it? That Erin was some sad little waif who wouldn’t have had any success whatsoever without being rescued by Isabelle?’ Leigh asked snarkily.

‘Pretty much,’ Alex shrugged.

‘You think that’s the right way to go?’ Leigh asked her.

Alex was amused. ‘You don’t?’

‘Not my place to question it.’

‘Yet you just did. So, come on, then. Let’s hear it. School me.’

Leigh shrugged. ‘It’s just, well, I guess I might think that it leaves you open to doubts about questionable power dynamics within the relationship, wouldn’t you say?’

Alex didn’t respond immediately. Because—and Alex would rather have pulled out

one of her own teeth with the lobster crackers than admit this—but Leigh might have had a small point. Not that Alex couldn't spin it.

'Hmm,' Alex said. 'That's certainly interesting. And if Erin had been twenty when they met, I'd agree. But she was nearly thirty.'

'Twenty-eight.'

'That's old enough to know better.'

'But young enough to be impressed by an established actress trying to get into your knickers, that's for sure,' Leigh countered.

'Youknowit wasn't like that,' Alex said irritably.

'You know what I know?' Leigh said, getting quite pissy. 'It's that Isabelle has control of the money, and she's left Erin without a pot to piss in, even though Erin's been earning real money for a decade. But Isabelle took Erin's money just because she could. Sounds like a power imbalance to me.'

'Isabelle hasn't taken anything,' Alex said, waving a dismissive hand. 'Erin spent every penny she earned while letting her sugar momma take care of the day-to-day expenses.'

'Shespentall her fees? On what?!' Leigh asked, exasperated.

Alex didn't know, so she opted for a snarky reply. 'That will be detailed in the court transcripts, I'd imagine.'

'You're ridiculous!' Leigh said a touch angrily.

Alex knew she was under Leigh's skin. She didn't mind that. That flush in Leigh's face, her dark eyes wide with anger, it was a good look on her. It wasn't a far cry from how she might have looked if... Well. Anyway.

Get your mind out of the gutter, Alex warned herself. You can't win against her like this.

Twenty

Leigh took a moment to gather herself from her ill-advised outburst. 'You know, Alex, you really are a very skilled wind-up merchant. If nothing else.'

Alex laughed. 'If nothing else? That's all I can do, is it?' She ate a bit of steak.

'It's all you've done to me,' Leigh told her. She immediately regretted it. Alex couldn't know she was getting to her.

But Alex was looking rather pleased with herself, so that ship had sailed. 'Can we cut to the chase?' Alex asked.

'What chase is that?' Leigh asked, playing for time.

'What is it you've got for me?' Alex asked plainly.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh tried to summon some bullshit, but it simply wouldn't come. She slumped in her chair. This was stupid. She couldn't do this. Alex wasn't an idiot. She could smell every attempt to trick her into revealing juicy morsels of information coming a mile away.

Leigh knew now this was not going to be the way she did things. It simply wasn't her. She wasn't sly. Even so, she couldn't quite bring herself to admit she had no real reason to drag Alex to lunch.

Leigh looked down at her lobster. 'You know what? I regret ordering this,' she explained honestly. 'The amount of work you have to do for what you get? I just don't think it's worth it.'

Alex accepted the subject change with surprising amiableness. 'I'd swap, but it might kill me.'

Leigh was horrified. 'You've got a seafood allergy? Why didn't you say anything? You shouldn't even be at the same table as this thing!'

Alex shrugged. 'No, it's OK. It's not an airborne thing for me. I can be near it.'

Leigh was relieved. But she needed to get the thing dealt with, just on the off chance. She set to work, snapping, breaking, sucking, getting the thing eaten in haste.

After several minutes of going hard at the lobster, she happened to glance up. Alex was wide-eyed. Leigh realised how disgusting she was being.

‘I just wanted to get it gone,’ she explained. ‘It’s a health and safety issue.’

Alex burst out laughing. ‘That was magnificent. It was like something from a nature programme.’

Leigh couldn’t help but laugh with her.

Alex looked down at her steak. ‘If we’re going feral, this steak may be a bit much, too. My belt is straining. You mind if I undo?’

Leigh smiled, pleased. ‘Go for it.’

Alex reached down and released herself with a noisy sound of relief. ‘Thank Christ.’

Leigh noticed an elderly couple shooting them looks. She couldn’t blame them. She and Alex looked like a couple of utter degenerates. It took Leigh to that night ten years ago. When everyone was a mess, and not very good at hiding it, either.

Ten Years Ago

Leigh didn’t want to tell this story. But she knew it might be worse if she drank instead of talking, particularly when no one else was being tight-lipped about their transgressions. They could imagine anything if she didn’t speak. Like she’d murder some neighbourhood pets or something.

She took a deep breath and let out her most private shame. ‘OK, here it is, then. Two years ago, I tried to make my mum think my dad was having an affair.’

The room went silent for a moment. Leigh could feel the sheer disgust. It was fair enough. It was disgusting.

‘How did you do it?’ Alex eventually asked, breaking the weighty silence.

‘I bought a thong and put it in the glove compartment of their car,’ Leigh explained.

‘What happened?’ Alex asked.

‘Time went by, and nobody found it. So when it was just me and my mum, I pretended to find it myself, and I showed it to her.’

‘How did she react?’ one of the girls asked, darkly fascinated.

Leigh paused. This was the worst part of the story. ‘She saw them, and she pretended they were hers.’

‘Maybe she really thought they were?’ Alex suggested.

‘My mother made it very clear on several occasions that she hated thongs. “One-way ticket to a yeast infection,” she calls them. That’s the reason I chose it in the first place.’

‘So she thought you’d found evidence of infidelity, and then she tried to protect you from it?’ Alex said, more of a statement than a question.

Leigh looked at her and opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

‘Jesus, Leigh. That’s dark, dude,’ Jacob said quietly. No one else was saying anything.

‘Then what happened?’ a girl asked.

‘Nothing. No one ever said anything about it.’

‘Wow, man. Just wow,’ Jamie said.

Leigh sighed. ‘It was a terrible thing. I know that.’

Jacob turned. ‘Sorry, Alex, but that pisses all over your hamster.’

Alex nodded. ‘Totally. We have a winner.’

Leigh was aghast. She shouldneverhave told this story. But it had been her instinct to be truthful. She was now realising how stupid that was. Why couldn’t she have just made something up?

The trouble was that the story needed context, and the time to provide it had passed. Given more time, Leigh would have liked to explain that her father had most likely been having affairs anyway and that she had found a pair of sunglasses in the car only weeks earlier while her dad was driving her to school. They were gauche knock-off Guccis that were not remotely in her mother’s style, and clearly weren’t her dad’s either.

‘Whose are these?’ she’d asked him. She hadn’t been suspicious, just wondering.

But her dad had snatched them quickly. ‘No one’s,’ he said and stuffed them into his pocket.

Leigh knew a guilty reaction when she saw one, and she knew what it meant. She was angry for her mother. Her mum was no angel, but this wasn't right. Leigh wanted to warn her, but she didn't know how to say it. So she'd recreated the moment, albeit with a less subtle clue as to what her dad had been up to.

But the moment her mum saw that thong, Leigh saw something in her eyes. A total lack of surprise. She knew. So all Leigh had succeeded in doing was embarrassing her, putting a secret out there that her mother had already decided to live with. It was the first and last time that Leigh had ever tried to pull anything like that.

And now everyone at the party was looking at her like she was a psychopath.

'I think we'll leave the game there,' Jamie said.

'Sounds good,' Alex said. 'I'm getting too drunk anyway.'

Leigh was sure that the next thing Alex was going to say was that it was time to get going, that she had an early morning. But instead, she said to her, 'I'm kind of tired. Shall we head up to your room?'

Leigh was stunned but managed to nod. And up they went.

Now

Leigh was ready to end this lunch and leave with her tail between her legs. With any luck, she could escape without having to admit this whole thing was a failed ruse. But she knew in her heart that was a vain hope. Because if Leigh knew anything about Alex, it was that she could pull the unpleasant truth out of Leigh like a rotten tooth.

And here it came. Alex was fixing her with those deep-set grey eyes, leaning across the table. 'Look, Leigh... Can we be real? What is this? What are we doing here?'

What is it you actually want from me?’

Leigh knew she was gonna have to get honest with Alex. Again.

Twenty-One

Alex hadn’t thought the lunch would end up with Leigh going absolutely bonkers on the lobster or Alex exploding from her clothes with the sheer force of meat. But it changed things. The whole energy of the lunch felt altered. You couldn’t see each other in that kind of state and keep any semblance of formality.

‘Can we be real? What is this? What are we doing here? What is it you actually want from me?’ Alex had to ask.

Leigh, wiping her hands on a cloth napkin, struggled to look Alex in the eye. ‘I can’t tell you. Not in detail.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’d use it.’

Alex felt affronted, but only briefly. ‘You know what, you’re probably right,’ she admitted. ‘I’m pretty cutthroat.’

Leigh sighed. ‘No. You’re just good at what you do.’

Alex was stunned. ‘Was that a compliment?’

‘Yes. Enjoy it.’

‘I am, believe me,’ Alex told her happily.

Leigh frowned. ‘Look, you dragged yourself out here, so I guess I owe you something. But I’ll keep it vague, OK?’

‘Cool,’ Alex said.

‘I brought you here today because I was sort of hoping you’d let something juicy slip that I could trade to someone else to keep quiet about something I would rather not get out because that other person is a total dirtbag with no concerns about sticking to the facts whatsoever.’ Leigh finished her run-on sentence and sat back in her chair breathlessly, worn from exertion.

Alex did the calculations. ‘OK, so, it’s got to be about the affair, right? And who’d trade one juicy tidbit for another? A journalist?’ She watched Leigh’s face carefully for confirmation. She got it. ‘And the person hammering me most for interviews has been Ivy Coulter, who is a dirtbag, god love her. So at a guess...’ Alex searched, and the answer came quickly. ‘Wait, did she find the mistress?’

Leigh’s mouth dropped open. ‘For fuck’s sake. I was so vague!’

Alex felt excitement bubble up. This was indeed useful info. She should run out right now and call Ivy to see if she could exploit this to her advantage. She had a couple of thoughts on how it could be used already.

But she didn't move.

It was only then that she understood something she hadn't before. Leigh's opinion of Alex had weight. And the weight of it came from the fact that Alex respected her. Watching Leigh try to lie and trick Alex and doing such a dreadful job of it spoke to a strange integrity. Alex couldn't help but admire it.

It sucked to realise that. Because they were enemies and couldn't be anything else, ever. Too much water had passed underneath the bridge to swim back from.

Leigh seemed to be waiting for something. 'Well?' she eventually asked.

'Well, what?' Alex said, topping off her wineglass.

She pointed the bottle at Leigh. Leigh held out the glass while Alex filled her up. Alex put the bottle down and took a sip. This wine wasn't worth eighty quid, but it was getting nicer by the sip.

Leigh didn't drink. 'I'm waiting.'

'For what?'

'Your next move,' Leigh said.

'My next move is to drink my wine and look at the dessert menu. I'm already feeling less bloated. I think I could probably squeeze in a scoop of ice cream—'

'Stop it,' Leigh said, suddenly angry.

Alex raised an eyebrow. 'What's up?'

‘I’m not fooled. You’re gonna do something. What is it?’

Alex didn’t know how to answer her, so she just sat there, slightly dumbfounded.

‘Can you just treat me with some respect?’ Leigh demanded.

‘What makes you think I’m not?’

‘Experience,’ Leigh said.

Alex was surprised at how much that hurt. ‘Jesus, Leigh.’

‘Youknowwhat I’m talking about,’ Leigh said, her tone darkening.

‘Are we talking aboutthat, then?’ Alex asked, slightly frightened. She was changing her mind about that ice cream. Now, it could only taste bitter.

‘I mean, why not?’ Leigh said.

Alex had a really good reason why not. But she wouldn’t admit that. Not ever.

Ten Years Ago

Alex followed Leigh up the stairs and into her bedroom. It was tiny, beige, unornamented.

‘How long have you been here?’ Alex asked, thinking maybe she’d just moved in.

‘Since the start of term.’

‘Oh,’ Alex exclaimed, sounding more surprised than she meant to.

Leigh caught the tone and looked around her. ‘I guess it’s a little bare.’

‘Where’s your stuff?’

‘In a couple of boxes in the closet.’ Leigh touched the back of her neck self-consciously. ‘I wasn’t sure if I was going to stay.’

‘You’re gonna drop out?’ Alex asked, shocked.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know,’ Leigh said. She seemed quite forlorn.

‘Are you OK?’ Alex asked.

Leigh went and sat down on the edge of her bed and turned away from Alex. ‘It’s OK. You can go now.’

‘What?’ Alex asked, thinking she’d misheard.

‘You think I’m gross because of that thing with the thong, and I don’t blame you. Don’t feel like you have to pretend.’

Alex had to admit it was not a great story. But it didn’t change anything. ‘Look, you told me they were toxic. And I know how it feels to be stuck in a situation where you don’t know where the next shitstorm is coming from. I get wanting it to end.’

Leigh turned to look at her, those dark eyes growing large with amazement. ‘Do you?’

Alex shrugged. ‘Sure.’

‘But what I did was awful. I want you to know that I know that. I’m not like that, seriously. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking,’ Leigh said, her eyes glistening.

Alex couldn’t help but go to her, sitting down next to her on the bed and taking her hand. Leigh let her take it, and they sat there in the quiet for a while. Alex didn’t know what to do next. It felt like a moment that could go in any number of directions.

The only thing she knew was that she didn’t want to be anywhere else. She wasn’t sure if she’d ever felt that before. There was always something niggling at her—push, push, pushing, always. ‘Do more, be more, get more.’ But she couldn’t push this moment. It could break if she did. She was powerless, confused, hopeful, and scared.

So Alex did the only thing that made any sense to her. ‘Can I kiss you?’ she asked quietly.

Leigh’s breath caught in her throat. ‘Yes.’

Alex leaned in quickly before she could talk herself out of it. But things slowed right down the second her lips met Leigh's. That luscious mouth brought an unknown peace to Alex, calming everything in her that was scrabbling for control. Kissing Leigh felt like pure relief.

Alex felt Leigh slip her arms around her, and she leaned into the hold, wanting to be in Leigh's hands utterly. She had never felt so OK with being exactly where she was.

Alex was shocked to understand what she was feeling. Happiness. In this person's presence, everything was good. As simple as that. Had she really never been happy before? She'd felt pleased with herself, she'd felt the high of achievement, she'd felt the intense relief of a near miss, but this was different. Alex hadn't had language for it until now.

Soon enough, they fell back on the bed and began pulling each other's clothes off urgently. Leigh moved down Alex's naked body, applying her magical lips to every inch of her, and Alex sunk ever deeper into the pure sensation of her and into the unexpected tranquillity of needing nothing except all of Leigh.

She moaned as Leigh pushed down further, to her most sensitive spot, and then it was happening, the rush of electricity up her thighs, up her body, culminating in a moan of pure pleasure erupting out of her mouth.

'Come here,' she said to Leigh, pulling her up to look into her eyes.

Leigh looked so vulnerable, defenceless. Alex suddenly understood why anyone called it making love. That's what this was. They weren't just rubbing body parts. They were making a feeling together.

And then Alex said it to her. Something she'd never dreamt she would ever say to anyone, ever. 'Can I fall in love with you?'

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh smiled wide. ‘Yes, please.’

Alex sighed with relief. All this time, she’d been waiting for just this and had never known it.

Sometime later, Alex awoke.

It took her a moment to realise where she was, but when she saw Leigh’s sleeping face, it all came back to her. They’d slept together, and now everything felt different.

She watched Leigh sleep as the sun rose, entranced, wondering what came next. Would Alex change? Become gentler, more open, a gooey, love-up softy? Alex was amazed to find that the thought wasn’t terrible.

Her phone beeped. It was her mother.

Call me.

Alex was immediately pissed off. Reality couldn’t give her a day off, could it?

She crept carefully out of the bed, grabbing a throw blanket off a chair and wrapping herself to cover her butt-nakedness. She took her phone out of the room, down the hall, and into an open bathroom. The bathroom was gross, but it wasn’t hard to figure out why—boys.

Alex rang her mum. 'Everything OK?'

'I'm so, so sorry for texting this early,' her mother said immediately. Her mother was always apologising and rarely had anything to apologise for.

'It's fine. What's up?' Alex asked.

'It's, umm...' She lowered her voice. 'I need to borrow some money. Just until payday.'

Alex tensed. 'What's going on?'

'Umm, I lost some money,' her mother almost whispered.

Alex was instantly furious. 'How?'

'It just went missing.'

'Where?'

'In the house,' her mother said vaguely.

Alex pinched the bridge of her nose. 'That fucking bastard.'

'Alex, come on. It wasn't necessarily—'

'Didn't you change the locks after he moved out?' Alex interrupted.

Her mother sounded embarrassed. 'Well, no. It seemed excessive.'

'No, Mum. It's never excessive. Not with Dad.'

‘But I don’t think we can assume it was your dad, Alex,’ her mother said weakly.

‘You do know it was him, don’t you?’ Alex asked, frustrated. ‘You’re just saying it might not be him for my benefit, right? Tell me you know it was him.’

‘No, Alex,’ her mother said, matching Alex’s anger. ‘He promised me when he left. He said he was sorry for it all and he’d leave me in peace. He meant it.’

‘Yes, of course he meant it. He always means it. And then he gets itchy.’

‘It’s a disease,’ her mother cried.

Alex gritted her teeth. 'I know.'

'Like cancer.'

'Not like cancer. You get cancer, you get treatment. He hasn't. So it's not the same, is it?!' Alex realised she was yelling, and she was yelling at the wrong person. And that person was quietly sobbing. Alex felt fucking awful. 'I'm sorry.'

'No, no, it's OK. I'm sure you're right, and I'm being stupid. I guess it's always been hard for me to accept who he is. Even now.' She sniffled. 'He wasn't like this when we met. I guess I can't let go of that man. Who he was at his best. I know that he's still there, underneath it all.'

Alex wanted to scream at her mother. She wanted to call her a naïve idiot. But what was the point? Her mother was born without the ability to see who people were. She preferred the fantasy. Alex loved her mother but hated that part of her. Because she would get screwed over again and again. She was her own worst enemy, convinced she could save everyone. And she couldn't even save herself.

Somehow, she was getting worse. Her mother had had no choice but to make her husband leave the house before he made her homeless with his addiction, and she still couldn't accept he was beyond hope. Alex suspected that her mother secretly dreamed he'd change and come back, and it would be lovely again. She'd probably wait forever, and all because he'd pulled the wool over her eyes for ten minutes when they'd first met a few decades ago. Alex was sickened by the whole thing.

'How much?' Alex asked.

‘Four hundred,’ her mother said quietly.

‘I’ll transfer it later today.’

Her mother immediately started backtracking. ‘Actually, I shouldn’t have asked you; forget it—’

‘It’s fine, Mum,’ Alex said. But it wasn’t.

‘Thank you, Alex. I knew I could rely on you. You’re a good girl.’

‘Not really,’ Alex said.

‘What do you mean?’ her mother asked, shocked.

‘Nothing. Gotta go.’

Alex hung up the phone and sat down on the toilet seat for a pee. Her mind was awlirl. By the time she’d finished emptying her bladder, she’d come to a decision.

She crept back into Leigh’s room and placed the blanket across a chair. She found her clothes at the foot of the bed and put them on as quietly as possible. She went to the door and looked back at the girl who seemed to represent nothing but possibility. She whispered goodbye to her.

She left the house as the sun rose, and she let herself have a small cry about her choice on the walk home. It had seemed for a minute there like Alex was going to know what happiness was, and she was grieving that loss. But her choice was the right one. Because deep down, she’d always known she was her father’s child, and that her inheritance was selfishness. She wanted more than she had, and she’d do whatever it took to get it. It was who he was and who she was.

Not Leigh, though. Leigh was sensitive, too easy to hurt. Alex could only break her. Thank god her mother had reminded her of that. Alex couldn't believe she'd let herself forget that love was a lie.

Twenty-Two

Things had taken a turn.

Whatever it was that Leigh thought she might get from this lunch was in the rearview. Now she wanted something else, and she was ready to demand it.

Leigh had been telling herself she was over that thing that had happened ten years ago because wasn't she supposed to be? It was one night. Nothing in the grand scheme of a whole life.

But that wasn't true. She'd thought she'd found someone special that night, only to realise she'd been tricked. Some part of her had never gotten over it. The wound should have healed, but sitting in this restaurant with Alex, she was bleeding freshly.

'So. Why did you do that?' Leigh asked, amazed at her own forthrightness. Maybe it was the wine, but she felt less timid.

'What?' Alex asked.

Leigh raised an eyebrow at her.

'Oh. That. Do we need to talk about that? It was about a million years ago.'

'It was, yes. But I just want to know... Look, I get it. You just wanted sex. But why would you take it that far?' Leigh asked.

Alex appeared a little scared, a brand-new look on her. ‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Youknowwhat you said. I know, you know.’

Alex’s grey eyes lost their usual spark, dimming. ‘Yeah. I know.’

‘Why would you say that to someone? Why would you make them think—’

‘I was drunk,’ Alex shrugged.

Leigh was surprised to find Alex’s answer quite shocking. ‘That’s it? You said all that to me because you were drunk? Wow.’

Alex leant forward and began playing with a saltshaker, staring at the thing like it was the centre of the universe. ‘What does it matter? It was only one night.’

‘It mattered, Alex,’ Leigh admitted. Because that eighteen-year-old girl was still inside her, and that girl had her heart torn to bits.

Ten Years Ago

Leigh blinked, slowly waking. She felt happy immediately. Sure, she was a little hungover, but that was only her body. In her heart, she felt wonderful.

Alex had seen all of her last night, which included the worst thing she’d ever done. And she hadn’t looked away. Alex had taken her into her arms and loved her. She’d made Leigh feel wanted and accepted. Leigh had never felt that in her life. It was magical.

That magic lasted until she turned over and saw that she was alone in bed. Alex was gone.

Leigh sat down in Marketing Metrics and Analysis. Well, slumped might have been a better description. She didn't hear a word the teacher said the whole lesson. All she could think about was Alex.

Where had she gone? Why? It didn't make sense that she'd left without a word. Leigh didn't want to believe that she'd simply been used. It couldn't be that. There was no way Alex could look her in the eye and lie like that. Something else had to have happened.

The trouble was, they'd never exchanged numbers. There had seemed no hurry to, so Leigh hadn't asked. But now there was no number, no address, no nothing. Leigh only knew one thing: she was on the same degree, albeit in the third year. She had to be here somewhere. As soon as this lecture ended, Leigh would track her down.

'Hi,' Leigh said to the receptionist, making sure to smile. She was being super normal right now. Nothing weird about this.

'Hello,' the young woman with the nose ring said, never looking up from her phone.

'Umm, I found a book, a-a-a textbook, umm, for my course.' Leigh was being careful not to ask anyone specifically about Alex. She didn't want to seem stalkerish.

Wait, was this stalkerish? No. She just needed to talk to the girl who'd asked if she could fall in love with her. Alex couldn't love her until Leigh found her.

‘A book?’ the girl replied, slightly confused. ‘The library is in a different building.’

‘It’s not a library book. I think it belongs to someone in another year. I was hoping to get it back to them,’ Leigh explained.

This was a weak gambit. Because the receptionist could just ask for the book so she could email the owner to come and pick it up. If she was conscientious.

‘What year?’ the woman asked.

‘It says Y3 MARKETING.’

‘I think they’re in 302 right now,’ she said and turned away, not giving a shit, bless her lazy arse.

Leigh headed to lecture hall 302 and waited outside the door. She could hear a teacher doing his thing inside. Leigh didn’t know how long the lecture had to go, but it didn’t matter. Leigh was blowing off her lessons until Alex came out.

It took twenty-five minutes for the class to let out. Leigh watched everyone leave, frightened, hoping she hadn’t gotten this wrong, that she wasn’t an idiot. That Alex would explain that this was all a misunderstanding.

After a throng of people passed through the door, Alex appeared at last. She didn’t see Leigh.

Leigh swallowed her fear. ‘Alex!’ she called.

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Alex turned to the sound of her name, and they locked eyes. And in that moment, Leigh knew she was stupid. Because Alex looked unhappy—frightened even—the moment she realised Leigh had tracked her down.

Leigh didn't say anything else. She simply turned and walked away. She knew. She didn't need to have a humiliating conversation to confirm anything.

She went home and lay down on her bed and cried and cried.

NOW

Leigh looked at Alex across the table, the woman she'd never expected to see again. 'It mattered, Alex,' she repeated.

'But, err, you stayed on the degree? Because I was a bit worried about that,' Alex replied.

Leigh laughed. 'What? You were worried?!'

'I mean...' Alex seemed to be on the verge of saying more, but then she looked back down at her new best friend, the saltshaker. 'A bit.'

Leigh snorted bitterly. 'Yeah, I stayed. Because I didn't have another plan.'

'But it worked out, I guess,' Alex said, still not looking at her.

'In time, I settled into it,' Leigh told her.

It had been a close-run thing, though. The Alex thing had nearly sent her over the edge. And then, somehow, she'd started to feel angry at Alex. Leigh decided that she didn't deserve the power to ruin her life. So she stayed, figuring she needed to prove to herself that she could see things through despite her pain. Because that was what life was, wasn't it? A slog through shit.

With time, Leigh had learnt to trust again, somewhat. She'd even found love a few times, though it hadn't lasted. But no one else had ever made her feel like love could change everything. It was the cruellest thing anyone had ever done to her. Offering hope.

'I'm glad you figured it out,' Alex said.

'I don't care if you're glad,' Leigh replied.

Alex looked at her and looked away again. 'I'm sorry, OK? I'm sorry.'

'I don't accept your apology,' Leigh said, starting to enjoy herself.

Alex deserved this. There had never been a single consequence for her until now. And she deserved to hurt a bit. She deserved to be uncomfortable. She deserved to know she was dogshit.

'I guess that's fair enough,' Alex said.

The waiter came to see if anyone wanted dessert. 'I'm good. I think we'll just take the bill,' Alex replied hastily.

The waiter nodded and left.

'I assume that's OK with you? I'm sure we've both got things to get on with?' Alex

checked.

Leigh nodded, ready to release Alex from this lunch of recriminations. There was nothing more to be gained. 'Of course.'

The waiter came and placed the bill down, leaving them to deal with it. Alex grabbed it.

'What are you doing?' Leigh asked.

'I think I should pay. For wasting your time today.'

'I wasted my own time,' Leigh said. 'Give me the bill.'

'No,' Alex said, placing a credit card in the folder. 'I've got it.'

'If you think this makes up for anything at all...' Leigh said.

For the first time in a few minutes, Alex looked her square in the eye. 'I know that.' She licked her lips nervously. 'If it's any consolation, you had a near miss, anyway.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh was bug-eyed with astonishment. ‘Oh, I see. You did me a favour by promising me the earth and then bugging off before the sun came up, did you? That’s your spin?’

‘It’s just the truth. It wouldn’t have worked,’ Alex said confidently.

Leigh’s anger was renewed. ‘You’re so full of shit.’

Alex nodded vehemently. ‘Yes, I am. I always was. And you found that out quickly. That was best in the long run. That’s all I’m saying. I could have wasted a hell of a lot more of your time, and I’m glad I had enough self-awareness to know that, at least.’

That confused Leigh. ‘What does that mean? Waste my time how? You were never going to stay. You were just drunk. How does that involve self-awareness—’

‘I don’t want to talk about this anymore,’ Alex said, waving the bill.

She caught a waiter’s eye, and he came over with a card machine. She tapped in her details and paid up.

When he left, Leigh couldn’t help herself. ‘Alex, just tell me what you mean.’

Alex got her stuff together and started to stand. ‘I’ve got to go.’

And she almost did. But then her phone rang.

Twenty-Three

Alex was freaking out. She needed to get the fuck out of this restaurant. Everything was going sideways. Her mouth, her oldest, most reliable friend, was doing her wrong. It was saying the real things, letting things slip that were never supposed to be said, ever.

Alex didn't even like to think about that time. And now here she was, loose-lipped in front of Leigh, her mouth running away from her.

Was it the steak? Was she meat drunk? This was the last time she ordered medium rare, she vowed.

She started to get up from the table, fully intending to flee the restaurant at speed when her phone rang. She checked the screen. It read LYING THEIVING SPERMDONOR. What the hell? He never called.

'Who is that?' Leigh asked, catching sight of her screen.

'My dad,' she said, now standing.

'Are you going to get it?' Leigh asked.

The phone stopped ringing, and the decision was taken out of Alex's hands. 'I guess I'll call him later,' she said, no intention whatsoever of ringing him.

He was probably doing his gambler's anonymous amends and had worked his way to his child. Well, sod that. He could tell it to her answering service.

'Anyway, I guess I'll see you at the party...' Alex started to say.

Then her phone buzzed, and a text preview lit up the screen. Call me! It's urgent!

Alex felt panic. 'Urgent?' she muttered.

Leigh heard it. 'What's up? Something wrong?' She sounded more concerned than Alex had any right to expect.

'I don't know. Maybe,' Alex admitted. 'I don't know if... I...'

'Sit down and call him right now. Find out,' Leigh instructed her.

Since Alex wasn't sure what to do, the command was a mercy. She sat down, ringing her dad back. 'What's up?' she asked.

Her father spoke uncertainly. 'Alexandra, Ummm, hi. I just... I'm sorry. I didn't know if you knew... Well, you can't know, can you? It only just happened...'

'What?' Alex demanded.

'Your mum's in the hospital. She fell and hurt her head. She went into a coma.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘WHAT?’ Alex screamed. ‘When? What hospital!’

‘Medford City. Can you come there now?’

‘I’m coming.’ She hung up the call.

Right away, she tried to order an Uber on her phone. But her thumbs didn’t seem to be obeying her, the little fuckers. She accidentally opened Uber Eats instead.

‘I don’t want teppanyaki; I want a fucking cab!’ she muttered, frustrated, close to tears.

‘Alex?’ Leigh asked. ‘Do you need me to get you a cab?’

Alex looked at her. ‘Yes, please.’

Five minutes later, Alex and Leigh were in the back of a cab. Alex didn’t exactly know why Leigh was here, but she was glad she was. Alex had now calmed down enough to explain what her dad had said.

‘She fell?’ Leigh asked.

‘Yes. I have no fucking idea how my dad would know that, but that’s what he said.’

Leigh nodded. ‘It’ll be OK.’

Alex knew Leigh was saying that to be comforting, and she didn't actually have the slightest fucking idea how this would pan out. But Alex had to admit, it lowered her panic a smidge.

'You don't have to come,' Alex told her.

'I'll just get you there, OK?' Leigh said.

That wasn't as crazy an offer as it should have been from Leigh. She might have hated Alex, but Leigh was, at heart, the sort of person who would escort an enemy to the hospital if they needed it. Alex knew that much.

It took a minute to find the right ward. The hospital was a labyrinth, and she was still struggling to get her brain to function properly. But Leigh took over the map reading and led Alex right to her father.

Alex rushed up to him. 'What the fuck!' she greeted him.

Her dad looked tired and old. Alex hadn't seen him in a few years, and he was greyer than the last time she'd clapped eyes on him.

'She fell in the bath,' he explained. 'She wouldn't wake up.'

'And it's a coma?' Alex checked.

'Yes.'

'Fuck.' She gave him a searching look. 'What the hell were you even doing there?'

He looked sheepish.

‘She’s remarried,’ Alex growled.

‘I know,’ he said apologetically.

Alex didn’t care what he’d been through today, she was furious at him. ‘You just couldn’t leave her alone, could you? When you get that bottomless mark, that endless supply of cash and sympathy, you have to keep your claws in, right?’

‘Don’t talk to me like that. I love her!’ her dad said, raising his voice.

In anger, he looked younger and towered a little bit higher. For a split second, Alex felt fear. Before remembering she wasn’t a child anymore. If she ever had been.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Does Rick know what you’ve been up to?’ she demanded.

‘He’s no angel,’ her dad sputtered.

‘Oh, it was Rick that cracked open my piggybank and took the contents to the bookies, was it?’ Alex said, taking a step toward him, squaring up. She wasn’t sure what she was doing, but things were getting away from her.

Her dad leant back slightly. ‘I’m in Gamblers Anon, now, Alex. I haven’t touched a bet in years.’

‘I’ve heard that before,’ Alex said.

‘Alex,’ Leigh said behind her. ‘Let’s go see your mum, OK?’

Alex turned to her, realising that in her tunnel vision, she’d forgotten Leigh was there. She was flooded with shame that Leigh was seeing this. ‘You should go.’

Leigh nodded evenly. ‘I can do that.’

‘Then do that. This isn’t your problem,’ Alex said, hating herself.

‘Jesus, Alex. Take a breath, would you?’ her dad said. ‘Your friend is trying to help you.’

‘Shut the fuck up,’ she told him quietly over her shoulder.

‘I wish I’d never called you,’ he sneered. ‘You don’t deserve to know anything. Your mother would be ashamed of how you’re behaving.’

For some reason, that was it. The red line. Alex turned and slapped her father.

The next few minutes were chaotic and blurry. Security guards appeared from seemingly nowhere and bodily dragged Alex down the hall. Several people were yelling, and Alex thought she might be one of them. And then she was back in the foyer, ejected through the sliding doors.

‘Fuck’s sake, I need to see my mother! She’s in a fucking coma!’ Alex yelled from the street.

The security men stood in front of the door and folded their arms into imposing positions. ‘You’re not allowed in. Try again, and the police will be called.’

Alex stood there impotently, realising she’d fucked up. Her mother was in there in who knew what condition, and she couldn’t see her or find out anything. Alex had never felt so utterly out of control. She didn’t know what had come over her.

She wasn’t sure what to do now. She couldn’t go in, but she couldn’t leave either. She was stuck. She didn’t know what had become of Leigh; she’d probably legged it when things got physical. A wise move.

Alex decided to move farther away from the doors, finding a bench to park herself on while she called the hospital to get some information in the only way left. But ten minutes later, she was still bouncing around the hospital switchboard. She couldn’t seem to find anyone who could give her an update on her mother.

She was on hold with the sixth person when the tears came. Someone sat down next to her, and she hoped to god that some stranger was not about to comfort her. That

was the last thing she needed.

But it was Leigh. 'Your dad had it wrong,' she told Alex. 'The coma was medically induced to reduce the blood pressure in her brain. She cracked her skull, and there was some swelling. But things aren't getting any worse, and the doctors say that's a good thing.'

Alex stared at Leigh. 'Oh.' She wiped the tears from her face and took a deep breath of relief. 'Really?'

'They're going to give her a day under and then bring her out of it. But the prognosis is positive.'

Alex realised she was still on hold and hung up the phone. 'Thank you.' Something occurred to her. 'Why would they tell you all that?'

'Because I told them I was you,' Leigh smiled timidly. 'I hope you don't mind.'

Alex didn't mind at all. But she was a bit baffled. 'Why did you stay? I told you... I was rude to you.'

'Because I get how complicated it was,' Leigh said. 'I might have lost it too in that position. That doesn't mean you don't deserve to know how your mum's doing. Your dad was a dick to say that to you.'

Alex marveled at Leigh. 'I don't deserve how kind you're being.'

Leigh smiled. 'Yeah, maybe not. But you're getting it anyway.'

Twenty-Four

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh needed to go. This weird blip in her war with Alex was drawing to a natural close. And she would leave—in a minute.

‘What are you going to do now?’ she asked Alex, who was looking in a compact mirror, dabbing at herself, tidying up what had been cried away.

‘I’m going back to work. I’ll come back later, hopefully after a shift change,’ Alex said, snapping the compact close.

‘You’re going back to work?’ Leigh asked, reminded with dread of the article that would hit the internet at some point today and completely ruin her client’s chances of coming out of this alright.

Alex shrugged. ‘I honestly don’t know what else to do. I’m no use here, that’s for sure.’

‘Mmm, well. I’m sure you’ll have plenty to do if you’d rather keep busy,’ she said, tired at the thought of what the rest of the afternoon would hold her. People hammering her for a quote, Erin probably on the phone in tears. It would be a shit show, alright.

She was gonna have to agree to that article if there was time left to do it. Fuck. She knew Erin was gonna would need to explain herself eventually, but of all people to give the first interview to... Leigh was gonna have to prepare the ever-loving Jesus out of Erin to have even a small chance of coming out of it OK.

Alex, as though reading Leigh’s mind, suddenly perked up. ‘Oh, I forgot. Ivy’s gonna

drop a bomb of shit any minute, isn't she? I'll need to be ready for that. I need to get my staff to prepare a response.'

'Yeah, me too,' Leigh said a tad miserably. This day had truly gotten away from her.

Alex's sharp grey eyes suddenly gave Leigh the most inscrutable look. It made Leigh feel nervous. 'What?' she eventually asked anxiously.

Alex groaned like she was annoyed about something. 'Wait here a minute.'

She stood and walked a few feet away and made a call, her back to Leigh. Leigh watched her back in befuddlement, totally unable to discern what she was doing.

Alex ended the call and came back to the bench, sitting down. 'Ivy's full of shit. The mistress is keeping her mouth shut.'

Leigh nearly fell off the bench. 'What?!'

'Yeah. She had the name, that's all. She knew it would be enough to trick you into getting Erin to give her the exclusive.'

'She told you that?' Leigh asked, still shell-shocked.

'Happily. I think she was quite pleased with herself. Which I guess she had a right to be, considering it worked. You were going to agree to an interview with her, weren't you?' Alex asked.

'I was,' Leigh admitted. She couldn't believe she was out of this fix just like that. She looked at Alex in wonderment. 'Why would you help me like this?'

Alex rolled her eyes. 'I think that's obvious. But we're square now, OK? For today, I

mean.'

Leigh nodded. After a beat, she raised an eyebrow and asked, 'Did she give you the name?'

Alex grinned, her usual cocky self again. 'Of the mistress? Now, that would be telling, wouldn't it?' She stood up and straightened her coat, giving Leigh one last sassy look. 'Leigh, you've got a lot to learn. I'd have never fallen for that crock of crap.' Alex walked off, laughing to herself.

Leigh watched her go, bewildered. A couple of hours ago, Leigh had known exactly who Alex was. But that Alex wouldn't have helped her out for any reason at all. So Leigh was back to square one with her.

Not that it mattered because all Leigh wanted to see in her now was a professional rival. A rival whose arse she was going to kick into outer space.

She called Erin. 'Hi, Erin. Everything OK?'

'Yeah.' She paused. 'I mean, is it?' she asked, suddenly worried.

'It's all good,' Leigh assured her, thrilled not to have to deliver bad news. 'But we need to get you ready for Selma Haynes, OK?'

'I think I'm ready.'

'Not yet, you're not,' Leigh said gently. 'But you will be. We're going to get this right, Erin. We're gonna talk about every detail and get you in the right headspace to handle this. If we can do that, people will see this interview and have no option but to see you as you truly are: a human being in a difficult situation who made a mistake. But the important thing is transparency. It's the only way out at this point. We're

going the integrity route.'

'If you think so, Leigh,' Erin said. 'I guess I've got to trust you.'

'Yes, you do. Because that's the exact opposite of what your soon-to-be ex-wife is going to do.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Which is what?’ Erin asked.

‘She’s going to try and bribe her way into a bunch of awards.’

‘She is? How do you know that?’ Erin asked.

‘I got an invite to the bribe party.’

‘Are you going?’

Leigh smiled to herself. ‘Damn right. Someone’s got to be there to witness the vile display. If only so I can plan my next move,’ she said.

That was true, but it wasn’t the only reason she wanted to go. However, Leigh wasn’t quite ready to deal with that just yet.

Twenty-Five

‘But you’re definitely OK?’ Alex asked her mother over the phone a few days later. She’d never gotten back in to see her at the hospital because she’d been put on a list and banned from the premises. But Alex had called them a lot. To the extent that she knew not only the moment her mother was revived but the full details of her every waking moment, including anything she ate and every time she pooped.

‘Yes. Got home this morning,’ her mother said. ‘I feel well rested from the coma. Best night’s sleep I’ve had in years.’

‘And Rick’s taking care of you?’

‘Yes, he is.’

‘Is he standing in the room?’ Alex checked.

‘He’s nipped out to the shops for tea bags.’

‘Great, so your new husband is not going to hear me when I ask what the hell is going on with your old one?’ Alex asked casually.

There was a silence, and then her mother said, ‘Maybe I’m not that well.’

‘Mother...’

‘Look, I know this is hard for you to understand.’

‘That’s true,’ Alex responded.

‘I made a mistake, OK?’

‘Why? What is it about him that’s just so fucking irresistible to you?’ Alex demanded.

‘You don’t quit loving someone because the marriage ends,’ her mother said. ‘Love doesn’t work that way.’

‘You cheated on your current husband. What about that love?’

‘Oh, Alex! You couldn’t understand it,’ her mother cried.

‘Why not? I’m an adult. Lay it out for me. Why would you sleep with that scumbag?’ Alex asked evenly.

‘You’re talking about your own father,’ her mother said, appalled.

‘That’s exactly why I get to talk about him like that,’ Alex reasoned. ‘Because he fucked me up.’

‘He didn’t fuck you up,’ her mother retorted angrily. ‘You’re fine. You’re good.’

‘I’m not fine or good,’ Alex spat angrily.

‘Why? What’s wrong?’ her mother asked.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Oh, nothing. I just can’t love anyone, that’s all.’ The words were out before Alex even knew she would say them.

‘Is that true?’ her mother said unsteadily.

Alex considered backtracking. But what was the point? ‘Yes.’

Her mother didn’t say anything for the longest moment, and Alex thought she was probably crying. But then she spoke, and there was no wobble in her tone at all. ‘Alex, that’s bollocks,’ she said with iron certainty.

‘What makes you so sure?’ Alex asked, taken aback.

‘Because you loveme.’

Annoyingly, that was true. ‘That’s different, though,’ Alex pointed out.

‘It’snot, actually,’ her mother said passionately. ‘When you put the sex stuff aside, loving a parent or a child or spouse isn’t all that different. It contains all the same feelings. So I know you can love. The same as your father can.’

‘Yes, well, that’s great. Because he’s a piece of shit, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, Alex, OK? Do you want me to admit that? He is. But guess what? You’re not.’

‘Thanks, Mother, but...’

‘No! You’re not listening. I know you’re a very focused person, and you go after what you want. But that’s OK because you’re still there for me, no matter what’s going on in your career. I know I can rely on you. I never had that with him. So don’t tell me you’re like him because I will never agree.’

Alex was shocked. Her mother always stood up for her dad, and Alex thought that meant she couldn’t see his flaws. Which Alex also thought meant she couldn’t see anyone’s flaws. But she saw his and Alex’s, and she thought they were different.

‘Mother, I have to go,’ Alex said quickly.

‘Oh, by the way, I got those flowers you sent yesterday. Very thoughtful.’

‘Mother, I have to go!’ Alex almost screamed.

She put the phone down at sixes and sevens. She went back to doing what she’d been doing before she’d called her mother and had an existential crisis, which was playing the Selma Haynes thing on her phone on repeat. One particular segment, actually. It was the worst bit or the best, depending on your perspective.

‘She never liked me to have separate friends. My friends could only be her friends,’ Erin said.

‘And how did she do that?’ Selma Haynes asked, her head cocked in concern.

‘Every time I mentioned a friend, she’d talk badly about them. Until I didn’t want to mention them. And then it was, “You’re going out with them? You need to be back at this time, and I want you to text me every hour.”’

‘And how did you feel about that?’ Selma asked.

‘I didn’t like it,’ Erin said, swallowing. ‘But she assured me it was for my safety. She kept saying there were plenty of people who would like to get to her through me.’

‘So you did it?’ Selma asked.

‘Yes. But one time, I forgot to text, and the time got away from me. I was twenty minutes late, I think. I went to the bar to get a round, and my card was cancelled.’

‘She was able to cancel your card?’ Selma asked, shocked.

‘She told me it would be easier to have everything joint because she made more than I did, and she wanted me to have anything I wanted. So if I wanted something I couldn’t afford, I could still have it. Seemed like a sweet gesture at the time, so I said yes.’

‘Until you didn’t do what she wanted.’

Erin nodded grimly. ‘Exactly.’

‘And what happened next? With your friends? Did they ask about what happened with your money?’

‘I lied and said it was a banking error. I don’t know if they bought that, but it didn’t matter because I stopped seeing them anyway. It seemed easier not to create another situation where Isabelle could humiliate me.’

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

The video paused as a call came through.

‘Hi, Isabe—’ Alex began, but she never quite finished the third syllable because the bearer of the name was on one.

‘Well?!’ Isabelle screeched. ‘I’m waiting to hear from you!’

Alex had been mulling, possibly delaying, her next move. ‘I’ve thought it over, and no, I don’t think we should sue. Not right now.’

‘I don’t agree,’ Isabelle said instantly.

‘Yes, well, I can understand why. But you can’t jump into defamation suits. They’re tricky. They don’t always go the way you expect.’

‘But we have to do something!’

‘Look, she did admit the affair, so—’ Alex began, but again, the sentence wasn’t allowed to come to a full conclusion.

‘They barely touched on it,’ Isabelle screeched again. ‘Selma Haynes didn’t give a crap; she was too busy burying me.’

‘I realise it’s not—’

‘She’s slandering me, Alex. Do you have any idea how it feels to have the entire world think you’re this?!’

Alex didn't, but she'd seen it happen in front of her plenty of times, so she had an idea of how Isabelle was spinning out right now. She might want to react in haste, but Alex knew that was a mistake. 'Look, I think we just need to...'

The door of Alex's office banged open, and Isabelle walked right in. 'Just need to what?!' she demanded.

'Jesus!' Alex cried, clutching her chest in shock.

Baker popped his head around the door behind Isabelle. 'Got Isabelle for you,' he announced.

'I can see that, thanks,' Alex said sarcastically.

'Well?!' Isabelle demanded, her face practically purple.

Alex leaned back in her chair, mildly terrified. 'Sit down. Let's talk.' She gave Baker a nod, and he shut the door behind him.

Isabelle put her hands on the back of the chair and leaned over it, towering and intimidating. 'This is no time for talk. We need to act now.'

Alex decided she was not having this sort of thing and stood up, now pretty pissed herself. 'Actually, this is exactly the time for talk. You and I need to have a conversation.'

Isabelle looked surprised. 'About what?'

'I think you know what I have to ask now.'

'For fuck's sake, Alex. I don't have time—'

Alex didn't give a shit about what she had time for. 'Isabelle! Just be straight with me. If there's truth in this, I can't go on with you. So. Is there?'

'You care? If I did this? It matters one way or the other to you?' Isabelle asked her, her decibel level dropping several notches.

'Fuckin'right it does,' Alex said, surprising herself.

She'd always thought the truth wasn't her business, and her only job was figuring out how to sell the client. But this was different. She couldn't stomach knowing it might be true.

Isabelle smiled as though relieved. 'Good. I'm glad. Because it didn't happen.'

'It's a lot of detail,' Alex said.

'I should think so,' Isabelle agreed. 'It happened to a friend of Erin's.'

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

That took the wind out of Alex's sails. 'What friend?'

'It was a man named Matthew Downing, an actor she knew from drama school. A boyfriend of his did everything she's describing.'

Alex hoped Isabelle was telling the truth, but Alex would have to do due diligence. 'Risky to use a friend's story. Mathew could easily talk.'

'He certainly could if he was alive. But he died a few years ago. Cancer.'

Alex sat back down in her chair. 'This is a fucking mess.'

Isabelle seemed to calm down. 'It certainly is.' She sat down, crossing her legs. 'Look, I know what I am, OK? I know full well. I'm difficult, cold, maybe a bit mean. But I didn't control her. I would never want a marriage like that.'

Alex swallowed thickly. 'OK.'

'OK? You believe me?'

'Yes,' Alex said. For now, she had decided to accept it until proven otherwise. 'Now, I have work to do. And so do you. Can you go and file for divorce, please?'

That took Isabelle by surprise. 'What?'

'As quickly as possible. This needs to happen now, or people will wonder why you're dragging your feet,' Alex told her. 'They might even think you're keeping her tied to

you on purpose, which would back some of the things she'd been saying.'

'I was dragging my feet because of emotional pain, but I guess nobody cares about that. I'll get it done.' Isabelle walked out.

As soon as she was completely out of the office, Alex went out to reception to talk to Baker.

'I need a private investigator,' she told him.

'What you need is a PA,' Baker replied snottily. 'I'm up to my eyeballs as it is. That fucking phone will not stop ringing. I can't keep doing everything.'

'I know,' Alex agreed apologetically. 'And I will get one. But not right now, OK? I need to hire someone to check a name Isabelle gave me...'

'Matthew Downing?' Baker sighed.

'I need a thicker door,' Alex mused.

'So that's it? If an investigator can confirm Isabelle's story, you're pressing on?'

'No. I'm also going to talk to this mistress, too. She's the key to this,' Alex told him.

'Do you have her name?'

Alex still didn't. Despite Ivy Coulter's cackling description of her own trickery, she still wouldn't give the bloody woman up. 'No, but I'll get it,' she vowed.

'What about the party?' Baker asked.

‘The party goes ahead,’ Alex said quickly.

Baker was staggered. ‘Is anyone even gonna come now that all this stuff is out there?’

‘They’ll go because this happened. People love scandal. Whether or not it wins her the award votes is a different matter.’

‘So how are you gonna hit back at Erin?’

‘Sideways,’ Alex told him.

She had to. She couldn’t attack her directly. Not until she knew it was right to.

‘How?’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I want Isabelle to do press for a movie she shot last year about a bad marriage. Isabelle plays someone married to a scumbag liar. She can do interviews and talk about how she connected with her character on a deep and personal level, which will be a great way for her to allude to Erin being the real bad apple in the relationship without really saying it. The internet will love it. Way more than some boring press release refuting the claims.’

Baker was confused. ‘What movie is that?’

‘It doesn’t exist. I thought that was obvious,’ Alex said.

‘What? How are you going to...’

‘I’ll figure something out,’ Alex assured him. She wasn’t totally convinced of Isabelle’s story, but for now, she had to proceed as though she was. Until evidence proved it one way or the other. If it turned out that Erin was telling the truth, Alex would drop Isabelle like a bad habit.

But if not, then Alex would attack Erin with everything she had. Nothing was worse for the cause than a pretend victim. Even worse if they stole the story from a real one.

The trouble was, Alex didn’t have the first fucking clue who the real victim was anymore.

Twenty-Six

‘Three offers? Really?’ Leigh asked over the phone the day after the Selma Haynes

interview had aired.

‘Yep. In one morning,’ Erin said, her tone light and chipper.

Leigh hadn’t ever actually heard her sound happy before. It was quite a difference.

‘That’s great, Erin. I’m glad it’s all happening so fast for you. You deserve to get back to what you do.’

‘You don’t know how great it feels to know there’s work for me now.’

‘You should take as much work as you can,’ Leigh advised. ‘Get back out there. It’s good for people to know that the industry took your side. As they should.’

‘You were right, Leigh. This changed everything. People are getting in touch, old friends I haven’t seen in ages.’ She breathed. ‘I should have done this years ago. I feel like my life is starting again. I’d forgotten it could be like this.’

‘Old friends? I like the sound of that. It would be great to be seen out and about with these old friends if you’re up to it.’

‘Whatever you say,’ Erin said. ‘I’m so grateful to you right now. I don’t even know how to say it. I didn’t ever want to talk about any of this, and if you hadn’t gotten Selma Haynes, I probably never would have—not like that. She was the only journalist who could have brought me back from the dead. Which is what I was.’

Leigh was thrilled to hear Erin sound positive. ‘And now they trust you again. So... Go get ‘em.’

They hung up. Leigh felt good about this turnaround. Though she didn’t imagine that was the end of things. No way was Alex going to take this lying down.

Regarding Alex, Leigh still couldn't shake her confusion about her. She was the reason the Selma Haynes interview could even go ahead. Which meant that Alex had shot herself in the foot, and for what? Because Leigh had talked to a doctor for five minutes?

Leigh's phone rang, and it was the woman in question.

'Hi,' Leigh said evenly, totally unable to predict what Alex would be calling about. The woman was a total wildcard.

'Leigh,' Alex greeted her. 'Having a good morning?'

'Not bad. How's yours?'

'I won't lie to you; it's been a shocker,' Alex sighed. 'I just had a conversation with Isabelle. I thought her head was gonna spin fully off her neck at one point.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Leigh said and then added quickly, 'For your sake, at least. Isabelle can go to hell, obviously. Oh, but while I've got you, how is your mother doing?'

Leigh heard the smile in Alex's voice. 'She's OK. She came around the next day, like you said. She's back at home, healing up.'

'Whose, err, taking care of her?' Leigh asked carefully.

'Her husband. Hercurrentone, that is.'

'Does he know... anything?'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘If he does, it didn’t come from me,’ Alex said vaguely. ‘Anyway, now that the personal crap is out of the way, let’s talk business.’

Leigh rolled her eyes. ‘Of course.’

‘Though it relates to my mother. Tangentially speaking.’

‘What?’

‘You helped me, and then I helped you, right?’ Alex said.

‘Yes...’ Leigh answered wearily.

‘I repaid that favour, and I wouldn’t ever say that I didn’t owe you, big time,’ Alex said smoothly.

‘I’ve got a feeling that’s about to be reframed,’ Leigh said.

‘Well, I was thinking that maybe we could keep the spirit of reciprocity going?’ Alex cleared her throat. ‘Hands in the air, I don’t have that name. I admit it. Ivy didn’t pass it along,’ Alex said.

Leigh could hear she was embarrassed to admit it.

‘No?’

‘No. So I’m asking you to give it to me.’

‘Can I put you on hold for a minute? I need to laugh my arse off,’ Leigh replied.

‘Yeah, I know, I know. But the thing is, it’s not... I need it for... semi-personal reasons.’

Leigh raised an eyebrow. ‘You planning to ask her out?’

Alex snorted. ‘Very good.’ She cleared her throat again, and Leigh could hear how nervous she was about this. ‘No, I just... It’s... I need to know... I want to verify things. Things said in the interview.’

‘For the purposes of?’ Leigh asked.

‘Making decisions about whether I forge ahead in this particular professional relationship,’ Alex said quickly.

‘Oh,’ Leigh said. Then she realised what Alex was hinting at. ‘Oh!’

‘Yeah. I’m just doing some fact-checking. This girl should be able to confirm things. Erin would have talked to her. About the marriage.’

‘Even if I gave you the name, you should know, she’s a clam. I’ve tried numerous times and can’t get her to talk to me. A—’ Leigh caught herself just in time. ‘I mean, the mistress does not want to be famous. Not like this, at least.’

‘Jeez, I nearly had you there,’ Alex laughed. ‘Starts with an A? That narrows it down. Could I get a second letter?’

Leigh was chewing it over. ‘I need to think about this.’

‘That’s cool. Can I call you back in two minutes?’

Leigh tutted. 'Alex, I will call you back. And it's going to be longer than two minutes, OK? Put the brakes on.'

'Sorry, it's just... I just need to know.'

'Well, well, Alex Walker in a moral quandary... Who'd have thought?' Leigh said, enjoying herself.

'You can cut that out,' Alex replied grumpily. 'It's just a brand issue. We can't represent the bad guys, that's all.'

'I don't believe you,' Leigh said. 'I think this bothers you personally—which it should.'

'Thanks, Mother Teresa,' Alex sneered. 'Appreciate the guidance.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Oof, Mother Teresa? Not a great example of moral fortitude when you dig down into her. She was far from perfect.’

‘Everyone is, Leigh. That’s why we exist.’ Alex hung up the phone on her snappy comeback.

Leigh was left the way she always felt after talking to Alex—puzzled, stimulated, on edge, amused, and annoyed. So Alex wanted the name, and she wasn’t going to do anything damaging to Erin with it? Could Leigh really believe that? With Isabelle up to her ears in the shit, Alex could certainly do with a hail Mary and getting Amanda’s name would give her an opportunity to talk the woman into a tell-all.

Leigh hadn’t managed to get Amanda to so much as pick up the phone, which should have been some comfort. But Alex was tricky, to put it mildly. Leigh wouldn’t put it past her to squeeze the goods out of Amanda. And a tell-all from Amanda would offset some of the good that Leigh had managed to achieve with the Selma Haynes interview. It would muddy the waters, at the very least. It was risking a lot to give that name to Alex, simply because she asked for it. The request should have been an easy no.

But it wasn’t. For some god-forsaken reason, Leigh believed Alex when she vowed to use the name only for personal assurance.

Leigh hated that she was even considering this. Alex’s word should have counted for precisely shit. So why didn’t it? Why did Leigh want to give her what she’d asked for? Leigh could be shooting herself in the foot and the torso, possibly the head. It was stupid to even consider it.

But... What if Amanda could confirm everything Erin had said? Then Isabelle would lose Alex's representation. And though there were other PR people out there, Alex was, well, Alex. Without her, Isabelle would feel like something of a lame duck. It might even be newsworthy that she'd been ditched. And when one rat leaves the sinking ship, so might they all. Managers, agents, everyone. It could roll into the kind of thing that might bury Isabelle completely. Leigh didn't hate that thought.

When Leigh framed it like that, it was practically a good idea to give her the name.

Still, she needed to be smart about this. She needed to put some caveats in place that would ensure Erin's protection in all this.

She rang Alex. 'You can have the name.'

'Leigh, you won't regr—'

Leigh cut her off. 'One thing, though. If you can get her to talk to you, which is a big if, we will see her together. Everyone knows everything, or no one knows nothing.'

'That's a double negative,' Alex quipped.

'Alex!' Leigh snapped. 'I'm taking a chance on you.' Leigh heard her own words and felt immediate embarrassment. 'On this!' she added quickly.

'Sorry. Yeah, that's a reasonable ask. Fine. So, gimme the name, and I'll get us that sit down.'

'You're confident,' Leigh noted.

'That's how I'll get her,' Alex remarked. 'Confidence is halfway there, almost always.'

That caught Leigh's attention. 'So, it's a scam, then? Your confidence is all for show?'

'Of course,' Alex said easily.

Leigh couldn't help but laugh. 'Wow. I wish you'd told me that before. I may have played things differently,' she said, thinking of the last month.

'Yeah, well, you can't get someone like you into bed without some smoke and mirrors,' Alex quipped. Leigh could practically hear the regret down the phone a second later. 'You didn't mean then, did you? You meant with Erin and Isabelle.' Alex laughed nervously, an uncommon sound coming from her. 'Can we erase the last ten seconds?'

Leigh wasn't erasing anything. She'd inadvertently walked into a truth she never expected to get, and she couldn't have left it alone if she'd wanted to. 'Smoke and mirrors? That's what you think it was that night?'

Alex took a pause. 'I mean, yeah. You wanted someone who knows who they are. I project that.'

Leigh was shocked by how angry that made her. She would not let the misconception stand. 'Alex, I liked you because I could see under that. You know that, right? You got my attention with confidence, sure. But you kept it by being kind to me. You didn't shame me or judge me. You listened. I hadn't had a lot of that. That's what I wanted from you. The girl underneath the razmataz.'

Alex didn't say anything for what seemed like three hours. And then she said, 'So, you have that name for me?'

If Alex wanted to move past an honest moment, there wasn't much Leigh could do

about it. She went with the tide of the conversation. 'Her name is Amanda Bradley. I'll text you the number.'

'Thanks, Leigh,' Alex breathed. She hung up.

Leigh texted her the number. You better not screw me, she wrote underneath.

You wish, Alex texted back, back on her usual form.

Leigh could deal with that. It wasn't like it could ever be different. This was Alex in a nutshell. Emotional truth was like garlic to a vampire to her. Leigh found herself wishing that weren't so. She believed that underneath all that bluster, someone special might well lurk. But if she wouldn't come up for air, then she would suffocate, replaced by Alex's false confidence.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Leigh shook the conversation off. There was no point in digging into Alex's damaged psyche. Leigh had her own to contend with.

But things were about to get interesting, that was for sure. Leigh had rolled the dice on Alex Walker, and she was about to find out whether Alex had gotten any better at making good on a promise. Not that it changed anything if she did. Not a thing.

Twenty-Seven

Alex was thrilled that little chat with Leigh had taken place over the phone because Alex's mask had really dropped for a second. Eye contact would have made it that much worse.

But fuck it, forget it, never mind, didn't matter. Alex had things to attend to. She had the name and number of the girl from the photo. She also had someone tasked with investigating Matthew Downing. She was going to get some answers if it killed her.

Alex rang Amanda Bradley.

'Hello?' answered Amanda, the woman of no further mystery.

'Hi, Amanda Bradley?' Alex checked.

'Yes,' the woman replied, already sounding worried.

'My name is Alex Walker. I work with Isabelle Kane.'

Amanda hung up.

Alex had expected that might happen. She had a plan B. She tapped out a text to Amanda.

Isabelle Kane doesn't know who you are. Yet. Pick up the phone, or I'll give her your details.

Alex looked at the message without sending it. She deleted it and wrote a new draft.

I know that Isabelle Kane is not a name you want to hear, but I'm not calling on her behalf. I need to ask you some questions, but the answers are only for me. You're the only person who can provide them, and I need your help.

She signed her name and sent that version, all the while kicking herself. It was a stupid, weak gambit. The truth? It wasn't her style at all. It was more how Leigh might have played things.

There was no reply—at first. But after a few hours, lo and behold, up popped a message.

What do you want?

A few days later, Alex parked up in front of Leigh's office in the near dark of the evening.

Leigh walked out of the building, and Alex didn't look at her waist for more than a second. She was getting better at controlling herself.

‘Get in, loser. We’re going vetting,’ Alex called through the window of the BMW.

Leigh rolled her eyes and slid into the passenger seat. ‘So, where does Amanda Bradley live?’

‘Not far, about thirty minutes.’

‘OK, well, I guess I’ll catch up on some work on my laptop if you don’t mind,’ Leigh said.

Alex shrugged. ‘You do you.’

Rain began to fall lightly across the windshield. Alex glanced at Leigh as she pulled out onto the road. Leigh already had her laptop out and was typing frantically. Alex was pretty sure she was doing that so they didn’t have to talk.

Alex drove for a while before glancing at Leigh again, wondering if she should address the tension. It sounded like a pretty terrible idea.

‘I can feel you watching me,’ Leigh said, never pausing her frantic typing.

‘I’m not...’ Alex began nervously.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘I’ve got other clients, you know,’ Leigh said defensively. ‘I don’t just run around putting out Erin’s fires.’

Alex said nothing and focused on the road. Ten minutes later, she couldn’t take the silence anymore. ‘So, you shocked I got Amanda to talk to us?’ she asked, trying to sound light.

‘Not really, no,’ Leigh said, a frown line appearing on her usually smooth forehead. She was still staring at her laptop.

Alex felt a deep desire to get her attention from her work. ‘Really? Because I believe the phrase you used was “Big If.”

‘Yeah, but that was because she said no to me. But you’re not me. So, what route did you go? You blackmail her or butter her up?’ Leigh asked casually, finally looking at her.

‘Neither.’

‘What then? A secret third PR method I’m sure I wouldn’t have a clue about?’ Leigh asked with a smirk.

‘You would, actually. I told her the truth,’ Alex admitted.

‘You did what?’ Leigh asked, surprised.

The rain outside changed from an occasional patter to a fast drumbeat.

‘I was square with her. No point playing this any other way.’

Leigh went quiet. Alex felt herself fretting about what was running through her mind. She felt oddly afraid in general.

Alex supposed what was driving her fear was that Leigh had the ability to induce someone to say stupid, honest shit. She was just so fucking earnest. Bullshit seemed to fall away in her presence. It was a rather terrifying character trait—particularly in proximity. And Alex had said, ‘Hey, let’s sit in a three-by-three metal cube alone for half an hour!’ Idiot.

‘Hey, so I heard you signed Jeff Banner,’ Alex said, just for the sake of having something light to say.

‘That happened yesterday, but we’re not announcing it for another week. How on earth did you get wind of it this fast?’ Leigh asked.

‘I have my ways. Big get, though. Bosses must be pleased.’

Leigh closed her laptop. ‘You’re not going to let me get anything done, are you?’

‘Calloway, you gimme the word, and I’ll zip it,’ Alex assured her.

Leigh chewed that over. ‘Don’t zip anything. I’d love to hear more about this new movie Isabelle made last year about spousal abuse that I’m pretty sure doesn’t exist. Soundsharrowing.’

‘It does exist,’ Alex lied, though she was kind of smiling. She liked that Leigh saw through her ruse.

‘Are you actually going to get it made just to keep the lie up?’ Leigh asked.

‘Leigh, the movie exists. But if it didn’t, do you know how many movies don’t get distribution deals?’ Alex asked. ‘So many movies are shot and never seen. It’s very sad.’

Leigh snorted. ‘You’re unbelievable.’

Alex tossed her a grin. ‘I know,’ she agreed.

Leigh started to smile but then looked away like she didn’t want to be seen enjoying Alex and her filthy methods. But Alex could see she did. It pleased her more than she wanted it to.

Leigh managed to get the smile off her face and downshifted her tone to dour. ‘We should probably confer.’

‘About what?’

‘Amanda. We need to be on the same page when we meet her.’

‘I’m not worried about that,’ Alex told her. She smiled to herself. ‘You know what? I’m glad you’re going to be there.’

‘Oh?’ Leigh replied cynically. ‘Why’s that?’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘Because when she tells me she never heard of any emotional or financial abuse, I get to see your face in real-time. It’s gonna be wonderful. I wish I could film it.’

‘You’re certain, are you? Of Isabelle’s virtue?’ Leigh quizzed.

‘Of course,’ Alex lied. ‘I mean, she’s no nun. I’m aware of that. But this shit your girl accused her of is fucking low.’

Leigh looked at Alex, and she could feel the heat of her examination. It was making Alex’s neck warm. She kept her eyes on the road.

‘So, what happens if you’re right?’ Leigh asked.

‘What do you mean?’ Alex said, changing gears. She didn’t need to, she just wanted something to do.

‘Well, if she’s innocent, the next step is to refute these claims. Directly, I mean. How are you going to do that if you can’t produce Amanda? If you’re planning to keep your promise to me, you’re locked out of that move forever.’

‘I’ve got something on the back burner. You needn’t worry about that,’ Alex said, tossing her a cheeky smile.

The investigator had gotten back to her just this morning and confirmed some stuff. There was indeed a Matthew Downing in Erin’s past, and he had died of cancer. His mother confirmed he’d had an early relationship go bad, too. It was a good sign.

‘Hmm. What could that be, I wonder?’ Leigh asked herself theatrically.

‘Don’t waste your time trying to figure it out. I’m utilising info you’re not privy to.’

‘Very mysterious.’ Leigh paused. ‘You know what? I don’t think you have anything. I think you just want me to think you do to keep me on my toes. Maybe even trick me into trading information with you.’

‘Now, why would I do that when I only have to say pretty please?’ Alex teased.

Leigh snickered. ‘Wow. A little goodwill doesn’t go that far with you, does it?’

‘It went far, believe me. It still does,’ Alex said, letting herself be sincere for a moment. Leigh didn’t respond, and Alex felt the need for a slight conversational pivot. ‘Whydidiyou give the name up, by the way?’

Leigh gave her a quick look. ‘Because you asked nicely.’

Alex rolled her eyes. ‘No, really.’

‘I’m hoping that when you have to ditch her, everyone else will follow suit, and her career will be wrecked,’ Leigh told her. ‘Butalso, because you asked nicely.’

‘That’s smart,’ Alex conceded. ‘Very smart indeed. Bit of a gamble, though. What if it goes the other way and you find out Erin lied through her teeth?’

‘That wouldn’t be my call,’ Leigh admitted.

‘I guess not. I would bet money that woman’s career is about to take a jump, and with it, her PR needs. She’s about to become a cash cow. Carter and Simon are gonna want to hang onto her.’

‘Maybe,’ Leigh said, and Alex glanced away from the road to examine her expression. She looked troubled.

‘You have doubts about her, don’t you?’ Alex noted.

Leigh looked down at her laptop. ‘It’s not my job to have an opinion,’ she said heatedly.

Alex didn’t like hearing Leigh say something like that. It seemed wrong. It was fine for Alex to play the game and talk the talk, but Leigh wasn’t Alex. She wasn’t so cynical. Alex hated the idea that could change.

‘That’s really how you’re going to play this? Bullshit,’ Alex asked.

‘It’s notbullshit,’ Leigh snapped.

‘I know you. It is.’

True anger slipped into Leigh’s voice. ‘You don’t know me.’

Alex didn’t want to address that, but she was far from finished with the topic. ‘You should walk away from that company.’

Leigh gave a shocked laugh. 'What?'

'I'm just saying.'

'And do what?'

'Not this, Leigh,' Alex said.

'Are you saying I'm not cut out for PR? I've given you a run for your money,' Leigh said snippily.

'That you have,' Alex agreed. 'I'm not saying you can't. I'm saying you shouldn't. It'll change you.'

'How?'

Alex considered her next words carefully.

What she wanted to tell Leigh was that she was honest and vulnerable and better for it. That she wasn't dead inside and Alex wanted her to stay that way. That Leigh needed to protect herself from this nasty world.

All those thoughts and more whirled around Alex's mind, boiling down into one simple statement, and that statement hovered at the edge of Alex's lips without quite breaking free. Maybe it never would have.

But Leigh wasn't letting it go.

‘How, Alex? Tell me what would be so bad about me doing this?’ she implored.

‘Because you’re too good for it!’ Alex exploded.

She didn’t look at Leigh, wouldn’t meet her eye. She felt panicked, frightened. She wanted to get out of the car. Which would have been difficult because she was driving the bloody thing.

Clearly, Leigh was on the same page. ‘Stop the car,’ she said quietly.

Alex instantly pulled over into a layby. ‘I’ll call you a cab. Sorry. I made it weir—’

She didn’t make it to the end of the sentence because her lips became otherwise occupied. Leigh had dragged her by the coat collar to kiss her.

Alex’s brain went to war with itself immediately. The three parts of her mind were all fighting for control. Her superego said, ‘Stop this. It’s a bad idea. This isn’t in the plan.’ While her ego said, ‘You can’t, you’ll hurt her.’ But her id? Her id said, ‘You want this. You’ve wanted it from the moment you heard her name again.’ And her id won.

As the rain hammered down on the BMW in that dark layby, Alex bodily pulled Leigh across the seat and onto her lap, letting go and giving in to what she had done everything in her power to deny she needed. Leigh Calloway.

Twenty-Eight

Leigh had officially lost her mind. And Alex was to blame. She was suddenly there—like, there, there. The woman Leigh had suspected sat under Alex’s brash confidence had finally shown up, and it was ten years ago, all over again. Leigh saw her.

Leigh didn't even care that they were on a public motorway, albeit stashed in a layby. Someone could drive by and see everything. Leigh's shirt came open anyway. It might have even ripped a bit, but Leigh was way past caring.

Alex's mouth moved from hers to her collarbone. And despite the awkwardness of the location, they were making it work. Alex was making everything work. Leigh's skin was on fire for her.

Leigh's back was pushed up against the steering, and she could feel its ridges pressing into her, but that was fine. Alex's mouth pushed farther down, below the bra line, and she was caressing some very sensitive parts with an experienced and skilled tongue. Leigh didn't want it to stop.

And then Leigh pushed her back into the car's horn.

They both screamed, and Alex stopped what she was doing. They looked at each other for a moment and then broke into laughter.

When the merriment subsided, it was replaced by mild awkwardness. It was too much eye contact. It seemed to fill the car with doubt.

'Should we have done this?' Alex asked, fear in her grey eyes.

Leigh pulled her shirt back together, feeling too naked. She didn't quite know what Alex meant. Was she really asking, 'Should we have done this?' Or did she mean, 'Doyouthink we should have done this?' Or—the most embarrassing interpretation—'Idon't think we should have done this.'

Mired in ambiguity, Leigh decided to keep her reply vague. 'I... I don't know.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

Alex heaved a deep sigh. ‘Amanda’s expecting us.’

Leigh slid off her lap with absolutely no grace whatsoever and sat back down in her seat. She buttoned her shirt back up, humiliated, dejected, rejected. ‘Let’s go,’ she muttered.

Alex nodded and started up the car.

No one said anything else, and eventually, Leigh picked her laptop from the footwell—where it had fallen during the passionate break in their usual rivalry— and went back to her emails.

Ten minutes later, they pulled up on a small, cheap suburban street. The houses were pressed together in a tight concertina, two up, two down, repeated ad infinitum.

For the first time since the layby, Alex turned and looked at Leigh. She smiled like absolutely nothing had happened. ‘OK, let’s see who’s a liar, shall we?’ She got out of the car.

Leigh climbed out next, watching Alex’s well-tailored figure move up the street. And she knew that there was no chance she would ever understand this person. Alex Walker was a mystery that refused to unravel. Just when you thought you were on a straight path to the heart of her, you found yourself on a roundabout, with no clue which lane you should be in, where the right exit was, your turn signal on the fritz, and your check engine light going off.

Leigh needed to stop making this mistake with Alex. It would never end well. Alex was Alex, a one-woman island, and Leigh was done with it.

She joined Alex at the door of number eight, Marlinton Road.

‘I’ll do the talking,’ Alex said.

‘I’m sure you will,’ Leigh said sourly.

Alex had time to shoot her one quizzical look before they heard the door unlocking.

The door opened, and there she stood—Amanda Bradley, the face that launched a thousand tweets. She looked like she’d lost some weight since that fateful day in the private members club. She was washed out, her hair greasy, her clothes not on their first day.

‘Hi,’ Alex said.

‘Come in quickly. It’s cold out,’ Amanda said.

In they went.

Twenty-Nine

An Alaskan Malamute jumped up Alex’s front and knocked her on her arse.

‘God, sorry. She’s friendly, I promise,’ Amanda said, trying to pull her off. ‘Betty! No!’ The malamute reluctantly climbed off, and Amanda got ahold of her collar and began to pull her gently into the kitchen. ‘I’m just gonna put her in the back.’

Alex got to her feet in the small, dark hallway. She dusted herself off unsuccessfully.

Her beautiful black pure wool maxicoat was now grey with dog hair. She turned and saw that Leigh had been watching her with a look of smug pleasure.

‘Adds something, I think,’ Leigh smiled.

‘Yeah, the smell of dog,’ Alex snarked back.

She was amazed she was managing to be even halfway normal with Leigh. What the hell had she let come over her in the layby? It was like she was an animal.

Well, Alex wasn’t an animal. Or if she was, she wasn’t some humping malamute. She was a sleek black panther. Or an arctic fox. Anything with a killer instinct and a nice coat.

Speaking of which, this bloody thing was going to have to go to the dry cleaners now. She hated looking dishevelled at the best of times. But in front of Leigh, now? It wasn’t what she needed. She needed to be Alex Walker, and she wasn’t feeling very much like her right now.

Alex was making mistake after mistake lately. Why? What had broken her stride?

Well, that was obvious enough.

Amanda came back in, rubbing the back of her neck self-consciously. ‘Sorry about her. She’s just friendly.’

‘No problem. So, I’m Alex Walker, and this is Leigh Calloway,’ she said with a gesture to Leigh, who gave a smile wave.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:06 pm

‘You’re Erin’s PR person, right?’ Amanda said, looking at Leigh, puzzled.

‘That’s right,’ Leigh confirmed.

‘You came together?’ Amanda asked.

It was a fair question. The whole set-up must have looked questionable.

‘Well, we’re both kind of here for the same reason,’ Alex said. ‘I can explain it all. Mind if we sit down?’

Amanda nodded. ‘Yeah, of course. Come through.’

Alex let Leigh go first. As she followed Leigh, she thought to herself, I had that insane rear on my lap an hour ago. And I could have had even more.

But it was better to stop before things got even more tangled and confused. Right?

They went into the living room. It was full of cheesy ceramic knickknacks, including such gems as a little boy fishing off a bridge with a no-fishing sign right next to him (the rascal) and a cat giving another cat a small love heart. Either Amanda had ironic decorative sensibilities, or this wasn’t her house.

Alex and Leigh sat down next to each other on a worn, pleather couch while Amanda positioned herself on a ragged armchair with her legs tucked underneath her.

‘So, here’s the thing,’ Alex began. ‘As you know, Leigh and I represent either side of

this split. But the problem we share is that one of them is lying. So, we're both trying to figure out what the truth is to determine whether we're going forward with them. We need to fact-check, and it seems like you're the best place to start. Would you be OK with that?' Alex began.

'You said all this over the phone,' Amanda said, nodding. 'It's fine, I can talk. But I just want you to understand that if you reveal anything I say to anyone, then I hope you're cool with ruining lives because that's what will happen.' She glanced around the shabby living room. 'Well, more so.'

Alex flicked an eye to a doily on a nest of tables. 'This is your parents' place, right? Did you have to leave your old place because of the scandal? Go into hiding?'

Amanda gave a derisive laugh. 'I certainly couldn't keep living where I was, that's true. But I'm not in hiding. It's a lack of options that has me sleeping in my childhood bedroom. Sleeping under an NSYNC poster, if you can imagine that.'

'Well, I know it's not fashionable to say so, but I personally think "Bye Bye Bye" is still a banger,' Alex shrugged.

Amanda had to smile. 'Yeah, maybe.'

'So, why exactly did you have to leave where you were?' Leigh asked, leaning forward.

Alex had said she'd do most of the talking, but she didn't mind. It was her next question anyway.

Amanda looked from Alex to Leigh, goggling. 'Are you seriously telling me you don't know? No one said anything?'

Alex swapped a look with Leigh. ‘Know what?’ they asked in perfect harmony.

Amanda sighed and rubbed the back of her head. ‘I was Isabelle and Erin’s maid. I lived in their house with them.’

Alex wasn’t easily shocked, but she had to admit, today was a humdinger.

Thirty

Leigh nearly fell off the couch in astonishment. ‘What? Theirmaid?’

Amanda nodded. ‘Yeah.’

Alex jumped in. ‘But Isabelle said she didn’t know who you were.’

‘Isabelle is full of shit,’ Amanda noted darkly.

Leigh felt satisfaction take her. Erin had never admitted who Amanda was, so she hadn’t lied. Isabelle couldn’t claim the same. And her web was about to unravel.

‘See,’ she said with a light rib nudge to Alex. Despite everything that had happened, she was taking the win.

‘So’s Erin, by the way,’ Amanda added, with a sharp look to Leigh.

‘Huh?’ Leigh gaped.

Alex threw her a quick grin. ‘You might want to hold back on that victory lap around the room, Calloway.’

‘Alex,’ Leigh warned sternly, and Alex’s smile dropped a fraction, which Leigh was satisfied to see.

Leigh turned her full attention back to Amanda. ‘OK, we’re way more behind than we realise. I think it might be wise if you started at the beginning of this story.’

Amanda took a sip of water. ‘Better hydrate, then.’ She put the glass back down and leaned forward in the armchair like a storyteller of old. But this was no fairytale.

‘So, five years ago, I took a job in their house—it was only my second job, I was nineteen—and for about the first year, it was a normal job. Don’t forget to clean the tops of the windowsills, don’t let limescale build up on the taps, all the usual stuff.’

‘But then Erin made a move?’ Leigh prompted.

Amanda shook her head. ‘No, the first one to make a move on me was Isabelle.’

‘WHAT!’ Alex exclaimed.

‘You were carrying on simultaneous secret affairs with both of them?’ Leigh clarified.

‘That’s crazy,’ Amanda said. ‘How the hell would that work? I couldn’t possibly

have managed to keep that under wraps with them both living under the same roof. No, we were all sleepingtogether.'

Leigh let out a long, sad sigh. She was not getting a victory today. On the upside, no one was. It didn't provide a lot of comfort to know that. Erin should have told her this. But she'd kept the secret when she had no reason to protect Isabelle's good name anymore. It didn't bode well.

Alex wasn't beaten. She was angry. 'You're fucking kidding? You guys were a throuple?'

Amanda gave the saddest smile Leigh had ever seen. 'I don't think I'd put it like that. Looking back now, if I'm honest? I was just a toy they liked to take out sometimes.'

'And you were OK with that?' Alex asked.

'I thought so at the time. I was even... This sounds silly to say now, but I was flattered. I was nineteen and kind of a bumpkin. And then these two famous attractive womenbothwanted me. I thought it meant I was special.' She shook her head, embarrassed.

'But you stayed a maid?' Alex asked.

'Only at first. And then I guess that felt a bit odd to them. So they said I was to stop working for them and come live with them, staying in the pool house. They even gave me a credit card for expenses. I was even more flattered by that. I thought it was becoming serious between us all.' She took a pause and frowned. 'Though they asked me to keep the uniform. They liked me to roleplay that I was still the maid and that I was trying to seduce Erin. Then Isabelle would do this thing where she pretended to come home early and catch us and then join in.'

Leigh grimaced. 'That's sounds...

'I know,' Amanda said. 'Now. But if you'd told me back then it wouldn't end well, I'd have said, "You don't get it. We're just having fun." But when I think about it now...' She lowered her head. 'It turns my stomach. I thought it was a game. I was pretending to be the maid. But that's all I really was to them. A servant.' She looked back up at them, desperation in her eyes. 'I thought they cared about me. You need to understand that. I wouldn't have stayed if I hadn't.'

Leigh nodded. 'That's very clear, Amanda. No one here's judging you.'

'No,' Alex agreed.

'What about your other relationships outside the house?' Leigh asked.

'Oh, they killed all my friendships stone dead,' Amanda said flatly. 'They kept talking about how I would probably grow out of them. Though, of course, I never met their friends. But they both had a lot of opinions on my old friends, my real ones. I stopped feeling comfortable mentioning anything, seeing them, anything.'

'So, you were isolated?'

'Very much so.'

'Do you know why they did that?' Leigh asked gently.

Amanda nodded. 'Right at the start, they asked me not to talk about us with anyone, and I was fine with that. I kept my promise. But I don't think they trusted me to keep quiet forever. I think they were worried I'd tell people what we were doing and ruin their rep as the perfect couple. So, they wrecked everything that wasn't about them. They became my whole world. For years, it was just me and them.'

‘Then what happened?’ Alex asked.

‘Well, I guess you could say that life imitated art. Because our sex game ended up playing out in real life,’ Amanda said.

‘With Erin?’ Leigh asked.

‘I guess she got tired of sharing her toy,’ Amanda said sourly. ‘She wanted time alone with me while Isabelle was filming on location. She assured me that Isabelle didn’t mind that she wanted us to have fun together. And then, right before Isabelle came home, Erin admitted it was a lie. Isabelle didn’t know and certainly wouldn’t have liked it. She implied I’d be in way more trouble than her if I said anything. So, of course, when Isabelle came back, I kept my mouth shut, and everything went back to normal with the three of us. Well, nearly.’

‘Nearly?’ Alex asked.

‘Isabelle’s behaviour seemed a bit more... She started wanting to know where I was all the time. She would ask for hourly texts when I left the house. “For my safety,” she said. She said that there had been threats against them as a couple, and she was worried. But it was only when Erin wasn’t around. She was checking we weren’t together without her, I think. One time, I went to the gym, and I forgot to text her. I tried to pay for lunch afterwards, and my card didn’t go through. I called her and she said, “I did that so you don’t forget again.”

Leigh swapped a look with Alex. It was a familiar story.

‘But then Isabelle left again, and Erin wanted the same deal. I didn’t think it was a good idea. But she...’

‘She forced you?’ Leigh asked.

‘Not as such. But she said we’d done it before, and it had been fine. I warned her that I thought Isabelle suspected, but she said I was worrying about nothing. I said no at first, but she just kept talking and talking about how much she wanted me and how irresistible I was to her. She also hinted that she wanted to leave Isabelle for me. She wore me down.’ Amanda took another sip of water. ‘And I started to think maybe it was love she felt?’

‘But what about you? How did you feel?’ Leigh asked her.

‘It sounds crazy now, but I didn’t pay that much attention to what I wanted. It just seemed like I should be grateful for whatever I got from them. And I didn’t have any other options at that point. I didn’t want to come crawling back here, that was for sure,’ she said, looking around at her parents’ living room. ‘So, I just let things roll on in the way I was used to. Erin kept talking about us leaving, but she said she was waiting for the right time. She wasn’t in a financial position to leave yet.’

‘But she was working, right? Making money?’ Leigh asked. This part had never made total sense to her.

‘Not as much as Isabelle, but yeah.’

‘So where was her money going?’ Leigh asked.

‘She said Isabelle was taking it all.’

‘Did you believe that?’

‘It didn’t make total sense. If that was the problem, then just divorce and separate your finances, right? She might lose some money, but she could make more. Why stay married to someone who kept hold of the purse strings if you didn’t love them?’

‘Did you say that?’ Alex asked.

‘I didn’t like to contradict her,’ Amanda said, embarrassed.

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know. She just seemed to get quite angry when I disagreed with her. So, I tended to let things be the way she wanted them. It seemed easier than trying to deal with her temper.’

‘She had a temper?’ Leigh asked.

‘She never hit me. But yeah, she broke stuff sometimes. Broke my phone once because I didn’t text her back quick enough.’

Leigh couldn’t believe this. It just kept getting worse.

‘But then, of course, we went to that club together,’ Amanda said. ‘Her idea, of course. I think she was getting a bit bold; I don’t know. Maybe, on some level, she wanted to get caught,’ she mused. ‘Anyway, Isabelle’s friend took that picture, and you know what happened next.’

‘How did that go down, the end of the arrangement?’ Alex asked.

‘Security came in at two in the morning and threw me out. I never saw either of them. Obviously, the credit card didn’t work. I had nothing. I had to walk all the way here. Took two and a half hours.’

Leigh rubbed her temples, worn out from the tale. She was officially very stupid indeed. ‘Did you see the interview?’ she asked Amanda. ‘She used your story to gain sympathy. She mixed up the details a bit, but it’s very much your story.’

Amanda shrugged, unsurprised. 'She's an actress. She used a script she had to hand.'

'How did none of this get revealed? I've been to that house. There's staff around that must have known what was going on. They'd have seen the pic and recognised you, right? It's not obvious it's you, but they would have known,' Alex interjected.

'Everyone in her employ signs a non-disclosure agreement. Including me.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘That tracks,’ Alex said. ‘I signed one, too.’

‘What about Erin?’ Leigh asked, needing to hear the end of this dreadful story. ‘You were both out, and she didn’t ask you to stay with her?’

‘I don’t think this will shock you, but after I got kicked out, I couldn’t get through to her. Blocked on everything.’

Leigh nodded. ‘You never spoke to her again?’

‘Once,’ Amanda said bitterly. ‘She called me after the photo went viral. She said she was sorry about the way she’d left me, but everything was tainted, and she needed to start fresh. But she’d always care about me, blah blah blah.’

Leigh grimaced. ‘I guess that’s a mercy in the long run. Did she say anything else?’

‘She turned it into a bitch session about Isabelle. So, of course, I talked about everything I could never talk about before. The hourly texts, the credit card. She wanted to hear every detail about how Isabelle had treated me. Even though she was very mixed up in a lot of it.’

‘Yeah, Ibetshe did,’ Leigh muttered.

‘Erin told me we were both victims and not to worry because she’d get Isabelle back on my behalf. She said it like she was protecting me. She also told me not to reveal my identity to anyone, no matter what, that it would muddy the waters of what she was about to do.’

‘But that was a warning too, right?’ Leigh said. ‘She was telling you to stay quiet.’

‘I knew Erin well enough by then to know how her threats worked,’ Amanda agreed. ‘And maybe I should have spoken up after she did that interview, but with the NDA... It seemed like the only thing I could achieve by saying anything was making things worse for myself. And who’d believe me, anyway? I’m nobody.’

‘So, what are you going to do now?’ Leigh asked, concerned.

Amanda shrugged. ‘I have no idea. I’ve been stuck here, unemployed, and all my old friends are gone now. My life was them.’ She looked at Alex. ‘But when you texted me, I just... Call me stupid, but I could tell you were sincere. I’m much better at knowing a liar these days.’

‘I won’t say anything,’ Alex said solemnly.

‘She won’t,’ Leigh vowed. She believed it, too. Whatever had gone down between her and Alex, she could see that Alex was moved by Amanda’s story. She cared, even if she’d never admit it. ‘And neither will I. Your name will never be revealed to anyone by either of us, I promise you.’

Amanda nodded. ‘Thank you. But what are you going to do with this information?’

Leigh’s brow deepened. She knew what she wanted to do. But what would she be allowed to do?

Thirty-One

Alex was back in the car with Leigh, out on a dark, quiet road. She wasn’t happy. This day was officially a shit show. The only thing that could be said for it was that Leigh was currently not busting her balls about anything, which made a nice change.

But nothing good lasts forever.

‘What’s your next move? You dumping her today?’ Leigh asked suddenly.

‘I can’t,’ Alex said.

‘What?!’

‘I have to serve a notice period. We signed a contract. I’ll end it, obviously. But I have to continue to provide the service she paid for until that term is out.’

‘You could just break it off and refund her,’ Leigh suggested.

Alex nodded. ‘Yeah, I’ll just go ahead and break a contract with someone we just learned is a vengeful monster. I’m sure there will be zero repercussions, legal or otherwise.’

‘So, that means you’re throwing her the party?’ Leigh asked.

‘It’s a screening,’ Alex said automatically.

‘Oh, please,’ Leigh snarked.

‘It’s all arranged and paid for. Couldn’t stop it if I wanted to,’ Alex frowned. ‘Wait, why am I letting you rake me over the coals? What about you?’

‘I’ll speak to the partners tomorrow. I’m gonna tell them what I found out.’

‘And?’

‘I’m sure they’ll see reason,’ Leigh said quickly.

Alex snorted.

‘What?’ Leigh demanded.

‘We’ll see,’ Alex said. ‘But don’t be surprised if they ask for proof you can’t provide.’

Leigh didn’t respond.

Alex went quiet, too, happily. She needed to figure out how she was gonna deal with this. The thought of serving even thirty days under that awful woman sounded unbearable. She needed a strategy.

But her thoughts were broken into, once more, by Leigh. ‘This isn’t right.’

‘What isn’t right?’ Alex asked tiredly.

‘They’re going to get away with the way they treated Amanda.’

‘I don’t know if what they did was illegal,’ Alex pointed out. ‘I mean, it’s shaky ground, but...’

‘I don’t mean that.’

‘Amanda needs therapy, but she’ll be OK,’ Alex told her.

‘She was used for years by those fucking creeps. People need to be warned,’ Leigh said, uncomfortable.

‘Yeah, well, we promised Amanda. So that’s that.’

‘I guess,’ Leigh sighed miserably. After a moment, she asked, ‘Has this ever happened to you before? A client turning out to be dogshit?’

‘Not to my knowledge,’ Alex said carefully.

‘Did you check, though?’ Leigh asked.

‘No. That’s not my job.’

‘But you did it this time,’ Leigh pointed out.

‘I didn’t have much choice.’

‘You totally had a choice,’ Leigh told her.

‘Stop it,’ Alex snapped.

‘What?’

‘You’re trying to get me to admit that I care about this,’ Alex said, a little too loudly for the space.

‘You’re gonna tell me you don’t?’ Leigh said.

Alex took a moment to formulate a response that she hoped was ambiguous enough for her to hide in. ‘It’s not at the forefront of my concerns.’

‘Whatever,’ Leigh said contemptuously.

‘What do you want me to say?’ Alex begged, frustrated.

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘You know what, don’t say anything!’ Leigh spat. ‘Just spend your whole life pretending not to give a shit about anyone besides yourself.’

Alex was pissed now. ‘It’s not a pretence, Leigh.’

Was that true? Not totally. But Alex wasn’t about to let Leigh know there was anything resembling a grey area in her heart. It would be better for them both to accept that Alex was only about Alex.

‘I’m sure that’s why your fingernails are buried in the steering wheel,’ Leigh observed.

Alex hadn’t realised she was dug in so deep. She relaxed her grip, disconcerted. When she’d been a kid, she’d worn out several stress balls to destruction. But as she’d gotten older, she’d become better at removing herself from her emotions. Stress balls had become unnecessary.

But looking at the little half-moon marks on the steering wheel, she was reminded of those ripped-to-shit little balls.

‘That’s it, I’m switching to decaf,’ Alex quipped.

Leigh said nothing.

They were back around the corner from Leigh’s office. Alex was relieved. She was worn out from being with Leigh. She simply asked far too much, and she had no right to do that. Alex had made it clear she didn’t have anything to give.

‘Here we are,’ Alex said, pulling up.

‘Thanks,’ Leigh said, unclipping her belt. But she didn’t get out of the car.

‘You forget something?’

‘Do you seriously think I should stop doing this?’ Leigh asked.

Alex felt a stab of fear. The last time this topic had come up, she’d ended up with Leigh on her lap. They needed to keep it light.

‘I think I don’t know what I’m talking about when it comes to you,’ Alex said lightly. ‘I should stick to having opinions only when I’m paid to.’

‘Yeah, you’ve made that clear,’ Leigh said, and she got out of the car.

Alex watched her go, her waist swinging with an angry gait, taking her somehow furious bum into the revolving doors of Carter and Simon.

Once she was gone, Alex had the worst thought she’d had in a long time. A real punisher.

She could have been yours if you weren’t such a fucking coward.

Alex closed her eyes and used all her will to erase the thought. When she felt able to convince herself she’d achieved it, she opened her eyes and drove off into the night.

Thirty-Two

‘But I spoke to her last night,’ Leigh said in the conference room the next morning, aware her voice was rising.

‘Who?’ asked Cybill Turner, her eyebrow raised.

She was only one of the four senior partners who sat around the table, but everyone knew her voice was the one that mattered. Everyone else would fall in line with her will.

‘I can’t say,’ Leigh said.

‘So you spoke to someone you cannot name, and therefore, cannot be properly vetted, who had an axe to grind with Erin?’ Cybill asked cynically.

‘Axe to grind?’ Leigh repeated, slightly shocked. This was not going the way she’d hoped.

‘Have you spoken to anyone that can confirm she was ever in that house?’ Cybill asked.

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

Page 77

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘Because they’re not going to speak to me. They all have NDAs,’ Leigh told her.

Cybill sat back in her seat and took her glasses off. She gave them a wipe with a cloth. ‘I must say, I’m shocked.’

Leigh felt some relief. Something was finally getting through. ‘I know, it’s terrible.’

‘No, I’m shocked that you would put this meeting together with this... nothing.’

‘Nothing?’ Leigh repeated. She was starting to feel like a parrot.

‘That’s right. It’s not more than a rumour. You should have known better than this,’ Cybill said with disdain. ‘Now, your former boss spoke well of you, so I’m going to let this go. But I don’t want to hear about this again unless there is significant proof. Do you understand?’

Leigh stared at Cybill, aghast. ‘I sat in a room with her. I know she was telling the truth.’

Cybill gave a mocking laugh. ‘Leigh, what I want you to do today is offer our services to Erin gratis for another month. After that, I’m sure we can talk about payments.’

‘Are you serious? She’s liar.’

‘Selma Haynes didn’t think so,’ Cybill pointed out.

‘Yes, well, Selma Haynes was fooled, too.’

Cybill was not impressed. ‘She has people who vet stories for her. How would she have missed this?’

‘Because no one would dare speak up for fear of implicating Isabelle. Isabelle and Erin are out to get each other, but they’re also accidentally protecting each other in the process.’

‘That’s absurd, Leigh. Simply absurd.’

‘What if it’s not? What if it comes out? What will you say then?’ Leigh asked, aware she was creeping dangerously into insolence.

Cybill gave her a hard look. ‘I’ve been working in PR for forty years. Do you have any idea of the rumours I’ve heard? People placing themselves in a coma for a week to lose weight, keeping children locked in their basements to use their blood to de-age, I’ve heard it all. My god, do you know what they used to say about Prince? That he had two ribs removed so that he could...’ She broke off.

‘You know what? I haven’t had my breakfast yet, so I think I’ll let you google the end of that story. My point is people will say anything. And people will repeat anything, too. In fact, and I don’t know if this was mentioned to you, Leigh, but part of our job is to protect our clients from exactly this kind of baseless accusation,’ she snarked.

Leigh wanted to scream. But she was getting nowhere with the partners because Cybill had a point. Leigh couldn’t prove this. All she had was having sat in a room with Amanda, watching her tell her story and knowing the truth when she heard it.

‘This meeting is over now, Leigh,’ Cybill said. ‘I don’t want to hear any more

unsubstantiated stories, OK?’

Leigh stood and walked out of the conference room without another word.

Henry was waiting in her office. ‘Look!’ he declared, gesturing at her desk. On it sat an enormous bouquet of beautiful flowers.

For the briefest of moments, Leigh thought Alex might have sent them. But then she realised how silly that was.

When she checked the card, her stomach dropped.

Been offered an action movie about Joan of Arc, the lead! I couldn’t have done this without you. Love, Erin x

‘That’s nice, isn’t it?’ Henry said.

‘Sure,’ Leigh muttered.

Thirty-Three

Alex was wearing a fabulous gown and a face like Kristin Stewart licking piss off a Carolina Reaper chilli.

All around her were people in much better moods, delighted to be at a swanky party being thrown in the ballroom of a swanky hotel. As well they might. A three-star Michelin chef had designed the menu for the night, mixologists were keeping everyone liquored up in style, and the gift bags were filled with Apple Watches, Montblanc pens, and Kopi Luwak coffee beans, to name but a few overpriced items.

And no one looked happier than Isabelle because the turnout was as good as Alex had

predicted. Eighty percent of the invitees had turned up. Everyone was crowded around her, asking about the movie she was promoting this week. The movie was called *Enemy in My Bed*, and it had an IMDB page that featured some screengrabs of the movie. Of course, those screengrabs were actually from a photoshoot in Isabelle's house with her butler playing the part of her co-star.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘Yes, I felt this was a good time to talk about it,’ Isabelle was saying. ‘I related very heavily to the role of a woman who cannot speak up, but obviously, I can’t talk about right now,’ she added conspiratorially.

‘When’s it coming out?’ someone asked.

‘Soon,’ Isabelle lied.

Alex felt like a piece of shit. She never thought she’d curse herself for being good at her job. But that’s what she was doing right now. She’d helped a dirtbag keep her dirtbaggery quiet. Of course, not everyone she’d ever repped had been an angel. That was OK, as long as you didn’t ask too many questions.

But this time, she’d asked the questions. Leigh was right on that one; she hadn’t needed to do that. Why the hell had she? Why had she felt compelled to look Amanda in the eye and hear the scummy details?

‘Is this that coffee that monkeys crap out?’ someone said, and Alex turned to see Leigh, stunning in a bottle green velvet dress, holding one of the gift bags, looking at its contents with slight awe.

Alex fought her surprise back. Though she’d invited Leigh, she’d never actually expected her to turn up to this expensive bullshit fest.

‘That’s right. Most expensive coffee in the world,’ Alex said, trying to look cool and unbothered by Leigh’s presence.

‘And an apt metaphor for what you’re selling tonight,’ Leigh said with a sardonic smile.

Alex snorted. ‘If you don’t like the gift bag, then please feel free to enjoy an amuse bouche or perhaps a signature cocktail. The theme is aviation.’

‘The theme is lies,’ Leigh said evenly.

Alex grinned at Leigh, enjoying herself. Why was it always like this with her? Did Alex have some kind of degradation kink she’d never noticed before? She tucked that thought aside.

‘Speaking of which, did you bring your client? She is still your client, right?’ Alex asked mockingly.

‘Yes,’ Leigh admitted, knocked off her perch somewhat. ‘You were right. I wasn’t allowed to break the contract. They’ve even offered her gratis services until she’s back on her feet.’

‘I tried to warn you,’ Alex told her.

‘It’s not like I didn’t know,’ Leigh said. ‘I guess I just hoped it would go differently.’

‘There’s your problem. Hope. It’s a very bad habit of yours,’ Alex told her.

Leigh gave her a salty look. ‘My bad. I’ll try to be more dead inside from now on. Just like you.’

Alex burst into delighted laughter. ‘I’m gonna miss this.’

Leigh looked surprised, but not as surprised as Alex felt. She hadn’t meant to say that

last part.

‘Yeah, I guess if you’re gonna be quitting Isabelle, we won’t have a reason to do this anymore,’ Leigh observed.

‘Guess I’ll have to find someone else to fuck with,’ Alex said.

‘I’m sure someone will come along.’

‘They won’t be as fun as you, though, Leigh. I can promise you that,’ Alex admitted. ‘You look great, by the way,’ she added.

It felt safer to compliment her physically than to talk about emotions. Though not without a little risk.

Leigh looked down at herself in surprise, like she’d forgotten what she was wearing. She looked back up, giving Alex’s red Givenchy satin number a once-over. ‘You too,’ she said quickly.

‘Your dress brings out your curves,’ Alex told her.

Was she flirting? No. Just... observing.

Leigh gave Alex a searching look. ‘Are you calling me fat?’

Alex raised an eyebrow. ‘No, crazy. I’m not calling you fat. It was a compliment. It’s the opposite of an insult. You may have come across them before.’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘Not from your lips,’ Leigh noted sassily.

‘If I keep being predictable, how will I keep you on your toes?’ Alex asked.

‘You’ve never had a problem in that department,’ Leigh shot back. She paused. ‘You give her notice yet?’

Alex looked over at where Isabelle was talking to her assistant, Steven. She was saying something to him with a smile. He wasn’t smiling, however. Alex was pretty sure she was chewing the poor boy out.

‘I have a letter of intent in my purse right now,’ Alex told Leigh. ‘I’ll give it to her at the end of the night.’

‘You gonna tell her why you’re ditching her?’ Leigh asked.

‘I can’t. Not without landing Amanda in it,’ Alex said quietly, checking for errant ears.

But the partygoers weren’t paying her any mind, too busy getting steadily sozzled, laughing, playing with the toys in their gift bags, and generally acting very pleased with themselves for being important enough for a bribe. Alex wished to god this party wasn’t her idea. It felt like a celebration of corruption.

Funny how that wouldn’t have mattered to her once. And funny how it did now.

‘So, what will you say?’ Leigh pressed.

‘I’ll think of something,’ Alex shrugged. And she probably would. But fuck knows what.

‘She’s not gonna like it, is she?’ Leigh asked, more of a statement than a question.

‘Nope,’ Alex breathed.

‘You gonna be OK?’ Leigh asked.

Alex was astonished that she cared. ‘I’m always OK,’ she told her.

Leigh looked at her for a long moment. ‘You know I know that isn’t true, right?’ she eventually asked.

Alex felt the words weigh heavily on her soul, the soul she never believed she had. Damn that woman. Why couldn’t she ever let things be easy?

‘Yeah, I know that, Leigh. But just for tonight, just let me pretend?’ Alex asked her, trying not to make it sound like she was pleading for some mercy.

But shewaspleading. And what she was asking, really asking, was, ‘Please don’t make me fall in love with you again.’

She didn’t know how Leigh was going to respond or if she understood. And she never found out because something had grabbed Leigh’s attention behind Alex.

‘Oh, my fucking Christ,’ Leigh muttered, her eyes wide in alarm.

Alex spun to see what could have elicited such a response from Leigh. But when she saw Erin Porter come in, dressed to the nines and obviously hammered, she wasn’t surprised. This had been inevitable. Isabelle had hired Alex to fight off the chaos of

her divorce but the thing about chaos, Alex was realising, was that it couldn't be defended against. It could only be postponed.

But the time was nigh. Isabelle's messy chickens were coming home to roost. And Alex wondered what this evening was about to become and who would come out of it with their minds, limbs, and reputations intact.

Thirty-Four

Whatever dance Leigh and Alex had been doing with each other was about to come to an end, and Leigh could accept that. She could also accept they weren't going to be friends. They were more than likely going to be nothing as soon as Isabelle got served notice. Perhaps that was for the best.

But what she couldn't take was going along with the notion that Alex was unfeeling. Leigh could see how much this Isabelle business bothered Alex, regardless of what she said. And she'd seen Alex lose her shit during her mother's medical emergency. She'd watched her publicly whack her father around the face for the love of god. There was plenty of feeling there. So why did she feel the need to put up this front? It was maddening.

But Leigh had to accept that it wasn't her place to ask for anything from Alex. She had to let Alex be Alex if she felt that worked for her. She had to stop prodding her, trying to squeeze her humanity to the surface.

And she was gonna do that any minute now.

'You gonna be OK?' Leigh asked.

'I'm always OK,' Alex said, with a flash of her perfect teeth. But the smile didn't reach her grey eyes. There was a storm in them.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘You know I know that isn’t true, right?’ Leigh said.

‘Yeah, I know that, Leigh. But just for tonight, just let me pretend?’ Alex asked.

Leigh saw the strain in her, how much it took to hold it all together. And she wanted to say something dramatic, bold, sincere, and insane. What she wanted to say was, ‘I know what you’re hiding, and it’s your best part.’ It was on the tip of her tongue to say it.

But Leigh never found out if she had the gumption to say that. Because she’d just spotted Erin staggering into the party, ripped to the tits, some woman on her arm.

‘Oh, my fucking Christ,’ Leigh swore.

Alex followed her gaze, but when she saw Erin, her reaction didn’t match Leigh’s. She smiled, delighted. ‘Now it’s a party,’ she said with a chuckle.

‘Excuse me, I’ve got to deal with this,’ Leigh said, heading for Erin.

‘Let me know if you need me to get security,’ Alex called after her.

‘If it comes to that, I think you’ll know,’ Leigh called back and marched over to her.

‘Hey!’ Erin cried as she clapped eyes on Leigh. ‘Here she is!’

‘Erin, what the hell—’

‘This woman is a miracle worker, you know? She dragged my arse out of a burning building,’ Erin explained sloppily to her companion.

The woman nodded, looking nervous. ‘I see.’

‘How did you get in?’ Leigh asked Erin.

Erin grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing tray. ‘This lady here has a vote for the MOKDA’s. She had a plus one for the party. Your name’s...’ She stopped. ‘I know I know it.’

‘It’s Lily,’ she said, looking quite remorseful about her choice of date. ‘I was round the corner having pre-drinks, and we happened to match on Bumble,’ Lily explained to Leigh. ‘She seemed more sober fifteen minutes ago.’

‘You know who this party is for, right?’ Leigh asked Lily.

‘She knows,’ Erin broke in. ‘I told her I just needed a tiny chat with the ex, and then we’ll move on. You know she served me today, right?’

Leigh didn’t give a shit. ‘Do you need the toilet?’ Leigh asked Erin urgently.

‘What? No,’ Erin said, confused.

‘Yeah, you definitely need the toilet,’ Leigh said, dragging her by the arm away from her relieved-looking date.

In the bathroom, Leigh pushed Erin into a stall. There was no one else in the toilets, but if she was about to berate Erin, she didn’t want anyone walking in on it. ‘What the hell are you doing?’

‘I told you. I want to talk to Isabelle,’ Erin said.

‘Then call her. You shouldn’t have shown up here.’

Erin narrowed her eyes. ‘What do you care?’

‘I care because I’m your PR person, obviously.’

‘Are you, though?’ Erin asked.

‘What are you talking about?’ Leigh asked irritably.

‘You haven’t taken my calls all week. You didn’t even thank me for the gift basket.’

‘If you thank someone for a thanks, you end up in a loop that you can’t get out of,’ Leigh improvised.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘No, you’re dodging me,’ Erin said. ‘Why?’

‘Look, I don’t think we have time for this...’

‘Did you speak to Amanda?’ Erin asked abruptly.

‘What? No,’ she said weakly.

She needed to work on her lying. It was piss poor.

Erin slumped against the cubicle wall. ‘Ah, shit. You did.’

Leigh didn’t say anything.

‘She signed confidentiality with Isabelle,’ Erin said with a nasty little smile. That smile was like a window into Erin, the real Erin. It was horrifying.

Leigh swallowed. ‘Yes, I know.’

Erin got back to her feet like a wobbly colt, her smile even wider. ‘You’re a nice person, aren’t you, Leigh? I always liked that about you. But the thing is, nice is a problem because it leaves you open to people who aren’t. People whose careers are about to blow up. People who could ask their PR companies to sack an employee.’

Leigh didn’t respond because her jaw was hanging wide open to the extent that she couldn’t form words. The reaction seemed enough to satisfy Erin.

‘Good girl,’ Erin said and walked unsteadily out of the cubicle.

Leigh stayed. Partly because she was scared, but also because she needed to pee. She could multitask.

She sat down on the toilet and let go, nearly ready to cry over what her life was about to become. It had been one thing to have to rep Erin with the knowledge of the kind of person she was. But now, it was openly hostile between them. The professional relationship was utterly untenable. And her bosses would not let her drop Erin for anything.

How the hell could she go on like this?

Thirty-Five

‘Alex, darling!’ Isabelle cried, almost running to her as fast as her stilettos would allow. ‘You’ve outdone yourself! This party is a total success!’

Alex put on a fake smile. ‘Glad you like it.’

‘Almost everyone came! How did you pull that off?’ she asked quietly, but the jazz playing big band music in the corner was plenty of cover for the conversation.

‘I think you underestimate people’s willingness to be close to a scandal,’ Alex told her honestly.

Isabelle’s smile faltered. ‘Oh, come on, now. You muddied the waters like a true professional. Now, no one knows exactly what to believe. And that was just enough to save my career, I think.’

‘Yeah, I’m a clever little liar,’ Alex said.

Isabelle's smile fell off her lips entirely. 'Is everything OK?' she asked.

'Yeah, it's great. I'm glad you're enjoying your party. Maybe we can talk afterwards?'

'About what?' Isabelle asked, antennae up.

'We'll talk later. Enjoy the evening,' Alex urged her, praying she'd just let it go.

But Isabelle was starting to look rather worried. 'Alex, is...'

Steven interrupted them, thankfully. 'Isabelle, we might have a small issue. Erin's here.'

Isabelle's eyes widened. She spun to Alex. 'Did you do this? Another one of your little tricks for a photo op? Because I don't think this was the night for—'

'Nothing to do with me,' Alex said. 'I don't repeat myself. Makes me easy to predict.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘Then how in the hell did she get in? Why would security even let her past the doors!’ Isabelle hissed, trying not to alert any of the other party guests drifting around to her utter fury. It was loud in here, but Isabelle’s body language was pretty loud, too.

‘She wasn’t on the invite list; that’s all I know,’ Alex said.

‘Get her ejected. Do it quietly. Do it now,’ she hissed.

Alex clicked her heels together and saluted. ‘You got it, boss.’

Isabelle didn’t look like she appreciated the joke, but Alex was clean out of fucks to give about offending that woman.

She went to look for Erin. Intuition told her to check the bar first. Lo and behold, there she was.

‘Hey, Erin!’ she greeted her cheerfully.

Erin turned and frowned. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m your ex’s dogsbody. Come to ask you to leave quietly.’

Erin laughed in her face. ‘Oh? She around? I need a quick chat about something.’

‘She doesn’t want to see you. And you know you shouldn’t be here. Let’s just get you into a cab, shall we?’

Erin turned back to the bar as a cocktail was placed in front of her. She took a leisurely sip. 'Get me Isabelle. I'll leave after I've talked to her.'

'I'm afraid that's not happening. What will happen will be me fetching the big guys who pretend they're not taking steroids to get that massive. But they are, Erin. They are.'

Erin was drunk enough not to care. 'Get your musclemen. I don't give a shit.'

Alex sighed and stepped up to the bar, asking the bartender for a neat scotch. As he complied, Alex turned to Erin. 'I don't get why you're doing this. You won, you know?'

'I didn't win. She's fine,' Erin said, gesturing at the party.

'You won enough. You took a serious chunk out of her that she's never getting back. You only stand to lose by making a scene.'

'You wanna know what that woman's nickname was for me?' Erin asked, turning to look at Alex.

'No,' Alex replied instantly.

'Billy.' Erin said, clearly not listening.

Alex frowned. 'Right...'

'Short for Third Billy, always billed third. She used to make it a joke that I wasn't as successful as her, that I'd never move up, just spin my wheels until I lost my looks, and then that would be that. Hilarious, right? And nothing's changed.'

‘I heard you just got cast in a lead role,’ Alex said. ‘Take the victory and leave.’

‘I just came to see the smile knocked off her face for once.’

‘You knocked it off plenty this week,’ Alex told her.

‘But I never got to see it. I need to see it.’

Alex gave Erin a hard look. ‘You don’t deserve that.’

‘You don’t know what she put me through.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Yeah, I bet. I heard about you. “The shark.” That’s what Leigh called you.’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

Alex chuckled at that. 'She did, did she?'

'Yeah. She thinks you're a real piece of shit.'

Alex was less amused by that. Something bubbled up inside her. 'Do you want to find out if she's right? I was phoning it in this week for Isabelle in terms of how we reacted to your Selma Haynes bollocks, but if I decide to destroy you, I mean really put my shoulder to the wheel, well... Even I'm a bit scared of what could happen.'

Erin giggled. 'I'm not frightened.'

The anger inside Alex rose ever higher. A little too high, maybe. 'No, I don't suppose you are. But guess what? I'm not a nineteen-year-old maid. You're not taking your shitty marriage out on me.'

Erin looked like she'd been slapped. 'What?'

Shit. She shouldn't have said that. 'This is my last warning. Go. Now.'

'What the fuck? You and Leigh have been sharing info?' Erin asked, confused.

Erin knew Leigh knew? That wouldn't be good. 'Leave her out of this.'

'Nah, it's fine. It's fine,' Erin assured herself. 'You'll have signed a confidentiality agreement for Izz, won't you? Both of you are toothless. I don't even need to threaten you.'

‘You threatened Leigh?’ Alex asked.

‘She’s such a nervous little thing, isn’t she?’ Erin grinned. ‘So vulnerable. You barely have to say anything, and she’s shaking like a leaf—’

Alex didn’t need to hear anymore. She went to find Leigh. But she was a little harder to track down than Erin. She wasn’t anywhere in the ballroom. Alex headed out into the corridor outside the ballroom. But the only person out there was Isabelle, making a phone call. Alex couldn’t seem to escape her tonight.

‘No, Jenny, I will not do a commercial in Japan. I can’t believe you would even suggest... Wait, how much?’ Isabelle spotted Alex. ‘I need to go. I’ll talk to you later.’ She put her phone in her purse and turned to Alex. ‘She gone?’

‘No,’ Alex replied, walking past without pausing.

‘Where are you going!?’ Isabelle asked. ‘You have a job to do.’

Alex paused, turned, took out her letter of intent, shoved it into Isabelle’s hand, and kept walking.

‘What is this?’ Isabelle asked her.

Alex still didn’t stop, but she could hear the ripping of an envelope. Apparently, Isabelle was a very fast parser because there was a hand on Alex’s arm two seconds later. She turned back to her.

Isabelle was furious. ‘How dare you.’

Alex raised an angry eyebrow. ‘How dare I what?!’

‘You can’t quit. We’re not done.’

Alex shook her hand off. ‘We are done, actually.’

‘You were going to get me an Oscar. You practically vowed it in blood.’

‘Get your own fucking Oscar,’ Alex sneered.

Isabelle seemed to realise she was being too much and tried to pull it back. ‘What’s this about, Alex? You owe me that, at least.’

Alex looked Isabelle dead in the eye. ‘I think you know.’

Isabelle trembled with building rage. ‘That stupid little bitch talked!’ she spat.

Now, the last time Alex slapped someone, it was her father. It was a personal relationship. Not that it hadn’t shocked Alex to have gotten physical. But her father had it coming since the day she was born. It made a kind of sense. She could square it.

But when Alex’s hand flew out and cracked Isabelle Kane around the face, there was true shock on both sides. What the hell had caused her to do that? Was she seriously risking her entire career and reputation to defend the honour of a total stranger?

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

Isabelle clutched her cheek. ‘Who the hell do you think you are?’ she cried, horrified.

‘I don’t know,’ Alex answered honestly.

Thirty-Six

Leigh didn’t see what had led to the slap. She was just trying to leave the terrible party after collecting herself in the toilet for a few minutes. But when she walked out into the quiet corridor, she was just in time to see Alex’s hand whip across Isabelle’s face.

Leigh ran to the scene to see Isabelle clutching a very pink cheek, staggering away from Alex. Isabelle’s ever-present PA was watching from a distance.

‘Did you see that?’ Isabelle asked, turning to him, and he nodded.

‘Come on!’ Leigh said, dragging Alex to the nearest exit.

‘I swear I’m not always this violent,’ Alex muttered to Leigh, discombobulated.

‘Just come with me.’

Out the back of the building, in a bin-filled alleyway, Alex slumped against a wall out of it.

Leigh clicked her fingers in front of her face. ‘Alex, come back!’

Alex seemed to come round somewhat, able to meet Leigh's eyes at least. 'What just... I slapped her. Why did I do that?!'

'I don't know, I just saw the slap,' Leigh explained.

'She was... She was saying... I...'

'What did she say?' Leigh asked.

Alex shook herself. 'Nothing. I just...'

Leigh's eyes widened anew. 'Alex...'

'What?'

'You're crying,' Leigh told her.

'That's absurd. I don't do that,' Alex frowned. But she pressed her finger under her eye and found the tear. She looked at it like it was blood coming from her eyes.

'You're upset. You need to go home,' Leigh said.

'I'm not upset,' Alex insisted. 'I'm just... I don't know what I am, but I'm not leaving this party. I need to apologise right now.'

'Don't you dare apologise to that woman,' Leigh said sternly.

'What choice have I got? I hit her.'

'I don't care—'

‘I’m in PR, Leigh.’

‘Yes, Alex, I’m aware of that because you might remember that I amalso—’

‘If she tells people I did this... I’m done. It’s over. I’ll never work again. The whole company... poof. Gone. Like it never existed.’ She sniffed. ‘I’m fucked.’

Leigh shook her head. ‘No. There’s got to be something... We can’t just be stuck under these terrible people’s thumbs forever.’

Alex looked at her. ‘Right, that’s... I waslookingfor you. Erin threatened you?’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘How do you know about that?’

‘She told me. Bragged, actually. I just wanted to check... Are you OK?’

Leigh wanted to say she was. But it would have been a lie. ‘No. I’m not.’

‘I’m sorry. What do you say I slaphertonight too, double my money?’ Alex asked wryly, a little of her old self coming back.

Leigh was touched that she’d even joke about it. ‘That’s nice, but I don’t want you to get a taste for it,’ she quipped.

Alex chuckled. Leigh was glad to see her smile.

‘Seriously, why did you slap her?’ Leigh asked.

Alex went quiet for a moment. Leigh expected a joke or deflection, the Alex Walker standards. But she must have been too tired to summon any of that because all she said was the truth. ‘I didn’t like the way she was talking about Amanda.’

Leigh nodded. ‘Iknewit would be that.’

Alex looked away, and somehow, from somewhere, anger seemed to rise. ‘This is your fault.’

Leigh looked at her in disbelief. ‘I can’t wait to hearthis.’

‘You keep poking at me.’

‘Poking at you?’

‘Yes. “Acknowledge your feelings, Alex. Stop pretending you’re a robot, Alex. Let people get close to you, Alex.”’

‘I never said any of—’

‘You did. In your way. You just stand there, being like you are. And it makes me feel things that I don’t like.’

Leigh was shocked. ‘That’s not my fault.’

‘Maybe not, but I can’t do it.’

Leigh put her hands on her hips, at a loss. ‘You don’t have to. Like you said, this will be over soon.’

Leigh could have sworn she saw remorse pass across Alex’s features, but if it was there, it never made it out of her mouth. ‘I need to go talk to Isabelle and get this straightened out if I can,’ she muttered.

Leigh was disappointed in her for caving in, but then again, Leigh couldn’t talk. She’d bent over and taken it from Erin tonight. ‘Do what you have to do,’ she said, the only kind thing she could think to say.

Leigh decided it was time to get out of here. She turned and headed down the alley, out to the busy, dark street.

‘Wait, why did you even come to this thing?’ Alex called after her.

Leigh stopped, but she didn't turn, merely tossing her final words over her shoulder. 'Because I'm an idiot and wanted to support you.'

She kept walking.

She didn't see a cab anywhere, and when she checked her phone, there were no Ubers for half an hour or so. She looked around and saw a bar. Maybe she should take a leaf out of Erin's book and drink some pain away.

She went into the bar and ordered whisky. She took a sip and remembered she hated whisky, but it was the drink of maudlin nights, so she kept at it. Soon enough, she finished it and ordered another. It tasted just as bad, but she drank it down.

She was considering punishing herself a third time when her phone vibrated.

I'm sorry. Please come back.

Leigh erupted in astonished laughter, causing a few bar patrons to look. She was past caring. She had a text argument to have.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

What for?She asked.

Because I need your help,came the reply.

With what?

You'll see.

I'm not coming because you click your fingers, Alex.

This isn't finger-clicking. It's begging. I'm on my knees, Leigh. I really need your help.

Leigh was amazed that Alex was being so contrite, but not enough to drag her arse back to that glitzy mess. At least not right away.

She waved at the bartender, and he came over. 'I'll have another whisky.'

'If you don't mind me saying, maybe you should order something you like?' the bartender said, placing her glass under the optic and injecting it with a fresh shot of whisky.

'I like it fine.'

'You keep grimacing.'

'I'm having a long, dark night of the soul. You can't pair those with Malibu and

Coke,' Leigh explained.

The bartender smiled. 'There's a million ways to poison yourself. You might as well make it a fun one.'

'I guess I'm just a glutton for punishment,' Leigh theorised as she paid for the drink.

She drank the drink, grimaced, and shoved a tenner in the tip jar. She walked out of the bar, still trying to decide which way she'd go. Away from this chaos to reevaluate everything? Or right back into madness?

Thirty-Seven

Alex dragged herself back into the hotel, intending to humble herself before Isabelle and beg her not to press charges. She also told herself she was never going to get in contact with Leigh ever again. Alex couldn't be around her anymore. It was starting to feel like torture. Something kept trying to get out of Alex, and she wanted that thing, whatever it was, to climb back down and, ideally, die.

In the ballroom, people were getting loud and sloshed. It was still a good few hours until the actual screening, but Alex didn't think most would make it that far. Not that it mattered. It was only listed for appearance's sake. People were here to be greased and nothing more. Hell, even Alex hadn't seen the movie.

Alex spotted Erin still propping up the bar. She truly did want to kick the living shit out of her; she wasn't kidding about that. These new violent impulses needed to be curbed, or she was gonna be stabbing people by next week.

She let Erin be for the time being and kept looking for Isabelle. She couldn't seem to spot her because the place was heaving, packed a fair bit tighter. Either people had come late, or randoms were getting past security.

Maybe Isabelle wasn't in here, anyway. Maybe she was nursing her cheek in private. One of the few places that might be empty right now was the screening room.

Alex left the party again and went down the corridor to a smaller room where the movie was to be shown on a large screen. She opened the door and popped her head in. Someone was in the first row of seats, but it wasn't Isabelle.

'Steven!' Alex said as Isabelle's assistant came into focus. 'What are you doing in here?'

He turned in his seat, slightly frightened. 'Just getting some work done.'

'Have you seen Isabelle?' Alex asked him.

'No!' he said quickly.

'I'm just trying to find her so I can apologise,' Alex explained. 'I'm not after round two.'

'She's probably in the car,' Steven told her.

Alex nearly left to follow his suggestion. But something inside her said that opportunity lay in the room. Maybe she really was part shark because she smelt blood in the water.

She closed the door behind her and went down to the front row of seating, sitting right next to him. 'Steven, we've never really talked, have we?'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

Alex could see deep worry lines creased in his forehead, even in the low light. ‘You didn’t tell her I told you I tipped you off about Helen taking that pic, did you?’ he asked quietly.

‘Pretty sure you’d know if I had,’ Alex replied.

Steven laughed nervously. And then, seemingly without transition, he was crying.

‘Jesus, Steven!’ Alex cried, shocked. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’m fine. I’m just tired,’ he said, sobbing.

She put a hand on his shoulder. Not because she was working him, but because she felt bad for the guy. His boss was a hellion. Alex couldn’t imagine what it would do to someone to be under Isabelle’s eye, day in, day out, for years.

‘Steven, you’re not fine.’

‘I’m great. My job is great! I couldn’t ask for a better boss!’ he said through tears.

‘You know I’ve met Isabelle, right?’ Alex asked.

He ducked his head. She pulled a packet of tissues out of her purse, and he took one, giving his nose a good long honk. Once he’d gathered himself, he slapped a big old fake smile on his face and said, ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me.’

Alex suddenly wished Leigh was there. She’d know just how to handle this. All Alex

had was her wits.

But maybe she could utilise a bit of that Leigh honesty?

‘Can I ask you something?’

He looked worried but nodded.

‘Why do you work for her?’ Alex asked gently.

‘Why do you?’

‘I don’t. I just quit,’ she told him. ‘That’s kind of what led to the slap.’

‘You quit and slapped her?’ he asked, impressed.

‘She’s too awful. I can’t do it anymore. But you know that, don’t you? Because when you told me who took that picture, you also knew who was in it, too.’

Steven was horrified. ‘No! I don’t have any idea who Amanda Bradley is!’ He groaned. ‘Shit, that wasn’t what I meant to say.’ He shook his head. ‘She’s gonna kill me.’

‘Steven, relax. You didn’t fuck up. I already had the name,’ Alex told him.

He covered his face for a moment in pure relief. Then he looked back at Alex. ‘You did?’

‘Yeah. You knew her, right? Did you know the deal with her, Isabelle, and Erin? How they kept her locked in the pool house like a vibrator in the knicker drawer?’

He nodded. 'Yeah. She was kind of my friend at first.'

'But they didn't want her having friends, did they?' Alex asked.

'No, they didn't,' he said ominously. He seemed to realise he was talking too much. 'Shit, I can't talk about this. My confidentiality agreement! Isabelle will ruin me!'

'She won't have time to ruin you because she'll have a full-time job ruining me,' Alex assured him. 'I slapped her; she's not letting that one go. I want you to know that I won't take it personally if you testify I did it, by the way.'

'Seriously? I mean, I'm not saying I want to, but...'

'I did it,' Alex smiled. 'It's a fair cop. But can you believe she didn't even try to hit me back? What a pussy,' Alex said, nudging him.

Steven giggled. And then he went quiet. 'I hate her,' he admitted quietly. He looked at Alex. 'I want to quit. But she said I wouldn't get a reference from her. Imagine trying to get a job with a twelve-year gap in your resume.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘And I bet you worked hard for her, didn’t you?’ Alex pressed.

She was making some real progress with Steven, but she didn’t want to push him too hard. He was likely to bolt.

‘You havenoidea.’

Alex nodded. ‘I’m betting she doesn’t want you to leave because you know where all the bodies are buried.’

‘I’ve had that thought myself,’ he agreed. He slumped in his seat dejectedly. ‘She was horrible to Amanda,’ he said. ‘They both were. But I think with Erin it was kind of worse because she hates Isabelle, but she couldn’t say anything directly to her. So she’d take it out on Amanda. And Amanda, god, she’s such a sweetie, she wouldn’t fight it.’

‘If Erin hated her wife, why wouldn’t she leave?’ Alex asked.

‘Because Isabelle has the money, and Erin likes money.’ Steven shrugged.

‘But she had her own, right?’ Alex asked.

‘She spends more than she makes. She was always getting red letters from credit card companies, even with Isabelle’s support. She likes pretty things. Extravagant holidays, expensive clothes, sports cars, all that crap.’

‘I knew it,’ Alex said, triumphant. ‘Gold digger.’ She loved it when her spin lined up

with the truth.

‘I guess. Well, she’s not actually that good at the whole acting thing, and I think she’s always known it on some level. Marrying rich was the only way she was ever going to get that kind of life. Although I suspect she’ll be doing better off the back of the scandal.’ He sighed. ‘Even now, Erin’s still making Isabelle pay the bill for what she wants.’

‘That’s very poetic, Steven,’ Alex complimented him.

Steven abruptly seemed to find a bit more panic in his system. ‘What the hell am I doing? I signed an NDA, and I’m sitting here acting like I’m not ruining my own life with every word.’ He gave Alex an examining look. ‘You’re too easy to talk to.’

Alex’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Me?’

‘Yeah.’ Steven looked embarrassed. ‘I just get this feeling you’re alright.’

That was the second time she’d heard that of late. And Alex wondered, Can I be this? Is it this easy?

An idea popped into Alex’s head, fully formed and ready to go. But could she really do it? Should she? Was it stupid? Or was it the best idea she’d ever had?

It would change everything. And it might cause Alex to lose everything, too. That alone should have made it easy to dismiss the thought and go back to plan A: Kiss Isabelle’s arse and pray it was enough to save her own.

But the trouble was, Leigh was right, goddamn her. Alex did care about this. She couldn’t help it.

She took a deep breath and started talking. 'I think it's wrong she got away with the way she treated Amanda. And Erin, too. They're a pair of creeps who abuse anyone they can keep quiet.'

'Well, sure, but what the hell can you do about it?' Steven said.

'I do have one idea. I could use your help, though. We could get some enemy of my enemy stuff going together?'

Steven looked scared but interested. 'I don't know. You want me to ruin my boss? Doesn't sound like the best idea.'

'It is if she's not your boss anymore. I need a good PA. Are you interested?' Alex asked.

Steven looked astonished and then delighted. 'Yes, please,' he said eagerly.

'Great.'

'I mean, if you promise you can protect me from her. She's very vengeful. I can't afford to get sued.'

'I know a good lawyer if that happens. And we'll countersue together.'

'If she compels me to testify that I saw you slap her, I'll have to do it. I'm a terrible liar,' he warned her.

'Like I said, it's cool. I did it, and I'll take the consequences.'

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘Then I’m in,’ Steven said. His eyes became haunted. ‘Good god,’ he said, looking a bit green. ‘I can’t believe I’m going up against her.’

‘You’ll never be free otherwise,’ Alex said.

‘I know. I’m not changing my mind; I’m just verbalising my terror. I find it helps.’

Alex smiled and held out her hand. ‘We’re doing this, then?’

Steven shook it. ‘But what’s the plan?’

‘First things first. We’re going to need some help if we’re gonna do this.’ She got out her phone and began texting Leigh contrite messages, begging messages. She just hoped it wasn’t too late.

‘Who are you texting?’ Steven asked.

‘My nemesis,’ Alex explained. ‘You’re gonna love her.’

Thirty-Eight

Leigh was outside the hotel, wondering if she was really gonna go back into the party from hell. Was she an idiot to even stand outside? Possibly.

While she was still dilly-dallying, Alex suddenly burst out through the main doors. ‘There you are! Thank God!’

Leigh set her face to anger. 'I wasn't definitely coming in.'

'Ofcourseyou were coming in,' Alex said. 'I don't have time for this. I need you.'

'What for?'

'I have a call list to go through, and you're gonna have to do the tough ones.'

'Calls to who?'

'Come with me to my pop-up war room,' Alex grinned.

'Yourwhat?'

Alex dragged her by the arm and into the hotel lobby. 'Come on, there's no time for fucking around. We've got to be done for twelve.'

'Done with what? Alex, what the hell are you doing?' Leigh asked, befuddled.

By now, they were at the entrance to the party room. Leigh put the brakes on. 'I'm not going in there until you explain.'

'That's not our destination. Don't worry.'

Leigh was making no promises, but she was certainly intrigued.

She followed Alex into a small, dark screening room to find a guy in his thirties, making notes with one hand while he tapped through his phone with the other. 'I've got a list of six,' he said.

'Are you serious?' Alex asked, shocked.

‘I’m not even finished,’ he said. ‘I’m sure there’s a couple more I’m forgetting.’

‘I think we only need three to agree,’ Alex said.

‘Threewhat, Alex,’ Leigh interrupted. ‘Talk. Now.’

‘Former maids turned sex slaves,’ Alex said.

‘Huh?’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘Amanda wasn’t the first, though she lasted the longest.’ She gestured at the guy with the list. ‘This is Steven. He knows everything.’

Steven gave her a quick wave. ‘Hi.’

‘He’s Isabelle’s assistant, right?’ Leigh checked.

‘He was. Now he’s mine. Long story short, I’m blowing it all up. Tonight.’

Leigh blinked. ‘Why?’

‘Because we’re all stuck with under those bastards, and I can’t have that. So let’s pool that rage and drain their power.’

Leigh was terror-struck. ‘But...’

‘I know,’ Alex nodded. ‘You have bosses. They won’t like it. So, this is your call. But I think if I can get this going, your bosses will have the proof they need that Erin’s a monster. Hopefully, the only thing they’ll have to say to you about it is, “Thanks for trying to warn us. Here, have a massive raise as an apology.” Alex paused. ‘Might be a bit optimistic.’

‘Isabelle wouldn’t accept your apology?’ Leigh asked.

‘Oh, I never gave it to her,’ Alex said quickly.

Leigh was surprised. ‘So, this is how you’re saving your career?’

‘Possibly?’ Alex said philosophically.

‘Seems like there are easier ways,’ Leigh was compelled to point out. ‘Starting with that apology you were planning before.’

‘Yeah, well, I had second thoughts about that.’ Alex shrugged, trying hard to seem casual. ‘I’ve never really been one for kissing the ring.’

‘But this is very risky.’

‘If it doesn’t work, at least they’ll say I went out big,’ Alex said with a twinkle in her eye. ‘So, you in?’

Leigh thought about it. She thought about how this would complicate things further for her. She thought about how fucking angry Cybill had been the last time they spoke. And she also thought about her old boss saying, ‘Be bold.’

And then there was Alex...

However she was trying to play this, Leigh knew there was more to it than simple self-preservation at work in Alex tonight. Leigh needed to hear Alex take a leap. If Leigh was going to be strong tonight, she needed Alex to do the same.

‘I’ll do it if you admit something,’ Leigh said. ‘That you’re not doing this for yourself.’

Alex rolled her eyes and groaned. ‘There’s no time for this.’

‘You better make time. I’m not helping unless you say it.’

Alex looked at the floor and let out an enormous groan of annoyance. ‘OK, Leigh.

You win. I'm doing this because I care, OK? About Amanda and everyone else those two devils have used and abused. You happy?'

Leigh grinned. 'Ecstatic. Now, who am I calling and what exactly is it I'm asking from them?'

Thirty-Nine

Alex watched as Leigh hung up the phone after a fifteen-minute talk with Amanda. She'd been talking low and slow. Alex couldn't read her tone at all.

Leigh turned to Alex. 'She said yes.'

'She did? Are you fucking serious, Calloway?!' Alex grabbed ahold of Leigh before she realised what she was doing.

But if Leigh was shocked by it, she didn't show it, accepting the hug completely. It was a momentary hug, but being pressed against Leigh, feeling her breath on her neck unraveled her.

They leant back from the hug after a few seconds, and Alex looked right into Leigh's big, dark eyes. She realised the terrible thing, the feared thing, the worst of all possible things, had happened.

Page 91

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

Alex was in love with Leigh.

But she would deal with that another time. Or possibly never. Never sounded quite appealing, actually.

‘How did you do it?’ Alex asked Leigh.

‘Well, first off, I spent ten minutes talking through how risky it was.’

‘Interesting play,’ Alex noted.

‘I had to. You know that,’ Leigh said earnestly

‘But then?’ Alex pushed.

‘I told her about the others. Everything Steven said. I think that made her feel better, knowing she wasn’t alone. And then she said, “If I wasn’t the first, I won’t be the last. I can’t let some other poor naïve idiot wander into either of those spider’s nests.”

‘So, she’s doing it? Like right now?’ Alex asked.

‘Yeah. She’s gonna text it over when she’s done,’ Leigh confirmed.

Alex did a small air punch of victory. ‘The other yeses just got a lot more likely. If everyone knows one person was willing to talk...’

‘Then what are we waiting for?’ Leigh asked. ‘Gimme the next name.’

It was midnight. Alex walked back into the party. The room was half-empty. Every gift bag was gone. It was gonna be a thin screening.

Alex was surprised and delighted to find Erin was still hanging around. She was drinking coffee now, presumably so she could keep on her feet.

‘Hey, you get your big moment with Isabelle?’ Alex asked.

‘I think she left,’ Erin said irritably.

‘That narcissist? Miss her own movie? Doubtful,’ Alex told her. ‘Hey, you still want to see the smile wiped off her face?’ she asked.

Erin looked interested.

‘Why don’t you come to the midnight screening? I think you’ll enjoy it.’

Erin sniffed. ‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. I promise you, it’ll be worth a look,’ Alex vowed.

Erin was intrigued. ‘Alright.’

‘Just out there,’ Alex gestured. ‘Staff will point the way.’

Erin did as she was told. One domino was set. But what about the other?

Alex headed out of the party, along with the faithful few who’d made it to the end. Isabelle was just coming in from outside, looking like she’d collected herself from the

earlier fracas. She looked very pleased with herself, no doubt looking forward to everyone seeing how great she was at dying on screen.

But when Isabelle saw Alex, her smile slipped. 'What are you still doing here?'

'I arranged this thing. I wanted to see it through,' Alex said.

'You know I'm going to report you to the police for assault in the morning, don't you? Try spinning that to future clients,' she said with contempt.

'You're reporting me?' Alex asked, trying to look worried. 'Isabelle, is there nothing I can do to make it up to you?'

Page 92

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

Isabelle looked surprised and pleased that Alex was so easily broken. 'Well, since you asked... I might be appeased if you tore up that letter you gave me earlier and signed a new contract. One where your company only works for me. At a discount rate, of course.'

Alex gave her a smile of utterly fake relief. 'I could do that, Isabelle. If you could forgive me.'

Isabelle touched her arm. 'I think we could be a good team now.'

Alex tried not to shudder outwardly. 'Now you've got something over me?'

She nodded. 'Exactly.'

Alex smiled, and this time, there was nothing fake about it. She was truly happy. Because she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that what she was about to do was the right call. 'Well, you're not leaving a lot of options,' Alex shrugged. 'So, I guess I'm in. Now, let's get you to your big moment, shall we?'

Isabelle gave her a magnanimous smile. 'Let's.'

They headed into the screening room. Alex noticed Ivy Coulter on her way in. They gave each other a quick nod.

Right on time, she thought. It had taken some serious talking to get her to come. Alex practically had to offer to sit on her face, but here she was.

Alex sat in the back, along with Isabelle. She could just about make out Leigh somewhere in the middle. Erin was front row.

All told, the screening was only about half-full. But that didn't matter. It only mattered that the right people were in attendance.

Isabelle also spotted her. Her jaw tightened. 'Is that Erin? What is she still doing here?'

Alex leaned in conspiratorially. 'I couldn't get rid of her quietly but look at it this way. When you get your standing ovation at the end of the screening, she'll have to soak in it.'

Isabelle smiled. 'I like the way you think,' she purred.

'I've hardly gotten started,' Alex promised her.

'Have you seen Steven?' Isabelle asked. 'I can't seem to track him down, and I thought I'd find him in here.'

'I'm sure he'll turn up,' Alex promised her.

And so he did, suddenly standing up in front of the room. 'Hi, everyone. Thanks for coming.'

'What the hell is he doing?' Isabelle frowned.

'He's giving you an intro,' Alex explained.

'I didn't ask him to do that,' Isabelle said, worry entering her voice.

‘Now, I appreciate that everyone is super excited to see *The Last Flight*,’ Steven began with a gleam in his eye. Alex liked seeing him standing a little taller for a change. ‘But before that, we’d like you to see a short film by some very talented filmmakers. It’s entitled, *You Really Deserve This*. Please enjoy.’

Isabelle finally smelled the disaster coming her way. ‘Alex, what is he...’

‘Shh,’ Alex hushed. ‘You don’t want to miss this.’

Steven stepped aside, and the lights dimmed.

The screen was dark, and then it cut to Amanda, her name captioned underneath. She was talking into the camera from what looked like a bathroom, probably the only private room she could snatch at short notice.

‘Hi, I’m Amanda Bradley. You might recognise me from a picture that became famous recently. People have a lot of theories about exactly who I am, but I want to settle it for good. I have a story to tell you. It’s about two famous actresses with too much money, too much time, and no empathy whatsoever.’

That cut to a different woman. ‘I’m Emma.’

A third woman, ‘Rosa.’

A fourth woman. ‘Iris.’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

The rest of the video cut back and forth between their almost identical stories. Clip after clip described how Isabelle and Erin had been operating for years.

‘They moved me into the pool house.’

‘I lived in the pool house.’

‘They said my friends wouldn’t get it.’

‘I wasn’t sure, but they said it could only work if I lived with them.’

‘It was really important that I not tell anyone.’

‘And then they kicked me out.’

‘They trashed me to everyone.’

‘I was homeless after that.’

‘They said if I said anything, I’d be sued for breaking the non-disclosure agreement.’

‘They threatened to sue if I broke the non-disclosure agreement.’

‘I signed the agreement when I was a maid, but then it seemed like it applied to our relationship, too.’

‘Isabelle was mean, and Erin seemed nicer. At first.’

‘But toward the end, Erin seemed like the scarier one. She smashed my phone in front of me because I didn’t answer a text quickly enough.’

‘I wasn’t allowed to leave the house toward the end. They made it clear that if I did, I wouldn’t get back in. And by then, I had nowhere else to go.’

And on it went.

Alex wasn’t watching the video. She was watching Isabelle, who was frozen in sheer horror while her mistreatment was described by every smartphone-owning former maid who had agreed to shoot their story. None of them had known about the ones who came before or after, but that was all it took for the house of cards to come down. Simply knowing it wasn’t just them. They were willing to break their silence—and the terrifying contract—to protect each other, not to mention future maids.

‘Did you do this?’ Isabelle muttered furiously to Alex.

‘Yeah,’ Alex said, proud. ‘You like it? I mean, I didn’t have long to slap it together, but I think it came out well.’

Isabelle looked at Alex with the devil in her eyes. ‘I’ll end you.’

‘If you must,’ Alex said. ‘But you might be a bit busy. Look around you.’

Isabelle turned and saw that, slowly but surely, everyone in the audience had raised their camera phones. Some were pointed at the screen. Plenty were pointed at Isabelle for a reaction. Or Erin.

‘I think you’re about to have a PR problem,’ Alex explained. ‘And I’m sorry, but I’m tendering my resignation with immediate effect.’

‘I’m taking you with me,’ Isabelle vowed.

‘That slap? Tell the world. I think they’ll understand it now.’

Isabelle stood up and looked down at Alex with pure rage. But the cameras were still on her, so there was nothing more she could do except leave—which she did.

‘Bye, Isabelle!’ Alex called after her.

Next up on her feet was Erin. She stormed up the aisle. ‘You!’

Alex stood to meet her, clapping her hands together in delight. ‘Hey, did you see? Isabelle was really upset. That’s what you wanted tonight, wasn’t it?’

Erin’s eyes flashed with rage. She didn’t care that she was being filmed. ‘I’ll kill you!’ she screamed. She pulled her arm back, and Alex was about to duck when she realised someone had tackled her to the floor.

‘Leigh!’ Alex cried.

Leigh looked up from atop Erin. ‘Get security!’ she cried, wild-eyed, struggling to keep Erin down. ‘She’s hulking out!’

Luckily, someone was ahead of Leigh on that, and the big guys came in. Leigh jumped off Erin, and Erin was dragged out, still screaming death threats. Alex helped Leigh to her feet.

‘That was brave,’ Alex told her.

‘Stupid, more like,’ Leigh said quickly, going pink in the cheeks. ‘She was running on booze strength. It was like a bucking bronco, only it wanted to murder me.’

Alex knew in her heart that Leigh had wanted to protect her, and it meant a lot to her.

But there was no time to enjoy it. Time to put a bow on the evening.

Alex turned to the fifty or so people in the room. ‘Well, I think we’ll call that the end of the show. If you still want to see Isabelle’s movie, well, theotherone, I’m sure it will be on Netflix at some point,’ Alex stated.

Everyone trundled out, muttering excitedly to themselves. They were satisfied. All this and free Apple watches?

One of the last out was Ivy Coulter. ‘This wasinsane. Will you send me that video?’

Alex turned to Leigh. 'You cool with giving her the scoop?'

Leigh shrugged. 'I guess.'

'This was a coproduction, was it?' Ivy asked, amazed. 'I'm gonna need the full story on this bizarre pairing. You know, after I'm done rippingthosetwo to shreds.'

'Sure.' Alex took out her phone and texted it to her.

Ivy heard her phone beep. 'You're officially off my shit list,' she said to Leigh. She practically skipped out.

Steven, looking pale and shaky, joined Alex and Leigh at the door, the room now empty. 'I need to go home and lie down.'

'You do that. I'll see you Monday morning to sign your employment contract.'

He grinned and left.

Alex was left alone with Leigh. 'Quite an evening.'

'That's an understatement,' Leigh breathed.

'Well, I guess that's that. Both of them are done.'

'Yeah,' Leigh agreed.

A thick silence fell upon them. Alex knew it was now or never to let out the things inside her that were asking, no,demandingto be said. Though Alex had taken Isabelle and Erin down and released numerous women from their shackles of silence... This? This was the moment she needed to be brave.

‘But what about us?’ Alex asked, her entire body trembling.

Leigh’s dark eyes widen. ‘What?’

‘Are we done?’

‘Do you not want us to be?’ Leigh asked, her dark eyes growing wide.

Alex felt like she might throw up from the stress of trying to talk to Leigh honestly. She wasn’t really doing this, was she? She could never deserve Leigh.

Could she?

‘There’s something I need to tell you,’ Alex said. ‘I lied.’

‘What about?’ Leigh asked.

‘I wasn’t drunk. All those years ago. That’s not why I said what I said,’ Alex confessed.

‘So then why...’

‘I said it because I mean it,’ Alex admitted. ‘I meant it all.’

Forty

Leigh’s heart was in her mouth. ‘You meant it?’

‘Yes. I really... I wanted to love you,’ Alex said, an unusual sincerity in her deep-set eyes. ‘But then I got this phone call about some shit my dad had pulled on my mum, and it brought me back down to reality. I felt like you deserved better.’

‘Better than what?’ Leigh said, unable to imagine what she could mean.

‘Better than me,’ Alex said, as though it were obvious. ‘Because I’m just like him.’

‘I don’t believe you are,’ Leigh said.

‘Well... That’s what I thought then.’

‘And what do you think now?’ Leigh asked.

‘I think... I don’t know who I am now. Everything is in flux. I did the right thing tonight, sure, but tomorrow?’ Alex shrugged. ‘No idea.’

Leigh sighed. ‘Thanks for the disclaimer. So now you can tell me what you really want to say.’

That frightened Alex. But Leigh didn’t mind it because Alex looked cute scared. Like a little dormouse peeping out of her hole, wondering if an owl was gonna eat her.

‘Look, I don’t know, OK?’ Alex stammered. ‘I don’t know how to ask... I thought I had it all figured out! What am I gonna do now? Be a good person?’ Alex laughed like it was about the craziest thing she’d ever heard.

‘I’ll get you a cape,’ Leigh said, folding her arms. She wasn’t trying to make this tough for Alex. But she couldn’t make it easy. She wanted to know what Alex really wanted.

‘Leigh, please,’ Alex pled.

Leigh smiled. ‘I’m still waiting for you to get to the point.’

‘Fine,’ Alex nearly screamed. And then she added, more quietly. ‘I love you.’

Leigh stopped smiling. ‘You love me?’

Alex looked scared again. ‘Yeah, w-w-what did you think I was gonna say?’

‘I guess I thought you might be coming round to the idea of going on a date or something. But you love me?’

‘It’s too much. You see? This is why change is such a pain in the arse. I’ve

overcorrected. I should have waited to tell you that, eased you into it over several months, but the way I've treated you like shit, I didn't think I'd get the chance. I thought I had to go big, and now you're freaked out! Which is a very normal reaction in retrospect—'

Leigh was tired of talking. She leaned in and grabbed Alex's waist, pulling her gently toward her.

Alex came closer, but she looked terrified. 'What are you doing?'

'Kiss me, you idiot,' Leigh said.

Alex's terror seemed to break, and she leaned in, kissing her long, deep and slow. It was a bone-shaking kiss. Leigh was glad she was holding onto Alex, because her legs might have given way otherwise.

When the kiss ended, Alex asked, 'You want to go on a date?'

'Yes,' Leigh said confidently.

‘Great. You free now?’

‘It’s gone midnight,’ Leigh pointed out.

‘Somewhere will be open.’

They were a few miles from the hotel, at a twenty-four-hour cafe. It was a shithole, but it was open late. Leigh and Alex had been sitting in the place for a while, talking, mocking each other, playing footsy under the table. Leigh felt... What was it? Oh yes. Happy. Relaxed. It had been a long time since she could say that. It felt like a very good sign.

Alex’s phone kept beeping. ‘Christ, I gotta turn off my notifications for Isabelle’s news alerts.’ She got out her phone and tapped around.

‘It’s that bad already?’ Leigh asked.

Alex glanced at her phone and started laughing. ‘Ohyeah.’ She put the phone away.

‘It happened a few hours ago, and it’s the middle of the night. How is it getting traction already?’

‘People at the screening posted, and it’s still business hours in the US.’

‘Global in hours,’ Leigh marvelled. ‘It’ll be an utter circus by tomorrow. I can’t wait

to talk to my bosses. I wonder if they'll fire me right away or let me serve out my notice?'

'You warned them,' Alex said.

'Yeah, and then I got a bunch of women to speak up without letting them in on it. It was explained to me once already that I was doing the opposite of my job, so I'm sure they'll love me now,' Leigh said.

She had made peace with getting sacked when she'd gone all in on the plan. It felt like a relief, in a way. She'd never felt like she knew what she was doing at Carter and Simon.

'You can put it on me,' Alex assured.

'Oh, I will,' Leigh assured her with a smile and a nod. 'I'm going to scapegoat you so hard, they'll think you're Satan in kitten heels.'

'I wear stilettos, thank you very much.' Alex looked around at the greasy spoon they were sitting in. 'Long time since I've been in a place like this.'

'Because you're fancy now?' Leigh asked, putting a salt-encrusted fry in her mouth.

They'd been here so long that both of them needed something between a midnight snack and breakfast. They'd settled on fries and ketchup.

'You think I'm fancy?' Alex asked, pleased.

'Yes. Mostly because you keep telling me you are,' Leigh said. 'Making fat stacks off the back of all those scandals and everything.'

Alex started laughing and laughing hard.

‘What’s so funny?’ Leigh asked her.

‘I think I need to tell you something. I’m not actually rich.’

‘What? But you said all that stuff about making a fuck ton of money?’

‘I wanted to impress you slash compete with you,’ Alex said, stuffing her giggles back.

‘But all the clients, all the press you get...’

‘It’s expensive maintaining a business, paying back the startup loan,’ Alex explained.

‘I’m doing a little better than breaking even, but that’s about it.’

‘But the suits... Thecoat, for Christ's sake!’

‘I repped someone in fashion. She sent me so many clothes. Upgraded my drip, as Baker put it.’

‘The car?’ Leigh asked.

Alex groaned. ‘The payments on that fucking thing are killing me.’

Leigh tutted. ‘That’s a disappointment.’

Alex arched an eyebrow. ‘Yeah?’

‘I thought you were rich. That’s most of your appeal, if I’m honest.’

Alex laughed. ‘Screw you.’

‘No, really. I thought if things went well, I could probably marry you at some point, give up work, and become a woman of leisure.’

Alex grinned. ‘Didn’t work out so well for Erin. You might need a new plan.’

Leigh shrugged. ‘Probably. So, you wanna go to mine?’ she asked.

Alex looked shocked and slightly scared. ‘What?Now?’

Leigh felt maybe she’d moved a bit fast. ‘Sorry, have I scandalised you?’

‘No, not at all. I just can’t believe this is happening. I thought I’d blown it with you. Like, alot.’

‘You did. I guess I like you enough to give you a last chance, though.’

Alex smiled. 'I'm sorry I said I loved you.'

Leigh was disappointed. 'You're taking it back?'

'No,' Alex said immediately. 'I just should have waited.'

Leigh sat back in her chair. 'That's what I'll do then.'

Alex tensed. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, I'm not gonna say it now. Or tomorrow,' Leigh said carefully.

'But you could?' Alex asked intensely.

Leigh smiled and ate another fry.

Alex took a deep breath. 'Can this work? I mean, are we just crazy?'

'I don't know,' Leigh admitted. 'I really don't. I just... Something about you... I don't know, Alex. It just feels right, somehow. You pull me in.'

'I feel like I don't deserve that,' Alex said.

'Yeah, I don't feel like I earned this yet either,' Leigh admitted. 'But you know what my boss said the day he nearly died? He said I don't ask for things for myself. And he was right. But I want this. I'm scared, but I want it. So, I'm telling you now, you better never pull anything like you did when we were younger. Because I'm putting a lot on the line even talking like this,' Leigh told Alex.

'I'm stupid, Leigh. But not that stupid. If this doesn't work out, I won't let it be because of cowardice. Not this time.'

‘What’s different?’

‘I don’t totally know. But what I do know is that it’s been ten years since we met, so I feel confident in the knowledge that there’s never been one person in my whole life who makes me feel the way you do. So, what do I do with that information? Everything I can.’

Leigh liked everything she was hearing, but she needed to say something. ‘You’re selling me right now.’

Alex looked down for a moment and sighed. She looked back at Leigh, sincerity in her eyes. ‘I am,’ she admitted. ‘I’m sorry about that. But my mouth is all I have, so I’m using it.’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘That’s not true,’ Leigh said. ‘You have plenty of other things.’

‘Like what?’

Leigh decided to start with the basics. ‘You’re a great kisser.’

Alex smiled, pleased. ‘That’s still technically a mouth thing.’

Leigh rolled her eyes and pushed on. ‘And you make me laugh. And there’s sweetness in you, though I know you don’t like to admit it. And I like the way you go after things. I like the passion in you. I like the way you stand up for yourself. I like the way you stood up for others tonight. You don’t need to sell me on Alex Walker.’

Alex went quiet, a minor miracle. Eventually, she leant across the table, taking both of Leigh’s hands. ‘I want it this, too. And I’m also scared. But here are the things that pull me to you. Firstly, your bum is world-class.’

Leigh started to laugh.

‘I’m serious,’ Alex said. ‘It mesmerises me. It does this bounce thing, but it’s also incredibly firm at the same time. It defies logic.’ Alex wiped the smile off her face and tried for serious. ‘But more than that, you’re kind. You’re not afraid to feel things, even when it breaks you. You’re honest. You don’t let me get away with anything. And I like talking to you more than I’ve ever liked talking to anyone.’

They looked at each other for a long moment. Then Alex said, very seriously, ‘You’ve got ketchup on her palm.’

‘I do,’ Leigh admitted, just as seriously. ‘I really do.’

They parted hands and wiped them both off on napkins with small smiles at each other.

‘So, is that offer to go to yours still open?’ Alex asked anxiously.

Leigh gave her a hard look. ‘You still gonna be there when I wake up this time?’

Alex nodded. ‘You bet your unbelievable arse I will be.’

Leigh stood. ‘Then follow me.’ And she walked away from the table, hearing Alex scraping her chair out, desperately trying to catch up. She felt confident that tonight she could ask for what she wanted, and she was absolutely gonna get it.

Forty-One

Three years later

Alex was standing up at her desk, looking at a wedding dress, frowning. ‘This is it?’

Steven nodded.

‘It’s a meringue,’ Alex said. ‘I said no meringues.’

He sighed. ‘I can call the designer, but this is what she sent over.’

‘You better,’ Alex told him. ‘If Tara Anders sees this, she’ll flip her shit.’

‘This is the seventh dress. She hated every single one,’ Steven pointed out.

‘That she has,’ Alex agreed.

‘Maybe it’s not about the dress. Does she even want to get married?’ Steven asked, a reasonable question.

‘That’s not for me to worry about,’ Alex said. ‘She says make my wedding a big deal, I do it. I just need her to follow through so I don’t have to give massive refunds to any of the sponsors she asked me to get her.’

‘Is she even gonna make it to the day?’ Steven asked.

‘If I have to piggyback her down that fucking aisle, she’s going to get married,’ Alex assured him.

‘What about Dan? You think he’ll make it?’

‘Tara is wife number four, so I don’t know about the long term, but at least we know he can fully commit to a choice of cummerbund.’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘Is this even gonna work?’ Steven asked.

‘Define work,’ Alex said.

‘I mean, is it really gonna distract everyone from the fact she was photographed in that seven-way last year?’

‘Let’s not shame her, Steven. She has a lot of love to give,’ Alex told him with a wry smile. ‘And the people that watch her shitty soap simply need to be reminded of that. That at heart, she’s just an old-fashioned girl who wants to marry the man of her dreams.’

‘But Dan is cool with it? The group sex stuff?’

‘Are you kidding? He was there!’ Alex told him.

‘What?!’ Steven exclaimed. ‘Is he in the photo?’

‘He’s the one in the gimp mask,’ Alex told him.

Steven shook his head in befuddlement. ‘Right, I better call that designer. Again.’ He walked out.

Alex sat down behind her desk and looked at the dress. It was definitely too poofy.

The door opened, and Leigh swept in. ‘Sorry to drop by unannounced, but do you have a minute?’

Though Alex had spent all day mired in the most cynical wedding of the century, her face lit up when she saw Leigh.

‘Hi,’ Alex said, standing and leaning across the desk to kiss Leigh sweetly on the lips.

‘Hi,’ Leigh said, taking the kiss and adding her own. ‘So, is this alright? You got time for a chat?’

‘Always,’ Alex smiled.

‘I know you’re busy...’

‘Calloway, you’ve got my attention,’ Alex assured her, sitting down. ‘Tell me how I can make your dreams come true?’

Leigh chuckled and sat down on the other chair. ‘I just wanted to check in about the campaign we talked about.’

Alex clapped her hands together. ‘Ah, yes. I’ve got the team on it. Someone should call you guys soon to schedule the pitch.’

‘You’re sure you have the time?’ Leigh asked uncertainly.

‘We made time,’ Alex told her assertively.

‘But...’

‘Leigh, it’s good for us. We do pro bono work for a women’s charity, and we get to look like people who give a shit. Win-win.’

‘And that’s the only reason you’re doing this?’ Leigh said cynically.

‘Totally.’

‘You don’t fool me, you big softie. I know all about your gooey caramel centre.’

Alex sighed. ‘Yeah, I know. But I need to be cynical right now. I’m doing cynical things.’

‘And you’re very good at them,’ Leigh complimented her. ‘Oh, Amanda says to say hi, by the way.’

‘Hi back.’ Alex remembered something. ‘Is she in the office? I’d like to ring her to tell her something really quick?’

‘No, she’s out fundraising.’

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

‘OK, well, tell her that I heard something I thought she’d be interested in.’

‘Is it that Erin Porter’s doing panto next year?’

Alex’s face fell. ‘Oh man, scooped? I thought I was first on this. You know she’s not even the most famous person on the cast list. Third-billed as ever.’ Alex enjoyed a nasty chuckle before asking, ‘How did you find out?’

‘I still know people,’ Leigh told her.

‘You haven’t worked in PR for years now.’

‘Yes, but with Jack back at the old place, I still have a friend in the biz who gives me the gossip.’

‘How is his heart doing?’ Alex asked.

‘He got a trainer and gave up refined sugar, so it’s better. He said he’s decided he’s ok to die at his desk, as long as he can do it in his eighties.’ Leigh started chewing the inside of her mouth, a nervous habit that Alex adored. ‘He keeps asking me to come back. He can’t accept that I was fired.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Alex said. ‘You didn’t get fired; you quit in terrible disgrace.’

Leigh gave a surprised hoot of laughter, and Alex felt that same old delight when Leigh laughed at a risky joke. No one got her like Leigh did.

Once Leigh had gotten her breath back, she said, 'Well, I had to quit. I had better things to do.'

'You sure did. Like romancing me,' Alex said, waggling her eyebrows. 'It's a full-time job.'

'Once I'd organised my stamp collection, I had to fill my hours somehow,' Leigh said with a half-smile.

'Absolutely. And I guess now I'm locked down; it makes sense to fill the void by setting up a legal aid charity for exploited female workers.'

'It was at a dreadful loose end,' Leigh agreed. 'We found another maid, by the way. Apparently, Isabelle was pulling that shit during her last marriage as well. That brings the class-action suit total to eight. And the lawyers are confident that NDAs are worthless, given that they were signed as part of their employment as maids. The second they stopped cleaning windows, those things stopped counting. So Isabelle's really up shit creek.'

'I couldn't wish future bankruptcy on a nicer person,' Alex said. 'I know you're saving the world and everything now, but I still kind of wish you'd have come and worked here,' Alex said, only half-serious. 'I'm signing more clients than I know what to do with. I can't hire people fast enough. That slap charge really brought in the business.'

Leigh cocked her gorgeous head. 'Part of me would have loved that, but you were right. That business wasn't a fit for me.'

'No,' Alex agreed, loving hearing that. But there was another part of what Leigh had said that flicked her switch. 'Hey, that first bit again,' Alex said.

‘What, that you were right?’ Leigh asked.

‘Look at my hand,’ she said, holding it up. ‘Goosebumps.’

Leigh rolled her eyes. She leaned back and put her feet up on the desk. ‘Hey, you still taking me out later?’ she asked quietly.

Alex shooed her feet back out. ‘We can go out now if you want.’

Leigh was excited. ‘Are you serious?’

‘We’re the bosses. Who could stop us from taking off?’ Alex said.

‘I never thought I’d hear you say that,’ Leigh smiled.

‘There’s more to life than work,’ Alex said.

Leigh’s mouth fell open in amazement. ‘Catch me, I think I’m about to faint,’ she said.

‘I wasn’t that bad before,’ Alex said.

‘You lived for work,’ Leigh told her. ‘You were like Jack, pre-pastry.’

‘Yeah, well. That was before I had you,’ Alex said, her lips curving into a smile.

Leigh gave her a look.

‘The second time, anyway,’ Alex amended off Leigh’s look.

Leigh smiled. She turned and saw the dress. ‘That’s not yours, is it?’

‘Nope. You want it?’

‘Not really.’

‘Shame. We could get a discount.’

‘Hmm, how romantic,’ Leigh smirked.

‘You want a romantic proposal?’ Alex asked.

Leigh laughed. ‘I’m not expecting any kind.’

Alex, her hand trembling, reached into her desk drawer.

‘What are you doing?’ Leigh asked, suddenly nervous.

‘I’ve had this in here for months. I was waiting for the right time. But I don’t think it’s coming.’ She took out the box and went around her desk. She sat down on the edge of her desk and flipped open the box to reveal a diamond ring. ‘Will you marry me?’

Leigh nearly fell off her chair. 'You want to marry me?'

'Yes,' Alex said with certainty.

'But you don't believe in marriage.'

'No,' Alex conceded. 'But I do believe in you.'

Leigh tried to speak, but only a squeak came out.

'Was that a yes?' Alex asked.

Leigh nodded. 'Yes, it was a yes. I mean, yes, a yes. Yes.'

'Can you say yes once more?' Alex asked, trying not to get too overwhelmed.

'I seemed to have forgotten how to speak,' Leigh apologised.

Alex laughed nervously. 'I'm scared, too.'

'But you're the one proposing,' Leigh pointed out.

'You might have said no,' Alex mused.

Leigh gave Alex a look that made her feel like jelly. 'I think you know I wouldn't have said no to you,' Leigh said.

Alex was a bit worried she was going to pass out, so she decided to slip the ring on, just in case. That way, when she woke up, at least she'd know she was engaged.

But the ring didn't get past the first knuckle. 'Oh no.'

‘It’s the wrong size,’ Leigh said with a nervous smile.

‘I took one of your rings to get measured!’ Alex cried.

‘Maybe I ate too much salt today?’ Leigh said desperately.

Page 102

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:07 pm

Alex sighed and took the ring back off, putting it back in the box. 'I hate that I messed this up.'

'You didn't mess anything up,' Leigh assured her, standing up and putting her arms around Alex's waist and kissing her tenderly on the neck.

The kiss cheered Alex up quite a bit, but she was still stuck on something. 'But it's not a proposal without a proper ring.'

'So, if there's a ring on someone's finger, only then is it a proposal?' Leigh asked.

Alex nodded, angry with herself.

Leigh slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out a small box. She cracked it open to reveal a ring. 'If this fits you, are we officially engaged, then?'

Alex looked at the ring, another diamond, stunned into silence.

'I wasn't sure about the right time, either. But you proposing seems like a strong sign,' Leigh said.

'You were going to propose? But you don't believe in marriage either!'

'Can I steal your line? Because I believe in you,' Leigh said, moving her hands up to hold Alex's face gently.

Alex wrapped her arms around Leigh. 'It was a good line.'

‘It was a great line,’ Leigh said. ‘It also happens to be how I feel.’

‘I was selling,’

‘You never had to sell me on you.’

‘I did once.’

‘But only once.’ Leigh slid the ring onto Alex’s finger. It was a perfect fit.

‘Shall we get married then?’ Alex asked.

‘Yes, please.’

‘Even though I’m a cynic with no proper role models for love?’ Alex checked.

‘You trying to talk me out of it?’ Leigh asked.

‘I’m disclaiming, that’s all. I don’t want to sell you a lemon.’

Leigh smiled and kissed her. Then she leant back and said thoughtfully, ‘If you’re a lemon, so am I. So. Let’s make lemonade.’

Leigh kissed Alex again, sweetly and lovingly. Alex quickly forgot her ring mistake. It was already in the past.