

Finding Lucas

by Samantha Stroh Bailey

Leah? Katie? Rach?" I call after opening the front door that my trusting family never locks.

Wait until their precious crystals and enema paraphernalia get swiped.

"Jamie? Is that you?" Leah trills from upstairs.

"Yeah, I'm home."

Leah glides downstairs with the same grace and elegance she's always had. My mom is ethereal. There's no other word more precise. Tall and willowy, her once blond hair is now silver and tied in a long braid that falls to the middle of her back. She's wearing her favorite pale blue gauzy skirt (the one with the tiny mirrors all over it, of course), a hemp tank top, and naturally, no bra. I've gotten used to seeing a lot of nipples around this house.

She pulls me close and kisses my hair, which I shrug off. Not giving up, she puts her hands on my shoulders and says, "Let me look at the gorgeous you. Hmmm, have you been taking your vitamins?"

"Yup. I guess they just don't work for me."

I never take vitamins, but it's a losing battle to tell her that because she'll inundate me with pamphlets about how flax seed oil will improve my mood. Trust me, it won't.

"Oh, wait! I'll get you some new powder I've been trying. It'll regulate your hormones. You just put it in hot water, let it thicken and drink it down. It works like a dream. Hey, where's Derek?" she asks, peering over my shoulder to see if he's crouching behind me.

I lower my eyes and inspect the navy blue front hall carpet decorated, naturally, with moons and stars. "Um, he had to work. We just got back."

I can feel her silently examining me from head to foot. "Did he ask you to marry him?" she asks warily, and when I look up, I see the worry in her eyes.

Obviously, Leah's not Derek's biggest fan at the moment. "No, of course not. Is that what you thought he was going to do?" I ask, surprised, because Derek and I never talk about marriage.

"I never know what Derek is going to do, Jamie," Leah replies cryptically and shakes her head from side to side, making the turquoise and silver

earrings Katie made for her tinkle musically.

Now, any other mother would expand on that, but Leah speaks more with her eyes and her tone, without judgment, without doing the normal mother nagging or clucking. But the result is the same. Anxiety.

"We had a good time!" I throw up my hands in exasperation because I want to prove to her that everything is okay. I don't want Leah to think I'm not happy. Her whole existence is about being happy.

But Leah just smiles serenely. "Okay."

Can't she tell me that she hates him? Can't she tell me I'm making a mistake by staying with him? Why does she need to be so easy and relaxed when she knows it makes me so tense?

I sigh. "Where's Rachel?"

"On the phone. Where else? I'm glad you had a good time." She locks eyes with me, says nothing, and I want to scream.

"We did."

"Hmmm." And that one word says everything. "Do you want something to drink? I just brewed a pot of dandelion tea," she asks, walking towards the kitchen at the back of the house.

I follow her lavender-scented trail and say, "No thanks. I just want to grab Rachel's essay and go. I have some work to do before tomorrow."

She turns on the stove and puts the silver tea kettle on the range. "Oh, what are you working on now?"

"People who look like their pets."

She giggles. "I'll have to make sure to tape that one."

Leah loves my show. Of course she does. She supports everything I do. If I told her I was running off to become a fire-eater at the circus, she'd buy tickets for every city and show up to watch me. She'd probably even light the stick.

I know that sounds fantastic, having a mother who supports and understands everything you do without placing her own expectations on you. But, sometimes, I'd really just like a mother.

I leave her to brew her tea and run up the spiral staircase, past the oil lamps and incense burners to Rachel's room at the top of the house. Rachel and I are total opposites. Where I'm

reserved and aloof, she's warm, outgoing, and bubbling with infectious energy. I rap my knuckles on her door. "Rach?"

She flings open the door and hurls herself into my arms. "Jamie! I missed you. I have so much to tell you. Steve emailed me and wants me to go out with him, but I know that Becky likes him. But it's not like they've hooked up or anything..."

And she's off for about fifteen minutes about school, her teachers, friends, new clothes. I can't help but smile. Rachel's the only person I'll let paw me. I couldn't stop her if I wanted to. It's been a long time since we've lived in the same house so I no longer have to witness massage trains and hair braiding sessions with her equally affectionate friends.

"How was your hot weekend?" she finally asks, her blue eyes huge, searching my face for any vestiges of excitement.

"Not so hot, really. We fought a lot."

Rachel takes a deep breath to fill her lungs with enough air to respond to this. In a second, I'll be bombarded with all of the questions she can get out in one breath. "You fought? Again? About what? How was the hotel, though? And Montreal? Did you learn any French?"

I can tell Rachel about the problems with me and Derek, because at eighteen, she doesn't take them so seriously, and she can jump from one topic to the next faster than I can think.

"We just fought about stupid stuff, and no, I didn't learn any French. But, yeah, the hotel was really nice. You would have loved it." I sit on the edge of her bed, avoiding the twenty or so pairs of tiny thongs she's scattered everywhere. "And he took me shopping."

Her eyes light up and she plops down next to me. "Shopping? Did you get a lot of stuff? Did he buy stuff?"

"He got tons, and I got makeup. See the rash on my face?" I say and smile.

Rachel's soothing laughter makes me feel better. She tosses her shiny hair over her shoulder, grabs my hand and pulls me towards her hot pink computer. "Do you wanna see the email Steve sent me? I can't tell what it means. I'm not sure if he likes me or just likes me."

I'm sure that makes perfect sense in the hormonally-charged brain of an eighteen year old who can't focus on anything or any guy for too long.

I read the email, take Rachel's essay, and say my goodbyes. Katie's with a client (I can tell from the sound of rain and wind coming from the stereo system in the basement) so I don't have a chance to say hello. I don't leave empty-handed, however. Leah presses two bottles of garlic and fish oil pills into my palm before I leave. How revolting. To be tossed in the trash with all the other supplements Leah's given me over the years.

In the television studio, a cat is trying to climb on top of a llama, so I leave them to it and head towards my desk. I stayed up late last night putting together the interview questions for Mitzy, the dumb as a brick, gorgeous, straw-shaped host of our show.

Mitzy can't read very well so the questions are always whispered in her ear through a tiny earpiece speaker. I still have trouble believing they couldn't find a talk show host who's both telegenic and brighter than a burned out bulb.

I know that my boss, Sue, the executive producer, wants to find someone to replace her, but she's too terrified to do it. Most people have a boss they're intimidated of. Mine is so fragile that if you speak above a whisper, she faints in fear.

Sue is definitely not producer material. She holds a PhD in Media Communications, and with her stringy brown hair (always, always in a bun), wire-rimmed glasses perched on her nose (or on her head which invariably makes her look desperately for them), and timid voice, she's better suited to being a researcher.

I have no idea how she ended up at a cheesy talk show, but I know why she can't leave. Her mom is ill with some disease that is so rare only two people in the world have it (and why I can never remember its name) so Sue needs money to have at home care. Poor Sue.

She tiptoes around everyone, hates the spotlight, and uses words like "pernicious" which not many people at this show can even spell much less understand. I can though because I do have that Master's degree, and I might as well put it to good use understanding Sue since I haven't done much else with it. Besides wave at it whenever I go to Leah and Katie's.

As her associate producer, one of my responsibilities is finding and meeting the psycho guests (like the girl whose

husband slept with her brother), and I positively adore it. Probably because they make my family seem normal by comparison. I also have to go through the myriad of calls that come at the end of every show. Have you ever wondered who actually answers the questions like: "If you or anyone you know is an obese transsexual, please call 'Tell It Like It Is'?" I'm absolutely floored by the flood of calls from desperate people who either really do need help or crave being on television once in their pathetic lives.

"Jamie? Could you come to the green room and get the guy who looks like a rat to zip up his fly?" Sue whispers from the intercom on the wall above my desk right as I'm sitting down.

After three years, I can finally decipher her hushed, mumbled sentences because that actually sounds like, "Hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

"Hey, Jamie, how was your weekend?" Lucy, the show's assistant director, and my closest friend at work, yells from her desk across the room from mine after I come back from dealing with Rat Man.

Decked out today in a thigh-high black leather mini, knee-high black boots, an orange leather vest, and jet-black bob, Lucy is one of the reasons I love where I work. She can beat my potty mouth hands down, especially after a bit of vodka, which I think she has hooked up to an IV next to her bed. As drunk as Lucy gets on her off hours, at work, she's a consummate professional.

"It was okay."

"How are things with big, manly Derek?" she asks with a wink.

"I got well acquainted with the shower head."

"Babe, you don't need a shower head. I'll give you something good if you're hard up," Carl, the cameraman, pipes in.

"Mind your own business and stop listening to my conversation, Carl, you idiot. And keep your pepper in its shaker because I don't want it anywhere near me."

"Too bad. You don't know what you're missing," he responds, hikes his pants up over his hairy belly that's sticking out of his sweat-stained shirt and goes back to fondling his camera.

I roll my eyes at Lucy, and she makes the universal drinking gesture (one hand forming a cup and lifting it towards her mouth) from across the room.

"I can't today. I'm supposed to go to Hanna's for dinner," I tell her.

"Hanna's cooking?" Lucy's brow knots in bewilderment. Hanna, my best friend, wouldn't know a blender from a microwave.

"Pizza."

"Ah. Okay, another time. Alright everyone, time to roll. Carl, you ready? Jamie, are the questions ready for her Royal Vapidness?" Lucy shoots the usual barrage of questions before a show.

I must admit it was a bit difficult writing some intriguing questions for this elite group of guests. After the usual "Did you notice you and the hairy llama resembled each other immediately or was it more of a gradual thing?" that's pretty much it. So, we have a pet and owner parade of sorts, and the audience will vote for the best pair.

Besides the dog that used a guest as a fire hydrant, the show was a success. Breathe a huge sigh of relief. Thank God we're not live. We tape at 10:00 a.m., and the first show airs at 3:00 p.m. and again the next morning at 9:00 a.m. That gives us a few good hours to brighten the vacant look in Mitzy's eyes, bleep the crass and offensive language, and make sure we're not breaking too many FCC guidelines.

"Hhh, shh, mmm, blah," Sue calls from the intercom.

Everyone in the room swivels their heads to look at me.

"Meeting in an hour," I translate.

I should so get paid more for interpretation. I have a few minutes so in a burst of sudden affection for Derek, I phone him at work.

"Derek Leeds the Third speaking."

Is it really necessary to tell everyone that your family had zero originality when naming you? And he only started using "The Third" when he got this job.

"Hi, hon, it's me."

"Jamie, you know I can't take personal calls at work."

Can't, Mr. Executive? Won't is more like it.

"You won't believe the show we did at work today," I say, completely ignoring his rudeness.

"I'm sure I would. What was it? Teen mothers knocked up by their teachers?"

"No, that's tomorrow."

"Jamie, we'll talk when I get home. Did you pay the credit card bill I left on the table this morning?"

I slap my hand against my head. "Shit! I totally forgot. I'll do it tomorrow."

"How could you forget something like that? I'm not paying the interest when the bill is overdue."

"It's not due for another two weeks. I know when to pay my own credit card, and I don't need you to remind me."

"No, but you need my money to pay it."

I clench my jaw and breathe through

my nose. "It's all your stuff! I didn't want the damn \$400.00 water purifier, I told you I'm fine with the tap, but you insisted. I only wanted the miles so we could go somewhere hot this winter. Look, I just called to tell you that I won't be home for dinner. You'll need to make yourself something. There're some perogies in the freezer."

"Isn't there anything healthy? Perogies are really fattening, you know."

I drum my fingers on my desk in impatience. "And delicious. Okay, there are some green beans, meatless hamburgers, an oxymoron if I've ever heard one, and portabella mushrooms in the fridge. Aren't you going to ask me where I'm going for dinner?" I ask, rubbing my neck in the sore spot I always get when I'm stressed.

"Fine. Where are you going?"

"Hanna's."

"Okay, have a nice day. I'll see you later."

"Yeah. Whatever."

"Don't get defensive, Jamie. I'll see you tonight. Have a good time. I hope she's paying for dinner."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. But she has more money than God. Have fun."

Click. I didn't know that God had money. Grind, mash, grit. Ahhh. Now, I feel like shit, my neck and jaw hurt, and the phone's still in my hand so I call Hanna at her shop.

Hanna owns an exclusive lingerie boutique on North Michigan Avenue. Known as Magnificent Mile, it's Chicago's version of glitz and glamour. Ornate street lamps light the wide cobblestone walkway leading to the most expensive and intimidating of stores, and Hanna's boutique is strategically located right next to the swanky hotels where the stars stay when they're visiting.

She snags some very famous clients and closes the store when they come in. Every once in a while, she lets me pretend I'm her assistant so I can gawk over Kim Kardashian choosing bras (in huge sizes, but it would be indiscreet to reveal the actual size), and George Clooney fingering the crotches of tiny thongs.

Hanna's got everything delicious in her store from tasteful teddies to raunchy leather panties lined with fur. There's a secret room in the back for the more risqué items, like crotchless panties and those naughty bras with the nipples cut out. Her store is one of the most popular in Chicago, regularly featured in New York Magazine in their "Where to Shop in Chicago" section.

I will always have a fond feeling for the DMV, which is where we met

twelve years ago. We were standing in different lines at the counter, both screaming and cursing because we'd forgotten something and wanted to blame it on someone else. Hanna had forgotten her money, while I had left the bill with my proof of address on my desk at home.

In the midst of our tirade (when one of us finally got too hoarse to yell for a moment, we could hear the other), we looked at each other and both burst out laughing. It was like finding a long lost sister. We had that instant chemistry that doesn't need words. We just get each other and never have to explain ourselves or apologize for our faults.

"Creme de Soie," she answers the phone in her velvety, I can give you everything you desire voice.

"Hanna, you busy?" I ask, feeling anxious after my call to Derek.

"Never for you, babe. What's up? How was the anniversary weekend?"

"Fine. It was fine."

"Fine?"

"Good. Nice."

"Those aren't exactly the adjectives I'd expect after a romantic weekend in Montreal."

I sigh and bite my pinkie nail. "I don't want to get into this right now, Han."

Hanna, having known me long before Derek came into my life, and who has witnessed the many ups and downs of our relationship, has been after me for a while now to leave Derek. But she doesn't know him like I do. And she knows when to let it go. For about an hour or so.

"Fine. When are you coming over?" she asks.

"Eightish."

"Sausage or healthy?"

"Oh, definitely sausage. Deep dish."

We hang up, and with the annoying phone call from Derek and the words that Hanna wanted to say but didn't still on my mind, I do what I do best. Get to work and ignore the nagging voices in my head. Everything will get better. It has to.

