

Chapter 1

This was the kind of message that Wharton Milner wanted to receive from Sonia Buckner. He had to read it a second time, ensuring that his eyes had not failed him:

Wharton, I've been thinking about us a lot lately. I want to take our friendship to another level. Can we talk about it?

It was a good thing he was consumed with the lunch rush at The Groovy Soul, or he might have taken a moment to let out a loud whoop and possibly cut a jig.

All the time spent being attentive and lending a willing and sympathetic ear had paid off. All the patience he'd shown Sonia knowing she was a married woman and mother of a teenage son also appeared to have been rewarded.

And to think all this time knowing Sonia, he never bothered to remember that Trent was her husband's name. It didn't really matter. He'd seen him once, and that was all that he needed to remember.

You've just made my day, Sonia. Mind, body, and soul . . . That's the way it's going to be!

Sonia showed no emotion when she sent Milner the text message from her Tracfone while on break from her job at United Care Plan in Columbia, South Carolina. She took a moment to reflect on the magnitude of her decision.

It came at a time after she'd recently turned forty. She felt that her marriage, although it was still in repair over the many disappointments that she blamed Trent for causing, would never get any better than its current state.

Trent had finally reached her sexually, but the enjoyment she desired was inconsistent. She felt she deserved better than what she'd been receiving at home, having now entered her peak years.

Her desire for Milner merely intensified over the past six months. Perhaps it was the anticipation of consummating something, which she strongly believed was justified, that made her even more confident about her decision.

Better yet, she may have convinced herself once and for all after he bought her a pair of diamond-studded earrings on her birthday while Trent forgotten about it all together. A couple of weeks later, they shared their first kiss while they were on another Saturday afternoon rendezvous in Augusta—a moment that Milner thought should have happened much sooner. Yet it worked out in its own time.

When do you want to meet? I'll even make the time

for it (wink!)

When can we talk about it?

I'll figure something out and get back with you. :)

The idea came to her rather quickly.

“Palmetto Fidelity, this is Trent Buckner—”

“Are you always this friendly when people call you?” Sonia joked with him. “Wow, I could use someone like you on my team at work.”

“Uh, nooooo!”

“What’s wrong? You wouldn’t want me to be your supervisor?” Sonia reacted. “I’ve seen them pull strings allowing nepotism in contract services. Maybe I can get you to work on another team? Then it wouldn’t be such a problem.”

“Baby, I like what I’m doing, thank you very much,” Trent said. “Well, isn’t this a surprise. What did I do to deserve this personal call from you?” He checked the time on his computer and mentioned it was about 1:45 in the afternoon.

“I thought I’d do something different.” Sonia rolled her eyes at her own comment. “Look here, I was thinking about stopping by that restaurant we went to in Cayce a few months ago. Do you remember it?”

“I can’t say that I do. Give me a clue—”

Sonia was nearly moved to laughter; it was precisely her point. She could not believe how fast her husband was falling into this ditch—face first—that she was preparing for him.

“The restaurant that served that nice buffet home-cooked style—I think it’s called The Groovy something. . . .”

“Oh yeah, that place! We talked about going back there. Were you thinking of us eating there tonight?”

“No, I was thinking about grabbing to-go plates for all three

of us. I don't feel like cooking tonight, and I wanted something different."

"Sure. That will work. Just make sure it's something that I'll eat."

"And if it isn't," Sonia replied, leading him on in a seductive voice, "I'll make sure you'll have something that's always served at the right temperature, and no oven or microwave is ever needed—"

Trent was incredulous at his wife's boldness, which could be quite arousing whenever his mindset was full of mischief and raunch. "You know, I do have a taste for some of that—" He went as far as sucking his teeth and grinning.

"Baby, I've known you for sixteen years. I think I've got that one under control. See you later. Time for me to go back into the asylum."

* * *

Sonia noticed a few changes inside The Groovy Soul since the last time she visited. The first thing was a new paint scheme—predominantly white but with peach colored trimming. There were several live plants brought in for aesthetics, and there were various pictures representing a southern lifestyle.

She also noticed there was new help working the dining area and the cashier's counter to keep pace with the burgeoning crowd that appeared to be frequenting the place.

Although she did not immediately see Milner, she figured he was no doubt around somewhere.

"I see you didn't get any dessert containers," Sonia heard a familiar voice from behind. She turned slowly and acknowledged Milner by making eye contact with him. They had not seen each other in a little more than a week.

She replied, “You must have told the new help that you were taking care of me personally, hmmm?”

He walked to the other side of the buffet bar as if he made a casual inspection. “I don’t miss a single thing whenever you walk in here. When did you get the new outfit?”

“You have been paying attention.” She looked herself over, admiring the navy skirt suit she recently purchased.

“I’ll be back with your dessert containers.”

Sonia was finished with filling her main course containers just as Wharton returned. “Excuse me, sir. Are you going to take care of my order for me?”

He did not immediately respond. But then it dawned upon him what she meant. “Don’t worry. That won’t happen again. I’ll be right back.” He went back to his office and stuffed two twenty-dollar bills in an envelope.

When Milner returned into the dining area, Sonia had a small mountain of Styrofoam containers that she’d carried over to cashier’s counter. He was there to offer his help.

“I figured a plastic bag would not work well for you, so I brought this box. Would you need help carrying this out?” He gave her a knowing stare.

“I really appreciate your service here, sir. Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. Thank you for visiting us!”

Milner was more than eager to escort Sonia out to her Infiniti M35, which was parked directly across the driveway.

He walked with great pride knowing that he and Sonia were soon to consummate their growing acquaintance.

“I’ve placed an envelope in this box addressing your order. Is there anything else I can do for you?” He looked over to his right at her.

“You can tell me what you have in mind for us—”

“I was thinking about us going in Charlotte next week, say, Tuesday. Would that work for you?”

“As long as I can plan three days ahead of time, that shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll text message you from work tomorrow confirming it.”

They stopped at her car.

“Sonia, you look nice in your new outfit.” He looked her up and down before licking his lips and nodding slowly for added effect. “A woman should have a nice set of legs like yours if she’s going to wear business skirts.”

She smiled back at him. “Thank you. I had you in mind when I picked it out.”

“Did you really?” He gave her a side-eyed stare.

“I sure did. And I bet you’d like to see more than just my legs right now—”

He was moved to chortling. A few days’ wait was not going to ruin it for him. “I better not make a scene. You know I would love to kiss you right here.” He also entertained the thought of groping and fondling beneath her skirt.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you, Wharton.” She thought back to how his lips felt against hers, the way she felt light headed once their tongues entwined, and the way her body reacted to him pulling her body toward his—this visit was fast becoming more than what she’d anticipated.

“Just don’t hold back on anything once you start with me,” he answered. “That’s all I ask.”

Late that night, Sonia felt unusually mischievous and she could not suppress it. And what she had in mind did not involve Trent.

She first stopped by the other closet in their bedroom and retrieved the Tracfone she used to contact Milner. Then she tipped into the bathroom.

Peering into the mirror, Sonia inspected her face. It was still

free of wrinkles and crow's feet. Next, she inspected her hair. Surprisingly, there was only a stray strand or two of graying amid her naturally auburn color; she dared not to look elsewhere on her body. She'd been considering of late to keep it bald rather than neatly cropped close so she wouldn't have to worry about it.

Next, she took a couple of steps back from the mirror, removed her silk kimono and the boy shorts that she wore to bed, and she inspected the rest of her body. She made a slow one-eighty in one direction and a slow one-eighty in the other, and she was quick to determine she was still firm in all the right places.

"I don't feel old," she whispered to herself. "I actually don't know how I am supposed to feel or act now that I'm forty. . . ."

She ran her hand over various areas of her body. It felt as if it was a fun and sensual thing to do. She reasoned the worldly view of what she was doing would applaud her for simply getting to know her body and loving herself. But this was something that was never taught or encouraged by anyone she knew of in the church.

Then she reached for the Tracfone. She began taking pictures of herself. Frontal view. Side view. Back view. She even went as far as sitting on the bathroom floor, spreading her legs far apart, and added a couple of pictures from that view.

Feeling aroused, she went as far as rubbing and stroking herself while fantasizing about Milner—it was a matter of moments before her body tensed and she struggled to remain silent while the pleasure produced a rippling effect throughout.

Afterward, she reviewed the photos that she'd taken of herself. She decided on sending Milner a photo that offered him a rear view of her along with the caption:

I was thinking of you tonight. Wouldn't you like to know my thoughts?