

Bought at a Price by Allison Wall

I met Bethany on our first day of high school, when girls in the compound started having classes together instead of in cohorts. Bethany sat down at the desk right by mine. I thought she was so brave, for sitting next to a stranger, since we hardly ever met new people. Her hair was beautiful, honey-brown ringlet curls down to her waist. Her eyes were the blue-green of a robin's egg.

Her smile was the sun.

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Bethany and I were instant friends. It was like we'd known each other since before our embryos were incubated. We spent every minute we could together, even rearranged the dormitory so our beds were side by side. Of course, we couldn't really talk there, because of the cameras and microphones, so sometimes we stole time. We worked out a system. In assembly, the safekeepers would go on and on about how lucky we were to be chosen, to be alive, to be raised through our sponsors' generosity, safe from plagues and all that, and our duty to our sponsors once we graduated. Bethany or I would get up and leave for the bathroom. The other would wait a few minutes, then follow. We'd fake that we had cramps or were sick, so the guards would let us go. They didn't care where we really went. The compound walls were tall, electrified, and constantly patrolled, so we couldn't go far anyway. We'd sneak out the door with the broken lock and meet down by the creek, where the sun flashed bright on the burbling water. I would lay my head in her lap and she would weave wildflowers into my hair. We kept careful track of time. We always got back before assembly was over.

By the creek, we talked about everything: who our sponsor-husbands might be, what our lives with them outside the compound would look like, how we would make them happy. I was positive Bethany would have zero problems. All she'd have to do is blink her eyelashes to send her husband to the moon. But Bethany was skeptical. "How can we make our husbands happy when we've never even talked to a man?" she wondered.

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So much depended on whether or not we pleased our husbands. That was the entire reason we'd been incubated—because our sponsors bought and paid for us, even named us. Our life's purpose was to be pure and perfect, set aside, undefiled by diseases and immorality, promised to one man. We each belonged to our sponsor. And when we finally were joined to him, we were supposed to meet all his needs. Including the needs no one would explain; the Needs of the Flesh. And if we couldn't? What would become of us?

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One day, through a third-floor window, Bethany saw a dorm mother *kissing* a repair man. And she showed me what a kiss was: her lips, warm and soft, on mine. We pulled away, gazing at each other, breathless. And we burst out laughing, giddy like little kids. We figured it out! This must be what our sponsor-husbands bought us for.

I asked, "What if we're bad at it?"

And Bethany said, "I guess we'll have to practice."

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At first, "practicing" was a joke. But we got closer to graduation and the jokes got less funny. I was terrified of disappointing my sponsor, but there was something else I was afraid of. Something I couldn't name, slipping away from me.

So we practiced harder. We found new ways of kissing, ways of touching each other, and things we never guessed our bodies could do. We were careful. Quiet. Tidied each other's clothes and hair afterward.

Once, I asked Bethany whether what we were doing was wrong. She said if being with a man was what defiled us, nothing we could do together would ruin us for our sponsors. We were practicing to be good wives. There couldn't be anything wrong with that. I believed her. I wanted to believe her.

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The evening of graduation day, we met at the creek. We would be married within two weeks, and our days from now till then on out would be filled with packing, moving, and wedding preparations. The social appointments to finally—finally!—meet our sponsors had been scheduled. There was so much to do! So much to talk about! We were bright, animated, happy.

But inside me, beneath the accomplishment and anticipation, was a tightness. Sadness, constricting my lungs. I caught a glimpse of tears in Bethany's eyes.

No, that was wrong. This was what we had been created and prepared and saved for. Our whole lives, this moment, the crux. We had finally made it! We were happy. We should have been happy.

We practiced, knowing this was maybe the last chance we had. We were solemn, concentrated. Then, we were divine. Ecstasy joined us, drowning us in each other. But when we finished, Bethany was crying. My brave, beautiful Bethany.

Beneath the bones of my chest, a hole ripped open.

She breathed, "I can't live without you."

"Me neither."

“I want to be with you forever.”

“Me too.”

Our heresy was stunning. We didn’t belong to ourselves. We didn’t get to decide who to spend our lives with. But it was the truest thing I had ever felt.

She whispered, “Run away with me.”

“Okay.”

And we lay there together, listening to the creek. Knowing there was no way over the walls, past the guards. I clung to Bethany, my face buried in her hair, and she held me in her lanky, tanned arms. The sun set. Frogs sang. Eventually, they came, flashlight beams in our faces. They separated us. Said: “It’s scary to start a new life. There’s nothing to worry about. Your sponsor is a good man.”

But nothing they said reached through the body that wasn’t mine, to touch the heart that belonged to Bethany.

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I never saw her again.

You are not your own; you were bought at a price.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

About the author:

Allison Wall is a queer neurodivergent American writer. She has published short speculative fiction, personal essays, and book and film reviews. She founded and runs NEURODIVERSION, a newsletter that centers neurodiverse news, research, and current events. Connect with Allison on her website, allison-wall.com, or on Twitter at [@awritingwall](https://twitter.com/awritingwall).