



losing it

SHAY VIOLET

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AT SOME POINT, THE WHOLE VIRGIN THING BECAME A SELF-FULFILLING prophecy. It became my identity.

Not “Paris Simmons, the girl from Greenville,” or “Paris Simmons, state champion hurdler,” or “Paris Simmons, Palmetto Women’s College honors graduate,” or even “Paris Simmons, the big sister of Miss Teen South Carolina, Paige Simmons.”

No, I just became Paris the virgin.

And it wasn’t even intentional. Sure, I was raised Southern Baptist, and in middle school I even signed one of those “purity pledge” cards, promising to remain a virgin until my wedding night.

But saving myself for my husband hasn’t been a thing in a long time, and unless it’s Christmas, Easter, a wedding, or a funeral, I don’t find my way into church very often.

I still believe, but my faith has become more of a personal thing, you know?

So, why am I still a virgin on the cusp of 30?

Am I ugly? Socially awkward? Lesbian? Asexual?

I’ll work backwards.

For somebody who might be asexual, my monthly battery bill is way too high. Yeah, I have a pocket rocket in my nightstand, and it gets quite a workout. My sex drive and appetite are either normal or high, from what I can gather.

I’m not a lesbian, I’ve never even kissed a girl, not even in college when I hung out with four of the baddest bitches in the world, my girls Ameerah, K.K., Savannah, and Sweet. If I was going to bat for the other team, I had my opportunities. Hell, my little sister did

pageants since she was little. I've been around plenty of beautiful, strong women, but they've never moved the needle for me.

I'll confess to being a bit of a nerd, but I still think I can relate to most people. But hey, if you can't rank your favorite Star Trek captains off the top of your head, then we may have a hard time finding common ground, anyway.

Oh, and you can try to convince me there's been a captain better than Benjamin Sisko, but if I agreed with you, then we'd both be wrong, so...

Alright, all that's left is that I'm just too damn ugly to have any man even take pity on me and give me a mercy fuck? Is that it? I suppose it's possible; my girls and I drove up to Orangeburg once for a fraternity party at South Carolina State since Sweet knew a guy there. A couple fraternity brothers were visiting from California.

We were all sitting on a big sectional, sipping our drinks, and there may have been some weed, there was definitely loud music, and one of the visitors went on a rant about how "All you southern girls are so dark, I can't wait to get home to L.A., back to my light-skinned honeys."

He then pointed right at me and said, "If you weren't so damn dark skinned, you'd be hella sexy."

Let that sink in. And yeah, he was black.

Apparently, I'm too dark for some brother's taste.

Of course, that had Sweet ready to fight, since she's the most hood of all of us, growing up in D.C., so she stood up and started cussing him, and calling him a bitch and everything, and it almost got physical.

Cooler heads prevailed, and the guy apologized, but it wasn't over. A little while later they slowed the music down and people started pairing off, hooking up and whatnot, and Savannah started slow dancing with the guy. Grinding up on him. Which, yeah, pissed me off, but it was a case of "keep your friends close, and your enemies closer."

When she saw her opening, Savannah gave the guy the biggest knee in the balls you've ever seen, and we ran to the car laughing before he recovered and wanted some payback. But the way she got him, totally unaware and with the force behind it, he might still be rolling around on the floor of that fraternity house to this very day.

Where was I? Oh yeah, maybe I'm still a virgin because I'm so damn ugly.

Okay, this could absolutely be the reason a guy would remain a virgin all through college and beyond. I get that. If a guy is repulsive, he's gonna have a tough time getting any.

For a girl, though? I'm not buying it. I've seen guys hit on literally anything with a heartbeat and a vagina. I recall one time a couple years ago when I had the flu, and I was the hottest mess on two legs. Hadn't showered in days, no makeup, dressed in sweatpants and a stained t-shirt with holes in it that I'd been wearing for three days, and I needed a few things from the store.

I drove myself to the Piggly Wiggly, practically laid myself across the back of the cart as I pathetically pushed it up and down the aisles, and I had two guys try to pick me up. And I don't mean they were being nice because I was sick, I mean it was, "Hey girl, where you going looking so *fine*?"

I ignored that idiot, but he persisted until he must have figured I was hearing impaired.

I looked like a corpse that should have been buried days ago.

"Hey baby, what's wrong, you don't feel so good?"

"Aha!" I thought. "A gentleman!"

I was in the vitamin section, looking for the biggest bottle of vitamin C in the store.

"I'm a little sick, yes," I answered weakly.

"I got the medicine you need right here, baby girl," he replied, grabbing his dick through his pants.

Seriously?

Truthfully, plenty of guys who are way beyond having to settle for anything short of what they consider to be a beautiful girl have asked me out, and some have even gotten me out. They just haven't gotten in my pants.

So not to sound conceited, I know I'm not ugly. I'm a beautiful, strong woman.

My virginity I blame— at least in part— on my middle school track coach, who told us that boys were only after one thing, and they could only drag us down, never build us up, and we had our entire lives to worry about them. So, in middle and high school, my grades and sports were enough reason to avoid guys and relationships. I didn't have sports in college, but my academic responsibili-

ties ramped up, so it was still easy to decline when guys approached me.

Once I graduated, I had the real world to worry about; finding a job, paying bills, etc. And eventually, the snowball had gotten so big it flattened any guy in my vicinity. A date or two, sure, but once it got serious enough that there was a societal expectation for clothes to start coming off? Uh uh, I was out of there.

I don't know how my friend Savannah did it. Or does it. Or whatever. She has confidence and swagger like Beyoncé, and she was like a guy when it came to hooking up; get them to make you feel good and kick them to the curb. Next!

But that's just not me. I'm not wired that way. But I've decided that once the curtain drops on the old year and the new one takes center stage; Paris the Virgin is being retired. Not that Paris the Hussie is taking her place, but one way or another, Paris Simmons is having sex.

And I've put my money where my mouth is. When my four best friends from college had our annual mid-December reunion at *Sadie's BBQ* back in Charleston, we each put \$200 in the pot and threw down our New Year's resolutions.

Mine was to lose my virginity.

We just had our annual June reunion where we spend a couple days in a rented house on or near the beach, eat at *Sadie's*, and catch up. Everybody was still in the running for the \$1,000 pot we each chipped in for regarding our New Year's Resolutions, although K.K. and I were the only ones "failing," since I was still a virgin and she had gained a bit of weight rather than losing any.

Now I'm back in Tallahassee, Florida enjoying the quieter summer campus that comes with working for a college. I'm in the admissions office at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, also known as Florida A&M, or FAMU. When most people think of a college in Florida's capital city, they think of Florida State, but FAMU resides on the highest geographic point in Tallahassee, so we spend our time looking down on the Seminoles. Go Rattlers!

One of the older women in the admissions department, Miss Claudia is always trying to set me up with her nephew, Jamichael. I've met him, and he's not exactly my type, but he's a former Mississippi State football player whose muscles have muscles, and he's

definitely the type who could help a girl out with a virginity problem.

Maybe I'll let him take me to dinner one of these days and let him win me New Year's resolution money with that big... body of his.

Until then, back to my pocket rocket and visions of Idris Elba.

"PARIS, I HAVE A SPECIAL ONE FOR YOU," MY CO-WORKER MISS CLAUDIA called out.

I rolled my chair around the side of my cubicle, so I could see her, and she handed me a stack of paperwork that appeared to be our standard FAMU application, but with several more pages attached than normal.

"What's this?" I asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me," she said with a laugh. "I've been at this since you were knee-high to a swamp gator, and I've never seen an application quite like this. I'm too old for that mess there."

"Okay, I'll take a look at it," I conceded. The fact that it was a paper application, filled out entirely in pen, was odd in and of itself. Most everything in our department was done on-line these days.

"Lucas Tucker" was the name atop the application. I skimmed over it, looking for anything out of the ordinary, and flags started popping up right away. For one thing, he was 32, which wasn't completely unheard of, but it was unusual. Second, he listed an address, with a suite number, in Topeka Kansas. And he'd gone to high school in Juneau, Alaska.

I couldn't recall ever receiving an application from Alaska. In case you didn't know, Florida A&M is an HBCU, short for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Alaska wasn't very high on the list of states of origin for any black college, and having done a little work in the alumni department, I couldn't recall receiving any

donations, mail, or requests for transcripts or anything originating anywhere in Alaska.

It got weirder.

Attached to the application were a series of credit-hours achieved and attained at other schools; four-year colleges and universities scattered all over the country. Capital University in Ohio. Chaminade University in Hawaii. Granite State College in New Hampshire. Louisiana State University. There were even a pair of HBCUs in there; Lincoln University from Missouri and Kentucky State. Tokyo International University in Oregon? Something called Sinte Gleska University in South Dakota?

Yeah, I could see why Miss Claudia wanted no part of this one.

The notion that the whole thing was some sort of elaborate hoax hit me when I noticed two separate references to a "St. John's College." One in Maryland and the other in New Mexico.

I rolled my chair back around the partition, so I could confer with my older, more experienced colleague.

"Miss Claudia is this a late April Fool's joke?" I held up Lucas Tucker's paperwork.

"I don't know what it is, exactly," she confessed. "But Lucas Tucker seems to be a well-traveled, erudite young man."

"Are all of these schools real? Sin-te G-Gleska?" I wasn't sure how to properly pronounce the alleged South Dakota university.

Miss Claudia just smiled.

"And there are really two St. John's Colleges, one in New Mexico and one in Maryland?"

"Indeed," she replied. "The one in Annapolis is the original. The campus in Santa Fe opened later, as a sister school. They use the 'Good Books' curriculum."

"Oh, of course." Whenever I spoke with Miss Claudia, I had to make mental notes of things to Google later. The "Good Books curriculum" would be one of those.

"And Sinte Gleska is a tribal college. On a Sioux reservation."

How the hell...

"I had to look that one up," she chuckled.

After working with her for six years, Claudia Daniels finally admitted to not knowing something. *Hallelujah!*

"I'm not even sure how to process this application," I admitted. "The classes and credits he's taken are a hodgepodge of subjects that

don't seem to be pointing toward any sort of conventional degree."

"Indeed!" Miss Claudia declared, using her favorite word for the second time in our brief conversation. "Best of luck to you, Paris." Her smile was warm and genuine. She could be infuriating, but she never meant to be.

I set the rest of my work aside and began assembling something resembling a traditional transcript for my mystery man.

His high school record back in Alaska was exemplary— a 4.0 GPA and a standardized test score far exceeding the averages for students I admitted to FAMU every day.

The most recent semester he'd completed was the spring one at Granite State College in Concord, New Hampshire, where he'd taken a course load that included a class covering New England's role in the Civil War, a study of 18th century New England literature, a generic calculus class, and a psych class called "Theories of Personality."

His grades, as was his custom, were perfect.

On a lark, I Googled his name, "Lucas Tucker," but I got no hits that seemed connected to my guy. There was a minor league baseball player in California by that name, but he wasn't the right one.

I went five pages deep in the search results before concluding it was a dead end. Social media didn't help, either.

I set Lucas Tucker's stuff aside and plowed through a pile of work I could actually complete, so I could feel like I'd accomplished something more in the eight hours at my desk than researching obscure colleges.

At the end of the day, I took one last look through his application when it dawned on me – Columbus, Ohio. Annapolis, Maryland. Santa Fe, New Mexico. Honolulu, Hawaii. Tallahassee, Florida. Those five disparate cities shared one thing in common – they were all state capitals.

I looked up the rest of the cities in which he'd taken college classes and the place he'd grown up- Juneau – and I knew I was on to something.

Sinte Gleska University was the only aberration; it was in Mission, South Dakota, just about seventy-five miles from the state capital, Pierre.

But it turned out to be the exception that proved the rule; believe it or not, it was the closest college or university to Pierre.

I was intrigued.

I WAS PROUD OF MY DETECTIVE WORK, BUT I STILL HAD QUESTIONS.

College isn't cheap. How was he funding this little tour of higher learning? It seemed more and more that maybe this entire enterprise was some sort of scam, that maybe he was staying one step ahead of the law, or the IRS, by constantly staying on the move.

Was his ultimate goal to receive a degree? Did he have a plan to assemble his assortment of classes into something meaningful?

Who was Lucas Tucker?

I shared my state capital discovery with Miss Claudia, hoping to be the rare person to impress her with my intellect.

"Miss Claudia, I think I figured out the Lucas Tucker guy," I said excitedly.

"Indeed?" she responded, rolling her chair out of her workspace to look at me. "Is it the state capitals pattern? I wondered how long it would take you to figure that out."

Grrrr.

"He's, what, trying to go to college in every state capital?" I guessed. "But how's he paying for it? New student loan every semester, or does he, I don't know, have an advance for a book or something?"

"Why don't you call him and ask him?" Miss Claudia suggested. "You'll have to talk to him eventually anyway, no time like the present."

Okay, full confession time. I am a little shy. I hate talking on the phone, especially to people I don't know. My advantage is that when I do have to speak to strangers, I generally have the upper hand,

since I'm the one holding the keys to the kingdom, so to speak. They're calling me because they want to get into Florida A&M, and I'm sort of a gatekeeper.



I LEFT work that afternoon and stopped at the grocery store to grab some pasta to make for dinner. I walked across the parking lot to Starbucks for my favorite iced green tea, and I noticed an unusual vehicle taking up several spaces nearby. It was a shiny trailer that looked like a silver bullet. Had it been midday, I imagined the glare would be blinding. As evening approached, it was still impressive. Two men were standing nearby discussing it, so I didn't feel quite so strange walking over for a closer look.

"I'm telling you, it's a '56," an old man in a retired military baseball cap said to his friend standing nearby.

"No, we used to have a '56 Airstream and that model was a little different. It's older. '54, maybe. Can you believe the way it shines?"

It was hooked up to a black pickup truck I can only describe as "muscular." It was a sleek, sexy truck, polished so that it looked as if it just left the lot. It said "F-450 Limited Edition" on the side.

"That's at least a \$90,000 truck," the man in the baseball cap said, loud enough that I assumed he was talking to me. "Depending on the features, it could be six figures."

"It's nice," I said. I wasn't normally any sort of car or truck girl; as long as it was dependable and had most of its paint, it was okay by me. Guys had tried and failed to impress me with their cars. I recalled my friend Savannah's brother, Sly, showing off the Italian sports car he bought with his first NBA contract, a Maserati or Ferrari or one of those, and thinking sure, it's nice, but my panties definitely weren't going to drop because of it, regardless of his on-again, off-again relationship with Ameerah.

But this truck and trailer held my interest. Maybe because the trailer looked like it could take off and fly away, it appealed to the sci-fi nerd in me. The truck was undeniably sexy. Muscles are sexy. And this truck had them.

I turned to walk to Starbucks, my curiosity quenched, when I heard the trailer door open behind me and the two old men begin

peppering the occupant inside with questions.

I turned to look back and saw a man climb out and stretch. His arms went way up over his head, causing his t-shirt to raise up from his jeans, revealing his stomach for just a moment. He had defined pelvic lines disappearing down into his jeans, carved to flank his six-pack.

I stopped in my tracks and my hand subconsciously clutched at the imaginary pearls around my neck.

Once the abs show ended, I let my gaze travel up.

And up some more.

He was at least 6'3, maybe taller. He wore a faded purple t-shirt that stretched across an impressive chest with sleeves that wrapped tightly around his biceps.

He had a light brown buzzcut and an easy smile. I watched him chat with the two older men who'd admired his trailer, and I wished I hadn't wandered quite so far away, since I was too far away to make out his voice distinctly. I placed him somewhere in his thirties, although he could have been in his twenties. There was an easy confidence to him.

Not wanting to appear as some kind of weird stalker or vintage Airstream trailer groupie, I continued walking to Starbucks.

Okay, I admit it, I stopped when I hit the little outdoor seating area and pretended to be waiting for somebody so I could take another look at Mr. Purple Tee Shirt.

He shook hands with the veterans and began walking.

Directly. Toward. Me.

I pretended to look at my phone, watching him walk in my peripheral vision. As he approached, he twisted his back and pulled his arms across his chest one by one to loosen up.

I could have watched him do stretching exercises all night.

When he hit the door, I got my first look at his butt, which pleasantly surprised me. Let's face it, lots of white guys have a serious case of flat-ass-itis, no matter how handsome or well-built they might be. It's just genetics.

Not this guy. He was just the right kind of plump back there, something to grab onto.

"Are you...?"

It took me a moment to realize he was talking to me. I hoped my eyes hadn't lingered too long on his backside. Fuck my life.

Mr. Purple Tee Shirt stood there holding the door, smiling at me. It was the first time I'd been near enough to get a good look at his eyes. Sparkling, deep blue.

Did I say fuck my life? Fuck that. *Fuck me any way you want you, stud!*

"Oh, thanks, yeah, in just a minute, my friend is meeting me here, sorry, go ahead."

"Guy friend or girl friend?" he asked. "Because if it's a guy, I'll go on in and let him get it for you. If it's a girl, I'll just stay here and hold the door to rack up double chivalry points. I'm trying to achieve knighthood, you know."

"I don't think it works like that, exactly," I countered.

"In medieval times? You're right. In modern times, however, I assure you, if I demonstrate enough courtesy, gallantry, honor, and bravery toward women, the local noblemen will have no choice but to grant me my knighthood."

"Slaying a dragon might help," I suggested.

"Indeed," he exclaimed, and I giggled.

"Is the notion of me slaying a dragon really *that* uproariously funny?" he asked with a grin. Two guys decked out in Florida State gear passed between us, leaving the coffee shop.

"No, it's not that at all," I protested. "It's just that I work with somebody who starts every other sentence with 'Indeed!' and it just reminded me of her."

"Sounds like a wise woman," he replied. "Is she a witch?"

"Not to my knowledge," I answered. "But she does seem to know pretty much everything. I've worked with her for six years and today was the first time I ever heard her say she had to Google something."

"She doesn't share an eye with her two sisters, does she?" His face filled with mock concern.

"No, she has two of her own," I laughed. "She's not a Stygian Witch." This guy was making me dig deep into my nerd vault. I hadn't thought about the Stygian Witches passing around their one shared eye and tooth in years. They're the ones who told Perseus how to defeat the Kraken in Clash of the Titans. He did it by killing Medusa.. Okay, sorry, I didn't mean to go off on one of my geek tangents.

Just be glad Mr. Purple Tee Shirt didn't reference Star Trek. You'd be here all day.

He gave me a hard look and started peppering me with questions.

"What's the only state capital with over one million residents?"

I thought a minute and flipped through them in my mind. It seemed like there must be more than one.

Alphabetically, Arizona came up early, and I was sure Phoenix was that big, so I blurted it out.

"Correct!" he said happily. "Goulash is the national dish of..."

"Hungary," I replied.

"Only one state in the United States grows coffee. Name it," he challenged me.

I immediately wanted to say Florida, since they seem to grow everything here, and lots of weird things that don't seem to grow anywhere else flourish in Florida, but I had never heard of a coffee farm or plantation in the six years I'd lived in the Sunshine State, and I'd traveled it pretty extensively.

I twisted up my face in thought.

"Cal... i... for..." I sounded out each syllable slowly. When he gave me the slightest scowl, I changed gears. "Hawaii!"

"Bingo. Damn, you're good," he said, leaning back so a pair of moms and one of their teenage daughters passed him to enter the shop. They all gave him overly friendly "thank yous" as they paraded past, and made no secret they were checking him out, but he never once glanced at them, keeping his gaze on me.

"The least they could do is tip the doorman," I observed.

"I know, right?" he responded.

"Most Grammy wins ever," I demanded.

He looked surprised. "I thought I was the one asking the questions."

"What fun is that?" I countered.

"Fun for me," he grinned. "But I'll play. Most Grammys? Hmm. Has to be... Quincy Jones?"

"Nope," I replied. "But he's tied for second."

"Half a point?"

"Zero points!" I answered.

More people stepped between us to enter the store.

"We ought to clear this door before the fire marshal shows up," he suggested.

"Probably so."

It was then that I noticed what his faded purple t-shirt said. "Capital University Women's Basketball Back 2 Back National Champions 1994 & 1995."

Capital University tickled something in my brain, but I couldn't place it right away. I dealt with transfers and applications every day and corresponded with other universities, but Capital wasn't in my usual circle.

I thanked him as he held the door and I passed below his outstretched arm.

"John Williams," he said while standing behind me waiting in line.

I shook my head.

"Stevie Wonder."

"Nope," I said and stifled a laugh. It was fun stumping the trivia whiz.

"Oh!" he declared. "I know this. Alison Kraus."

"Do you need a hint?" I asked with a playfully mocking tone.

"I need a Frappuccino," he answered.

It was my turn to order, and the barista greeted me by name and asked if I wanted my usual, which I did— an iced green tea made with lemonade, biggest one they had.

I pulled my debit card out and my new friend ordered over my shoulder and said he had both drinks.

"When strangers buy you drinks, they sometimes come with... *expectations*," I observed.

"This is coffee," he countered. "Or, tea, in your case, not a *drink* drink. And there are no expectations except that A, you enjoy it, and B, you tell me the answer to your Grammy question. Oh, and C, how you got the name Paris. Deal?"

"And your name?" the barista asked over my shoulder.

"Lucas," he replied, and we slid out of the way of the next people in line as she tried to hand him his change.

"Keep it," he said. I could have sworn he handed her a fifty-dollar bill and judging by the pile of cash in her hand and the smile on her face, it must have been.

“Thank you *very* much, Lucas,” she replied, and stuffed the money in the tip jar on the counter.

Lucas. Lucas. Why was the name familiar? Then it hit me.

Capital University. Lucas.

Lucas Tucker.

What the what?

Lucas Tucker was *white*? And hot? And in Tallahassee?

And buying me Starbucks?

WE SAT DOWN AT THE END OF THE COUNTER TO AWAIT OUR DRINKS.

I glanced over at him while he wasn't looking. Could this really be Lucas Tucker? According to his transcripts, he'd attended two HBCUs and a college for Sioux Natives. Along with a whole bunch of "traditional" schools, sure, but the whole thing was just weird. If it was true. If it was really him.

In six years working at FAMU, I could recall processing applications for four Caucasian students, and two of them were kickers for the football team, one from Finland. I recalled thinking he was in for a bit of culture shock at Florida A&M, but the last I checked, he was on course to graduate with honors and he was engaged to a cheerleader from Miami.

"Well?" Lucas turned toward me and asked.

"Okay, working backwards, since I don't have my drink yet to enjoy it, I got my name from my mother."

"I might have guessed that much on my own," he said with a grin. "Why Paris?"

"She always wanted to travel and didn't think she'd ever be able to afford it. Paris was the city she most wanted to visit, and in case she never got there, she'd at least have me. That's the story as I know it. Why are you Lucas?"

"I wish I knew," he answered quietly. "If I ever met my parents, I'd love to ask them."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't--"

He stopped me with a gentle hand on my forearm. "You couldn't have known. And you certainly aren't one of them, so you have

nothing for which to apologize. Well, actually you do have one thing. I'm going to lose my shit if you don't tell me the answer to your Grammy question."

The barista gave us our drinks and thanked Lucas again for his generosity.

"You could always Google it," I said, and took a sip of my drink. I gave an exaggerated "Ahh" with a smile when I swallowed. "Fantastic. Enjoying it very much."

He flashed a thumbs down. "Google? Perish the thought. That's cheating."

He furrowed his brow in thought. "It isn't Prince, although it ought to be..." He mused.

"Correct and correct," I said.

He took a sip of his drink and held it up and tipped it toward the barista to acknowledge a job well done.

"I'll give you the answer if you answer another question first."

"Okay," he said slowly, as if trying to figure out my angle.

"Why Florida A&M?"

He looked puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"You're Lucas Tucker, right? From Alaska? Man of mystery, on a mission to attend a school in every state capital?"

He looked around, as if maybe he'd been tricked somehow or was on a reality television show and there were hidden cameras he hadn't spotted.

"You have me at a disadvantage," he finally said, after a long sip of his drink. "You seem to know everything about me and all I know about you is that you're wicked smart, like green tea, are named Paris, and have extraordinarily beautiful eyes. Beyond that, you're a blank to me. It's unfair, no?"

He set his elbow on the counter and leaned his head onto his hand as he looked at me expectantly.

"I'm sorry," I said. *Wait, did he just call me smart and beautiful? Hold up.* "I didn't know who you were until just a minute ago. Or didn't know you were somebody I already knew. Or, let me back up." *Get it together, Paris. It's not like a guy has never given you an unsolicited compliment before.*

My self-talk was going four million miles a minute and my heart was racing to keep up.

"I work at FAMU. Florida A&M," I explained. "In the admissions office. I was handling your paperwork just this afternoon. You were the talk of the office, to be honest."

"But how did you find..." he began.

"That's just it," I said. "I didn't. I didn't have any idea you were even in Florida, much less here. I was on my way home from work, to get dinner from the store, and on my way across to get my tea and I saw your trailer. People were stopping to look at it, and it's pretty eye-catching, you must know, so I came over to see it, too. Then outside, at the door, we started chatting, right? I didn't know your name."

"When you told her your name," I aimed the straw of my cup at the barista. "I put two and two together. Don't see many Capital University shirts in Tallahassee."

He looked down at his shirt and laughed. "That's the weirdest story I've ever heard, but it's too bizarre to be made up."

He extended his arm. "I'm Lucas Tucker," he said as I shook his hand.

"Paris Simmons," I replied.

"Mucho gusto, Paris," he said, telling me in Spanish that it was nice to meet me.

"Igualmente," I replied. "Likewise."

"You know, with all the semesters of first-year Spanish I've taken, you'd think I'd retain more of it than I do," he said.

"Not all of us have a gift for languages," I said. "I don't. At least not compared to my friend Sweet. I've lost track of how many languages she speaks. A dozen, maybe?"

"You have a friend named 'Sweet'?" he asked.

"Tyesha is her real first name, but she's from D.C. and when I first met her in college, she introduced herself as 'Sweet T from D.C.'" I explained. "It got shortened to just Sweet before long, and that's all I've ever known her as. If somebody called her Tyesha I'd have to think for a minute before I knew they were talking about her."

"What college?" Lucas asked.

"One you'll never get into!" I teased.

"Don't be so sure," he said. "I can be pretty persuasive."

"Well, you'd need gender-reassignment surgery first, and I'm not sure you're that committed. Or at least I hope you wouldn't be, but,

forgive me, because what a waste that would be."

As soon as I said it, I regretted it. It was way too flirty.

Nice job, Paris.

"What I mean is--"

His laughter cut me off. "No worries, Paris. I look terrible in a dress."

He composed himself. "Was it Spellman?"

"No, Palmetto Women's College."

"Well see, there you go. That's in Charleston, not Columbia, so it wouldn't fit my criteria anyway."

I was a bit surprised he knew PWC. Most women, even women of color, didn't know PWC right off the bat, unless they were from South Carolina or Georgia.

"Georg Solti," I said. "Hungarian composer. 31 Grammys."

"Indeed!" Lucas said, and slapped the counter. "I knew that. Dang."

"But I'm impressed that you knew PWC," I said. "It's pretty obscure, in the grand scheme of things."

"You may not have guessed it, but I'm a bit of a nerd," Lucas confessed.

"No!" I said, feigning shock and horror.

"Guilty," he replied, holding his hand up. "And one of the things I am a super-nerd about are colleges and universities. Not sure why, exactly. Maybe it was a book at the library."

"Must have been quite a book to set you on this path."

"It was one of those generic 'Guide to American Colleges and Universities' type of books. An old edition. Probably donated in a box of books left over from an estate or something."

It was my turn to look puzzled.

"I grew up in a group home. In the old days it would have been called an orphanage, I guess, right? But it was called a group home back there in Juneau. I had a few foster families, but none that ever worked out. In the group home we had a small library, mostly donated stuff, and I read it all. But I got kind of obsessed with that college guide. I'm probably the only person who ever read one of those things cover to cover, like it was a novel."

I nodded. I was extremely familiar with those books, and picturing a young Lucas painstakingly reading each page was both sad and hilarious.

"I never left Juneau. I'd never been *anywhere*. So, books, that book specifically, were my way out. And the internet, of course, but we all shared one slow desktop, so it wasn't like I could surf to my heart's content.

"When I turned eighteen, I had to leave the group home, so I did odd jobs and stuff, took a few classes at the local community college that I could afford, but I was pretty much stuck dreaming. But I switched from the pitiful little library at home to being able to go to real libraries whenever I wanted, and eventually I saved up for a laptop, and here I am."

It was an inspiring, romantic story, but it didn't explain the truck and trailer outside, the endless travel, all the tuition.

But I had pried enough already.

"I just realized, I have ice cream and meat in my trunk that aren't going to last forever if I don't get them home," I said.

I wanted to give him an opportunity to get off the hook, so to speak. Or maybe it was my own inevitable defense mechanism kicking in.

I could watch Lucas's delicious mouth move all night, look at the rippling of his forearms, listen to his engrossing tales. But some little part of me was trying to find a way out. Paris, the eternal virgin, couldn't afford to let a man get too close.

Especially a man like Lucas Tucker.

"I have a freezer in my Airstream," Lucas offered. "Unless I'm just boring you, in which case I apologize, and I take no offense in you needing to go."

"No, not at all," I answered, too quickly, I feared. "I just didn't want to pry into your personal life, didn't want you to feel pressured to talk about stuff from the past that was none of my business."

Lucas looked at me a while, and I could almost see the scales in his mind weighing what he'd say next.

"What the hell," he muttered to himself. He leaned in a smidge closer to me, so he could speak softly enough that only I would hear him. "Paris, file this in the 'socially awkward' drawer, because I know that's what I am, but I'm going to say it anyway and hope for the best. I'm sapiosexual. I'm guessing you know what that means, or else it probably wouldn't apply in this scenario?"

I did know. A sapiosexual was someone aroused by intelligence. Turned on by smart people, so to speak. I nodded my head.

"Well, that's me. I love brains. Smart girls are my thing. But I'm also a guy, slave to my eyes and my libido and everything that goes with it. So pretty girls also get my attention. But in the grand Venn diagram, the little crossover section of girls I've met who are both crazy smart, uproariously funny, and drop-dead gorgeous is tiny. Teensy tiny. Small." He placed his thumb and index finger an eyelash apart.

"And yet just today, this afternoon, right now, out of all the Starbucks in all the strip malls in the world, here you are."

This was starting to sound like to corniest come-on of all-time. But it was equally earnest and sincere, in a way only someone possessed of Lucas Tucker's childlike vulnerability could be.

"First of all, thank you for the flattery, deserved or otherwise," I replied. "But if you've been going on a tour of schools, all over the country, you must have run into lots of smart people. And I'm on a college campus every day. There are pretty girls everywhere. I find it hard to believe that I'm some unicorn."

"Pretty girls," he said, back to his regular conversational volume. "Big circle." He held his arms up. "Smart girls. Just as big a circle. *Funny* girls? Significantly smaller circle. Where the three overlap?" He made a circle with his forefinger and thumb. "So, yeah, there are more than one of you out there, but not that many. Or maybe my idea of beautiful isn't as generic as some guys. I don't know. But you're it, and, oh my God. I just realized, in all my insane rambling, I never even asked if you had a boyfriend. Or were married. What shade of red am I right now?"

"Somewhere between fire engine and... the original cover of *The Catcher in the Rye*," I joked. "But it's cute. And I'm single."

He exhaled like a blowfish.

"Whew. What a relief. Fantastic. I see three options. One, you move your food from the trunk into the fridge in my Airstream. Two, we go back to your place and you put it in your fridge. Three, you take your stuff home, then meet me elsewhere so we can have a drink or dinner or whatever it takes for me to spend more time with you."

I intentionally mulled it over for longer than I needed to, just to make him squirm. "There's a fourth option. I thank you for the tea and go home and we call it a night."

He visibly deflated.

"Kidding!" I reassured him. "A joke!"

He wiped his brow.

"I would love to see the inside of that spaceship you have parked outside. But how am I to know that you aren't some sort of serial killer who's trying to lure me to my doom? Or at the very least just get me in there to get my clothes off?"

He looked genuinely surprised.

"Paris, I promise, I would never..."

I was kinda hoping you would, I wanted to say.

"I am going to take a picture of your truck, and your trailer, and you, and send them to a friend. Just in case. Deal?"

He rubbed his head with both hands as if to fix his hair, which was too short to need brushing anyway.

I snapped a picture of him and sent it to my friend Savannah, working as a nanny in California:

In case I disappear, I was last seen with this man. Lucas Tucker. I'll send you pictures of his truck in a minute. Love ya!

She responded instantly. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, girl!"

"That leaves things pretty wide open, don't you think?" I replied.

"The only thing wide open ought to be your thighs. He's HOT!"

I laughed and tucked my phone into my bag.

"Has the cavalry been notified?" he asked.

"The cavalry, the National Guard, and even a Texas Ranger," I responded.

I waved goodbye to the barista and we headed to the parking lot.

We approached his truck and trailer and I took pictures of both, including Kansas license plates on both.

"How does Kansas play into this?" I asked.

"Location, location, location. It's smack dab in the middle of the country, and this is home, so it makes sense to register it as centrally as possible. I pass through once or twice a year and keep everything current. Get my mail delivered to a service there, too, but you probably knew that."

I nodded. I walked over to my car and gathered my groceries. My pint of *Ben & Jerry's* strawberry cheesecake was soft and covered with condensation, but it would refreeze. The ground beef seemed fine.

He was waiting with the door to his trailer open when I returned. I stepped inside and gasped.

I'D NEVER BEEN INSIDE AN AIRSTREAM TRAILER, SO I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT to expect, but it wasn't what I found.

It had a large flat-screen television, and everything else you might expect in a high-end luxury hotel room, all crammed inside a trailer. The kitchen was small but had every modern amenity. I was also half-expecting some sort of messy college student slash bachelor pad, but the entire place sparkled, and everything was organized, neat, and tidy. There was even a set of bookshelves, filled with hard-covers, that ran low to the floor extending down the opposite wall, below the television.

"Wow," I managed. "This is way nicer than I thought it would be. Than I thought it *could be*, I mean. It's amazing. I've never been inside one of these before."

"Madam, this is the *Flying Cloud* model," he said in a faux posh British accent. "It's all pretty much top of the line, I got it decked out as well as I could. It's home, so I wanted it to be comfortable, but this thing is going on being seventy years old, so it needed to be modernized a bit."

"It's incredible," I said. He took my bags and put everything cold where it needed to be to keep.

"May I?" I stood next to the couch and pointed down at it.

"Of course. Mui casa and all that."

"If you're traveling, you could do a lot worse," I observed.

"I'd cook more if I had more space," he said. "And the shower isn't like a real shower. But when I want one or need one, I just treat myself to a hotel anyway."

"Where do you sleep?" I asked. *Where do you fuck?* Is what I meant.

"Up there," he pointed to a small loft toward the back. "I had it customized a bit. Probably killed the resale value, but whatever."

He climbed the ladder to the bed and moved and pressed some buttons. A section of the metal roof retracted, revealing a window. It had small sections that slid open with screens to keep bugs out.

"I like seeing the stars and I like a breeze," he said. "It's tempered glass, totally safe."

I stepped up onto the ladder for a look.

"I want one!" I declared. "This is so cool!"

"It wasn't cheap," he said. "First, I had to find one, which isn't easy. I liked the look of this model, this year. Bought it from the original owners, in Oregon. Then I had to have it shipped to a company in Wisconsin to have all the work done. It turned out better than I hoped it would. But altogether from the time I started looking for one to the time they handed me the keys and it was done was over a year."

"Okay, totally none of my business, although it might become my business at some point if you still want to get into FAMU, but how do you pay for all this? Are you robbing banks in each city as you travel?" I hoped I was joking.

"Money's not a problem," he answered, hopping down from his bed. He walked over to the fridge and pulled out a pear and a bottle of water, offering each to me, which I declined with a smile. He sat down at his dining table and took a big bite of the fruit and had a drink.

"Nobody knows this," he began. "And I mean *nobody*, okay?"

I feared what he was about to confess. It seemed like Mr. Perfect might be on the verge of unraveling before my very eyes.

I nodded my head that I understood.

"Totally on a lark, sheer luck, I got in early on Bitcoin. And I mean *early*. When it was less than a penny a coin. I was working construction in Juneau, trying to save up for a car. I was riding a bike back and forth to work. Sometimes clear across town. Like getting up in the middle of the night and riding two hours in the dark to a job site. And you can probably guess it gets pretty cold there.

"I was at the library on a Sunday just surfing around on the internet, doing nothing in particular, and I stumbled on some reference to

this new thing called Bitcoin. I read what I could on it, which at the time was almost nothing, and I decided to put my nest egg into it. Dumb, right? Like what kind of an idiot puts all his money into something like that?

"Turns out it wasn't quite so stupid after all. I cashed out a bit after a couple years, then a little more, but for the most part I left it alone and it just grew and grew and grew. I pretended it wasn't there and just worked whatever overtime I could and saved money, 'real' money, while I had this 'imaginary' fortune sitting there. It was like having a winning lottery ticket in a frame on the wall and biding my time, but the one I had, the prize just kept getting bigger all the time."

I tried to do the math in my head. I didn't know how much he started with, or even exactly what Bitcoin was worth now, but I recalled it going over \$10,000 per coin, and figured if somebody had bought \$300 worth when it was a third of a penny it would now be worth... yikes.

Nine hundred million dollars? A billion? More?

"Are you trying to figure it in your head?" he asked with a chuckle. "It's a lot. Way more than makes any sense or than I ever deserved, but it's a big number. Really big."

"Most guys would buy an island, stock it with supermodels in bikinis, and never come back," I observed.

"Ha. Yeah, I guess if I walked around with an 'I'm a secret billionaire' t-shirt on, I'd attract lots of attention."

My jaw wanted to drop but I fought to keep it in place.

"But I'm picky, I guess. The stuff I told you in Starbucks? About the kind of girls I'm attracted to? All true. But now you can figure out how I bypass so many admissions offices and clerks and such. Offer to fund a scholarship or four, and you can sign up for PhD level classes if you want to. Even at a Native American college or a historically black university. May not work at PWC, though."

"My alma mater is always begging for money," I said. "I'm sure they'd be happy to take your donation, even if they wouldn't let you enroll. Besides, if a hot guy was waltzing around campus, the girls couldn't go to class in their pajamas anymore. That's one of the huge draws of a women's college."

"Tell me one of your secrets, Paris," Lucas said, getting up to toss the remains of his pear in the trash and slide next to me on the

couch. "Since you know my best one now."

He had demonstrated the value of taking big risks, both with the Bitcoin story and by bringing up his sapiosexuality. The one secret germane to whatever our potential relationship might become was easy.

"I'm a virgin." I confessed.

I didn't know what to expect, as I'd never told somebody I'd known for so short a time such a personal secret (everybody who knew me well knew, but that didn't extend to hot guys I had only met an hour ago).

"Really?" he asked. I nodded.

"Huh. Wouldn't have guessed that. Would you have guessed that I am, too?"

This time my jaw really did fall open.

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?" I ASKED. "YOU AREN'T PATRONIZING ME?"

He reached over and took my hands in his. "Paris, I grew up in a group home. I grew up with my nose buried in books, trying to avoid the world. I worked construction for years, with no car, renting a little cabin out on the edge of town with no running water.

"Where do you think a woman, or a relationship would have fit into that picture?"

"Yeah, but you've been on your college tour now for years. You've got tons of money. You're... I'll just say it, you're hot. Why in the world wouldn't you have been banging coeds at every stop?"

"That's just it," he explained. "I'm never in one place for more than a few months. Maybe if I'd been sexually active before, it would be no big deal. But I haven't been, and I don't want it to be... *meaningless*. I want it to be special. I don't mean bed of roses, romantic movie special, I know that's not realistic, but I don't want to be somebody's one-night stand, not at this point. I'm not saying I need to wait for marriage, just that if I waited this long, into my thirties, well, I didn't wait for *nothing*, you know?"

Although the roads we'd taken were different, we'd arrived at virtually an identical place. His stance on his own virginity and potential first time was almost exactly the same as mine.

"Makes perfect sense to me," I said. "That's just how I feel. Most people assume I'm super-religious and waiting for marriage or that I'm asexual or lesbian or a million other things than what I really am, which is just Paris. Paris the virgin. But not necessarily because I want to be, I've just built this thing up in my head by now, and it

seems to have value. Like your Bitcoin. If you dumped it when it hit ten dollars, what's the point? Quick thrill, nice little pile of cash, but then what. You waited, and now it's a fortune."

"I like the way you put that," he replied. "Perfect analogy."

He still held my hands in his, and his fingertips were tracing little patterns on my palms. He'd scooted closer, to where I could smell him, just a hint of whatever manly deodorant he wore and that faint musk that made him a *man*. His touch was making me tingle, and I pressed my thighs hard together to make it stop. Or to make it feel better. I wasn't sure which.

Suddenly, I needed to get home and get my little friend out of the nightstand drawer. Like, immediately.

No, you don't.

My self-talk took a wicked turn.

You need to climb on top of this magnificent man's big dick and ride it until your first time is worth that same billion dollars as his Bitcoin.

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said, lifting his left hand from its grip on mine and the back of his hand caressed my cheek like a butterfly's wings. "But if fate or the universe or whatever you want to call it didn't put us both in this parking lot earlier, what else would you call it?"

"Serendipity," I said breathlessly, my heart pounding in my chest.

The next thing I knew, we were kissing.

I'd been kissed before, but not like this. His hand slid around to the back of my head, holding me where he could have me, taste me, *consume* me. I clutched at his biceps and his forearms and kissed him back. The passion of the moment was overwhelming. I moaned and mewed softly into his mouth and tried to keep from trembling, which was useless.

I could feel him shaking as well, the muscles in his arms not only rippling, but shaking. The kiss broke and we were both panting.

We made eye contact and gasped "Wow" simultaneously.

"That was..." we both said in unison, then we dissolved into giggling.

We leaned into one another, half hugging and half collapsing, laughing for lack of knowing how else to express our mutual joy. And desire. Or so I hoped.

I wiped a tear from my cheek and coughed, taking a deep breath and sitting up tall to refocus.

He did likewise, and we sat just like that, staring into each other's eyes intently.

Our hands joined in front of us, our knees touching only just as we sat on the couch. I edged forward as he did, and our mouths met again, this time deeper and more slowly. It was a soulful kiss, and our hands released and moved to each other's faces.

There was no urgency, the kissing was wandering, meandering, exploratory. I captured his bottom lip gently between my teeth and pulled him back to me when he tried to ease back to catch his breath. His tongue darted into my mouth. We made out like teenagers, but with a passion and confidence in our bodies that only adults could muster. When one of us got going too quickly, or became too heated, the other would pull back and bring things off the boil. The control let everything build slowly and build it did.

The temperature in the Airstream seemed to climb twenty degrees, then thirty, and I felt reason abandon me and a primal, animal side rattling its cage, demanded to be set free. A great pressure inside me threatened to burst at any moment.

"Paris," Lucas struggled between gasps. "I want--"

I couldn't wait for him to finish his sentence. Another heartbeat would be too long.

"I do, too," I replied as our foreheads touched gently and our eyes met again.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

The time for words was past. I responded with action. In one fluid motion, my top was on the floor of his trailer, followed by my shoes. His eyes widened as he drank in my naked shoulders and collarbone and down lower, to where I was glad I'd happened to wear my nicest bra that day, the green, lacy one. It fit me perfectly, creating maximum lift and depth of cleavage. I didn't have breasts like K.K. or Savannah; mine were more modest, probably due to my years of training my body for track, but I was proud of what I did have, and Lucas seemed appreciative.

He stared in wonder, and I reached back and as gracefully as I could manage, removed my bra and tossed it onto my top.

I took Lucas's hand in mine and placed it on my breast, biting my bottom lip as his thumb dragged slowly across my nipple, pulling it down and then releasing it so it sprang back up. He repeated the motion, making me whimper and squirm in my seat as his free hand

found my other nipple and grazed it with his knuckle. I felt as though I might come just from that alone if he kept it up.

There were times I'd pinch and tug at my own nipples when into a particularly feverish masturbatory frenzy, but it had never felt as good as Lucas just barely touching them.

I broke the trance my breasts had placed him in by reaching for the bottom of his purple t-shirt, and he obliged me, raising his arms up and letting me pull it off.

Shirtless, he looked even better than I'd have hoped he could. Broad shoulders framed powerful pecs that tapered down to the wonderful six-pack I'd so briefly and torturously glimpsed outside just a short time ago.

For the first time, I noticed that his dick was straining against his pants, tenting awkwardly. It needed to be set free! Immediately!

"I want it. I want to see it, I want to taste it, I want to feel it," I said, glancing down at the bulge. *Geez, Paris, slutty much?*

"Paris, you're so beautiful," he whispered as he stared at me, his eyes moving from mine back down to my breasts and back up to my neck.

He leaned forward and kissed my throat, forcing me to throw my arms around his shoulders and cradle the back of his head in my hands.

His mouth moved from the side of my neck around to the front of my throat and down across my collarbone, and I leaned back to invite his mouth lower.

My nipples were fairly screaming for more attention.

He gently lifted my left breast to his mouth, swirling his tongue around my swollen bud before sucking on it firmly.

"Oh... *fuck*," I moaned, any pretense at civility long gone.

I held his head in place, never wanting him to stop.

He became more aggressive, his teeth capturing my nipple as his tongue bathed it. Mini shockwaves pulsed through my core, paving the way for what to come.

Lucas withdrew, just long enough to switch to my other breast, and he repeated his performance, much to my delight.

My hand fell between my thighs. I needed some sort of pressure there to quench the fire that threatened to engulf both of us, the trailer, truck, and all of Tallahassee.

When I applied pressure, my breath caught in my throat, a choking moan that surprised him.

"Are you alright? Did I do something wrong?" Lucas asked in the most adorable tone of voice.

"You're doing *everything* right," I purred back.

He returned to my breasts, and I reclined back and basked in the way he lavished attention on them.

As he worked, I found the buttons on the pants. I had work of my own to do and I undid them, wriggling them over my hips, down, and off. All that remained were the green silk panties that went with the bra. Thank God. I have some underwear I'm not particularly proud of; much more functional than anything else. These were actually sexy, I thought. I hoped.

Lucas's hand slid down my bare thigh, around the bend of my knee and down the back of my calf. He reversed the motion at my ankle, making his way back up the front of my shin and around the back of my thigh, slowly, as he kissed, sucked, and licked my breasts.

"You," kiss, "have," kiss, "the sexiest," kiss, "legs," kiss, "ever," he said as he began to cover ribcage and around my belly button with kisses.

His big hands continued massaging my legs.

I was beyond being able to carry on a conversation or even compose a sensible sentence.

"Your dick," I practically begged. "Please, Lucas."

He stood up and fumbled with his belt, finally yanking it free of his jeans completely and casting it aside.

As he undid the buttons and unzipped, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. No man had seen my pussy before. Ever.

It felt like the first time I jumped off a diving board or the first time I hit a high hurdle going full speed. Once I slipped my panties off, I'd be in mid-air over the hurdle, hoping I'd cleared it. I'd be suspended above that crystal blue water three feet below, hoping I would shatter into a million pieces when I hit it as six-year-old me feared.

My panties caught on my left ankle just as Lucas pulled the waistband of his boxers clear of his cock.

I hoped I didn't look too ridiculous lying there naked and staring.

His dick looked enormous to my inexperienced eyes. It bobbed in the air obscenely, the tip glistening.

I sat up and reached for it unabashedly, taking it in one and then both hands, marveling at how something could be so hard and yet so soft at the same time. It was warm and had heft to it. It pulsed in my hand. I wanted to have it nearby always and forever and be able to reach out and touch it, play with it, *fuck* it, whenever I wanted to. I was immediately envious of all men that they had such a toy they had access to 24/7 to pull on and stroke and hold and dammit it felt so good in my hands.

I looked up at him and found his head tossed back as my hands slipped and slid along his shaft, lubricated by the clear droplets oozing out the end. He groaned a deep, manly rumble, and I shuddered.

I suddenly realized I'd completely forgotten the rest of him, and I apologetically reached below his dick with one hand to feel a set of balls for the first time.

If having a dick in my hands was fun, Lucas's balls were another level entirely. I suppose I'd never spent any time considering what they'd feel like, but they were tight and full, the skin different from his dick, and I squeezed them softly, making him make a whimpering sound that went directly to my clit.

I squeezed again, harder, and his glazed eyes opened and fixed on mine. "Easy," he gasped.

"Sorry," I said, caressing them softly, which changed his demeanor instantly. He trembled and a large dollop of what I'd later come to know as precum oozed out of him.

"Can you never ever stop holding my dick and balls in your hands, please?" he said between moans. "It feels so fucking good."

I stood up, still holding him in both hands, and started kissing him again. He held my face in both hands and kissed me desperately, and I inhaled his moans as I tested what felt best to him. I found that swirling my palm in circles on the end of his dick got the strongest response, so I did that more frequently and speed as he got more and more wet.

I was soaked.

He pulled away from our kiss despite me trying to follow his mouth with mine.

"Paris, you're going to make me come. You have to slow down," he pleaded with me. I gave him a firm squeeze and one last rub

across his head and his arms encircled my shoulders to keep him upright.

I had a volcano ready to erupt between my thighs.

He seemed much too large to have him slamming into me like I imagined sex going, so I suggested he sit down on the couch instead. I wanted to maintain some sort of control of what was going to happen to my body, even though my pussy was screaming in my ear that it needed to be filled and pounded.

He sat back on the couch, arms spread like wings, smiling.

"What?" I asked, suspicious of his grin.

"I thought I was lucky with the stupid Bitcoin," he said. "But I never in a million lifetimes thought I'd ever be lucky enough to be with somebody who looks like you. You're glorious."

I straddled him and kissed him, his hardness touching my stomach.

My hand reached down between us and positioned him at my opening. Our eyes locked and I lowered myself inch by excruciating inch.

I was a virgin in the technical sense of the word, but I had experience with my toys and fingers. I was no tight ingenue who'd bleed at the first introduction of some skinny little penis.

But the way Lucas stretched me was painful and a different kind of fullness than I'd ever experienced. I was grateful for my foresight to insist on being on top and in charge.

I was halfway down, eyes closed, biting my lip as I focused on the searing sensations splitting my center.

Lucas's hands found my arms and caressed them from my shoulders down to my wrists, which flanked his head as I supported myself.

His right hand moved to my ribcage, grasping me there possessively and urging me gently to take him deeper.

I obliged, letting myself engulf him fully. I yelped as he touched a place inside me that I didn't know was there, and tears stung my eyes.

I rose up and dropped again, finding a pleasing rhythm.

My hips rolled and ground against him, undulating as I sought my climax.

He pulled my right hand around in front of him and began kissing it, sucking my fingers into his mouth one by one as I fucked him.

The hand on my side migrated around to my lower back and then my ass, pulling me tighter toward him.

His head fell back, and he struggled for coherence. "Paris, your, oh! Your body...it feels...I'm gonna...oh fuck!"

Everything happened at once.

I felt a boiling inside me, like when I've left something on the stove too long and the lid begins to rattle and pop. I rode him harder and the top flew off the pot and smashed into the ceiling. The shattering I feared as a little girl on the diving boards finally happened. But it was my mind and soul fracturing all at once, not my body. My body simply shook and trembled and flexed and thrashed, completely beyond my control.

As my orgasm tore through me, Lucas shouted a warning. One I couldn't have heeded even if I wanted to.

"Paris, I'm gonna come you have to... Oh!"

I *felt* his orgasm inside me. His dick pulsed and I could actually feel him emptying himself inside me. Coolest thing ever, by the way.

We grabbed one another in an almost violent embrace, clutching, holding, kissing, coming.

When it finally subsided, he was still inside me and I slid and rolled and twisted until I was on my back and he was above me, our bodies slick with sweat and breathing heavy.

He kissed my face, my cheeks and the sides of my nose, my fluttering eyelids, across my chin, then sweetly on the mouth.

Before I realized what was happening, I felt him slowly fucking me again. *Weren't guys supposed to come and then, like, I don't know, fall asleep or something?*

"I can't stop," he whispered. "Is it okay?"

"Nothing has ever been more okay," I said wearily and lay there as he took his pleasure from me.

His hands explored me as he gave me long, slow thrusts. My pussy felt battered and bruised since everything was new, but I wrapped my legs behind his and my body invited him in deeper, again and again.

I came for him twice more before he climaxed, and by the time he was finished, I was a limp, exhausted ragdoll.

He tenderly placed a towel between my legs and wrapped a blanket around my nakedness as he pulled on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt.

"Do you like Mexican?" he asked me softly.

I nodded.

"Be right back. I'll lock it. You'll be safe."

I drifted off into a light sleep with a delightful soreness I wanted to become deeply familiar with.

LUCAS WOKE ME UP BY SOFTLY CALLING MY NAME. I STRETCHED AND looked over to find a robe folded up on the table next to me.

"It says it's one-size-fits-all, I hope it works," he said. "I walked over to *Marshalls* and it was the best thing I could find there."

"Oh, I guess you didn't want me getting dressed?" I asked playfully.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I just wanted you to be comfort-" he began, then he laughed. "Yeah, and that, too."

"I wasn't sure what you liked, so I got a lot," he continued, pointing to two huge bags behind him on the counter.

"We'll eat what we want, and I saw a homeless dude out by the road, we'll give him the rest if it's okay?"

"Was he tall and skinny?" I asked.

"Yeah, taller than me. Like 6'5, maybe."

"I bet it was Delbert," I said. "He's always around. People say he played basketball at FAMU way back when, before he wound up on the streets. He's generally harmless, but he gets really angry sometimes. I think he self medicates. He has good days and bad days. He hands out flowers to girls on campus sometimes. I don't know where he gets them. He's given them to me sometimes. It always lifts my spirits. That's sweet that you'd want to feed him."

"Hey, I've been there," Lucas said. "Not the drug part, but back in Juneau there were definitely times I didn't know what my next meal would be or where I'd lay my head that night."

"Would have been a lot nicer being homeless here in the winter-time than in Alaska, I bet," he said.

"Yikes, I can't imagine that kind of cold. I'm a southern girl through and through."

"You'd be surprised," he replied. "Juneau is practically tropical compared to some parts of Alaska. It's not Barrow or Nome, that's for sure. It almost never gets below zero there."

"Balmy!" I said, and we laughed.

Lucas divvied up the food from *Antonio's*, the Mexican place two doors down from *Starbucks*. I put on the robe, which wasn't a color I'd have picked (Pink isn't my thing), but I was grateful for it and knew he'd done the best he could on short notice. He'd gotten my favorite, carne asada, and I wasn't the least bit ashamed to eat the entire thing. Losing one's virginity is exhausting, hungry work!

He ate an enchilada and four tacos, leaving two huge burritos and some soft tacos. He grabbed a bottle of soda from the fridge and a jumbo *Twix* candy bar from a box in his cabinet.

"It's my guilty pleasure," he confessed. "Best candy bar on earth. And do you know where the name comes from?"

"I do not," I said and smiled. "But I bet you do."

"It's a portmanteau for 'twin biscuit sticks.'"

"How many of the girls you bring in here know what portmanteau means?" I asked accusingly.

Poor Lucas looked shocked. "I... Paris, I promise, I was telling the truth. There aren't any other--"

"I know," I said. "But you're so cute when you're flustered that I can't help myself."

I stood up and let the robe fall to the floor, standing there naked, enjoying his eyes on my body. "I'm going to get dressed and go with you to take Delbert his dinner."

Lucas stared at me with a smirk. "Paris, your body is *insane*. I can't believe how sexy you are."

"Thank you, handsome," I said back. "You're quite the hottie yourself."

He bowed deeply. "Thanks for the genetics, mom and dad, whoever you are!"

We ventured out into the dark parking lot, bags in hand, and walked over to the corner of the lot where there was a small stand of trees, where I knew Delbert to hang out sometimes.

As we approached, we heard voices, muffled at first, then louder, like an argument.

"Maybe this isn't the best idea," I said. "It's really dark over there, and we don't even know if Delbert is there."

Lucas had a serious look on his face, and he increased his pace. "No, that doesn't sound right," he said. "Somebody might be in trouble."

It was clearer now, several voices, three or four, cussing and arguing.

There was very little light, a couple of dumpsters, and a fence behind the trees, creating a small, semi-enclosed space.

"I told you I ain't holding nothing, man!" One of the voices yelled, followed by the sound of a struggle.

"Fuck you! Give me that shit!"

"Come on, yo!"

There was definitely a struggle happening, a fight.

"Lucas, we should just go and call the police," I insisted in a loud whisper.

"Hold these," he said, handing me the bags and breaking into a light jog.

"Delbert?" he called out. "Delbert!"

I hustled behind him, coming around the dumpsters to find Delbert on the ground with two men standing over him.

"Get the fuck outta here, white boy, this don't concern you," one of the men growled at Lucas.

I stopped in my tracks. The second man turned, holding a knife.

"Nah," the knife-wielding man said. "All this concerns me. Come closer, baby, what you got in them bags?"

"Nothing for you," Lucas answered angrily, approaching the two men while shaking his arms loose.

"Lucas!" I screamed.

The man with the knife stepped forward toward Lucas as Delbert scrambled to his feet behind the two would-be muggers.

"Come on," Lucas said. "Show me if you know how to use that thing."

The man lunged forward slicing through the air, narrowly missing Lucas, who deftly side-stepped him. He swung back around, and Lucas ducked away, this time sliding forward and wrapping his arms around the man's midsection. He twisted backwards and down, slamming the man to the pavement, jarring the knife loose.

Delbert made a menacing motion toward the other man and he fled toward the fence, scaling it and disappearing into a culvert.

Lucas moved into a crouch and slid behind his opponent, wrapping an arm around his throat and both legs around his waist.

The man flailed for a moment and slumped, unconscious.

Delbert and I stared at Lucas, unsure how to proceed.

Lucas picked up the knife and chucked it into one of the dumpsters.

"I guess I didn't mention that I've taken judo," he said to me. "Growing up in group homes and foster homes you can't imagine the amount of bullying, and not just from other kids. As soon as I got out, I started taking any and every self-defense class I could afford. Jiu jitsu and judo are my favorites. Everything is cool. Are you okay?" He was focused on Delbert now.

Delbert nodded, and I approached him with the bags of food.

"It's burritos and some other stuff, in case you're hungry," I explained.

"You work at FAMU, right?" he asked, accepting the bags warily.

"Yes, that's right," I said.

"I thought so, pretty lady. I've seen you on campus. You've helped me out before."

"When I can," I said. "Thank you for the flowers, Delbert."

"Thank you both," he replied.

"Get somewhere safe," Lucas said. "These guys seem like trouble. He's gonna wake up with a headache, and not in a good mood, I bet."

"Yes sir," Delbert replied, already walking across the parking lot, back into the light, bounty in hand. "God bless you both."

I WENT HOME SHORTLY THEREAFTER, COLLECTING MY FOOD FROM THE Airstream. I made Lucas promise not to spend the night in that lot with a couple of guys potentially hellbent on revenge.

My bed never felt so good, and my body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds as I sank into a deep slumber. I'm usually a morning person, but when my alarm went off, the last thing I wanted to do was get up.

When I did, I found I'd missed a couple late-night texts from Savannah, asking if I was okay.

"Better than okay, had a great time!"

She replied later in the day, once she was up, west coast time putting her three hours behind.

"Well...?" she asked, and I knew what she meant.

I wasn't ready for the world to know that I was no longer Paris the Virgin.

"He's great, we had lots of fun!"

"Fun? Or *fun*?" she asked.

"We don't talk about our resolutions until we meet at *Sadie's*," I protested.

"True. But if you'd have done it, you'd tell. I know you!"

She knew me as well as anybody ever had, but a lady has to keep a few secrets.

I showered, my nipples and pussy were ultra-sensitive. I had to make myself come to clear my head as the hot water crashed down on me.

It was easy with Lucas Tucker to think about.

I drove through the parking lot from the night before to make sure Lucas had kept his word, and he had. His truck and trailer were nowhere to be found.

Because they were parked at FAMU.

I walked into the admissions office and Miss Claudia greeted me. "Good morning, Paris." She looked me up and down and cocked her head.

"Oh, my goodness," she exclaimed. "Who was it?"

"Who was what?" I asked.

She twisted up her face. "Girl, you can't fool Miss Claudia. You think I can't tell?"

"Tell what?" I asked, genuinely perplexed.

"You've been with a *man*!" Miss Claudia exclaimed.

I stuttered and stammered while she laughed and slapped her legs. "Paris, the way you're walking and the way you're smiling tells me it was *good*. I just want to know who the lucky brother was, that's all!"

"Well, a lady never tells her secrets," I said. "And I'm not saying if I did or I didn't."

"Oh, honey," she said. "There's no use playing that game. I *know* you did. But I can respect your privacy. I just want to live vicariously through you, that's all! Is it anybody I know? At least tell me that."

"No," I admitted. "You don't know him, I'm sure of it. He's from out of town."

"Indeed," she said in a tone that told me she didn't necessarily believe me. "But I'll get to the bottom of this sooner or later." She wagged a finger in my direction.

"We'll see," I said, and set my things down on my desk.

"Oh! I almost forgot," Miss Claudia called out. "Remember that boy we were talking about yesterday, the one with all the unusual schools on his transcript? Lucas Tucker?"

My heart raced at the mention of his name and butterflies flitted around in my stomach.

"Yes?"

"Well, he's here. As in, *here*. For an interview."

"He is?"

"Indeed. And brace yourself, Paris," she continued. "He's *white*!"

"Indeed," I said, hiding my smile. "Let me get organized and I'll see him."

I TIDIED UP MY DESK, PULLED OUT LUCAS'S PAPERWORK, AND SLIPPED into the bathroom to check myself in the mirror.

Satisfied, I stepped out into our small waiting area.

"Lucas Tucker?" I called out, as if I had no idea who to expect.

He stood up from where he'd been sitting and reading a book. He was wearing khaki pants and a blue polo shirt. He was freshly shaved and looked like he'd stepped off a GQ cover.

"Hello, I'm Lucas Tucker," he said and extended his hand, which I shook.

"Right this way, Mr. Tucker," I said, and ushered him to my cubicle.

"Does it hurt to be so pretty?" he leaned in and asked me in a whisper as we passed through the hallway.

"Stop it, silly," I hissed back.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he continued. "Not even for a moment."

We reached my pitiful excuse for an office and I sat down opposite him next to my desk.

"I've looked over your application," I said as professionally as I possibly could. "And I'd like to invite you to be part of the 'FAMUly' in the Fall, if you're still interested."

"Will you require a FAFSA?" I asked, referring to financial aid paperwork.

"No, I'd like to pay up front, with cash," Lucas answered. "But there's something else I'd like to discuss."

Here we go, I thought. Yes, I'd love to have your dick back inside me, at your earliest convenience. But some of us have to work for a living, and I can't discuss such matters at work!

"It's a Mister Delbert Ventress. He was a student here twenty-two years ago. He played on the basketball team for two years. He's interested in completing his degree."

"Lucas, what are you..." I asked in a whisper. If Miss Claudia could hear what was coming from my cubicle, which I knew she could, I wanted it to sound as professional as possible.

"Education is important. Mr. Ventress has fallen on tough times. But he's getting back on his feet.

"He'll be residing in the *Blue Coral Apartments*; I'll have his address and phone number to you by the end of the day. You hopefully have his records in the system somewhere, so you'll know where to place him, academically speaking."

I knew the apartments, they weren't far from campus, not the nicest in town, but not the worst either. No way could a homeless guy afford them all of a sudden. Likewise, he wouldn't qualify for any standard scholarship or student loan programs. I guessed his athletic scholarship money had run out long ago.

I was flabbergasted.

"I can... Sure, I can get to work on that, yes."

"I'm sponsoring him. Whatever he needs. He'll be cleaned up and ready to go in the fall," Lucas said with a wink.

I jotted down the scant information I had on Delbert, to enable me to begin processing him later in the day.

"Dinner tonight?" Lucas leaned in and asked me quietly.

I stared back at him. His proximity made certain parts of my body ache.

"I get off at 5:00. I'll be home by 5:20. Be waiting for me there if you can. I need to be with you again. Like, as soon as physically possible."

He grinned broadly. "I was hoping you'd feel that way, because it's exactly how I feel."

Getting any work done for the rest of the day was nearly impossible. All I could think about was Lucas.

I mentioned an "anonymous donor" sponsoring Delbert's return to FAMU as a student, and though Miss Claudia was skeptical about his chances, she suggested I run it by the athletic department, to see

if they might have tutoring help available for him. She had a soft spot for the man who'd given her so many flowers over the years.

I contacted our men's basketball coach, Leonard Casey, who said he was currently in Charlotte, North Carolina, recruiting . He didn't know Delbert personally, but he pledged his support for the project and said he'd see to it that Delbert got the tutoring help he needed as well as suggesting that he might be able to find an opportunity with the team as a student manager if he was interested.

I left work that day excited for the chance to help someone turn his entire life around.

And excited for completely different reasons to get home.

I DROVE DOWN MY STREET AND SAW HIS PICKUP TRUCK PARKED IN FRONT of my duplex. His trailer wasn't around, so I figured he'd parked it somewhere safe.

As I pulled in, I spotted Lucas leaning against his truck. He held up a single finger as he finished reading a page in the old, beat-up hardcover he was holding. I got out and bounded over to him, waiting patiently before kissing him exuberantly.

"What'cha reading?" I asked.

He turned the book to its spine, which read *Roughing It*.

"It's Twain, one I haven't read. I just got it last week. First edition. About his travels in the Wild West in the 1860s.

"Do you know what pen name Samuel Clemens used besides Mark Twain?"

I shook my head.

"Thomas. Jefferson. Snodgrass."

"I'll file that one away," I replied.

"You better. It could be a Final Jeopardy question!"

"I suppose it could," I agreed, as we strolled up the path to my door. "But my lead will be unassailable, so it won't matter!"

"Ah yes, a 'runaway' as Alex calls them. Did I mention that I intend to be a *Jeopardy* champion one day? That's part of what fuels my constant quest for new places and things to learn."

I unlocked the door and turned to him, placing my finger on his mouth.

"No more trivia, no more talking. There are much better things we can use our mouths for."

He bent down and kissed me.

"That's nice, but I had other things in mind." I grinned my most wicked grin.

We walked inside and I set my things down on the table inside the door. I locked it and turned to him. "I waited almost thirty years to have sex. You have come along, Mister Lucas Tucker, and unleashed something in me that I hope you can handle, because I can't, not on my own."

He just grinned at me.

"We never really got to talk about last night," I said, leading him past the living room and up the stairs to my bedroom. "I was completely blown away. You insist it was your first time, and I have to believe you, no matter how difficult it is. Because you were beyond my wildest dreams and expectations."

"Now that I've had that taste, I want to gorge myself. I have been distracted all day. I can think of nothing but getting home with you and getting naked and doing everything there is to do."

We both began to quickly undress. When his boxer briefs came down, it was easy to tell that he was more than ready to indulge me in everything I wanted to try.

"Sixty-nine," I said bluntly, shedding the last of my clothing. "I know it's lewd or whatever, and maybe not ladylike to ask for something like that, but it's like, this *thing* with me that I've thought about and fantasized about and I'm comfortable enough with you to think that you won't be completely weirded out by me being up front about what I want."

"Everything I ever read about 'healthy relationships' and 'fulfilling sex lives' and such says that communication is key, so I'm--"

He cut me off by kissing me deeply. As he did, his knuckles did that maddening thing where he dragged them across my nipples. I mewled and tried to wiggle away, but he kissed me harder and I melted against him. I surrendered my body to him. He could have me any way he wanted me.

"I've never given anybody oral before," Lucas admitted. "Or received it. But every 'first' with you so far has been incredible, so, yes. That's always my answer to you."

I kissed him and our bodies pressed together. "This is so awkward, but should we, I don't know, take a shower together first or something?"

"I took one this morning," he said. "So, I think I'm okay, but if you want me to, I will."

"I meant more for me, honestly," I confessed.

"You're delicious, Paris," Lucas replied. "I want you just as you are."

He sat back on the bed, his cock rising majestically from between his pelvic lines. I clenched inside as my body recalled the pleasure it gave me, and it was all I could do not to just climb back onto it again.

"Let me taste you, sweetness," Lucas beckoned, and I climbed up onto the bed alongside him. I kissed his face and his mouth and then swung myself around so that my legs were astride his handsome face.

I leaned down so that I was face to... err... *dick* with him.

As I contemplated how to go about giving my first blowjob, he began to kiss and lick all around my opening.

I froze in place, wanting to do nothing to discourage him from continuing.

"Oh. My. God." I gasped as he began to give me long licks along the cleft of my sex. I reached out and grasped the base of his dick, hanging on for dear life as his magical tongue bathed my pussy.

I extended my tongue flicked my tongue all around the end of Lucas's cock, and he responded by bucking and rolling his hips while he moaned into my soaking wet sex.

His tongue began to circle my clit, and I lifted up for a moment as the sensations became overwhelming, but he took hold of my hips and pulled me back to his hungry mouth.

In response, perhaps in an effort to get him to focus elsewhere than my buzzing, sensitive clit, I engulfed his cock with my mouth, taking him as deep as I was able.

My eyes were bigger than my mouth, as before I knew it, he was at the back of my throat and my hand was wrapped around his shaft with dick left over.

It felt so dirty, so filthy to have a hard dick in my mouth... but at the same time so natural and perfect, the way it rested at the roof of my mouth and my tongue lapped at it.

His tongue found my clit and curled itself around it, engulfing what felt like a zillion nerve endings all at once. As a last-ditch effort, I moved my hand from his shaft to his balls, squeezing and

pulling on them. His objections were muffled by my wetness smothering his face as I sought my climax.

He thrust up, trying to fuck my mouth, but I kept it hovering just out of reach. His desperation drove me wild, and I came hard on him, screaming out my pleasure as his tongue attacked the center of my need.

As I came down, I tenderly licked, sucked, and kissed all over Lucas's twitching dick as he moaned beneath me. He tried to lick me again, but I was too sensitive, so I writhed away and his kisses landed on my inner thighs, a place I would never have dreamed I loved to be kissed so much.

Eventually I needed his mouth again and I centered myself right on his plunging tongue. It felt like he was *making out* with my pussy, which had me rutting and rubbing myself all over his face like I was in heat. I took him as deep as I could in my mouth again and again, until finally he shuddered, tensed, and came.

As he did, he screamed into me, his tongue reaching deeper than ever, and I joined him in orgasmic bliss. I swallowed everything he offered me, although in truth I didn't have much choice in the matter, as most of it erupted so forcefully it was gone before I knew it.

I wearily slid off of him and rolled onto my side, basking in the aftermath. He spun around so we were face to face, and we held each other like that for a good, long while. To my surprise, he didn't hesitate to kiss the mouth that had just sucked him off, and for my part, tasting and smelling myself all over his face only made me burn hotter for him.

We made love again shortly after, and he took me from behind for the first time. I'm pretty sure that's my favorite position, although there's something so intense about looking into his eyes while he, or I, or both of us, are climaxing that I lose when he's pounding his big dick into me from the back.

Lucas and I aren't *always* fucking, but most of the time if we aren't, I wish we were. And not because I don't enjoy his company otherwise; we have epic Trivial Pursuit matches and we watch *Jeopardy* together (competitively) every night.

Sometimes I even let him win.

WE SPENT THAT SUMMER MAKING UP FOR A COMBINED 60+ YEARS OF celibacy by having so much sex that Lucas “was afraid his dick might fall off.” That idea didn’t bother me as much as it did him, because I loved his mouth just as much as his thick cock.

The summer afforded me some downtime, and we took a few trips, Lucas-style. We drove down to Miami in his truck, sleeping in the Airstream, and then slowly up the coast and across the panhandle. We fell in love first with Saint George Island, then Destin, and finally Seaside.

It was on the beach in Seaside, watching the sunset, that he told me he loved me for the first time.

We eventually moseyed up to Greenville, where I felt it important that he meet my family, since I had by then fallen deeply, inescapably in love with Lucas.

He charmed my mother and sister, and that was before I gave them a hint as to how ridiculously wealthy he was. When I let on to Paige that he had *lots* of money, she told me that if I didn’t marry him that she would, so I better lock him up. She was joking, but I was always worried that a man as handsome as Lucas might decide to set his sights a little higher than little old me.

I shouldn’t have been.

It was six weeks after we’d met that I realized I was late.

A pregnancy test confirmed my suspicion, and since I was in the Airstream when I found out, there was no hiding it or planning a clever way to tell Lucas. I emerged from the bathroom weeping, and he rushed up to embrace me.

When he saw what I was holding in my hand and confirmed with me that the lines meant I was carrying his baby, he joined me in crying tears of joy.

We wiped away our tears and marveled at the little blue stick. Lucas silently dropped to one knee. "Paris, this isn't exactly the way I planned it, since I don't even have a ring picked out yet, but I've known I wanted to be with you forever since the first time I saw you smile. You're the most brilliant, beautiful girl in the world. Will you marry me?"

I eagerly accepted.

Lucas parked the Airstream in storage and moved in with me. Never has a man been more doting toward his pregnant partner. From day one, he wouldn't let me lift anything heavier than a glass of milk, even though I insisted it was perfectly safe for me to continue doing my regular stuff all throughout the pregnancy. It was nice not having to do laundry or dishes anymore, though.

And the pregnancy orgasms? O.M.G.

School started in August, and classes were going well for Lucas. After an initial adjustment on the part of many of his classmates who were surprised to find a white man in his thirties in class with them, he loved being part of the "FAMUly." He'd bump into Delbert on campus now and then and they'd have lunch together or spend time at the library as study partners.

I continued working, and as much as I'd tried to keep the fact that I was dating, and pregnant by, a student, on the down low, eventually I had to confess it to Miss Claudia. She was shocked at first, but she helped me keep my secret.

Lucas and I planned to get married just before my maternity leave would have kicked in anyway, so I gave notice at school that I'd be leaving as of the first of February. I wanted all my co-workers and FAMU friends at my wedding.



SPEAKING OF FRIENDS, one day Sweet called out of the blue, and as we were catching up, the subject of our New Year's resolutions came up.

She was still working for Ezra Brannigan, but she insisted that her time there was almost over. I started to tell her about Lucas, and

my pregnancy, but I caught myself.

I wanted to walk into Sadie's with Lucas. And with my big old tummy full of a baby. Ha!

I mentioned that I'd met a guy, but it was nothing serious.

"You get the D yet, girl?" Sweet asked.

"Stop it! You know I don't 'get the D'. We've gone out a few times. He's really cool. We'll see."

Of course, by then I was closing in on being two months pregnant.

The conversation with Sweet inspired me to tell Lucas about my friends, our resolutions, and the planned December reunion.

"You had sex with me just to win \$800?" he asked with a grin.

"Yeah, clearly just for the cash. I suffered through it. The things a girl has to do for money!"

"I think you ought to 'suffer' some more," he said, and he got up from his chair and walked over to where I lay on the couch. I was dressed in just a long t-shirt since it was evening and we were winding down.

He knelt by the sectional and tenderly kissed my feet, massaging them and sucking my toes one by one, making me shiver.

Lucas took his time enjoying my legs, working his way slowly up each one with kisses and feather-light touches. By the time he reached mid-thigh, my legs were spread wide, inviting him in.

"Make me suffer some more," I said, and he complied, masterfully using his mouth to make me come again and again until he carried me up the stairs and tucked my satisfied ass into bed.

MID-DECEMBER ARRIVED, AND IT WAS TIME TO MAKE THE BI-ANNUAL pilgrimage to Charleston. To *Sadie's BBQ*.

I told nobody that I was bringing a guest with me, as it would break protocol and I didn't want anybody to feel weird about it, but once they saw the state I was in, they'd understand.

I was into the second trimester, in full bloom. Lucas claimed I glowed, that he'd never seen anyone so beautiful. I didn't agree, but I appreciated his compliments.

We drove the truck up from Tallahassee, making many bathroom stops for me. Surprisingly, he'd never been to Charleston, so we arrived a couple days early to take in the sights like the architecture of Rainbow Row downtown, the magnificent Angel Oak out on Johns Island, and the beaches. We did some shopping on King Street, updating my maternity wardrobe and buying some things for the baby, although we'd agreed not to find out the gender, so we were a bit limited.

We stopped by campus and picked up a PWC onesie, and he tried to talk me into stopping by the admissions office so he could plead his case, but I refused.

The big day arrived, and we drove from our hotel downtown over to *Sadie's* for lunch with my girls. I'd been texting them, and we were all present and accounted for.

We pulled into the parking lot, the gravel crunching under the weight of Lucas's big truck and bigger fiancée.

Lucas parked a space over from a bright red Ferrari, the likes of which I'd never seen anywhere near *Sadie's*, which isn't exactly locat-

ed in the best part of town.

Its location is part of its charm, on the border between downtown Charleston's genteel upper crust and a crumbling part of town that's altogether darker than the touristy parts of the Holy City.

The clientele winds up being a mix of old money willing to live "dangerously" for delicious food and families struggling to make ends meet who, for a fraction of the cost, know they can eat as well as anybody in South Carolina.

But a red Ferrari? That may have been a first. I'd have to ask Miss Sadie about it.

We walked in, well, Lucas walked, I waddled, but we got in the door, and the first face I saw was my adopted grandmother, Miss Sadie herself.

"Miss Paris!" she nearly shouted, hopping up out of her chair. "Sweet Jesus!"

She rushed over to me holding her face, with tears streaming down her face.

"I'm gonna have another great-grandbaby!"

I laughed out loud, and a confused Lucas stood there smiling.

"Miss Sadie is every PWC Lady Leopard's grandma," I explained.

"Only the ones who come to see me!" she corrected.

Suddenly, a familiar face stuck its pretty head around the corner and screamed.

"Paris, oh my God!" K.K. squealed. She rushed over and threw her arms around me.

Behind her, a guy with wild blonde hair stood, smiling. He walked over and extended a hand to Lucas. "Hello, I'm Graham."

His British accent caught me off-guard, and I turned my head to look as Lucas shook his hand and introduced himself.

K.K. and I spoke as one. "Sorry, this is-" and then we started laughing again.

"This is Graham," Lucas said, holding out his open hand toward K.K.'s beau.

"And this bloke is Lucas," Graham said, introducing my man to K.K.

We had barely completed introductions when the door opened behind us and the happy shrieking and screaming began anew.

"Sweet!" K.K. called out.

"Ezra?" Graham said, with a look of bemusement on his face.

"What, is this the new *Flanagans of Charleston*?" A deep voice behind me asked, and I watched Graham reach past me to shake hands with a handsome older man next to Sweet.

"Not a chance. I can't cook like she can," Graham said, his thumb pointing at Miss Sadie.

I turned all the way around to find Sweet standing there with a serious look on her face.

"Do you have some news you'd like to share?" she asked in an accusatory tone. Her eyes flitted from my face to my belly to Lucas and back to my face.

I shrugged and grinned. She broke into a smile and gave me a big bearhug. K.K. joined in.

"Not too hard!" I protested.

When she let go, she turned to Lucas. "I'm Sweet T," she said, extending her hand.

"Enchanté, mademoiselle," he said, kissing her hand. "Je m'apelle, Lucas."

K.K. jumped in.

"Hey, where's my Pepé Le Pew kiss?" she asked.

Lucas kissed K.K.'s hand and gave her the same French greeting.

Sweet began speaking in rapid-fire French, but Lucas held up his hands in defeat. "That's all I know! I swear! Paris told me you had some sort of superpower with languages. I don't, but I thought I'd give it a try."

"Bien essayé," Sweet said with a smile. When we all gave her a blank look, she rolled her eyes.

"Y'all need some culture," she said with her D.C. sass. "It means 'nice try'!"

Miss Sadie ushered us into the private dining room, where she'd had staff push another table together with the one that had been set for us.

We got to know each other, at least those who weren't already acquainted.

It turned out that K.K.'s man, Graham, owned a restaurant in London, and that Ezra, who couldn't stop undressing Sweet with his eyes, had a house nearby and ate there frequently.

In fact, Sweet had eaten there with Ezra a few times, and when he mentioned that fact, Graham's face lit up.

"Right," he said. "You were with Ezra that night with the ugly Russian. You'll both be happy to know that I've banned him from the restaurant.

"You won't believe this, but last month he tried to get a table at our new location in Las Vegas. The one Kiondre helped me open." He put his arm around K.K. and kissed her.

It was odd to me to hear the names Tyesha and Kiondre, but if that's what their men wanted to call them, who was I to argue?

Miss Sadie had cornbread and fried pickles sent over to our table, and a round of drinks appeared.

"Miss Sadie," Graham asked. "I know it isn't a traditional appetizer, but I'd pay double for butter beans for the whole table."

Graham turned to Lucas and Ezra. "I promise, you've never had anything like Miss Sadie's butterbeans. They'll change your life."

"Can't wait," Ezra replied.

"I don't know how much more 'life changing' I can handle," Lucas joked, placing a hand on my pregnant belly.

Ezra shook his head. "You have *no* idea," he said.

"Ezra has a son who has presented some... *interesting* challenges," Sweet said, turning to make eye contact with Ezra.

"Okay, so he vandalized the Sphinx and got himself banned from Egypt," Ezra explained. "For life. When he was eleven."

"Yikes!" K.K. exclaimed.

"He's growing up," Sweet added. "But he has definitely sown his share of wild oats."

"Lucas, what do you do?" Graham asked.

"I'm..."

As amazing as Lucas is, I feared this moment for him. I knew Ezra was Sweet's boss, and a big shot oil tycoon. Graham owned restaurants in two countries. For all I knew, Lucas was worth more than both of them combined. But there wasn't a graceful, easy way to answer the question.

Lucas looked at me during the pregnant pause, and I smiled to encourage him.

"I'm just the luckiest guy in the world, that's all," he said, and I swooned. He kissed me and gave me a squeeze.

Lucas was just about to say more when the next Lady Leopard arrived.

Savannah.

And she wasn't alone.

When all the "Oh my Gods" and shrieking ended, we all turned to face the new man in the room, holding Savannah's hand, and looking like a runway model.

"Everybody, this is Lincoln," Savannah said. "Lincoln, this is everybody."

"Aren't you Rex's boy?" Ezra asked.

"Um, yes?" Lincoln said, searching Ezra with his eyes.

"Ezra Brannigan. *Brannigan Oil and Petroleum*," he explained. "I've done some deals with your father over the years. Haven't seen him in years, but you're a chip off the old block. Strong genes in that Rawlings family."

"I'll tell him you said hello," Lincoln said with a warm smile.

Savannah explained that she had been hired as the nanny for Lincoln's twin girls. Lincoln corrected her that the twins were his sister's, but Savannah stuck to her guns.

"Those girls are ours now. I wish we could have brought them, but we drove here, and the car is brand-new and not baby-friendly."

"Pfft," Lincoln said after a bite of cornbread. "Milan and Sofia will have that thing full of stuffed animals and diapers and sippy cups before you know it."

Savannah gave her man the playful evil eye. "Excuse me?"

She then turned to us. "Okay, I'm about to jump out of my skin here. Y'all have to come outside and see my car."

As we prepared to go outside, Miss Sadie arrived next to a server carrying a tray filled with a large pot of butter beans and a stack of bowls.

"Ahh," Graham said, inhaling deeply. "Heaven has arrived."

"Why thank you, Mister Graham," Miss Sadie replied. "I brought some butter beans with me, too."

We all laughed and the four of us proceeded outside to see Savannah's car while the men stayed behind to eat.

Outside the restaurant, all in a line were the red Ferrari from earlier, a silver Bentley, Lucas's truck, and a dark blue Range Rover.

"We came in one that one," Sweet said, indicating the Range Rover. "It's a rental. We flew in just this morning."

"This," Savannah said, practically laying across the hood of the Bentley, "was my Christmas present from Lincoln."

It was a beautiful car.

K.K. explained that she and Graham had driven in from Las Vegas in his Ferrari, and she confessed to getting it up over 140 MPH on a lonely road outside Amarillo, Texas.

I could wait no longer.

"We drove up from Tallahassee in Lucas's truck," I said, pointing out his vehicle, which would be the most expensive in almost any other parking lot in town. "I have to tell you all something. This is crazy, but Lucas bought a lot of Bitcoin when it first came out. You know Bitcoin, right?"

They all nodded.

"He flipped it, most of it, when it went over 10k. He'd never mention it, he's too modest and everything, but he's loaded. And I mean *loaded*."

"What kind of year have we all had?" K.K. asked. "I mean, is this crazy? Out of the blue, all four of us arrive hooked up, and not with any raggedy men, either."

"It's like a damn blizzard in there," Sweet said, and we all laughed.

"We ought to get back in there before Miss Sadie steals our men," I remarked, and we headed back in.

"I feel bad for Ameerah," K.K. said. "That's going to be a weird room to walk into all alone. Like a third wheel to the fourth power. We have to make sure to make her feel welcome, okay?"

All my girls agreed. I knew they wouldn't let me down.

We walked back in and sat down, and Miss Sadie approached our table. "Is Miss Ameerah joining y'all?"

"She's supposed to," Sweet said. "But we can probably order, yeah?"

Graham spoke up. "Miss Sadie, just cover this table with food and keep it coming. Bring me the bill at the end. I trust you."

As one, Lucas, Ezra, and Lincoln each reached for their wallets. They weren't used to having anything paid for by anyone else.

We heard the front door open and voices out in the entryway.

Ameerah, stunning as always, turned the corner, clinging to a man.

A man with a ballcap slung low.

A man with one arm.

The conversation stopped and as one four Leopard sisters rose and rushed to greet our friend.

AMEERAH HUGGED EACH OF US, BUT SHE NEVER LET GO OF HER MAN'S arm. When I got up close to him, I could see that he had extensive scarring on one side of his face down onto his neck. The hat he wore had a Navy insignia on it.

He was ruggedly handsome despite whatever he'd been through.

"This is Talon," she said, and we each greeted him with hugs. "He's a SEAL. He was wounded in action. He hates when I brag about him, but he's the bravest man I've ever met." Talon grunted, and waved her off. She responded by kissing him on the cheek.

Our men rose and formed a line to meet him.

One by one, they introduced themselves and thanked him for his service. Graham asked him if he'd ever had occasion to fight alongside any Royal Air Force soldiers, and Talon indicated that he had, and that they were fine warriors.

When more chairs were arranged and we sat down, Ameerah held up her hand. "I thought I was going to have the biggest news to share," she said, flashing an engagement ring. "But it looks like Paris has me beat."

"I don't know, I haven't got one of those yet," I joked, pointing at Ameerah's finger and looking at Lucas expectantly. He'd proposed, and we'd even made wedding plans, but somehow lost between school and work and pregnancy had been picking out my engagement ring.

Lucas rolled his eyes and straightened up in his chair, looking around at the group.

"Okay," he said, throwing up his hands. "I was waiting for the perfect moment, but maybe this is it."

He got up and squeezed into a kneeling position between his chair and Lincoln's.

From his pocket he produced a small box, which he opened to reveal the blinding glare of an enormous diamond.

"Paris, you've already made me the luckiest man in the world just by sharing these last few months with me. I want to share the rest of my life with you and him." He touched my tummy.

"Her," I corrected, and he scrunched up his face into a smile.

"Either way," he said.

"Hmmm...." I said, my head cocked and my index finger touching my lips.

"She says yes!" Savannah shouted, and the rest of my girls joined in. I reached out my arms and hugged Lucas before kissing him, a sweet kiss that turned passionate until somebody threw a fried pickle at us.

"You can't get pregnant again while you're already pregnant," K.K. said. "Have to wait until that one's out of the oven first!"

Everyone applauded my "official" engagement, and Miss Sadie's staff appeared with more barbecue than I'd ever seen before.

We ate and drank and laughed and it was a meal that I'll remember on my deathbed.

I have never felt so much love in one small space, so much happiness all at once.

Once we all pushed our dessert plates away, with remnants of pecan, peanut butter, and key lime pies on them, I called the group to attention.

"While this has, without question, been the most fun and memorable reunion we've ever had, there's a small bit of business to complete."

The men all reached for their wallets, ready to battle for the check.

"Not that," I said. "*This*."

I held up my notebook, and Savannah and K.K. immediately covered their faces with their hands.

"New Year's Resolutions," I said, and spread the ten \$100 bills we'd put in the pot across the table.

I turned to the page where everything had been recorded.

"Lincoln," I said, "Savannah swore to a year of celibacy. How has that turned out?"

His silence told me everything. I drew a line through her name.

"Miss K.K., you resolved to lose 40 pounds. Now girl, you look amazing, but I think that booty is even bigger than last year."

"Hell yes, it is," a happy Graham remarked, and she playfully smacked his arm.

I drew a line through K.K.'s name.

"Ameerah... You wanted to get over a certain somebody... but there was a second part to your promise... You weren't going to fall in love with anybody. Yet here you are, engaged, and happier than I've ever seen you before."

"And very much in love," she said, looking at Talon with stars in her eyes. They kissed deeply, and nobody dared throw a fried pickle in their direction.

I drew a line through Ameerah's name.

"Just you and me, Sweet," I said.

"Five for you and five for me," Sweet said. "We split the pot."

"You've left *Brannigan Oil*?" Ameerah asked. "Seriously?"

"Tyesha is no longer an employee of mine," Ezra said proudly. "She's my wife."

Jaws dropped around the room.

"We eloped last week. Got married, coincidentally, in Paris."

"Hold up!" I protested over the murmurs of congratulations to the newlyweds. "That's the craziest loophole I've ever heard of. I protest!"

The table fell apart laughing, even stoic Talon.

To this day, she won't admit that she cheated, and I won't concede my sole victory.

But it turns out none of us needed the money anymore anyway.

We left the pile of cash as a tip for Miss Sadie's staff.

All five men handed our server their credit cards to pay for the meal, and Miss Sadie herself put them in a bowl and picked one at random.

Over Ezra's boisterous arguments, Lincoln paid for our grand feast.

LUCAS AND I GOT MARRIED ON VALENTINE'S DAY, BACK HOME IN Greenville. I'll only ever be able to wear my dress when I'm pregnant, but Lucas seems to enjoy keeping me that way anyway.

Baby Samuel Simmons Tucker was born a month after our wedding, and he's the perfect mix of Mommy and Daddy. As I drifted in and out of sleep in the hours after Sam was born, the most endearing memories I have are of Lucas holding him, rocking him back and forth, staring at him in amazement, and speaking to him in whispers.

"You are so loved, little boy. You will never, ever have to worry or wonder about that. You're the most precious thing in the whole world. I'll only let go of you so Mommy can hold you. But not for long." He looked up at me and grinned. I stuck my tongue out at him.

He's the best father I've ever met. Not having parents of his own to love him has inspired Lucas to be involved, above and beyond.

His semester at FAMU was the last of Lucas's academic career, although he insists that once the kids are grown that he intends to take some more classes somewhere. Or maybe he'll embarrass one or more of them by enrolling wherever they do.

Yes, I said they. In the twelve years since I met Lucas in that Starbucks parking lot, our family has relocated to Seaside, Florida, on the Panhandle.

There are now eight of us.

Like I said, Lucas likes me pregnant. And for all the misery that pregnancy can be, feeling those kicks and flutters is the most magical

thing in the world. And pregnancy orgasms? *Hello!*

So, yes, we've had six children. Sam was first, followed by another boy, Lucas, Jr.

Before I got pregnant again, Lucas took my mother, sister, and our two babies on a long-awaited trip to Paris. He even, through Ezra Brannigan's connections and by splashing some cash, managed to get us a private after-hours tour of the *Louvre*.

When we returned from our trip, Lucas got me pregnant again, and, as fate would have it, we began a string of four girls. A set of twins followed by two more. If you've been paying attention at all, you ought to be able to guess their names.

Ameerah and Savannah were the twins. We put the names of my four best friends in a hat and picked them out, to avoid hurt feelings. Kiondre was next. She's an epileptic, and let me tell you, a little one having seizures is about the scariest thing in the world.

I felt a little bad that we were finished and hadn't had a Tyesha, but this past Spring, unplanned and four years after Kiondre, along came Tyesha. Yes, we call her Sweet. And her middle name is Sadie.

Lucas still has his wanderlust, and we still have the Airstream. We take long drives as a family every summer, and we've explored all 48 continental United States together. We're planning to start on Canada when Sweet's a little older.

Every year or so, usually right after school lets out when we're getting ready for our annual summer trip, we get a visit from Uncle Delbert.

We've never explained to our kids who he really is, and at this point he's satisfied being their uncle, and they all adore him.

The man Lucas rescued from the streets of Tallahassee not only completed his degree at FAMU, he went on to earn a pair of master's degrees, in education and U.S. history.

He teaches high school history and coaches varsity basketball in Tallahassee. The year before last, we took the Airstream down to Lakeland to cheer his team on in the state tournament.

They lost in overtime against a team from Miami with two 6'9 players. Coach Delbert walks over to his boys collapsed on the court after the final buzzer. He leans down with his hands on his knees and talks to them. One by one, they rise and he pats them on the back. His love of this game and his players brings me to tears.

They are a young team, and most of them will come back for another year of training with Coach Delbert. They will be even stronger and more prepared to win the Championship.

Delbert has tried to pay us back for the money Lucas spent on getting him back on his feet, but we always politely decline and tell him that if he insists, then just pay it forward and donate it to the scholarship fund at FAMU.

Whew. So, there you have it. I waited and waited, until I wasn't even sure why, but in the end it was all worth it.

Little Sweet seems to have finally fallen asleep, so I'm going to power down my laptop and tiptoe into our bedroom, where Lucas just messaged me that he's laying in bed naked, if I'm interested.

I hope he's been getting plenty of rest and taking his vitamins. I'm *very* interested.

And always will be.



Soldier Beast

Ameera's Story

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