



Just
Pretend

SOFIA T SUMMERS

JUST PRETEND

A SINGLE DAD FAKE FIANCEE ROMANCE

SOFIA T SUMMERS

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

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Just Pretend

Just Friends

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Secret Baby with Daddy's Best Friend

Knocked Up by Daddy's Best Friend

Pretend Wife to Daddy's Best Friend

Amazing Value Box Sets

Brothers Best Friend (Six Standalone Forbidden Romances)

Forbidden First Times (Six Standalone Romances)

DESCRIPTION

**Pretend to be my fiancée to make my ex-wife jealous?
He couldn't possibly be serious.**

Except that he was...

And I was pretty damn serious when I went along with his mad plan.

One word: Switzerland.

That's where I'd go to play the role of his fiancée.

Doesn't sound so bad, does it?

Walker is my irresistible single dad next door.

He's older. Handsome. Charming.

I've drooled over him.

I've wanted him.

And I've crossed the line with him.

All while he made me feel special with all my curves.

We had a good thing going until we began destroying it.

A fake engagement combined with real feelings is a cocktail that's lethal.

Now imagine that cocktail with a drizzle of pregnancy and whole lot of
craziness...

I doubt either of us will come out of this thing sober!

PROLOGUE

Ally

“ALLYSON.”

The sound of my name sent a shiver down my spine and I turned to see Walker standing behind me in the hall. He was wearing a pair of faded dark jeans and a white T-shirt that clung to his muscular frame and instantly – *instantly!* – I felt myself getting wet. His dark hair was wet, presumably from the shower, and even in the dim hallway I could see the bright glow of his blue eyes. My heart began to pound and inside of my bra, my nipples stiffened against the cotton. My mouth went dry, and I swallowed hard, working my tongue over my teeth, and blushing as he stepped closer.

Walker.

The only man I had ever known, and the man whom I *knew* I was falling in love with.

“Sofie ... Sofie’s still asleep. I just wanted to check on her,” I said. No matter how much I swallowed, my mouth stayed dry and just saying the words aloud felt awkward, like they didn’t belong to me, or like I’d never learned how to properly speak English.

“So, what are you still doing here, then?” Walker asked in a low voice that sent a warm shiver down my spine. He stepped closer and I smelled him – his musky body wash, his cologne, his aftershave.

A man has no right being this gorgeous, I thought as Walker moved

closer still. I was so close now that I could see a muscle twitching in his jaw and hear the rasp of his breathing.

“I ... I don’t know,” I admitted softly.

Walker smirked at me, raising an eyebrow and cocking his head to the side as if he was capable of seeing every thought in my head.

“I think I know,” he said. He reached out and put his hand on my waist, lightly, but just low enough down that I knew what his intention was.

To possess me, to consume me.

He wants me as much right now as I want him, I realized.

And just like that, our mouths were together, and we were kissing. Walker’s tongue slipped into my mouth and I moaned as our lips pressed together, madly, again and again and again until I felt weak. Walker’s hands slid down my body, cupping my breasts and squeezing them through the thin shirt I wore. When I broke away from the kiss and came up for air, I was nearly gasping.

“We can’t do this,” I said breathlessly.

“I need you,” Walker growled. He kissed me again, more roughly this time, and that was when I knew that I was weak and powerless to resist him. As he pulled me against his taut, muscular body, I felt arousal explode within me. I pressed my body against his and stretched up on my tiptoes, letting him feed on my mouth as our kiss grew deeper and more passionate.

He needs me, I thought as a burst of delirious happiness exploded within me.

Me. He could have anyone in the world, and it’s me who he needs.

I was barely aware of Walker’s hands moving lower, down to my waist, and guiding me down the hall, backwards, until we were in his bedroom. The dim evening light filtered in through the windows and I closed my eyes as Walker broke the kiss and nudged my head up, exposing my neck. When I felt his hot lips and tongue against my neck and collarbone, I shivered with a hot wave of pleasure. Every time his lips touched my skin, I felt like I had died and gone to heaven and I moaned softly, running my fingers through his silky, damp dark hair.

“You’re so delicious, Allyson,” Walker growled.

I shivered again. It was funny – I *hated* my full name when most people used it. But not Walker. Whenever he said my name, it made me feel wonderful. Adult and mature and sexy.

But that shouldn’t have been a surprise. Everything Walker did made me

feel like that.

“I want you,” I whispered. Walker’s mouth found my own again and he put his hands on my waist and hoisted me up onto the bed as if I weighed no more than a feather. As always, the sensation of his large, strong hands on my body made me weak in the knees and I closed my eyes and leaned back as his hands teased me through my panties. Walker didn’t even waste any time trying to touch me over my clothes. He slid a finger inside the crotch of my panties and flicked it against my wet pussy lips, making me moan and whimper with intense pleasure. All I could focus on was how much I wanted him, how much I needed him in that singular moment. Arching my back and biting my lip, I scooted back on the bed as Walker climbed on top of me and pressed me into the mattress. Clad in my T-shirt and panties, I felt exposed and vulnerable as he pressed a denim-clad thigh against the crotch of my underwear. The sensation of his strong, muscular leg rubbing against my clit was heavenly and I moaned, arching my back, and pressing my chest against his body, fighting the urge to grind against him until I exploded with pleasure.

“You want me so bad,” Walker growled in my ear. His lips and tongue found my earlobe and began to lick and suck as I whimpered and cried out softly. Warm, intense pleasure filled my body and I tugged at his shirt in an attempt to pull it over his head and expose his perfectly muscled torso.

Walker chuckled. “Eager, are we?” He smirked at me before getting to his knees and crossing his arms over his chest, catching handfuls of fabric in his hands and pulling it over his head. As always, every time that I saw him without a shirt on, I gasped. He was breathtakingly sexy – the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen, and I had to resist the urge to pinch myself to make sure that this was really happening, that it wasn’t a dream or the universe’s way of playing a sick joke on me.

“I need you,” I purred. Walker reached for my shirt and lifted it up and over my head, leaving me exposed to him in a bra and panties. He stared down at me, obvious and wanton lust in his dark blue eyes.

“You’re so beautiful,” Walker said.

I flushed hotly. I still didn’t believe it – I was so curvy and pale and round, nothing like the kind of woman Walker should have been with. But still, even though I didn’t believe it, I loved hearing it. I loved imagining that a man like Walker could love me with my stretch marks and blemishes and faults.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Walker leaned down and kissed me passionately, pressing his mouth against mine as he reached one hand behind my back and unclasped my bra, pulling the material away from my body. With his free hand, he traced light patterns on my belly before sliding between my legs and feeling my wetness through my panties. I shivered at his touch, spreading my thighs wide and blushing hotly at myself for doing so. The things that Walker did to me, the way he made me respond and react to his touch and his body, were things that before now, I had never thought myself capable of doing. He had changed me, transformed me from a naïve girl into a woman.

And I loved it. Even though leaning into his touch and his kisses and his body and his cock always made me blush, it was a wonderful feeling. A freeing feeling – the kind of feeling that I’d never had before in my entire life.

“Please,” I begged softly as Walker brushed his thumb against my clit through the soaked material of my panties. “Please, touch me. I need you.”

Walker smirked. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of my panties and pulled them down my legs, then spread my thighs and gazed down at my exposed pussy. I blushed beet red when I saw the look of hunger on his face. Walker’s strong hands pressed my thighs into a splayed, wide-apart position, pressed them down into the mattress with an almost painful force. Having him pin me down like that meant that I couldn’t move.

Not that I would have wanted to. Walker pressing me down against his bed was my favorite place in the world, and I closed my eyes and breathed in as I savored the delicious sensation of submitting to him.

“Baby, you’re so wet for me,” Walker growled. An electrifying shiver ran down my spine and I moaned and wriggled, spreading my legs almost painfully wide as Walker slid a single finger inside of my waiting pussy. The way he teased me, like always, was enough to drive me crazy and I gasped and shook as he slid another finger inside of me. When I felt Walker’s thumb rubbing against my exposed clit, I covered my mouth so that I wouldn’t scream with pleasure.

“That’s right, baby, show me how you like that,” Walker said in a low voice that made me flush even harder. I couldn’t stop myself from obeying – from bucking my hips up and down and grinding my pussy against his fingers and thumb. He knew how to give me such exquisite pleasure – it was like our bodies had been designed for each other. With his free hand, Walker moved

to my breasts and began rolling and gently pinching my nipples between his fingers. Bolts of ecstatic arousal shot through my body and I gasped as he slid a third finger inside of me.

“Walker,” I purred softly, biting the inside of my lip in an attempt to stifle a loud moan. “Please, please take me. I need you!”

Walker’s response was a low growl. He took his hands away from my body and my eyelids shot open as a frustrated gasp escaped my lips. We locked eyes and I watched hungrily as he unbuckled his belt and undid the fly to his jeans, shoving them roughly down his hips. Clad only in boxer briefs now, my mouth watered at the sight of his cock pushing the material forward. I reached for him, wanting him inside of me, but Walker batted my hands away. He pushed his briefs down and his cock sprang free, looking as magnificent and huge as it always did. There was already a glistening drop of pre-cum on the head of his cock and I whimpered with eager pleasure as I reached forward and wrapped my hand around his shaft. Walker groaned and thrust his hips forward, filling my grip with his dick, and I couldn’t hold back a smile as I began to pump my hand up and down. I loved pleasuring him – it was almost better than the feelings he inspired in me – and I worked his shaft up and down until his eyes rolled back in his head and he was panting with lust.

“Spread your legs wide for me, baby,” Walker growled. I blushed hotly and obeyed, holding my thighs apart with both hands. Walker steadied himself with a hand against the mattress and plunged deep inside of me, filling me with his massive cock. I felt myself clench around his beautiful dick as Walker began to pump in and out of my body, slamming his hips against mine with every powerful thrust. It felt so good that a loud moan escaped my lips and I closed my eyes and turned my head, biting the sheets to keep as quiet as possible. Walker began thrusting harder, rubbing against my clit with every thrust and soon, I was clenching handfuls of the pillows to keep from crying out. With every movement, every action of our locked bodies, the mattress inched back and forth. Walker was so strong, so powerful, and I loved surrendering to him.

Ever since we had first met, it was all I wanted to do.

“Fuck, baby, I’m so close,” Walker grunted. He thrust in harder than before, burying himself to the hilt and I let out a loud gasp as he slid his hand between our bodies and began rubbing at my clit. It felt so good that tears came to my eyes and I was on the verge of a powerful orgasm when Walker

stopped.

“What?” I gasped. “What’s wrong?”

Walker held his finger to his lips, motioning for me to be quiet. I blinked at him in a haze of horny, confused frustration but Walker didn’t reply. He eased off the bed and quickly reached for his clothes, dressing faster than I would have thought humanly possible. A cold feeling washed over me, and I shimmied into my own outfit as quickly as I could.

“It’s Sofie,” Walker said. “I think I heard her outside of the door.”

My heart slammed to a sudden stop and my stomach dropped out of my body. I had that same shaky, dry-mouth feeling that I’d first had upon seeing Walker in the hall just moments before.

Except this time, it wasn’t good.

A

lly – Several Weeks Before

“So, how do you know these people?” I asked, glancing down into my purse, and fumbling for the worn case that contained my sunglasses.

My best friend, Missy, slowed her VW Beetle for a red light and reached for the bottle of water in the center console between us. She unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. I squirmed impatiently in the passenger seat.

“Well, are you going to tell me, or not?” I asked.

Missy grinned. She offered the bottle to me, which I declined with a quick shake of my head and raised an eyebrow at her.

“Come on,” I said. “It’s not fair – I don’t know anything about them!”

Missy made a show of swallowing a giant mouthful of water, then carefully replacing the cap on the bottle, and putting it back in the console. The red light turned green, and the car lurched forward as her foot found the gas pedal again.

“Sorry,” Missy said. “But Ally, you’ve got to relax! I can’t remember the last time I saw you this nervous!”

“I can’t remember the last time I felt like this,” I admitted. “It doesn’t feel great.”

Missy raised an eyebrow at me. “It’s just a job interview,” she said. “It’s not like it’s, I don’t know. Life or death or anything.”

I put my face in my hands and groaned. “I don’t have any more savings,”

I pointed out to her. “It’s not like I can stay on Tybee if I don’t get this job.”

“So ... you’ll go home to New Jersey and work for a while and then move back,” Missy suggested.

I pulled a face, wrinkling my nose and groaning again. “No,” I said. “You know how that would go, right? Mom would be overjoyed at me moving back in the house with her and my dad, and they’d never let me move back down here.”

“Well ...” Missy trailed off, frowning as she slowed for another traffic light. It was a day in early June, hot and humid. Even though the sun was sinking low in the sky, it was just as hot as it had been at noon and I fanned myself with the spare copy of my resume that I’d printed out to bring with me.

Anxiously, I checked my phone for the time. “Are we going to be late? Do I need to call them?”

“No,” Missy said. “Don’t worry about it – this isn’t even that bad,” she added, gesturing to the traffic around us. “Everything is going to be fine.”

I sighed. “I’m just anxious.”

“You have no reason to be, you have perfect experience and great references,” Missy replied. She eyed herself in the rearview mirror and reached up to tousle the dark brown bangs that hung like a roof over her eyes.

“She’s kind of a ... well, you know. The stay-at-home-mom type who doesn’t actually raise her own children,” Missy said thoughtfully. “You know, like she does charity stuff and has a Pilates instructor who comes to visit her in her home gym.”

I raised an eyebrow. “They have a home *gym*?”

No sooner than I’d asked my absurdly naïve question, Missy signaled the Beetle and turned right into a gated community flanked by large ponds and fountains. I spotted a golf course over to the left-hand side as Missy continued driving, slowing down every time we rolled over a wide speed bump.

“Yeah, well, it’s not like, *huge*, or anything,” Missy said. She wrinkled her nose. “Probably just some machines, that kind of thing. It’s been a really long time since I’ve been in their house.”

I nodded.

“And he’s, well, he’s fine,” Missy said with a short laugh. “My mom always used to say that he was really horny, but it’s probably just his personality and not like, something you need to actually worry about, you

know? He's probably one of those guys who just feels like he has to compensate for something like, all of the time."

I sighed. "Great," I muttered. "So, I'll be working for a Stepford Wife and perv?"

Missy burst out laughing and I resisted the urge to glare at her.

"No, nothing like that." When I didn't reply, she added: "Ally. Come on. They're *normal*. For this area, anyway," she finished. "The pay is supposed to be really good, and if I didn't think things would be fine, I never would have told you about the job."

That didn't make me feel any better. Ever since I'd been accepted on full scholarship to Savannah State University, I'd realized that I was ... well, frankly speaking, a lot different than most of my new friends. Missy, who had grown up on Tybee Island, came from a lot of money. As did her parents – her mother was the one who had first heard about the au pair position that I was about to interview for.

New Jersey hadn't exactly felt thoroughly middle class. But the level of money and wealth in Savannah that got thrown around made me ... well, uncomfortable wasn't the way to put it, maybe.

But I'd always felt like an outsider. Back in college, Missy had always paid for everything. I had been so lucky to wind up with a roommate who had become a true best friend, and even luckier that she was generous to a fault (not that I'd ever taken advantage of her, or anything like that). Now that I was on my own, though, I was determined to *actually* be on my own.

"We're here," Missy chirped. She pulled the Beetle into a massive circular driveway that stood in front of an imposing, antebellum-style house. Large white columns stood in front of a brick façade that looked like it would've been more at home in *Gone With The Wind* than a modern setting.

I gulped. "Missy, this is the biggest house that I've ever seen," I whispered, as if the family was already listening.

Missy nodded sagely. "My mom always said it was entirely too much house for just four people," she said. Leaning close, she raised an eyebrow. "She said that the Hornes couldn't stand each other, and that's why Mrs. Horne built an addition onto the house every day."

Missy laughed, but I didn't find the thought very funny. I couldn't imagine how painful and weird it would feel to be married to someone whom you couldn't stand – especially not to the point of adding onto your house because you didn't feel that you had enough space from your own spouse.

It was profoundly sad.

I opened the passenger-side door and climbed out of the Beetle. Immediately, the humid Georgia air overwhelmed my senses. It smelled like honeysuckle and jasmine and something murky and deep, almost like a swamp. After having lived in the Deep South for almost eight years, I knew that I should have been used to the combination of scents by now. But they still got ahold of my senses and took me hostage, took me to a strange, swampy, primordial land.

New Jersey had never done that, as much as I'd enjoyed it. I'd been happy enough there when I was growing up, but it had never sunk claws into me the same way that the South had done. I'd never felt a sense of wonder at the primal landscape. New Jersey was highways and McMansions.

The South was living history – not all pleasant, of course, but it was history all the same.

“You want me to stay? Mom said she wanted me to say hi to Ann, but I don't have to stay if it would make you feel awkward,” Missy offered. “I can just stay in the car or something while you're inside.”

I nodded. “If you wouldn't mind, that would be great,” I said honestly. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Missy said. She gave me a big, goofy grin. “Good luck,” she said. “You're going to kill it.”

I smoothed my skirt – a conservative gray tweed that I'd found in a Tybee Island consignment shop – and squared my shoulders before climbing the several marble steps that led to the extensive, wrap-around front porch. There were potted hibiscus of all colors and vines wrapped around the porch railings that were too perfectly placed to have grown naturally. It was beautiful – I'd never seen such floral arrangements outside of wedding receptions before – and I held my breath as I debated whether to use the large brass knocker on the door or ring the discreet bell to the side.

After just a few seconds, the door swung open, leaving me blinking in confusion. The interior of the house seemed impossibly dark compared to the bright, sunny evening and I narrowed my eyes and squinted.

“Hello?” I asked tentatively. After a few moments, my eyes adjusted to the dimly lit foyer of the house and I had to work actively to keep my jaw from dropping. The dark-paneled wooden floors had been polished to a toffee-like sheen and expensive Oriental rug runner led the way from the front door down a long hall in front of me. The walls were painted a demure

ecru shade and the furniture was all dark wood that looked heavy and expensive.

Standing in front of me was a woman a little older than myself, wearing a black dress.

“Ms. Cane?”

“Ally,” I said quickly. “And you must be Mrs. Horne!”

To my surprise, the woman flushed slightly and shook her head. She gave me an odd look, an expression of mixed emotions that I’d never seen before, and cleared her throat.

“No, Ms. Cane,” she replied. “I’m Ruth – Mrs. Horne’s assistant.”

I blinked at her, unable to hold back my shock. *My potential employer has a maid*, I thought. *What century did I stumble back in time to, anyway?*

“Mr. and Mrs. Horne are waiting for you,” Ruth said. Her accent was soft and Southern and there was something so friendly about her – based on what Missy had said about the Horne family, I wondered what prompted Ruth to keep the job.

“Thank you,” I said, still feeling awkward. “I’ll um, let you lead the way.”

Ruth gave me another polite smile and motioned for me to step inside. She closed the door after me and led me down the long Oriental runner, past several rooms. At the end of the hall, a door was slightly ajar. Ruth knocked softly and pushed it open.

“Go ahead,” Ruth said, nodding her head at the door and gesturing for me to go inside. “They’re waiting for you.”

I flushed again. *What have I gotten myself into*, I thought as I went inside. The room was a den – a very masculine den, with the same dark wooden furniture that I’d seen in the hall and the foyer of the house. The walls were covered with dark blue watered silk wallpaper and I had to clench my hands into fists to keep from reaching out and touching it.

“Ms. Cane,” a booming masculine voice said. Startled, I whirled around. Sitting on a white silk couch sat, I presumed, Mr. and Mrs. Horne. Mrs. Horne was just as Missy had painted her – thin, within an inch of her life, and wearing expensive athleisure. Her blonde hair was perfectly coiffed in a bun and her makeup, although subtle, was expertly done. She looked more like a fashion model than a wife and I wondered how she managed to keep every flyaway strand of hair free of frizz – the Georgia weather was pleasant, but my hair had been perpetually tangled ever since I’d first moved here for

college.

“Ally,” I said. “Well, it’s Allyson – but no one calls me that. It’s just Ally.”

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Horne laughed, and I shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other.

“Please,” Mrs. Horne said, speaking for the first time. “Sit.” She gestured at a chair across from the couch where they sat – neither one had gotten up to shake my hand or welcome me.

I swallowed hard and sat down, crossing my legs at the ankle, and shifting my knees to the side.

“Thank you so much for having me come in,” I said. “I’ve heard such wonderful things about you from Missy.”

Mrs. Horne let out a small, charming, fake-sounding laugh.

“Melissa is such a sweet girl,” she said. “I’m such dear friends with her mother.”

I nodded. “We’ve been best friends for years,” I said.

There was an awkward silence, then Mrs. Horne reached for a sheet of paper and glanced down at it. I realized it was a printed-out copy of my resume and I shifted in the chair, pushing my knees to the other side, and re-crossing my ankles.

“So, you worked as an au pair for Miller Johnson and his wife?” Mrs. Horne asked, although the way she phrased it was less a question than a statement.

I nodded. “Yes,” I said. “For three years. I started with them right after I graduated from college, and then they moved to France.”

“Alsace,” Mrs. Horne said, and again I had the strangest feeling that she was somehow correcting me.

I nodded. “They were a wonderful family – I loved their children. It was hard for me when they left, I felt like I had almost become a part of their family.”

Mr. and Mrs. Horne exchanged a look, and I wondered if I’d said the wrong thing.

“Well, Mrs. Johnson couldn’t have enough nice things to say about you,” Mrs. Horne said slowly.

“Ally, let me cut to the point,” Mr. Horne said. He winked at me and I flashed back to that moment in the car, when Missy had told me that he was a total pervert.

“Of course,” I said sweetly. “What is it?”

“We’re looking for someone who wants to do just that with our boys,” Mr. Horne said. “We’ve been searching for the right girl for months now, and no one seems like they would be a good fit for us. But your room and board will be part of your wages, and you’ll have one day off per week. We can be flexible,” he added with another wink.

I swallowed. “That sounds good,” I said. In truth, it sounded more than a little archaic – and I didn’t love being referred to as a “girl” at twenty-four years old. *But this is the South*, I reminded myself. *These people are old money – it’s not like New Jersey, not at all.*

“Good!” Mr. Horne boomed loudly.

Mrs. Horne didn’t look quite as convinced. “You do come highly recommended,” she said. “But since we’ve had some difficulty with finding a suitable fit. What would you say to a trial arrangement at first? And we can revisit if things don’t work out for both of us?”

“It would be paid, of course,” Mr. Horne said. He grinned at me and I swallowed nervously. “We want to make sure that we’re as much of a right fit for you as you are for us.”

It suddenly struck me as strange – I hadn’t met either of their children, and the way Mr. Horne was talking, it was almost like he and his wife were discussing *their* needs instead of the needs of the children.

“So,” I said, smiling as best as I could. “Tell me about your boys.”

AN HOUR LATER, Ruth walked me to the front door. “So,” she said, already more casual than she’d been with me when I first arrived. “How did things go?”

“Good. I think,” I replied slowly. “We’re going to do a trial period before committing to anything, but I’m excited. Peter and Parker sound like such sweet little boys. And twins! I love twins!”

Ruth chuckled. “They’re something else, all right,” she said. “But, hey. Welcome.” I expected her to offer my hand, but instead she pulled me into a hug. When we broke apart, I saw she was still wearing that same odd expression that she’d first had when she’d shown me into the house.

It wasn’t envy, or anger, or anything like that.

It was pity.

“You have a good night,” Ruth said, opening the front door. “When are

you moving in?”

“In a few days,” I explained. “But definitely by the end of the week.”

She nodded. “See you soon,” she said.

Once outside, the bright sunshine was almost blinding after the dark, chill interior of the Horne family house. Missy was waiting for me in her Beetle, true to her word. When she saw me, I gave her the thumbs-up sign and she leapt out from behind the driver’s seat and hugged me.

“Oh my gosh, I knew that you’d get it!” Missy chirped. “Congratulations!”

“It’s not a done deal yet,” I warned her. “I’m on probation,” I added in a whisper. “We’re doing a trial period.”

“Which I am *sure* that you will crush,” Missy said confidently. She checked her phone and groaned. “Mind if I run inside and just relay that message from my mom?”

“Go ahead.” I gestured to the house. “I’ll be here.”

“Car’s unlocked if you need the AC,” Missy said. She mimed fanning herself, then threw me a smile and darted into the house without knocking.

Working for my best friend’s family friend is going to be weird, I thought. But I’ll get used to it.

The sound of a car door slamming made me jump and I whirled around. There, across the street, was an equally grand house, but something about it was far more Spartan and tasteful than the Horne family mansion. There was a large SUV parked in the driveway and I shielded my eyes and watched as a man strode into the house.

Just the sight of him was enough to make my mouth go dry. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a muscular frame that made me think of Prince Eric from *The Little Mermaid*. His dark hair gleamed in the sun and even though we were dozens of feet away, my stomach did a weird little jump at the way he walked, which was both graceful and aggressive at once.

It sounded silly, even to me at the time, but I’d never had this kind of reaction to a man before. Just looking at him made me wonder how it would feel to be swept into his arms and kissed and held. Despite the heat of the day, it sent a cold shiver down my spine and I let out a long, shaky breath.

I knew that I was staring at him like a total freak, knew that I should look away before I made a complete ass out of myself, but the sight of him was hypnotizing.

Just as I was about to force myself to turn away and retreat to the air-

conditioned safety of Missy's Beetle, the man stopped and turned around. It was like he had sensed that I was staring at him, could hear my thoughts from across the wide, Magnolia-lined street. As soon as I saw the sculpted features of his face, I couldn't stop myself from smiling shyly.

We locked eyes and I felt it again – a delicious cold shiver running down my spine. My nipples tingled and inside my panties, I felt a strange sensation unlike anything I'd ever experienced. If it hadn't felt so exquisite, it would have been almost painful.

He didn't break eye contact. He stared and stared, until my entire body was filled with an intense yearning, the strange urge to run across the street and throw myself into his muscular arms.

And then, just like that, he turned away and disappeared into the sanctuary of his large, tasteful home.

Walker

THE ENTIRE RIDE home from my office, my jaw was clenched with anger and my hands were tightly gripping the wheel of my Mercedes GLS. It had been a long fucking day, and I'd intended to get home hours before the sun began sinking low in the sky.

Once, years ago, I wouldn't have dreamt of leaving the office before it was dark outside.

But that was before Sofie, my daughter and the pride and joy of my life, had been born. That was before I'd known how purely and desperately I could love another person, before I'd learned the true meaning of devotion and care.

Once upon a time, I had been a workaholic attorney.

Now, I was a devoted dad ... who tried very hard to avoid falling into the pitfalls that being a senior partner often meant prey to. Working in product liability suits and mass torts hadn't ever been my first choice – I'd wanted to stay a public defender forever.

But my ex-wife, Marina, had had other plans. "Don't you want to be more ambitious, Walker?" She'd ask constantly, batting her lashes. "Don't you want to have a nice house?"

What I had wanted wasn't success or money for myself, but to make her happy.

In the end, I'd gotten the success *and* the money. But I didn't have Marina, not after she'd cheated on me. Now, I had success, money, and Sofie. Truth be told, I only cared about the last.

I pulled into my driveway, still cursing myself for not having left the office at least an hour ago, and slowed the Mercedes to a slow stop. I got out of my car and stretched, turning my head as I did so.

That was when I saw her. She was standing in the driveway of the house across the street, which belonged to the Hornes. I knew they had children around Sofie's age, but this woman was no child. She wore a prim and proper outfit that made me think of a schoolgirl fetish video – a grey skirt which showed ripe, plump thighs that I immediately wanted to kiss and bite and nibble until she moaned. A white blouse, stretched over a truly magnificent pair of tits. Red hair that was gleaming in the sun.

And she was staring at me. A shy smile spread over her face when we locked eyes and even though I knew I should be moving on, getting inside, I couldn't tear myself away from her smile and eyes. She was breathtaking – pale and curvy and so innocent looking that it almost hurt.

My cock and balls began to ache with desire for her. It was absurd, but I suddenly envisioned crossing the street and sweeping her into my arms, kissing her deeply and wetly and sliding my hands down her back and squeezing that delectable ass of hers.

You're crazy, she can't be more than half your age, I thought. Surely, this had to be some kind of fantasy that my overworked mind had come up with to numb the pain of living.

But no. She was real. The breeze blew, ruffling the ends of her curly red hair, and even though I knew it was impossible, I found myself nearly able to catch her scent. I imagined how she'd smell: sweet and floral and powdery.

And I knew her pussy would smell even better.

Hot, electric, horny energy was rushing through my body and I could feel myself starting to get hard.

This is insane, I told myself. *Get a grip on yourself, man.*

I kept waiting for her to turn, for her to laugh and run into the house, amused and tickled that an old creep like myself had been staring at her. But she didn't. I could see that her lips were slightly parted, and her breath was coming in damp little bursts.

She was the loveliest creature I had ever seen ... and she was seemingly fixated on me.

You've gone mental, I thought. I shook my head, as if to clear all thoughts of the luscious redhead who stood across the street. Tearing my eyes from hers took a Herculean effort but I finally managed to do it. The invisible, gossamer-like thread between us broke as I turned my body and headed into my house.

Inside, the foyer was so dark that it took my eyes a moment to adjust. I barely had time to kick off my shoes before I heard a loud cry.

“Daddy!”

I straightened up just in time to feel my daughter, Sofie, barrel into my legs. She was giggling and laughing, and I felt my heart fill with the purest love as I reached down and scooped her up into my arms.

“Hello, sweetheart,” I said as I kissed her cheek. “How was your day?”

“Aunt Julie and I painted a picture!” Sofie chirped. She giggled again and thrashed in my arms, so I gently set her back down on the ground.

“That sounds amazing, sweetie,” I replied. “Where is Aunt Julie?”

No sooner than I'd asked the question, Julie appeared in the hallway looking somewhat mussed. She wore an apron over her narrow, almost boyish frame, and she was smiling sheepishly.

“We were also planning on baking cookies,” Julie admitted, flushing slightly as she approached me. “But *someone* decided that she'd rather watch a movie. I was just cleaning up. I'm sorry – your kitchen is kind of a mess.”

I waved a dismissive hand through the air. “Don't even worry about it,” I said. “You have to get going soon, yes?”

Julie shook her head. She made a face as she untied the apron and folded it in her hands.

“I had a date,” she said. “But he canceled on me.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “What an idiot,” I said.

Julie blushed.

“You want coffee, or anything?” She asked. “I made too much.”

“Ew!” Sofie cried. “Coffee is yuck!”

Julie burst out laughing and I chuckled slightly.

“You'll like it when you're older,” I told Sofie. “I wouldn't worry too much about that now.”

The three of us went into the kitchen where Sofie sat down with a game on her iPad and Julie poured two cups of coffee. Once we were settled, I took a long sip.

“How was she today?” I asked.

Julie shrugged. “When I got her from school, her teacher said that everything had gone well.”

“Good.”

“Oh!” Julie exclaimed. She took a long gulp of coffee and shook her head. “Her teacher told me to tell you that she’s got some play coming up? *Alice in Wonderland*, or something?”

Shit, I thought. Out loud, I replied: “I can’t believe that I almost forgot about that! I swear, she just told me about it yesterday.”

Julie laughed, then shot me a guilty smile. “I know, time has to go so fast as a parent,” she said.

“It does,” I replied. Out of the corner of my eye, I glanced at Sofie. She was thoroughly entranced by her game and the tip of her tongue was poking out of her lips as she concentrated on tapping the screen with both hands.

“She’s growing up so fast,” Julie said. She took another swallow of coffee and set the mug down on the table. “I remember when she was still a little baby.”

“I do, too,” I admitted. Thinking about that time – five years ago now – felt strange. Surreal, even.

“I should get going,” Julie said. She got to her feet and drained the last of her coffee. “You need me the rest of the week?”

I nodded. Pulling my wallet out of my pants, I took out a twenty-dollar bill and passed it to Julie, who gave me a look of confusion.

“What’s this for?”

“Get a pizza and buy a movie or something,” I told her. “Your date canceled, remember?”

Julie flushed, but she took the money and folded it into a small square before tucking it into the pocket of her jeans.

“You’re really the best brother-in-law in the world,” she said.

I smirked at her. “I try,” I replied. “Have fun tonight, okay? That’s an order.”

Julie nodded. She bent down and kissed Sofie on the top of her head, then waved once more and left. When I heard the front door close, I cleared my throat.

Sofie looked up. “What is it, Daddy?”

“Did you have a good day at school?”

Sofie nodded solemnly. “Yes,” she said. “And I had fun with Aunt Julie.” She paused, gnawing her lower lip and narrowing her little blue eyes at me.

“Daddy, when are *you* going to pick me up from school?”

I suppressed the urge to sigh. There was no possible way that I could begin to explain to my daughter just how much I wanted that, how badly I wanted to spend more time with her ... but that I couldn't do so, not if I wanted to keep this roof over our heads.

Ever since Marina had left, I had frequently thought about downsizing. The house – *this* house – had been her idea, her baby, her project.

But it was all Sofie had ever known, and I wanted her to have the best. I wanted her to grow up without want of anything in the world. I wanted her to be proud of me, to be proud of having a father who worked tirelessly to give her everything she could ever need or desire.

It was a sacrifice that I had long since determined to make, if only for the well-being of my little girl.

“Soon, honey,” I said. “And don't forget about your play! You know that Daddy is going to be there, right?”

“I know,” Sofie replied, nodding as she spoke. A huge yawn overcame her, and she stretched her mouth open wide and held her arms in the air, shaking slightly as she lowered them back down into her lap.

“I think it's time for a nap,” I said, raising an eyebrow at my daughter.

Sofie stuck her tongue out, but she yawned again and rubbed her eyes with both hands.

“And when you get up, we'll have dinner,” I said. I got to my feet and walked over to the fridge before opening the door and peering inside. There was glass container labeled “enchiladas!” in Julie's messy hand and I nodded.

“Aunt Julie made us enchiladas,” I said. “Don't those sound good?”

When I turned to look back at Sofie, her eyes were half closed, and she was drooping over the iPad. Suppressing a smile, I walked over to her and scooped her up in my arms before carrying her out of the kitchen and up the stairs. By the time we reached Sofie's bedroom, she was practically snoring on my shoulder and I carefully leaned down and deposited her on top of her pink four-poster bed.

“Sleep well, sweetheart,” I said, kissing her forehead and pulling a quilted throw over her. Sofie yawned again, then rolled over. By the time the side of her face hit the pillow, she was asleep.

For a moment I stood there and watched her, marveling at the fact that she was my daughter. What Julie had said was true – sometimes, I couldn't believe how fast she was growing up. In another five years, she'd be ten – a

little person, almost. Someone with opinions and preferences and tastes.

And in another five, she'd be fifteen – a teenager, almost ready for college.

The idea that in fifteen years, I'd be fifty-three was almost disconcerting. *At least I'll be retired by then, I thought. And I can finally spend some quality time with Sofie ... just in time for her to leave for college.*

Time had done nothing but increase in speed over the years. The divorce aside, the last five years had practically zoomed by.

I wanted time to slow down, if only so I could enjoy more time with my daughter.

Sofie startled in her sleep and I pulled another blanket over her until she settled, then I backed out of the room and closed the door behind me.

When I was the only one awake in the house, it felt far too large for my comfort. I padded down the hall and down the stairs, then went into the kitchen and rinsed the coffee mugs in the sink. It wasn't that late – the sun was still in the sky, albeit rather low – but after the day that I'd had, I needed a drink. I went into my office and closed the door behind me, then walked over to my bar and poured two fingers' worth of gin into a glass, adding tonic water and a squeeze of lime. I took a long swallow, then sat down in my chair and closed my eyes.

I was feeling drained. It had been a hell of a day – a meeting with the other partners that had taken up most of the morning, followed by hours chained to my desk as I worked on an upcoming deposition that was scheduled to take place within the next three weeks.

I opened my eyes just long enough to lift my glass to my mouth and take another swallow. As I felt the alcohol begin to take hold of me, I leaned back in my chair and sighed.

Would my life always be like this? One hectic day after the next, with barely a chance to spend any time with my daughter? At this point, I was fairly certain that she was closer to her aunt than she was to me. If Julie had been anything like Marina, my ex-wife, I would have minded tremendously. But thankfully, Julie and Marina were like oil and water. I couldn't have asked for a better aunt to my little girl.

My thoughts began to wander, away from Julie, away from Marina, away from Sofie and from work and from the incredibly stressful day that I'd just had. I finished my drink and set the empty glass down on my desk as the memory of the curvaceous redhead from across the street.

Who was she?

Who cares, I thought. The only thing that matters is that she's fucking stunning.

Maybe my over-the-top response to her was a result of the intense stress that I'd been feeling, or simply because I hadn't been with a woman since Marina had left me.

Or maybe it was something else – something darker, something like pure, wicked lust that I couldn't manage to shake. Maybe the girl, whoever she was, had inspired something in me that I'd never seen the depths of before.

God, just thinking about her again was enough to make my cock stiffen and swell inside of my pants. I groaned and closed my eyes, putting my hands over my face and sighing. Just seeing the girl and drinking in her deliciously round figure had inspired feelings inside of me that I hadn't been aware of in years. Thinking about her was making me feel like a horny teenager again – like a guy who couldn't even walk down the hallway at school without popping a boner at the sight of a girl in a teasingly short skirt.

My cock was throbbing harder than ever and before I could think about what I was doing, I moved one of my hands from my face to my lap, absentmindedly stroking myself through my pants. I hadn't masturbated in weeks and the warmth of my hand sent a shock of hot pleasure through my body, causing me to nearly groan aloud.

Fuck, I thought immediately. This HAS to be why I reacted to her like I did – it's because I haven't jacked off in so long that the sight of any even remotely attractive woman would be enough to set me off.

The rational part of my brain knew that that was true. But there was something inside of me, something deeper, that wondered if it wasn't more than just the sight of her curves, the glimpse of her shy smile, that would have set me off all the same, even if I'd been stroking my cock twice a day for weeks.

It was wrong – getting off to the image of a woman who I didn't even know, a woman who had no idea that I was using the oh-so-pleasing image of her curves to get hard.

But now that I'd started, I couldn't stop myself. I swallowed hard and clenched my jaw, then unzipped my fly and pulled my cock through the slit of the fabric. As soon as I wrapped my hand around my shaft, I couldn't help but groan. An instant bolt of hot pleasure shot through me and I closed my eyes and nearly gasped aloud.

Instantly, she was in my mind again. The insane, delectable curves of her frame. That curly mess of red hair that I longed to bury my fingers in, to tug at her scalp just hard enough to guide her mouth to my own. I imagined that her lips, so naturally pink and soft, would part as my tongue slipped between them and danced with her own.

I began stroking myself, slowly at first, then faster as I thought of how her face would look when taking me for the first time, taking my girth into her sweet, young, soaking wet pussy. How her pink lips would form a small “o” of surprise and how her eyes would roll back in her head, unable to contain the pleasure she felt from my driving inside of her. I thought of how she’d greedily grind herself to orgasm on my cock, rocking her hips back and forth. I stroked my cock harder as I pictured her curves undulating on top of me, her tits bouncing in the air as I grabbed her hips and held her down on my cock, pierced her over and over again. It was the most delectable, erotic image that had come to my mind in what felt like years and I groaned aloud as my cock began to gush cum. My heart was racing in my chest and I was soaked with sweat as a swell of ecstasy crashed over my head and filled my body with pure, sweet pleasure.

Still breathing hard, I reached for a tissue and began to clean myself off. My heart thudded against my ribs and I opened my eyes and groaned. Even though I had just had a powerful climax – the most powerful in quite some time – my arousal for her hadn’t decreased at all.

It was almost frustrating, I thought as I zipped up my trousers and disposed of the tissue in the wastebasket under my desk.

I had wanted a release.

I had wanted to push her out of my mind forever. For all I knew, I’d never see her again.

But I had a feeling that she was going to be lingering in my mind for quite some time.

A

lly – One Week Later

“ALLY, would you mind helping me with the groceries?”

The sound of my name jarred me back into reality and I clumsily stood up from where I had been sitting at their kitchen table. The twins – Peter and Parker – were playing on the kitchen floor with a big brass pot and wooden spoons.

“Let’s play drumkit while your mom and dad are still out,” I’d suggested, almost an hour before. At first, they’d scoffed at me. But they’d been banging on the pot for the better part of an hour, and I was pleased that I’d been able to amuse them for as long as I had without a tantrum.

“Of course not, Mrs. Horne,” I said automatically.

Mrs. Horne pursed her lips and made a face. “Really, Ally,” she said, almost disapprovingly. “Ann is fine. Mrs. Horne makes me feel like my mother-in-law!”

I nodded, although I wasn’t sure that I’d be able to internalize that request. Ann Horne had such dominating energy about her that calling her by her first name to her face would have felt almost disrespectful.

“Peter, Parker,” Mrs. Horne said, narrowing her eyes. “What are you doing?” Without waiting for an answer, she turned to me and raised an eyebrow. “They should be watching one of their educational videos,” she told me. “Afternoons on the weekends are for making sure they’re going to do

well in school on Monday.”

They're in kindergarten, and besides, it's summer break I thought, but I didn't say it. Instead, I tossed her an apologetic smile.

“I'm sorry,” I told her. “They were – but they wanted a break, and I thought it would be a good idea to let them blow off some steam before dinner. You know – so they aren't too crazy.”

Peter and Parker were paying zero attention to me as I spoke and suddenly, I got the sad impression that they were used to being discussed as if they weren't even there.

Mrs. Horne didn't reply, only shrugged, and I followed her outside to the large circular driveway where her Range Rover was parked. The trunk was open, and the backseat was laden with bags from Whole Foods.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen so much food.

It was a week now that I'd been working for Mr. and Mrs. Horne and so far, I was enjoying it. Peter and Parker could be a ... touch bratty at times, but after all, they were only five years old. We were still getting used to each other – that much was clear. They were adorable kids, though, and for the most part, very well-behaved. I'd privately decided that I was going to try to humble them a bit, though, especially after Parker had stood up to me on my first morning.

“We're rich,” he'd proclaimed, and when I'd burst out laughing at what I had taken to be a joke, Parker had burst into tears.

“Ally, if you could grab that, I'd appreciate it,” Mrs. Horne said. She pointed at a large container of propane gas. “I had to ask the nice man at Home Depot to help me load it into the car.”

I nodded. Gripping the container, I hauled it out of the Range Rover and headed for the front door.

“Ally, no,” Mrs. Horne said. “Please take that around back. I don't want it in the house,” she added, shaking her head, as if I should have instinctively.

Sweat broke out over my body as I lugged the heavy canister around the side of the Horne's' massive house and into their backyard. I had to set it down for a second as I fiddled with the keypad lock on the gate to the yard. Slumping against the fence, I wiped my damp forehead with the back of my hand and tried to slow my heavy breathing. I *knew* that I was out of shape although to be honest, I had never really been in much shape to begin with. I'd been curvy my entire life, and always self-conscious about it.

That's one good thing about being the nanny to a couple of five-year-old

boys, I thought as I hefted the canister once again in my hands and lugged it into the back yard. *They're certainly going to keep me on my toes, and maybe I can finally lose some weight.*

The enormous gas grill, settled next to the pool, seemed an age away but I finally made it there and set the canister down. By the time I'd let myself out of the back yard and locked up the door again, Mrs. Horne had finished carrying the groceries into the house.

"That took a while," she said, and again I got that stinging sense of disapproval from her. Anxiety made my heart begin to thump hard and I blushed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not really used to lifting heavy things."

"Well," she said, effectively dismissing my passive apology. "I'm going to lie down for a bit. Would you mind watching the boys until dinner?"

"Of course not," I said.

Mrs. Horne disappeared upstairs, and I went into the kitchen, where Peter and Parker were. They had abandoned the pot and spoons in favor of chasing each other around the table and trying to grab each other.

"We're playing tag," Peter explained calmly.

"There's only two of you," I said lightly. "You usually need three for that."

"You're it!" Parker said. He grinned devilishly at me and ran towards me, poking me in the hip.

Immediately, I realized my mistake.

"Let's go outside for tag," I said. "We don't want to wake your mom, do we?"

"Yes!" Peter and Parker screamed in unison.

I raised an eyebrow. Maybe I was going to get along better with the boys than I'd first thought.

"Outside," I said firmly, pointing to the front door. "You have that beautiful front yard and you want to play inside?"

I led the boys outside, carefully closing the door behind me so as not to disturb Mrs. Horne from her beauty rest. Outside, the boys began zooming around. They were surprisingly fast for being only five years old and I was panting again as I finally caught up to Peter. When I tapped his shoulder, he froze.

"You're it!" I said, laughing happily. Peter and Parker burst into laughter and fell to the lawn, laughing loudly. An amused smile spread over my face

as I watched them.

But when I looked up, my heart stopped. The man – that gorgeous man I'd seen a week ago across the street – was approaching me. His black hair gleamed in the late afternoon sun and his eyes, even from a few feet away, were a piercing sapphire blue.

Behind him, in tow, was a little girl who looked roughly the same age as Peter and Parker. She was the spitting image of the man and my heart sank.

He's married, I realized instantly. And this must be his daughter.

"Hello," the man said in a deep, charming voice that sent a shiver of pleasure rushing down my spine.

"I'm Walker Thompson," he said. "And this is my daughter, Sofie. She saw you three playing and wondered if we could join in. Would that be okay?"

W *alker*

WHEN I'D COME HOME from work that day, Sofie had been asleep for most of the afternoon.

"I really did try to wake her," Julie said apologetically. "But she said that she didn't sleep well. I'm sorry," she added. "She'll probably be up all night."

"It's fine," I said, even though it was the opposite of fine. I had a big deposition coming up and my staff attorneys hadn't been putting in the work that I'd been requesting of them for weeks. I was liable to have a long night ahead of me, and with an active five-year-old daughter, I almost contemplated asking Julie if she'd be able to spend the night.

"Anything else I can do before I head out?" Julie asked.

I shook my head. "No, thank you," I told her. "It's fine. Go ahead and I'll see you tomorrow."

Julie nodded. As soon as she left, I sat down at the kitchen table and poured myself a drink. I hadn't been alone for more than five minutes when I heard the pitter-patter of Sofie's footsteps running down the hall.

"Daddy!" She launched herself into my lap, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

"I heard you spent most of this afternoon sleeping," I said as I raised an eyebrow.

“I heard it was a Sunday and *you* spent most of the day at work,” Sofie said, crossing her arms and sassing me.

“Daddy has a big, busy week ahead of him,” I said. “What do you want for dinner? Did you and Aunt Julie make anything?”

Sofie peered around me and glanced out the window facing the front yard. She let out a squeal of delight.

“Daddy, Peter and Parker are playing tag with some lady!”

“What?”

“Come and look,” Sofie said. She grabbed one of my hands in both of her tiny paws and tugged. I reluctantly got to my feet and followed to the window. Sure enough, the neighbor kids were chasing each other around the yard.

And that was when I saw her. My redheaded goddess, the woman I’d been dreaming about for over a week now. Her curves bounced and jiggled as she ran, chasing the boys and laughing.

“Can we go play?” Sofie asked.

I was tired. I hadn’t had anything to eat all day, other than my morning coffee, and I needed a shave and a shower and something to put in my stomach.

But in that moment, I forgot all of that. The sight of her body moving around the yard was too much to handle, and I felt my cock rising to the occasion.

“Of course,” I said automatically. “Let’s go.”

Sofie squealed again and tugged me towards the front door. After pocketing my keys, we walked across the street together, hand in hand.

The redheaded beauty was even more stunning up close. Freckles dotted her pale skin, and I could tell from the way her tits were bouncing that she wasn’t wearing a bra. She wore short-shorts that perfectly encased her bubble ass, and her creamy thighs were practically begging to be wrapped around my waist.

She didn’t see me until I was a mere few feet away and when she noticed me, she froze like a deer in the headlights. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I saw a strawberry flush spread over her pale, freckled cheeks.

It’s probably just from the sun and the heat, I told myself. *It’s not because of anything that I’ve done.*

“Hello,” I said, cursing myself for sounding so awkward. “I’m Walker Thompson, and this is my daughter Sofie. She saw you three playing and

wondered if we could join in. Would that be okay?”

The redhead blinked at me, still obviously startled. The sight of her was driving me wild and I could feel my cock throbbing with arousal. I could *smell* her – her light, delicate sweat and the hint of something sweet, almost like strawberries and vanilla.

“Of course,” she said, smiling shyly at me. “I’m Ally, by the way. I, um, just moved in with the Horne’s. I’m their nanny,” she added. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Say hello, Sofie,” I chided my daughter.

“Hello,” Sofie said. She blushed shyly, then burst out laughing as one of the twins raced up and tagged her. The three kids began zooming around the yard, leaving me and Ally standing together. She walked under the shade of a large oak tree and began fanning herself with one hand. The motion pressed the thin fabric of her shirt against her tits, and I saw that her nipples were hard.

If it hadn’t been for the immediate presence of my daughter, I would have been tempted to take her right there and then.

There was something remarkable about her. She looked so young and fresh, as if she had been untouched by the world. Her red curls frizzed alluringly around her head and her big blue eyes traveled the length of my body.

She wants me, I suddenly realized. *Even if she doesn’t know it yet, she wants me.*

I cleared my throat, determined to avoid seeming like a creep.

“So, how do you like working for the Horne family?” I asked her, as casually as I could manage.

“It’s great so far,” Ally replied. She shielded her lovely blue eyes with one hand and glanced across the yard, looking after her charges.

I chuckled.

“What?” Ally asked me in a guarded voice. She flushed again.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “It’s just ... well, I’ve been living across the street from them for a few years now, and Ann can be a piece of work. When I first moved in, she called the HOA on me because she didn’t like the type of flower-pots that my wife had put out.”

Ally’s smile faded and she visibly tensed.

“My ex-wife,” I corrected, inwardly groaning.

“I’m, um, sorry about your divorce,” she said, clearly groping for the

right thing to say. “That can’t be easy to have gone through.”

“It was absolutely for the best,” I said honestly. “Don’t even worry about it.”

Ally giggled. “Did ... did she really do that? Call about the flower -pots, I mean?”

I nodded. “Oh, yeah,” I told her. “It was a complete disaster. You should’ve seen my ex – she was ready to tear her hair out over it. She even talked about moving *again*.” I paused. “But I wanted things to be stable for Sofie. She deserves that, even if my own life was a complete mess at the time.”

Ally nibbled on her plump lower lip and I had the sudden, irresistible urge to crush her curvy frame to mine and kiss her deeply and wetly.

“That makes sense,” she said slowly. “I mean, I’m not a parent. But if I were to ever become one.”

An absolutely insane image popped into my mind. *What would it be like to have a baby with Ally, I wondered. Would she have blue eyes and red hair, just like her mother?*

It was then that I knew I’d gone too far, too long, without being with a woman. I hadn’t bothered to date after my divorce – I’d thrown myself into work, and ignored my basest instincts. Taking care of Sofie had always been a huge priority and even though Julie had teased me about how I should be out there dating around, or at least put up a profile on a dating site, it just ... somehow hadn’t been appealing. Marina had hurt me deeply, but it wasn’t just that.

It was more, I just didn’t see the *point* of dating, especially not with Sofie being so young. I didn’t want the potential outcome of introducing her to a woman only to have things not work out between us. Not only was she young, but my daughter was very sensitive, and protecting her was my number-one priority.

Clearly, though, I was going to have to start doing *something*. Even if it was just looking around on Tinder for women to date casually. I couldn’t keep obsessing over my new neighbor – she was far too young for me, and too innocent.

I couldn’t fuck up her life and hurt me the way that Marina had hurt me.

All the same, a voice in the back of my head said. *It doesn’t hurt to look.*

Ally

I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT – I wanted to pinch myself. Was this *really* happening? That gorgeous man – *Walker* – and I were having a conversation, an actual conversation. My heart was beating rapidly in my chest, like it had suddenly been replaced by a tiny, anxious hummingbird. I could feel myself flushing every time his blue eyes flicked over me, and my mouth was dry. My tongue felt fat and heavy inside of my mouth and my palms were soaked with sweat that was absolutely unrelated to the humid, sticky summer heat.

“So,” I said, biting the inside of my mouth. “Um, how old is Sofie?”

“She’s five, just like the boys,” Walker said. “Part of the reason why we stayed here is because you know, they’re the same age and they like playing together. I thought it would be good for her to have friends her age who would be in the same grade as her at school, you know?”

I nodded. “That makes sense,” I said. I glanced over to the kids, making sure that they were still playing together and having fun. Sofie was making a face as she chased after Peter and Parker, who were both laughing. Even though I hadn’t known Peter and Parker for very long, I had to admit that the sight was heartwarming.

“They’re really cute together,” I said.

“They are,” Walker agreed. He took a step closer to me and I felt goose bumps break out over my skin. We were so close that I could have reached

out and touched him with the tip of my finger, but I resisted the urge. I could smell him – his cologne was musky and intriguing, mingled with the scent of coffee and aftershave. I wanted to close my eyes and press my face into his chest and breathe him in deep – I wanted to feel the fabric of his button-down shirt against my face. Just the thought was enough to make me blush and I took to fanning myself again.

“It’s so hot outside,” I said. “I’ve never been good at handling this kind of heat, you know?”

Walker chuckled. “I might ask what you’re doing in Georgia, then,” he said, smirking at me.

God, just the way his eyes flicked over my body was enough to make me hot. A strange and foreign blend of feelings was coalescing together in my body and I swallowed hard. Being near him made me feel both hot and cold at the same time, like someone was examining my insides as they spoke to me. I could feel my stomach churning with anxiety and the space between my legs was growing damp and moist – just shifting and feeling my wet panties against my sensitive lips was doing things to me.

It had been one thing to watch and admire Walker from afar, but now that he was standing so close to me, it was hard to ignore those feelings.

“Actually, I grew up in New Jersey,” I admitted. “But I went to college here and I really liked it, you know? Despite the heat. It’s so pretty, and everything is so scenic. It doesn’t look like that back home.”

Walker raised an eyebrow at me, making me feel as if I was under a magnifying lens.

“There are some pretty parts in New Jersey, too,” he replied.

I blushed and shook my head. “Not where I grew up,” I said. “Trust me on that. I wasn’t even close to New York City. I think I’ve been a total of three times in my life, and once was for my birthday dinner when I turned eighteen.”

“Ah,” Walker said thoughtfully. He nodded. “The Russian Tea Room?”

I shook my head and laughed. “No,” I said. “Slices of pizza in Times Square. My friends and I drove up and spent the night there, but we couldn’t afford a hotel or anything, so we just walked around all night.”

Walker laughed. He had a beautiful laugh – it was rich and deep and sonorous, and hearing it sent a shiver rushing down my spine.

I was surprised that talking to someone as handsome as Walker was as easy it was. Even though he had the looks to be a Calvin Klein model, he

didn't act that way. And he definitely didn't act the way I'd seen some men around here acting – entitled, like he owned the entire world. He definitely had what Missy called “big dick energy” – the phrase alone was enough to make me blush – but it wasn't in a bad way.

It was just ... a lot.

“That's funny,” Walker said. He shook his head. “I don't even remember my eighteenth birthday,” he replied. “I was probably doing dumb guy stuff, like getting drunk with my friends and trying to impress girls with skateboard tricks.”

Even though that had clearly been years ago, I felt a hot blaze of jealousy when he mentioned trying to impress another girl.

What is wrong with me, I thought as I wiped my sweaty palms on my denim shorts for the hundredth time that day. *Why can't I just act normal with him?*

“But, all guys are idiots at that age,” Walker said. He smirked at me again and I felt a white-hot bolt of lust coursing through me. “Luckily I'm too old for that now, huh?”

Is he actually flirting with me? I wondered, blushing and shrugging. Walker started to laugh and after a moment, I joined in.

I wondered if he'd still be talking to me like that if he knew that I was a virgin.

Walker checked his watch, cursing under his breath as he did so.

“Shit,” he muttered. “I'm sorry to do this, but I've got to get Sofie back home. There's a meeting I need to prep for tomorrow, and I don't want to be up all night doing it.”

I nodded. “What do you do?” I asked.

Walker grimaced. “I'm an attorney,” he said. “That was the best and worst decision of my life.”

Before I could ask why, he called to Sofie. She reluctantly came over, sweaty and covered in dirt spots.

“You're a mess,” Walker exclaimed jokingly. “Where's my Sofie and what've you done with her?”

“I'm right here, Daddy,” Sofie replied with a giggle. She threw herself into his arms, smudging dirt all over his crisp white shirt. To my surprise, he burst out laughing, too.

Well, I guess if he's rich enough to live in that house, he's probably got all the white shirts in the world, I thought.

“Ally, it was wonderful to meet you,” Walker said. Our eyes met and I felt a sizzle of chemistry between us. “But I’ve got to get this little munchkin back home, and get ready for dinner.”

I flushed happily. “It was great to meet you,” I said. “And I should be doing the same, to be honest.”

Walker and Sofie turned to leave and impulsively, I cleared my throat.

“Good luck with your meeting tomorrow!” I called after Walker.

Walker turned, Sofie still in his arms, and smiled at me.

“Thanks,” he said. He seemed touched that I’d remembered, and as our eyes met again, my nipples tingled, and my clit began to throb.

He’s going to be trouble, I thought.

I just know it.

W *alker*

I COULDN'T DENY that I was so eager to see Ally again that I did something I'd never done before. I lied to Julie.

"I'm actually taking Friday off," I told her on Wednesday of that week. "I figured I'd spend a little time cleaning the house and spending time with Sofie."

Julie blinked. "Are you sure? I mean, I know that I haven't been doing a very good job cleaning up around here, but I can put in more hours. I don't mind," she said. "I definitely need the money."

"No, don't even worry about it," I said. "Your job is taking care of Sofie, not being my maid."

Julie flushed. "I mean, if you're sure," she said uncertainly.

"Of course," I said. "And I'll pay you, of course. I know it's short notice."

Julie looked a touch relieved.

"I just have one favor to ask," I said. "Would you mind staying an extra ten minutes or so? I have to run across the street really quick."

"Of course," Julie said. She smiled at me. "Take all the time you need."

"Sofie's still asleep and I don't think she'll wake up, but I don't want to frighten her, just in case," I said.

"Not a problem," Julie replied. She smiled again. "And thanks for the day

off ... maybe I'll do something with friends, or something. It's been a while since I've had a day off in the middle of the week."

I nodded at her, then slipped my keys into my pocket and jogged across the street. As I knocked on the door of the Horne's large house, I swallowed and hoped that what I was doing wasn't terminally stupid.

Ally answered the door, wearing a seersucker blouse that emphasized her shapely tits and the round curve of her waist. She wasn't wearing those demonic little shorts, but rather a gauzy skirt that swung around her knees. Even the sight of her calves and ankles was enough to stir something inside of me and I shifted, hoping desperately that I wouldn't get an erection just from the sight of her. Her red curls were damp, and she smelled fresh and clean but again, I detected that hint of vanilla and strawberries.

God, I thought. I want her so much – I want to do terrible things to this girl. Terribly wicked, wanton things. I want her to drop to her knees and worship my cock, to tongue my balls and look up at me with those big blue eyes as she sucks me off and tastes my seed. I want her to spread her legs for me and let me lap her clit until she screams and thrashes with pleasure, I want to—

"Walker?" Ally asked uncertainly. Her eyes searched my face. "Is everything okay? Did something happen to Sofie?"

"Everything's fine," I reassured her. "But I have a favor to ask. Julie, Sofie's regular babysitter, isn't available on Friday. I was wondering if you wouldn't mind watching Sofie while I'm at work – it should just be for a half-day," I added. "And I'd pay you, of course. I know three kids is a handful. Would one hundred and fifty be enough?"

Ally blinked in surprise. "Oh my goodness," she said. "Walker, really, you don't need to pay me. Of course, I don't mind watching Sofie. You know, kids are kind of like puppies ... as soon as you've got more than one around, they pretty much take care of themselves unless they get into trouble ... which, I guess, does happen," she added, flushing hotly at her own words.

The sight of the pink hue spreading over her cheeks just made me want her more and suddenly, I wondered what it would be like to gently spank her. To take her over my lap and pull up that loose skirt and pull down her panties. To tease her, with my fingertips lightly brushing her ass. The way she'd wriggle and spread her legs, exposing her pink slit and asshole. How I'd gently, very gently spank her and how she'd strain and moan and lean into it, spreading her thighs even further as she inched her pussy towards my

hand.

God, I had to stop thinking about things like that – I was in very real danger of coming in my pants if I kept thinking about Ally like that.

“Anyway, thank you so much,” I said. “You can bring the boys over to my house, if you want. If that would make things easier, you know?”

Ally made a face. “I don’t know,” she said. “They’re ... well, frankly speaking, they can be kind of messy.”

I laughed and waved my hand dismissively, trying to ignore the itch in my fingers to cup Ally’s face and bring her in for a tender kiss.

“I don’t mind,” I told her honestly. “I can just get the house cleaned afterwards, over the weekend. Even though she’s a girl, Sofie can be messy, too.”

Ally looked a touch relieved. “Okay,” she said. “What time will be good?”

“Around nine in the morning,” I said. “And I’ll be out of the office by noon, I swear.”

Ally nodded. “That should be fine,” she said softly, biting on her lower lip.

If I didn’t walk away right then and there, I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from embracing her and kissing her deeply, so I took a step back.

“Thanks,” I said shortly. It probably sounded cold, but the truth was that I was almost afraid to be alone with Ally. The lusty urges in me were growing so strong that I was having difficulty suppressing them. And despite the way that she’d been looking at me the other day, I knew that we couldn’t get involved. I was old enough to be her father, for one.

For another, she was so beautiful that there was no way she could be single. And as much as I wanted her to be mine, I didn’t want her to be disrespectful. I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable – she lived right across the street, for fuck’s sake, and the last thing she needed was some old lech perving on her sweet young curves.

TWO DAYS LATER, Ally showed up with Peter and Parker in tow, shortly before nine o’clock in the morning.

I caught her in the middle of a gigantic yawn as I opened the door and found her standing on the other side, rubbing her eyes blearily.

“Sorry,” Ally said. She flushed and giggled a little bit. “We’re used to

sleeping in a little bit more.”

Peter and Parker didn't look tired – they looked bubbly and bouncy, two twin piles of trouble.

I wonder just how bad they're gonna destroy my house, I thought with an internal groan. But the image of Ally sitting on my couch, spreading her thighs and warming the cushions with her delectable ass was more than enough to make up for it.

“Sofie's just finishing breakfast,” I said. “Would you two like anything to eat?”

“Cereal!” Peter and Parker yelled in unison at deafening volume. “We want cereal!”

“You guys already ate breakfast,” Ally teased, ruffling both of their heads with each of her lovely hands. “And besides,” she added in a stage-whisper meant clearly for me. “They don't need any more sugar. Trust me.”

“I think I have some fruit,” I said.

“Yuck!” Peter yelled.

“They'll be fine,” Ally assured me. She held up a lunch bag. “I brought snacks, so they wouldn't eat you out of house and home.”

Sofie appeared, clutching my leg, and peering at her friends and Ally.

“Daddy bought extra snacks just for you,” she told the twins earnestly.

I could have died of embarrassment. I cleared my throat so I wouldn't do something as un-masculine as blush, then shrugged.

“I didn't know if they have any favorites,” I said. “I just picked up a few extra things. That's all.”

“He bought the entire store,” Sofie said confidently, and suddenly I wished that my daughter hadn't inherited my tendency for verbosity.

“Well, anyway, I need to get going,” I said. I turned to Ally. “Do you want my cell number? Just in case of emergencies, or something like that.”

Ally nodded. I thought I saw her blush again as she reached for her phone and handed it to me. I added myself into her contacts, resisting the urge to take a quick look at her texts to see if she had a boyfriend. When I handed her the phone back, our fingers touched briefly and a hot bolt of intense lust shot through me. My cock twitched and throbbed in my pants and I knew I needed to get out of there, or risk turning this G-rated movie scene into something far too explicit for five-year-old eyes.

“I'll be home by twelve-thirty,” I told Ally. “No later. Will you be okay until then?”

She nodded. “Don’t worry,” she said with a slight laugh. The kids had all run off into the living room and Ally lowered her voice. “Compared to Peter and Parker, I’m sure Sofie is going to be a picnic.”

I couldn’t lie – as I said goodbye and left the house after taking another lingering gaze at Ally’s curvy frame, I hoped more than anything that she’d text me after all. Not due to an emergency, but rather because she wanted to hear from me, because she wanted to talk to me.

Being around her made me feel like I was twenty years younger, and I was eager for more.

WORK, for once, was a breeze. Leaving the office in the middle of the day had a reckless, holiday-ish feel about it and on the way home, I stopped at a little artisanal market and picked up some snacks, on the off-chance Ally would feel like hanging around when I got home. I’d picked up tons of junk food for the kids, but for us I bought some hummus and crackers, a loaf of sourdough bread, a jar of fig jam, and a wheel of Brie.

She’s going to think that I’m a pretentious fuck, I thought, rolling my eyes as I handed over the credit card.

All I wanted to do was impress her – it was insane. I really *did* feel twenty years younger again, like a young idiotic man courting his first serious girlfriend.

I sped on the way home, pushing the gas pedal into the floor with my foot. By the time I screeched to a halt in the driveway, it was twelve-thirty on the dot. Climbing out of the car, I scooped the brown paper bag full of groceries into my arms and headed into the house, expecting complete and utter chaos. Gritting my teeth, I braced myself for a disaster.

To my surprise, the house was quiet and tidy – it even looked a touch cleaner than it had when I’d left.

“Sofie?” I called out. “Ally?”

There was no reply. I frowned and walked into the kitchen. It was spotless – even Sofie’s breakfast dishes had been washed and put in the drying rack.

“Hello?” I called again.

Still no reply.

Still frowning, I set the bag of groceries down on the kitchen table and peered into the dining room, which led to the living room and beyond.

It was so silent that I could hear the click and whirr of the central air come on, all the way from outside.

I blinked in surprise. Had something happened? Ally hadn't called or texted, and I realized that it had been stupid of me not to ask for her number before, when I'd given her my own.

That was when I heard it – a shriek of pure, unadulterated laughter. It was coming from outside. I quickly crossed the dining room and the living room and opened the French doors that led to the back yard.

What I saw would have been enough to thaw the heart of the Grinch. Peter and Parker were chasing each other around, playing with toy wooden swords that Sofie had used for a play back in pre-school.

Sofie herself was seated in Ally's lap, with Ally's arms around her and a book in Ally's hands. They were leaning against the big oak tree – it was Sofie's favorite tree and over the last year or two, she'd been asking for a treehouse for Christmas. The idea of it scared me shitless, but maybe it was time to reconsider.

Ally was reading to Sofie and Sofie was playing with Allie's red curls that hung down from her head. Seeing them together stirred a deep reaction in me that was difficult to explain. As always, I was desperately attracted to Ally and her curves. But seeing her hold my daughter tenderly and gently, well, that made me feel something deeper than pure lust.

It made me wonder what it would like to be a family again, a real family. Marina had never had much interest in being a mother – she'd always made that painfully obvious. But there was something so naturally maternal, so wonderfully warm about Ally. Some of it was the way she looked – a figure like that, she was *born* to have children.

But it wasn't just that. It was her demeanor, her tenderness.

I almost hated to interrupt them. I could have stood there forever, watching the sweet and caring way that Ally was holding and reading to Sofie.

Peter and Parker ruined the moment. They spotted me, screamed, and charged at me with the wooden toy swords.

"I surrender!" I said playfully, throwing my hands into the air.

That didn't stop them. The twins charged at me, matching expressions of terror and glee on their tiny faces.

The sound of their shrieking was enough to break Ally's concentration and she looked up, then burst out laughing. She set Sofie down on the ground

and then quickly scrambled to her feet. She was wearing those tiny, obscene little shorts again with a loose top and her tits bounced alluringly as she launched herself at the twins.

“Peter, Parker!” She called loudly. “Stop right there.”

The boys, her charges, froze in place and I raised an eyebrow at them. I had to admit that I was impressed. Even though she was mostly well-behaved, Sofie could be a sassy little thing much of the time and she wasn’t always the easiest kid in the world. Peter and Parker, twin forces of spoiled and boy-energy, had to be even worse. Ally had barely gotten to know them, and already they listened to her.

She’s going to be a really good mom someday, I thought, before I could stop myself.

Ally jogged up to me and I had to drag my eyes away from the way her curves bounced and jiggled as she approached. Her face was flushed (*from the heat of the day*, I told myself) and her red curls framed her round face in an incredibly alluring way. I wanted to take her face in my hands and bring her close to me for a deep kiss.

“Hey,” Ally said breathlessly when she reached me. “How was work? Did everything go okay?”

I nodded. “Everything was fine,” I replied. “How was your morning?”

Ally giggled a little bit. “It was fine,” she said. “We ... had some snacks and then I brought everyone outside after those boys found the swords in Sofie’s toy chest.” She was still holding the book in her hand and I glanced down. When she saw the direction of my eyes, Ally flushed.

“It turns out that Sofie and I have the same favorite book,” she said. “Or, rather, it was my favorite book when I was her age. I read, you know, *actual* books now,” she said.

“She said it was her favorite!” Sofie echoed. She’d come over to us and she threw herself into my arms. I scooped her up.

“You’re getting too big for this,” I mock-groaned as I put Sofie’s legs behind my head and held onto her hands with my own. She giggled and gently kicked my chest, her tiny feet swinging in the air.

“We had a good morning,” Ally reassured me. She glanced at Peter and Parker, who had dropped the swords and resumed chasing each other around the yard. “And I think everyone is going to sleep very well tonight,” she added, too quietly for the twin boys to hear.

“Well, I don’t know what the rest of your day looks like, but I picked up

some snacks,” I offered. Raising an eyebrow, I added: “You know – assuming that you didn’t get your fill of Fruit Roll-Ups.”

Ally giggled. “The boys ate most of what you bought,” she said. “I’m sorry – they’re like bottomless pits when it comes to snack food.”

I shrugged. “Hey, I remember that age – I hate to break it to you, but that doesn’t end until well after college.”

Ally rolled her eyes. “Hopefully they’ll no longer need an au pair by the time they go to college,” she said. A strange, almost wistful look came over her face. “It’s really weird to think about them being so much older than they are now,” she said. “Like, about *me* being so much older.”

Yeah, I thought. You’ll practically be my age by then. Imagine that.

But I didn’t say that – I wasn’t exactly eager to remind Ally of the age difference between us.

“So, would you like something to eat?” I offered. “Or do you need to get the boys back home?”

Ally shook her head. “No, I told Mrs. Horne that I’d be out with them for most of the day.” She flushed slightly. “I had a feeling that work might take you a little longer than you said – I can’t imagine how busy you are.”

I laughed. “No,” I told her. “I set an alarm, don’t worry. I wouldn’t have left you hanging like that.” A thought occurred to me, and I realized that I suddenly had stumbled onto the perfect opening. “And besides,” I added, as casually as I could. “I don’t have your phone number. I wouldn’t have had any way to get in touch with you if something *had* come up.”

Ally bit her lip as a scarlet flush spread across her face. “Oh,” she said, sounding almost dazed. “You’re going to think this is really silly of me, but I didn’t even think about that,” she admitted. She took her phone out of her back pocket and squirmed slightly as she tapped at the screen. Seconds later, I felt my own phone buzz in my pocket.

“There,” she said. “I texted you. So, um, now you have my number. You know, if you need it to ask me to baby-sit again, or anything like that, or if you—”

“Daddy!” Sofie said, tugging at my hair in a way that was almost painful.

Ally clamped her lips together and suddenly I was dying to know what she had been about to say.

“What, princess?” I asked Sofie, glancing up at her.

“I’m hungry,” Sofie announced.

“Let’s go inside for a snack, then,” I said, looking at Ally to see her

reaction. She bit her lower lip and nodded, then called to the boys. The five of us walked into the house. Peter and Parker immediately made a beeline for the pantry and Sofie followed close behind.

“So, what did you get for us?” Ally teased. “Lunchables? Apple sauce?”

I chuckled under my breath.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. I took the brown paper bag in my hands and pulled out everything that I’d bought at the market.

“Oh, this looks so good,” Ally said, with almost a sexual kind of longing in her voice.

“What, do they not feed you over there?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ally flushed. “No,” she said. “It’s not that ...” She trailed off, gnawing on her lower lip. “It’s just ... well, nevermind,” she said. “You don’t need to hear about all of this crap.”

“Well, now you *have* to tell me,” I said. I cocked my head to the side and crossed my arms over my chest. It occurred to me that this was exactly how I make myself look when Sofie had misbehaved, and I softened my gaze after a second.

Ally looked down at the floor. “I mean, of course they feed me,” she said. “I eat breakfast and lunch with the boys, and then I’m free to use the kitchen before or after they all have dinner together.”

“So, what’s the problem?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at her.

Ally cleared her throat. She twisted her pale hands in front of her curvy stomach and tossed her unruly red curls.

“It’s just, um, well, Mrs. Horne is like *really* into Pilates and stuff,” she said quietly. “Like, she’s kind of obsessed, to be honest.”

I shrugged. “That tracks with Ann,” I said.

“But she’s just um, well, she’s really judgmental,” Ally said. “She makes comments about my weight all the time and like, I love eating but now I always like, feel really guilty about it when I’m over there. I feel like I’m doing something wrong,” she admitted.

“That’s bullshit,” I said, in a voice too low for any of the kids to hear. “Don’t let her dictate your life choices. It’s your body.” *And I happen to think it’s phenomenal*, I added silently.

Ally looked up at me again. This time, there was a glimmer of confidence in her eyes and she nodded.

“You’re right,” she said. “Thanks, Walker.”

God, hearing her say my name was almost enough to bring my cock to

full attention. She looked up at me from under her lashes as she said it, and the urge to touch her was so strong that it coursed through my body like an electric current.

“Oh, hold on,” Ally said. She frowned. “My phone is ringing,” she explained as she reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone.

“Hi, Mrs. Horne,” she said. After a second, she added: “No, we’re still across the street.” She eyed me as she spoke. “Walker just got home.”

I could hear the sound of Ann Horne’s voice, but not loud enough to make out any words.

“Oh, of course,” Ally said. She flushed. “We’ll be right home,” she promised. “Okay. Bye.”

When she hung up, she sighed. “I’ve got to bring the boys back,” she said. “Mrs. Horne has a friend coming over who’s going to measure them – they’re going to be the ring bearer’s in a cousin’s wedding,” she continued. “I’d forgotten all about that – I didn’t think that it was going to be today.”

I nodded. Disappointment swelled up inside of me, especially as I realized that I was going to be able to let Ally eat the food I’d bought, without policing her body and criticizing her. Yes, she was a big girl.

But she was insanely beautiful. She practically glowed from the inside out, and she had such a killer smile. She had an aura of beauty and sex about her, and I wanted nothing more than to show her that for myself, to make her believe how truly beautiful she really was.

Ally collected the boys from where they were sitting in the pantry, eating chocolate chip granola bars, and ushered them towards the front door after quickly wiping down their faces with a damp paper towel.

“Bye, Sofie,” Ally said cheerfully. “I had so much fun reading to you.”

“Byeeee!” Sofie cried, stretching out the word and giggling. “Can you come back over soon, Miss Ally?”

Ally blushed. “I’d love to,” she said, but her eyes met mine as she said it. Again, a hot bolt of lust shot through me.

“See you soon,” I told her. “I’ll walk you out – I need to check the mail, anyway.”

Peter and Parker ran down the driveway and Ally scurried after them. I followed behind at a more leisurely pace, admiring the curve of Ally’s ass and how she swung it from side to side as she walked.

The twin boys checked both ways for traffic, then darted across the street to the safety of their own home. Ally, however, turned around at the foot of

the driveway.

“Thanks,” she said.

I laughed. “I should be thanking *you*,” I told her.

Ally gave me a small smile. “I had fun,” she said. “Sofie’s a great kid.”

“She is,” I agreed.

Ally’s glance lingered on me for several more seconds, then she tore her eyes away and scampered across the street, after the twins. I watched her until her delectable figure had disappeared into the house, then stared at the door for several seconds in hopes that somehow, she’d reappear.

She didn’t, of course, and I felt a fresh wave of lust crashing and breaking over my head.

I reached into the mailbox and pulled out a sheaf of paper – advertisements and bills, just the usual.

Except there was one envelope that stood out. It was shiny and off-white, the color that women call “eggshell” and I squinted down at it as I read my name printed in a fancy script on the front.

I tucked the bills and mailers under my arm and slit the envelope open with my thumbnail, right there in the driveway. Inside, there were several pieces of heavy cardstock.

It took me a second, but I realized that it was a wedding invitation.

Ms. MARINA THOMPSON and Mr. Garrett Blythe request the pleasure of your company at their upcoming nuptials.

I STARED. My heart slowed, then began to race in my chest.

Great, I thought, narrowing my eyes and resisting the urge to rip the fancy, expensive invitation into shreds.

My ex-wife was getting remarried.

And for some fucking reason, she wanted me there.

Ally

ON SUNDAY, Mr. and Mrs. Horne gave me the afternoon off.

“We’re taking the boys to the rehearsal dinner for my cousin’s wedding,” Mrs. Horne explained. “And we won’t be back until late.”

“Enjoy yourself,” Mr. Horne said, letting his eyes travel the length of my body. It made me uncomfortable, and again I got the sense that he had a little too much interest in just how I planned on enjoying myself.

Mrs. Horne gave me a thin-lipped smile and I tried to return it.

I’m sorry your husband is kind of a creep, I thought. Please don’t take it out on me, I promise I’m not doing anything to encourage him or lead him on.

“So, what are you thinking of doing with your time?” Mr. Horne asked.

“I don’t know,” I lied. “Probably just, um, relax or something here.”

Mr. Horne nodded, as if he liked the idea of me being alone in the house. The idea, frankly, gave me the creeps.

As soon as the family was gone, I pulled out my phone and called Missy. We’d been texting a lot over the last few weeks, but I hadn’t actually seen in her in about a month, and I missed her desperately.

Not to mention, I really wanted to tell her all about Walker, and my blossoming, impossible crush on him.

After taking a quick shower, I threw on my favorite yoga pants and a

loose t-shirt from college. Although it was impossibly hot outside, the Horne family kept their house super cold, and I hadn't quite gotten used to it. I added a hoodie and a pair of thick socks and then went downstairs to wait for Missy.

She showed up an hour later, with a bottle of wine and a loud scream for me when I opened the door. She put the wine down and then launched herself at me, hugging me tightly and squeezing me in her toned arms.

"Oh my god, girl," Missy shrieked. "Your hair is so long!"

I laughed. "It's only been a month," I said. "And I don't think it's any longer – I think it's just bigger, from the humidity around here!"

Missy and I carried the bottle of wine into the kitchen, and I pulled up Grubhub on my phone. "You want to order a pizza?" I asked. "Or Chinese, or something?"

"Let's get Thai," Missy said comfortably. "My treat."

I wrinkled my nose. "I don't love that," I said.

"Come on, try something new," Missy said. She raised an eyebrow at me, and I laughed.

"There's this place near us that has really good curry puffs," Missy said. "Trust me, it's like Indian food but even better."

"Okay," I said.

Missy laughed. "I'm teasing you," she said. "We'll just get a pizza, okay?"

I nodded, feeling admittedly relieved. With Mrs. Horne out of the house, I wanted to actually enjoy eating ... it felt like I hadn't been able to do that since I'd first moved into their giant home.

Twenty minutes later, we settled onto the floor of my bedroom with pizza and the wine that Missy had brought. She started catching me up on her own life, how her job was going, and by the time she'd finished talking, I'd drunk two glasses of wine and was feeling more than a little tipsy.

And more than a little horny. All I could think about was Walker. I felt a slight pang of guilt for not being a better friend and hanging on Missy's every word, but it was impossible. The wine just made the feelings more intense, and I felt that I was practically aching for his touch, for his mouth, for his hands. Every time I closed my eyes, I pictured him pulling me into his big, strong arms and kissing me deeply.

My first *real* kiss, and it would be from a *real* man, not some dumb boy my own age.

“So, um, there’s something I have to tell you,” I said breathlessly when Missy had finally finished talking.

She refilled her wine glass and raised an eyebrow at me as she took a sip.

“Oh? How do you like working for Ann, by the way?”

Any other time, I would’ve taken the opportunity to mention how weird I thought my new employer was, but right now, I had a one-track mind.

And that track was Walker Thompson.

“I met a guy,” I confessed.

Missy squealed so loudly that I almost dropped the half-eaten slice of pizza that I held in my hand.

“How? Who is he? Oh my god, Alllllly, tell me everything!” Missy gushed.

I blushed and bit my bottom lip.

“He, um, he lives across the street,” I said. I swallowed hard, then took a bite of pizza and chewed as Missy searched my face.

“Ohh?” Missy scrunched up her forehead. “Um, is he like, their kid?”

I swallowed. “No. He’s, um. Older. He’s a single dad. He’s divorced.”

“Oh my god, Ally, what,” Missy said. She narrowed her eyes at me. “Don’t get involved with a single dad, not like, not at our age. He’s never going to have time for you. He’s probably a workaholic.”

I bit my lip. The urge to fight her on the matter was strong. My mind rebelled against her words. *You don’t know him, and I do*, I thought.

“He’s really hot,” I said. “But more than that, like, he seems like such a good guy. He clearly cares so much about his daughter. And he offered to pay me like, way too much money to watch her with Peter and Parker the other day. Every time we talk, I feel like there’s something between us.”

“I don’t know,” Missy said. I could tell she was being guarded – she wasn’t looking at me, and she was gnawing her lower lip.

“I know, it’s weird, he’s probably like, in his forties,” I said. “But ... he seems so different from any other guy I’ve ever met.”

“Ally, why not think about trying a dating site?” Missy asked. She was gentle, but I could tell that she was trying to nudge me away from the idea of Walker. “You and this guy are in completely different stages of your lives.”

“I know, but when I talk to him, I feel like myself,” I explained.

“I mean, you’re always yourself,” Missy countered.

I shook my head. The wine was going to my head, and the gesture made me dizzy for a second.

“No, it’s not like that,” I said. “You know what I mean – you know how awkward I get when I’m talking to new people. Or like, guys, in general. But Walker’s not like that. He’s really easy to talk to. He doesn’t make me feel intimidated, or like he’s trying to make fun of me.”

“Well, I mean, he *is* older,” Missy said. “So like, that’s probably part of it. But still ... I just don’t want to see you hurt,” she said. “And he lives on the same street! What happens if he dumps you and you see him? Are you going to start crying if you’re like, with the kids?”

I bit my lip. “Who says that he would be the one dumping me?” I asked, frowning.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Missy said. “Really.”

I sighed. Just as I was about to refill my glass with the last of the wine, my phone buzzed and the screen lit up.

When I saw the name on the screen, my heart skipped a beat and then began to thud rapidly.

“*Oh my god,*” I whispered.

“What?” Missy asked. She reached for the last piece of pizza and took a bite.

“It’s Walker,” I said. Sweat broke out all over my body and my hands began to shake so badly that I almost dropped the phone.

“I wonder if he’s asking me out,” I said, still staring at his name on my phone. I was too afraid to open the text, too afraid it would say something that I couldn’t handle.

“Yeah,” Missy said. She raised a brow at me. “Maybe he just wants you to babysit again.”

I swallowed hard. With my heart in my throat, I swiped open my phone and tapped on the text.

“Oh wow,” I said. “Um, he asked me if I’m able to meet up with him later. He says that he has something to ask me.”

Missy blinked. “Well, to be fair, that doesn’t sound like he wants you to babysit,” she mused.

I closed my eyes and let my phone drop into my lap as I sighed happily.

“No,” I said quietly. “No, it doesn’t.”

W alker

I MADE sure that Sofie was fast asleep in her room with door almost closed before inviting Ally over. The idea had come to me earlier that afternoon, and I was nervous about asking her.

But I had to do it. I had to try.

I was almost nervous about seeing her. *Get your shit together*, I told myself as I dabbed cologne on my wrists. *You're a fucking adult and she's barely out of her teens. You have nothing to be nervous about.*

When I heard her timid knock on the door, I opened it to see her in a pair of leggings and a t-shirt.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Um, my best friend was over, and I didn't really have time to change. I didn't know if this was urgent."

I could smell wine on her breath, but she didn't seem drunk. Strangely, the idea of kissing her and tasting wine on her lips and tongue was the most arousing thought I had had where Ally was concerned. Her curly red hair was tied up in a messy bun and I wanted nothing more than to gently pull the hair tie out and run my hands through her mass of tangles. In the dim lighting of my living room, she looked downright angelic.

"Would you like something else to drink?"

Ally flushed. "I had a couple of glasses of wine," she said. "But I could have a third, I guess."

“Of course,” I replied smoothly. I went into the kitchen and opened a bottle of red, then poured two glasses for us, then carried them back into the living room. Ally took her glass and our fingertips touched, sending a current of lust through my system.

I thought I saw her tremble, but I couldn't be sure.

“So,” Ally said. She cleared her throat and took a sip of wine, then looked up at me. I resisted the urge to sit next to her on the couch, and instead lowered myself into my leather armchair.

“You said you had something to ask me,” Ally continued. “Did you want me to watch Sofie again?”

I chuckled. “No. Believe me, I would've come right out and said that, if that was the case. And I wouldn't have offered you alcohol before watching my daughter,” I added.

Ally blushed deeply. “You're right,” she said, shaking her head. “That was a dumb thing for me to have said.”

“No it wasn't,” I replied. “I mean, I could have been asking for a future date.”

Ally's already-red cheeks turned even redder.

“Sorry,” she said.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I said calmly. “But I have an offer for you.”

Ally blinked.

“I'm ... well, I'm going to a very posh wedding. In Lucerne. Switzerland,” I said. “My ex-wife is getting remarried. And I need a date.”

Ally blinked again, more exaggerated this time. “Are you kidding?” She asked. “And you want ... ?”

“You? Yes,” I said. *And I want you for a lot fucking more than just that,* I added silently.

“Why? I mean, um, why me?” Ally asked. She giggled nervously and sipped her wine again.

“Because you're perfect,” I said. “You're young. You're innocent. You're fresh. And it would make her jealous.”

Ally pressed her lips together.

“I'm not normally the petty type,” I explained. “But what she did to me was terrible. And what she did to Sofie, well, unforgivable.” I paused for a second, wondering just how deeply I should explain. “She never had any interest in being a mother, she only had Sofie because she thought it was

expected of her. And she's basically forgotten that she has a daughter. She doesn't care about Sofie. And while I don't care now that she hurt me, having my daughter ask me almost daily where her mother is kills me."

Ally's eyes glistened with tears.

"I'm so sorry, Walker," she said.

I waved my hand dismissively. "It's fine. I mean, it's not fine. But it will be. That's why I want to hurt her, you see."

"That makes a lot of sense," Ally admitted. She took another swallow of wine. "But really, Walker. Me? I mean, you could hire some like, a totally gorgeous escort or something. It doesn't have to be me."

I stared at her. I couldn't tell her the truth – that in addition to wanting to hurt my ex, I wanted Ally for myself. I wanted to wine and dine her in one of the richest cities in the world. I wanted to woo her. I wanted to get the most luxe hotel suite I could find and make her understand that she was beautiful and perfect.

I wanted her to fall for me, even if only for a night.

I wanted her, period.

And I was growing dangerously close to the point of needing her.

"I don't want an escort," I said calmly. "I want you, Ally."

She didn't reply.

"And there's a catch," I said. "If I want to make this truly convincing, I want you to pretend to be my fiancée."

Ally's eyes widened and she drained the rest of her wine, setting the glass down on the coffee table.

"What? I mean, why?"

I pressed my lips together.

"Because it'll complete the illusion," I said. "That I've moved on, and that I've found the perfect mother for Sofie. And watching you two together the other day, well, that made sense."

Ally was silent for a long moment before she nodded. "When is the wedding?"

"Next month," I said. "You should be able to find someone to take over for you, right? Or at least take some real time off, for once."

Ally nodded. "I can ask Missy," she said.

"And if you come with me, I promise that I'll foot the bill for everything," I said. "You won't have to worry about paying for anything – I'll make a couple of calls to expedite your visa, so that we have everything

in time and ready to go.”

Ally nodded.

“And you’ll get money every day, for shopping or whatever you want,” I said. “The shopping in Switzerland is fantastic, you’ll love it.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Ally said.

“Yes, I do,” I said, nodding my head. “You’re doing me a huge favor by doing this, and I want to make sure that you have some time on your own to shop and have fun.”

Ally was silent for a moment.

“And anything you want, you’ll have it,” I said. “We’ll fly first-class and everything.”

Ally looked up. Her big blue eyes met my own and I nearly convulsed with lust.

“This is a lot,” she said slowly. “I mean, I’m still really confused as to why you’d ask ... me, of all people, but ...” She trailed off, biting her ripe lower lip.

“Will you do it?”

There was a long, pregnant pause between us.

“Yes,” Ally said finally. “I will.”

Ally

I WAS STUNNED. I felt like I was in the middle of a fever dream. And even though I'd only had three glasses of wine over the course of the evening, I felt floaty and hot, like I'd had three *bottles* instead.

I couldn't believe that Walker wanted me to pose as his fiancée.

I couldn't believe that he wanted to take me to Switzerland, to his ex-wife's wedding.

All of it was so bizarre that I couldn't even begin to put the pieces together.

We barely knew each other. Despite the magnetic pull between us, I wondered why he had chosen me. We had only talked a handful of times. I squirmed on the couch as I wondered how the plane ride would go. Sitting next to him for hours at a time. What would we talk about?

Would it be awkward?

And then, I had a thought that made me blush from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. If I was pretending to be his fiancée, there was no doubt that we'd be sharing a room.

My whole body tingled at the thought of sleeping in the same room as him. I was sure there would be a couch or something, or would he ask me to sleep in the same bed, to preserve the illusion of being engaged?

"I have to go," I said suddenly, getting to my feet.

Walker gave me a concerned look. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I just, um, left my best friend hanging. I was worried that something was wrong.”

Walker chuckled. “No,” he said. “Just wanted to run that insane scheme by you.”

I swallowed. He stepped closer to me and I could smell his cologne. It was spicy and musky and dark, and I wanted to throw myself into his arms and hold him, feel his strong arms holding me tightly.

“Um, thank you for the wine,” I said. “And ... I know this sounds crazy, but I want to help you,” I said softly.

Walker moved even closer – I could have reached out and put my hand flat against his toned chest. My heart was thudding rapidly in my chest and my mouth was dry as I looked into his sapphire-blue eyes. He had such a strong, commanding presence.

I wanted to be his for the taking.

And did this mean that he wanted *me*, too?

I didn’t know.

But I knew that I wanted to find out.

TEN MINUTES LATER, Missy was gaping at me. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “That’s crazy. There’s no way that happened!”

I nodded. “I know, it sounds insane. But asked *me*.”

Missy blinked. “Well, maybe he really is interested in you,” she said. “I mean, he could have just hired someone, right?”

I nodded again. “That’s what I said,” I replied. “I’m ... really in disbelief. Part of me thinks this is a weird trick or joke, but to what end? I mean, other than embarrassing me?”

“He’s too old to do that kind of thing,” Missy said. She’d gone out while I had been at Walker’s and bought another bottle of wine. At the sight of it, I remembered the way Walker had looked emerging from his kitchen, carrying the stemless glasses for us.

“Or, he could have asked you because you’re young and naïve and you won’t push back against him,” Missy said. She frowned. “He’s got all of the power in this relationship dynamic.”

I knew that I should be internalizing what she’d just said, but the truth was just hearing the word *relationship* in context to Walker and myself was

far too exciting to dwell on the negatives.

“Maybe,” I said. I didn’t want to think too much about that possibility. Although I didn’t know Walker very well, I didn’t want to believe bad things about him. He seemed so kind, so mature.

And so unbelievably fucking sexy that I could hardly stand it.

I wished that I was still there. I wished that he had poured more wine for us and taken me into his arms to give me a passionate, wine-soaked kiss.

“What do you think this means?” I asked.

Missy tapped her chin. “I think it means that you’re going to Switzerland,” she said, giggling a little bit. “And I think it definitely means that we need to get you a killer dress for that wedding.”

THAT NIGHT, after Missy left, I lay in bed with my heart pounding. I should have been sleepier – I’d had a lot of wine, and even though I’d had plenty of carbs to soak up the alcohol, I should have been passed out. But I was wired, and I felt almost completely sober. I couldn’t believe that Walker had asked this of me – what did he *think* was going to happen?

The sun was beginning to rise in the sky by the time I finally fell asleep.

In the morning, I felt wretched. Even though I’d felt sober by the time I finally fell asleep, my head was throbbing when I woke up. My entire body ached, and my face felt greasy and swollen.

I sat up in bed and groaned.

“Ugh,” I said to myself as I balled my hands into fists and tried to rub the blurriness from my eyes. My stomach did a flip-flop inside of my abdomen, but it wasn’t the fun kind of flip-flop that happened every time I saw Walker. It was the nauseous kind of flip-flop – the same way I’d felt the morning before taking final exams in my last semester of college.

“Oh, shit,” I groaned as I swung my legs over the side of the bed. A fresh wave of dizziness hit me as I stood up. Just as I was tugging my sleep-shirt down over my round thighs, there was a pounding on my bedroom door.

“Ally!” Mrs. Horne called from the other side of the door, in a voice that was far too loud for this time of morning.

“Yeah?” I called back. I winced at the sound of my voice – it was hoarse and foggy, just like my brain.

“You need to be downstairs *now*,” Mrs. Horne hissed, in a quieter voice this time.

“I’ll be right there,” I called back, aiming for a cheery tone.

“Now,” Mrs. Horne repeated.

I held my breath until I heard her footsteps retreating from my door.

As soon as she was gone, I yanked my sleep-shirt over my head and threw it onto the unmade bed. There wasn’t time for a shower and I groaned as a scent of my own ripe bodily odor wafted up towards me. I smelled like wine and sweat, and I swiped deodorant under my arms and on the insides of my thighs. After dressing in a pair of denim shorts and a loose blouse, I sprayed dry shampoo into the greasy roots of my curls and tried massaging them into something that resembled clean. Once I was dressed, I went into the bathroom and splashed my face with cold water, then brushed my teeth and used mouthwash for good measure.

Even after spitting out the Listerine, I could still taste the hint of red wine on the back of my tongue.

I am never drinking again, I vowed, closing my eyes and breathing deeply. For another horrifying moment, I was in very real danger of puking. But thankfully, the nausea passed. I washed my hands, then left the bathroom and trotted downstairs.

Mrs. Horne was sitting at the kitchen table. She didn’t look up when I came in.

“We’re planning a 6th birthday party for the twins,” she said, still glancing down at her iPad.

“What can I help with?” I asked. I went to the fridge and grabbed the orange juice. After pouring myself a glass and putting the carton back in the fridge, I sat down at the table, across from Mrs. Horne.

“I’m still trying to decide on a theme,” she said, pursing her lips and swiping through photos on Pinterest.

“Peter and Parker mentioned the other day that they like playing soccer,” I offered. “Maybe a sports theme?”

That got Mrs. Horne’s attention and she looked up. “Don’t be silly, Ally,” she said. “I want something that’s trendy. It’s not like they’re going to remember it, anyway. They’re turning six.”

I blinked. At first, I’d thought the problem with Peter and Parker was that they were too spoiled. But now, I was starting to realize that it was the opposite.

“Go get the boys,” Mrs. Horne said calmly. “And we’ll talk about some ideas together.”

Well, at least she's willing to do that, I thought. I got up from the table and finished my juice, then set the glass in the sink. As I walked down the hall, I knew that I needed to push Walker out of my head, at least for the day. Mrs. Horne clearly wasn't happy with me and even though she hadn't said anything, I could sense that she knew I'd been drinking the night before.

Ruth, Mrs. Horne's assistant, was in the twins' room, helping them get dressed.

"Hello, Miss Ally," Ruth said sweetly. She smiled at me. "We're having a good morning, aren't we, boys?"

Peter and Parker nodded. I couldn't help but notice the way they look at Ruth was far warmer than the way they looked at their own mother. She had dressed them in coordinating shirts with dinosaurs on them and matching blue pants.

"Hi!" Peter yelled excitedly when he saw me. He launched himself at me and threw himself into my legs with such force that I almost stumbled backwards.

"Hey little dude," I said, ruffling his hair. "Your mom wants to talk to you guys about your birthday party? Doesn't that sound fun?"

"No," Parker said. He was still sitting on his bed and he gave me a sulky look.

I blinked. "Why not?" I asked. "I love birthdays. I still celebrate mine, although I haven't had a party in years."

"Parties aren't for grown-ups," Peter said seriously, narrowing his little eyes at me.

"Well, that explains why I haven't had one in years," I joked. *Couldn't be because I'm terminally shy and have like, no social circle,* I added silently. *Nope, definitely not because of that.*

"We hate our birthday," Peter said. He sounded sullen and he looked up at me as he spoke.

"Why?" I asked.

"We don't want to have the same party," Peter said. "But Mom always says that it's *cuter* if we do that," he added.

"We're twins but we still don't like the same stuff," Parker chimed in.

I nodded slowly. I had to give the boys credit – they were a lot smarter than many kids their age.

"Maybe we can talk to Mom about that," I said.

"She won't listen," Parker said confidently.

“She never does,” Peter added.

“We’ll try,” I promised. “But I think it’s time for us to get started on your breakfast.”

After saying bye to Ruth, who had begun to make the boys’ beds, I took the boys down the hall and down the stairs to the kitchen. Mrs. Horne was still there, sitting at the table with her iPad.

“Hi, sweeties,” she said, without looking up.

“Hi, Mom!” Peter and Parker chorused in unison. They climbed into chairs on either side of Mrs. Horne.

“Ally, I’d like for you to spend today with Joanne Plough,” Mrs. Horne said. She glanced up at me. “She’s a party planner in Savannah. You have an appointment with her in one hour.”

I nodded. To be honest, even though all I wanted to do was go back to bed and dream about Walker, I knew it would be good for me to get out of the house.

“Sounds good,” I said. “What about the boys?”

“I’ll have Ruth watch them,” Mrs. Horne said. She yawned. “I have Pilates and yoga later.”

Poor Ruth, I thought as I went upstairs and grabbed my bag. After sliding my feet into sandals and swiping lip balm over my chapped mouth, I headed back downstairs, said goodbye to the boys, and then left.

The drive into Savannah didn’t take nearly as long as I’d expected – traffic was light and my phone kept feeding me all of my favorite, happy songs from my big playlist.

Walker featured heavily on my mind. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw his handsome face. That black hair, those blue eyes, his sculpted cheekbones. The way his jaw clenched when he saw me, as if he was trying to restrain himself from doing something.

I knew what Missy would say – that I was getting in over my head, obsessing and fantasizing about a man whom I barely knew. She’d tell me that I was going to get hurt – she’d tell me that I needed to pump the brakes and take things slow, that I needed to get to know Walker before deciding that my feelings for him were truly as big as they were.

Does he really want me, I wondered as I parked my car in front of the party planner’s small brick boutique.

Or am I just making this up because I want him so much?

Walker

WHEN I WENT into the office on Monday, everything felt different. I couldn't understand why – nothing had changed, despite the looming depositions ahead.

Then, as I settled down at my desk, I realized it was because something *had* changed, it just wasn't anything to do with work.

It was me. I was suddenly happy and excited, in a way that I hadn't felt in years, not since before Sofie was born. I had something to focus on, something to look forward to.

My legal assistant, Tara, knocked on my open door as soon as I'd sat down.

"Good morning, Mr. Thompson," she said. "Would you like coffee?"

I nodded. "Thank you, Tara," I replied. "Good weekend?"

Tara shrugged. "It was fine," she said. "I wanted to remind you that there's a meeting at two-thirty, and then tomorrow you're meeting with our client for deposition preparation."

I nodded.

Tara disappeared and then reappeared minutes later with coffee, steaming and hot. I took the mug from her hands and took a long swig, then set it down on my desk.

"Do you know anything about Lucerne?" I asked.

Tara blinked. I liked her – she was professional and always did everything correctly – but we hadn't spoken much about anything outside of work. Honestly, that was one of the things I liked *most* about her – my other secretaries had often fallen into the habit of acting like a girlfriend, or like I was their older brother, and they could gossip about their boyfriends or their problems.

“Come again?” Tara asked.

“Lucerne, Switzerland,” I said. “I'm going to a wedding there and, well, I'm bringing a date.”

“Oh,” Tara said. She blinked, and I took that to mean she was as confused by this interaction as I was. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “I haven't been, I'm sorry I can't be more help.” She paused, then cleared her throat and added: “I assume that you'll want me to make the hotel booking for you?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding and reaching for my coffee again.

Tara turned to leave and suddenly, I cleared my throat.

“You know what, Tara?” I said.

She turned around and cocked her head to the side. “What is it, Mr. Thompson?”

“Nevermind about the bookings,” I said. “I'll do it myself.”

“Are you sure?” Tara's forehead creased with confusion. “I mean, that's part of my job, handling your personal affairs.”

“I'd like to do it myself,” I said, nodding as I spoke.

“Well, okay,” Tara said. “But only if you're sure.”

“I am,” I assured her. “Trust me.”

I SPENT a shameful amount of time that morning looking for the perfect hotel, someplace opulent and luxurious where I could take Ally. Obviously, the invitation had included a suggested block of chalets, but I didn't want to be staying anywhere near Marina and the wedding party if I could help it. In the end, I booked a five-star hotel ... and I even shelled out for the honeymoon suite, which included a spa day and turn-down service every night.

She'll love that, I thought, hoping that it wouldn't overwhelm Ally. I couldn't remember the last time I'd enjoyed planning something so much – it had been years.

Possibly even my entire life.

The rest of the work day sped by. The meeting was short and thankfully,

useful. By the end of the day, I was ready to get home and see Sofie.

And possibly be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of Ally.

Even though we had each other's numbers, we hadn't spent a tremendous amount of time texting. I was usually too busy during the day to look at my phone, and I had a feeling that Ally was too shy to initiate much conversation.

I'll have to work on fixing that, I thought as I pulled into the driveway of my house.

Across the street, I saw Ally emerging from the Horne house as soon as I parked my car. She skipped down to the mailbox and as soon as I saw her, I knew I had to talk to her. The wedding was a month away, and I couldn't spend that month in tortured longing. I wanted to start getting to know her ... and her delectably luscious body.

"Ally," I called, as I walked down the driveway to my own mailbox.

Ally smiled happily when she saw me.

"Hi," she said. "How are you? How's Sofie?"

"We're both fine," I replied. "I was wondering, what time do your charges normally go to sleep?"

Ally blinked. "Usually around seven-thirty," she said. "Why?"

"Would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow night?" I asked. "Does eight work for you?"

Ally nodded. A hint of mischief came into her eyes and she glanced up at me from beneath her eyelashes.

God, she's so beautiful, I thought. *And she doesn't even know it!*

"You're not going to ask me for any more favors, are you?" Ally asked idly.

I chuckled.

"No," I said. I smirked at her. "Well, at least, I don't think so," I teased back. "Depends on my mood."

Ally flushed hotly and I grinned at her. The heat between us was palpable – every time I talked to her, the rest of the world just seemed to fade away. I forgot about everything – the sweltering summer sun, the sheaf of bills clutched in my hand, the blisters on the backs of my heels from breaking in new work loafers.

All I could think about was her, and how desperately I wanted her.

"That sounds nice," Ally said. She bit her lower lip, and I fought the urge to pull her, to slide my hands down her back and cup her ass, to knead her

soft skin until she'd moan with desire and press her magnificent curves against my body.

"Any allergies I should know about?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ally giggled. "Wait, are you actually going to *cook*?" She asked.

I feigned a wounded look. "I have a daughter, you know. She'd have you know that I'm a real gourmet ... I can open a can, and everything."

Ally giggled.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I don't have any allergies. I'm fine."

"Good," I said.

Every second of silence that passed seemed to grow more charged than the last.

"I ... I should go inside now," Ally said. She gulped and swallowed, then tore her eyes from mine and let out a little shaky sigh. "But I don't want to," she admitted quietly.

The revelation shot through me and I had to make a concerted effort not to blink in surprise.

She's interested in me, I thought. I had suspected as much, but this all but confirmed it.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, raising an eyebrow.

Ally looked up at me and flushed, then smiled. "I'm looking forward to it," she said. Blushing even harder, she added: "Fiancé."

Ally

I COULD HARDLY SLEEP that night, thinking about how Walker had asked me over to dinner like that.

“Is it a date?” I’d asked Missy on the phone, immediately after coming inside.

“It kind of sounds like it,” Missy said. “Although inviting you over like that for a first date ... I don’t think a lot of people would do that.”

“I mean, he has Sofie,” I pointed out.

“He could get a sitter,” Missy had replied. “But either way, I hope it’s a date. For your sake, you know.”

After we’d hung up the phone, I’d played with the boys and gotten them ready for bed. As soon as they were asleep, I’d gone to my room and dug through my closet. I didn’t have very many nice things to wear – the nicest dress I’d ever owned was my prom dress, and that was boxed up in New Jersey with my parents. And of course, it would’ve been ridiculous to show up in a prom dress. He’d think I was actually crazy, and I didn’t want to come off that intense.

In the end, I settled on a pair of black jeans and a loose shirt that I thought was flattering because it hid the bulge of my stomach. I was so anxious – no one half as attractive as Walker had ever paid much attention to me, and while it was very flattering, it also made me feel that I was under a

microscope.

THE DAY PASSED AGONIZINGLY SLOWLY. The boys were in a sulky mood – Mrs. Horne had settled on a circus theme for their party – and nothing I did managed to coax them out of it. Peter refused to get in the bath after Parker had finished up and I had to bribe him with a slice of cake, which I knew Mrs. Horne would be furious about if she found out.

“This is our little secret, okay?” I asked hopefully as Peter was finishing up.

He nodded. “I like you Miss Ally,” he said. “You’re a lot nicer than Mommy.”

I couldn’t lie – his words were almost enough to make me tear up.

After the boys were finally settled, it was quarter ‘til eight, so I took the fastest shower known to man, thankfully managing not to nick my legs with my razor in the process. I pulled on cotton panties and my black jeans, then fumbled with the neckline of my top until it was just off my shoulders. I didn’t have time for make-up, but I didn’t think Walker would mind.

He’d certainly seen me in worse states.

Outside, the sun had fallen, and the air was twilit-dark but it was still muggy and damp and scorching hot. The pavement seemed to sizzle under my sandals as I walked down the Horne’s driveway and crossed the street. By the time I made it to Walker’s front door, I was sweating lightly.

I didn’t have to knock – Walker swung the door open and to my surprise, Sofie rushed out.

“*Someone* wanted to see you,” Walker said. There was a touch of amusement in his voice, and I laughed as I squatted down.

“I have to go to bed soon, but I wanted to say hi,” Sofie explained sheepishly. She was already in her Elsa-and-Anna pajamas and she gave me a hug.

“Hi, sweetheart,” I said.

Sofie pulled away and I stood up, trying not to grunt as I did so. There was the smell of something delicious wafting towards the foyer from the kitchen and I sniffed the air.

“Let’s get you to bed,” Walker said to Sofie. He took her hand and led her down the hall. As soon as they were at the entrance to her bedroom, he turned back to me.

“I won’t be long,” he explained. “We just read a story together every night. There’s a tray set out for you in the kitchen, help yourself and relax,” he added.

I couldn’t help but grin. “It’s fine,” I said. “I have my phone – I’m good.”

Walker chuckled. I went into the kitchen and debated taking out my headphones to catch up on a podcast, but then I heard strains of Walker’s voice coming from Sofie’s room and I paused, closing my eyes, and smiling as he read her a story about a unicorn.

In the kitchen, there was a tray spread with different cheeses, crackers, and cured meats. I nibbled at a cracker with some brie and prosciutto, trying to quell the anxiety in my stomach.

What was going to happen tonight?

Just as I was starting to get really nervous, I heard the sound of a door closing, followed by Walker’s footsteps. He appeared in the kitchen and leaned against the open doorframe, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Would you like something to drink?”

I nodded.

Walker came into the kitchen and walked over to the counter, where he took a bottle of red wine and uncorked it. He poured two glasses and passed one over to me.

“What are you cooking?” I asked. “It smells delicious.”

Walker smirked. “Penne alla vodka, with peas and pancetta,” he said.

“I ... have to admit that I’m impressed,” I admitted.

Walker laughed. “Don’t be,” he replied. “It’s maybe one of three different things that I can actually make.”

“Well, still, it’s more than me,” I admitted. “I eat too much processed stuff.”

“Cooking is relaxing, but I rarely do much of it now,” Walker said. “Sofie’s in her picky-eater stage ... she eats a lot of chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese.” He shook his head and uttered a mirthless laugh. “I always told myself that I was going to be one of those people who raised their child to eat healthy, varied food from a young age and look at me now. I cave. It’s just not worth fighting over, not after the days that I have.”

I nodded.

“It’s funny – she knows that she’s got me wrapped around her little finger,” Walker said. He took a long sip and wine and I followed suit. “She’s a lot better with her babysitter, but then I’ll try to get her to eat vegetables

and she just throws a fit.”

“You’re a really good dad,” I said. “A lot of kids develop really weird issues about food, and well, I think you’re doing things in a very healthy way.”

“I hope so,” Walker said. He sat down at the table across from me and reached for a piece of parmesan.

“I ... uh, nevermind,” I said.

“No, what?” Walker asked.

I blushed and looked down into my wine glass so he wouldn’t see.

“I was just wondering, like, they say being a single parent is hard. But what do you think? Sofie’s a great kid. I mean, Peter and Parker have two parents and they may as well have none ... I thought they were little brats when I first met them, but Mrs. Horne treats them more like accessories than children.”

Walker laughed sadly.

“It’s hard,” he admitted. “But she’s worth it. She’s everything to me, and I always want her to feel loved and protected. I don’t mind being alone. I’d rather be a single dad than be married to someone who wasn’t a good mother.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

“What about you?” Walker asked. He refilled my glass of wine, then his own.

“What about me?” I asked.

Walker chuckled, deep and sonorous and low in his throat. The sound of his laughter filled me with warmth far more intense than I felt from the wine.

“How did you grow up?” Walker asked.

I shrugged. “I think it was pretty normal. I’m an only child. My best friend, Missy, is the closest thing I have to a sister, but we only met in college. My parents are still together. They’re ... well, they’re not unhappy, I mean, I guess they’re pretty normal.”

Walker nodded. “And you think you’ll stay down here for good?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do when I graduated college, and Missy knows the Horne family – she grew up around here.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” Walker said.

Our eyes met and I felt a sizzle of lust jolt my body. My pussy began to tingle, and my clit throbbed at the sound of his deep voice. Even though he’d

said something so casual, I savored his words.

He likes me, I told myself. He really does.

“I am, too,” I admitted shyly.

A timer went off, interrupting the moment and I cursed internally as Walker got up to check on the pasta. He frowned, then pushed it back into the oven.

“Needs a little more time,” he said. “Would you like a tour of the house?”

I nodded, although I was slightly disappointed that he didn’t immediately sit back down and start telling me just how glad he was that I was there. I stood up with wine glass in hand and followed Walker down the hall.

“I figured you might have poked around a little bit when you were watching Sofie the other day,” he said in a hushed tone so as not to wake her. “But I wanted to show you around anyway.”

I bit my lip and nodded as I followed him into an opulent room. The walls were papered in emerald green watered silk and the furniture was all dark teak wood.

“My office,” Walker explained. “This is the one place in the house where I can come to be myself.”

“I think it’s important to have that space,” I said. “A sanctuary.”

Our eyes met and I felt another sizzling burst of arousal explode in my lower belly. Already, I could feel that the crotch of my cotton panties was soaked and I flushed as the sodden material rubbed against the lips of my pussy.

I stepped closer to Walker and my foot caught on the edge of a rug, sending me flying forward. But before I could crash to the ground or even spill my wine, Walker’s strong arms caught me by both hands. In his hands, I felt tiny and petite, something I had never imagined before.

“Allyson,” Walker growled in a low tone that sent a shiver down my spine. Our eyes locked and he steadied me, righting me to my feet. I was trembling and my heart was beating so fast that I thought it would burst right out of my chest.

Before I could think about what I was doing, I set my wine glass down on his desk and threw myself into Walker’s arms. His grip on me tightened and I strained on my tip-toes, throwing my head back and kissing him greedily.

Walker groaned into my mouth as our lips crushed together. His hands moved from my arms to my back, and he slid his fingers down to my ass, squeezing it hard through the denim of my jeans. His touch sent a bolt of

thrilling sensations through me – hot and tingly and so delicious that I moaned into his mouth.

Walker's tongue slid between my lips and I opened my mouth to him, tasting the wine on his lips and mouth. Our tongues danced and flickered together, and I reached up and ran my hands through his thick, dark hair, marveling at how soft a man's hand could feel. I couldn't help but press every inch of my body against him, whimpering with pleasure as I felt my nipples stiffen inside of my bra. Walker kept massaging and kneading my ass with one hand and with the other, he held my back close to his body. Before I realized what was happening, we were walking backwards together until Walker put his hands on my waist and pulled me down onto a leather couch in the corner of the room.

“Ally,” Walker groaned in a ragged voice. We'd fallen with me on top of him and I straddled him, already feeling a hard bulge between his legs through the fabric of my jeans. He felt *huge*, far bigger than I ever thought a man could feel and I shivered at how it would feel to take him inside of me for the first time.

Beneath my hands, Walker's chest was hard and toned and firmed and I moaned softly as I leaned over him to kiss him again. His mouth consumed mine as his hands slid through my curls, pushing them away from my face and gently tugging my hair until pleasure traveled all the way down the back of my neck to the base of my spine. He was grinding his hips beneath mine like he was already inside of me and I gasped as his hands slid down to my waist and under my shirt. He didn't even bother try touching me under it but pulled it over my head and threw it to the side, leaving me exposed in only a bra and jeans.

“You're so fucking beautiful, Ally,” Walker growled.

I whimpered with pleasure as he slid a hand into the cup of my bra and brushed my stiff nipple with his thumb, sending a whirlwind of ecstasy through my body. His touch was so exquisite, so tender and rough at the same time, that my clit tingled just from feeling his hands on my nipples.

I was blushing so hotly that my skin felt like it was burning, and I leaned down to kiss Walker, cupping his face in my hands as he reached around behind me and expertly unclasped my bra with two fingers.

“I want you,” I panted into Walker's mouth as I ground my hips on his pelvis. Walker groaned. He sucked and nibbled at my lower lip, pulling it into his mouth and licking it with his tongue. The primal sensation made me

gasp loudly and Walker's hands moved to my hips and guided me over his erection. I wanted to be closer to him – I wanted to be fully naked against him. Suddenly, for once in my life, I didn't feel self-conscious about my size or my curves. Being with Walker, being in his arms like this, made me feel beautiful and I wanted nothing more than to surrender to all of the feelings coursing through me.

My hands moved from Walker's face down to his chest and I fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, clumsily and quickly. My heart was racing, and my entire body was tingling as Walker's hands moved over my bare back, holding me close and stroking my skin. I whimpered as his hands moved lower, squeezing my ass through my jeans, then moving around front to my waistband and unfastening the snap.

I'd gotten Walker's shirt all the way unbuttoned and it fell open, exposing his hard, toned, abdomen. His skin was smooth and soft, and I leaned down and kissed his bare chest, flicking my tongue over his nipples and taking them into my teeth. Walker groaned. He put both of his hands on my hips and flipped me over onto my back in a single, expert motion that left me breathless. I'd never felt as delicate in my life as I felt now, and I panted with excitement as Walker spread my thighs and knelt between them on the couch. His sapphire eyes locked with mine and a hot jolt of lust shook my body. He peeled his unbuttoned shirt off, revealing strong, muscular shoulders and a torso that left me weak. Walker leaned forward and unzipped my jeans, and I lifted my hips automatically as he began sliding them down my legs. Now, I was clad in nothing, but my cotton panties and I shivered, feeling exposed. The crotch of my panties was soaking wet, and I gasped and flushed as the scent of my arousal filled the room.

"Ally," Walker growled. He trailed a finger down my stomach and over the crotch of my panties, making me quiver and shake with excitement. When I felt his fingers brushing against my clit through the soaking fabric, I gasped and moaned and arched my back, spreading my legs wide like a wanton slut. His touch was so delicious, so delectable, that I wanted more, *needed* more. I wanted to feel him inside of me, I wanted him to touch me and fill me and bring me to a gasping, sobbing climax.

"Don't stop," I begged. "Please don't stop."

Walker smirked down at me. His blue eyes were smoldering with obvious lust and desire and I held my breath as he pulled my panties down my legs and tossed them to the side. His fingers skidded up my inner thighs, pausing

briefly at my pussy lips. I held my breath and twisted in frustration, spreading my thighs as wide as I could and inching closer to his fingers, whining in anticipation.

“Good girl,” Walker said quietly. The sound of his quiet praise sent a thrilling shiver through me and when he touched my exposed clit, I gasped. Beads of sweat broke out over my body as Walker rubbed my clit, sending the most heavenly feeling through every nerve inside of me. I closed my eyes and screwed up my face, moaning and panting and writhing to the motion of his hand. It felt like something was burning inside of me, but deliciously so, and I gasped and whimpered as he rubbed slow, torturous circles around my clit. I was so wet that I could feel a damp spot beneath me on the leather couch and I shivered and shook as Walker slid a finger inside of me. I felt impossibly tight, just around his finger, and the sensation of his hand pumping in and out of me while his other hand rubbed my clit was almost too much to bear.

I knew it was shameless and wicked, but I put my hands to my breasts and pinched and played with my nipples as Walker pleased me.

“So naughty,” Walker said in a low growl.

I opened my eyes and looked at him, panting hard.

“I want you,” I begged. “Please, Walker, I want you to take me.”

Walker didn’t stop pleasuring me. He was edging me, bringing me closer and closer to a peak that I’d never been able to reach on my own. I gasped and cried out softly as I took my hands from my body and fumbled with Walker’s belt and trousers.

Walker batted my hands away.

“Not yet,” he said in a deep growl. “I’m not done playing with you yet.”

W *alker*

ALLY WAS SPREAD out before me, completely naked, completely shameless and slutty and beautiful. Watching her play with her nipples had awakened a dark, dominant part of me that I hadn't previously known to exist.

"Please, Walker," Ally begged. She rolled her eyes back into her head as I slipped another finger into her soaking pussy. She was so tight that it felt like she was clenching my hand and I groaned as I imagined how it would feel to pierce her with my cock, to slide deep inside of her and claim her as my own.

"I'm having fun toying with you," I teased her in a low voice.

Ally let out a cry that was half-moan, half-sob. She was grinding her pussy against my hand, desperate for more pleasure. I flicked my thumb over her hard little nub of a clit, enjoying the way she shook and moaned with ecstasy as I touched her.

My cock was throbbing – it was almost painful, that was how much I wanted her. I took my hands away from Ally's soaking pussy and her eyes shot open. She whimpered and bit her lower lip as she watched me undo my belt. I unbuttoned my pants and unzipped the fly, then briefly got to my feet and yanked my pants and boxers down in a single motion. My cock bobbed free and Ally started breathing harder at the sight of it. I got back onto the couch, kneeling between Ally's round hips. I put my hands on her thighs and

pulled her closer, teasing the opening to her pussy with the head of my cock.

Ally gasped with pleasure. Her eyes rolled back into her head once again and she reached for me, grabbing blindly at my hips and torso. I steadied myself with one hand on the couch and one hand on her hip, then plunged deep inside of her for the very first time.

Ally let out a shriek and she stiffened. As I began to rock back and forth, sliding my cock in and out of her curvy body, she melted and moaned. Ally wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me in deep. She ground herself against my lower torso and whimpered, moaning softly as she rubbed her clit against my pubic bone.

She felt so good wrapped around me, like wet velvet, and I uttered a low groan as I thrust deep into her pussy, burying myself to the hilt inside of her delicious self.

Ally reached for me, pulling me close and kissing me breathlessly. Her tongue flickered against mine and she nibbled on my lower lip as she stroked my shoulders with her sweaty hands. I moved my hands between our bodies and pinched and played with her nipples, bucking my hips and thrusting harder and harder. Ally quivered and gasped.

“Walker,” Ally panted as she buried her face in my neck and bit me gently. “Walker, you feel so good,” she moaned, raking her hands through my hair.

I grunted loudly as I plunged inside of her, fucking her deeper. Electric ecstasy was swarming through my body and I clenched my teeth. I grabbed Ally’s wrists and pinned them over her head, burying myself inside of her with swift, long strokes.

“Come for me,” I growled, pressing my forehead against Ally’s and flicking my tongue over her lips. She moaned and touched the tip of her tongue to mine, whimpering and shimmying her body underneath my own. Ally held her breath and bucked her hips, rubbing herself against me and moaning loudly through clenched teeth.

“It feels like I’m going to explode,” Ally cried out. Her face was flushed, and her curls were soaked with sweat as I felt her finally begin to clench me with her pussy, soaking me with her arousal. She cried out, louder and louder, burying her face in my neck to muffle the sound of her orgasm crashing and breaking over her head.

She felt so good clenching me that I couldn’t hold off any longer. I gritted my teeth and bucked and gasped and exploded, a white-hot pleasure unlike

anything that I'd ever known filling my body. I felt myself gush inside of her, coming hard and fast.

"Ally," I groaned, thrusting hard and deep. Pleasure crashed over my head and I felt myself drowning in it, drowning in her. I never wanted to do anything else other than fuck her – it was all I could think about doing.

For a moment, we stayed locked together on the couch. Then, I straightened up and pulled out, my cock coated and soaked with her fluids. I was still rock hard, and the scent of Ally's juices were almost arousing enough to make me want to fuck her again.

"Oh my god," Ally panted.

All I could do was lazily grin at her. "I know," I said with a smirk.

"I ... I didn't know that would happen," Ally admitted, suddenly shy again. She flushed deeply as she reached for her discarded clothing. I got to my feet and dressed and by the time I was fastening my belt, Ally was pulling the sweaty tangles of her curls into a messy bun on top of her head.

"Oh, shit," I muttered. "The food!"

Ally burst into giggles and the two of us darted from my office into the kitchen. It was hard to believe it, but only ten minutes had elapsed. When I checked the penne alla vodka, it was perfectly done, if slightly crispy on top.

"Well, I always like the crispy noodles on top, anyway," Ally said. She giggled again and I raised an eyebrow at her as I pulled the food out of the oven with two mitts on my hands.

"Do you still want to eat?" I offered.

Ally nodded. "I think we worked up an appetite," she teased.

I smirked at her. "You're cheeky," I told her.

Ally giggled. She sat down at the table, smoothing her blouse over her chest, and pressing her lips together. I portioned out two bowls of pasta and then carried them to the table. Taking a seat across from Ally, I handed her a bowl.

"Would you like more wine?" I asked.

Ally shook her head. "No," she said. "I, um, I feel dizzy enough, to be honest."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Are you okay?"

Ally nodded. "Yeah," she said. "I ... just, um, well, I didn't expect that." She looked sheepish, and I wanted nothing more than to reach across the table and take her hand, but I didn't want to upset her.

"It probably shouldn't have happened," I admitted.

Ally nodded. “Yeah,” she said. In that moment, she sounded very far-away, and I wondered if I’d upset her.

We ate quietly, but it wasn’t awkward. I couldn’t stop thinking about what had just happened, how the scent of Ally’s amazing pussy was still on my fingers. And despite what I’d said about it not happening again, I already knew that I still wanted her. Fucking her hadn’t quenched my need for her at all.

If anything, ironically, it had just made me want her more. I wanted to explore everything with her, I wanted to do things that we hadn’t touched. I wanted to go down on her, to suck her clit and feel her delicious thighs on either side of my head, gripping me as she came with my tongue in her pussy. I wanted her on my knees in front of me, sucking my cock with her hand cupping my balls and her eyes looking up to meet my own.

Thinking about it was making me hard, *again*. I swallowed hard and tried to shove all thoughts of Ally out of my head, but it was hard. I had no idea why this woman had such a profound effect on me.

I wondered what it would be like to share a hotel room with her for several days.

A hotel room and a giant bed. The two of us, alone.

I couldn’t fucking wait.

“This is really good,” Ally said shyly. She took another bite of pasta and looked up at me. “Thank you for having me over for dinner.”

I nodded. “I ... I thought it would be prudent for us to get to know each other a bit before the trip,” I said. “And by the way, I’ll need your measurements.”

Ally cocked her head to the side.

“I’m having a gown made for you,” I said. “For the wedding. It’s black-tie,” I added.

“Oh,” Ally said. She flushed. “Um, ... well, I was going to buy a dress, but you’re probably right. I wouldn’t have any idea of how to shop for something like that.”

We lapsed into silence again as we finished our pasta. When Ally was done eating, she gave me a guilty smile and got to her feet.

“I told Mrs. Horne that I’d be home by ten,” she said, biting her lower lip. “I ... wish that I didn’t have to go,” she added. “I really enjoyed tonight.”

You have no idea, I thought as I stood up. You have no fucking idea how much I needed you, Ally.

But all I said was, “Good. I’m glad that you were able to come over.”

I walked her to the door, consciously dragging my eyes away from her curvy body. I couldn’t look at her without licentious thoughts springing to mind, and the last thing I needed was to be caught pawing the neighbor’s au pair on my front porch.

“Good night,” Ally said softly. She turned to me, lips parted, and for a moment I thought she was going to kiss me. Instead, she winked and gave me a little wave, then turned and sauntered down the driveway, swinging her hips.

As soon as I was inside again, I closed the door and leaned against it, groaning to myself.

What the fuck was this girl doing to me?

A

lly – Two Weeks Later

“YOU SURE YOU don’t mind? Peter and Parker can be a lot sometimes,” I said to Missy, pulling an anxious face as I spoke.

She shook her head. “No,” She said. “You know my family’s on vacation, anyway, and they didn’t want me coming along – some cousin is going to watch the kids, or something.”

“I know,” I said guiltily. “But this was supposed to be *your* vacation,” too.

“Ally. Stop. It’s totally fine,” Missy said. “I need the money, you know?”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I said, sagging against the doorframe. We were standing in my room, which was strewn with clothing and looking more of a mess than it ever had before. I had about four hours until Walker was going to pick me up for the airport.

The last two weeks had been ... well, kind of a blur. I’d been really busy with Peter and Parker, getting ready for their birthday party, and Mrs. Horne had kept me working from dawn until almost midnight most days. Walker had been gearing up for a deposition at work, and although we’d been texting a bit, we hadn’t seen each other for more than a few minutes at a time.

I missed him. There were moments when I felt like what had happened between us was something that I’d imagined, like a dream or an apparition. It was hard not to feel that way. The only person I’d told was Missy, who had

predictably squealed and jumped up and down in happiness and excitement for me, but it was something I'd thought about constantly, even being so busy.

His words had also stayed with me, about how it probably shouldn't have happened. Was he *really* busy with work, or was he just avoiding me because he was afraid that I'd lost my mind and gone crazy over him?

The idea made me uneasy. And now that we hadn't spent any real time together in the last two weeks, we were about to get on a plane and fly to Switzerland together and spend days together in the same hotel room.

Not to mention, there was the looming reality of meeting his ex-wife, the woman who had hurt him and left Sofie without a mother. I didn't even know her and yet, I already hated her. I couldn't imagine a woman who would do something as cruel as abandoning a child, especially a precious and sweet child like Sofie.

Thinking about it made me very upset.

"Ally," Missy said, snapping her fingers in front of my face. "Earth to Ally!"

I flushed hotly.

"Sorry," I said. "Daydreaming."

"We need to pack," Missy said. She peered into a bag from a Savannah department store. "What *is* all of this stuff?" Missy pulled out a \$400 silk top, with the tags still attached.

"Walker, um, bought me a lot of clothes," I admitted sheepishly.

"This guy is too good to be true," Missy said enviously. "I bet he's got like, a total freak side or something that he keeps hidden."

I flushed hotly as a sharp memory from our night together came crashing back to me – Walker's hands spreading my thighs as he prepared to slide inside of me. I hadn't told him the truth: that I had been a virgin before he'd taken me, and I wondered if he'd known. I had been so aroused and so ready for him that it had barely hurt, and the pain hadn't lasted for more than a few seconds. When I thought about how it had felt to orgasm with his cock inside of me, I couldn't help but shudder with pleasure.

"Wow," Missy commented. She dumped out the rest of the bag and pawed through the clothes. She pulled up a sundress – it was a Pucci print, halter-neck, also silk, and when I'd seen the \$2,000 price tag, I had nearly cried.

"Is this what you're wearing to the wedding?"

I shook my head. “I haven’t seen that, yet,” I admitted. “He had a gown custom made for me.”

“Holy shit,” Missy breathed. She walked over to my suitcase and gently started rolling the clothes into neat little bundles, tucking them in my suitcase like a pro. I watched, nervously, then went over to my dresser and started putting my makeup and toiletries into a plastic Ziploc bag.

“I know,” I said. “He really went all out.”

Missy nodded. “Hey, Ally?”

Her voice was suddenly serious and just hearing it made my stomach twist anxiously.

“Yeah?” I asked. “What is it?”

Missy looked somewhat guilty.

“I love you,” she said. “But ... um, please be careful, okay? I know you’re head over heels for this guy, but you really don’t know him very well yet and ...”

“And what?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

“Just please don’t get hurt,” Missy said. “I’m really worried for you.”

I swallowed hard.

“I can’t make any promises,” I admitted. “But I’ll try.”

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I met Walker in the driveway. Thankfully, the Hornes weren’t home – they knew that I was taking a few days off, but I hadn’t been able to able the truth, that I was going on a luxe vacation with their neighbor. I had a feeling that both of them would be disapproving, and that wasn’t something I wanted to deal with.

A black limousine pulled up to the house and I blinked in surprise, especially when Walker climbed out of the back. He chuckled at my amused expression. It was so good to see him that I nearly threw myself into his arms, but I managed to restrain myself.

“What’s with the limo?” I asked, unable to keep from giggling a bit.

Walker snorted. “It’s actually cheaper than airport parking,” he said. “And I figured, you know, why not arrive in style?”

I blushed. “Everyone’s going to be looking at us,” I said softly.

Walker reached for my hand and a spark leapt between us, sending a warm shiver down my spine.

“Everyone’s going to be looking at *you*,” Walker corrected.

My blush deepened so much that I felt like my skin was burning.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I said under my breath as Walker helped me into the back of the limo.

The ride from Tybee to Atlanta was smooth and quick – it was hard to believe that we’d been in the limo for three hours. Walker and I caught up about the last few weeks – he’d actually had to fly up to Boston for the deposition – and I told him all about the debacle of planning the birthday party for Peter and Parker.

“It’s hard,” I said. “Because like, they’re twins but they still have their own personalities, and it makes me really sad that their mom just refuses to see that.”

Walker nodded. “That would drive Sofie crazy,” he admitted.

I nearly asked if Sofie had ever wanted a younger brother or sister, but held my tongue.

When we got to the airport, Walker helped me out of the limo. We checked our bags and went through security, then to the first-class lounge of Swiss International Airlines where Walker handed me a glass of champagne.

I couldn’t believe it – I felt completely out of place, and completely different than I ever had in my entire life. It was like I’d woken up in a normal, middle-class world and suddenly entered a strange land of wealth and fortune. Even though the Hornes were mega-rich, they were still normal-rich. Being in the first-class lounge with Walker, I felt like such a schlub. Everyone around me was so well-groomed and clad in expensive clothing. I was wearing one of the outfits that Walker had bought for me – a pencil skirt and a blouse with a bow that tied at the neck, but I still felt out of place. I’d tried my hardest, but my curls never seemed to cooperate in the humid weather, and I could tell without looking in a mirror that my makeup had begun to melt.

“Relax,” Walker said, as if he could read my mind. He narrowed his eyes at me. “You’re fine, I promise. Drink your champagne.”

I blushed and obeyed, closing my eyes and enjoying the taste of champagne on my tongue. It tasted like money, like freedom, like sweetness and wealth.

After we finished our champagne, Walker escorted me to the gate. We boarded first and I couldn’t help but look around our surroundings in awe. The first class seats were huge – they could be folded down into full beds – and it was almost like sitting in a little cubicle. A flight attendant brought

more champagne, and macarons and I giggled as I accepted both, blushing with happiness as Walker settled down next to me.

“I can’t imagine how much this must’ve cost,” I whispered to Walker.

He smirked at me. “Flying first transatlantic is always worth it,” he said. “Trust me.”

“I’m not a great flier,” I admitted. “I always get really anxious.”

Walker clinked his champagne flute against mine. “Hence the champagne,” he said. “Just relax, Ally. I promise, this will be a breeze.”

I DIDN’T KNOW if it was the champagne or the experience of flying first-class, but Walker was right. I barely noticed takeoff or the few bumps of turbulence that we had as we flew out of Atlanta.

“You should try to get some sleep,” Walker advised after we ate dinner – lamb, served with red wine, with tiramisu for dessert – and the flight attendants had come around to convert our seats into beds.

“I’m not tired,” I said, yawning as soon as the words came out of my mouth.

Walker chuckled at me.

“I know,” he said. “But trust me – you’ll feel a lot better when we get there if you’re able to get some rest now. Your body will have an easier time adjusting to Swiss time.”

I nodded, but I still wasn’t sure that I could sleep. Walker nodded off next to me with a book in his lap, and I stared at his features, resisting the urge to kiss him or brush his silky black hair away from his forehead.

I couldn’t believe this was really happening. It was the single most exciting thing to have ever happened to me, and it was overwhelming now that it was happening. Tybee Island and Mr. and Mrs. Horne and Peter and Parker and even Missy, they all felt so far away, like they were in a completely different world.

Before I knew it, I was drifting off to sleep.

“ALLY,” Walker whispered. I felt his finger stroking my cheek and the sensation jolted me awake. I blinked and yawned, rubbing the crumbs of sleep from my eyes. The plane was filled with morning light and suddenly, I

smelled coffee and heard the sounds of everyone coming to life.

“I can’t believe I fell asleep,” I groaned, yawning again and shuddering.

“Champagne helps with that,” Walker said. He smirked at me. “They’re about to serve breakfast, but I remembered something.”

Just as he spoke, a flight attendant ducked her head in.

“Would you like breakfast, ma’am?”

I nodded. “Yes, please,” I replied.

She handed me a tray with coffee, a mimosa, a croissant, some Brie, and some cured meat. The buttery, greasy smell of the croissant made my stomach rumble and I practically moaned as I took a bite.

“I can’t believe how hungry I am,” I said.

Walker nodded. “Traveling takes it out of you,” he said. “But Ally, I have something for you.”

I blinked. “You mean, something else? After this trip, and those clothes, and—”

Walker chuckled and I clamped my lips together.

“It’s just one more thing,” he said. “I meant to give it to you in the limo, but I forgot.”

I set my croissant down and waited anxious as Walker reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. When he opened it, my eyes widened at the sight of a large diamond set in platinum. My heart was in my throat as Walker took my hand and slid the ring onto the appropriate finger of my left hand.

I couldn’t stop blushing. I knew it was fake, that we were just pretending, that it was for show.

But I got a thrill from feeling him slide it on my finger all the same.

W *alker*

EVEN THOUGH BOTH Ally and I had slept on the plane, I still felt jet-lagged and edgy as we rode in a limo to the hotel that I'd picked out. Ally was practically falling asleep in the lobby and as she rode the elevator up to our room, she let her head droop onto my shoulder. Warmth surged through me and I leaned over and kissed the top of her head, so gently that she wouldn't even feel it.

The room was spectacular. It had views of all of Lucerne and the large, king-sized bed was like a bright white beacon in the center of the room. There was a recessed conversation pit in front of the bed and a living room, complete with a tray of pastries and complimentary champagne.

"This is beautiful," Ally said, groggily rubbing her eyes as she spoke.

I yawned. I wasn't as young as I had once been, and traveling, even in first-class, had left me feeling tired.

"I normally don't advise doing this," I said. "But maybe we should take a nap, just for a couple of hours. We'll want our internal clocks to adjust soon, but I have a feeling that we're both too wiped to enjoy ourselves if we were to go out."

Ally nodded sleepily. She pulled her skirt and blouse off without a trace of self-consciousness, then climbed into bed in her bra and panties. If I hadn't been so exhausted, I would have ravished her right there and then. But I was

so tired that it felt like my brain had turned to mushy soup inside of my skull, and as soon as I lay down and closed my eyes, I was asleep.

TWO HOURS LATER, I woke up. For a moment, I didn't know where I was. The windows of the room were open and there was a warm, dry, pleasant breeze that smelled like the sea. The mattress was incredibly soft and I stretched, opening my eyes and seeing soft yellowish-white light everywhere.

And beauty.

Ally was lying a few feet away from me, at the other end of the huge bed. She was still sleeping and her tangles of red hair had fallen over her face and into her eyes. Her lips were slightly parted, and she sighed softly in her sleep, stirring and rolling over, her curves barely concealed under the sheets.

My cock began to stiffen as I thought about what would happen if I reached for her, to pull her into my arms and rouse her with a kiss, then climb on top of her and fuck her. Her soft moans, the way she'd twist her curves against mine. How I'd cup her tits in my hands and pinch and play with her nipples until she was begging to take my cock.

Fuck, I thought. My cock was rock-hard and I got out of bed, trying to shake all thoughts of Ally away. I had no idea how I was going to keep myself from fucking her during this trip.

Fucking her just the once had been a mistake – it had only made me want her more. And I couldn't get seriously involved with someone young enough to be my daughter. To my intense consternation, I found the fact that she was forbidden only made her more appealing.

I went into the bathroom and took a quick shower, washing the plane dirt and travel grease from my hair and my body. The urge to jack off in the shower was strong but I ignored it – the bathroom had glass walls, and the last thing Ally needed was to wake up and see that she'd gone to Switzerland with a complete pervert.

The shower helped to clear my head, and I whistled under my breath as I shaved in the large vanity mirror. By the time I was dressed and out of the shower, Ally was awake. She was sitting at the end of the bed, wrapped in one of the big fluffy white hotel robes. When she saw me, she smiled and it turned into a yawn.

"I must have been exhausted," Ally sad. She yawned again and rubbed her eyes.

I tried to ignore the way the robe pushed her tits together into a savage cleavage.

“Well, our bodies think it’s the middle of the night,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m starving,” Ally said. She got up, her curves bouncing as she moved upright.

“Why not take a shower,” I offered. “And then we can go out and get something to eat. Sound good?”

Ally nodded. She dug around in her suitcase for her toiletry bag and then went into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. The mental image I had of her soaping her wet, glistening body was doing terrible things to me and I clenched my teeth and sat down at the desk, taking my laptop out of my bag, and checking in on work in an effort to distract myself from all thoughts of sweet Ally and the dirty, raunchy things that I wanted to do to her.

As usual, I got sucked into work. Ally came out of the bathroom, towel-drying her curls. She was wearing more of the clothes I’d bought for her – designer jeans and a blue linen blouse that emphasized her chest and collarbone.

“Walker,” Ally said, near-whining. “I’m getting hungry,” she added, pulling a face. “Can we go?”

I glanced down at my laptop. There was an urgent email that I should have replied to, but I shook my head and closed the computer. *It’s the middle of the night back in the states, I told myself. They’re not going to know the difference.*

“Of course,” I said. “Any idea what you’d like?”

Ally shrugged. “I don’t even know what they eat around here,” she said. “I’ve never been to Europe before.”

I laughed.

“What?” Ally asked. She looked a touch hurt.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I wasn’t laughing at you. I just ... I enjoy being with you, you know? Your perspective is different.”

And it was. Being with Ally was nothing like being with Marina. Ally was so pure, so fresh. Part of it was admittedly due to her youth, but that wasn’t all. Much of her innocence, I had a feeling, would stick around for years.

And I couldn’t be the one to ruin that.

Ally and I left the room and took the elevator downstairs, where we

crossed the lobby and went out into the streets. The sun was falling low in the sky and glistening on the Reuss river. The air was warm, but dry and Ally tilted her face to the sky to catch the last of the sun's rays.

"It's so beautiful," Ally said dreamily. She looked at me and smiled. "I wish we never had to go home. I could stay here forever."

"I could, too," I admitted.

Ally's smile faded. "Let's just walk around for a little bit," she said.

Instinctively, I reached for her hand. When I laced my fingers with her soft ones, my heart began to beat faster. Again, I had the sense that being with Ally made me feel twenty years younger, like I'd never even had a girlfriend before.

I could feel the ring that I'd given her, and it gave me a strange jolt of pleasure. She hadn't taken it off since I'd slipped it onto her finger on the plane, and I had to bite back a smile at the thought.

"Oh, look, this place has crepes," Ally said. She tugged my hand and pointed.

"Does that sound good?"

"It sounds more than good," Ally said. "It sounds like the best meal of my life." She pulled me up to the shop, only to groan with dismay.

"They're closed," I said, narrowing my eyes.

"It's so early," Ally said. There was a touch of sulkiness in her voice, and I had to resist the urge to laugh at how adorable she was. "Why the hell would they be closed?"

"I don't know," I said with a shrug. "We'll keep going. We'll find something, I'm sure."

Except, we didn't. We walked the length of the city streets, but most of the restaurants had closed for a few hours in the evening. The only place open was a burger place, but Ally dismissed it in favor of it being "too American."

"Maybe it's like, a Swiss thing?" Ally suggested. She sounded deflated.

"Maybe," I said, frowning. "Want to go back to the hotel and order room service? I know it's not the same, but—"

Ally practically launched herself at me in gratitude. She wrapped her arms around my neck and squeezed me, pressing her curves against me. It was both adorable and arousing and I chuckled as Ally released me from the tight hug and faced me with a smile.

"That sounds amazing," she said. "Let's go."

We made it back to the hotel in ten minutes and went to our room. I

ordered hanger steaks with Bordeaux butter for both of us, steak frites, arugula salads on the side, and a bottle of champagne as a surprise.

Ally was practically bouncing up and down with excitement by the time the food arrived.

“Look,” she said, grinning at me and pointed at the recessed conversation pit in the floor.

I chuckled. Ally had moved some of the pillows from the bed and taken a tray from the side table in the foyer of the suite.

“I thought it would be fun to have a carpet picnic,” Ally said.

How are you so fucking cute, I thought.

The food came and I took it from the tray, tipping the hotel worker, and carried everything inside myself. When Ally saw the champagne, she started laughing.

“Being with you is going to ruin me,” Ally said, shaking her head.

“How so?” I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Because I’m going to get so used to drinking it that I won’t be able to go back to anything else,” Ally said. She had changed into her pajamas – a matching set in navy blue silk that I’d bought her. The blue complimented her pale skin and flaming red curls and seeing her get so much enjoyment out of the clothing that I’d bought filled me with a strange amount of joy.

I snorted. “Don’t be silly,” I told her. I set our dinner down on the tray that Ally had moved, then opened the champagne and poured us each a flute.

I’d never seen anyone devour a steak faster than Ally inhaled hers.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head and blushing a little bit. “I was just so hungry.”

I shook my head. “You’re fine,” I said. I grinned at her. “I’m glad you’re eating. It’s good for you.”

Ally’s flush darkened. She settled back against a pillow and crossed her legs. Her silk pajama shorts rode up her thighs, exposing more creamy white skin, and the crotch nestled against her pussy, tightly enough to outline her labia in a tantalizing manner. She reached for the champagne and refilled her glass.

“Let’s play a game,” she said. “What do you say?”

I blinked. “What kind of game?” I asked. I cut a piece from my steak and chewed, then swallowed.

“Well, we’re drinking,” Ally said. She giggled. “How about Never Have I Ever?”

I laughed out loud. “I haven’t played that since college.”

“Me, either,” Ally said. Her color was high as she spoke. “But it would help us get to know each other, I think,” she added.

“You go first,” I said. I eyed her.

“Never have I ever gone skinny dipping,” Ally said.

I took a sip of my champagne.

“No way!” Ally exclaimed. She burst out laughing. “I can’t believe that!”

“I did,” I admitted. “When I was in law school. I know it sounds wild now, but I did.”

Ally snorted.

“Never have I ever sang in public,” I said.

Ally drank and I raised an eyebrow.

“I loved acting in high school,” she said. “I was in a musical one year – *Once on this Island.*”

“Really? That ... seems so unlike you,” I admitted.

“Why?”

“Because you’re shy,” I said.

“But not when I’m acting, because then it’s not really me up there,” Ally said. “When I’m playing someone else, I don’t feel shy at all.”

“That ... makes a strange amount of sense,” I said.

“Never have I ever been in love,” Ally said. She raised an eyebrow at me. “To get you back for that,” she added. “Because I know you have.”

I looked at her and pressed my lips together.

I didn’t drink.

Ally cocked her head to the side. “Walker,” she said. “You were married. I know you were in love with your ex, right?”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. “I ... I don’t know that that’s true,” I admitted. “I thought I was. I was in love with the person who I thought she was. But that turned out to be a lie,” I said. “And I’m grateful to her because she gave me Sofie. But I don’t think I was ever in love with Marina, no.”

Ally looked stunned.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She scooted closer and reached for my hand. Feeling her soft skin on mine sent a bolt of lust through my body. Her big blue eyes searched my face.

“I really shouldn’t have said that,” Ally continued. “I really hope that I didn’t upset you, Walker.”

“You didn’t upset me,” I said truthfully.

We locked eyes and another, stronger feeling of desire washed over me. Ally was breathing hard – her tits were heaving beneath the blue silk of her pajama top – and her lips were slightly parted. She smelled like strawberries and sunshine and her messy red curls were falling in her face. I reached forward and brushed her hair away from her eyes with one hand. It was impossible not to stroke my fingers through her curls and as I did so, Ally closed her eyes and moved her head closer to my hand, nudging me, wanting more.

My heart began to race. I slid my fingers down Ally's scalp, down to her neck, and traced light patterns on her sensitive skin with my fingernails.

Ally moaned in response. She opened her eyes and I saw that she was trembling.

“I want you,” Ally whispered.

And just like that, she was against me once more. She positively flowed into my lap and pressed her mouth to my own, tasting like champagne and sweetness. Ally straddled me, the silk pajama shorts riding up even higher on her delicious thighs. I was instantly hard and Ally began grinding against me, through the layers of our clothes.

I groaned with desire as I slipped my tongue into Ally's mouth, tasting her, flicking her tongue with my own. Ally wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned into the kiss, pressing against me so tightly that I could feel her stiff nipples through her the thin silk of her pajama shirt.

“Walker,” Ally purred into my mouth. Without breaking the kiss, she squirmed her hands in between our bodies and fumbled with the buttons of my shirt, practically tearing it from my body. As I pulled my arms free, Ally leaned back and grinned at me, then pulled her pajama shirt over her head. Her tits bounced with the motion and instantly, I leaned forward and sucked her nipples, taking her creamy peaks into my mouth and gently biting them before flicking my tongue over each of her nipples.

Ally squirmed and writhed. She ground her hips harder against me and I slid a hand inside of her shorts, feeling how wet she was. She wasn't wearing panties and the silk crotch of her shorts was soaked with the juices of her arousal. Knowing that she was wanting me so bad set me off and I took her in my hands and flipped her over, so that she was on her back and I was between her thighs.

“You're so beautiful,” I growled, hooking my thumbs in the waistband of her shorts and sliding them down her round thighs.

Ally blushed.

“I want to taste you,” I said in a low voice. “I need to taste you Ally.”

Ally made a strangled noise in the back of her throat and nodded. I kissed and licked her inner thighs, moving closer and closer to her pussy with each kiss. Ally writhed as I slid a finger inside of her soaking pussy, just the one. She gasped when I spread her pussy lips apart with one hand, then flicked my tongue over her clit. Her taste was honey and nectar, the sweetest scent I’d ever smelled in my life, and as I sucked and licked at her clit, Ally went wild. She thrashed and moaned and buried her fingers in my hair, tugging at my scalp and whimpering loudly.

“Oh my god, Walker,” Ally groaned. “That feels soooo good,” she cried. “Please, please don’t stop.”

I flicked my tongue faster and faster, sliding two fingers inside of her and wriggling them inside of her tight hole. Ally bucked her hips, grinding against my face. Her juices coated my lips and chin, and I savored her taste.

“Walker, I’m so close,” Ally gasped.

I stopped. I pulled away and wiped my mouth on the back of my arm. Ally moaned in frustration as I got to my knees and unbuckled my belt, then unzipped my trousers and yanked them down. My cock sprang free and I kicked off my pants, then lay down on my back.

“I want you to ride me,” I growled.

Ally

“I WANT YOU TO RIDE ME,” Walker ordered.

I was absolutely soaking wet for him and trembling with desire. I couldn’t ever remember being this turned on in my life – even more so than I was the first time that we’d slept together because now, I knew what to expect. Now, I knew what pleasure his cock and hands and mouth were capable of providing.

I nodded quickly. Climbing astride Walker made me feel self-conscious but for once, my body was the furthest thing from my mind. He cock pierced me as I knelt astride. Walker put his hands on my hips and began guiding me, slowly at first and then faster and faster. As I rode him, my clit rubbed against his pubic bone and hot pleasure exploded inside of my body. It felt like every nerve, every cell, every particle of me was being electrocuted with white-hot ecstasy.

Walker put his hands to my breasts and cupped them. When his thumbs and fingers pinched and rolled my nipples, I gasped as another electric current went searing straight to my clit. His cock filled me so well – I felt that my pussy had to stretch just to take him – and every motion sent pleasure coursing through my body.

“Fuck yeah, baby,” Walker growled. He put his hands back on my hips and started moving me up and down, fucking me hard. My clit slammed

against his hard torso and I moaned as the pleasure began ramping up in my body. I could feel the sensations growing stronger and stronger, like a hot core between my legs, and I let out a loud cry.

“I’m gonna come,” I moaned loudly, screwing my eyes shut and grinding faster against Walker’s body. When my orgasm hit, it felt like light was radiating through my body and out of my pores, filling the room with a perfect golden glow. I gasped and shrieked, grinding hard as my pussy clenched and soaked Walker’s cock with my juices. My heart was beating so fast that I thought it was going to burst out of my chest and run away.

“Fuck, baby,” Walker growled. He bucked and thrust deep inside of me, digging his fingers into my hips almost painfully hard. He screwed his eyes shut and growled loudly, sliding his hands back to my ass and pushing me up and down on his cock.

“Come for me,” I moaned softly. The aftershocks of my own pleasure were still zipping through my body and when I felt Walker explode deep inside of me, I gasped and shrieked. He felt so good, so powerful, that I imagined him filling me with his seed.

Walker growled and grunted, taking my hands in his and squeezing, then letting out a loud bellow.

I was still breathing hard when he finished and I slowly eased off of him, lying down with my sweaty hair resting against his toned chest.

“I thought that wasn’t going to happen again,” I teased, propping myself up on an elbow and smirking at Walker.

Walker turned to me and raised an eyebrow.

“I can’t help myself with you,” he said. “You have a very powerful effect on me.”

I swallowed hard.

“The feeling is mutual,” I said shyly. “Trust me.”

I got to my feet and finished the rest of my champagne. I’d gotten sweaty during our walk earlier and sweatier again just now, and I thought a shower before bed would be a good idea. I walked into the bathroom and turned on the water, then stepped under the warm spray and began soaping my body.

Seconds later, I heard the door to the shower open. I turned to see Walker, who was looking at me with intense, obvious lust in his eyes.

“I never got to finish pleasuring you,” Walker growled. He dropped to his knees and slid a hand between my legs. I was still tingly and almost sore from having orgasmed so hard on his cock and when his wet, soapy hand

brushed against my clit, a jolt of electricity went soaring through my body.

“Walker,” I moaned, spreading my legs as much as I could while still remaining on my feet. Walker spread my pussy lips with his fingers and began flicking his tongue against my clit and kissing my pussy. Every touch of his tongue and lips brought me closer and closer to the edge and before I knew it, I was coming hard, with my hand tangled in his hair and the warm water beating down on my head.

I was breathless. I was dizzy and lightheaded, and filled with passionate feelings and lust and ... something stronger.

I knew that this was technically a no-strings-attached arrangement.

But I also knew that a hard truth: that I was starting to fall for Walker, and I had no idea what to do about it.

I'll just enjoy this while it lasts and while I still have it, I told myself.

That's really all I can do.

Walker

“I’M ALMOST READY!” Ally yelled from behind the closed bathroom door.

I was sitting at the foot of the bed, with my elbows propped on my knees and my chin in my hands, marveling at just how much time it could take the human female to groom and ready herself. Ally had been in the bathroom for several hours, and it was nearly time to leave for the wedding. There was an Aston Martin that I’d rented waiting for us downstairs at the hotel entrance, and I was starting to get anxious.

It wasn’t that I was nervous about seeing Marina again, or even introducing Ally as my fiancée.

It was just a general sense of nervousness that had settled over me like a thunderstorm cloud.

Ever since Marina and I had split up, I hadn’t been overly social. The most socializing I ever did was professional, or talking to Julie about how things were going.

Julie had been shocked when I’d told her about my decision to go to the wedding.

“You’re not going?” I’d asked, narrowing my eyes “You’re her sister.”

“After what she did to you and Sofie, she’s not my sister anymore,” Julie had replied. “And I can’t believe *you’re* going.”

I’d sighed. “I know, I know it’s probably not a good idea, but—”

“It’s definitely not a good idea,” Julie had replied.

At the time, I’d written her words off as being spoken in the heat of the moment. But now, sitting in the honeymoon suite of a luxe Lucerne hotel and waiting for my fake fiancée to emerge from the bathroom, I wondered if Julie had been right.

Maybe I shouldn’t go. I know that she’d only invited me to make me jealous – and I’d only accepted to shock her, and to show her that I’d moved on.

But maybe this was immature. Maybe, I should just take Ally by the hand and take her out for a fabulous night of dinner and dancing, then fly home the next day.

Marina was a bad mother, but that didn’t necessarily mean that she was a bad person.

I swallowed hard, clenching my jaw. I didn’t know what was wrong with me – I’d been fine during the day. Ally and I had fallen asleep after I’d eaten her delicious pussy in the shower, and then we’d gotten up at a normal morning time and gone out for breakfast, croissants with ham and cheese with coffee, and then spent much of the morning sightseeing and walking around Lucerne. It really was a beautiful city, made all the more beautiful by the gorgeous, fun woman at my side.

Now, the sun was about to set, and the wedding was scheduled to take place in one hour. I got to my feet and began pacing the room, back and forth, wondering just what was taking Ally so long.

Just as I was about to knock on the door of the bathroom and tell her to hurry up, the door opened.

When I saw Ally, my jaw dropped.

She’d done something to her hair – the frizzy curls were gone, replaced by sleek waves that were intricately braided at the nape of her neck, with shiny tendrils framing her face. She was wearing makeup, just enough on her eyes to be tasteful but with dark red lipstick that made her look mature and stunningly beautiful.

The dress I’d bought for her clung perfectly to every curve of her body. It was jade-colored silk, nipped in at the waist, with only one shoulder and a trailing cape. I hadn’t had much of an idea in mind when I’d ordered it custom for Ally, but I’d given the seamstress her measurements and a photo and just said to come up with something formal enough for black-tie, but flattering.

The seamstress, clearly, had outdone herself. I made a mental note to send her an enormous tip once Ally and I were safely back on Tybee Island.

“You ... look stunning,” I said.

Ally blushed and smiled, showing her teeth, and giggling a little bit.

“I don’t think I’ve ever worn anything this nice,” she admitted. “It’s beautiful, Walker. Thank you so much.”

“I ... I feel that just seeing you in it is worth it,” I said.

Ally flushed even darker and bit her lower lip.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

Ally nodded. “I am,” she said. “I just have to get my shoes and bag.” I’d ordered the shoes and had them dyed to match the dress, and with a modest three-inch heel, they put Ally a little closer to my height. The clutch, which I’d had Julie find and order for me online, was vintage gold Chanel and it complemented the jade silk perfectly.

“I can’t get over how beautiful you look,” I said, shaking my head from one side to the other. “You are stunning.”

“Stop it,” Ally teased. She made a show of looking me over. “You don’t look so bad, yourself,” she said.

I groaned. “I hate wearing tuxedos,” I replied.

“What, like it’s a regular occurrence for you?” Ally teased.

We walked to the door of the hotel room and I opened it for Ally, admiring the way her curves moved in the jade silk gown. In heels, the way she swung her ass from one side to the other was even more exaggerated and my cock twitched and chafed with desire as I watched her.

Closing the door behind us, I made sure it was locked and we rode downstairs in the elevator.

“It’s not a regular thing, per se, but it happens sometimes,” I said.

Ally giggled. “I can’t imagine,” she said. “Do you know that this is the first wedding I’ll have gone to as an adult?”

“The last wedding I went to was my own,” I replied. As soon as it was out of my mouth, I regretted saying it – I didn’t want to upset Ally, but to my surprise, she giggled again.

“What?” I asked her. “What’s funny about that?”

“It’s nothing,” Ally said. “It’s just ... you know,” she added. “Same bride and all.” She glanced down at the ring on her finger, adjusting it, and I felt a swell of something strange and protective wash over me.

I chuckled, deep and low in my throat. “You’re right,” I told her. “Same

bride, and all.”

When Ally saw the Aston Martin, she squealed.

“I can’t believe this! Oh my gosh,” she said, turning to me and raising an eyebrow as I opened the passenger side door for her. “My dad would be so jealous right now. He’s really into classic cars.”

I smirked. “You should send him a picture,” I replied. “I’m not much for cars, but I felt like making an entrance.”

Ally snorted. “You’re so extra,” she said, shaking her head.

“I’m going to pretend like I know what that means,” I countered.

Ally burst out laughing and playfully smacked my arm. “It means, over the top,” she said. “You’re very over the top, Walker.”

“I have a flair for the dramatic,” I admitted. I climbed in behind the wheel, adjusted the mirrors, and peeled away from the hotel.

The wedding was at vineyard just outside of Lucerne and Ally was oohing and awing over the scenery the entire way. I had to admit that it was easily the most beautiful place I had ever been in my life, and ... I also had to admit to myself that I was enjoying it even more because Ally was with me, sharing the sights and sounds and scenery.

I dropped the Aston Martin with a valet and Ally slipped her hand through my arm, like a real fiancée would do. I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, not wanting to mess her lipstick.

Ally flushed with pleasure. She smelled different, too – more floral than sweet, a more mature scent.

“You look beautiful,” I told her under my breath as we approached the venue.

“You’re just saying that because you have to,” Ally teased.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “I’m saying it because I’m your fiancé,” I said. “And because I adore you.”

Ally blinked at me in surprise. Before she had time to reply, a well-dressed woman came over to us and smiled, graciously dipping her head.

“Buona serata,” she said, looking me in the eyes. “And welcome to the wedding of Ms. Marina Thompson and Mr. Garrett Blythe. May I have your invitation, please?”

I reached into my pocket and handed over the little card that had come with Marina’s invitation, embossed with my name and space for a guest.

The woman’s eyes widened when she realized that our last names were the same.

“A brother, yes?” She asked.

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “I’m her ex-husband. And this is Ally, my fiancée.”

“Oh, my,” the woman said. She blinked in surprise, then her gracious smile came back and she bowed to Ally as she had done to me.

“Welcome,” she said. “There is cocktail hour before the ceremony, so, please enjoy.”

Ally’s cheeks turned pink, and she nodded. “Thank you,” she said.

I felt another swell of pride that she was mine.

Even if we were just faking it.

“This is really gorgeous,” Ally said. She shielded her eyes from the sun’s rays with her free hand. Together, we walked through the vineyard, to where a large group of well-dressed people were socializing outside of a large, ornate mansion.

“Would you like something to drink?” I asked Ally.

She nodded. “Yes,” she said. “But Walker?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll go with you,” Ally said. She bit her lip. “I know it’s kind of silly, but I don’t really want to be left alone. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” I assured her. “I won’t leave you alone. I know it has to be intimidating,” I added. “But if it makes you feel better, I don’t really know any of these people, either.”

Ally giggled. We walked over to where a bar was set up and I took two flutes of champagne and handed one to Ally.

“What should we toast to?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

Ally laughed. “To our engagement, duh,” she said, winking at me and nudging her glass against my own.

I chuckled. “I approve,” I said.

There was soft music playing and we walked through the vineyard together, sipping champagne and enjoying the quiet atmosphere. Most of the anxiety that I had been feeling back in the hotel had begun to fade and I was enjoying being out with Ally, sipping champagne and holding her hand. Ally had tucked her clutch under one arm and as we looked at the grapes and the Swiss hillside, things felt ... almost *normal*.

The music had stopped, and I checked my watch, then frowned.

“The ceremony’s about to start,” I said. “We should probably head back.”

Ally drained the rest of her champagne and nodded.

“I’m kind of nervous,” she admitted.

“You have nothing to be nervous about,” I told her.

She bit her lower lip and swallowed.

“I just don’t want to embarrass you, Walker,” Ally said. “I know it sounds dumb, but—”

I put both of my hands on her shoulders and pulled her close, then kissed her deeply. It was a soft kiss, with no tongue, but Ally melted against me and sighed softly, nestling her body against my own. A hot thread of desire wormed its way through me, and I pressed my lips to the glossy surface of her hair.

I could stand here forever like this, I realized as I held her tightly.

If only we could.

Reluctantly, I stepped back and took Ally’s hand. We were silent as we walked through the vineyard, back towards the large mansion house. The wedding was set to take place behind the house, and there were neat rows of white Chiavari chairs currently being filled by the guests. I noticed as I led Ally to our seats that everyone was staring at her – the men with admiration, the women with envy.

Another surge of pride swelled inside of me. She was mine, if only for the day, and I loved that everyone was staring at her.

Ally noticed, too. As soon as we sat down, she leaned over. “Walker, everyone is looking at me,” she whispered. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I told her. I reached for her hand and twined my fingers with hers, squeezing. “You’re beautiful, that’s all.”

Ally blushed deeply. I would have kissed her again, but that was when I heard the music start – Mendelssohn’s Wedding March, the same music that had played at *my* wedding to Marina – and I sat straight and rigid in my seat.

I heard the other guests start to murmur and turn around, eager to catch a glimpse of the bride. Even Ally turned to look, but I kept my gaze focused and straight ahead at the altar, where Marina’s fiancé stood. He didn’t bear much resemblance to me at all – he was on the shorter side, blonde, bearded.

Poor bastard, I thought.

A flower girl pranced down the aisle – she didn’t look familiar, and I assumed she must have been from the groom’s side of the family. Some of the guests made little cooing noises as she walked past and I smiled. The way she skipped and hopped reminded me of Sofie, and suddenly I missed my daughter so much.

“She reminds me of Sofie,” Ally whispered, leaning over and tickling my ear with her breath.

I grinned. “She does,” I said, nodding slowly.

Then came the bridesmaids – they could have been carbon copies of one another, and Marina, for that matter. Leggy, tall, blonde.

Boring.

Finally, Marina walked down the aisle, holding an enormous bouquet of lilies and greenery in her Pilates-sculpted arms. She wore a simple white gown with a train that dragged behind her on the ground. Her smile was fixed and frozen – the same smile I’d grown used to over the years.

The smile that said, “I’m performing, look at me.”

“She’s so pretty,” Ally whispered to me.

I shrugged.

“Not on the inside,” I whispered back.

Ally giggled and covered her mouth with one hand when someone sitting in front of us turned to glare at her.

We were seated so far back that I had a hard time hearing the vows, but they were the standard, usual vows. Nothing special. It was typical Marina – everything had to be done by the book, or else she had no interest.

When they kissed at the end of the ceremony, everyone clapped politely. Marina threw her arms around her new husband, Garrett, and hugged him tightly. Then, they walked down the aisle, hand in hand. As soon as they’d walked past, the guests all stood up and started filing out after them.

“They’re probably going to take photos before the reception,” I said to Ally. “Would you like another drink?”

Ally

“YES, PLEASE,” I said to Walker.

“More champagne?”

I giggled. “Sure,” I replied. “That sounds really good right now.”

Walker and I made our way over to the bar and waited in line. The couple in front of us turned around, and the woman did a double-take when she saw Walker.

“Walker? Is that you,” she asked in disbelief, cocking her head to the side and blinking.

Walker chuckled. “Sure is,” he said. “Marina sent me an invitation, so I thought I’d come. This is my fiancée, Ally,” he continued. “Ally, this is Joanne. She’s one of Marina’s cousins.”

“Pleased,” Joanne said. She turned to me and raised an eyebrow. “Best wishes on your engagement,” she said, offering her hand.

I shook it – she had a nice, firm grip, but not too tight.

“Thank you,” I said shyly. “This is so beautiful, I feel like I’m in a dream.”

Joanne laughed. “A dream that cost about two million dollars,” she said, rolling her eyes.

I decided that I liked her.

Walker and Joanne chatted as the line slowly moved forward to the bar.

In the distance, I could see Walker's ex-wife posing for photographs with her new husband and the bridal party.

I had expected Marina to be beautiful, but seeing her in person was another thing entirely. She was so beautiful that she didn't even look like a real woman from the planet Earth. She was like a gorgeous alien – blonde and tanned and toned, fitter than any woman I'd ever seen in real life, even Mrs. Horne. Her cheekbones were sharp enough to cut glass and her hair was so blonde that it was almost silver. I couldn't hear her, but I could see from where I stood that she was laughing and smiling.

I swallowed hard, trying to push down the overwhelming feeling of envy that I had. After being with someone who looked like Marina, I had no idea why Walker wanted to be with someone who ... well, someone who looked like me. It just didn't make sense. I was fat and pale with frizzy red hair and stretch marks, even though I'd never given birth.

I was painfully average, the kind of girl who just didn't stand out. Even though Missy didn't date much, she got hit on constantly. I was always her shadow, the plain friend, the quiet one standing in the background. An awkward memory came back to me – the night that we'd graduated from college, Missy and I had gone out to a bar. This drunk table of guys next to us had offered to buy us a pizza.

"I like pineapple on pizza," I'd said, laughing.

"Ew," one of the guys had said. "That's so gross, I can't believe you actually eat that."

"I like pineapple on pizza, too," Missy had offered.

"Oh, yeah," the guy had said, turning to her and smirking. "Pineapple's great."

I loved Missy, but that moment had perfectly encapsulated our friendship. It wasn't her fault that she was so much more conventionally attractive than I was.

But I'd be lying if I said that sometimes, it didn't hurt.

Walker and I moved to the front of the line. He got us more champagne, and we wandered over to the area of the vineyard where the reception would be taking place. Tables were set and arranged beautiful with place cards and flowers and silver – it was easily the most ornate thing I had ever seen in my life.

"Ally, it looks like we're over here," Walker said. He put his hand on the small of my back and guided me to a table further away from the bridal table.

“It’s beautiful,” I admitted. “Your ex has good taste.”

“I can all but confirm that she used a wedding planner or several,” Walker said. He pulled out my chair for me and we sat down, sipping champagne together. Just being with him made me feel so good – and I couldn’t lie, I had loved being introduced as his fiancée. That had made me feel warm and safe all over.

The bride and groom took their places at the table and then the speeches began.

“I always tune this part out,” Walker said. He yawned. “How long do you want to stay?”

I shrugged. “I mean, this is your thing,” I said. “It doesn’t matter to me – we can go whenever you want.”

Walker nodded. “Well, I can’t imagine that we’ll be here for too long,” he said, shifting in his chair and reaching for my hand. “You look so beautiful,” he said. “I can’t stop staring at you.”

I flushed hotly as I sipped my champagne. Walker didn’t know the other people sitting at our table and beyond basic introductions, we didn’t chat much. The speeches ended and then the music started playing, and people started getting up to dance after Marina and her new husband had their first dance, to “At Last.”

“Would you like to dance?” Walker. He got to his feet and offered me a hand.

Grinning, I got to my feet. “I’m not much of a dancer,” I admitted. “But, yes. I would.”

“I’ll lead,” Walker said. He pulled me into his arms, and we began a slow, graceful waltz around the room. I closed my eyes, practically floating in his hands as he guided me expertly.

“I could do this forever,” I said softly, nestling my head into Walker’s shoulder and chest.

He held me more tightly. The song slowed down and changed, and we swayed back and forth, slowly and intimately.

Then, suddenly Walker froze. My eyes shot open, and I realized that Marina was standing right next to us. She had a fixed, frozen smile and icy blue eyes.

Up close, she was even more beautiful than she had been from a distance.

“Hello, Walker,” she simpered. “And who is this?”

Walker cleared his throat. “Hello, Marina,” he said. “This is Allyson. My

fiancée,” he added.

Marina blinked. It was the first time I’d seen her look anything even close to human.

“Hello,” she said, turning her head to me and staring at me. Her eyes were so intense that I felt like she could see right through me. Her skin was flawless – it looked airbrushed – and her lashes were long and inky-black. Her lips were naturally pink and her body was incredible, she was easily the most petite and toned woman I had ever seen in real life.

I swallowed. “Hi,” I said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Well, Walker, it was lovely to see you,” she said. “Bye to you and Amber now.”

“It’s Allyson,” Walker growled, and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Right, well, whatever,” Marina simpered. She laughed, then walked away, the train of her gown trailing behind her.

As soon as she was gone, I felt like sinking into the earth and collapsing.

“Are you okay?” Walker asked.

No, I thought. I’m the furthest fucking thing from okay. Your ex-wife is insanely beautiful and now, I feel uglier than I ever have in my entire life.

The incident with Marina had made the pineapple pizza memory feel like child’s play. And to make matters worse, she hadn’t even *asked* about Sofie. I couldn’t imagine how someone could be so cold – Sofie was her flesh and blood, her baby, her daughter. Her child. And there had been no mention of her at the wedding, much less an invitation for her to be a flower girl or the like.

Walker had been right – Marina clearly didn’t give a shit that she had a child. It made me sad – both for Walker, and for Sofie, who deserved so much more than that.

THE REST of the reception passed in a daze. All I could think about was Marina, and why Walker had chosen someone like me. Was this a big joke? Was he playing some kind of a cruel prank on me? I felt sick to my stomach and I wished that I hadn’t had so much champagne, or that I hadn’t gotten up to dance.

I stayed in my seat, quiet as ever, as Walker socialized. By the time the sun had set and the moon was high in the sky, he turned to me.

“Ready to call it a night?”

I nodded.

We picked up the Aston Martin from the valet and drove back into Lucerne. I couldn't enjoy it anymore – the scenery was nothing compared to the pain I felt in my heart, and I just wanted to be alone so I could sob.

When we got back to the hotel, I went into the bathroom and sat on the toilet for a long time, sitting on top of the lid until my thighs went numb. I wanted to cry, but I didn't want Walker to hear me and for the first time since we'd arrived in Switzerland, I wanted to be alone.

“Ally?” Walker asked. He rapped on the door. “Are you okay? You've been in there for longer than it took for you to get ready,” he added.

I got up from the toilet and flushed it for effect, then washed my hands and went out into the suite. Walker had taken off his jacket and tie but was still wearing his tuxedo shirt and pants.

I swallowed hard.

“What's wrong? You've been really quiet today,” Walker said.

I bit my lip.

“I ... I don't think I'm good enough for you,” I confessed. “I'm young. I'm barely educated – I almost didn't even graduate college. And I'm fat,” I added.

Walker narrowed his eyes. He crossed the room in two big steps and pulled me into his arms, holding me tightly.

“You are not fat,” Walker said. “You are beautiful, and I love you.”

The shock of his words barely had time to hit me as he tilted my chin up to meet his face and kissed me hard. When his tongue slipped into my mouth, I moaned softly. Walker's hands on my body, touching me through the silk, drove me crazy and I whimpered and trembled as his hot touch moved down my back, cupping and squeezing my ass until I moaned softly into his mouth.

“Walker,” I moaned. I was suddenly more aroused than I ever had been in my life, and I closed my eyes and leaned in for another passionate kiss, fumbling with the buttons of Walker's shirt and trying to pull it away from his sculpted body.

Walker batted my hands away and went to unbutton his own shirt swiftly and efficiently. When he was standing shirtless in front of me, I went weak in the knees. I knew that I could never get tired of looking at his sculpted, insanely sexy abdomen – just the sight of his chest was enough to make me wet. My fingers were trembling as I went to unzip the hidden side zipper of

my silk dress and Walker pushed them away and unzipped me himself, helping me out of the dress. I gasped as his hands tugged my panties down my legs and reached behind me, unclasping my bra and letting it fall to the floor.

Standing there, naked before him, I felt vulnerable and open. But in his sapphire eyes, I suddenly knew that he thought I was beautiful.

“I want you,” I whispered, dropping to my knees and crawling over to him. Walker groaned when I ran my hand over the bulge in his trousers. I unzipped the fly of his pants and eased them down his hips and legs. He wasn’t wearing underwear and his cock sprang free – there was already a delicious bead of pre-cum on the head, and I licked my lips and opened my mouth to take him inside of me.

I licked my tongue over the head and swirled it over the shaft, moving my head back and forth as I licked and sucked him. It was the first time I had ever given a blowjob and the thought of it was enough to make me blush crimson red, but the groans of pleasure emerging from Walker’s mouth made it worth it. With one hand, I cupped and massaged his balls as I continued to pleasure him. He tasted so good – musky and clean at the same time, and I closed my eyes and moaned as I bobbed my head. Walker slipped his fingers into my hair and tangled them there, guiding my head and thrusting into my mouth as I flicked my tongue over the sensitive area under the head of his cock.

“Ally, oh god,” Walker groaned loudly. He thrust forward again, and I took a few more inches of him into my mouth, swirling my tongue over the head of his cock like a delicious ice cream cone. I loved knowing that I was giving him such intense pleasure – it made me feel sexy and happy and powerful, all at once.

When I pulled away and looked up at Walker, wiping my mouth on the back of my hand, he was staring down at me with molten lust.

“I need to fuck you now,” he growled.

W *alker*

AS INCREDIBLE AS Ally's mouth had felt on me, I wanted to fuck her. Needed to fuck her. I picked her up in my arms and stepped backwards, until we fell onto the bed in a tangle of sweaty limbs. Ally lay down on her back and spread her thighs and I pushed them apart with my hands, pressing her down into the mattress, teasing the wet entrance to her pussy with the head of my cock. She was so wet that the tangle of red hair between her legs with glistening with arousal and her skin was flushed with obvious desire.

"You want me?" I growled.

Ally whimpered and nodded. She reached for my hips, pulling me closer, and spread her legs even wider under the pressure of my hands. I steadied myself with one hand against her hip, then plunged inside of her pussy and pierced her with a long, smooth stroke.

As soon as I was buried inside of her, I could feel that I was about to come. Ally had worked me up so intensely with her tongue and lips and vigor and I groaned, plunging inside of her again and again and again. She whimpered and arched her back, throwing her head back into the pillows and closing her eyes as I fucked her hard.

"Walker, you feel so good," Ally moaned. I put a hand between our bodies and began rubbing her clit as I fucked her. The extra stimulation made Ally scream with pleasure and she bucked her body against mine, rolling her

hips and thrashing against me.

“I’m going to come,” I growled, pumping into Ally harder. Pleasure shot through my nerves and exploded in my body, making me feel as powerful as a god. We moved together in a perfect sensual rhythm and I took hold of Ally’s ankles and yanked them high into the air, resting them on my shoulders and balancing my hands against the soles of her perfect, soft feet. Ally whimpered and ground harder against me, greedy and desperate for pleasure, and when I put my fingers back to her clit, she began convulsing with ecstasy. Sweaty red curls clung to her face and her makeup was running from the effort of being fucked so hard, but she had never been more beautiful to me. I couldn’t stop staring at her as my cock penetrated her, again and again, until we bucked and gripped each other and came together.

As my cock gushed seed inside of Ally’s perfect body, I groaned loudly and closed my eyes, driving harder than ever before, desperate to fill her. Desperate to claim her and ride her and make her mine for eternity.

“Oh my god,” Ally moaned. Her pussy was clenching me, and her juices were soaking me, coating me with the delicious scent of her arousal and pleasure. I couldn’t bring myself to pull out just yet, and so I flopped down on top of her, kissing her tits and sucking her nipples and running my hands over her perfect, sweaty body.

When I began to lose my erection, I pulled out of Ally and curled up next to her, holding her in my arms. I could feel that her heart was pounding ... and to be honest, so was mine.

I had never had sex like the sex that I had with Ally. It was incredible. It was hot. It was passionate. It was intense.

Ally pulled my arm over her waist and pulled the sheet over our sweaty, naked bodies. The windows were open, and the nighttime breeze was floating in the room, making me feel calm and sedate.

Tomorrow would be our last day in Switzerland – the day after, we’d be going back home. Going back to normalcy and work and giving up the pretense of being engaged to Ally.

The thought made me strangely sad. Ally shifted in my arms and soon, I realized that she’d fallen asleep. I frowned, gently unwrapping my arm from her waist and sitting up in bed. I knew that I should be exhausted – the wedding alone had taken so much out of me.

But I was wired. I slipped out of bed and got dressed as quietly as I could. Ally snored gently from bed, not waking the entire time. I scribbled a note to

her, saying that I'd gone out, and silently slipped out of the room.

Downstairs, the lobby was nearly empty. I thought about going to the bar and ordering a drink but instead I pushed my hands into my pockets and headed out into the night air. It was crisp and chill, not at all like Georgian summer nights, and I strolled to the banks of the river.

I couldn't stop thinking about Ally.

I closed my eyes and ran a hand through my hair, thinking about everything that had transpired over the course of the day.

That was when I remembered what I'd said to her, right before we'd had sex. I'd told her that I loved her.

I hadn't even thought about it in the moment – it had just slipped out. I couldn't believe myself, though. I had always been so cautious, so guarded.

And now, I'd just told the truth to the person who was rapidly becoming one of the most important people in my world. Sofie would always be number one – I knew that I'd always have to be there for my daughter.

I didn't want to bring another woman into my life only to break my daughter's heart, but I *did* love Ally. I didn't regret telling her, although I wish that it hadn't happened right before sex.

I had real feelings for this woman.

But I had to put being a father first, no matter how difficult that would be.

Ally

WHEN I WOKE up in the morning, Walker was sitting at the foot of the bed and watching me.

“I was wondering when you’d wake up,” he said, giving me a little smirk. “I ordered breakfast for us. I didn’t know what you’d want, so I got some of everything.”

I yawned and blearily rubbed sleep out of my eyes. I was so tired that every muscle in my body ached – probably from the dancing and the stress of yesterday, I figured.

“I just need to wake up a little bit first,” I said, my voice embarrassingly raspy as I coughed and stretched.

“Of course,” Walker said. “I’ll be right back.” I watched as he went over to the desk and sat down, then opened his work laptop and began furiously typing away at an email.

I cleared my throat and stretched again. I was still naked and I blushed, then stepped out of bed and wrapped the sheet around my body to hide my curves. I couldn’t stop thinking about last night. It had been so perfect, so wonderful, that it didn’t even seem real. Walker’s touch – his hands and his mouth and his hard body against mine. And his cock, fucking me slowly and then penetrating me faster and faster, bringing me to the most powerful orgasm that I’d ever had.

And the words he'd said, right before we'd had sex.

He had told me that he loved me.

I could only wonder if it was true. Missy had told me once never to believe a man who said "I love you" before or during or after sex. I had no idea where she'd heard it – she'd probably read it in *Cosmo*, or something – but it seemed like a decent piece of advice to follow.

But Walker had been so unguarded in that moment, I could only wonder if it was really true.

Did he really love me? And if so, what was going to happen when we got back?

I took a deep breath and walked over to the room service tray. Walker hadn't exaggerated – there was a ton of food, way more than we could eat in one sitting. There was an omelette and toast and rolls with ham and cheese and croissants with butter and jelly and oatmeal and cereal and orange juice and coffee. I poured myself a cup of coffee and went out to the balcony, looking down over the shimmering city of Lucerne.

I didn't want that moment to end. All I wanted to do was stand there forever, smelling the air that was somehow so much fresher and cleaner than it was in America. Everything was so exotic and wonderful here.

And being here with Walker made it even better. I felt like I had died and gone to heaven, or at least had a very, very good dream that was somehow lasting forever.

"Hey," Walker said. He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me close and resting his chin on my shoulder. Being in his arms always made me feel so tiny and petite and perfect, the way a girl should feel when with her boyfriend.

Or fiancé, I thought, glancing down at the shimmering diamond on my left hand. I still hadn't taken the ring off, and I wasn't eager to do so. I didn't want to give up the engagement ruse and return to real life.

I knew that we were pretending, but it felt so good that I knew stopping would be painful.

"Hey, yourself," I said, leaning back against Walker and closing my eyes.

"Not hungry?"

"I'm starving," I admitted. "But I was hungrier for the view than I was for food. Isn't that the cheesiest thing you've ever heard?"

Walker chuckled. "No," he said. "I think you're a lot more clever than you give yourself credit for, Ally," he replied.

I fell silent and pressed my lips together, glad that he couldn't see my face because his words had made me blush.

Do you love me, I wondered, swallowing hard. *Or was it just something that you said in hopes of making me feel better?*

"You should eat while it's hot," Walker said. He gently nudged me back in the direction of the room. Reluctantly, I obeyed. I walked over to the room service tray and split a hard roll in half, laying cheese and meat inside and spreading the inside of the roll with the salted butter that seemed to come with every Swiss meal. Taking that and the coffee, I sat on the edge of the bed and watched Walker. He was pacing back and forth.

"Work drama," he said, waving a hand dismissively in the air. "I might have to do some work on the flight back, but I thought we should do everything we can to enjoy our last day here."

I nodded. "I'm sorry things are so hectic right now," I said.

Walker snorted. "It can't possibly be more hectic than wrangling five-year-old twins all day," he said. "But it's close, trust me."

I nodded again. Even though I didn't know much about what lawyers actually did in their day-to-day lives, I liked that Walker was talking to me about work. It made me feel important, like I was a real part of his life, not just a fake fiancée that he'd taken overseas to make his ex-wife jealous.

"So," Walker asked, raising an eyebrow at me. "It's our last day here. What would you like to do?"

Anything, as long as it's with you, I thought, biting my lower lip and glancing away.

"We never went shopping," Walker said.

I shrugged.

Walker laughed out loud and shook his head in disbelief.

"What?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. "What's so funny about that?"

"It's nothing," Walker said. He was still looking at me with a weird expression. "It's just, you," he continued. "Literally every other woman on earth would be begging me to take them shopping here. We're in Switzerland," he added for emphasis.

"Shopping was never my favorite activity," I replied. *Especially not here*, I thought. I'd seen the women walking the streets of Lucerne – they were all tiny and trim and toned, just like Walker's ex-wife. I doubted I'd even be able to find anything that fit me, and I imagined the experience would be a rather demoralizing one.

“Let’s just take a walk, and maybe get dinner,” I said. “Sound good?”

Walker nodded. “I have to admit, I’m a touch relieved,” he said. He was still chuckling under his breath, a deep, sonorous sound that filled my whole body with warmth. Just being in the same room with him was enough to make me positively vibrate with desire and love.

Love.

I still couldn’t believe that he’d told me he loved me. It felt so surreal – what on earth did a man like Walker Thompson see in me? Was he blind?

Or did he think that I was safe, because of my weight and my looks (or lack thereof)? Had Marina burned him so badly that he never wanted to be with another conventionally attractive woman again?

“Well, so am I,” I said, resisting the urge to stick out my tongue at him. “I happen to hate shopping myself.”

Walker laughed. “You’re something else,” he said.

AN HOUR LATER, I’d showered and dressed in another one of the outfits that Walker had bought me – a custom pair of jeans with a loose silk blouse that was somehow flattering. I put on sandals with a low heel and an ankle strap and Walker and I left the hotel. I was already missing Lucerne and we hadn’t even left yet – there was a weird ache in my chest, a sadness almost. A melancholy feeling that I couldn’t seem to shake, no matter how hard I was trying.

It was bizarre. I could only remember feeling like this once or twice in my life. The first time was when I’d left New Jersey to go to college in Georgia, and I’d wondered if I’d ever come home and feel the same way again. It hadn’t been homesickness, but rather a kind of nostalgia.

One of my professors in college had said, “nostalgia is the pain of an old wound” and it was something that I’d never been able to forget.

I wondered if I’d think of Walker, and of our time together, every time someone mentioned Switzerland.

“Hey,” Walker said, nudging me with his elbow as we rode the elevator down to the first floor. “You okay?”

I nodded. “I’m fine,” I said. “Just feeling a little strange.”

I expected him to pry, but he didn’t. Instead, Walker just nodded and ran a hand through his silky black hair, pushing it away from his forehead and giving me an intense look with his dark blue eyes.

“I get that,” he said. “The last day of a trip is always weird for me.”

We spent the afternoon walking around the city, pointing out things to each other and laughing. Even though we’d only been here for a few days, it was starting to feel like home. There was a crossanterie where we’d gotten breakfast and dessert nearly every day, and I felt a pang of longing as we walked past. I wondered if I’d ever be back.

And I wondered if I came back, if it would be with Walker.

The sun began sinking low over the river and I pressed my lips together, swallowing hard. I couldn’t stop thinking about how “I love you” had sounded in Walker’s voice, and how desperately I wanted to hear him say it again, when we weren’t about to have sex.

“How about dinner?” Walker asked. He steered me in the direction of an Argentine steakhouse, where we were seated outside at a little metal table and wicker chairs. Walker ordered for both of us – lamb, with steak frites on the side – and I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes, breathing in the fragrant smell of roasting meat and the flowing river and the luxury perfume worn by the wealthy women who walked around Lucerne as if they owned it.

“Thank you for coming with me,” Walker said, when the waiter had disappeared with our order. “I appreciate it, Ally. More than I can say.”

I nodded. It was hard not to blush when he said my name like that, in that low voice of his that made me think he really did have feelings for me.

“Of course,” I said. *I love you*, I thought. But I didn’t say it. Instead, I replied: “Besides, it’s not like I could miss a free trip to Switzerland.” I kept my tone light and casual, but Walker didn’t smile. He reached across the table for my hand and laced his fingers with mine, clasping my hand tightly.

“Ally,” Walker said. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

My heart began to pound in my chest and sweat broke out on my palms as a shiver ran down my spine.

“Walker, I—”

“Shit,” Walker muttered, interrupting me and pulling his hand away. He frowned as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

Immediately, I knew there was something wrong.

“Walker?” I asked. “What is it? What happened?”

“It’s Sofie,” Walker said. All of the blood had drained from his face. “She’s sick, and she’s in the hospital.”

Walker

IMMEDIATELY, I went into Panicked Dad mode. The text from Julie had been simple, but enough to strike fear into the heart of the strongest man on the planet, much less me.

“Oh my god,” Ally gasped. She covered her mouth with both hands and her eyes began to water with tears.

“We have to go,” I said curtly, getting to my feet and dropping a few bills on the table to cover the meal that hadn’t yet been served. Ally and I jogged silently back to the hotel and thoughts of anguish and fear filled my head. All I could think of was the worst – what had happened? Sofie had a peanut allergy, had she accidentally eaten something? Or what if it was cancer? Fear began to shake me to my core as I thought of a cousin who had died from leukemia at a very young age.

Ally was panting as she ran behind me, struggling to keep my pace.

“Walker,” Ally gasped. “What happened?”

I didn’t answer her until we were back at the hotel, waiting for the elevator. The fucking thing was taking forever and I growled under my breath as I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, fighting the urge to open the fire alarm door and run up the stairs, all the way to our honeymoon suite.

“I don’t know,” I said. “All I know is that we have to go home. Right now.”

Ally nodded silently. She was chewing the inside of her lip again and she stood next to me, trembling. As she reached for my hand, I barely felt the soft touch of her fingers against mine.

We ascended up to the top floor in silence as I silently cursed the speed of the elevator the entire time. Everything suddenly felt like it was happening in slow motion and I was the only person moving at a normal speed.

As soon as we were in the room, I grabbed my suitcase and started hurling everything in without taking the time to roll my clothes or bag up my shaving stuff. Ally did likewise. She didn't even bother changing into something more comfortable for the flight. It probably took us ten minutes to pack, but it felt like an eternity. Every second that passed without knowing more about what was going on with my daughter was torture and agony and I felt like screaming from frustration.

"Ally," I said, turning to her. "You can stay here for the night, if you want. I know we were supposed to have one more night together, and the flight home isn't going to be pleasant."

Ally immediately shook her head. "Of course not," she said, almost defiantly. "I'm going with you, Walker. I'd never dream of staying without you."

Her words barely registered as I nodded.

"Okay," I said. I called down to the front desk and arranged for a taxi to take us to the airport, then Ally and I left the room and hurried downstairs as quickly as we could.

"Drive fast," I told the taxi driver. He nodded and I threw our bags in the trunk, then practically pulled Ally into the back of the cab with me. The air between us was silent and tense but right now, I couldn't think about anything other than Sofie. In the back of my mind, I realized that at some point, I'd have to call Marina and let her know, but right now I wasn't even thinking about it. All I could do was worry about my daughter, and hope that she was okay.

The airport was a nightmare. Ally sat with our luggage while I argued with employee after employee. There was no direct flight back to Savannah that night, but I found us a flight to Chicago with a connection to Atlanta. It would be over ten hours before I'd be home, and the thought was nearly enough to defeat me.

"It'll be okay," Ally said. She patted my arm as we boarded the plane. There wasn't enough room in first class, so we were crammed into coach.

The experience was like being stuffed in with a herd of cattle, but I was barely cognizant enough to internalize it.

Ally and I didn't speak for much of the flight – she seemed to sense my mood, and to realize that I needed time and space to process what was happening. We landed in Chicago just as the sun was coming up and then ran down two terminals to catch our flight to Georgia. As soon as we were in the air, I connected to the wi-fi network and made arrangements to rent a car as soon as we got to the airport. I'd initially arranged for another limo to take us home, but I knew my driving would be much faster. Thoughts of Sofie kept racing through my head – how frightened she must be, how she must be feeling alone and scared.

"I'm going to the hospital as soon as we land," I told Ally as the plane approached Atlanta. "If you want, I can drop you off at home."

Ally looked exhausted, but she shook her head. "I want to be there for you," she said. "I promise, I won't leave your side."

IT WASN'T until much later that her words sunk in, and I realized just how much Ally was willing to do for me.

As soon as we touched down in Atlanta, I rented a car and drove faster than I'd ever driven in my life back to Savannah. Ally was white in the face the entire time – she was clearly freaked out, but she didn't say anything, and I cursed under my breath every time I got stuck behind someone going slower than the speed limit in the passing lane. By the time we got back to Savannah, it was almost midnight, and Ally was practically falling asleep in the passenger seat. Still, she refused my offer to drop her off at home.

We made it to the hospital and Ally sat with our bags in the waiting area of the emergency room as I rushed back to see my daughter. Sofie was sitting in a bed, holding her stomach and crying. When she saw me, the sobs got even louder. She threw her arms around me and I held her tightly.

"Are you the father?"

I turned to see a surgeon clad in scrubs.

"Yes," I said.

"May I speak with you privately?"

I glanced over my shoulder. Sofie was still crying, but she was clutching the blanket tightly around her and she sniffled.

"Only for a moment," I said. "I just got here."

The doctor pulled me into the hallway. “She has appendicitis,” he said. “And we need to operate immediately, but we needed your consent.”

I nodded.

“Of course,” I said. “Anything.”

“It should take an hour or so, and then she’ll be in recovery for several hours as she wakes up,” the doctor said. “We can call you at home.”

“I’m not leaving,” I said.

The doctor nodded. “We’ll direct you to a waiting room,” he said. “Take a few moments with her and we’ll start prepping for surgery.”

He left and I went back into the curtained-off stall where Sofie was. I pulled a chair close to the bed and sat down, taking her hand in mine.

“Honey, there’s something wrong with your tummy,” I said. “But they’re going to make it all better, and I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

“Daddy,” Sofie said tearfully. “It hurts so much.”

Knowing that my daughter was in such acute pain hurt – it was like a wound to the chest – and I pressed my lips together, trying to stay strong for her.

“I know, baby,” I said. “But they’re going to make you feel better. When you wake up, you won’t be hurting anymore.”

Sofie nodded. She was so strong, especially for a five-year-old, and sometimes I was so proud of her that I couldn’t believe she was mine.

I sat with her until they came to sedate her and wheel her into surgery. Watching them wheel the gurney down into the hall filled me with fright and dread, but I kept telling myself that it was okay. Appendectomies were a regular procedure, and Sofie was going to be just fine.

It was only after the doctors and nurses had wheeled Sofie away that I remembered Ally, sitting in the waiting area with our bags. I took a deep breath and strode away from the emergency ward and towards the waiting room.

Ally was sitting alertly in a chair, guarding our luggage, and flipping through a magazine. When she saw me, she nearly leapt to her feet.

“What is it?”

“Appendicitis.”

We spoke at the same time and Ally blinked and nodded. “Ohh,” she said. “Oh, Walker. I’m so sorry. She must be so frightened,” Ally added. Then, she yawned and balled her hands into fists, rubbing her eyes.

I nodded. “I am,” I admitted. “But they got her in time, and she’s being

wheeled into surgery right now.”

Ally nodded.

“I’m going to stay here,” I said. I took in her appearance – her shirt was creased and there were visible sweat stains under her arms. Her face was greasy and there were dark circles under her eyes. Her messy red curls had been twisted into a loose bun, but pieces were slipping out and framing her face.

“And I’m going to send you home,” I added firmly.

“Walker, I can stay,” Ally said. She yawned again, a huge yawn that shook her whole frame. “I really don’t mind.”

“I mind,” I said. “You need your sleep. And a shower, and some proper food – not just airline shit.”

Ally blushed.

“I’m sorry I’m so tired,” she said. “I think it’s jet-lag.”

“And stress,” I said. “I’ve put you through a lot lately, and I know that.”

I was glad when Ally didn’t resist.

“Okay,” she said, stifling another yawn. “Will you be okay? Do you want me to bring you something to eat?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine,” I told her. “I have no appetite right now – I’m not going to be able to eat anything until I find out that she’s okay.”

Ally nodded. “I understand that,” she said. “Keep me posted, okay?”

I nodded. It felt awkward, parting like this. My mind was racing with worry, but I didn’t want to let her go without so much as a hug. I pulled Ally close and held her tightly, then kissed the top of her head.

“Go home and get some sleep,” I told her. “I’ll be in touch.”

As soon as she was gone, I sank down in a chair and put my face in my hands. Then, I pulled out my phone and called Julie. She answered on the first ring and said she’d be right there, that she’d only gone home to sleep for a few hours.

“WALKER, I AM SO SORRY,” Julie said when she got to the hospital. “I feel responsible.”

I shook my head. “You had nothing to do with this,” I said. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get here – we couldn’t get a direct flight home from Switzerland.”

Julie nodded. For a moment, I thought she was going to ask about the

wedding. Instead, she sat down next to me and handed me a cup of coffee that she'd brought. It was cold and bitter, but I drank it greedily.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here now,” Julie said. She yawned and sipped her coffee. “Aside from this, we had a great time together.” She raised an eyebrow. “Sofie missed you a lot. I’m sure that she’s happy you’re home.”

I nodded. The last fifteen hours had been a painful odyssey, but now that I was home, I knew things would be all right.

I just wished I had been able to articulate how I felt to Ally.

Ally

I TRIED NOT to panic when a couple of days went by without my hearing anything from Walker.

I tried not to take it personally, or to feel hurt.

But I couldn't lie to myself – it *did* hurt.

“He’s probably just worried about his kid,” Missy said. She frowned and leaned down to pick at her toenail polish, where it had chipped on her big toe. “Do you think I should do black again, or maybe gold? What about red?”

“But he could at least let me know how she’s doing,” I said.

Missy looked slightly annoyed.

“I’ve been here for an hour, and all you can do is talk about Walker,” she said. “Are you sure that you’re okay?”

I sighed, puffing out my cheeks and blowing a forceful stream of air to the ceiling.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Things were so different in Switzerland. It was like ... it was like being in a movie, or something. It didn’t feel like real life.”

“Well, it wasn’t real life,” Missy countered. “It was a vacation, Ally.”

I sighed. “It felt real.”

“You just said it didn’t,” Missy said. She frowned. “Al, I’m worried about you. You’ve been in this funk ever since you got home.” She scooted

closer to me – we were sitting on the floor of my bedroom at the Hornes house – and patted my shoulder. “Why haven’t you reached out to him?”

“I have,” I said. “I’ve texted a couple of times, but his phone has been off. They sent as text messages,” I added. “And his car hasn’t been in the driveway.”

“His kid just had major surgery,” Missy said. “He’s probably been spending all of his time at the hospital with her.”

“I know, but it hurts,” I said. “It takes thirty seconds to send a text, you know?”

“I know,” Missy said. “But it’ll be okay.”

“He told me that he loved me,” I admitted, flushing hotly and staring down at the floor, suddenly very interested in the pattern of the carpet.

“What?” Missy blinked. “Holy shit, Ally, you didn’t tell me that!”

“I ... I didn’t say it back,” I said. “It was kind of in the heat of the moment. And now I feel like I ruined things forever by not reciprocating. I was about to tell him when we were out having dinner, but then he got the text from Sofie’s babysitter, and ... it just didn’t seem like the right time to do that.”

“Holy shit, Ally,” Missy repeated, shaking her head. “He’s probably just giving you space.”

I nodded miserably. “I miss him so much it hurts,” I said. I reached for my glass of wine and took a long swallow. “Like, I’ll be doing my work and everything is fine and then suddenly he just pops into my head and I have to say I have to use the bathroom so I don’t start crying in front of the twins. And Mrs Horne caught me crying in the kitchen when I was making dinner. I had to lie and say that I’d been cutting onions.”

Missy pulled me into a hug. Even though it wasn’t the hug I wanted – the only arms around me that I wanted were Walker’s – it still felt good to be in the arms of my best friend.

“It’ll be okay,” Missy said confidently – the kind of confidence that I’d always wished I could emulate, but could never manage.

“I hope so,” I said, still frowning. “I feel so sad. I miss him so much.”

“Give him two more days,” Missy said. “And then go over with a toy for Sofie, and ask how she’s doing. He’ll be touched that you care.”

AND THAT WAS JUST what I did. Waiting the two more days was torture – I’d

actually had to take Walker's number out of my phone so I wouldn't do something stupid like text him at two in the morning when I was lying awake and missing him – but I managed it. And then, that Saturday, I drove to a boutique toy store in Savannah and spent way too much money on a doll for Sofie that looked just like her. And then, armed with what I hoped would be a good present, I took a deep breath and drove to Walker's house.

His car was in the driveway. *That's a good sign, I thought. Or is it? Is it a sign that he's back home and everything is normal now and he's still not interested in talking to me?*

The thought made my stomach churn as I carried the doll to the front door of his house and knocked. Seconds later, the door swung open. Walker stood there, in a grey cashmere sweater that made his skin look as pale as alabaster and his hair as dark as ebony.

"Ally," he said, blinking in surprise. "Hello."

"I brought this for Sofie," I said, holding up the doll. "I wanted to see how she was feeling."

Walker stepped back and let the door open so that I could come inside.

"She's much better. We just got home from the hospital this morning," Walker said. He gave me a wry grin, as if no time at all had passed between us.

I both loved and hated that grin. Everything inside of me was aching to throw myself into his arms, to ask him why he hadn't gotten in touch with me before now.

Instead, I took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm glad she's feeling so much better," I said.

"She's in the living room," Walker said. "Why not come see for yourself?"

Somehow, things between us had changed. They no longer felt formal, which should have been a good step, but it wasn't and I found myself unable to explain why. He was treating me so casually, as if he wanted to hold me at arm's length.

"Okay," I said anxiously.

Walker hadn't mentioned the doll that I'd brought, or if Sofie would like it and suddenly, I hoped that I hadn't managed to massively overstep.

He didn't offer me anything to eat or drink and I wondered if that was a good sign ... or if it was a bad one. *His daughter just got home from the hospital, of course he's not in the mood to entertain,* I thought.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that my sudden arrival had disrupted things. Walker led me down the long hall, past the kitchen, past Sofie's room, and into the large living room. The high ceiling and fireplace was just like the Horne house, but different – their house looked like Mrs. Horne had just blindly hired an interior decorator with no sense of individual taste.

Walker's house was different. The furnishings were minimal, yes, but it looked like people actually *lived* there. Toys of Sofie's were scattered on the floor and on the couch, and there were framed photos of her adorning the mantle.

If Mrs. Horne had her way, no one would even know that she had children except for when she needed to trot them out for a photo shoot.

Sofie was sitting on the couch, bundled up in a blanket. She was carefully holding a cup of apple juice in her hands and when she saw me, she smiled.

"Hi, sweetie," I said as I walked over to her, still holding the doll that had cost me the better part of a paycheck. "How are you feeling?"

Sofie nodded at my words. "Hi, Miss Ally," she said.

I sat down next to her and carefully took the cup of juice from her, setting it down on the glass-topped coffee table.

"I brought you something," I said, handing her the doll.

Sofie's eyes widened and she blinked, then grinned. I could tell that she was still in a lot of pain – she was moving far more slowly than usual, and her eyes had the glazed look of someone on painkillers.

"Wow," Sofie breathed. "Daddy, she looks just like me!"

Walker came closer and chuckled. He nodded, then gave me a strange look for a moment before turning his attention back to Sofie.

"She does," he agreed. "I wonder where Miss Ally found her."

I blushed – hearing him say *Miss Ally* just hit different than it did when his daughter said it.

"I never give away my secrets," I said in a mock-serious tone, crossing my heart and then pretending to lock my lips and toss an imaginary key over my shoulder.

Sofie squealed. "I love her," she cried. "Thank you thank you thank you!"

Walker chuckled again. "Thank you," he said, directed at me this time.

"How was the hospital?" I asked Sofie.

She pouted. "I didn't like it," she said, shaking her head from one side to the other as she cradled her new doll in her lap. "But Daddy was there every day. He spent the night in my room every night."

A lump formed in my throat as I pictured Walker curled up in an uncomfortable, sterile hospital chair, next to Sofie's bed. I couldn't explain it – I'd never thought of myself as the type who would be attracted to single dads. But Walker was so much more than a single dad – he was a loving, kind man who wanted nothing but the best for his daughter.

And for that, I loved him.

I love him, I thought, fighting the urge to say the words aloud.

I loved him so much, and the truth was, now I didn't think I'd ever be able to tell him.

“Can Miss Ally stay and read me a story?” Sofie asked Walker in a hopeful voice.

Walker turned to me and cocked his head to the side. “I don't know, princess,” he said. “You just got home today – you've had an exhausting few days, don't you think?”

Sofie opened her mouth to protest but a big yawn came out. Her whole frame shuddered and shook with the force of it, and she sleepily nodded at Walker.

“Yeah,” she said after a long moment. “I just missed Miss Ally,” she added, curling her knees close to her body under the blanket and hugging the doll.

I kept waiting for Walker to add something cute, like about how he'd missed me, too, but he didn't. The atmosphere in the room began to feel increasingly awkward and I slowly got to my feet, knowing that I should be seeing myself out.

“Well, Sofie, I'm so glad that you're home and that you're starting to feel a little bit better,” I said, smiling down at her.

Sofie smiled and nodded. “Thank you for my dolly,” she said, clutching the doll to her chest.

“I'll see you out,” Walker said.

I held my breath as I followed him down the hall to the front door. Outside, the sun was shining so brightly that I had to blink and cover my eyes.

“I'm sorry I stopped by without much warning,” I said. “I should've called, I just—”

Walker held up a hand and shook his head. “Ally, no,” he said. “I know you've texted me a few times. I've ... just been mostly so consumed with worrying over Sofie that real life had to be put on pause for a while, if that

makes sense.”

“I understand,” I said.

And I *wanted* to understand. I knew that Sofie would always be the number-one priority in Walker’s life, and I honestly loved that – I wouldn’t have wanted to be involved with him if that wasn’t the case.

But I still wished that he could make a little room for me, too. After the magical time that we’d spent together ... I’d thought we really had something.

“I’m glad,” Walker said.

The air between us grew even more awkward. A hot, damp breeze ruffled the ends of my curls and for a moment, I thought Walker would smooth them behind my ear, as he’d done so over in Lucerne.

“I should get back to Sofie now,” Walker said. “Thanks for stopping by, Ally.”

And just like that, I was on my own again.

With no more answers than before, and even more questions.

Walker

I HATED SEEING Ally walk away like that, with her shoulders slumped over, like she had been defeated.

How could I possibly begin to tell her the truth? That I wanted her more than ever, that she was more appealing and desirable to me than she had been at Marina's wedding?

But I had to make sure that before I embarked on anything serious with Ally, I needed to make sure that Sofie was okay with the possibility of Ally entering our lives ... possibly forever.

And I couldn't do that, not while Sofie was still recovering from major surgery.

I thought of Ally constantly, and did my best to shove those thoughts to the back of my head in order to focus on work and my little daughter and her recovery.

If anything, not talking to Ally on a regular basis just made me miss her more. I had even started dreaming of her. Not even sex dreams although, of course, I had those, too. I dreamt about our time in Switzerland, and how the last night would've gone if I hadn't had to rush to the airport to come back home. I wondered if we'd have enjoyed that dinner together and then gone on a long walk through the streets, only to end up in bed together back in our hotel room.

God, how desperately I wanted her to be a real part of my life, not just a fantasy. Not just a pretend fiancée.

But someone real – someone with importance and significance and weight in my life.

The next day I took Sofie back to the hospital for her post-surgery checkup. She was feeling a little feverish in the morning which had me worried but once we got to the hospital, Sofie seemed like she was feeling much better.

“How are you doing, sweetie?” Sofie was sitting on the exam table but she was still shorter than the doctor, and he squatted down to look at her.

Sofie blushed shyly. “Fine,” she said, looking away and biting her lip.

“Do you mind if I take a look at your tummy?”

Sofie shook her head and the doctor lifted her shirt, then looked at the incision. It was under a bandage that he carefully removed and then glanced at the stitches. I’d be meticulous about dressing her wound and changing the bandage every day, but even so. Sofie was a five-year-old, who even while recuperating could get into messes.

“How does it look?” I asked, rocking back and forth on the balls of my feet. I tried not to act the part of the nervous father, but I couldn’t help myself.

“It looks fine,” the doctor said. He had Sofie lie down so he could re-bandage her wound, then he pulled her shirt down and helped her off the exam table.

“You’re doing well, sweetheart,” the doctor said to Sofie. “Keep it up, okay? And I’ll see you again in a couple of weeks.”

When Sofie was playing with her new doll, the one that Ally had given her, he turned to me.

“She’s doing very well,” he said. “The surgery was very straightforward, and she’ll be absolutely fine in a couple of weeks. Just try to keep her quiet and calm, okay?”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate this more than I can say.”

ON THE WAY HOME, Sofie and I stopped at Dairy Queen. I bought us each cherry-dipped vanilla cones and we sat in my car, eating together.

“So, Sofie,” I said, turning to her and hoping to project an air of casual confidence. “What do you think of Miss Ally?”

Sofie blinked at me, then took a big bite of her ice cream. Vanilla ice cream ran down her chin and I reached over to wipe it with a napkin.

“Miss Ally?” Sofie asked. She blinked at me again. “Why?”

“Well,” I said. “For a few reasons. I know that she’s watched you a few times, and that you’ve had fun with her every time. And she was so sweet to bring you a present after you had your appendix out, don’t you think?”

Sofie looked at me and nodded. “I love my doll,” she said, reaching for the doll that was still perched on her lap.

“I like Miss Ally a lot, too,” I said. I knew that at only five years old, there was no way that Sofie could understand just how serious I was as I spoke to her. But I wanted to understand that Ally was important to me ... and that I wouldn’t mind if she became a part of our family.

“You do?” Sofie asked.

“Why do you sound surprised?” I asked. “She’s very sweet and kind and funny. Don’t you think so?”

Sofie nodded. “It’s weird,” she replied.

I frowned slightly. “What makes you say that?”

“She’s *my* friend,” Sofie said, almost possessively. “She spends time with *me*, Daddy, not you.”

I laughed out loud and Sofie gave me a perplexed look.

“What’s so funny, Daddy?” Sofie asked. She looked upset and I felt a touch of guilt. Reaching over, I smoothed a stray lick of black hair behind her ear.

“It’s not funny,” I said. “I’m sorry. It’s just, even though she’s your friend, Miss Ally is a grown-up, too. And sometimes, grown-ups like spending time with each other.”

Sofie nodded slowly, but I could tell that she didn’t understand what I was saying.

“And I think I might like to spend some real time with her,” I said. “But I wanted to make sure that you’d be okay with that, princess.”

Sofie thought about it for a moment and I held my breath.

“Yes, Daddy,” she said finally. “I’d like that.”

“I’m glad,” I told her.

“But I want her to still be my friend, too,” Sofie added, narrowing her little blue eyes at me.

I nodded. “Of course,” I told her. “I wouldn’t dream of stopping that.”

SOFIE FINISHED her ice cream and fell asleep on the way home. I couldn't stop thinking about Ally. As usual, that feeling of being a kid again came rushing towards me – just the idea of asking her out on a real date was thrilling and exciting and made me almost nervous.

And having my daughter's approval – even if she didn't know the full extent of the situation – felt good.

But all the same, I wondered (and worried) about the possible outcome of our relationship. She was so much younger than I was – how could she possibly want something serious with a man old enough to be her father? And even though I knew Ally cared for Sofie, I couldn't imagine she'd want to settle down with a man who had a kid from a previous marriage. She was in her early 20s – she didn't want to think about being a stepmother.

All the same, I knew I couldn't resist. I'd ask her out, and just enjoy this while it lasted.

I already knew that I'd never be able to forget her.

And I wanted to make some more memories while I still had the chance.

Ally

A FEW DAYS after the disastrous visit to Walker's, I was stunned when I saw him approaching me outside. Peter and Parker were running around, being holy terrors, and I was hoping to get them tuckered out before dinnertime. Mr. and Mrs. Horne had some kind of charity event, and I was on the hook for watching Peter and Parker until after midnight. I was hoping I could get them to go to bed at a normal time, but I was losing hope. They had eaten a ton of candy that morning and unfortunately, the sugar high hadn't worn off.

"Peter! Parker!" I said loudly. "You two need to calm down!"

"It's the neighbor man," Parker sang loudly, before running around my knees in a circle.

I nearly gasped. Whirling around, I flushed brightly when, sure enough, I saw Walker striding towards me. He smiled at me and I bit the inside of my mouth. Inside, a mixed blend of emotion was swirling through me. I was aroused and desperate and sad and eager, all at once. I wanted to throw myself in his arms and kiss him and feel his arms wrap around me and hold me.

And I never wanted him to let me go. Not ever. Not in a million years

"Hi," I said. "Um, what's up?"

Inwardly, I cringed. *Um, what's up?* I thought. *Stop being so lame!*

Walker raised an eyebrow. "Busy day, yeah?"

I nodded. “They’re pretty hyper,” I said. “And I’ve got them for the night. Mr. and Mrs. Horne have this thing, so I’ll be up pretty late. I’m just hoping they’ll sleep,” I added. Turning my attention to the boys, I suppressed a groan – they were chasing each other around the yard with super-soakers, screaming and making a muddy mess. Peter and Parker were adorable, but they were some of the rowdiest kids I’d ever come across.

“I can see that, yes,” Walker said. He raised an eyebrow at me. “But, that’s not the reason I came over here. I wanted to ask you – when is your next night off?”

“Tomorrow,” I said. My mouth went dry, and my heart began to race in my chest. “Why?” I knew I shouldn’t get my hopes up, but I couldn’t help it. *He’s probably just going to ask if I can watch Sofie, or something like that, I thought. He’s made it clear that he’s not interested in me anymore.*

“Well. That’s a little less notice than I was hoping for, but I was wondering if you’d do me the honor of going to dinner with me,” Walker said. He crossed his arms over his broad chest, and I felt like my heart was going to leap out of my body and run away.

A sweat, completely unrelated to the intense summer heat, broke out over my body and I felt a scarlet flush creeping up my neck and over my cheeks and nose.

“Okay,” I said. “I mean, yes. I’d really like that, Walker. Thank you.”

Walker nodded. “Good,” he said. “I’m glad.” He seemed to relax a bit and suddenly, I wondered if I’d made him just as nervous as he’d made me.

Did a man like Walker really care whether or not I accepted his invitation?

I wanted to believe that he did.

“What time are you free?” Walker asked.

“Is nine too late?” I asked. “I can probably be ready by eight-thirty, but —”

“Nine is fine,” Walker said. “I’ll just have Sofie’s babysitter stay a little later. Her usual sitter is busy so, I’ll have to ask someone else.”

“I can ask my friend Missy,” I offered. “She’s an au pair.”

Walker smiled at me. “That would be great,” he said. “If she wouldn’t mind,” he added.

She won’t mind if she knows how happy it’ll make me, I thought.

“Not at all,” I said. “I’ll give her a call right now.”

I BARELY SLEPT THAT NIGHT. It didn't take much convincing on my part to get Missy to agree to watch Sofie, which should have been a relief. But I was nervous – what if we went out together and the chemistry wasn't the same? Just standing next to Walker had made me feel like my heart was about to explode with delirious happiness and anticipation. But it had been weeks since we'd had a real conversation about anything other than Sofie.

I kept replaying scenarios over and over in my head. What if he only wanted to get me out to tell me that he wanted to keep things casual between us?

I knew that it was probably just my anxiety speaking, but I couldn't seem to relax, no matter how hard I tried.

By the time I fell asleep, the sun wasn't quite risen but I could hear the birds chirping in the trees, getting ready for the break of day.

I woke up a few hours later, feeling drained and exhausted and hungover, even though I hadn't had anything to drink. I didn't bother with a shower, figuring that I'd just take one later, before my date with Walker. After getting dressed in a pair of loose shorts and a college T-shirt, I went downstairs where Peter and Parker were having breakfast – cereal – and poured myself a cup of coffee.

“Miss Ally!” Parker yelled, so loudly that I almost winced. “Good morning!”

“Good morning, sweetheart,” I said. I added three teaspoons of sugar and more than a heavy pour of cream to my coffee, then joined my charges at the table.

“What would you like to do today?” I asked the boys.

“I dunno,” they said in unison.

“How about going for a walk?” I asked. “Or, we could go to the zoo in Savannah? Would you like that?”

Peter shrugged, but Parker looked excited at the idea.

“It might be fun,” I said in a teasing voice. “We could go look at the lions?”

“I wanna see the snakes,” Parker said.

Peter perked up at the mention of reptiles. “I wanna go during feeding time,” he said loudly. “I wanna see a snake *eat* something!”

Both of the boys burst out into giggles and after a moment, I joined in.

“That sounds like it could be gross,” I said, pretending to consider the idea in my head. “I don't know if I wanna see that!”

The boys laughed harder, just as Mrs. Horne came into the kitchen with a startled look on her face.

“What’s so funny?” She asked me.

“We’re thinking about going to the zoo today,” I explained.

“We wanna see the snakes eat something,” Parker said. His eyes were flashing with mischievous excitement.

Mrs. Horne didn’t look thrilled. “Well, better you than me, I suppose,” she said to me before pouring her own cup of coffee and sitting down at the table. “Ally, do you really think that’s appropriate? They could have nightmares,” she added, in a voice too low for the twins to hear. It didn’t matter – Peter and Parker were now engrossed in a discussion about what kind of snakes they wanted to see, and what they wanted to watch the snakes eat.

“It’ll be fine,” I assured her. “Don’t worry – I won’t let them see anything that could frighten them.”

Mrs. Horne didn’t look convinced, but she nodded. “Well, it’ll be nice to have some peace and quiet in the house for a change,” she said.

Inwardly, I winced. I hated the way she talked about her kids – like they were annoying nuisances whom she wished didn’t exist. My heart hurt for Peter and Parker – even though they could be rambunctious and loud, they still deserved to have parents who loved them.

Like Walker loves Sofie, I immediately thought, before I could stop myself. To my horror, I blushed and Mrs. Horne looked up.

“What is it, Ally?”

“It’s nothing,” I said dismissively, shaking my head as if to underscore just how *nothing* it really was.

“Oh?”

“Really,” I said, forcing a smile. “Oh, and Mrs. Horne?”

“Yes?”

“I’ll be going out tonight, around nine,” I said. When she didn’t reply right away, I added: “It’s my night off.”

“Oh. Well, yes. Of course,” Mrs. Horne said. She sounded distracted and I wondered if she’d heard anything that I’d said. “That’s fine, Ally.”

Something about the “that’s fine” really bothered me in a way that I couldn’t quite explain. *It’s my night off*, I thought. *I shouldn’t have to feel like I’m asking your permission if I want to go out and do something.*

But I couldn’t say that – of course, I couldn’t.

“Thank you,” I said. To the boys, I added: “Guys, hurry up and finish your breakfast so we can get ready for the zoo.”

WE HAD A LONG, tiring day outside in the Savannah heat, looking at the animals. As Peter and Parker and I moved from the reptile house to the bird house to the big cat enclosure, I was happy and relieved that the boys were keeping themselves occupied and entertained – all I could think about was Walker, and how our date would go. Just picturing the two of us sitting at a table together was enough to make me aroused. I wondered if he’d hold my hand over the table ... or if he’d put his hand on my thigh under the table and squeeze, making me wet before we even got back to his house.

By the time I got the boys back home to Tybee Island, I was so horny that I thought about touching myself in the shower.

But I didn’t. I wanted hands on me, but not just any hands. I wanted Walker’s hands on me – I wanted him to touch me and run his hand between my legs, to tease my pussy lips until I spread my thighs wide and begged him to take me.

I took a long time in the shower, carefully shaving my legs and my bikini line. I washed my hair with Mrs. Horne’s fancy, thirty-dollar shampoo, and took my time getting ready. I wore some of the clothes that Walker had bought me for Switzerland – a long skirt that made my legs look slimmer and an off-the-shoulder silk top.

Missy showed up at quarter to nine and when she saw me, she nearly gasped.

“Ally, you look stunning,” she said. “I hope you guys have a wonderful time tonight.”

I blushed. “I’m so nervous,” I admitted. “Thank you so much for watching Sofie. She’s a really sweet kid.”

“It’s no problem,” Missy assured me as we crossed the street together and made our way up Walker’s long driveway. “Besides, he told me that he’d give me a hundred bucks! That’s like, more than I make in a day, just for a few hours.”

I flushed. I wanted to believe that Walker was being so generous because he was so desperate to spend time with me, but that couldn’t be the truth – he was just a generous man. I looked down at my skirt as the hem ruffled in the slight, damp breeze, and again wondered why he had gone so much trouble to

get new clothes.

We knocked on the door and Walker opened it a few moments later. He smiled at me, then turned to Missy and nodded.

“I just put Sofie down to sleep,” he said. “But she’s been having nightmares lately, so if you wouldn’t mind not wearing headphones? Just to hear her if she calls out,” he said. “And I know you have Ally’s number, but here’s my card if you need to reach my cell.”

Missy nodded professionally. “Of course,” she said. “I’ll probably just read or something.”

“I got some food if you’d like,” Walker said. “Some bread and cheese – it’s all in the fridge, so feel free to help yourself.”

Missy nodded again. “Thanks,” she said. “When do you expect to be home?”

“We’ll be back by eleven-thirty,” Walker said. “Thank you again.” I stood in the foyer while he gave Missy a quick tour of the house, showing her where Sofie’s bedroom, the bathroom, the phone, and the kitchen were.

AND JUST LIKE THAT, he and I were alone. Walker put his hand on the small of my back as he walked me out of the house, towards his car. When he opened the passenger side door for me, I flushed, glad for the dark night so he wouldn’t see my pink cheeks.

“Thank you,” I said.

“My pleasure,” Walker replied. He waited until I was seated and situated before he gently closed the door and walked to the driver’s side of the car. I swallowed hard and wiped my sweaty palms on my skirt, then pulled the seatbelt over my torso and buckled it.

As he drove, Walker put his hand on my thigh. Feelings of warm, intense arousal wormed through my body and it took everything in me not to sigh with happiness. After a few Walker-less weeks, it felt so good to be with him again that I could hardly believe it. Just sitting next to him in the car made me feel close to him, as if we’d never been apart at all.

“So,” I asked lightly. “Where are we going?”

“I thought Italian would be good,” Walker said.

“I love pasta,” I admitted.

Walker laughed gently. “We’re going to a northern Italian restaurant,” he replied. “Not a lot of pasta, but they make a fantastic risotto.”

“Oh,” I said. I suddenly felt stupid – like I’d said something a dumb kid would say.

“But I didn’t know the difference for a long time,” Walker added, as if reading my mind.

I smiled out the window. It seemed that Walker always knew exactly what to say to me to make me feel better. His words managed to soothe and arouse me at once, and I pressed my thighs together as my body began to tingle at the thought of spending the whole evening with him.

We drove off Tybee Island and into downtown Savannah, where Walker handed his car to a valet outside a small, unassuming-looking building.

“I know, it doesn’t look like much,” Walker said, taking my hand and lacing his fingers with mine. Feeling his touch sent a shiver of excitement down my spine and I bit my lower lip as he led me towards the entrance.

“But it’s wonderful inside,” he added. “I never would’ve found out about this place if it wasn’t for Julie, Sofie’s usual sitter,” he said. “She used to be a hostess here before she started working for me, and she’d bring Sofie and me food from the restaurant.”

I knew it was irrational, but I felt a pang of jealousy at Walker’s mention of Sofie’s sitter, whom I’d never met. I wondered if she had a secret thing for Walker, if that was the reason why she’d started bringing them food.

Stop it, I told myself. He’s with you right now – he obviously wants to be with you, not her.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel a touch uneasy.

Walker led me into the restaurant and as soon as I saw décor, I forgot all about my brief pang of jealousy. Awe overcame me – as unassuming as the building was on the outside, that was how beautiful it was on the inside. It was dark and intimate and cozy, with only a small handful of tables covered in red and white checkered oilcloths. Each table had a few candles and the couples spread throughout the room were all leaning close together, drinking wine, and smiling at each other.

“It’s almost like being back in Switzerland,” I confessed to Walker.

He nodded at me. “I thought you’d say that,” he said. “That was one of the reasons why I thought you’d like this place so much.”

I blushed, ever so slightly.

The hostess – who was very pretty and couldn’t stop making eyes at Walker – led us to a private table in the corner of the room, partially hidden behind a large, potted fern. Walker pulled out my chair for me and then

gently pushed me closer to the table before taking a seat across from me.

The menu was simple – only a few dishes listed, with no prices by them. I bit the inside of my lip – I knew that Walker had a lot of money, but I also knew that restaurants that didn't list prices were typically very expensive.

“The lamb ragu is fantastic,” Walker said.

My stomach growled and I nodded. “I'll have that,” I told him.

“And we'll split a bottle of wine,” Walker added. He glanced up at me from the menu. When his eyes met mine, a bolt of desire raced through my body and my clit began to pulsate. I couldn't explain why, but there was something about being with him out in public that was almost sexier than being with him in private. It was like we were carrying on our own private little affair in front of everyone else. Being with him in Switzerland had felt different, because no one there knew us. But now, there was a very real chance of us running into someone who we both knew, and it was incredibly arousing. Part of it was the pride of being with a man who looked as good as Walker did.

But that wasn't everything.

When the waitress came back, Walker ordered a bottle of red wine for us to split and lamb ragu for both of us. I loved that he ordered for me – his smooth, masculine voice sent a thrill through me every time I heard it.

“I love this,” I admitted. Walker smirked at me. A second later, I felt his hand on my knee under the table and I had to suppress a moan. He slid my skirt up to my thighs and rested his fingers on the inside of my thigh, just close enough to make me squirm with desire and want.

“You're being bad,” I said softly.

Walker raised an eyebrow at me. “I'm being very good,” he said, inching his hand closer and closer to my panties.

I was panting by the time the wine arrived. Walker took his hand away from my body to open the bottle and I shuddered, involuntarily kicking him. The wine splashed everywhere – Walker dropped the bottle in surprise and all of a sudden, the table was covered in spilled wine. It dripped down onto my skirt and soaked his shirt and trousers.

I immediately flushed beet red. “Oh my god,” I cried. “I am so sorry!” Shame and embarrassment burned me and my heart began to race as tears welled up in my eyes.

To my surprise, Walker chuckled. The other patrons of the restaurant were glaring at us, angry that we'd managed to ruin their own intimacy.

“Ally, relax,” Walker said. “It’s fine.” He was blotting at his shirt with a napkin but the stain continued to spread. When I did the same to my skirt, I burst into giggles.

The waiter came up and gave me a stern look, then turned to Walker.

“We had a little accident,” Walker said. He raised an eyebrow. “Could we have our meals to go, please?”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, we were back at Walker’s, soaked with wine and still laughing. Missy had just left and Sofie was still asleep.

“Before we eat, I’m going to take a quick shower,” Walker said. He smirked at me. “Here,” he added, tossing me a clean t-shirt of his. “Do you want a shower, or are you good?”

I shook my head. “I’m okay,” I said. “It was just on my skirt. No worries.”

Walker nodded. He gave me one last heart-wrenching smile, then disappeared into his bathroom and shut the door.

My pulse began to race and quicken and I was seriously tempted to follow him into the bathroom, but instead I discarded my clothes and shrugged on his t-shirt. Even though it was clean from the drawer, it still smelled like him and I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes and sighing with happiness.

I sat on his bed for a few minutes, then thought that I heard stirring coming from the direction of Sofie’s room. Getting to my feet, I tiptoed out of Walker’s bedroom and down the hall, peering in at Sofie. She was still sleeping peacefully, and I stared at her for a moment. She looked just like a tiny, female version of Walker – I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen such a pretty child – and she was clutching the doll I’d given her as she snored softly.

That was when I heard footsteps behind me.

“Allyson.”

The sound of my name made my pulse race and I turned to see Walker standing behind me. He was wearing a pair of faded dark jeans and a white T-shirt that clung to his muscular frame and immediately felt myself becoming aroused. His dark hair was slicked back and damp from the shower, and even in the dim hallway I could see the bright glow of his blue eyes. My heart began to race and my clit tingled at the sight of him.

“Sofie ... Sofie’s still asleep. I just wanted to check on her,” I said. No matter how much I swallowed, my tongue felt fat and clumsy and my mouth was painfully dry, as if I was speaking for the first time in my life.

“So, what are you still doing here, then?” Walker asked in a low voice that sent a warm shiver down my spine. He moved closer and I swallowed again my nipples began to throb and stiffen inside of my bra.

A man has no right being this gorgeous, I thought.

“I ... I don’t know,” I admitted.

I did know – I wanted nothing more than for Walker to step closer. I had forgotten all about the restaurant, about the wine incident, about the food that was still waiting for us.

Walker smirked at me. He had a way of looking at me like he was capable of reading my mind, and I pressed my lips together and flushed.

“I think I know,” he said. He put his hand on my waist, pulling me closer to him and taking me in his arms as if he wanted to possess me, to consume me.

He wants me as much right now as I want him, I thought as my heart began to slam against my ribs.

Before I could take another step, we were kissing, our mouths locked together in a passionate tangle. Walker’s hands cupped my breasts through the t-shirt he’d lent me, and I whimpered with pleasure.

He needs me, I thought as an explosion of delirious arousal burst within me.

Me. He could have anyone in the world, and it’s me who he needs.

Walker’s hands moved to my waist, and guiding me down the hall, backwards, until we were in his bedroom one again. The glow of the moon shone in through the windows and I closed my eyes as Walker broke the kiss and nudged my head up, exposing my neck. When I felt his hot lips and tongue against my neck and collarbone, I shuddered with delight. Every nerve, every cell in my body was alive for him, wanting him. Every time his lips touched my skin, I felt like I had died and gone to heaven. I whimpered softly, running my fingers through his wet hair, pushing it away from his forehead.

“You’re so delicious, Allyson,” Walker growled.

I shivered again. It was funny – I *hated* my full name when most people used it. But not Walker. Whenever he said my name, it made me feel wonderful. I loved how he only called my Allyson when we were about to

have sex – it made me feel like we had a special secret between us.

“I want you,” I whispered hoarsely. Walker’s mouth found mine again. He gave me a deep, searching kiss and put his hands on my waist and lifted me into the air, settling me down on his bed and kissing me roughly. As always, the sensation of his large, strong hands on my body made me weak in the knees and I closed my eyes and leaned back as his hands found their way to the snap and fly of my jeans. Walker didn’t even waste any time trying to touch me through my t-shirt and panties. I felt exposed and vulnerable as he pressed a strong thigh against the crotch of my underwear. The sensation of his strong, muscular leg rubbing against my clit was so wonderful that I moaned, arching my back and eagerly pushing my chest against his body.

“You want me so bad,” Walker growled in my ear. His lips and tongue found my earlobe and began to lick and suck as I whimpered and cried out softly. Warm, intense pleasure filled my body and I tugged at his shirt in an attempted to pull it over his head and expose his perfectly muscled torso. I was soaking wet – I could feel my soaking panties clinging to the lips of my pussy and I gasped as Walker pushed his thigh against me, again and again, sending white-hot bolts of pleasure through me.

Walker chuckled. “Eager, are we?” He smirked at me before getting to his knees and crossing his arms over his chest, catching handfuls of fabric in his hands and pulling it over his head. As always, every time that I saw him without a shirt on, I gasped. He was breathtakingly sexy – the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen, and I held my breath, wondering if this was real, if we were really about to have sex again.

“I need you,” I whimpered softly. Walker reached for my shirt and lifted it up and over my head, leaving me exposed to him in a bra and panties. He stared down at me, his dark blue eyes glowing with lust and passion.

“You’re so beautiful,” Walker growled.

I flushed hotly. I still didn’t believe it – I was so curvy and pale and round, nothing like the kind of woman Walker should have been with. I was nothing like Marina. Even my best friend was prettier than I was. But still, even though I didn’t believe it, I loved hearing it. I loved imagining that a man like Walker could love me with all of my faults and my imperfect body and my blemishes.

“Thank you,” I said softly. Walker leaned down and kissed me deeply, pressing his mouth against mine as he reached one hand behind my back and unclasped my bra, pulling the material away from my body. With his free

hand, he traced light patterns on my belly before sliding between my legs and feeling my wetness through my panties. I shivered at his touch, spreading my thighs apart and feeling like a shameless, wanton little slut. The things that Walker did to me, the way he made me respond and react to his touch and his body, were things that before now, I had never thought myself capable of doing. He had changed me, transformed me from a naïve girl into a woman. I wanted nothing more than to crawl after him naked, on all fours, just for a scrap of his attention or the promise of his touch.

I loved being bad for him. I loved being good for him. I loved everything with him – he had completely taken over my mind, over my heart.

He'd taken everything in me and made it wonderful, and I would have given anything for it to never stop.

“Please,” I whimpered quietly as Walker stroked my pussy through the damp crotch of my panties. “Please, touch me. I need you.”

Walker smirked. He tugged my panties down my thighs and tossed them to the side, then put his strong hands on the insides of my thighs and pushed them apart. The smell of my arousal filled the air and I blushed beet red when I looked down and saw that the hair between my legs was glistening with my juices. Walker's strong hands pushed my thighs down into the mattress and held me there, held me captive for his own audience. His eyes hungered with lust and I gasped softly as I strained against him, desperate for another kiss, eager for his touch.

“Baby, you're so wet for me,” Walker growled. I gasped hotly as Walker slid a finger inside of me, all the way inside, and he gently pushed his thumb against my clit and began to stroke and rub me until I was writhing with pleasure. I covered my mouth with both hands so I wouldn't scream and I bucked my hips up and down, inviting more of his touch. He slid another finger inside of me and began rubbing my G-spot.

Behind my hands, I whimpered and moaned.

“That's right, baby, show me how you like that,” Walker growled. My eyes rolled back in my head as pleasure took over my mind. It was like we had been made for each other, made to please and tease and torture each other. Walker moved his free hand to my breasts and began rubbing and rolling my nipples between his fingers. Ecstasy ran through my body and I gasped as he slid a third finger inside of me.

“Walker,” I cried quietly, taking my hands away from my mouth and suppressing a loud moan. “Please, please take me. I need you!”

Walker's response was a groan of desire. He took his hands away from my body and my eyelids shot open as a frustrated gasp escaped my lips. We locked eyes and I watched hungrily as he unbuckled his belt and undid the fly to his jeans, shoving them roughly down his hips. Clad only in boxer briefs now, my mouth watered at the sight of his cock pushing the material forward. I reached out for him, desperate to have him inside of me but Walker pushed my hands away. He pushed his briefs down and his cock sprang free, looking as veiny and throbbing and beautiful. Every time I saw him naked, he was more beautiful than the last and I shuddered with want at the sight of his hard shaft.

"Spread your legs wide for me, baby," Walker groaned. I whimpered and obeyed, lying back on the bed and spreading my legs as far apart as they would go. Walker braced himself with one hand against the bed and then plunged deep inside of me, piercing me deliciously with his massive erection. My pussy clenched and gripped his cock as he began to fuck me, filling me with deep, slow strokes that made me bite my lip and moan. It felt like heaven and I twisted my head, burying my face in the sheets and muffling my own loud cries. Walker began fucking me harder, his body rubbing my clit with every thrust and sending intense pangs of pleasure and ecstasy through my body. With every motion, every shift of our locked bodies, the mattress rocked against the bedframe. Walker was powerful and strong, and I loved relinquishing control of myself to him.

Ever since I'd first seen him, it was all I wanted to do. I wanted to belong to him – I wanted to be his. I wanted to be his girlfriend, his pet, his lover. I wanted him to own me. I wanted him to take control of my pleasure and I wanted to please him, to make him happier than he'd ever been in his life.

"Fuck, baby, I'm so close," Walker groaned. He leaned close and kissed me roughly, pressing his mouth to mine and breathing in my breath. His tongue lapped at mine and he sucked my lower lip, flicking his tongue over it and biting my gently. I gasped into his mouth as he thrust in harder than before, burying himself to the hilt inside of my pussy. Walker's hand slipped between our bodies and began rubbing my clit, rubbing me fast and hard until I was nearly about to come. It felt better than anything in my life had ever felt and I was nearly in tears when Walker suddenly stopped, yanking his hand away from my body and leaving me gasping in frustration.

"What?" I gasped. "What's wrong?"

Walker held his finger to his lips, motioning for me to be quiet. I blinked

at him in a haze of horny, confused frustration but Walker didn't reply. He pulled out of me quickly and eased off the bed, yanking on his clothes. In a panic, I reached for my t-shirt and panties, pulling the soaking underwear back up against my crotch, which was still throbbing with hot, unfulfilled lust.

"It's Sofie," Walker said. "I think I heard her outside of the door."

My heart slammed to a sudden stop and my stomach dropped out of my body. I had that same shaky, dry-mouth feeling that I'd first had upon seeing Walker in the hall just moments before.

Except this time, it wasn't good.

Walker

ALLY WAS BREATHING hard and panicking and as much as I wanted to take her in my arms and tell her that it was going to be okay, I couldn't focus on that at the moment.

“Stay here,” I told her. I walked to the door of my bedroom and opened it, only to find Sofie standing on the other side. She was clutching the doll that Ally had bought her and she was in tears, sniffing and sobbing.

“Daddy, I had a bad dream again,” she cried, bursting into a fresh wave of tears as her whole frame shook.

I was still breathing hard from having just fucked Ally and hot lust was still racing through my body, but I pushed those thoughts aside as I squatted down. Sofie immediately ran into my arms and clung to me. I picked her up, scooping my arms under her bottom and across my back.

Ally stood there, like a deer in the headlights.

“Can I sleep with you tonight, Daddy?” Sofie asked. She rested her head against my shoulder and inwardly, I groaned.

I hadn't wanted her to catch us like this – hell, I hadn't wanted her to catch us at all, but especially not when we had been in the middle of having sex. It wasn't Ally's fault, but I wished that she wasn't here.

Sofie didn't notice Ally at first -- she was still upset over the nightmare that she'd had, and she was clinging to my neck with surprising force for a

five-year-old. When I walked her over to the bed (still ruffled from my tryst with Ally) and set her down gently, Sofie detached her arms from my neck and turned around. Ally was standing awkwardly in the room with a towel wrapped around her waist.

“Miss Ally?” Sofie asked sleepily. She rubbed her eyes with her tiny hands balled into fists and yawned. “Are you sleeping over, too?”

“Um,” Ally said awkwardly, looking at me.

“She is,” I said, not wanting Ally to feel even weirder than she already did. “Is that okay with you, Sofie?”

“Only if I can sleep between you,” Sofie declared. Her nightmare forgotten, she yanked the covers of my bed back and climbed right into the middle. In five minutes, she was asleep. As soon as she was out, I went to Ally and took her hand, leading her into the bathroom.

“I’m sorry about this,” I explained.

Ally shook her head. “No, no, it’s fine,” she told me. “I know that kids have nightmares. But, um, are you sure that I should stay over?”

I nodded. “Yes,” I told her. “I do.”

“You don’t think it’s too weird?” Ally whispered. She glanced over my shoulder at Sofie, who was still asleep in my bed. She’d curled up in the fetal position, holding her doll close to her chest.

I wasn’t sure what to think. On one hand, I wanted Sofie to get used to Ally spending a lot of time here. But on the other, I was starting to wonder if I hadn’t started moving too fast. I had planned on asking Ally to stay the night even if she hadn’t accidentally spilled wine everywhere at dinner.

And I should have prepared for this – as I’d told Missy earlier that evening, Sofie *had* been having a lot of nightmares lately. I’d thought they were related to summer ending and the prospect of her starting kindergarten soon.

Whatever the cause was, she couldn’t have picked a less convenient night to have one. I wasn’t angry with her, not in the least – I felt horrible that she had been having such trouble sleeping. But I couldn’t wrap my mind around a way to tell her what Ally and I doing.

And partially, that was because I didn’t *know* what we were doing. Were we dating? We’d never really talked about it ... and that was no one’s fault but my own. I needed to man up and figure out what I was doing with Ally, both for her sake and my own.

“No,” I said, although I wasn’t being entirely honest with her about that.

“No, I don’t think it’s too weird.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Ally said. Her nipples were still harder under the t-shirt I’d lent her, and a surge of desire raced through me. The urge to bend her over the bathroom sink until we both climaxed was strong, but I couldn’t do that, not with my innocent daughter sleeping mere feet away. Still, the lust was coursing through me and I knew that by morning, my balls would be aching and blue.

“Here,” I said to Ally, reaching into my dresser and handing her a pair of my boxer shorts. “You can put these on, too.” Ally flushed. She went back into the bathroom and dropped the towel around her waist, then pulled up my shorts. Seeing her in one of my t-shirts and boxers was strangely sexy – sexier than anything else I’d seen her in before, even the green gown I’d bought her for Marina’s wedding. It made her seem like a part of my life, and I realized that more than anything, I wanted her to be just that.

I just had to figure out how to work things out with Sofie, first.

I DIDN’T SLEEP well that night. Sofie thrashed and tossed and turned. Ally slept deeply – I heard her soft snoring and kept closing my eyes, drifting off, and thinking that we were back in Switzerland. Things had been less complicated then – of course they’d been less complicated, I hadn’t had Sofie with me.

But I couldn’t be like Marina – I couldn’t be the kind of parent who abandoned the needs of their child in order to please their own selfish urges. I was devoted to Sofie, and I wanted to make sure that she always knew that.

Finally, around dawn, I managed to drift off into a thin, restless slumber.

“Daddy! Daddy!” Sofie squealed, rousing me with a jolt. She was kneeling on my bed and shaking me by the shoulders by both of her little hands.

“What is it, honey?” I asked sleepily.

“Miss Ally made breakfast!” Sofie yelled. She got to her feet and started jumping up and down on the bed, waving her arms in the air.

“Oh,” I said groggily. My voice was dry, and it cracked as I spoke, making me wince. “That’s nice of her,” I added.

“Daddy, sounds like you need your coffee,” Sofie chided me. “Miss Ally made that, too!”

I yawned, feeling my jaw crack in the process, then rolled out of bed in a

t-shirt and a pair of boxers. I felt for my jeans on the floor and pulled them up my hips, then reached for a belt and cinched it around my hips. Sofie leapt off the bed, still clutching her doll, and ran down the hall to the kitchen. As I followed her, the smell of hot coffee and something sweet hit my nostrils.

Sofie squealed with excitement and ran into the kitchen, leaping onto a chair and standing there, clapping her hands together. By the time I got there myself, I saw Ally bending over to pull something out of the oven. She was wearing an apron over my t-shirt and boxers and something about the way she moved jolted my heart. She looked so domestic, so at home, so perfect there.

It suddenly struck me as odd that she hadn't ever done this before, that I'd only met her a few short weeks ago, that she hadn't always been in my life.

Ally whirled around, holding a pan of something that looked delicious. She blinked in surprise when she saw me.

"I told Sofie not to wake you," she said, and I noticed dark circles under her blue eyes. Her frizzy red curls were tied into a topknot on her head and there were still traces of mascara under her eyes.

She'd never looked more beautiful to me than she did in that moment.

"I made apple cider bread," she said, almost bashfully as she set the loaf pan down on a silicone mat to cool. "I saw that you had some cider in the fridge – I hope you don't mind."

I shook my head. "It smells delicious."

Sofie smiled and blushed. Her eyes traveled the length of my body and the desire and love there was clear – she may as well have had a circle of pink hearts floating around her head every time she looked at me.

Fortunately, Sofie didn't seem to notice.

"I love apple cider," she said, almost solemnly, as she lowered herself down into a proper sitting position in the chair.

"I'm sure you do, sweetie," Ally said. "I love it, too. It's my favorite thing to drink in the fall."

I didn't say anything. I felt so awkward, and I hated myself for it. There was nothing I wanted more than a real relationship with Ally. But I had moved too fast, and I hadn't been careful. I loved the way that she and Sofie got along, but it was a double-edged sword.

If Ally and I were to break up, it would break Sofie's heart. And after that, I knew I'd never be able to date again, or at least not for several years, when Sofie was much older and less prone to caring about that sort of thing.

My heart seemed to harden in my chest as I sat down in a chair. Ally sliced the bread into thick slabs and set one in front of me, along with the honey and a small dish of butter. She kept her hands on my shoulders and leaned down to kiss my cheek.

“I had so much fun last night,” Ally whispered in my ear, when Sofie was distracted with her doll. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

Under the table, I balled my hands into fists.

This wasn't right. It was too much, too soon. She was acting so sweet and loving, and I should have been able to reciprocate.

But instead, I just felt uneasy and guilty. I loved her, but it wouldn't be fair to offer her a clandestine relationship. I never wanted Ally to feel like anything less than a priority to me.

Not to mention, work had been hellish. I knew there would be times when I wouldn't even be able to see Ally once a week, despite her living across the street. She didn't deserve that – she deserved better. She deserved someone her own age who would treat her well and worship her and be able to give her all of his free time.

She didn't need an old man, a complicated man, a man with baggage and issues of his own.

Inside, it killed me. I had really been falling for her.

But now, the right thing – the *mature* thing to do – was to walk away, and to tell her goodbye.

Maybe in the future, things would be different.

But for right now, this was the way that things would have to be.

Ally

WHEN I LEFT Walker's house that morning, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something dreadfully wrong. He seemed so withdrawn and taciturn and upset – and he didn't give me the chance to be alone with him to ask about it, either. Sofie was fluttering and hovering, even when I said goodbye. He didn't kiss me or pull me into his arms, but gave me a look that made my stomach feel cold and nauseous.

I wondered if I had overstepped by getting up early and baking breakfast. The truth was, if I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have gone out of my mind with worry and arousal. I'd had trouble falling asleep because I had still been so horny for him, and thoughts of him pulling me into his arms and fucking me until I sore were plaguing my mind.

Maybe he's just feeling the same way, I told myself. Maybe he's afraid that if he pulls me into his arms, it'll be so arousing to him that he won't be able to stop himself from ravishing me.

But even for me, that was a stretch.

I didn't want to be right about something being wrong. But I didn't hear from him for the rest of the day. I busied myself with taking care of Peter and Parker, telling myself that I'd wake up to a text from him.

THE NEXT MORNING CAME, and there was no text from him. I blinked at my phone for a bit as my stomach turned and churned.

He'll have texted by the next time I look at my phone, I told myself, setting it face-down on my nightstand before I got up and started to dress.

That morning, it was pouring rain outside. The boys wanted to run around outside and splash in the mud puddles, but I firmly vetoed that suggestion, knowing the hell that I'd catch from Mrs. Horne if she were to catch me in the process of allowing her children to muddy their clothing.

Instead, we sat in the living room and watched movies and colored with crayons. Peter and Parker were still talking about the animals we'd seen at the zoo – we were watching *Jumanji* – and I found myself getting lost in thought, thinking about Walker and how I missed him and if he was thinking about me.

Mr. Horne came in unusually early that evening – around four-thirty.

“Hello,” he boomed from the foyer. “Anybody home?”

Peter and Parker leapt to their feet: it was obvious to anyone with half a brain that they vastly preferred their father to their mother. They ran down the hall, shrieking for their daddy, and I hauled myself off the ground and followed. By the time I joined them, Mr. Horne had Peter in a mock-chokehold and he was ruffling his son's hair.

“Hello,” I said, almost awkwardly.

Mr. Horne looked up at me. Even though I wasn't wearing anything particularly revealing – a pair of jean shorts that ended just above my knees and a loose t-shirt from college, he took his time gazing at me. I felt a squirmy, wriggling feeling inside my body and suddenly wished that I had a giant parka on overtop of my clothes.

“Hi,” he said, smirking at me. I swallowed, forcing a smile at him. “I thought I could come home early so the four of us could have dinner tonight. Doesn't that sound like fun?”

It did not sound fun – it sounded creepy and boring.

“I'm used to eating after you all eat,” I said, as lightly as I could manage. “And besides, wouldn't Mrs. Horne be upset about that?”

Mr. Horne gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes, making me wish that I hadn't said anything at all.

“Mrs. Horne is upset about a lot of things,” he said, winking at me as if I were a co-conspirator. “She won't mind.”

I frowned. “Well, I'll make something for the three of you, and—”

“Nonsense,” Mr. Horne said. “I’ll have Ruth do it.”

“She left for the day a couple of hours ago,” I pointed out. “But I think I can probably find something in the freezer.”

I went into the kitchen and pulled out the freezer drawer, rummaging through. It was mostly bags of frozen vegetables from Whole Foods – stuff like cauliflower “tater tots” and veggie “noodles” – but I found a foil-wrapped tin of lasagna with Ruth’s handwriting, as well as directions for heating.

When I turned around with the lasagna in my hands, Mr. Horne was standing almost directly behind me and I suddenly had the uncomfortable suspicion that he had been staring at my ass.

“I can preheat the oven and put this in,” I offered, taking a step back from Mr. Horne.

“Oh, Ally, come on,” Mr. Horne said. He winked at me and I felt acutely skeeved out. “I came home from work early to spend time with my boys and with you.”

Why, I thought, but it would have been pointless to ask – Mr. Horne was creepy, but he wasn’t the kind of creep who would admit it.

“Um, that’s really nice of you,” I said. “Peter and Parker will appreciate that a lot.”

“So, we should celebrate,” Mr. Horne said swiftly. He took the frozen pan of lasagna from my hands and put it back in the freezer. As he stepped closer, a wave of his strong cologne washed over me – it smelled like cheap alcohol, even though I was sure it was expensive – and I tried hard not to gag.

“We should go out,” Mr. Horne said. “Wouldn’t you like that?” He was asking me, but Peter and Parker both cheered in unison.

“Mr. Horne, I have some things I should be working on,” I lied. “You three go have fun.”

Mr. Horne raised an eyebrow at me and I blushed uncomfortably.

“Please, Ally,” he said. “Call me Mark. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Only Mr. Horne could have made the word “friend” sound creepy.

“Um, sure,” I said, hoping that he’d back off. “But I’m working on these applications for grad schools, and to be honest I’m not feeling very well.”

That, at least, wasn’t a lie. I was feeling sick to my stomach – I assumed it was because of missing Walker so much and feeling confused and unsure about our situation – and all I wanted to do was lie down, take a nap, and wake up to a text from Walker.

“We can at least order takeout,” Mr. Horne said. He took another step towards me and his cologne washed over me again, making me even more nauseous than I already felt.

“Pizza!” Parker shouted at the same time that Peter yelled, “Chinese!”

Mr. Horne chuckled. “What about Ally?” He asked, turning to his kids and smirking at them. “She’s the guest of honor – don’t you think that she should choose?”

“Really, Mr. Horne,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not feeling well, and I should go upstairs and lie down for a while if that’s okay. I can watch the boys again after dinner.”

Mr. Horne’s smile faded a touch and a strange, unsettling look came into his eyes. I fought the urge to shiver. I’d always gotten the sense that he was a creep, but this was going above and beyond, even for him.

For the first time, I wondered if he was really and truly dangerous.

“Well, fine,” he said in the brusque, snappy voice that I’d heard him use with Ruth. “That’s fine. We’ll just have to have fun by ourselves, won’t we boys?”

I darted out of the room and up the stairs, where I locked myself in my bedroom (I checked the lock twice, but I didn’t love that the other side of the door had a keyhole) and flopped down on the bed. So much was going on, and I felt so weird.

There was only one person who would understand, and it was Missy. I knew that I’d stretched her patience with me very thin over the last few weeks, but I couldn’t handle being alone anymore. Reaching for my phone, I texted her.

“Can you come over? I’m kinda freaking out right now.”

THREE HOURS LATER, after her charges had been put to bed, Missy and I sat on the floor of my bedroom with a pizza between us. Mr. Horne had wound up taking the kids out after all – to Chuck E. Cheese – and the house was quiet and silent for once.

“What’s going on?” Missy asked. She opened the pizza box and took out a steaming slice. “You don’t look like you’re doing well,” she observed.

I shook my head. “I’m totally not,” I said. “I’m so confused and unsure about what’s going on with Walker. I haven’t heard from him ever since that morning, and I don’t know what’s happening. I texted him a couple of times

and sent him an email and, nothing. Like, radio silence.”

Missy nodded. “I know it’s upsetting,” she said. “But it seems like there’s something else going on, hon.”

“Mr. Horne is really creeping me out,” I whispered, leaning closer and reaching for a slice of pizza. “He keeps staring at me all the time and being really ... I don’t know, gross. Like, he came home from work today and suggested that we all go out to dinner together. And he didn’t want to take ‘no’ for an answer – he was really upset that I excused myself. Like, he actually got *mad* about it,” I said.

“Ew,” Missy said. She wrinkled her nose. “You don’t think he’d try anything, do you?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “Or at least, I don’t think so. But it grosses me out and I don’t feel safe. Not even with the door locked.”

Missy frowned. “And that’s everything?”

I looked down at the pizza in my hand. It was from my favorite place – a local chain that Missy and I had been eating since college – but suddenly, I had no appetite. The scent of pepperoni and melted cheese and grease was turning my stomach, and I set the slice down back in the box.

“Okay, what’s *really* wrong,” Missy said. She narrowed her eyes at me. “I have never, ever seen my bestie Ally turn down a piece of pizza.”

“I ... I think I might be pregnant,” I said softly.

“Ally!” Missy gasped. “What? *How?*” She added, before I could reply.

I swallowed hard. “We never used protection,” I admitted. “And ... it just kept happening. I don’t know,” I added helplessly, throwing my hands up in the air. “I thought it was supposedly really hard to get pregnant!”

“Oh my god, Ally,” Missy said, putting her face in her hands and shaking her head. She stayed like that for a minute, then got to her feet and grabbed her keys.

“Wait, where are you going?” I asked, sounding almost panicked. “Please don’t leave me,” I added.

Missy shoved her feet into her sandals. “I’m not going anywhere,” she said, shaking her head. “*We’re* going to the drug store to get you a pregnancy test.”

My stomach did a nervous flip and for a very real moment, I thought that I was going to vomit.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m scared,” I added a moment later.

“I know,” Missy said. “But it’ll be okay. I promise.”

Shakily, I got to my feet and grabbed my purse.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, we were home and sitting together in the guest bathroom as a pregnancy stick sat in a cup filled with my pee.

“Time’s up,” Missy said. “You ready to look?”

“No,” I said anxiously. “But I know that I have to.”

I walked over to the stick and pulled it out of the cup, forcing myself to take a deep breath and flip it over.

“Well?” Missy asked.

My heart slowed to a dull thudding in my chest, then began to race uncontrollably.

“It’s positive,” I admitted.

Before I could stop myself, I burst into tears.

W *alker*

BEFORE NOW, I hadn't realized that it was possible to miss someone as much as I missed Ally. It had been over a week since the disastrously awkward date that we'd had, and I was trying to work out in my head how I was going to proceed with things. It was clear that I wanted her.

I loved her. I needed her.

But I had no idea if she'd even be willing to talk to me at this point. I couldn't get out of my head long enough to consider it. Enough time had elapsed that most sane people would've just walked away.

Ally deserved better and I'd done nothing but prove that to her.

I sighed, then got up from my chair and stretched, cracking my back and raising my arms over my head. After I stretched, I walked into the kitchen, where Sofie and Julie were sitting at the table with a brand-new coloring book that Julie had brought over that morning.

"Hey, you," Julie said. She gave me a look of concern. "Walker, you look terrible," she said, getting to her feet. "Are you coming down with something?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I'm fine. I'm just ... well, it's nothing, forget it. I'm fine."

Julie shook her head. "You're clearly not fine," she said. "What's going on?"

At that exact moment, Sofie looked up at me.

“Daddy, where’s Miss Ally?” She asked. “It’s been so long since we’ve seen her. I miss her so much!”

“I know, honey,” I said. I felt pained. “I miss her, too.”

Julie gave me an odd, knowing, look and I pressed my lips together in a thin, firm line.

“Well, when can she come over?” Sofie persisted. “Our slumber party was so fun!”

“I had fun, too, baby,” I said.

“And I miss her bread,” Sofie added. “She’s such a good cook, Miss Julie!”

“I bet she is,” Julie said. She raised an eyebrow at me and mouthed, “Slumber party?”

I ignored her.

“I’m sure we’ll see her soon,” I said. “Why not see if Peter and Parker want to play outside together?”

“Yay!” Sofie cheered, leaping up from the kitchen chair and clapping her hands together.

“You should go home early,” I told Julie as Sofie raced down the hall to put her sneakers on.

“Slumber party?” Julie asked in a quiet voice.

“Sofie ... ah, Sofie almost caught us together,” I said. “And then she slept in my bed, with Ally and myself.”

“Oh my god,” Julie said. She shook her head. “Walker, what happened?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I ... I haven’t seen her since the morning after. I don’t know what to say to her. I don’t know what I want to do. I want her, but it’s too much, too soon. Things between us are so big and intense and ... I don’t think she’s ready for the responsibility of being a stepmother at such a young age. She should be with someone closer to her age, not me.”

“Walker, she clearly likes you a lot,” Julie said. She narrowed her eyes. “Why do you keep trying to push her away?”

I sighed. “It’s complicated. There are so many factors,” I said.

“It’s only complicated because you’re making it complicated,” Julie replied. She cleared her throat. “If you want to be with her, tell her. Don’t keep avoiding her. She’ll think that you just used her for sex, and I know that’s not the case.”

Sofie reappeared in the room. “I’m ready, Daddy!” She yelled.

“Okay,” I said.

“Tell her,” Julie repeated firmly. “No woman likes to be left hanging.”

“What does ‘left hanging’ mean?” Sofie asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” I replied. “Let’s go see if Peter and Parker want to play.”

The three of us walked outside and Julie got into her Mini Cooper, shutting the door behind her and rolling down her window.

“Walker,” she called just as Sofie and I had begun walking down the driveway. I turned back and raised an eyebrow at her.

“Tell her,” Julie repeated. “She’s clearly important to you. Don’t ruin this before it has a chance to begin, okay?”

I nodded.

I hated that I was taking advice from who was essentially my younger sister, but Julie was right. I’d been unkind and insensitive to Ally. I’d ignored her because I was too confused to think clearly.

I had been a completely selfish bastard, and I hated that.

I held Sofie’s hand and had her check both ways for traffic before we crossed the street and began walking up Mark and Ann’s driveway. Peter and Parker weren’t outside, and I frowned. It was a nice day – far milder than the intensely hot and humid weather that we’d been having – and normally, I knew Ally took advantage of weather like this in hopes of tiring out her charges.

Sofie skipped up to the door and knocked, then hopped from one foot to the other as she waited for the door to open.

When it swung open, I saw a beleaguered-looking woman in a black dress standing there. I’d seen her a few times before, but I’d never seen her looking this haggard. She had dark circles under her eyes and her normally-tidy hair was straggling out of a bun at the back of her head. She looked to be a few years older than Ally – maybe twenty-five, or twenty-six – but she had the look of a much older woman based on how tired she was.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m sorry that Mark and Ann aren’t home right now – do you want me to take a message?”

Seconds later, Peter and Parker streamed out of the door behind her. They yelled at Sofie, who shrieked, and seconds later the three of them began running around the yard, chasing each other.

“Oh, thank god. You brought her over to play?”

I nodded. “Um—”

“I’m Ruth,” she said. “Mrs. Horne’s assistant,” she added.

“Is Ally here?” I asked.

Ruth suddenly looked evasive. “She’s not,” she replied.

“Well, do you know when she’ll be home?” I asked.

Ruth flushed. She reached up and tucked a loose strand of brown hair behind her ear.

“Ally quit,” she said. “She just moved out yesterday.”

My jaw dropped and I blinked in surprise.

“I know,” Ruth said wearily. “Believe me, it was a surprise to Mr. and Mrs. Horne, too. They keep going on about *betrayal*, like she owed them something. I mean, it was rude to not give notice, but she clearly had a reason.”

“She quit?” I repeated dumbly.

Ruth nodded. “Yes,” she said.

“Did something happen?” I asked. “I know that she and Mrs. Horne didn’t always get along.”

Ruth shook her head. “I have no idea,” she said.

“Did she leave anything?” I asked. “Like a forwarding address? Or did she say what she was going to be doing?”

Ruth was beginning look at me suspiciously, and I knew that I probably sounded crazy, but I didn’t care. All I cared about was Ally, and finding out where she had gone.

And finding out why she had left in the first place.

“No,” Ruth said slowly. She narrowed her eyes at me. “And she didn’t say anything to Mr. and Mrs. Horne, either, if that’s what you’re going to ask next.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, groping helplessly for words that wouldn’t come. “It’s just ... uh, we were sort of close, and—”

Ruth held up a hand. “I don’t need to hear it,” she said. “I’m sorry I can’t be more help.” Glancing past me, she eyed Peter, Parker, and Sofie. “Is she going to play with them for a while?”

“Uh, sure,” I said, still distracted by thoughts of Ally.

“Do you mind watching them for a while?” Ruth asked. “I’m exhausted.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Uh, yeah. Not a problem.”

Ruth shut the door and I turned around, resisting the urge to put my face in my hands.

What the hell had happened, and why on earth had she decided to leave

without telling me?

Suddenly, I had the feeling that something was very wrong.

Ally

“ALLY, you’ve got to get up and do something,” Missy chided me. She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at me. “Are you feeling sick?”

I nodded. “This sucks,” I admitted. “I’m just so sad.”

Missy nodded. “I know you are, honey,” she said. “But you need to start looking for a job.”

I sat up and looked down at my stomach. I wasn’t showing yet – luckily, with my curves, I doubted that I’d show for a while – but I definitely *felt* different. I was constantly starving, even hungrier than I had been before. My breasts were swollen and sore – just standing in the shower and having the water touch them was painful. I was more emotional than usual: I couldn’t stop crying for days on end, and I had a feeling that it wasn’t entirely to do with Walker, but rather with my pregnancy.

“I know,” I said, sucking in my breath and letting it out in a long, slow stream.

“I love having you here,” Missy said. “But we need to get you back on your feet.”

I nodded slowly.

“Have you thought about your parents?” Missy asked. “Or going back to New Jersey?”

I flushed with hot shame as guilt rose in my throat.

“They would be so disappointed,” I said softly. “My dad, especially. He’s so traditional, and he was so proud of me for finishing college. This would kill him.”

Missy nodded. “It’s hard,” she said. “But sometimes, we need to rely on our family.”

I shook my head. “I can’t,” I said. “I got myself into this mess, and I need to take care of it myself.” I paused for a moment. “And my mom, well, she’s so pragmatic ... she’d probably try to get me to get rid of me. But like, I love my baby already. I can’t wait to meet him or her. And I could never do that. It’s not their fault that I made this mistake.”

Missy raised an eyebrow. “Ally, it wasn’t just you,” she said evenly. “It takes two to make this kind of *mistake*,” she said. “You need to tell him.”

The shame grew even more intense and pinpricks of tears came to my eyes. Sniffling, I shook my head.

“I can’t tell him,” I said softly.

“Why not?” Missy asked. She put her arm around me. “You know that I’m basically like your sister, but that’s not the same. Don’t you want your baby to have a dad?”

“I ... I can’t tell him,” I said. “I’m so ashamed, and he clearly decided that he’s done with the relationship. If I tell him, he’s going to think that I’m begging for attention, and it’s going to make me look like a laughingstock. There’s no way I could do that.”

“But Ally, I—”

“No,” I said firmly. “He’s shown that he doesn’t give a fuck about me, Missy,” I said. “If he did, he would’ve responded to my texts. Or my email. But he doesn’t love me – he clearly just wanted to sleep with me. He didn’t even have the decency to break things off to my face,” I added.

Missy took a deep breath. “Okay,” she said. “I love you, and I’ll support you. I still think you should tell him, but I understand why you don’t want to.”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I said. “I love you, too.”

“Come have dinner with me,” Missy said. Unlike me and the Hornes, she didn’t live with the family whose children she cared for. She had a one-bedroom apartment, just outside of Savannah, and for the last two weeks I had been staying there. I was grateful to her for putting me up because I didn’t have enough money to get my own apartment, but I knew that it wasn’t a permanent solution.

Being alone terrified me. Not because I was lonely – I was used to being lonely. But because I was so anxious about what would happen when the baby came. I hoped that I'd be a good mother, but I was nervous. What would happen if the baby looked just like Walker – based on Sofie, his genes were strong – and every time I looked at him or her, it just reminded me of their father?

I swallowed hard. I already loved my baby, and I was determined to try to do this right, but I was scared to death.

“I think I got pregnant in Switzerland,” I told Missy.

“Really? What makes you say that?”

“The timing,” I said. “I’m about seven weeks along, according to my new doctor. So, it probably would’ve happened then.”

Missy nodded. She opened her mouth to speak, then apparently thought the better of it and closed her lips.

“What?” I asked her.

“It’s nothing,” Missy said. She glanced away. “It’s just, um, well. If you guys were together, that would be really romantic, you know?”

A crushing feeling of sadness overwhelmed me and I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said. “I ... I just wish that I could be mad, you know? But like, I can’t even be pissed about it. I just miss him so much that it hurts.”

Missy nodded. “You have to push through,” she said. “I know it sounds impossible right now, but you have to focus on being the best you that you can be right now. You have to focus on the baby, and how you’re going to be such a good mom.”

I nodded. I knew that she was right, but all the same, her words hurt.

“I’m going to look for some jobs tomorrow,” I said. “And then can we do something fun?”

“Like what?” Missy asked.

“Like ... I don’t know, go out to lunch downtown, or something,” I said, shrugging. “Anything to make me feel like things are normal again.”

“Oh, yeah,” Missy said. “It’s my day off, so that’s perfect.” She lit up. “Oh, and there’s this really cute little French place that just opened on Tybee. We should go and pretend that we’re like, fancy,” she said with a giggle.

“Absolutely,” I said.

For a moment, I felt like my life hadn’t completely capsized. For a moment, things felt normal. I knew that it would take a long time for things to truly return to normalcy, but until then, I would just focus on these

moments and hope for the best.

W *alker*

EVER SINCE I'D found out that Ally had quit working for the Mark and Ann Horne, I hadn't been able to focus on anything. Not on work, not on keeping my house clean, not even on Sofie.

And it was starting to show. The day after I'd talked to Ruth, I'd spotted Ann Horne in the driveway and gone over to talk to her. As usual, she looked exasperated.

"Hi," I said, handing her a bottle of wine. "I brought this over for you and Mark ... I figured that the two of you were stressed, what with Ally having quit and all."

Ann took the bait – hook, line, and sinker. She took the wine from me and sighed dramatically.

"She didn't even give me any notice," Ann complained. "It's like, who does she think she *is*? She worked for *me*," she continued. "And she just decided to quit one day and move out! That ungrateful little bitch," she added.

"She's not ungrateful," I said, before I could think about it.

Ann narrowed her eyes at me. "What do you know about her?" Ann asked. "You barely spoke, yes?"

"I ... I'm sure she had her reasons," I said hastily.

"Well, at any rate, I'm exhausted," Ann snapped. She rolled her eyes.

“Ruth has been working as my nanny in addition to everything else, and it’s nearly impossible to find a replacement. I don’t want someone who’s going to run off without so much as giving notice,” she said firmly. “I want someone who will stay here and be content in this job.”

“I ... I can ask around at work,” I said. “Some of the partners have children who are just getting out of school now and they might be good fits.”

Ann huffed. “Well, thanks,” she said. “But right now, I just can’t handle it.” Still clutching the wine I’d given her, she stalked into the house and slammed the door behind her.

I rolled my eyes, then turned around and headed back home. Inside, Julie was sitting on the couch and flipping through the channels. The TV volume was low, and I sat at the other end of the couch.

“Well?”

I shrugged. “She wasn’t very helpful,” I said. “And it wasn’t like I could ask much about Ally – she’s clearly too pissed off.”

“Sofie just went down for a nap,” Julie said quietly. “And I have enchiladas in the oven for dinner tonight.”

“Do you want to stay over and eat with us?” I asked.

Julie shook her head. “No, I have a date, actually,” she said. She yawned. “I should go home and start getting ready, I’m just feeling so lazy.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I get that. I ... I feel like I’ve been in a fog ever since Ally left.”

“Walker,” Julie said. “This isn’t like, the nineteen-hundreds. You can find her. You have her number. You have her email address.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to explain myself,” I said.

Julie sighed. She ran a hand through her blonde hair and rolled her eyes.

“Men are so dumb sometimes,” she said. “You have to make a grand gesture, Walker. You have to apologize. You have to let her know how important she is to you.”

“I ... I want to marry her,” I said. “I want her to be a mother to Sofie, and maybe more children in the future. I want her to be my wife, and I want her by my side, always.”

“And I’m somehow guessing that she doesn’t know any of this,” Julie replied drily.

I didn’t answer. “I told her that I loved her in Switzerland. She never said it back. I ... should’ve been more honest with her,” I said. “And I feel like the world’s biggest dick.”

“Then, stop,” Julie said. “Stop being an asshole. Tell her the truth. You want to marry her? Buy a ring – a *real* ring, not the ring you gave her for my sister’s wedding,” she added. “Let her know that she’s important to you and that you want her in your life.”

I nodded slowly.

“And I’ll help you pick out a ring, if you want,” Julie said. “But if you don’t act fast, Walker, she’s going to lose patience. She’s going to meet someone who isn’t afraid to tell her how he feels, and she’s not going to want to give you a second chance.”

“I know,” I said. “I ... wish things hadn’t happened this way.”

Julie got to her feet, her long blonde hair swinging over her shoulders.

“Well, tough shit,” she said. “They did happen this way, and you can’t control that. You can only fix things going forward, okay?”

“I know that,” I said.

“You want this woman?”

“Desperately,” I said. “I never thought I could love anyone the way that I love her.”

“Then, tomorrow we’ll go shopping for a ring,” Julie said. “And you can tell her that you don’t have to get married right away – that might frighten her. She was never even your girlfriend. But it’ll show that you’re committed.”

I nodded. I was scared – that this would blow up in my face, that Ally would say no, that she’d say that she’d never loved me.

But I knew I had to try.

“I need her,” I said fiercely. “And I’ll do whatever it takes to get her back.”

Julie smiled. “That’s the spirit, champ,” she said. “Go get your girl back.” She walked down the hall to leave, then paused and turned back to face me.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m ... just glad you found a good woman,” Julie said. “Unlike my cheating bitch of a sister. Ally seems really sweet,” she added. “And she clearly makes you happy.”

A lly

THE NEXT DAY, I got up super early and combed the internet for places that were hiring. I wasn't really qualified to do much, despite my degree I had little experience doing everything but childcare. And after the disaster that had been the Horne family, I didn't want to be an au pair again ... at least, not for a really long time.

I felt a deep sense of guilty for having left Peter and Parker as I had, with barely a word goodbye. I'd gone into their room before I had told Mrs. Horne that I was quitting and squatted down on the floor. They were both sitting on Peter's bed, playing a game on their Nintendo console, and I'd cleared my throat.

"I have something pretty serious to tell you guys," I said.

"What is it, Miss Ally?" Parker asked. He set his controller down and after a moment, Peter reluctantly did the same.

I was surprised to find tears coming to my eyes. *Damn being pregnant*, I thought, swallowing hard so I wouldn't cry in front of my soon-to-be-former charges.

"I'm moving out of your parents' house," I said. "I'm going to live with my best friend Missy for a little bit and then look for my own place to live."

"Are you still going to take care of us?" Peter asked. His little forehead was creased with concern, and I felt my tears threatening to come back and

make a sobbing mess out of me.

“I can’t anymore, sweetie,” I said. “I’m sorry, but I have to leave.”

“I’m sorry,” Parker said.

“Yeah,” Peter chimed in. “I’m really sorry, too.”

“What are you sorry for?” I asked. “Neither one of you did anything wrong.”

Peter and Parker looked at each other, then turned to be, obviously confused.

“We must’ve been bad,” Parker said hesitantly. “Because you’re leaving,” he added.

“And you wouldn’t be leaving if we had been good,” Peter said sadly.

“Oh, no. No, sweeties, no, you didn’t do anything wrong at all,” I said.

Inside, it felt like my heart was breaking.

“This is a me thing,” I tried to explain. “I ... I just think I need to do something else for a while,” I added. *And it’s not like I can keep being an au pair, not when I’m having a baby of my own in just a few short months.*

“But why, Miss Ally,” Peter said. He had begun to sniffle, and I was very worried that if one or both of the twins started crying, I wouldn’t be able to hold back my own waterworks.

“I’m sorry, boys,” I said. “I promise, it’s nothing that you’ve done. I’ve had so much fun spending time with you.”

They nodded solemnly. I felt terrible and for a moment, I wondered if I should’ve let Mr. or Mrs. Horne just tell them that I’d quit.

But I couldn’t have done that, not to Peter and Parker. They were good kids, they just needed someone to pay attention to them.

“Listen,” I said, getting to my feet. “I want to tell you both something really important, okay?”

They nodded in unison.

“Yes, Miss Ally,” Parker said.

“The two of you always have to look out for each other,” I said firmly. “And love each other, okay? Don’t ever let anyone come between you. You’re going to be best friends for the rest of your lives, and you’ve got to take care of each other. When one of you is sad, the other one of you needs to comfort him, okay?”

Peter and Parker looked confused, but they both nodded.

Because you’re certainly not going to get that kind of love and support from your mother or father, I thought. The thought made me sad – I felt like I

was abandoning Peter and Parker when they needed me the most, but I also knew that I had to move on.

“You’re both very special kids,” I said. “And I’ll always remember you.”

Peter and Parker launched themselves at me, hugging me around the hips. I patted their heads, then slowly detangled myself from their arms and left.

As I walked down the hall, tears had streamed down my face.

Now, weeks later, I still felt guilt for having left Peter and Parker. I hoped that Mrs. Horne would hire another au pair who would give them love and affection and encouragement, but knowing her, I wasn’t sure. All I could hope for was the best – that Peter and Parker had listened to my final words and taken them to heart. They were each other’s greatest assets, and I hoped that they would always stay best friends.

“How’s it going?” Missy asked. She poked her head into the bedroom and rubbed a towel against her wet hair.

“It’s going,” I said. “There’s a bakery that’s hiring, but I’m afraid if I started working there, I’d gain even more weight.”

Missy laughed. “That sounds fun,” she said. “Maybe you could become like, a pastry chef, or something.”

I didn’t laugh with her. There was something depressing about the idea – a fat single mom, working at a bakery, then going home to her lonely apartment and trying to put on a happy face for her kid.

“Maybe not a bakery after all,” I muttered. “There’s a plant nursery looking for cashiers – that could be good, yeah?”

“Maybe, yeah,” Missy said. She walked to her dresser and started rummaging through one of the drawers. “What about if we dressed up for lunch? That could be fun,” she said.

I didn’t feel like dressing up. I didn’t feel like doing anything that was even remotely *fun* – I felt like wallowing. The pregnancy hormones were almost too much to take. One minute, I felt like crying and sobbing and sitting in bed, rocking back and forth with the sheets clutched in my hands.

The other minute, I felt ... well, horny was really the only way to put it. I’d heard people joking about how they’d never felt more aroused when they were already pregnant, but I’d always dismissed that as a ridiculous fantasy.

It wasn’t a fantasy, though. It was true – at least, it was true for *me*. It was ironic – now that Walker had clearly decided that he was done with me, I had

never wanted him more physically. I tortured myself at night sometimes, lying in bed and letting my fingertips roam over my body, pretending that my hands were his. I hated the memories of being with him because they were so painful. I hated knowing that it would never happen again, that he'd never hold me in his strong arms. As much as I'd loved having sex with Walker, the only thing I had loved more was being held by him. Feeling his arms wrap around me and hold me close to his body. Feeling his hands cup my face and bring my mouth to his for a passionate, tender kiss. Feeling his tongue flick against mine and letting a soft moan escape my lips into his mouth.

Stop, I told myself. You're just going to make this worse, and no one needs that.

"Ally?"

I glanced up. "Sorry," I said, flushing slightly. "I was spacing."

"So, yeah, lunch," Missy repeated. She held up a dress – it was a light summer dress, pale pink chiffon with a floral print and a sash that tied in the back. "What do you think about this?"

"It's really pretty," I told her. I wanted to stop moping – I needed to get my shit together and be a better friend, but it was hard at the moment. I didn't want to frustrate Missy, and I could tell that I was getting close to pushing her to her breaking point. She had already done so much for me – not getting mad at me when I quit working for friends of her parents with no notice, letting me move in with her and stay there rent-free while I worked on getting my life together, and most importantly, supporting me during my break-up and pregnancy.

"What are you going to wear?" Missy asked. She turned her back to me and shed her gym shorts and shirt, then pulled the chiffon dress over her head and tied the sash at the back into a large bow.

"I don't know," I said. I finally summoned the effort to climb out of bed and walk over to the closet. I'd hung some of my things – the nicer stuff that Walker had bought me before Switzerland – but looking at those clothes made me sad.

"You should wear this dress," Missy said. She came up behind me and pointed at a blue linen shirtdress, one of the presents from Walker.

"Wearing that will just make me think of him," I said.

Missy nodded. "I know," she said. "So, you need to work on reclaiming this stuff. It's *yours*," she emphasized. "Time to own it, no?"

I knew she was right, but I still hesitated before reaching for the dress.

“Okay,” I said finally. “Give me a couple to get dressed and do something with my hair and then we can go.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, we were sitting outside at a wicker table with an umbrella keeping the worst of the punishing sun away from our heads. It was still hot – it was late August, after all – but there was a slight breeze in the air that ruffled the hem of my dress and the ends of my hair, and the air smelled good, salty from the ocean and like delicious warm bread from the inside of the bistro.

Missy and I ordered lunch – brie and arugula and walnut sandwiches on baguette with honey and walnuts – and she ordered a cocktail while I opted for iced sweet tea. When the server had taken our order, Missy laughed.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s funny,” she said, gesturing. “I mean this place is supposedly French, right? But of course, you can’t have a restaurant in Georgia that doesn’t offer sweet tea.”

I giggled. “You’re right,” I said.

As we sat under the shade of the umbrella, I began to feel myself relax. Inside, my stomach still felt tight and clenched but I told myself that this was normal – that this was my new normal, and I’d have to get used to it.

“I’m probably going to apply at like, a daycare or something,” I said. “Taking care of kids without getting emotionally invested ... and free childcare, for after I give birth.”

“That’s a smart idea,” Missy said. She nodded. “I know you’re still bummed about Peter and Parker,” she added.

I nodded. “Yeah,” I said. “I mean, I had to leave ... there was no way I could’ve stayed, not across the street from Walker.”

Missy didn’t reply. A strange look came over her face and her mouth was slightly parted. She wasn’t even looking at me – it was like she was staring at spot over my shoulder.

“Don’t turn around,” Missy said.

It was too late – I was already shifting in my seat and craning my neck to see what she was looking at by the time she’d spoken.

When I saw him, my heart lurched precariously to the side and then I felt my stomach do a nervous flip.

It was Walker. And he wasn’t alone – there was a beautiful, young,

blonde woman walking beside him. They were chatting animatedly, and I could tell that they knew each other very well. They were walking down the other side of the street and they paused, going inside of a jewelry boutique and closing the door behind them.

“What the fuck,” I said softly.

“Ally,” Missy pleaded. “Look at me.”

When I turned back to face my friend, there were tears in my eyes.

“It’s bad enough knowing that he never loved me,” I said, feeling the hot anger rise up inside of me. “But he had another woman on the side, this whole time? And he’s buying her *jewelry*?”

I got to my feet.

“Ally, don’t do anything,” Missy said. “You’re really angry right now but listen to me: feelings aren’t facts. You don’t know what he’s doing – she could just be a friend.”

I felt sick to my stomach. Here I was, carrying this man’s baby, and he didn’t give a single fuck about me.

“I’m going to say something when he comes out of the store,” I said angrily, clenching my jaw and balling my hands into fists under the table.

“Ally, please don’t,” Missy said.

But it was too late. I had been pushed to the point of breaking, and there was no coming back. Walker had decided that he was done with me.

And I was ready to tell him just how deeply he’d hurt me.

Walker

“WELCOME TO TYBEE JEWELS,” a smiling saleswoman greeted Julie and me.

“Hi,” I said.

“Are you thinking about taking the next step to make your relationship official?” The saleswoman asked. “I’m Denise and I’d love to help you out.”

Julie and I laughed, startling Denise.

“We’re not together,” I said. “This is my sister – she said that she’d help me shop for a ring.”

“Oh,” Denise said. She nodded, looking relieved. “Well, what are you thinking?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Something beautiful and classic, but simple. Nothing too flashy.”

Denise nodded. She pulled out a tray of rings and set it down on the counter. I walked closer and peered down at them.

“She’s not a fussy woman,” I said, more thinking out loud than to either Julie or Denise. “Something like this, maybe,” I added, pointing down at a large solitaire flanked by small sapphires on either side of the diamond.

“That’s pretty,” Julie said. “And the sapphires make it look a little different than every other engagement ring, don’t you think?”

I nodded. “Yeah,” I said. “I think she’d like that.”

Denise hovered as I looked at several other rings, but I kept going back to

the one with the diamonds and sapphires. I couldn't explain why, but it even *felt* like Ally.

"We can re-size all of our rings for free," Denise explained. "Or, you could custom order one for her."

"I'd like to custom order one," I said. "And have the inside engraved."

"Oh, that's a lovely touch," Denise said. "And what would you like it to say?"

I thought for a moment and frowned.

"Will you marry me again?"

The startled expression on Denise's face was more than worth it.

JULIE and I stepped outside of the jewelry store, out into the bright sunshine. I'd put Ally's ring on my credit card and since it was a custom order, I'd been warned that I wouldn't be able to replace it.

But that didn't matter. I had to let her know how I really felt – that I wanted to be with her forever.

"The look on her face was priceless," Julie crowed. She laughed again, shaking her blonde head from side to side. "She couldn't even keep a poker face!"

"I know," I said, shaking my head from side to side and chuckling. "But, at least she was nice about it."

We turned the corner and for a moment, I froze. Ally was standing there, wearing one of the dresses I'd bought her for our trip to Switzerland. She was red in the face and her hands were balled into fists at her sides.

"I cannot believe you," Ally said angrily. Her voice was rising dangerously close to a scream. "It was bad enough that you never gave a fuck about me, but you've had another woman this entire fucking time?!"

"Ally, I can explain, I—"

"Shut up!" Ally screamed. Her nostrils flared and there were tears in her eyes which she frantically wiped away. She was shaking in anger and I wanted nothing more than to pull her into my arms and hold her tightly, but when I stepped closer, Ally leapt backwards like she'd been scalded.

"No," Ally said loudly. She shook her head vehemently. "I don't want to hear any more of your bullshit and your lies, Walker, I'm fucking done!" She turned to Julie. "This man is not who you think he is," she sniffled. "He's not a good man and he's—"

“Walker isn’t my—”

“I don’t want to hear any of your bullshit, either,” Ally snapped at Julie, cutting off her words. When she turned back to me, the look in her eyes was pure heartbroken sorrow. Knowing that I had been the one to cause this pain killed me, but I was going to make it right.

“Ally, I—”

“No,” Ally said, cutting me off and wiping at her eyes again. “I’m done with your excuses and your lies,” she said hotly. She started trembling again and a fresh wave of tears came over her, running down her cheeks.

“Please listen to me,” I begged. “This isn’t what you think. Julie is just —”

“I’m pregnant,” Ally blurted out.

For a moment, I was too stunned to react. When I stepped forward and reached for her, she jumped into the air. Ally began sobbing and she put her face in her hands, whirled around, and ran away.

“Ally, wait!” I called. I broke into a run after her, but I felt Julie’s hand on my arm.

“Walker, don’t,” Julie said. Her eyes met mine and she shook her head. “She’s not in her right mind right now and she’s not going to listen to anything you say. You’ve got to give her some time and space to cool down, and then you can explain.”

I was so stunned that Julie’s words barely made an impact on me. I couldn’t believe it – I was about to become a father, *again*?

I had to know more. I had to get answers – I had to know what had happened, why Ally had concealed this from me. Clearly, she had mistaken Julie for my girlfriend, or worse.

“Walker?” Julie asked. She peered into my eyes. “Walker, are you listening to me?”

“I’m just ... dazed,” I said, shaking my head in an attempt to clear the fog. “I can’t believe she’s pregnant,” I added.

Julie led me to a bench under a tree. “Well, did you ever use protection with her?”

“I assumed she was on the pill or something,” I said, still shaking my head. “I can’t believe that she’s not. This is so insane,” I added.

“Walker,” Julie said sternly. She narrowed her eyes at me. “You never *asked* her if she was using protection?”

“I, uh ...” I trailed off sheepishly. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “In the

heat of the moment, I never even thought about it.”

“Obviously,” Julie said. She rolled her eyes. “God, I swear. Men are such idiots sometimes.”

I’d already fallen back into the steel trap that was my own head. Julie kept talking but I tuned her out, leaning over and resting my elbows on my knees with my face in my hands. Today had been so completely surreal – and I had so many questions. How long had Ally known that she was pregnant?

Why hadn’t she told me before now?

Had I lost my chance to make things right with her and move on? I vowed that no matter what, I’d make sure that she had financial support to help with the baby. Even if she didn’t want me to be a part of her life, it was still my child that she was carrying, and I didn’t want her to have to worry about money. I wanted my future son or daughter to have everything they needed in life.

“I desperately need to talk to her,” I finally said to Julie, sitting up and turning to face her.

“I know,” Julie said. “But she’s clearly upset – and I bet pregnancy hormones aren’t doing anything to help that. Give her a couple of days to cool down and then call her. Tell her that you need to talk to her. Invite her over for dinner. Get flowers. I’ll take Sofie to the movies or something,” Julie offered. “Or she can spend the night at my apartment.”

“I ... I don’t want to wait that long,” I said.

“I know,” Julie said. She made a sympathetic face at me. “But you can’t approach her when she’s this emotional.”

“Ally’s ... always kind of emotional,” I said, thinking back to our time in Lucerne and how easy it had been to read her face.

“Well, she’s extra emotional right now,” Julie said. Her voice was almost stern. “And you’ve got to let her calm down enough to the point where she’ll listen to you. She’s frazzled and hysterical. Just give her a day.”

It hurt inside, but deep down I knew that Julie was right. It was just in my nature to try to fix things as soon as possible, and I desperately wanted to fix things with Ally. I wanted to support her and love her and be there for her.

I vowed that no matter what, I would get to the bottom of this and do everything that I could to make things right.

Ally

I SPENT THE WEEKEND SOBBING. I felt so bad – just when I had vowed to finally start moving on with my life, Walker had appeared in front of me with one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen. Missy spent the weekend consoling me – we went shopping for chips and queso and candy and pretzels filled with peanut butter and soda and then curled up on the couch together and watched stupid movies that we’d liked in college. I laughed at some of the scenes in the comedies, but it felt hollow. On the inside, I wasn’t laughing. All I could think about Walker.

“You didn’t hear him out,” Missy said gently, when I told her that.

“What could he possibly have to say, except more lies?” I’d asked sadly. I sniffled and Missy handed me a fresh box of tissues – I’d been crying so much over the last few days that I probably needed salt pills. My nose was raw and red from being blown into tissues and sniffing and my eyes were sore from crying.

“I mean, you’ll never know unless you reach out,” Missy said.

“I ... I don’t want to hear him tell me that I meant nothing to him and that he’s sorry for hurting me, but that he’s found someone who’s a better match for him,” I replied. I reached for a box of peanut butter cups and unwrapped one, putting the entire thing into my mouth at once and letting the candy dissolve. I could practically feel my body absorbing the sugar and I reached

for another one, toying with the wrapper before eating it.

Missy was watching me with an odd look on her face. I chewed and swallowed, then turned to her.

“What?” I asked her.

“It’s nothing,” Missy said. “I don’t want to upset you, Ally. I’ve just ... I’ve never seen you like this. It’s almost like you’re trying to destroy yourself. And you’ve got another life inside of you now,” she added. “You have to be good and healthy for your baby.”

“I know,” I said, sinking back against the couch cushions. “It’s just ... it’s so hard. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Take the rest of this weekend for yourself,” Missy said. “And then on Monday, I want you to start trying for normalcy.” She paused. “I know you’ll probably hate this, but my mom always used to say that the sun will still come up tomorrow, even if you’re hurting.”

I winced. Part of me didn’t want the sun to come up tomorrow, not if it meant that I’d continue going on without Walker.

But Missy was right. I had to start being better, if for no other reason than soon, I’d be a mother. I’d have a child, with needs and wants to put ahead of my own. Reaching forward, I folded the bag of candy closed and clipped it with a clothespin.

“You’re right,” I said with a sniffle. “I promise. Monday will be a new start.”

ON MONDAY MORNING, I woke up, determined to have a good day. The weather was finally tolerable, as long as you stayed in the shade, and I went for a long walk to downtown Savannah where I watched tourists posing for photos in front of the antebellum houses. I treated myself to an iced green tea from a little café that overlooked the beach and then sat on a bench with one hand on my belly.

“Little one,” I said aloud, looking down at my belly. “I’m your mom and I love you so much already. We’ll be a team, just the two of us and sometimes, your Aunt Missy, who’s going to love you so much.”

I wasn’t pregnant enough to be able to feel kicks or a heartbeat yet, but it soothed me to imagine my baby listening to my voice. I’d read that in a baby book Missy had given me – the more you talked, the more familiar your baby became with your voice.

I just hoped that my baby, who was a curled little fish in my belly, loved me as much as I loved them. I'd even started thinking about names. I like Kaitlynn or Diane for a girl and Connor or Connell for a boy. Nothing too weird or trendy, just nice names that would age well and be timeless.

There was a lot that scared me about the future. I was worried about money, worried about finding a job that would be enough to support me when I had to take maternity leave. I was worried about being a single mom, not because I didn't think it would be easy to find a boyfriend or husband but because I wanted my child to ideally grow up with both parents.

And I was worried about being a good mom. Even though I had a lot of experience with children, there was a huge difference between caring for someone else's children and caring for your own. I kept wincing whenever I thought of Mrs. Horne, and the way she'd discard her children's desires in favor of her own.

"I promise that I'll always be a fair mother to you, little bean," I said, cradling my belly with both hands. Although I wasn't showing yet, I had definitely gotten bigger ... but I chalked that up to my late-night candy binges with Missy. With a grunt, I got off the bench and started the long walk back to Missy's apartment. I let myself in the door, calling hello as I went into the kitchen and set my keys down on the island.

Missy was sitting at the kitchen table, narrowing her eyes at a magazine. When she saw me, she put the magazine down and smiled.

"You were gone for a long time," she said.

"I was trying to clear my head," I admitted. "And I heard back from that day-care place – they're looking for someone to work about thirty-two hours a week. So, not quite full time, but good enough for now."

Missy nodded. "That's great," she said.

"Yeah. I, um, have an interview there tomorrow," I said.

Missy nodded again. "Remember," she said. "They're not allowed to ask if you're pregnant or if you have children."

Before I could reply, my phone buzzed in my pocket and I reached for it.

"Shit," I muttered. "I hope it's not them calling to cancel or tell me that they just filled the position."

When I saw the name on my caller ID, I froze.

"Who is it?" Missy asked. She narrowed her eyes.

My mouth went dry. "It's Walker," I said softly.

Missy's eyes widened. "Ally, you have to talk to him," she said. "I mean,

you told him about the baby.”

I swallowed hard as my heart began to pound in my chest. Swiping open the call, I steeled myself for the worst.

“Hello?”

“Allyson, it’s Walker,” he said. I knew that I was supposed to be angry and hurt, but the sound of his voice still did things to me. A shiver ran down my spine and my palms began to sweat. My body was betraying my brain.

My head knew that I should be over a man who had treated me hot and cold, then disappeared without an explanation.

But my body was craving and wanting his touch, to feel his lips on mine, to feel his cock buried inside of me.

“I know,” I said flatly. *Sparkling wit, Ally*, I thought sarcastically as I began to pace back and forth in the kitchen.

“I found something of yours that you left in my suitcase,” Walker said.

“You can put it in the mail,” I said.

“Ally, please,” Walker said. “I’d very much like the chance to see you. To explain. But I need to do this in person.”

I clenched my jaw, then unclenched it. Missy had her head cocked to the side.

“What?” She mouthed.

“I ...”

“Ally, please,” Walker said. He’d never pleaded with me before, not like this, and he sounded humble and sincere. I tried telling myself that he was a liar, that he’d hurt me, but I just couldn’t shut him out like that.

“Okay,” I said numbly.

“When are you free?” Walker asked.

“When did you have in mind?” I countered.

“The day after tomorrow,” Walker said. “Thank you, Ally.”

We hung up and I sat down at the table, setting my phone down and slumping over with my face in my hands.

“He said I left something in his suitcase and that he wants to talk to me,” I said, my words muffled by my hands.

“Are you going to go?”

“I ... I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, I still have something of his, too. That stupid ring he put on my finger on the plane.”

“You should probably give that back,” Missy advised. “And it’s too valuable to put into the mail.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I mean, would you go?”

“What? Me? No, Ally,” Missy said. She reached across the table and took my hand, squeezing it protectively. “You know how much I love you – we’re like sisters. But you have to do this on your own.”

I sighed. “You’re right,” I told her. “I’m sorry. I’m just nervous.”

“That’s okay,” Missy said. “I’d be nervous, too.”

I nodded. I was feeling the lowest I’d ever felt in my life ... and now, I was scared. What was he going to say? Was he going to try to bribe me to get rid of the baby? Or was he going to pay me to leave him alone and leave him out of the child’s life?

I had no idea, but I guessed that I’d find out soon.

“I’m going to do it,” I told Missy. “If only to be the bigger person.”

Missy squeezed my hand. “I’m proud of you,” she said.

I just wished that *I* could be proud of me.

W *alker*

“DADDY, DADDY!” Sofie screeched. She ran into the kitchen where I was putting the last dishes from our lunch into the dishwasher.

“What is it, angel?” I asked, scooping her up and teasing her.

“Aunt Julie is here!” Sofie yelled, her voice mere inches from my ear. Wincing, I set her down on the ground and she ran around in a circle before darting into the foyer and yanking open the door.

“Aunt Julie!” Sofie yelled. I heard Julie’s laughter followed by her footsteps as she followed Sofie into the kitchen.

“Hey, Walker,” Julie said.

“Hey, yourself,” I said.

Julie turned to Sofie and squatted down on the floor. “Why don’t you go get your shoes on,” Julie suggested. “And wash your hands, too, okay?”

Sofie nodded. Bursting into giggles, she ran down the hall and into her room.

Julie got to her feet and walked over to me. She raised an eyebrow. “Are you okay,” she asked, keeping her tone too quiet for Sofie to hear. “You don’t look like you slept much.”

I groaned. “I didn’t,” I admitted. “I was up working until three o’clock in the morning and then I kept thinking about ... well, you know,” I said.

“You’ll have answers later,” Julie said. She patted me on the arm, as if to

buoy my strength and make me feel better. Had I been in a better mood, I would've laughed – Julie was not only younger than I was, but she was a solid foot shorter than me and far smaller. The idea of her trying to console me was almost hilarious.

“Yeah,” I said dully. “I keep thinking that she'll flake.”

“Walker, she's probably desperate to know what's going on,” Julie offered. “I don't think she'll ghost you. She might be angry, but ...” Julie trailed off, then shrugged. “It'll be fine.”

“What are you and Sofie going to do?” I asked, just in time for Sofie to run screeching back into the kitchen. She had her Elsa backpack on and matching Elsa-and-Anna pink sneakers that I'd bought her for the start of kindergarten in next week.

“I don't know,” Julie said in an exaggerated voice, turning to Sofie. “What are we going to do today, pumpkin?”

“Ice cream,” Sofie sang out, hopping from one foot to the other.

Julie laughed. “I don't think you need any more sugar, little one,” she said. “Do you want to go to the movies? Or the aquarium? We could see the fish,” she offered.

“What about the sharks,” Sofie squealed, jumping into the air.

“Sure,” Julie said. “That sounds great.” She turned to me and raised an eyebrow. “What time were you thinking for me to bring her home?”

“Why not take her to dinner after the aquarium,” I offered. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my wallet and gave Julie one hundred and fifty dollars in cash.

“This should cover the aquarium and gas money and dinner,” I said.

Julie blinked. She folded the cash and stuck it in her back pocket.

“Thanks,” she said. “We'll be home later.” To Sofie, she offered her hand. “Let's get going, princess,” she said. “Daddy's got some chores to take care of.”

“Bye Daddy!” Sofie shrieked. She took Julie's hand and tugged her towards the door. Just as they were almost out of the kitchen, Julie turned back. She cocked her head to the side and gave me an odd look.

“Walker, everything's going to be fine,” she said. “I have a good feeling about this.”

“I wish I could say the same,” I said drily. Forcing a smile, I looked down at Sofie.

“You be good for your aunt Julie, sweetie,” I said. “And I'll see you later

tonight.”

AS SOON AS Julie and Sofie were gone, I pulled out a bottle of Italian sparkling water and put it on the table with two glasses. I’d gotten some food – cheeses and cured meats with a crusty baguette – and I arranged it on a charcuterie board, hoping Ally would feel comfortable enough to eat.

I hadn’t been this nervous about anything in my life. Compared to this, taking the bar exam had been a piece of cake. I’d been anxious when Marina had first come to me and told me that she was pregnant with Sofie, but as soon as Sofie was born, that anxiety had faded and been replaced with intense love.

Pacing back and forth in the kitchen, I shoved my hands into my pockets and waited. Ally was due in ten short minutes, and I knew those ten minutes would be the longest of my life.

When I heard a tentative knock on the door, I steeled myself. This could be the last time that I ever saw Ally. And although I was desperately hoping that wouldn’t be the case, I knew that she would be well within her rights to leave. I had pushed the boundaries of what any reasonable person could tolerate, much less someone as sensitive as Ally.

I crossed the floor of the kitchen into the foyer and opened the front door. Ally was standing there, wearing a pair of denim cutoff shorts and a loose blouse that I didn’t recognize. She wasn’t red in the face with anger like she had been the other day, but she wouldn’t meet my eyes. Her red curls were twisted into a knot at the top of her head and I longed to pull her close to me and run my fingers through her hair. She looked even curvier than she had before and I wondered if that was because of the baby growing inside of her belly.

Despite everything, I had never seen her look more beautiful.

“Hello,” I said. I felt oddly formal, as if Ally and I had never spent any real time together.

She still wouldn’t look at me.

“What do you want, Walker,” Ally asked dully. She looked down at her hands, at the slivers of dirt under her nails, then down at her sandal-clad feet. Her toenails were painted red but some of the polish was chipping away.

“I’d like to talk to you,” I said.

Ally didn’t reply. “Please come inside,” I said, stepping back from the

doorway and allowing her to enter.

After a moment, she followed me inside and shut the front door behind her. Ally glanced, then turned to me and our eyes met for what felt like the first time. Her blue eyes were wide and earnest, and she lowered her lashes, still peering up at me, much the way she used to do when my cock was in her mouth. A hot bolt of electricity ran through my body and I clenched my jaw, leading Ally into the kitchen.

“Ally, I—”

“Walker, wait,” Ally said. She took a seat at the table and I sat down across from her, watching the way she gnawed at her lip.

“I’m sorry about the other day,” Ally said. “I ... I shouldn’t have reacted that way, but I was so angry. You ignored me. You ignored my calls and my texts, and you left me hanging like that, and I hated you for it. And then, I saw you with that other woman, and I couldn’t believe that you could be so cruel and heartless to do something like that.”

I sighed. “That other woman is Julie,” I said. “Sofie’s long-time babysitter. And Marina’s younger sister.”

Ally did a double-take. She blinked and her head twisted back in surprise.

“If she’s Marina’s younger sister, why wasn’t she at the wedding?” Ally asked.

“Because she was staying here. With Sofie,” I said. “When Marina cheated on me, Julie decided that she no longer wanted to be a part of her older sister’s life. There’s never been anything romantic between Julie and myself ... she’s like my kid sister,” I said.

Ally flushed deeply. She didn’t speak for a long time and when she did, her voice was soft and quiet.

“Oh,” Ally said. “I see.”

“Julie was helping me shop for someone else,” I continued.

Ally’s flush turned an even deeper shade of red. Crimson spread from her hairline down her face and neck, into the neckline of her shirt.

My heart was thudding in my chest as I got to my feet and closed the distance between myself and Ally. Getting down on one knee, I reached into my pocket and pulled the small velvet box out of my pocket.

“Ally,” I said huskily. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry that I couldn’t figure my shit out before now, but I promise, I’m working on myself. I’m never going to hurt you like that, not ever again.” I opened the box, revealing the custom ring that I’d had made, the one with the large diamond solitaire and two

flanking sapphire baguettes.

“I want you to marry me,” I said. “I want you to be mine forever, to be a part of life and Sofie’s life. I love you, and I want to make our love real. Not for fake anymore. I want you to be my wife, and I want you to be a mother to my little girl.”

Ally’s jaw dropped and I watched as tears welled up in her big blue eyes.

“And we don’t have to rush things,” I said, shaking my head. “We can have a long engagement, we can learn more about each other, we can—”

Ally practically flowed out of the chair and into my arms. Instantly, her mouth was on mine, giving me hot, greedy kisses as she flicked her tongue between my lips. Desire swelled inside of me and I held her tightly, running my hands down her back and squeezing her ass as I pulled her close to me. We toppled onto the kitchen floor together without breaking our intense kiss.

Ally

I BREATHLESSLY PULLED AWAY from Walker. We'd fallen onto the floor when I'd melted against him and fallen out of my chair, and suddenly the situation was so adorable and absurd that I started laughing.

Walker kissed me again, running his hands through my hair and pulling my curls out of the loose bun at the top of my head, pulling my hair around my face and then pushing it out of my eyes.

"You never gave me an answer," Walker growled.

I giggled again. "You never showed me the ring," I teased back. "But I ... I never gave you back the old one," I confessed. "I know that I should've turned it back over to you, but I couldn't help keeping it. It made me think of you, and of us, and I didn't want that to be over. I missed you so much."

Walker nodded slowly. He pulled me close and put his strong arms around my body, rubbing my back as he pulled me into him.

"Ally, falling in love with you frightened me," he admitted. "And I was worried – not because of me, but because of Sofie. This is a lot of change for her. And when she almost caught us together, I'm ashamed to say that I panicked. I didn't know what to do – I didn't want to bring a mother figure into her life only to have her disappear again. Do you understand?"

I nodded. "It hurt," I said quietly. "But I understand. I know that dating is different when there are children involved."

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t better at communicating this up front,” Walker said. “This was very new. We are very big, and very intense, and it caught me by surprise when I fell in love with you. I wasn’t expecting that to happen. But I’m glad it did,” he added.

“I love you, too,” I said, nuzzling into his neck and breathing in his smell that I loved – musky and woodsy and intimate, almost in a primal way. Just the way Walker smelled was enough to turn me on and before I knew it, I was kissing his neck, kissing my way up to his strong, chiseled jaw. My lips found his and I moaned softly as Walker’s tongue slid into my mouth. His hands moved over my body, stroking my back and waist and then shifting down to my ass where he squeezed just hard enough to send an erotic thrill rushing through my body. My nerves tingled and danced with arousal and I whimpered gently as Walker began sucking and nibbling on my lower lip.

“I want you,” I moaned loudly into Walker’s mouth. His hands tangled in my hair again and he groaned with urgent desire as I pushed him down onto his back and climbed on top of him. He felt so strong and muscular beneath me that I closed my eyes and arched my back, straddling him. Walker’s shaft was already rock-hard beneath the material of his pants and I groaned with anticipatory lust as I felt his cock rubbing between my legs. My jean shorts rode up, exposing even more of my round thighs and I took Walker’s hands and moved them to my thighs, wanting him to touch me.

“Oh, Allyson,” Walker growled. He pulled me close for another deep kiss, sending butterflies fluttering through my entire body. When his hands moved back to my thighs, he squeezed and kneaded my skin, then slid his fingertips tantalizingly close to my pussy. The hem of my shorts had ridden up impossibly high and feeling the denim grinding against my pussy was both heavenly and torturous at once. I moaned as Walker’s fingers slid inside one leg of my shorts, squirming towards my soaking-wet pussy. Just kissing him had been enough to make my clit throb with urgent lust and I could feel that the crotch of my panties was damp with my arousal. Walker pushed a finger inside of my panties and I moaned as I felt his fingertip flick against my clit.

“I want you, Ally,” Walker groaned. He sat up and gently pushed me aside, then got to his feet and offered me a hand. As soon as I was on my feet, we were kissing again and walking backwards, stumbling down the hallway to his bedroom where Walker pushed me down on the bed. His sapphire-blue eyes blazed with dark lust as he hastily unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it to

the side, then fumbled with his belt and kicked his trousers down. He wasn't wearing underwear and his cock sprang free, making my mouth water at the beautiful sight of him.

I'd never seen a more gorgeous man than Walker, and my mouth went dry as he came towards me, unbuttoning my shorts and unzipping the fly and tugging them down my legs. As soon as my shorts were off, the room was filled with the scent of my pussy and I blushed hotly, pulling my shirt and bra over my head as Walker pulled my panties down my legs.

"You're so beautiful," Walker growled. He climbed onto the bed and I spread my legs, wanting to welcome him between my thighs. Instead, Walker scooted down and crouched between my legs. He locked eyes with me as he put his mouth on my leg and swirled his tongue over the delicate spot at the back of my knee. A hot shiver ran through me and I whimpered and moaned, screwing my eyes shut and arching my back. Walker's lips and tongue and mouth moved over my thigh, licking and sucking and biting and I whimpered with pleasure. His pace towards the cleft between my legs was agonizingly slow and I gasped when I felt his hand on the lips of my pussy, spreading me open and wide and vulnerable for him.

"You want me to taste you?" Walker growled.

I nodded my head furiously and whimpered.

"Say it, Ally," Walker growled.

I gasped and flushed hotly. "I want you to ..."

"Say it."

"I want your mouth on my pussy, please, please taste me," I begged, throwing my head back into the soft mattress and spreading my legs as wide as they would hot. Walker's hot breath teased and tickled me and when I felt his tongue flick against my pussy, I gasped.

"Please," I begged. "Please taste me."

Walker dove into my pussy, sucking my clit and flicking his tongue over the most sensitive spot on my whole body. He slid two fingers inside of me and began pumping them in and out, making me moan and cry out as intense ecstasy filled my body.

"Walker," I cried hoarsely, grinding my hips against his face. I could feel how close I was to orgasm, but just when I felt myself about to come, Walker pulled back. He got to his knees and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand before leaning down to kiss me. I licked my juices from his lips and chin and tongue, reaching for him and pulling him close.

“I want to claim you as mine,” Walker growled. “As my fiancée. As my love. As my wife, *forever.*”

Walker

ALLY LAY BENEATH ME, flushed and sweating, her legs spread and her pussy glistening with arousal. I wanted her so bad that I could hardly stand it, and I braced myself with a hand on her thigh before driving deeply inside of her. Ally shrieked with pleasure as I pierced her, sliding all the way inside of her body to the hilt, burying myself in her warm, tight pussy.

“Oh, Walker,” Ally moaned. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she gasped as I began to pump my hips, taking her. Claiming her.

Making her mine.

I balanced myself on my knees and took Ally’s ankles in my hands, hoisting them in the air and propping them on my shoulders as I drove into her. She felt so good that I could hardly breathe as I fucked her. Bolts of intense pleasure raced through my veins and arteries, filling me with heavenly ecstasy. Whenever I was buried inside of Ally, it felt like we were the only two people in the world.

“You feel so good,” Ally moaned. She flushed and bit her lower lip, closing her eyes and straining under me. Her tits quivered and shook, and I dipped my head to her chest, sucking and gently biting her nipples, just hard enough to let a little pain mingle with the pleasure flowing through her. Ally bucked underneath of me, grinding her pelvis against mine as I drove my cock into her, again and again. Pushing my hand between our bodies, I found

Ally's hard clit and began to finger her, rubbing her roughly in time with my strokes.

"Walker, oh my god," Ally moaned, thrusting her body against my hand and wrapping her thighs around my waist. I pinned her down to the bed and fucked her hard, sheathing myself in her delicious wet warmth.

"Come for me, baby," I growled, leaning over her and kissing her roughly. As if on command, Ally began to twitch and gasp and shake. Her entire body trembled and I felt her tight pussy clenching around me, milking me, pulling my seed from my body. As the powerful orgasm crashed over my head, I loudly groaned into Ally's mouth, giving her a messy, sloppy, deep kiss.

The sensations of pleasure were still racing faintly through my body as I pulled out of Ally and flopped down next to her on the bed.

"Walker," Ally whimpered. She immediately clung to me, resting her head on my chest. I wrapped an arm around her and held her close, nuzzled the sex-sweat that had begun to bead on her forehead. A fragrant miasma of lust and arousal hung in the room and there was a not-small part of me that wanted to stay like that forever.

"I'll be right back," I said to Ally. Getting up from bed, I walked into the kitchen, still naked, and reached for the ring box that I'd left on the floor. I brought it back to Ally and sat on the bed, opening the box and showing her the ring.

"I had this designed just for you," I said.

Tears came to Ally's eyes and she nodded wordlessly as I took the ring in my hand and slid it onto her finger.

"I want to marry you," she said. "I ... I'm so happy right now."

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her.

Ally pulled away for a second. "Walker, how are we going to tell Sofie?"

I paused for a second. "We're going to tell her that you're joining our family," I said.

"And?" Ally asked.

"And that soon, she'll be a big sister," I added.

"Ally threw her arms around me. Her warm, sweaty naked body against mine felt so good and I could almost feel myself getting hard again.

"I want you again," I said, stroking her hair. "But we should get dressed. Julie and Sofie will be back soon."

Ally nodded. She flashed a wicked grin at me.

“What?” I teased. “You’ve only got that expression on your face when you’re up to no good.”

“It’s just,” Ally said, trailing off and flushing hotly. “I’m thinking about how Mr. and Mrs. Horne are going to flip the fuck out when they realize that I’m living with you now ... and that I’m having your baby.”

I snorted. “Don’t even worry about them,” I said.

“Oh, I’m not,” Ally said. She smiled at me as she pulled her panties on, then her shorts and her bra. As she lowered her shirt down and tugged it down to her hips, I felt such a surge of love for her. This pure rush, almost like a shock to the system.

“I love you,” I told her. “I’m so glad you came over here and heard me out, Ally.”

Ally pressed her lips together, then gave me a small smile. “I am, too,” she said. “I am, too.”

ALLY and I went into the kitchen where she dove into the snacks I’d bought for us. I poured the sparkling water for us and we toasted. Just as she finished eating, the front door swung open and Sofie ran inside.

“Daddy, we had so much fun!” Sofie yelled. She hurled herself at my leg and clung tightly, beaming up at me.

Julie followed her inside seconds later. Her eyes swept from me and Sofie over to Ally, who was standing by the counter and blushing hotly.

“Hi,” Ally said, striding towards Julie and offering her hand. “I’m Ally.”

Julie took her hand, glancing down at the ring.

“And before you say anything, I have to apologize,” Ally said shyly. “I ... I wasn’t fair to you at all the first time that we met, and I’m really sorry about that.”

Julie waved her free hand in the air. “Don’t even worry about it,” she said. “I ... I can’t promise that I wouldn’t have done the same thing, if it had been me in your shoes. It’s nice to meet you,” she added. “And congratulations,” Julie finished, taking another look at the ring.

Ally’s cheeks turned from pink to red. “Thank you,” she said.

“Walker, Sofie should be pretty tuckered out,” Julie said. “We stopped at Friendly’s for dinner, but she didn’t want anything besides an ice cream cone.”

“Is that right, kiddo?” I asked Sofie, scooping her up in my arms.

Sofie burst into giggles and buried her face in my neck.

“I should get going,” Julie said. She looked from me to Ally, then back again. “Congratulations, you two,” she said. “You deserve it.” To Sofie, Julie said: “Bye, sweetie. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Bye, Aunt Julie!” Sofie hollered. I set her down and she ran to Julie, giving her legs a tight hug before releasing her.

“Bye, sweetheart,” Julie said. She waved at me again, smiled at Ally, and then left.

As soon as she was gone, Sofie seemed to realize that Ally was standing there for the first time.

“Miss Ally!” Sofie exclaimed. “I didn’t know you were coming to play with me.”

Ally flushed slightly and giggled a little. “Well, I think your dad wanted it to be a surprise,” she said.

“Why don’t we all go sit together in the living room,” I suggested. Going to the fridge, I got a box of apple juice for Sofie and a fresh bottle of sparkling water to split with Ally. Sofie let out a cry of surprised delight, then darted into the living room and jumped onto the couch.

“Are you nervous?” Ally asked me in a voice for Sofie to hear.

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “I feel absolutely fine about this.”

Reaching for Ally’s hand, we walked into the living room together and sat down on the couch, on either side of Sofie.

“How was your day, honey?” Ally asked Sofie.

Sofie immediately wriggled onto her lap and Ally laughed, adjusting her position on the couch and putting her arms around my daughter.

“Aunt Julie and I went for ice cream,” Sofie said breathlessly. “And we went to the aquarium, and saw the fishes!”

“I love fish,” Ally said. “I especially love looking at the jellyfish, don’t you?”

“Uh-huh,” Sofie said. “They’re my favorite,” she added earnestly.

Just watching the two of them warmed my heart in a way that I had never thought possible.

“Sofie, we’ve got something kind of serious to talk with you about,” I said.

Sofie turned to face me. She was still squirming on Ally’s lap but finally she settled down when Ally began stroking her hair.

“What is it, Daddy?” Sofie asked.

“Miss Ally – *Ally*,” I corrected myself. “Ally is going to be living with us.”

Sofie blinked. “Why?” She twisted around in Ally’s lap and looked up at her.

“Because I love her very much,” I said. “And she loves me. And she loves you, too,” I added.

“It’s true,” Ally said. “I do.”

Sofie smiled. I could tell that she was struggling to process this – and it *was* big news – but she was doing so well, and I felt a surge of pride for my daughter.

“And,” Ally said, looking from me to Sofie. “Soon, you’re going to be a big sister.”

Sofie blinked in surprise. “I am?!”

“You are, sweetie,” Ally said. “Isn’t that exciting?”

Sofie blinked again, then nodded.

“Oh, yes,” Sofie said. She cocked her head to the side, and I hoped that she wouldn’t ask about where babies came from. Instead, she giggled.

“Do I get to pick if it’s a girl or a boy?” Sofie asked.

Ally burst out laughing. “No, honey,” she said. “But you’ll be a great big sister, no matter what.”

“Yay!” Sofie shrieked.

As the three of us burst into laughter, I finally had the sense that everything was going to be okay. There would no doubt be bumps in the road, but Ally and I had weathered worse before. And we’d made it through, stronger than ever.

“Sofie, Ally and I are going to be getting married,” I said, when the laughter had died down.

“And we have something very important to ask you,” Ally interjected. I looked at her in surprise and she smiled at me.

“What is it?” Sofie asked, suddenly solemn and serious.

“Would you be my flower girl?” Ally asked.

Sofie threw her arms around Ally, hugging her tightly.

“Yes!” Sofie yelled. “I can’t wait!”

A grin so wide that it threatened to split my jaw in two spread across my face and when I looked at Ally, I saw her smiling in the exact same way.

“Good, honey,” I told my daughter. “That makes me really happy.”

EPILOGUE

Ally – *One Year Later*

“Do YOU, Allyson Cane, take Walker Thompson to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Tears came to my eyes and I nodded.

The minister turned to Walker.

“And do you, Walker Thompson, take Allyson Cane to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Walker squeezed my hands, then nodded. “I do,” he said in a deep, husky voice that sent a bolt of love shooting through my body.

The minister smiled. “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” he said. To Walker, he added: “You may kiss the bride.”

Walker reached for me, putting a hand on the small of my back and pulling me close. He kissed me deeply, dipping me down low to the ground. With my eyes closed and his lips on mine, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. The salty scent of the sea air filled my nose and as our guests clapped and cheered for us, I felt a tear of happiness roll down my cheek.

Walker brought me upright once again, giving me one more gently kiss on the cheek. We turned to face our guests and I was grinning so wide that my face almost hurt. Walker lifted my hand into the air, and everyone clapped and cheered as we made our way down the aisle. Missy and Julie followed us, in matching mint-green dresses. Behind them, six-year-old Sofie

skipped and ran, throwing handfuls of pink and green flower petals from her flower girl basket.

I couldn't believe it. I was finally Mrs. Walker Thompson. It had only been a year since he'd first proposed, but so much had happened during that year. I'd moved into the house he shared with Sofie, stunning the Horne family. Mr. and Mrs. Horne had taken to ignoring me completely, but I did get to see Peter and Parker sometimes when they came over to play with Sofie ... and I was more than happy to learn that their new au pair was far warmer than their mother.

I'd gotten rounder and rounder as the months had gone on, finally giving birth in the early spring to a beautiful baby girl, Cecille, who was currently cooing and gurgling in Julie's arms.

"Come with me for a minute," Walker whispered in my ear.

"We have to go to our reception," I replied, pretending to be scandalized as he took me into his arms and kissed me.

"First, I want to be alone with my wife," Walker said. His voice turned my legs to jelly and I shivered with arousal as he kissed me again, nipping at my lower lip with his teeth. During the last few months of my pregnancy, I had felt so swollen and bloated that I hadn't even wanted to think about sex. And after giving birth, it had taken me a few weeks to get back to the point of feeling desirable. But now, my body was raging with pulsing hormones. I wanted nothing more than for Walker to drag me behind a palm tree and push my dress up around my waist, then take me and fuck me and claim me all over again.

"Walker," I whined. "We really can't leave our guests, it's rude, they'll ___"

"Shhh," Walker said. He put a finger to my lips and smirked at me. "Babe. We're in Hawaii. No one is going to care. They're going to drink and dance and have fun. They won't even know that we're gone."

I looked over my shoulder. Sure enough, the reception area was already laden with guests. Missy and Sofie were dancing in circles and Julie was swaying to the music with Cecille on her hip. I saw my parents, laughing and talking as a hotel staff member put floral leis over their necks and handed them each a tropical drink.

"Okay," I said.

Walker grinned at me. He laced his fingers with mine and led me away from the festivities, to the private bungalow that was the honeymoon suite for

the Ohana Royal Suites. He led me inside and kissed me deeply, urgently, pressing me against the wall and running his hands down my body. In my custom lace-and-chiffon wedding gown, I trembled and shook. I wanted him so much that I could hardly stand it, and I gasped as he pulled my skirt up and slid a finger inside of the blue panties that Missy had given me for luck that very morning.

Walker leaned in close. His fingers inched closer and closer to my pussy and I moaned, spreading my legs and thrusting my hips forward. I wanted him so much that I could hardly stand it.

“Allyson, you’ve never looked more beautiful to me than you do today,” Walker growled. He kissed me deeply as his fingers slid inside of me and I moaned into his mouth, sucking on his lower lip as his thumb brushed against my hard clit. Pleasure shot through me like lightning.

Walker pulled his hand away and led me to the bed, glancing over his shoulder at me as I followed. Just the sight of lust and love in his sapphire eyes filled me with more pleasure and happiness that I could articulate. I had no idea why I had gotten so lucky – the most gorgeous man in the world was my husband, and I was his wife. Forever. Walker loved me so much – Cecille was proof of that – and just being his made me feel happy and safe.

“Ally,” Walker growled quietly in my ear. His lips and tongue found my neck, sending shivers down my spine when he kissed me.

“I love you,” I whimpered, tilting my chin high into the air as Walker’s mouth moved lower and lower. When he pulled away, I nearly gasped.

“And I love you, Allyson,” Walker said. He took one of my hands in his and lifted it to his mouth, locking eyes with me as he kissed my palm.

In that moment, I knew that everything would be perfect. Sure, things wouldn’t always be roses. But Walker loved me. He would treat me like a princess for the rest of my life, and I would treat him like my handsome Prince Charming. Everything I had ever wanted had somehow magically become real.

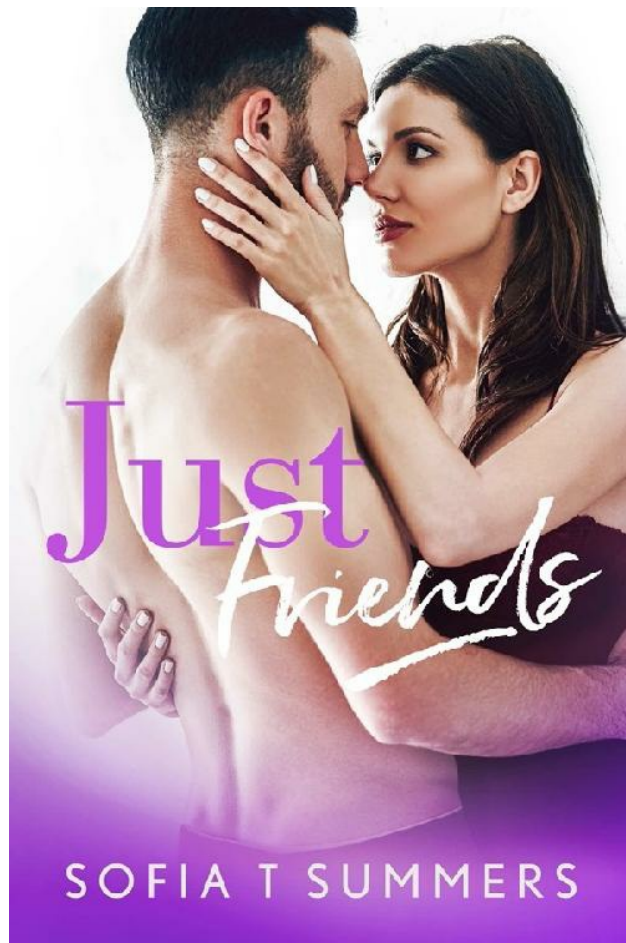
And now, I was ready to embark on the rest of forever.

*If you enjoyed **Just Pretend**, you are going to drool over Betty and Oz in **Just Friends** (Complete standalone, perfect HEA, loads of emotion and book two in this series)*

Fake marry my best friend. Throw in some “benefits.” What could go wrong? How about ten little fingers and ten little toes...

Get Just Friends [HERE!](#)

JUST FRIENDS (SAMPLE)



DESCRIPTION

Fake marry my best friend. Throw in some “benefits.” What could go wrong? How about ten little fingers and ten little toes...

Oz’s plan seems so simple.
Convince his grandma to let us live in her rent-controlled apartment by
telling her we’re married.
It shouldn’t be hard.
After all, we’ve been best friends for years and are already roomies.
We know each other almost better than we know ourselves.
But our fake marriage leads to other very *real* things.

Real touches that light my body on fire.
Real feelings that sear my soul.
And *real* consequences that will arrive in nine months.

If I tell him, it could destroy his dreams of rock and roll stardom.
Yet, if I don’t, I could lose the most important person in my life.

So, yeah, Oz’s plan *seemed* so simple...
In reality? Not so much.

PROLOGUE: BETTY

Teetering back and forth, my mind was following a fine line between tipsy and drunk. I couldn't sit up straight anymore. Anything could be laughable right about now, but that seemed like a good thing. I was drinking to get out my own head. I was on my fifth attempt, a pale ale that tastes like citrus and pine. It wasn't my first pick. It wasn't even my second.

Oz and I had already finished those.

I took another sip as I stared at Oz from across the bare oak table. Ambient window light cast a pale glow across his face, forcing me to see him. He had been my best friend for ten years now. Lanky Oswald Harris wasn't lanky anymore. He wasn't the teenage boy I once knew. He was twenty-five years old and chiseled like a stone sculpture.

The only time I ever left the country was on a spring break program in college. We were studying classical art in Florence, getting a guided tour of its finest museum. The keynote piece, Michelangelo's David, had been described as perfection personified. I wasn't sure when or how, but grown-up Oz looked just like that sculpture. He had the same Roman nose, the same serene expression, and the same perfectly sculpted torso.

"Do you want another one?"

Snapping back to attention, I realized Oz was talking, holding out his hand to take my empty amber bottle. Thinking there was still beer inside, I had my lips around the top. I was only drinking air.

"Um, yeah sure," I agreed, not knowing what else to do.

I couldn't think straight tonight. The feeling at least made sense when I was intoxicated.

Opening the door of the jade green fridge, the light illuminated the antique kitchen. It almost seemed too bright now.

Squinting himself, Oz asked in his familiar baritone, “Do you another pale ale or maybe a hard cider?”

“Let me try the cider,” I decided, not eager to drink more of the other.

Two new bottle caps were added to the pile on the counter. Handing me the drink, its cool condensation ran over my hand. It made me realize how warm I felt and how desperate I was for some cooling relief.

Oz sat back down across from me, drinking something dark brown. I took a sip of the tart cider, trying to ignore the heat growing inside me. Looking into his pools blue eyes wasn’t helping. They really did look like two perfect pools. I could almost smell the sunscreen and chlorine. His sun-kissed skin and sandy blonde hair didn’t help.

We had been swapping stories about summer camp, trying to remember names and faces from a lifetime ago. I wasn’t sure where that conversation had gone, but I needed it to pick up again. Letting my imagination wander tonight was too dangerous. According to the clock on the wall, Oz and I had been roommates for less than six hours. Things between us couldn’t fall apart so soon.

“What were you saying, Oz?” I asked casually, trying to hide how I was slipping.

He chuckled, “I was just talking about the wallpaper in this damn place. I don’t know how we’re going to live with it.”

“Oh, I bet we can make it work,” I assured him. “We have to figure out something if we ever wanna sleep again. I’m not interested into turning a zombie just yet. That wouldn’t be a good look for either of us.”

We both laughed, alleviating some of my anxiety.

“I don’t know how I lived in this place as a teenager,” Oz sighed. “I mean, the wallpaper has been here for *decades*. It can’t be suddenly getting to me now.”

“Ginny said it was put up before the first moon landing,” I remembered from dinner. “We should be in awe of the history.”

“That was some dinner.” Oz smiled, flashing a perfect pair of dimples.

“I know. I especially loved the part where your grandmother talked about conceiving your father.”

Oz squirmed instantly, and I couldn’t help but giggle like a child. Even drunk, it was easy to tease him. He would probably get me back later, but his

reaction was definitely worth it.

“I was thinking more about our kiss, Betty.”

He got me back sooner than I had anticipated. My spine stiffened as the memory from dinner came flooding back. I could still feel his handprints against my face. The taste of wine on his lips was more potent than the weak alcohol we were drinking now. This kiss had left me dazed and confused, but Oz couldn't know that.

He could never know that.

Casually flipping my hair, I questioned, “Oh? Why is that?”

“I thought I would get a better reaction from you,” he admitted. “That was some of my finer work.”

I shrugged. “I give it a B minus.”

Feigning shock, Oz clutched at his chest theatrically, acting as if I had shot him.

“You hurt me,” he lamented. “I deserve an A.”

“Well, you aren't getting one from me,” I teased back.

That part was true. I refused to admit how the air left the room. I would never say how my heart kept racing through the rest of dinner and dessert. It had been agony to keep my cool then, and I was hardly keeping it now.

“You should know I have received plenty of positive feedback on my kissing!” Oz boasted. “Some girls called me the best they've ever had.”

Leaning forward, I countered, “You got any receipts for that?”

Oz scoffed. I laughed again. The warmth inside my body had begun to burn, but I stopped caring. The cider seemed to be the final straw. I officially lost any sense of reason or logical thinking. I could only grin like the fool I was. It was a mistake to egg Oz on like that. His blue eyes flashed with the signal of a challenge.

That could only mean one thing.

“I bet I can get an A plus out of you, Betty Finch,” he swore to me, his eyes narrowing. “I bet I could make your knees go weak and your toes curl.”

With a wolfish grin, this handsome devil had rolled his dice. I had started the game without realizing it, and now fear was creeping up my spine. I didn't listen to the voices in my head. They told me to admit my bluff. They told to save myself, while I still had the chance. It would all be just a joke anyway. We would laugh about it later, but the memory of that kiss kept me from laughing now.

“I highly doubt that,” I lied.

“Really?” He pressed. “Are you scared I’ll ruin you for other men?”
Scoffing, I couldn’t roll my eyes hard enough.

“Oh my God, no.”

He didn’t give up. Amused now, Oz continue to prod me with his little remarks. His expression sparked with excitement.

“You are!” He insisted with a grin. “I can see it all over your precious little face. You’re *scared*.”

“I’m tired. I might be a little drunk,” I relented. “But I’m not scared of you. We’re just being stupid.”

“Then why aren’t you looking at me right now?”

Without realizing it, I was staring at the clock on the wall again. I couldn’t look back at him. I didn’t trust myself any longer, and I was getting annoyed. From the corner of my gaze, I could see Oz leaning toward me. His pool blue eyes were still gleaming.

“I’m trying to read what time it is,” I lied again.

“Then, what time is it?”

Squinting, I said, “Five minutes after two.”

“Okay, you look at me again, Betty.”

My temper flared. Every inch of my body was burning. There was no drink in the world that could quench this fire.

“Fine,” I huffed, glaring back him. “But don’t say I’m scared when you should be the one who’s scared. You’re the one with something to prove. Not me!”

His face softened, but the spark remained in his eyes. I had called his bluff, but Oz was nothing short of determined. He had always been a sore loser, just like I refused to be wrong. Drunk and stubborn, we stared at each other for a long moment, our faces inches apart.

“If you don’t care, Betty,” he pressed in a darkened tone. “Why not just get it over with? You’ve always loved being right.”

I opened my mouth, but I didn’t things through. If this was a trap, I didn’t just walk into it. I ran at full speed.

“Fine,” I shot back. “I dare you to prove me wrong!”

“Fine, I will!”

Oz had been lying in wait. I didn’t retreat fast enough to save myself. I was caught up in his hands and his lips. The kiss tasted like the malt chocolate stout he’d been drinking, and it was more intoxicating than any of the beers we shared. His strong hands tangled themselves in my hair, coaxing

me across the table.

It was just me burning anymore. It was the whole kitchen, the whole apartment. Every bit of air smoldered like hot coals, and Oz was the only oasis in the entire desert. This kiss was far better than first, but now I couldn't stop. I couldn't let go. I was desperate to keep his lips against me, willing to do anything to have my relief.

In a hectic rush of want, I found myself sitting on the kitchen table, wrapping my legs around his waist. His lips trailed away from mine as his hands left my hair. I could feel his tongue brush against my neck as he snatched at the buttons of my nightgown. There was no stopping him. Even if I wanted to end this madness, we were past the point of no return.

I was ready to watch the whole room burn down.

Daring to go farther, my fingers pushed past the waistband of his sweatpants. Every inch of Oz was hard as marble now. I traced the long length of it, wondering what it would be like to have Oz inside me.

"Hell," I heard Oz curse under his breath. "Betty."

I didn't know which one was more damning, hell or my name. Oz seemed to be thinking of them on equal terms.

"Oz, I-," I began to say, but there was nothing to be said.

All logic burned up in the atmosphere. Words were failing me. Only gasping breaths could escape my lips, while Oz moved his teasing mouth across my chest. I could barely keep hold of him as he nipped at my breasts, bringing out the best and the worst reaction. It was awful how much I enjoyed it.

If he hadn't braced his iron grip against my back, I might have melted right there. Molten hot, I was close to liquid anyway, and I was his to mold. I was his to tease and taste. Possessed by something I didn't understand, Oz devoured me like a starving man. I could feel him trailing down my torso, pushing me back against the table. Loosing my grip of him, my fingers searched for anything to clutch.

My hands found themselves making a mess of Oz's hair. My toes and fingers curled as his mouth moved past my navel down between my thighs. Biting my lip, my eyes shut tight upon impact. I was still feeling stubborn, and I still didn't want to give Oz a full sense of satisfaction. That still didn't stop a whimper from escaping. It couldn't stop my back from arching. My legs begged to wrap around his neck and keep him there forever.

Reeling from the ecstasy, every nerve-ending in my body exploded. I

couldn't deny it. No man had made me feel like this before. I was feeling so high that I was above my clouded judgment, giving a brief moment of clarity. My fingers relaxed their tight grip as I realized what we had just done. We had just played a dangerous game, but I couldn't tell who actually won.

Oz had proven me wrong, making more than just my toes curl. He went above and beyond expectations. If there was a downside to our actions, I couldn't see it now. Only time would tell us the repercussions, but that thought didn't worry me the most. There was one question that played on repeat. The answer seemed to be on the tip of my tongue, but my whole body was recovering from what just happened.

As I lay there wondering, Oz's face rested against my inner thigh, his ragged breath tickling my sensitive skin. He must have been on his knees down there. I couldn't believe it.

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