

The Auditing

By Kallie

“Hey Becky, why do I have to hold on to these dumb looking things?” Val asked, a cocky grin on her face, as Rebecca handed her the long, cylindrical electrodes.

“It’s Rebecca. And they’re electrodes,” Rebecca replied, with as much cheeriness as she could muster. She hated being unpleasant to people, but Val seemed determined to push her to her limits. “And you have to hold them because we agreed that you’d be the subject, and I’d do everything else.”

“Oh, right. So all I have to do is answer a few dumb questions?”

“That’s... yes.” Rebecca sighed. Not for the first time, she cursed silently for letting herself get pressured into this situation. In all her time in college, she’d wanted nothing more than to keep her head down, study hard to preserve her perfect GPA, and then come out the other side graduating summa cum laude. It had been going well - until her professor had insisted she partner with Valorie Everson for her class research project. Val was the last person Rebecca had ever wanted for a lab partner. The captain and star player of the college soccer team, she had a well deserved reputation as an arrogant, boisterous jock who cared far more about drinking and having fun than studying. She’d earned her place in college on an athletics scholarship but apparently her GPA had fallen perilously low, leading the school dean to devise the project of teaming her up with a high-performing student who was sure to ensure she got at least one good grade in a joint project. Apparently, Rebecca had drawn the short straw. She’d been cornered by Professor Linter after class, and unfortunately for her, Rebecca had always been bad at saying ‘no’ to people - not that he’d made it seem like she had much of a choice.

So, she’d ended up in a lab room with Val, who had waltzed in a full hour late as if nothing had happened. As a result, it was after dark, and there was no-one else around. Rebecca had done her best to smile and keep upbeat, telling herself that they’d get finished as soon as possible so they could go their separate ways. Val’s inattentiveness was making that difficult, and causing her patience to wear thin. The jock girl seemed more interested in her phone than in anything Rebecca had told her, and so Rebecca had found herself needing to explain things over and over and over again.

“And you just ask the questions?”

Rebecca sighed again. She’d already explained this twice. “I ask the questions, and monitor all the equipment to get our results.”

Val glanced at the set of machines connected to her. “But what the hell is the point?”

Rebecca looked at Val incredulously, and had to suppress a groan. Due to Val’s shit-eating grin she wasn’t sure if the jock girl was serious or not, but she certainly looked the part of the hopeless dumbass jock. Val was wearing a varsity jacket over a t-shirt and jeans, with a nose stud piercing to complete the look. Rebecca figured she’d spent more hours in gym than a classroom, by a large margin. The two of them couldn’t have been more different. Rebecca was slender and short, and liked to hide behind her large glasses and dark, rolling curls. She was dressed, like usual, in soft pastel colors - a black skirt and a yellow cardigan top. Yellow was her favorite color, and she felt it flattered her dark skin.

“OK,” Rebecca said, tapping her foot. “Let me explain this all, from the beginning, one more time.”

“Sure,” Val replied. “Knock yourself out.” The grin on her face almost made it seem like she enjoyed wasting Rebecca’s time.

“The class assignment is to quantitatively evaluate the religious practices of Physicism,” Rebecca explained in a tired voice. “You know what Physicism is, right?”

“Creepy religious cult?” Rebecca considered pointing out that Val’s bias might not be conducive to the experiment, but instead she just nodded. “I think I saw a documentary on them once.”

Rebecca managed to contain her surprise at the fact that Val had ever seen a documentary, and continued. “Physicism endorses a practice they call ‘auditing’. It’s kind of like therapy. The subject - that’s you - gets asked a bunch of questions, while holding two electrodes connected to a C-meter. That’s this device.” Rebecca pointed to the small plastic box with a dial on it that was wired up to the electrodes Val was holding. “This passes a small current through your body, and measures the way the current flows. Supposedly, this allows the one asking the questions - that’s me - to assess the psychological impact of the questions, and respond accordingly. Physicism claims that auditing can allow its subjects to deal with all kinds of psychological issues and traumas.”

“Right.” Val nodded slowly. “That all sounds real nerdy. Guess it’s right up your alley, huh?”

Rebecca ignored the comment, just like she’d already ignored many similar comments. “What we’re going to do is recreate an auditing session as accurately as possible. Then, these devices will monitor your physiological responses and help us determine if the process is actually therapeutic.” Rebecca gestured to the array of other machines in the lab, many of which were wired up to Val. “Heart rate, sweat, brain waves, that kind of stuff.”

“If you say so.” Val snorted. “How come you get to play with all the toys and I just gotta sit here?”

“That’s the way you wanted it!” Rebecca was unable to keep her exasperation out of her voice. “You said you wanted the easy job!”

“Oh. Right.” Val sniggered at Rebecca’s obvious irritation. “And why do we care about any of this boring stuff?”

Rebecca wanted to tear her own hair out, but contented herself with a loud huff. “Physicism claims that practices like these are therapeutic, but their critics accuse them of being exploitative and a form of brainwashing. In fact, a few years ago, a report into the exact practice we’re researching claimed it could be considered a form of hypnosis, with potentially-”

“Whatever, forget I asked.” Val checked her phone, and laughed at something. “You wanna get on with this? I’ve got places to be.”

“Fine by me,” Rebecca replied, through gritted teeth. “We need to start off by getting a baseline. Just sit there and keep holding those electrodes.”

“Say please?” Val wheedled. Rebecca ignored her. She didn’t know why Val seemed more interested in annoying her than in getting their assignment done, but she refused to rise to it or to sink to the jock girl’s level. Turning her back to Val, Rebecca switched on the C-meter, and all the other monitoring devices she’d wired up to her. A low, electronic hum filled the lab. Rebecca did a quick lap of the room, checking each piece of equipment. Everything was working perfectly.

“OK. Now, what’s your name?” Rebecca asked Val.

“Adam Sandler.”

“Be serious.” Rebecca sighed. “I need a baseline. A true answer to a simple question, no stress attached.”

“Jeez, relax Becky.” Val grinned. She knew exactly what she was doing, Rebecca was sure of it. “My name is Val. Valorie Everson.”

“Thank you.” Rebecca checked all the equipment again. Everything looked to be working fine. “All good. I think we’re ready to get started for real.”

“Ugh, finally,” Val commented.

Rebecca took her place sitting opposite Val, on a lab stool with the C-meter facing her. “All you have to do is respond to what I say. Ready?”

“Sure.” Val shrugged. “Sounds easy.”

“OK.” Rebecca picked up a piece of paper from the table next to her, and looked at the questions written on it. “Can you recall a time you had a problem with another?”

Val snorted. “Sure. I had a problem with Professor Linter when he gave us this dumb assignment.”

“OK.” Unfortunately - or perhaps mercifully - Rebecca was meant to be a neutral presence, and wasn’t meant to pass any judgement. “Can you recall a time you had a problem with another?”

“Uh.” Val looked at her pointedly. “That’s the same question, Becky.”

Once again, Rebecca sighed at being called ‘Becky’. She’d always disliked the nickname. But she made no more of an issue of it than that, and instead tapped the C-meter sitting next to her. “No reaction. We need to keep going until we find something that means a little more to you than that, apparently.”

“Ugh.” Val rolled her eyes. “Fine, whatever. Uh... last week Professor Turner gave me a ‘D’ on my paper. I sure as hell had a problem with her over that.”

Rebecca checked the C-meter. Still nothing. “Maybe academics aren’t the right way to go. Let’s try again: can you recall a time you had a problem with another?”

“Um... lemme think.” Rebecca was pleased to see that Val’s boredom was making her eager to get things done quickly. “How about... at the last big game, Coach Lasky pulled me off the starting squad just so he could give Sabrina a chance to captain!”

This time, when Rebecca checked the dial, she found that the needle was jumping all the way up to the middle portion. “That really bothered you, didn’t it?”

“Well, obviously! I’m twice the player she’ll ever be, and everyone knows it. It was ridiculous for Lasky to jeopardize a match for something like that. Fortunately I managed to bring it back after he brought me on at half-time, but even so! He and everyone else should stop messing with me and just let me do my thing. I’m the best. That’s just how it is.”

“But why were you... scared?” Rebecca said slowly, carefully inspecting the way the needle jumped around the half-circular dial on the C-meter.

“Scared?” Instantly, Val’s voice was full of rage. “What the fuck?”

"That's just what the C-meter says," Rebecca replied quickly, realizing she should have been a little more diplomatic.

"Stupid machine." Val looked off to one side.

"So... you're saying you weren't scared?"

"I... I..." Val's eyes flitted nervously between the C-meter and Rebecca's face. It was the first time Rebecca had ever seen the jock girl so off-balance. Rebecca realized it gave her the perfect chance to press deeper, like she was supposed to.

"You were scared, weren't you?"

"I..." Val's voice trailed off, and after a moment she nodded slowly.

"Good." Rebecca noticed the C-meter jump a little. "Why were you scared?"

"I don't want to be replaced."

"So you're scared of being replaced?" Rebecca asked. In response, the C-meter jumped again, indicating she had hit upon something.

"I... guess so." Val's voice was unusually quiet as she spoke, almost as if she was ashamed.

Rebecca wasn't sure what to ask next, so she decided to follow her instinct. "What makes you think Coach Lasky or Sabrina were trying to replace you? Maybe they were just mixing it up a little, or trying to give Sabrina some more experience."

"No way," Val said emphatically.

"What makes you so sure of that?" Rebecca pressed. The readings on the C-meter confirmed that this was the right line of questioning to pursue. "Is that what they said?"

"I..." Rebecca didn't need the C-meter to let her know that Val was agitated. The jock girl was visibly sweating and her brow was furrowed, and she kept shifting and fidgeting awkwardly. "I just know, OK?"

Rebecca could sense the lack of certainty in Val's voice. There was something quietly intoxicating about seeing a girl who was normally so cocky and domineering become so uncertain. She kept expecting Val to stand up and walk out, but she didn't. It was almost like something was compelling her to continue.

"Did either of them say that?" Rebecca asked. "That they were trying to replace you as captain?"

"No."

"Did you hear something about it? A rumor?"

"No."

"Has Coach Lasky been unsupportive of you in the past?"

"Not really," Val conceded.

"Has Sabrina been mean or unfriendly to you?"

"Hell no. She's always so damn nice." Val seemed almost irritated by that, Rebecca noted.

"Do you have any real reason to believe that they had bad intentions?"

"Well... why else would they be doing anything?" Val said, frustrated.

Rebecca knew that, according to procedure, she was meant to find a way to resolve Val's issue, but she was somewhat at a loss for how to respond to such a stubborn conviction that other people were being malicious. After a moment's thought, though, she hit on an idea. "OK. Let's just assume you're right. Let's assume they were both trying to replace you. Now, think back to that day, and everything that happened. Tell me, does everything really make sense from that perspective?"

"I don't... know." The needle on the C-meter dial jolted sharply.

"Focus," Rebecca urged, in as soothing a voice as she could muster. "Think about what they said to you. Think about the way they said it. Think about the way they looked at you. Was it really as underhanded as you're suggestion?"

"I..." Val looked like she was fighting a war inside herself, until after a long pause, she sagged in defeat. "I guess not."

"Coach Lasky was just trying to give Sabrina a chance to captain for once, wasn't he?" Rebecca felt elated by her apparent breakthrough. Maybe this whole auditing thing was more genuine than she'd thought.

"Yeah..." Val conceded reluctantly. She spoke in a distant, almost whispery tone.

"They weren't trying to replace you, were they?"

"I don't think so." Val swallowed awkwardly, but if anything her voice was gaining in strength as she agreed with Rebecca. "No."

"So, are people always trying to replace you?"

"They're... not?" Val said it almost as if it were a question.

"I think you should say it yourself." Rebecca was amazed by how effectively she seemed to be getting through to Val.

"People aren't always trying to replace me."

As she spoke, a sudden change came over Val. It was like a weight had been lifted from the girl's shoulders. All the knotted tension that had shown in her face drained away, and her shoulders sagged. She exhaled in a long, drawn-out sigh, like she was releasing a breath she'd been holding for a long time. Rebecca was astonished, and her astonishment only grew when she checked the C-meter and found that the needle was resting steadily against the low end of the dial, indicating a complete lack of tension. Rebecca found it hard to believe that Val's anxiety around rejection could have been dealt with so quickly, but when she glanced around at the other monitoring devices she'd set up, they merely confirmed what the C-meter was telling her. Val's blood pressure was down, her heartbeat was slow and relaxed, and her brain wave activity indicated a relaxed state that was almost more akin to light sleep than anything else. Rebecca thought back to that report she'd read about how Physicism's auditing might be akin to a form of hypnosis.

"Val?" Rebecca ventured. "Are you feeling OK?"

"I feel... great," Val answered slowly. Her eyes were slightly unfocused.

"Are you sure about that?" Rebecca asked, concerned. "Do you want to continue?"

"Yes," Val replied, surprisingly quickly

"Val, are you really sure?"

Val didn't seem the slightest bit annoyed by Rebecca's questioning. "I'm sure, Becky."

Rebecca sighed. "I wish you'd stop calling me that, I really dislike it."

"Oh." Val paused for a long moment. "Sorry, Rebecca."

Rebecca froze, stunned. Now she was absolutely certain there was something weird going on. Accepting Rebecca's wishes was beyond uncharacteristic for Val, let alone apologizing. She was seriously tempting to call an end to the experiment right there, and slap Val round the face until she was her usual disagreeable self again. But then she thought about the assignment, and about what their results might mean. This could be groundbreaking! Actual, lab-setting proof that the practices of Physicism could have a hypnotic effect. If they got more data, a top grade could be the least of her reward. Not that she was being selfish, Rebecca told herself - this was all about the science. She did have to admit, though, that she wouldn't be sad to see Val made a little less bitchy.

"Hey Val." Rebecca decided a further little test might be in order. "I'm a little cold right now. Could you lend me your jacket?"

If she could persuade Valorie Everson to part with her prized varsity jacket, which she was never seen without, that would really be something. As she'd half-expected, Val's face twitched for a moment. But then it relaxed again into a happy smile, and Val said: "Sure." Val set down the C-meter electrodes carefully, and then slipped off her jacket and handed it to Rebecca.

"Thanks," Rebecca said, awestruck. Even though she hadn't really been cold, she put on Val's jacket. It easily fit over her cardigan. Without her jacket and with a peaceful expression on her face, Val looked so much less intimidating and formidable. She looked like a completely different girl. Rebecca was surprised at how pretty she found her, but she forced the thought aside.

"Why did you give me your jacket?" she asked.

"Because you were cold," Val answered. "And because whatever you did just now felt really, really amazing. I guess I wanted to repay the favor."

"Fascinating," Rebecca breathed. She thought about what the leaders of Physicism claimed about auditing. They claimed that most people existed in a 'pre-blank' state, burdened by numerous traumas, pains and anxieties. They also claimed that auditing could act as a release, helping the subject's mind more towards a 'blank' state. Supposedly, once all their traumas and anxieties were resolved, subjects would be free of the part of themselves that caused them to experience negative emotions due to their painful memories. Previously it had all sounded like pseudoscience, but now Rebecca wasn't so sure. Val seemed like living proof of Physicism's claims that the process of auditing could help people relax, achieve peace, and behave in a calmer, kinder, more enlightened way towards others. Then, Rebecca thought about the accusation that auditing was a form of hypnotic brainwashing. Was that what she was doing to Val, inadvertently? Was she brainwashing her? The thought was obviously uncomfortable, but Rebecca couldn't help but feel a little intoxicated by the idea of wielding such control over someone like Val.

"Let's continue." Rebecca looked down at the sheet of questions, and Val picked up the electrodes

again. "Can you tell me a secret?"

"I like girls."

Rebecca blinked. Val had answered so quickly and so matter-of-factly that Rebecca wasn't sure she'd heard her right. She checked the C-meter. No reaction. Apparently Val was comfortable with her sexuality, even if she didn't advertise it.

"Good. Can you tell me a secret?" Rebecca continued.

"I don't really drink that much, and I never do drugs," Val answered calmly. "I just pretend to so people don't think less of me."

"Good." This time, there was a flicker of something on the C-meter. Rebecca decided to go deeper. "Why do you think people would think less of you if they knew about that?"

"That's just how it is," Val said. "That's how people think."

Rebecca thought for a moment. "Do you feel like people expect you to drink?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I'm tough. I want people to know I'm tough."

"Is it important to you that people know you're tough?" Rebecca was starting to feel more like a therapist than a researcher.

Val thought for a moment. "Yes."

"Why?"

"If you're not tough, people walk all over you."

"But why does that mean you have to pretend to drink, necessarily?" Rebecca still didn't quite understand.

"It's just what people expect," Val said with a shrug.

"I see." Rebecca thought for a moment. She knew she was supposed to help Val deal with this, but she wasn't sure how. "Does it bother you, having to pretend?"

"I... guess it's kind of annoying, having to keep up the appearance," Val answered slowly.

Judging from the reading on the C-meter, there was more to it than that. Rebecca decided to take a guess. "Do you feel guilty about lying?"

"Not really." On the C-meter, Val's tension appeared to be rising, and her brow was furrowed again. "I feel... embarrassed."

"Embarrassed?" Rebecca had a sudden epiphany. "Because pretending isn't what a tough person would have to do, right?"

“Yeah...” Val shifted uncomfortably.

“Hmm.” Rebecca asked herself what Val’s problem really was. Not that she didn’t drink. And not, Rebecca suspected, that people would judge her for not drinking. Val’s problem was that she was afraid to let anyone see any other side of herself than the tough, obnoxious girl Rebecca had known her as until just a few minutes ago. “Tell me, what do you think would happen if people found out you don’t drink?”

Val looked faintly alarmed by the possibility, but eventually she answered: “I don’t know.”

“Do you think people would think less of you?”

“Yeah... probably, yeah.”

“Think about your friends for me.” Rebecca watched the C-meter closely as she spoke. “Focus on maybe one or two of them. Do you think those friends would think less of you?”

“No,” Val answered. “I trust them.”

“So,” Rebecca reasoned to her, “why do you think anyone else would treat you any differently? Surely most people don’t even care whether or not you drink.”

“I’m... not sure.” Val’s body language gave away that she was far from convinced, and the C-meter confirmed it. Clearly, Rebecca needed to try a different tactic.

“OK. Val, could you please tell me what being tough means to you?”

Val seemed a little more comfortable with that question. “Being self-reliant. Being someone who gets what they want. Being someone no-one can fuck with.”

“Right.” Rebecca was hoping she could get Val to consciously process the discordance between her beliefs about herself and her subconscious feelings. “A tough girl doesn’t care what anyone thinks about her, does she?”

“No,” Val answered immediately.

“Then,” Rebecca continued, “how can you be tough if you care so much about other people’s opinions that you’re willing to hide something about yourself?”

Val froze, her face contorted into a mask of pained confusion. The C-meter was registering extremely high levels of tension and frustration. Rebecca wasn’t surprised; Val was having to confront her own hypocrisy. Fortunately, Rebecca thought she could offer her a way out, but she would have to drive the impact home a little more first.

“So, you’re not tough, are you?”

“No,” Val said eventually, in a small voice. Her eyes were growing increasingly unfocused.

“But you still want to be, don’t you?”

Val nodded.

“Good. Then, do you know what you have to do?”

Val shook her head.

"Well, if you come clean and stop pretending to drink, then you won't be letting other people rule your life anymore, will you?" Rebecca asked.

"No."

"So. What do you have to do?"

"I... I..." Val looked like she was fighting a battle within herself, but then all her tension drained away. "I have to stop pretending."

"Good." Rebecca thought she saw Val smile a little at the praise. "That way you can be true to yourself again. You can truly be tough."

"Yeah." There was now a kind of amazement in Val's voice. She sounded truly unburdened. Rebecca checked her monitoring devices. It was just like before. The C-meter had practically flatlined, and Val seemed to have entered an even deeper state of relaxation. Her eyes were half-closed, and she had a vacant, happy smile on her face. Rebecca was both amazed and excited. She could hardly sit still. This was groundbreaking! It was almost proof that Physicism was brainwashing people. Almost. She needed a clearer demonstration, Rebecca decided, deliberately ignoring the giddy, intoxicating head-rush she was feeling.

"Val, my throat's kinda dry," Rebecca said. "Could you get me a drink of water from the water cooler outside?"

"Of course!" Val answered brightly. She set down the electrodes, stood up, and practically skipped her way out of the lab. Rebecca was tempted to pinch herself to see if it was real. Valorie Everson, infamous asshole jock, skipping to follow a request from a lowly nerd like her? Rebecca couldn't stop a slightly manic grin slowly spreading across her face. It was thrilling.

After a few moments, Val returned, carrying a cup of water which she eagerly handed to Rebecca. Her smile only brightened when Rebecca thanked her. "Why did you agree to get me a drink?" she then asked.

"Oh, well I'm just so grateful!" Val explained. "I don't know what it is, but I feel great now. I wasn't expecting this auditing thing to be so helpful. But anyway, you're my lab partner. It only makes sense for me to help you out a little bit."

Rebecca nodded as she processed that. It seemed like as well as feeling generally more agreeable and co-operative, Val felt a specific sense of gratitude towards her. It was fascinating, as was the fact that Val seemed to have come to genuinely appreciate the process of auditing itself. Rebecca was just about to move on, when a small voice in the back of her head suggested to her that she needed to push Val a little further. After all, asking someone to get a cup of water was a very normal request, at least for most people. It didn't really prove anything. To show that something really remarkable was going on, Rebecca needed to get her to do something extraordinary. Something that no-one would do simply on request.

"Val, could you please take your top off?" The words just slipped out.

Rebecca really expected Val to frown or slap her, but instead the jock girl simply said: "Sure!" and pulled her t-shirt off over her head without the slightest bit of hesitation.

Rebecca's mouth went dry at the sight of Val, topless, with nothing but a sports bra concealing her breasts. She felt an urge, no longer connected with any scientific need, to push even further. "And your bra."

Wordlessly, Val removed her bra as well. Rebecca couldn't help but stare agape at her small, perky breasts, now exposed.

“W-why did you do that?” Rebecca asked her, her voice cracking a little.

“Because you asked,” Val said simply.

“But... but...” Rebecca was struggling to find the words. “Isn’t it embarrassing?”

Val cocked her head to one side, as if considering the question. “A little. But compared to what you’ve done for me, it’s really no big deal. After everything we talked about, being ashamed to let you see me topless just seems silly.”

“W-what if I wanted to touch you?” Rebecca blurted out. She was no longer thinking even slightly as a scientist. She felt incredibly warm, like her blood was boiling. Why couldn’t she stop staring at Val’s chest?

“I’d let you,” Val said, after a short pause. “It’s really no big deal. I owe you one, anyway.”

Rebecca wanted to abandon their assignment, and see how far she could push Val before the hypnotized jock girl pushed back. But she made herself focus on the task at hand. She needed to get this done properly. “Please take the electrodes again,” she said, trying not to sound too flustered. “Let’s keep going.”

Val did as she asked, and nodded eagerly. “Yes. Please.”

After taking a deep breath to calm herself, Rebecca looked down at her paper sheet and started to read the next question. For about an hour, she asked Val question after question, each of which Val answered quickly and happily. Most of them caused her no response whatsoever, but occasionally she would hit on something that would take a little more questioning to resolve. Each time it was resolved, Val would have the same reaction: she’d sigh happily, smile a little wider, and sink into an even more relaxed state. Her eagerness to both continue the experiment and be nicer to Rebecca only grew each time. It was like she was a whole different person: nice, polite, helpful and friendly. Val herself seemed to appreciate the change. At one point she’d actually apologized to Rebecca for her previous behavior, and hearing Valorie Everson apologize for anything had been almost as big of a surprise as seeing her take her bra off. The whole time, Rebecca’s mind was racing with both scientific curiosity and personal temptation. She couldn’t stop thinking about all the things she could make Val do. All the things she wanted to make her do. Part of her wanted to take full advantage of it, to get some payback on Val and on all the other jocks and bullies that had ever pushed her around. But after hearing some of what Val had told her, she felt sorry for her more than she felt vengeful. She wanted to help Val. But if helping her carried a few side benefits, well, Val didn’t seem to be about to object. Rebecca couldn’t stop grinning. It felt good to be in charge, for once.

“OK. Last question,” Rebecca said. She’d reached the bottom of the page. “Can you recall a time of change?”

“Yes.” Val was so relaxed her voice sounded empty, but Rebecca could still sense a little hesitance. “When I was 14 we moved school district, and I had to go to a new school.”

The seemingly innocuous anecdote had Val registering incredible levels of stress on the C-meter. “What happened?”

“I didn’t fit in,” Val answered. “I felt small and lost and confused. I hated it and I didn’t know what to do. I got bullied.”

“So you decided to become tough, didn’t you?” Rebecca guessed. Being tough had come up enough times in Val’s answers that she knew it had to stem from something like what Val was describing.

Val nodded. “Yes. “

Rebecca tried to imagine 14-year-old Val, having a tough time at school. "I'm sorry. That must have been really hard for you."

Val looked surprised, like she'd never heard that before. "It was."

"Is that why you act the way you do?" Rebecca asked.

"I think so, yeah," Val replied. "I don't want to be anything like that weak kid I used to be, getting pushed around and ignored."

"How do you feel about the way you were back then?"

Val paused. "Guilty," she said eventually.

"Do you feel like it was your fault?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because... if it wasn't, why didn't anyone help?"

Rebecca nodded thoughtfully. "You said you felt ignored. By your classmates? The teachers? Your parents?" At the mention of parents, the C-meter spiked sharply. "Val, what was happening with your parents?"

"They got divorced," Val sounded hollow. "That's why we moved. After that, my mom never had time for me anymore. She was busy working or dating."

"Val, that wasn't your fault," Rebecca told her emphatically.

"I guess," was all Val had to say in response.

"Listen to me. Val. It wasn't your fault. You didn't deserve to be ignored like that"

"Then why did she?" Val asked, a pained look on her face.

"I don't know. Maybe it was a hard time for her too, and she was struggling with it." Rebecca could see Val wasn't really convinced. "Can you recall a time when your mom treated you with love?"

"Yes," Val replied.

"Can you think of another one?"

"Yes."

"Another?"

"Yes."

"OK," Rebecca said. "How about a time after the divorce?"

It took a little longer, but answered: "Yes."

"Another?"

"Yes."

"Another?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that your mom loves you?" Rebecca asked.

"I... do," Val said, looking troubled.

"So, do you believe that what happened when you changed school was her way of punishing you? Do you really think she would have done that?"

"I... I... don't," Val struggled to say.

"Then that means you didn't do anything wrong. You don't have anything to feel guilty about. Isn't that right?"

"Yes?" Val seemed so uncertain, but Rebecca could sense the hypnotized girl was looking to her for guidance.

"You don't. Val, do you trust me?" Val nodded. "I promise you that you don't. Do you know what that means?"

Val shook her head.

"It means you don't always need to be though," Rebecca said softly. "You can be, sometimes, if you want. But you don't have to be. I promise."

Val listened, accepted, and relaxed. It was like a switch had been flipped. Her eyes fell completely shut, and she slumped so much Rebecca thought she would fall out of her seat. Rebecca looked at the C-meter. The needle on the dial was still. There was no reading. Was this the 'blank state' people were meant to be able to achieve? If so, that meant Val had successfully processed the core of her psychological issues.

"How do you feel?" Rebecca asked.

"Incredible," Val sighed happily. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," Rebecca replied automatically. If Val was really a 'clear', then that should mean she had practically no inhibitions or feelings of shame or embarrassment. And if Rebecca's current thinking was right, Val's sense of relief about all that had resulted in developing intense feelings of gratitude towards her, the auditor, who she additionally perceived as a source of guidance and authority due to her role in the process. It really was fascinating, and the report of their findings was sure to make for an incredible assignment paper - once she'd done a little more testing, of course.

"OK Val," Rebecca said, "that's our assignment finished! All we need to do now is write up our findings into a report to submit to Professor Linter. Is it OK if I ask you to do that?"

"Of course, Rebecca!" Val replied, with her eyes still closed.

"Really?" Rebecca was curious to hear more of how she was now thinking. "It's really OK for me

ask you to do all that work all on your own?"

"Yes," Val answered, without any hesitation. "It's the least I can do to repay you, and to be a good lab partner."

The sense of awe and eagerness to please in Val's voice was making Rebecca feel light-headed. Now she no longer had an experiment to focus on, she was finding it harder than ever not to stare at Val's breasts. She quickly stopped resisting the temptation. It wasn't like Val was going to mind. "What else would you do for me, if I asked?"

Val thought for a moment, and then said: "Anything."

"Anything?" The word, laden with potential, filled Rebecca's body with heat and an unfamiliar kind of excitement.

"Anything."

Rebecca licked her lips as she stared at Val's naked breasts. She made her choice. This was the opportunity of a lifetime, and Val seemed just as eager to please as Rebecca was to have a little fun.

"You can get started on our report later," she said, standing up off her stool and starting to remove her own clothes. "Here's what we're going to do right now..."

"Rebecca, Valorie," Professor Linter addressed them. It was one week after their experiment, and he had asked them both to stay back after class for a quick word. "I just wanted to let you know that I was very impressed with your lab report. Very impressed indeed."

"Thank you, Professor," both students answered.

"Rebecca, I'm particularly impressed to see that you managed to get Valorie so engaged," Professor Linter continued. "I must say, I was nothing short of shocked to see her turning up for each and every class, bright and early, and actively participating. Quite the change!"

"Thank you," Rebecca repeated.

"Rebecca helped me realize that with the attitude I had, I was only holding myself back," Val said brightly. "I'm gonna work really hard to bring my grades up!"

"I'm glad to hear it," Professor Linter exclaimed. "So, the experiment... all that Physicism stuff, auditing and so forth, it was all nonsense, eh?"

"That's right," Rebecca said. "Complete nonsense."

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised. Either way, good work! You'll both be getting top grades."

"Thank you," both students said again.

Professor Linter dismissed them both with a wave of the hand, and Rebecca led Val out of the classroom. Once outside, they turned to each other. "Are you sure we should have lied to the Professor like that?" Val asked.

"Yes," Rebecca replied. "It's best we keep this between us."

“OK!” That was all it took to soothe Val’s concerns. Since the experiment, she had been a completely different person. She’d been polite, friendly, agreeable and hard-working - almost suspiciously so. And she’d remained utterly faithful to every one of Rebecca’s requests and suggestions, her gratitude and trust undiminished. There was no trace of the old, asshole jock left. Rebecca had been encouraging her to be nicer to people and to put a little more effort into her studies, but she hadn’t stopped her focusing on sports. In fact, from what she’d heard, the soccer team had been showing some improvement now that their captain and star player was more encouraging and empathetic to those around her. Rebecca reasoned that in exchange for her help, a little physical affection wasn’t much to ask for in return. Val certainly didn’t seem to think so. Rebecca looked around.

“Hey, come on!” she said, slipping an arm around Val’s waist and letting her hand slip down to grope her ass. “There’s a supply closet over there. We have enough time for some quick fun before our next class.”

“Are you sure?” Val asked. Rebecca laughed. Val had become so studious and diligent.

“Yes.” With no-one around to see, Rebecca moved in close to Val and kissed her cheek, then nibbled playfully on her earlobe. She loved the way Val never resisted when she touched or groped her. “Just think of it as another little assignment.”