



*Unapologetically  
Me*

DANESHA LITTLE



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Me*

*Daneshia Little*

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# PROLOGUE

## *Jericho*



“Ooooh baby, that feels so good,” my girl, Brandy Moore, hummed into my ear as I stroked her to another climax.

“Turn over,” I instructed.

I had been locked in the studio for the past fifteen hours working on music for my new album, when my assistant, Courtney Bassett, told me that Brandy was at my condo in Brooklyn. It was an unexpected but nice surprise to end the night.

Brandy was an actress but not just any actress; she was America’s new “*go to*” black actress.

For the past month, she had been living in Toronto preparing for her new role in a huge blockbuster movie that included megastars, Malik Wallis and Chris Reed.

“Damn, you really *did* miss me,” Brandy moaned.

I was trying to go for as long as I could because I *did* miss having her around.

Weird sounds began to flow from Brandy’s lips as if English had become foreign while reaching her peak. I had lost count of what number orgasm that was for her, but she fell completely limp afterward.

After flushing the condom, I threw on some shorts and walked down the stairs of my townhome-style condo to smoke a blunt.

Halfway down, I noticed my assistant Courtney sitting at my dining room table on her iPad engrossed in reading something while spooning ice cream in her mouth. When I hit

the final wooden step, I glanced at the microwave and realized that it was after one in the morning.

“What are you still doing here?” I asked. She was so obsessed with whatever she was reading that she didn’t even answer or acknowledge my presence. “*Courtney.*”

“My bad,” she shifted in her seat. “I didn’t expect you to come up for air any time soon.”

“I thought I told you to go home a long time ago.”

“I was waiting for Eric to call me when I got an alert that my favorite writer updated her book. I guess I lost track of time.”

“Where is the accountant?”

I knew full well that this nigga was cheating on her and I hated she couldn’t see that no matter how many signs were in front of her.

“He called me an hour ago to tell me that he had to go out for drinks with his boss.”

“You know you can do so much better than him, right?”

“Don’t start.”

Courtney was a brown-skinned cutie in a bookworm kind of way. She was both sweet and spicy in personality. What I most appreciated about her was her professionalism and loyalty, two things that were hard to find in this business. The last thing I wanted was to see her get hurt.

“And who updated a book? Why are you reading a book that’s not done?” While standing over her, I looked down at her tablet. I saw pictures of *me* on her screen. “What the fuck is this?”

I began to read some of the words trying to make sense of what I was reading.

“Calm down,” Courtney giggled. “It’s just a fanfic about you.”

“What the hell is a *fanfic*?”

“It’s when fans write stories using their favorite people, tv shows, movies as their inspiration,” she explained. “There are actually a whole lot of stories about you on this *WriteNow* site. This book that I’m reading by *YaraTheWriter* is by far the best one.”

“What is it about?”

“It’s like an updated version of *Love and Basketball* and *Brown Sugar*, but with a twist. Whoever Yara is, she can write her ass off.”

I read more of the displayed chapter and found myself surprisingly entertained by what I read. “What’s it called?”

“*Jericho’s Heart*.” She grinned as if she knew something that I didn’t. “If anything, you should read it for the comments alone.”

She clicked on a paragraph and another screen popped open with various readers leaving a trail of comments. I couldn’t believe what I was reading.

“Yo, this shit is wild.” I rubbed my beard.

“Mhm. I told you.”

“Why are you reading fantasies about me?”

“Believe me; it’s *all* for the laughs. I know that you wouldn’t even do or say *half* of that stuff.” She crossed her arms. “And trust, nobody over here is checking for you like that.”

“Lemme hold this,” I said already walking off with her tablet.

“That’s cool; I can pull it up on my phone anyways. I’m gonna crash in the room,” she told me as an afterthought, referring to the spare room that she often stayed overnight in.

“Yea...a’ight.” My eyes were caught up in the story I was reading.

After grabbing a bottle of Gatorade, I climbed the stairs. I scrolled through the screens until I reached the beginning of @YaraTheWriter’s story.



# Chapter 1

## *Fatima*

*\*Two Weeks Later\**



“Do you have to leave? Why can’t we just lay in bed all day?” I whined while watching my man, KeVon Simmons, walk out of my bathroom freshly showered. “You just got here.”

“Fatima quit it. I came here right after the bruh’s party last night.” He dug through his gym bag.

“At almost two in the morning. I swear it feels like we rarely see each other anymore.”

“With graduation coming up, you know I’ve been taking on more clients. I can’t slack off now, no matter how much I want to lay in bed with my sexy-ass girlfriend.”

“Then I’ll *never* see you,” I pouted.

I wanted to be mad, but I couldn’t because I was honestly proud of how hard KeVon was working to be successful. Even though he was set to graduate from Norfolk State in December with a degree in Physical Education, he had already opened up a private gym with one of his boys who was also a certified trainer.

“If you get back in the gym with me, you’ll be able to see me as much as you want.” He began to smother his body with lotion.

“I hate the gym. And I don’t want to lose any more weight. I like where I’m at.”

“It looks good on you baby, but a size 14 is not a healthy size for you. You need to lose at least another twenty pounds to get to your healthy target weight.”

“My doctor seems happy with where I am.”

“He’s just happy that you aren’t a size 20 anymore knocking on death’s door.” After his harsh statement he stood up.

Even though we attended different schools, we met at a frat party when I was much thicker my freshman year. We became friends after that first meeting. A health scare my sophomore year changed everything in my life, forcing me to take my health more serious.

I had stopped taking my blood pressure medications because I hated the side effects, not realizing that those pills were keeping me alive. In the middle of one of my sophomore classes, blood started running from my nose and I was rushed to the hospital. By the time I reached the emergency room, I learned that my blood pressure had reached 220/170. I was only nineteen back then and I could have died.

*Talk about a wake-up call!*

I started working out and losing weight. Then just as I turned my life around, I found out that I had a tumor in my stomach as a result of severe hypertension.

It took two major surgeries to remove it and taking care of myself had remained a priority since. In my eyes, I looked sexy at any size, I just didn’t want to die.

KeVon, who had already started training clients, volunteered to help me get in shape. It was during this time that we grew closer.

In only his boxer briefs, he looked as if he was modeling for a Calvin Klein ad in front of me. Standing at 6’2 and dripping like a dark chocolate Hershey bar, KeVon was the epitome of *Man Crush Monday*. The problem was that *he* knew it too.

His words stung.

No woman wanted to hear her man say that she needed to lose weight. I slid off the bed and strolled to my bathroom, leaving KeVon to debate about my dress size with himself. I wasn’t in the mood to think about it, and unlike him, I wasn’t obsessed with my body.

To me, my weight just meant that there was more of me to love. I had never dated anyone who *didn't* love my size. I fell for KeVon because I admired how much he cared about me.

“Tima, don't be like that,” KeVon said coming up behind me and wrapping his muscular arms around my waist. “I want you to be *healthy*. You know how much I love you and I'm not trying to lose you.”

“I know.” I picked up my toothbrush, slid toothpaste across the bristles and began to brush my teeth. I leaned on the doorframe and watched as he moved around.

KeVon had always been cute in my eyes. He sported a low fade with waves that complimented his clean-shaven sculpted face. When we first met as freshmen, his physique was smaller. Through the years he worked hard to obtain his football player physique.

“What do you have going on today?” he asked pulling his black tank over his head.

“I'm going to Cracker Barrel with Autumn-”

“*Fatima*,” KeVon chastised me with his eyes.

“What! I can't enjoy some comfort food every now and then?”

“That stuff is not good for you.”

“A lot of stuff is not good for me,” I countered. “It's been a long time since I've eaten there, and that's where my girl wants to eat before we go to Deja's to get *our hair did*.”

“Are you going out tonight?”

“We don't know yet. You know how it is,” I responded, but he had stopped paying attention to me because his phone was continually going off. I watched as he typed responses.

“I gotta go; my client is already waiting for me at the gym.” He kissed me on the lips. “I'll see you later on tonight.”

“Mhm.”

“Don't be like that.”

As soon as he was gone, I reached for my laptop and began to work on another chapter of my book.



## Chapter 2

### *Fatima*



“What are you getting today?” Deja asked.  
“Same as last time.”

After eating at *Cracker Barrel*, my bestie Autumn Allen and I went to get our hair styled. The two of us had been inseparable since our freshman year at Hampton University, even living side by side in the same apartment building. Like me, Autumn was curvy and proud.

“Alright, alright,” Deja sang while inspecting the newly purchased hair. “We’re about to hook you up, and you need to tell that man of yours not to sweat this one out.”

“Please, he’s been too busy with that gym,” I mumbled.

“Oh, he’ll make time after I get done with you,” Deja noted.

Deja Roane had initially started at Hampton with us, but by sophomore year she realized how talented she was at doing hair and dropped out to go to beauty school full-time. Since she didn’t have her license yet, she transformed the second bedroom of her apartment into a makeshift salon.

“Hold up, I’ll be right back,” Deja suddenly announced. I gazed at her pretty reflection in the mirror as she walked away. She had the tiny waist and big butt of any IG model. The body that KeVon wanted me to have.

While Deja checked on Autumn, I took that quick moment to read my new notifications on *WriteNow*. Along with hundreds of new comments and votes, I realized that I had five new followers: *@beauty0508*, *@KlaysWifeOnly*, *@JarenyvsJericho*, *@AliciaNChris*, and *@BookLuver17*.

*WriteNow* was an online writing community where writers could go and share their stories without having to go through an editor or publisher. You could publish whenever you wanted, and your feedback came instantly and directly from your reading audience.

No one in my life knew that I was a popular writer on *WriteNow* with over 30,000 followers. Some of my friends followed me and read my books without even knowing that @YaraTheWriter was actually me! I think the validation from my friends was the biggest compliment of my work.

I scanned the newly written chapter of my book, *Jericho's Heart*. I tapped the publish button and placed my phone back in my lap. Then I looked around the room to see whose eyes were buried in their phone.

“My girl updated her book,” Autumn announced excitedly. “Tima, you need to take a break from those science books and check out her work so we can talk about her stories.”

“I *have* to read those science books if I want to graduate and go to medical school,” I reminded her.

Autumn knew how strict my parents were and how much pressure they were putting on me to become a pediatric doctor. As their only child, the last thing I wanted to do was disappoint them. They knew nothing about my writing, and I had never planned to share it with them since they didn't believe that creative jobs were necessary. I quietly enjoyed the best of both worlds- writing as @YaraTheWriter anonymously while earning my degree in medicine.

“But you don't have to read them *all* the time,” Autumn countered.

“I've missed the last three updates myself,” Deja mumbled while working on the next braid. “I heard it's getting juicy.”

“Girl, why the sex scenes gotta be so good,” Chanel Henderson, our other homegirl, said. “I be trying to tell Yara she needs to tag me in this story because that damn Jericho is so *fine!*”

“That man can get it anywhere, any position, and anytime,” Autumn chimed in. “And I read your little nasty comment, Chanel.”

“The only person I want reading my comments *is* Jericho,” Chanel stated. “I need him to know *all* of the things I wanna do to him.”

*Jericho.*

I loved using him as the inspiration for my newest story. Not only was he a successful rapper, but he was a 6'6 tatted up double shot of Cognac. Everything about him exuded sex, and he was genuinely talented. His first album had been out for a year, and it was already being considered a classic.

If you combined the smoothness of Drake, the lyrical genius of Kendrick, the consciousness of J. Cole, and the uniqueness of Chance the Rapper you made yourself a dose of Jericho. There were hundreds of fanfics about him on *WriteNow*.

“You know what you sound like right now, don't you?” I asked.

“Mhm. A woman who knows exactly what she wants,” Chanel answered holding her head high.

“You're talking all that mess, but if Jericho were standing in front of you right now you wouldn't know what to do,” Autumn joked causing us all to laugh. Her cinnamon-colored brown skin was flawless, and she had a smile that lit up any room that she was in.

Hailing from Chicago, when we first met Chanel as freshmen, she was completely closed off. As a senior, she had grown entirely out of her shell. Of all my friends, she was the most fun to be around, and when you put her and Autumn in the same room, it was a comedy show all in itself.

“Y'all some freaks. I'm gonna start recording these conversations,” I threatened.

“As long as you are sending them to *Jaren Young*. I don't care. I hate that he's with that toothpick Brandy though, she don't know what to do with all of that. Jaren needs a woman

with some meat on her bones,” Autumn bragged smacking her thigh.

“She is so stunning though,” I said defending the thin actress.

As Hollywood’s new “*it*” black girl after starring in a movie that Denzel Washington had produced two years before. We were all surprised to find out that she was connected to Jericho. They never confirmed their relationship, but it was obvious that they were dating.

“Just think. She gets to work with Malik Wallis all day and *then* gets to take her ass home to Jericho,” Chanel said shaking her head. “*That* is the life I’m talking about.”

“As much as I love Jericho, that Malik Wallis could get it,” Deja chimed in.

We all began to agree with her through nods and mumbles.

“How is your boo doing?” I asked Deja privately as the other two girls went back to their phones.

“Not a *damn* thang,” Deja responded while moving to the last braid. “There ain’t nothing worse than a fine man with *no* job or any drive to do anything with his life.”

“I know that’s right.”

“Tima, you are lucky your man has his shit together. You better hold on to that one, trust me when I tell you there ain’t nothing else out here.” She paused. “I’ll be right back. I need to rinse Autumn out.”

I thought about Deja’s words as she walked away but was distracted by a new message that I got from one of my new followers.

**@JarensJericho: Why do you think Jericho would choose the model over the girl he grew up with? It’s obvious who he wants.**

*Me: Look at who is on his arm now. Even though this is a fiction story, I try to stay true to the personality of the real-life person that I am using.*

**@JarensJericho: You think Jericho is superficial?**

*Me: Not necessarily, but if he had a choice between the two women, I see him choosing the prettier one just because he can.*

**@JarensJericho: sounds superficial to me**

*Me: Like I said, it's my interpretation of who I think he is. Neither of us personally know him to say otherwise.*

**@JarensJericho: agreed**

*Me: Thank you for reading my story though.*

I loved interacting with my readers and helping them to understand my process, so I didn't mind the short debate. I waited a few seconds, and when I didn't receive a response, I quickly closed the app so that Deja wouldn't catch what I was doing.

# Chapter 3

## *Jericho*



“Run that back,” I told my engineer Brendan Powell and producer, Richie Beatz. “I need to hear that one again.”

I closed my eyes as the track began to play with my raw lyrics laced over the driving beat. Something was missing, but I couldn't figure out if it was something on the actual track, if it was my hook or my lyrics in general.

“It's not there yet,” I said when the song finished playing.

“The hook needs something,” Richie decided.

Richie had been with me since I first started rapping and produced most of my beats. He was just as hungry as I was so that we would live in the studio for days sometimes.

With my pad in front of me, I began to scan the words. As we started to change some of the lyrics, I looked up when I heard other voices in the studio. When I saw Samir, I immediately removed my headphones and stepped out of the booth.

“Yo!” I said giving the legendary rapper love.

“I heard you were making some fire in here and I came to check it out.”

“Trying to,” I told him sitting down in one of the open chairs. “Aye, start that over.”

Brendan pressed a few buttons, and then we all began to nod our heads as the new song played in the background. I looked over at Samir. His eyes were closed as if he was trying to digest every lyric fully.

Samir was my favorite emcee of all time; being discovered by him was a dream that felt like it was right out of a movie.

To have his stamp of approval meant more than any number of record sales.

When the song finished, Samir opened his eyes. “That’s it right there.”

“I feel like it’s not there yet.”

“Lyrically, you killed it,” Samir added with a nod. “The only thing I can see you messin’ with is that hook but leave the rest of it alone.” He began to laugh. “Shit, I might have to jump on it.”

“You already know.”

No matter how hard you were, when you were in the same room with someone you idolized, you couldn’t help but turn into a kid. If he wanted a verse on every song on my record, I would be cool with it. That’s how much love I had for Samir.

“How’s the rest of the album?” he asked.

“I wanna add about four more tracks, but it’s about done.”

“Let me hear something else,” he requested leaning his body against the long table. Brendan began to play track after track for Samir, and he gave me notes on each one.

“What are you thinking for the title?” Samir asked sitting down in the chair next to me.

“I was thinking *Jaren vs. Jericho*.”

“A’ight, explain to me what that means to you. You know you’re not the first to do an album like that.”

“To me, *Jericho* is the lyrical genius who made it, and *Jaren* is that ballplayer and hustler who is still grinding to make it.”

I actually got the idea for my new album title while talking to Courtney when she was trying to come up with a screen-name for me while creating my account on the *WriteNow* app. Lately, I had been feeling torn between two worlds with my newfound success. The hunger was somewhat slipping away because of my success out the gate, and I had to get it back. Reading Yara’s story had given me some ideas. I didn’t know

who she was, but she seemed to get who I was, and it was inspiring me in the studio.

“A’ight. I see where you’re going with it,” Samir nodded with a grin.

*Jaren Young* had a unique path. Playing basketball had been my life. After being recruited across the nation, I settled on Syracuse to remain close to home. To this day I regret that decision.

My sophomore year, after getting into a pushing match with my coach in the middle of a nationally-televised game, I got kicked off the team. No other Division I team wanted to take a chance on me. And just like that, my pro career was over.

It was then that I turned to my gift of writing poetry. It was only meant to be fun, not my plan B. I started putting my poetry to music and worked on my style. I had always loved music but becoming an emcee was not the path I saw for my life.

I anonymously started making mixed tapes under the alias Jericho, and each one became bigger than the last. When the man himself, Samir, got a hold of one, he reached out to me, and the rest was history.

Everything finally came together when I turned twenty-six. It had been a hard three-year grind to get to that point, and during that time I was doing anything to make money. Jaren was hungry, Jericho was living lavishly. I wanted to explore those two sides of myself with this album.

“I know whatever I put out has to go hard cause that first album was bigger than what we all thought it would be,” I explained.

“I went through the same thing,” Samir nodded. “Don’t think about that other album while you’re working on this one. It will fuck you up.”

“I can’t even walk down the street without niggas asking about the new music. I *gotta* deliver.”



“Don’t focus on what the streets want,” Samir countered. “Why do you call yourself Jericho? What did you tell me when I first asked you that question?”

When I was young, a Sunday School Teacher was telling us the story of Jericho. She said that God gave us that story because he wanted to break down the walls of our hearts so that we could learn to let him in. I chose that name because that is how I wanted people to look at my music. I didn’t want them to think about what they knew or thought they knew about me. I wanted my music to speak to them. I wanted my lyrics to break down the walls just like God did with Jericho.

“Get back to that. Forget *all* that other shit.”

Once Samir left, I took his advice and rocked out in the studio until almost three. In the middle of smoking a blunt to relax, I got an alert that Yara had updated her story. I welcomed the distraction from my music and clicked on it to see happened next in the story.

In her story, *Jericho* left the NBA to start a rap career. More and more she was turning him into an asshole on this new path, and I wondered if that’s really how she viewed me which is why I sent her a message weeks ago. Since then we had traded messages here and there debating about the book. Whoever she was, she was funny, and I liked how she thought.

In the new chapter Yara had posted, my character’s childhood friend, *Lisa*, showed up at his studio out of the blue in the middle of the night to convince him not to get married. Surprising even me, Yara had him smashing her raw on the equipment board. Lisa and my character had chemistry the entire story, but when their paths sent them in different directions, they grew apart. Even though he was engaged to someone else, it was obvious that he wanted Lisa.

If anybody knew that I was reading this story daily, they would probably laugh. But I found it to be a welcome distraction from my real life. And to be someone’s inspiration made the story that much more intriguing.

I jumped into the backseat of my car and got settled. Even though it was late, I still wasn’t tired. I began to read through

the newer comments being posted. Courtney was right they were just as entertaining as the actual story and a hundred times worse than the comments I received my IG page. I sent Yara a direct message.

*Me: Jericho's cheating on his girl now?*

Since it was so late in the morning, I didn't expect her to reply. I took the elevator to my floor and then walked inside of my empty condo.

Brandy was back in Toronto, and Courtney was at her spot, so I had my place to myself. I considered rolling another blunt, but my phone began to vibrate interrupting that thought.

**@YaraTheWriter: Are you the moral police now?**

*Me: just curious*

**@YaraTheWriter: This chapter was more about her than him. She needed this.**

*Me: So just fuck him in the process?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I didn't look at it like that, he has feelings for her too!**

*Me: Then why is he engaged to somebody else?*

**@YaraTheWriter: Because if you can't be with the one you want, you gotta love the one you're with.**

*Me: nah Jericho ain't like that*

**@YaraTheWriter: And how do you know that?**

*Me: I'm a big fan*

It was something about talking with someone anonymously that had me hooked. I felt like I was getting the real in somebody and not the fake shit that came with this fame. I had been laying so low while working on the album that it was nice conversing with someone on an authentic level.

**@YaraTheWriter: What do you think Jericho would do?**

*Me: he wouldn't be with the other girl in the first place*

**@YaraTheWriter: Do you think he really loves Brandy Moore? Or do you think they are another media couple?**

*Me: you can see it's real*

**@YaraTheWriter: How? He never posts anything about her, and he doesn't talk about her in interviews.**

*Me: Is that what makes it real?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I think so. Do you think it's real for her?**

I thought about this for a minute before responding. You could never fully know what was in somebody's heart, but I felt that Brandy was giving me her all.

*Me: I do.*

*Me: You think it's real with your man?*

There was a pause before she finally responded.

**@YaraTheWriter: Absolutely**

*Me: Do you think your man would cheat on you?*

**@YaraTheWriter: He knows better**

**@YaraTheWriter: Do you cheat?**

We had already established that I was a male reader and it was that information that made our discussions that much more entertaining. She said she enjoyed hearing the male point-of-view.

*Me: I have before*

**@YaraTheWriter: Typical! Does your girl know that?**

*Me: she knows about my past*

**@YaraTheWriter: You don't cheat anymore?**

*Me: I'm older. I believe in karma.*

**@YaraTheWriter: You and me both.**

*Me: Out of all the celebrities out here, why did you choose to write about Jericho?*

**@YaraTheWriter: Since I can't have him, I guess I'm living a fantasy through my book.**

*Me: Your man know about that?*

**@YaraTheWriter: He doesn't know I write.**

*Me: Why not? Your stuff is good.*

**@YaraTheWriter: It's complicated.**

*Me: You can't share your passion with your man? What kinda relationship you got?*

**@YaraTheWriter: None of my friends or family know either.**

*Me: Why not?*

**@YaraTheWriter: They all want me to be a doctor.**

*Me: What do you want?*

**@YaraTheWriter: To make my parents proud.**

*Me: What about you?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I'll just keep writing on WriteNow and doing both.**

*Me: A silenced gift helps no one.*

When she didn't respond, I sent one last message before calling it a night.

*Me: What you want matters too, think about that.*

## Chapter 4

### *Fatima*



“She is sleeping with him!” Autumn squealed scrolling through her phone. “Look at that smile on her face. I *know* that look, and that’s the look of a woman who is getting her back blown out.”

“Let me see.” I took Autumn’s phone.

“Look at how she’s staring at him,” Autumn continued. “That’s not just a *going out to dinner with my co-star* look.”

“But the whole cast is there,” I defended looking at pictures of the cast dinner of Brandy Moore and her co-stars.

*The Gossip Room* had posted pictures questioning if something was going on between Brandy and Malik Wallis citing rumors from sources on the set.

“They are always trying to start something by posting pictures that make things look worse than they are.”

“I don’t give a damn about all that. Look at them; they are into each other.”

I stared at Brandy, and I hated to admit that Autumn had a point. Brandy’s cat-like gray eyes were beaming as she looked on at Malik. He was giving her a similar longing look, and you could see the obvious attraction between the two. I couldn’t tell if they were playing it up for the cameras since their characters were love interests in the movie or if the paparazzi had captured a genuine moment between the two.

“I can’t see anybody cheating on Jericho.” I swiped through more pictures.

Brandy was beyond beautiful by society’s standards, like a younger version of Vanessa Williams. She was Hollywood-

skinny with enough curves to keep her being every guy's fantasy girl.

"That ho better not cheat on my man," Autumn said standing in front of the full-length mirror in her apartment. "But if she does, mama has the perfect medicine for a broken heart."

"Girl, you know Jericho don't mess with no curvy girls in real life." I started laughing.

"He hasn't met the right one yet." She began to twerk in front of the mirror.

I threw one of the tangerine-colored throw pillows at her. "I can't stand you."

"That's only because you know I'm right," she commented flinging her hair.

We were both getting ready to go to *Muse Paintbar* in Virginia Beach with some other friends to have dinner, drink, and paint. We had all become so busy with graduation plans, that our senior year was flying by without us seeing each other. This *Girl's Night Out* was supposed to remedy that.

I hadn't been updating *Jericho's Heart* in the past week because of interviews I was preparing for with John Hopkins School of Medicine and UNC School of Medicine. They were my top two choices for medical school, with John Hopkins being my top choice.

"I'm telling you, sis I could teach that man a thing or two."

"I bet your nasty ass could," I said returning her phone.

Once we got to *Muse Paintbar*, we began to eat dinner with our friends while looking at sample paintings all over the walls. I sipped on some red sangria while narrowing my eyes on a painting that kept my constant attention for most of the dinner.

I walked over to the gray painting of a simple red box holding something inside of it. One of the professional artists stood next to me.

“Not too many people ever gravitate towards this one,” she said.

I didn’t even understand why I felt so drawn to it.

“What is it?”

“It’s a locked box. The gray represents the artist’s mood, and the red box represents her heart.”

“What’s the stuff inside of the box?”

“It’s all painting supplies,” she replied. “The girl who painted this wanted to be an artist but didn’t think a career as an artist was realistic. She painted this to represent the fact that she had to lock away her gift to fit society’s expectations of a real career.”

“What happened to her?”

“She owns *Muse Paintbar*,” she grinned proudly. “This was the first painting she hung up. It reminds her every day that dreams come true.”

I was speechless.

“If you want to choose this style, I can trace it for you, and if you want to lock something else inside of the box, I can trace whatever you want.”

I thought about putting a box with a simple book inside, but I knew I would have to explain such a painting to my friends.

“No, I think I want to paint that wine glass set over there in maroon.”

“That’s one of our more popular designs,” she smiled warmly. “I’ll start tracing that for you.”

I tied the smock around my neck and placed my glass of wine down next to the easel between Autumn and Deja. We made small talk about what design we each chose, and my eyes kept going back to the owner’s box painting.

My reader @JarensJericho’s words came to mind. ‘*A silenced gift helps no one.*’

Initially, his words had caught me off guard, and I didn't respond. We hadn't chatted since.

*What did he know? He was probably some jobless loser sleeping on his mother's couch. Who was he to give me advice about my life? He didn't know me!*

My phone began to vibrate in my back pocket alerting me that I had a new message.

***KeVon: 10:33PM: going out, I'll text you later***

***Me: 10:35PM: Just meet me at my place when you're done.***

KeVon lived in a rented house with his business partner in Norfolk not too far from the art studio. We were supposed to meet up after my night out, but his message let me know that was no longer the plan.

I waited for him to respond, but he didn't. I started sweeping my paintbrush across the traced canvas.

"What time am I dropping you off at that boy's house?" Autumn asked.

"You're not; I'm riding back home with you."

"Let me guess, he's going out?"

"I don't see nothing wrong with him going out as long as he's coming home to you," Deja commented pausing her paintbrush in the air.

"Thank you, Dej." I blew her an air kiss.

"Don't feed her that mess," Autumn said leaning forward on her stool. "So, you are okay with the only time your man has open to spending with you being in the middle of the night?"

"It's not like that. We're both busy, and we make time when we can," I said in our defense.

"His frat brothers and that gym are not more important than you," Autumn said pointedly.



“Let her be Autumn. Fatima’s in love, and you can’t tell a girl in love how to feel about her relationship,” Chanel added.

“I *can* keep reminding my best friend that she deserves better than somebody’s scraps.”

“I’m not accepting anybody’s scraps,” I clarified.

We spent the next two hours painting, sipping, laughing, and talking. By the time I got back home to my apartment, it was after midnight. I didn’t expect KeVon for another two hours, so I pulled out my laptop and began to finish a long overdue chapter.

I loved Autumn, but I hated how she only thought negatively about my relationship with KeVon. I didn’t want to be the bitter girlfriend nagging or accusing my man of something if I hadn’t caught him doing anything.

*Did I want more time with him?* Yes, but I wasn’t about to force him to put his business on the backburner to appease me.

I spent the next hour finishing the chapter. With all the drama that had been reported about Brandy, I decided to add a similar scenario in my book.

In my story, my Jericho character found out that his fiancée had been sleeping with her agent. Once I finished with the tumultuous chapter, I published it then went to my bathroom to freshen up.

After showering and pulling on a short gown, I crawled onto the bed and pulled my MacBook onto my lap. I read the incoming comments on the new chapter. My readers were way more brutal with his fiancée than they had been with Jericho or Lisa when they cheated. I hated when I saw a double-standard like that and hated even more that my readers didn’t even realize when they were doing it!

*Why were Porsha’s sins worse than Jericho’s? They both cheated!*

When I saw the red dot next to my inbox, I realized that I had a new message and I knew it was most likely from @JarensJericho. When it wasn’t, I was disappointed because I had become accustomed to receiving messages from him.

It had been a while since we had chatted, and I was starting to miss hearing from him, whoever he was. I liked being able to talk about my writing and my pursuit to become a doctor openly.

I decided to take a chance and send him a new message.

**@JarensJericho: What do you think about the new chapter?**

I closed my laptop and placed it on the nightstand. I flipped through the channels until I stopped on some Lifetime movie that looked like it could keep my attention until I fell asleep.

I wasn't sure how much time had gone by when I heard a knock at my door. I answered to find KeVon looking sexy with his eyes glossed over.

"Damn baby, you already got right for me," he said closing the gap between us.

He began kissing my neck. I couldn't enjoy it because he smelled like he had literally taken a shower in alcohol and then dried off in cigarette smoke.

"KeVon, you stink."

"It's just the clothes," he said slurring his words while peeling off his long-sleeved shirt. "All I've been thinking about all night is you."

He yanked my gown over my head, kicked off his Timberland boots and began to push me towards the couch. I tried to ignore the alcohol and musky stench, but it was too strong. I stilled my body.

"You have to go take a shower first."

KeVon looked at me with frustration. "What? You're always talking about us spending more time together. Then when a nigga drops everything to be with you, you're tripping as if that ain't good enough."

"That's not what I said. I took a shower earlier so that I would be fresh for you." I tried to calm my words with kisses. "I'm just asking you to do the same for me."

“If you love me, it shouldn’t matter *what* I smell like.” He dropped his face between my breasts and circled his tongue along my peaks.

I couldn’t get past the stench, so when I found the strength to push myself off the couch, I did so and stood with my hands on my hips.

“Come on; I’ll take a shower with you.” I pulled his hand.

“I’m your man, Tima.” He jerked his hand away. “*You* should want me no matter what.”

“*KeVon-*”

“Nah, it’s cool.” He walked over to his discarded shirt.

“What are you doing?” I tugged on my gown.

“I’m going home.”

“Are you serious?”

“I don’t know what the hell has gotten into you lately,” he spat pulling his boots on.

“All I asked you to do was *take a shower!*” I said meeting his anger. “You smell like the club, smoke, and funk!”

KeVon pulled his keys out of his pocket. “There are girls around here who don’t give a fuck about what I smell like.”

“Well I suggest you go find one of them.”

“I should’ve stayed my ass in Norfolk,” was the last comment he made before closing my door.

KeVon was in no condition to drive, but I wasn’t about to run after him either. The one thing I would never compromise on was respect.

After sending KeVon a text asking him to let me know when he made it home safely, I went back to my laptop to read more comments.

There were notifications of new votes, comments, and followers. None of them were from @JarensJericho, and for the first time since we first started communicating, I carried an empty feeling about him not responding.



# Chapter 5

## *Jericho*



I was in the studio with rapper Baptiste, my engineer Brendan, Richie, and a few of the homies. My phone kept going off as we worked, and I knew it was more people wanting to ask me about all the recent blog gossip about Brandy and Malik Wallis.

Unlike other people I didn't like to talk about who I was messing with, especially to the media. To me, it was nobody's business, and it wasn't like they cared anyway.

*How many public celebrity couples did they build up just to tear down later?*

Brandy called me the minute the post went up, and social media started buzzing. She assured me that none of it was true and I accepted that. I trusted a person's word until they showed me otherwise.

She informed me that after she finished shooting her scenes for that day that she was flying to New York. I didn't need her to do all that, but she was insistent that she needed to see me.

I wasn't an insecure man who needed to be up under my woman all the time. And I believed that if somebody was going to cheat, they were going to do it whether they were 5 miles away or 5,000. I wasn't naïve about the situation, I gave her the same benefit of the doubt that I wanted in return. There had been plenty of rumors floating around about me and she didn't believe any of them either.

For the next few hours, I focused on finishing the Baptiste track.

After we finished the song, Baptiste left, and my boys sat around talking about where they wanted to go for the night. I took out a blunt and started smoking as they made plans.

“You rolling?” Richie asked.

“Naw, I’m gonna take my ass home,” I said after exhaling.

“This nigga over here is in love,” one of my boys said causing everyone else to laugh.

“A nigga just tryna lay low until the album drops.”

“Is that what your girl is doing?” PD asked with amusement.

I could see that he was trying to be funny, but he should’ve known by now that I was a genius with the pen

“You still being a bitch,” I mumbled after I finished taking another puff.

“How am I a bitch? My girl ain’t out here fucking nobody else.”

“Only bitches believe everything they read.” I slid off the table I was sitting on. “If I was to tell you everything I heard about *your* girl, you might off yourself.” I began to dap up my other boys. “I’m out. I’ll see y’all niggas tomorrow.”

“Man fuck you Jaren, you ain’t heard shit about my girl,” PD cursed me from behind.

“Stay up,” I laughed while leaving them in the studio.

The minute I walked through my door, the scent of something sweet hit my nose. I looked around expecting to see Courtney, but she was nowhere in sight.

I climbed the stairs until I reached the master bedroom and found Brandy dressed in a sexy white lingerie number sprawled across my bed asleep. A few fruity scented candles were burning, illuminating my gray and black decorated room.

I walked over to the king-sized bed and leaned down to kiss her on the head, and she began to stir awake.

“You’re home.” She rubbed her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Almost two.”

“I’m sorry baby; I tried to wait up for you.” She began to caress the side of my face.

“I told you that you didn’t need to make the trip. I’m busy trying to wrap this album up.”

Brandy moved to her knees and wrapped her arms around my neck. “I needed to make sure that *we* were okay.”

“Like I said on the phone, I believe you.”

“Baby, I would *never* do that to you,” she said holding my face. “Chris rented out a restaurant for the cast, and we all went out to eat. I don’t understand why the blogs are trying to make it more than what it is.”

“I heard you the first time,” I paused and searched her face. “But if I *ever* find out-”

“You never have to worry about that.” She kissed me on the lips.

I didn’t say the words back because I had love for her, but I wasn’t sure beyond that. I believed that love came with time. That was the number one thing I learned growing up with a single mother who suffered many heartbreaks.

Brandy and I had only been dating for about six months, and she felt it was love early on.

When I first met her at an industry party, I thought she was just another airhead actress looking for a come-up from my sudden fame. She was on all of the *up-and-coming* actress lists, and I had assumed from what I read about her that she was exactly Black America’s *new sweetheart*.

She was anything but that. Yes, she was beautiful with her gray eyes, honey-coated skin, and light brown hair but she turned out to be a down-to-earth Detroit girl who was smart and driven. We had been keeping everything between us on the low until TMZ leaked a video of us leaving my condo in the middle of the night. Even though the public assumed from then that we were together, I never confirmed or publicized it.

For the next hour, Brandy sexed me down to make up for all the time we had missed out on while she was shooting the

movie. She wasn't a night owl like me, so she went right to sleep afterward. I , however rolled over on my back and picked up my phone.

I scrolled through and answered some new messages from my manager, read some comments on my social media pages, and checked the schedule that Courtney emailed me for that next week. My album was pretty much complete, and the execs were ready to hear it.

Then I went to *WriteNow* to catch up on the last chapter I hadn't read from Yara's book.

What I read irritated me. I could tell that Yara had taken the public headlines about Brandy and me and spun it into her story. It was foul. Up until that point, I thought she was a brilliant, original writer.

I went to my messages and noticed that she had also written me a new message.

**@YaraTheWriter: What do you think about the new chapter?**

*Me: I think it was lazy*

I was about to exit when she surprised me by responding immediately.

**@YaraTheWriter: Lazy? How?**

*Me: Ur using shit you read in blogs to come up with stuff for ur story.*

**@YaraTheWriter: I think it makes it more realistic.**

**@YaraTheWriter: Why are you taking it so personal anyways?**

*Me: Not takin it personal, u don't need to read gossip to get ideas.*

**@YaraTheWriter: You don't think Brandy is cheating on him?**

*Me: Do u know her?*

**@YaraTheWriter: No.**



*Me: Then why would u assume u know who she's sleeping with?*

**@YaraTheWriter: You can see it in her eyes. A woman's eyes never lie.**

That shit threw me off because I looked directly into Brandy's eyes when she told me that she wasn't stepping out on me.

*What did Yara see that I didn't?*

*Me: What happens next?*

**@YaraTheWriter: Jericho is gonna leave Brandy and find a real woman.**

*Me: I was talking about ur story, not his real life.*

**@YaraTheWriter: I guess you'll have to wait and see like everyone else.**

*Me: U really think Jericho would drop his girl over some blogs?*

**@YaraTheWriter: He can do so much better than her.**

*Me: Where is ur man at?*

**@YaraTheWriter: Where is your girl?**

*Me: next to me*

**@YaraTheWriter: Does she know that you are talking to another woman?**

*Me: I'm talking to another writer*

**@YaraTheWriter: You write?**

*Me: poetry*

**@YaraTheWriter: Why don't you post some of it on your page? I would love to read it.**

*Me: maybe later*

**@YaraTheWriter: She wouldn't care that you are talking to me at almost 4?**

*Me: ur real funny*

**@YaraTheWriter: How?**

*Me: We don't even know each other.*

**@YaraTheWriter: I like that about us.**

*Me: Why is that?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I like opening up to you.**

I paused and reread her words because as much as I hated to admit it, I liked being able to chat with someone who wasn't trying to tell me what I wanted to hear because of who I was. Yara was just cool in general, and I could see that she needed these talks as much as I did.

*Me: Ur not curious about who I am?*

**@YaraTheWriter: A little, but then I would have to tell you who I am too.**

*Me: What's wrong with that?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I want to keep the mystery between us.**

*Me: Is Yara ur real name?*

There was a long pause before she answered.

**@YaraTheWriter: No and I'm not telling you my real name.**

*Me: I didn't ask for it and u still didn't answer my other question.*

**@YaraTheWriter: What question?**

*Me: Where is ur man? Shouldn't he be there with u?*

**@YaraTheWriter: We got into another fight.**

*Me: U seem to do that a lot lately*

**@YaraTheWriter: Don't remind me.**

*Me: Want some advice?*

**@YaraTheWriter: From you?**

*Me: From a man*

**@YaraTheWriter: But you don't know me or him.**

*Me: I'm a man tho and I'm telling u a man who is always picking fights is not happy with what he has.*

There was a pause.

**@YaraTheWriter: Our relationship is more complicated than that. You don't know us.**

*Me: I understand, but that is how it is.*

**@YaraTheWriter: I guess I'll talk to you after the next chapter.**

*Me: I hope it's better than this one.*

I placed my phone on the nightstand and rolled over to try and get some sleep. I had to go back to the studio that next day to add some finishing touches to the album.

I hoped to have the entire thing ready for the executives so that I could start living a normal life again.

For the past few months, I had turned into a hermit separating myself from distractions. The sacrifice was worth it though; I felt confident that I had another classic on my hands.

# Chapter 6

## *Fatima*



I couldn't believe that I was already three months into my senior year. I had finished my interviews for medical school and was waiting to hear back. Although I was excited about my future professional plans, I wasn't as secure about things in my personal life.

After his drunken tirade two weeks before, KeVon returned to my apartment that next day to apologize. We spent that day making up. Then we turned around and spent the rest of the week fighting over little things all over again. It was a cycle that I was getting tired of.

I didn't want to spend the rest of my senior year fighting back and forth with him. If we couldn't make it work while we lived close to each other, how were we going to survive if I was in Baltimore or Chapel Hill? With KeVon's graduation taking place that next month. I wanted us to finally get back on the same page or go our separate ways.

I hated to admit it, but @JarensJericho's words were also floating in my mind, '*a man who is always picking fights is not happy with what he has.*' I wanted to tell myself that this wasn't the case between us. I wanted to believe that KeVon was just stressed with his business and upcoming graduation, but the signs were there that something was off.

After I finished with my classes for the day, I went to see him at the gym.

When I walked inside, I didn't see him right away. I looked around until I eventually found him towards the back in the weight area working out with a blonde who looked as if she didn't even need a trainer. She was just as fit as he was.

He was laughing and joking around with the woman who was lying on her stomach on a machine while lifting one of

her legs behind her in the air. When he saw me, he excused himself, and we started walking towards the exit.

“Hey, baby. I thought we were meeting at the crib later on?”

I held out my phone and began to re-read his text out loud. “*Sounds good come by the gym after your class.*”

He checked his watch and looked back at the woman.

“Is there a problem?”

“I have to finish up with this client, and then I have another one coming after her. If you were dressed, I would have been able to work you out, too.”

“I can just wait for you at the house.”

“It’s gonna be awhile.”

“That’s fine. I have a lot of studying to do anyway.”

“Why don’t I come through when I’m done?” he suggested.

“Why does it seem like you don’t want me at your place?”

“I didn’t say that. I just don’t want you waiting around for me.”

“What’s going on with you lately? If you aren’t into me anymore or if you don’t wanna be in this relationship. Just say that.”

“What? Where are you getting that from?” he asked. “You know how I feel about you.”

“I know how you *used* to feel about me. In the past, you would drop *everything* to spend time with me. *Now* it’s all about the gym, your clients, or your frat,” I mocked shaking my head. “I don’t even know what it is that we are hanging on to anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Do you even wanna be with me?”

He uncrossed his arms and stepped forward to pull me into a hug. “Baby, you know I wanna be with you.”

“Then treat me like it. I’m starting to feel more like a drive-by or a project than your girlfriend.”

“Come on now. I’m hard on you because I don’t wanna see you back in the hospital fighting for your life.”

“But if I tell you that I’m happy with where I’m at, you shouldn’t keep trying to make me feel as if I’m not,” I reasoned.

“I care about you.” He looked inside of the gym. “Look, I gotta get back in there. Can we finish talking about this at *my* house?”

“I should just go home.”

“Tima, don’t be like that. Give me another hour here, and then we can finish talking about all of this.” He leaned in and kissed me on the lips this time.

I made the short drive to his house and Miles let me in. After small talk, I climbed the stairs to his room and as usual, found the bed not made and a few clothes were thrown on the floor. I picked them up and made his bed before sitting on top of it.

I should have been working on some of my real homework, but all I wanted to do was write another chapter of my book. I pulled out my laptop and began to type chapter 38 of *Jericho’s Heart*. @JarenavsJericho had been so impressed with the last few chapters that I found myself pushing myself to dig deeper to channel the Lisa character. All of the insecurities I felt in my real-life relationship, I explored through her.

In the previous two chapters, when Lisa tried to confront Jericho about the night they slept together, he acted like it was nothing but sex. His rejection broke her heart, and she buried herself in her career, playing for the WNBA’s Minnesota Lynx. My Jericho character remained with his fiancée.

It almost paralleled what the real-life Jericho was doing. He never made a statement and didn’t seem bothered at all by the things going on around Brandy, and the rumors eventually died down. The blogs did report that Brandy rushed back to New York to be with him after the scandal broke.

I was kind of hoping that it wasn't true because I didn't want someone like Jericho to get cheated on. He seemed like the type of guy who avoided serious relationships in the first place. If a guy like *him* got hurt, I could see him writing them off altogether.

I wrapped up my chapter with Jericho realizing that he had made a mistake letting Lisa go after a huge fight with Porsha. He realized that all of the reasons he was staying with Porsha were superficial and that his heart was really in Minnesota with his childhood friend. But when he goes after her, it's too late.

I posted the chapter. A few minutes later KeVon walked inside carrying his gym bag.

He dropped the bag to the floor and approached me.

"Sorry about earlier." He eased on to the bed, and I closed my laptop.

"You had to work."

"I did." He searched my eyes. "I don't ever want you thinking that I don't want you."

"That is how it feels, especially when you never make time for me."

"I promise that I will make more time for you," he said. "What else?"

"If you wanna be with *me*, I need to feel like you do. Right now, I feel like an obligation."

"Baby, you're not an obligation. If I didn't wanna be with you, I would tell you," he countered. "I know it's stressful right now, but just think. I'm already looking at expanding the gym, and *you're* about to be my lil doctor."

"Your *lil doctor* won't *be* a doctor at all if I don't hear back from John Hopkins or UNC."

"You'll hear something soon." He kissed my shoulder. "I know you killed those interviews, everybody who meets you falls in love with you."

“I hope,” I mumbled. “What about you? Graduation is right around the corner. Are you ready?”

“I can’t finish these classes fast enough.”

“I’m proud of you,” I told him wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I’m proud of *you*. How many guys can say that their girlfriend is about to get into the number one medical school in the country.”

“Let’s *hope* I get in.”

“You will,” he said with encouragement. “And we’re gonna get married and have like five kids.”

“Oh really.”

“And we’ll be laughing about all of this in a few years.”

“I hope so,” I sighed as he peeled my shirt off.

“I made sure to take a shower at the gym,” he joked before raining kisses on me.

For the next hour, we made love and then we laid in the bed together. While flipping channels to find something to watch, an image of Jericho appeared.

“Wait, turn it back.”

He returned to some music channel discussing the release of Jericho’s new single from his new album, *Jaren vs. Jericho*. My entire body froze.

*It had to be a coincidence; there was no way the man in many of my fantasies was reading a story that I wrote using him or messaging me every day.*

The moment KeVon left the room to get something to drink, I sent @JarenavsJericho a new message.

*Me: How did you come up with your screenname?*



# Chapter 7

## *Jericho*



**@YaraTheWriter: How did you come up with your screenname?**

**D***amn.*

After we played the new album for the executives at my label, they were instantly excited about the new music and started releasing press releases along with the first single, *Moment of Truth*.

It had only been out a couple of hours and was already playing nonstop on iTunes, all over social media, and radio stations across the country. I knew I had another smash on my hands, but I didn't realize it would blow up like it was. It was nice to see the fruits of my hard work though.

To celebrate, I went out with my entire team. Even in the midst of the party jumping around me, I clicked on *WriteNow* when a notification popped up.

I only had one book in my library, *Jericho's Heart*, so whenever I got a notification it was because Yara had either updated the book or sent me a new message. I hadn't chatted with her in a few days, so I wanted to see what she was up to.

However, seeing her message caused me to pause.

*Do I tell her?*

*Me: If I tell u who I am, will u tell me who u are*

"Aye son, I told you this song was gonna be that hit!" Brendan yelled while drinking out of a bottle.

I laughed and then my eyes wandered to the women on the dance floor in front of us.

“I’m taking her home...and her...and her... I need to add a little whipped cream to my sundae with that one right there with the pink dress,” Richie rambled drunkenly.

The Bronx born-Rican had no shame. He loved women and wasn’t shy about telling them about it.

“A’ight nigga, make sure you strap up, or your shit is gonna be burning again.” I shook my head with amusement.

“I learned my lesson from the last time,” he acknowledged in a strained tone.

I could only laugh harder because I remembered when Richie first started feeling himself after my first album. Girls threw themselves at him as much as they did me and he accepted it all.

One night, he collected about eight girls after a show in Maryland and took them back to his hotel room. At some point, he stopped using condoms because he had run out. He ended up getting Gonorrhea but didn’t know from who because the night had been that wild. His shit was burning so bad that he cried every time he went to the bathroom. Luckily, what he caught could be cured with a shot.

“Haha nigga, you *real* funny,” Richie replied. “Wait until your ass catches something.”

“No woman I mess with *ever* wants those kinds of problems,” I said looking down at my phone.

**@YaraTheWriter: I asked about your screen name.**

*Me: I just came up with it*

I hoped that she would drop it.

**@YaraTheWriter: Is it just a coincidence that Jericho’s new album is Jaren vs. Jericho?**

*Me: How would I know something like that?*

**@YaraTheWriter: That is why I am asking you.**

*Me: It makes sense he would name his second album that.*

**@YaraTheWriter: I guess so...**

*Me: Do u like the song?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I love it!**

*Me: Why u up so late, don't u have class?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I can't sleep**

*Me: Another fight?*

**@YaraTheWriter: Nah, we're actually good now.**

*Me: I hope it works out for u*

**@YaraTheWriter: Where is your girl?**

*Me: At home*

**@YaraTheWriter: Where are you?**

*Me: Ur asking a lot of questions*

**@YaraTheWriter: Just having a conversation.**

*Me: Does ur man know that u are next to him talking to me?*

**@YaraTheWriter: He's sleeping.**

*Me: I know what that's all about.*

**@YaraTheWriter: What do you know?**

*Me: When that shit is good a nigga will go right to sleep.*

**@YaraTheWriter: Are you saying what you're getting isn't good?**

*Me: WTF*

**@YaraTheWriter: You are always the one up while she's asleep.**

*Me: I do most of my work at night.*

**@YaraTheWriter: I bet you do.**

*Me: U got jokes now.*

I started laughing. We easily talked like two friends who had known each other for a long time when we didn't even know each other's real identity.

**@YaraTheWriter: You started it!**

*Me: U won't tell me who u are?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I can't.**

*Me: I'm gonna get it out of u eventually*

“Nigga get off of the phone!” PD yelled wrapping an arm around my neck. “Tell Brandy you’ll talk to her stuck-up ass when you get home.”

“I’m taking care of business,” I told him brushing him off my shoulder.

“Do that shit tomorrow,” PD continued. “You’ve been stuck in the studio working on this album. You need to be drinking harder than *all* of us.”

“I’m straight.” PD was drunk enough for the both of us already.

“On the real bruh. You need to leave that stuck-up girl alone and get you an around-the-way BK girl.”

“Like *your* around-the-way BK girl?” I countered.

“See, there you go. I told you before about talking about my girl.”

“Go have another drink.” I nudged him towards the waitress carrying new bottles.

Once he was out of sight, I went back to finishing my conversation with Yara.

**@YaraTheWriter: Who I am doesn't matter. You just need to know that I write entertaining stories.**

*Me: Ur not curious about me?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I am a little curious.**

**@YaraTheWriter: But not curious enough to tell you who I am.**

*Me: I'll figure it out.*

**@YaraTheWriter: You can try!**

“Jaren,” my assistant Courtney called my name, and I tore my eyes away from my phone.

“Whassup?” Whatever she had to tell me was about business because she was bursting at the seams.

“Did you see the emails?”

“Which emails?”

“Guess who wants to go on tour with you this summer?” She was ready to squeal the answer before she even got the question out.

“Who?”

“Kadeem!”

The news was huge. Kadeem was the biggest emcee out besides Drake. He was the most respected lyricist by far. I scrolled through the email traffic to read it all for myself. Kadeem’s people had reached out to the record company about us co-headlining a tour together since we were dropping albums around the same time.

“Now that’s whassup,” I said as I continued to scroll through the numerous comments from executives. “I gotta see what that paper gonna be like though.”

“Of course,” she said not able to stop jumping with excitement. “Do you know how many people are gonna run to a concert featuring you *and* Kadeem?”

“In theory it sounds right, but we gotta get through some red tape first. Don’t get too excited.”

“You take the fun out of everything,” she pouted. “Let me have my moment please.” She flung her bone straight dark hair. She normally wore it conservatively either up in a bun or a ponytail. Tonight, it was down. “Did you see the email from Brandy’s agent?”

“About what?” If it were up to Brandy’s agent, he would have us in front of every media outlet. Even if Brandy wasn’t trying to capitalize on my success, her agent was.

“She has that other movie coming out, and they want you to attend the movie premiere with her.”

I looked at Courtney like she was crazy.

“I’m only bringing it up because it seemed like you two were getting serious. I thought you might wanna go.”

“That’s *her* thing, I’m all for supporting her, but the Hollywood stuff I leave to her.”

“Want me to tell them no?”

“Nah, hold off. Let me think about it and talk to B first.” I took a sip of my drink.

“Alright boss.” She then playfully maneuvered her way back on the dance floor.

My attention went back to my phone.

**@YaraTheWriter: Why do you care?**

*Me: Why don't u?*

**@YaraTheWriter: It's not important! I like what we have.**

*Me: For now, you do.*

**@YaraTheWriter: What's that supposed to mean?**

*Me: Exactly what I said.*

I waited a few minutes, and when she didn't respond, I exited out of the app and enjoyed the rest of the night. The funny thing is, as hard as I tried to get Yara out of my head, I couldn't.

I almost put a song on the album called *A Silenced Gift* but knew *that* would have been a dead giveaway.

Personality-wise, Yara seemed like the type of girl that a guy could easily fall in love with. Something *had* to be wrong with her if she was hiding her identity so fiercely. For all I knew, she could've been a complete lunatic with a gift for making up stories.

When I thought back over our conversations, I don't know why, but my intuition when it came to her believed that she was authentic. Which was weird in the Catfish society we lived in.

The problem was we both had other people in our lives, and we were continually tap-dancing over crossing the line with as much as we talked already.

Either way, with my album done, my time was going to be limited. And if I accepted this tour with Kadeem, I wouldn't have much time to talk to her anymore anyway.

# Chapter 8

## *Fatima*



“Damn Fatima, is it like that?” One of KeVon’s frat brothers, Landan, said while looking me up and down.

“Please tell my girl how gorgeous she looks,” Autumn bragged smacking my butt playfully. “She won’t listen to me.”

We were at *Sapphire*, one of the newer clubs in Virginia Beach. It was a club filled mostly with students who were celebrating the end of another semester.

Things between KeVon and I were good again. This was the first night in two weeks that he was going out with his friends. With his graduation coming up that following week I expected his time to be limited.

This night wasn’t about him though; I was out celebrating Autumn. She had just found out that she got into HU’s Graduate School for Counseling. She was so excited because even though she had applied to other schools, she wanted to stay at Hampton. She wanted to be a high school counselor and had already established relationships with many of the local high schools. She felt her best chance of getting a job after graduation was in the area.

I, on the other hand, still had not heard from either John Hopkins or UNC. I was beginning to get anxious because everyone else around me was getting notifications from their schools. I hadn’t considered the possibility of not getting accepted to either school, and the reality was making me scrap for a plan B.

Autumn and Landan had been deep in conversation while I was lost in my thoughts. Apparently, Landan had made a joke, because Autumn nudged me roughly in the side as she laughed



at whatever he said. I did my best-forced laugh and watched the smile spread on Landan's caramel face.

He was the Que that wore his letters everywhere because he wanted everyone to know that he was an Omega. Mostly because he was often mistaken for a Kappa or an Alpha thanks to his pretty boy looks.

"Where is your boy at?" I asked Landan expecting to see KeVon since the rest of his line brothers were there.

Landan opened his mouth to answer but looked unsure of what to say. As if fate was on his side, the DJ started to play C Murder's old school classic, *Down for My Niggaz*, and I watched as he ran to the floor with the rest of their frat brothers to take over the dance floor.

I scanned the sea of purple and gold shirts among the club's red lights that were flashing around the dance floor. I noticed the figure of every single one of his boys but didn't see him anywhere in sight.

I pulled out my cell phone and sent him a message.

***Me: 1:32AM: Are you at Sapphire?***

I waited for a response but didn't receive one. I tucked my phone away and scanned the crowd as the DJ started to play Future. The Ques still owned the floor.

"I thought you said that KeVon was going out with his boys?" Autumn asked suspiciously.

"That's what he told me." I rechecked my phone to see that he hadn't responded yet. I glanced at Autumn and found her dangling her keys in front of me.

"It's time that we take a ride and see what *Mr. Simmons* is up to."

I never believed in popping up at anybody's house unannounced, but tonight something was telling me that's exactly what I needed to do. I followed Autumn out to her metallic gold Nissan Versa and jumped inside of the passenger seat. My heart was pounding so fast that I considered turning around. I wanted to believe that whatever KeVon was doing

that he was doing the right thing. I even hoped that if he was up to something that he would be smart enough to do it away from his place.

Autumn drove like a get-away driver. She leaned forward with both hands gripping the steering wheel tightly, speeding at miles that made me feel as if we were on the run.

“Slow down before you get us killed!”

“We need to get to his house before one of his boy’s tips him off that you are looking for him,” Autumn noted never taking her eyes from the road.

“Ain’t nobody at that club worrying about what I’m doing.”

“You would be surprised what men do to cover for each other,” she said while getting off on the exit that led to KeVon’s house.

It was the fastest I had ever made it to Norfolk from Virginia Beach, and I didn’t know if I was supposed to be impressed or terrified by that fact. We pulled up to KeVon’s house, and when I saw his all-back Dodge Durango, I closed my eyes.

Autumn parked across the street and turned to look at me. “You got a key, right?”

“No,” I said shaking my head. I looked up and saw the glimmer of light through the curtains of his bedroom window. “But I know where they keep the spare key though.” I followed-up, my curiosity now peaked.

“Well, let’s go then.”

“Maybe we should knock first?” My stomach churned the closer we got.

“Where’s the key?”

Walking to the side of the house, I lifted the bricks until I found the key. I handed it to Autumn.

“If he’s not doing anything, then we leave with no problems,” Autumn reasoned.

“What if he is?”

“I’m not holding you back, and you better beat the black off of his lying ass!”

I let out the breath that I had been holding and pushed the silver key into the lock and turned. I hated that the door so easily opened. I tiptoed inside with Autumn right on my heels. She was acting like a detective looking around their mostly black living room which held accents of Omega paraphernalia throughout.

“You can tell that nothing but niggas live in here,” she whispered as we walked towards the stairs.

I had been here many times before, but my feet never felt as heavy as they did at that moment. I began to climb the stairs and could hear voices coming from his room. I stopped and turned to Autumn ready to run back down the stairs and out of the house because I was not prepared for whatever was behind that door.

“*Beat. His. Ass.*” She mouthed through clenched teeth.

I sucked in vital air as I resumed my climb up the steps. When I reached his door, once again I almost chickened out. I didn’t want to know what was behind it. Autumn turned the knob and threw the door open, and from the doorway, my mouth dropped at the sight of *KeVon* in the bed laying on *Deja’s* chest. They were both completely naked watching his TV as if they did this all the time.

“What the f-” Autumn announced.

I was rendered speechless. My eyes kept darting from the man who was supposed to love me to the woman who did my hair weekly, who I often confided in about my relationship and who I also considered a *friend*.

“Tima...let me explain,” KeVon said carefully easing himself from the bed. He started pulling on shorts that were nearby on the floor.

“Let you *explain*?” I repeated.

“It’s about time she knows the truth,” Deja stated a little too comfortably.

“Bitch, I will cut you!” Autumn exclaimed jumping towards her, but KeVon’s fast hands gripped her by the waist stopping her assault. Autumn didn’t even care that she had on a club dress that hiked each time she struggled to get away from him.

I, however, felt as if I had boulders tied to my ankles and I didn’t know who to go after first- her or him. This had never happened to me before.

“I wish you *would* lay a hand on me,” Deja said sarcastically to Autumn who was still reaching for KeVon.

“I’m gonna do a lot more than *lay* a hand on you. I’m gonna snap your lil ass neck in half.”

“Cut that shit out Autumn,” KeVon chastised struggling to keep her away from Deja. I finally reacted and removed his hands from Autumn forcefully.

“Let her go,” I demanded.

“Not until she calms her ass down!” He shot back much louder than he should have considering the circumstances.

Huffing and puffing Autumn began to make demands. “*You* beat his ass, while I snap this hood Barbie doll in half.” She lunged for Deja who still sat in the same spot in the bed. This time I reached for my friend out of fear of how bad she could hurt Deja if she made contact. I didn’t want her to end up in jail over my drama.

“She’s not worth it,” I said around the hammering inside of my chest.

“Just let me get one hit so I can wipe that dumbass smile off of her face,” Autumn begged. I looked up to find Deja blowing her a kiss.

*Was this bitch crazy? She really wanted to die!*

“Everybody calm the fuck down!” KeVon snapped trying to take control of the situation.

“Oh, I’m calm,” Deja smirked. “It’s your *lil Dumbo* over there that looks like she’s about to kill herself.”

*This bitch was supposed to be my friend!*

I snapped at her reckless words and dove onto the bed, I was trying to choke the life out of Deja. She was squirming and kicking when I felt KeVon pull me off of her as if I weighed only 100 pounds.

“Fatima, chill the fuck out!”

I started kicking and elbowing him as much as I could with him holding me from behind.

“How could you do this to me?” Tears stung their way down my hot face. The pain from the reality of what had been going on behind my back was fully sinking in.

“I’m sorry,” he said restraining me with his arms. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

“Sleeping with one of my friends is your way of *not* hurting me!”

“*That* bitch ain’t your friend,” Autumn corrected.

“Don’t be mad at me because I know how to take care of a man and your girl don’t,” Deja bragged.

“Bitch, I’m trying not to *kill* your simple ass, but you must wanna die today.” Autumn pointed her finger at Deja, but KeVon used his free hand to hold her back. I didn’t realize how strong he was that he could hold on to both of us.

I elbowed KeVon hard in the chest. He reluctantly put me down, and I turned around to face him. He held up his hand to his face as if he was expecting to block a hit.

“How could you?” I wiped tears roughly from my face.

“Sis, you look so pathetic right now,” Deja interrupted with a sarcastic laugh. “Don’t do this.”

“*Deja!* Shut up!” KeVon directed.

The next thing I know, Autumn jumped on Deja like a tiger attacking its prey, punching and slapping Deja all at the same

time. KeVon reached down and pulled Autumn off of her.

“I need both of you to get the fuck out.” He pointed at the door.

“I’m gone!” Autumn said while cracking her neck like a fighter. “I said all I needed was one hit.”

“Fuck you, you fat-ass bitch,” Deja said nursing the side of her lip that was starting to swell.

“You want some more?” Autumn dared holding up her fists.

“Get the fuck out!” KeVon boomed causing all of us to jump. He turned to me. “Take your ghetto side-kick and leave.”

I smacked him across the face before I had a chance to think about what I was doing. His tongue massaged the inside of his cheek before he turned to me.

“You’ve got five seconds to get out of my house.”

“Or what? Are you gonna hit me?” I taunted stepping closer to his face.

I felt Autumn tugging on my left hand. “Come on Tima. I told you he wasn’t worth shit.”

“*I’m* not worth shit?” he chuckled sarcastically. “She ain’t gonna find nobody better than me.”

“You keep thinking that,” Autumn said pulling me towards the door.

“I hope you catch something,” I said before leaving the room.

“She got that part right her nasty ass has been all through the seven cities,” Autumn added from the hall.

As we jogged down the stairs, I regretted wearing knee-high boots because my feet were on fire. I could hear Deja and KeVon yelling at each other as we walked further away from where they were until we were out the door altogether.

As soon as we reached her car, my body went limp as I hunched over in physical pain. I began to cry in front of the passenger door before I felt Autumn helping me up.

“Come on; I’m not about to let you cry out here where they can see you.” She opened the door, and I climbed inside.

Once inside, I began to wail because the pain rippled through me so deep that I wanted to die.

“You can do so much better than him,” she soothed as we began our long drive back to Hampton.

Even though that was the right thing a friend should say, and it was probably true, I wasn’t digesting those words at the moment. All I felt was pain.

“Let it out.” Autumn encouraged patting my back. “You deserve this cry. He was foul for what he did, and Deja is just as messed up as him.”

And cry for the entire drive home I did.

# Chapter 9

## *Jericho*



“**Y**ea, that verse was *crazy*,” I emphasized after watching Kadeem finish in the booth.

He and I were two lyrical animals pushing each other. I couldn't get enough of the energy that was in the air while being in the studio with him. It was just the two of us and my engineer Brendan. We didn't want to risk the song getting leaked, and we wanted the process to be as raw as possible without any outside distractions.

Our record companies and managers had worked out most of the important details, and it had been decided that we would tour together. I would open the show; he would close. I wasn't the type of artist who cared about where I was in the line-up, as long as I was performing and making money in the process. Since the details were close to being finalized, to promote the tour, we decided to get in the studio together and do this song.

With Christmas approaching in two weeks, I was between spending time with my mom and sister in Jersey or with Brandy and her family in Detroit. It didn't help that she was pissed at me because I didn't want to go to her movie premiere in January. I didn't want to put our relationship out there like that.

My compromise was to spend the holidays with her, visiting both of our families together, but she complained about scheduling conflicts on her part. I believed it was her way to act out because she wasn't getting her way in the movie premiere argument. So, at the moment things were a toss-up as to what my plans would be.

My attention went back to where I was when I saw Kadeem come out of the booth. We chopped it up for a little while about the tour and our albums. I was planning to drop



my mine in March, and he was dropping his in April. We were going to head out on our US tour in May and crisscross the country until October.

After we finished the song, Kadeem left, and I stayed behind to work on more music.

When things died down, I leaned back in my chair and started answering some messages. Then my thoughts went to Yara and the fact she hadn't posted anything in weeks. I opened the app and sent her a message.

*Me: Everything good?*

I had thought of Yara often, even when I didn't want to. It was something about her that I was drawn to even though I hadn't technically met her. Since I was with Brandy, I always held my curiosity at bay and remained careful about crossing the line.

I was sifting through emails on my business phone when a notification came up on my personal phone.

**@YaraTheWriter: Yes and no.**

*Me: What's the yes?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I got into my first choice for Medical school!**

*Me: I knew u would, congratulations. The no?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I found out my boyfriend was cheating on me with my friend who also happens to be my hair stylist.**

*Me: Damn*

*Me: How u find out?*

**@YaraTheWriter: Walked in on them at his house.**

*Me: That's fucked up.*

*Me: U beat both they asses?*

**@YaraTheWriter: I tried to.**

**@YaraTheWriter: I was mostly shocked.**

*Me: U seen him since*

**@YaraTheWriter: He's showed up at my place a few times, but I'm over him. You only get one time to screw me over.**

*Me: Sorry to hear that.*

*Me: Write about it.*

**@YaraTheWriter: What?**

*Me: The best art comes out of the worst pain.*

**@YaraTheWriter: Where do you get all of these sayings from?**

*Me: Life*

*Me: Put all that pain and anger in ur next chapter I guarantee it will be ur best.*

**@YaraTheWriter: I'm too angry to write.**

*Me: Try again, it will flow*

**@YaraTheWriter: I hate that you always give good advice. I feel like you're my therapist or something.**

*Me: I'm sending u my bill.*

**@YaraTheWriter: You don't know who to send it to.**

*Me: Ready to tell me?*

**@YaraTheWriter: No.**

*Me: I'm gonna find out.*

**@YaraTheWriter: Good luck with that.**

**@YaraTheWriter: Any holiday plans?**

*Me: Going home and u?*

**@YaraTheWriter: Same, going to spend it with my parents. Your girl going with you?**

*Me: That's a topic for another day.*

**@YaraTheWriter: Trouble in paradise?**

*Me: I told u before that relationships aren't meant to be a paradise.*

**@YaraTheWriter: Was that your way of avoiding my question?**

*Me: It is what it is.*

**@YaraTheWriter: That doesn't sound good.**

*Me: Like I said before LIFE.*

**@YaraThewriter: Hey I am going to start working on this chapter. I just got some ideas. I'll talk to you later.**

*Me: Use all of the pain.*

I exited out of the app and went back to answering other messages when Brandy called.

“Sup.”

“I just finished shooting for the night and I wanted to hear your voice.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I miss you,” she whined. “Since the album is finished you should come up here with me for a few days.”

“I can do that. When do you wrap?” I was trying my best to meet her halfway because I didn't like fighting with her.

“The director is trying to get us outta here before Christmas. He's pushing for the twenty-third.”

“Are we going to Detroit or Jersey first?”

“Neither, my agent booked me for some more publicity for the other movie.”

I internally sighed; these were new plans that we hadn't discussed.

“Jaren. Did you hear me?”

“About?”

“I want you to come to L.A. with me. We could spend the holidays out there.”

“I’m not trying to spend Christmas out there; I’m spending the holidays with my family in Jersey. I invited you to spend it with me, but it looks like you’ve already made other plans.”

“Here we go with that again,” she said with exasperation. “You know how hard it is for black actresses in Hollywood. I can’t afford to pass up these opportunities, not while I’m on top.”

“At least we know you have your priorities straight.”

“*Jaren*,” her voice was filled with frustration.

“Brandy, I want you to do what is best for you. I’ve always been straight up about that.”

“Then why don’t you support me by doing this *with* me,” she sighed. “Just a couple of appearances and then the premiere. I won’t ask you for anything else.”

I dragged my hand down my face and allowed my head to fall back against the wall. “My answer hasn’t changed.”

“If you needed me to go to your record release party or anything I would be there in a heartbeat.”

“I would never *expect* you to do that. If you *wanted* to be at those things, I would let you decide that on your own. I wouldn’t try to make you feel guilty about it.”

“The difference between you and me, is that I actually *care* about your career.”

“So, if I don’t come to your appearances, that means I don’t care?” I found the concept humorous. “*You* want to live our relationship out in public. I don’t. You knew that about me when we got together.”

“It’s not like that. I’m in *love* with you. I want you with me because I want everyone to know how much I love you.”

“And I care about you enough to protect what we have by keeping it private.”

“I understood that for the beginning of our relationship, but we are going on almost eight months now,” Brandy argued. “People know that we are together, and they *love* us!”

“They love it for *now* and because we’ve been keeping it private. When we start doing red carpets and posting everything we do, watch how fast that shit goes away.” I exhaled.

“I want you with me. I don’t care what anyone else thinks.”

I took my cap off and threw it on the table beside me. “Let me think about it.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“That doesn’t mean yes, it just means that I’m gonna *think* about it.”

I noticed Brendan holding up his hand to let me know that he had finished adding some things to the track and that it was ready for me to listen to.

“Aye, I’m about to listen to this track, then head home.”

“I can’t wait to hear it,” she said still sounding giddy from my earlier answer. “I love you.”

“Make sure you get some sleep.”

“Why won’t you say it back to me?”

This was another one of our recent arguments. I still had not said those three words.

“You know I don’t throw those words around.”

“And you think I do?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Do you love me Jaren?”

“I’ve got love for you B, but I’ve *always* been upfront with you,” I said as clearly as I could. I could count how many women I ever said those words to in my life. “When I’m ready to say those words, you will *know* I mean them.”

Instead of responding, she hung up.

There was nothing worse than being at the point of a relationship where you felt obligated to do stuff because the other person expected you to.

I sat by Brendan and began to listen to the track he had just finished mixing. While listening my thoughts went back to Yara and not the woman they should have been on.

# Chapter 10

## *Fatima*



“Are you excited about going to medical school?” My mother’s older sister, Dorinda, asked.

“She got into her first choice too,” my mother Loretta bragged holding her handful of cards protectively. “John Hopkins is the top medical school in the country.” I didn’t see the need to answer my Aunt’s inquiry because my mom was doing enough talking for the both of us.

It was a lazy Christmas afternoon, and I was in Charlotte with my family. My father, Otis, was in the living room watching football, with his brother Apollo, and my aunt Dorinda’s adult sons Martez and Montrel. I was in the kitchen with all of the women including my uncle Apollo’s daughter Charity, my dad’s younger sister Sable, my aunt Dorinda and my mom.

While my aunt Sable leaned on the counter whispering on her phone, the rest of us were playing spades at the kitchen table.

“We are so proud of both of you girls,” my aunt Dorinda said looking between us. “Charity you are graduating from N.C. State and Fatima you are graduating from Hampton-”

“And you both are going to continue pursuing your education,” my mom finished her sentence.

“You ready for all those long hours?” Charity asked placing a card on the table.

“As ready as I’m gonna be.” At the interview, I learned just how intensive the program at John Hopkins was, and I was extremely nervous about it. I realized that I wasn’t going to have any time to write or do much of anything while in the program.

“You’ll do fine. You’ve wanted to be a doctor since you were a little girl and used to give me and your father check-ups,” my mom chuckled lightly.

“You’ll be the first doctor in our family.” My aunt Dorinda tapped my hand lovingly.

I wanted to get the conversation off of me, so I turned to my cousin. “Have you figured out what you wanted to do with your psychology degree?”

“I was thinking about going into forensic psychology.”

“You can thank CSI and Criminal Minds for that,” my aunt Dorinda teased. “Both of you girls picked lucrative fields to pursue.”

“Fatima is going to be a great pediatric doctor,” my mom stated proudly.

“What if she decides that she *doesn't* wanna be a doctor?” my aunt Sable challenged.

My aunt Sable was in her early thirties and worked in Atlanta as a flight attendant for Delta Airlines. The career choice fit her because she never kept a boyfriend long and her biggest fear was settling down. She didn’t believe any man knew how to be faithful.

“She doesn’t have any other choice,” my mom answered causing all of us to look at her with shock. “She’s come this far; it would be insane if she tried to pursue something else at this point.”

“Fatima!” My father called from the living room. “The door is for you.”

I wasn’t expecting anyone, so I pushed back my chair and walked to the front door still pondering my mom’s words. Unfortunately, when I reached the living room, I saw KeVon standing by the door holding a gift.

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to give this to you in person,” he tried to reason.



“We aren’t together anymore,” I reminded him. “Whatever is in that bag, go give it to Deja.”

“That girl doesn’t mean anything to me,” he tried to keep his voice low because my cousins, Martez and Montrel, were staring at him from the couch. Both of them knew what had happened with KeVon and they looked just as surprised that he was there.

“I don’t care *what* she *means* to you; that’s not my problem anymore.”

“*Tima*. Can we go somewhere and talk?” He nodded towards where my cousins were openly watching him.

“There is nothing left to talk about,” I reminded him.

“I made a mistake.” He tried to reach for my hand.

“I don’t-” but before I could finish my sentence, my mom sauntered into the room.

“KeVon?” My mom asked beelining for him with her arms spread wide. “I thought I heard your voice. How are you?” I watched on in shock as KeVon hugged my mother just as warmly.

“Have you eaten already?” she asked still holding on to his arm.

I couldn’t believe that she was still so chummy with him.

“No, ma’am. I caught a flight from Baltimore and came straight here,” he responded.

“Come on, let me go fix you a plate. We can’t have you starving on Christmas.” Holding on to KeVon’s arm my mom led him towards the kitchen.

For the rest of the afternoon, I watched as my mom asked KeVon question after question about his business and the rest of the ladies in my family seemed in awe of anything he said. All of them except aunt Sable. She saw through him. The others seemed hypnotized by his charm.

When my uncle Apollo and Charity decided it was time to leave, KeVon also followed suit. My mother nudged me so

hard to walk him to the door that I wanted to turn to ask her if *she* wanted to do it since she seemed more interested about him being there than I was. At the door when KeVon opened it, I all but tried to push him out but he held on to my hand.

“Fatima, I know I messed up, but you’ve got to believe me when I say that I regret hurting you,” he pleaded. “Baby, I promise you that it will *never* happen again.”

“And like I already told you, *it’s over*,” I said shaking my head. “That’s it.”

“Tima, I wanna marry you and start a family with you,” he said taking a step closer to me. “We can get past this.”

“Goodnight KeVon.”

“*Fatima*, wait.”

“I’m closing the door now,” I told him unmoved by any of his pleas. “*Don’t* come here again.” When I went back inside the kitchen, I found my mom cleaning up.

“Where’s everybody?” I asked stalling the inevitable conversation.

“Sable is upstairs getting ready for her flight to Atlanta tomorrow. Your father, Dorinda and the boys are upstairs getting ready for bed.”

“Need help?”

“Where’s KeVon staying?” She put a bowl in the dishwasher.

“At the Holiday Inn not too far from here.”

“That was sweet of him to travel all the way here from Baltimore to come spend Christmas with you.”

“It’s not sweet if I didn’t want him to. Why did you invite him in? I told you I wanted *nothing* else to do with him.”

“Was I supposed to turn him away after knowing he traveled all the way here for you?”

“*Yes!*”

“That man is trying to win his woman back,” she said as if she was impressed by what he did. “You can’t fault him for doing what he had to do.”

“Mom, he was sleeping with one of my friend’s *behind my back*. How can you keep defending him?”

“KeVon is a good man. Men at that age do dumb things, but they eventually get it together when they find the *right woman*.”

“Exactly, when he *finds* the right woman. That isn’t me, or he wouldn’t have been screwing Deja.”

“You’re so stubborn,” she continued picking up a dessert plate. “You’re never gonna keep a man that way.”

“What do you expect me to do? Forget everything he did to me and take him back in *hopes* that he learned his lesson and won’t cheat on me again?”

“Yes! What you two have is special. It reminds me of what your father and I have.”

“Mom, please don’t compare us to you and dad.”

“Hear me out on this.” She held up a palm. “When I met your father, he was out there.”

“What are you saying?” Recalling what my father looked like young, I could see him having lots of women.

“I’m saying that I overlooked a lot to get to this point and I am telling you that I am so happy that I did.” She paused. “I helped to mold him into the man that he is today, and I love that man with everything in me. It wasn’t easy to get to this point.”

“Mom!” She shushed me. “Are you telling me that dad has cheated on you before?”

“All of that doesn’t matter. I *forgave* him and then we had *you*, and I have never been happier in my life.” I couldn’t believe what my mom was telling me.

*My ultra-independent, sexy, confident, sassy mom had been cheated on and put up with it?*

“Don’t make that face. That was a *long* time ago.”

“It’s hard for me to believe that you let dad get away with *anything*, especially cheating.”

“In relationships, you have to ask yourself if you wanna be *happy*, or *right*?”

I didn’t answer.

“What KeVon did was disgusting, but it was a mistake. He knows that he messed up and he’s trying to make things right with you. Give him some credit.”

“I guess we look at things differently,” I said walking towards the stairs.

“*Fatima.*”

I turned to her.

“We are talking about the same man who helped you with your weight problem. Not many men would have done that.” I opened my mouth to speak, but she cut me off. “Don’t try to respond. You need to think about what I said.”

I climbed the stairs feeling so many conflicting emotions. This wasn’t the Christmas I had in mind. From KeVon showing up unexpectedly to my mom trying to convince me to lower my standards. I knew in my mom’s twisted way; she only wanted what was best for me.

When I got to my room, I threw myself on my bed and looked at the hundreds of new notifications that I had on *WriteNow* including two from @JarensJericho.

**@JarensJericho: Merry Christmas.**

**@JarensJericho: I liked that new chapter.**

He had sent the messages hours ago.

*Me: Merry Christmas to you too! I hope yours is turning out better than mine.*

I went back to my page to scan the new reader comments. I received an alert that I received a private message.

**@JarensJericho: What happened?**

*Me: My ex showed up in Charlotte trying to beg me for another chance.*

**@JarensJericho: Did u kick him out?**

*Me: I tried but my mom invited him inside and he stayed at my house most of the day.*

**@JarensJericho: But he's gone now?**

*Me: He's back at his hotel. I told him not to come back.*

*Me: My mom even thinks I should give him another chance. Can you believe that?*

**@JarensJericho: Why?**

*Me: She says that guys like him deserve a second chance.*

**@JarensJericho: Guys like him?**

*Me: He helped me through a health scare, so my parents adore him.*

**@JarensJericho: Ur health good now?**

*Me: Yes, I'm okay now.*

**@JarensJericho: Good**

**@JarensJericho: I've been to Charlotte a few times.**

I had never slipped up and told him anything about the real me, and he now knew something outside of my writing.

*Me: My parents live in Charlotte. I grew up here, but I don't live here anymore.*

**@JarensJericho: Where do u live?**

For some reason, I was in the mood to share more. It was as if the earlier talk with my mom made me want to be a little rebellious when it came to my secret. Even though I didn't know him, I also wanted to know who he was.

When I first heard about Jericho's album title, my first thought was that I could be talking to him or someone close to him. Then I convinced myself that someone like him wouldn't have all this time to message back and forth with me. And why

would he when he could have any woman in the world that he wanted.

*Me: I go to Hampton.*

I held my breath as I waited for him to respond

**@JarensJericho: The real HU. LOL**

*Me: You know it!*

**@JarensJericho: Ur not too far from NY.**

When he said that I froze again. Jericho was from Brooklyn.

*Me: Are you in NY now?*

**@JarensJericho: Jersey**

**@JarensJericho: I'll be down ur way.**

*Me: Are you planning a visit or something?*

**@JarensJericho: Maybe**

I sat up in my bed as my heart pounded a little faster.

**@JarensJericho: GN**

# Chapter 11

## *Jericho*



The time I spent in Jersey with my mom flew by. My mom, Yolanda, was my best friend. She looked more like my older sister than my mom. During my trip, my baby sister, Aliyah, who had just turned eighteen, told me about some guy she was dating. I wanted to protect them both from the heartbreak of the world, so I didn't want to hear about either of them dating anyone.

My dad was the definition of a deadbeat. He got my mom pregnant and had nothing else to do with her. I had never met the man and had no desire to.

*What kind of man abandoned his child?*

My mom met Aliyah's dad when I was about five, and they got together producing my sister a few years later. My mom loved that man. It tore her to pieces to find out that he had a whole other family in Queens. Watching my mom go through that kind of pain is what made me the man that I was.

She didn't raise a boy scared of responsibilities; she raised a man who knew how to speak his mind and stand by his word. I remember her sitting me down when I was ten and telling me never to use the words, *I love you* unless I meant them and was ready for that type of commitment.

I thought I had found love in high school. Looking back, I know it was just puppy love. I was a broke ball player, and that wasn't good enough for her back then. It was the first and last time a woman hurt me.

Up until Brandy, I was casually messing around. I wasn't looking for anything either. The two of us clicked, and it naturally transitioned into something more. The past few months, we had hit a weird place. Talking to Yara wasn't

helping because it reminded me of what I didn't have with Brandy.

Not knowing Yara's identity forced me to convince myself that what I was doing wasn't wrong. We had been conversing back and forth for two months and were in keeping our identities private. Her move to tell me where she was from and where she went to school was deliberate.

Talking to her was one thing, knowing where she was made the situation different. I had to pull back, so after Christmas Day, I stopped talking to her cold turkey.

It was New Year's Eve, and I was set to perform at a huge party at the Barclays Center starring *DJ Khaled and Friends*. I killed time lounging outside of my dressing room talking to Courtney and my security guard, Tyson Wilkes. Up to that point, I only used him for performances or when I had to go out of town. No one in New York bothered me for me to need him full-time.

Tyson was larger than me at 6'9; he was an ex-football player whose presence alone intimidated people. Many people referred to him as the darker-skinned version of Suge Knight.

"Oh my God, it's Jericho!" A few fans walking by backstage squealed when they saw me.

"Aye, hold up," Tyson said halting them.

"It's cool." There were only three of them, so it was manageable.

"Jericho, we're ready for your sound check in fifteen," a petite brunette with headphones announced walking briskly up to us.

"He'll be there," my manager, Larry Chandler, answered for me.

Larry had been my manager since I signed with Twisted Life Entertainment. He was in his forties and married with two kids. His family lived in California, but he spent most of his time in New York.



I finished making small talk with my fans and took more pictures before hitting the stage for sound check. The rest of the night flew by; I performed right after Samir opened the show. Then I stayed around and watched all the other artists.

Around noon that next day I had barely closed my eyes when my personal cell began to ring, and I smiled when I saw my mom's name.

"Hey beautiful," I yawned into the phone.

"Happy New Year! How did it go last night?"

"It was straight; how was church?"

"We had a nice time. Your sister is still mad I didn't let her go to that party. She doesn't understand it's dangerous out there on New Year's."

"She'll be a'ight; I'll hit her up in a minute."

"Did you think about what we talked about?"

"I did."

While at home, I opened up to my mom about the issues with Brandy and she tried to explain that sometimes in relationships we had to get out of our comfort zone for the person we cared about.

"Get your butt on a plane and go surprise that girl," my mom interrupted my thoughts. "At least try to show her that you care."

"I told you that I'm flying out there, but I'm not going to the premiere. I'm gonna do something special for her afterward."

"She'll be glad to have you in L.A."

"A'ight ma, let me get off this phone before you have me carrying her purse, too." I chuckled.

*"Jaren Young!"*

"I love you."

"I love you, too, son."

\*\*\*\*\*

*December 26, 2017*

**@YaraTheWriter: What do you think?**

**@YaraTheWriter: You are either busy or don't like the new chapter.**

*December 30, 2017*

**@YaraTheWriter: Everything ok? Did I say something wrong?**

I looked at all of the messages from *Yara*. I had cut her off without even an explanation while trying to put up boundaries between us.

It was two days into the New Year, and Brandy was still being short with me because I didn't join her promotional tour. She had wrapped shooting her other movie and was in L.A. doing press. She didn't realize that I was on a jet flying to surprise her. After catching up on emails, I browsed my social media pages but became bored. I couldn't help myself; I went to *WriteNow* and caught up on the story. Then I sent Yara a message. She at least deserved an explanation.

*Me: Happy New Year stranger.*

*Me: I know u wanna know what happened but all I can tell u is that I got a girl and talking to u was starting to get in the way of that.*

Once we landed at LAX, I wasn't surprised to find bumper to bumper traffic. I tried to call Brandy to let her know I was in the city, but she never answered. As the driver took me to her hotel, I scrolled through my IG page and started seeing pictures of Brandy coupled up with Malik at her premiere.

*What the fuck? She went to the movie premiere with him!*

It was at that moment that I knew this wasn't the relationship I needed. No explanation could justify this kind of disrespect. She knew me and knew this was something that would set me off and did it anyway. If I were walking the carpet with another woman, she would lose her mind. She was pulling this stunt to get a reaction out of me, and she was going to get one alright.

Once at the hotel, I chilled out in the room. I had plans to fly back to New York that next morning, so I was using this time alone to get some much-needed rest.

As I was getting ready to call it a night there was a knock at my door, and I knew exactly who it was.

“Larry told me what room you were in,” Brandy said biting her lip. She was still dressed in her evening gown. “Why didn’t you tell me that you were gonna be here?”

“I was trying to surprise you.” I allowed her inside. “You really thought it was smart to go with *him* to your premiere? The guy who everybody already thinks your fuckin’?”

“He offered to go as a friend. Our agents figured we could do double promotion for both movies.”

“And you thought that shit was smart?”

“We went as *friends*.”

“If that was the case, you would’ve given me a heads up about it. How bout I take a *friend* to the Grammys with me?”

“You wouldn’t have to do that because *I* would be there for you.” She looked around my room as if searching for answers. “Besides you were just all hugged up with some random on the blogs.”

“*You mean my fans?*”

“It doesn’t matter who they are; you were all hugged up on them.”

“Don’t try that reverse psychology shit. What you did was fucked up.”

“I wouldn’t have had to ask him if you were with me.”

I laughed.

“I don’t find anything funny.”

“It’s *not* funny and this night helped me make a decision.”

“A decision about what?”

“I think we’ve gone as far as this can go,” I shrugged. “I don’t do that Hollywood shit, and it’s important to you, so I

want you to do you. If you wanna be with him, be happy.”

“I wanted *you* there tonight, not him. I’m in love with *you*.”

“We’re different B, you have your focus, and I have mine...it is what it is.”

“And you want to throw away everything because of tonight? Because of one mistake?”

“It’s not only tonight, its everything.” I rubbed a hand roughly over my head.

“*Jaren*, it was just for publicity. I have to do whatever I can to stay on top,” she explained raising her voice. My expression let her know that I wasn’t moved. “You know what, we are going to talk about this again after you cool off because obviously, you aren’t thinking clearly.”

“Trust me when I say that we’re done here.”

I could see how harsh my words stung. We faced off for a few seconds before Brandy left the room altogether.

# Chapter 12

## *Fatima*



“Listen to this,” Autumn said reading from a blog post. “It seems like one of hip hop’s favorites couples has called it quits. After announcing his joint tour with Kadeem earlier this week, Jericho has been busy preparing for the tour and the release of his new album. While Brandy Moore has been spotted around L.A. with rumored new boo, Malik Wallis. Neither Brandy or Malik have confirmed that they are dating, but pictures don’t lie.”

“Damn, that’s fucked up,” I said putting the hand weights down.

The two of us were in our apartment’s gym facility trying to work out because we both had New Year’s resolutions to get summertime fine. I didn’t want to lose much because I had lost weight already from the break-up stress. I mostly wanted to tone up.

As I worked out, Autumn had mostly been on her phone reading to me what was trending on Twitter. At the moment, the number one topic was the fact that Jericho and Brandy were no longer together when pictures surfaced of her being intimate with Malik Wallis.

“I knew she wasn’t with Jericho anymore when she went to that premiere with Malik.” Autumn lifted her right leg again. “That’s alright. I’m gonna slide into my baby’s DM to make him feel better.”

“You are not,” I laughed.

“Watch me,” Autumn said resuming her leg lifts. “I’m gonna be like, ‘When you come through Hampton in June you can rest your gorgeous head on my pillows.’” She pushed up her breasts.

“Girl, that man is gonna have security carry your thirsty butt out of the Coliseum.”

“Jaren will take one look at all this thick chocolate and wanna visit the candy factory.”

“Speaking of June, we better hurry up and get our tickets for that concert.”

“We are *not* missing this show. My baby daddy *needs* me there to support him.”

I rolled my eyes as we both wrapped up our workout. We left the building and walked towards our apartments. As we neared my door, I saw KeVon holding a bouquet. Autumn started laughing the closer we got.

“You can find all kinds of free time now,” Autumn commented eyeing him up and down as she passed by.

“Hello to you too, Autumn,” he replied dryly.

“Tima, if you need me, you already know where I’ll be.” She disappeared inside of her apartment.

“What are you doing here?”

“You know why I’m here.”

I started unlocking my door, and he stood over my shoulder. “No, I *don’t* know why you’re here. I thought I was clear the last time we spoke.”

“I see you’re still getting those workouts in. You look good.” He followed me inside and placed the flowers on my counter.

“What is it that you want?”

“I miss you.” He stepped closer. “I want us.”

“You weren’t thinking about any of that while you were sleeping with Deja.”

“That situation with Deja...it wasn’t my fault.”

“Are you kidding me? She was laid up at *your* house. Or are you gonna try and tell me that she broke in and raped you?”

“It wasn’t like that. She reached out to me about training her a few months back, things kinda happened. She was a mistake.”

“And like I keep telling you. You should have realized how much you loved me *before* you started sleeping with my friend.”

“I can’t change what happened, but I can promise you that I will *never* hurt you like that again.”

I didn’t respond. I was so frustrated with the entire situation.

“KeVon, just leave me alone.”

It took several more minutes before he finally took the hint and left.

Instead of going to take a shower right away, I pulled out my laptop and began to write. I channeled all of my frustrations in the chapter and published it without even proofreading it.

After taking a hot shower, I threw on a t-shirt, and a pair of leggings then made myself some tea. I settled back in front of my laptop to read the feedback from my new chapter.

I noticed a new message from @JarenavsJericho and my stomach did a little flipflop. I missed the outlet of talking to him. Before he sent the message explaining why he ghosted me, I had all but given up on him because readers came and went all the time on this website.

I had to respect the fact that he backed off because of his relationship.

*How could you be mad at a guy for trying to do the right thing?*

Had KeVon been more like him he wouldn’t be in the current predicament that he was in. Emotional cheating easily led to physical cheating and KeVon was the example of what could happen if you weren’t careful. @JarenavsJericho was the example of how you were supposed to handle a situation like

that. You couldn't help who you were attracted to or had a connection with, but you *could* control your reaction to it.

**JarenavsJericho: U good?**

*Me: Yea, why?*

**@JarenavsJericho: U went off on that new chapter.**

*Me: My ex showed up at my apartment.*

**@JarenavsJericho: He knows he has a good thing and doesn't wanna lose u.**

*Me: He should have thought about that before sticking his dick in somebody else.*

**@JarenavsJericho: True**

*Me: I'm surprised to hear from you. Where's your girlfriend?*

**@JarenavsJericho: Not with her anymore**

I paused. Even though I had ruled out the fact that the person behind this screen name was the real Jericho. I would still compare things he told me against what I knew about the real man. Autumn had confirmed that Jericho and Brandy were no longer together and now @JarenavsJericho was telling me that he wasn't with his girl.

*Was that just a coincidence?*

*Me: What happened?*

**@JarenavsJericho: Didn't work out.**

*Me: I'm sorry to hear that. At least you didn't walk in on her with somebody else.*

I waited a few minutes, but he didn't respond to that comment.

**@JarenavsJericho: U know who ur talking to don't u?**

My fingers felt sticky going across the keys as I tried to respond to him.

*Me: I think I am starting to figure it out.*

**@JarenavsJericho: That doesn't make u nervous?**



*Me: Yeah it does.*

*Me: If it's true I'm surprised you even have time to read my story.*

**@JarenavsJericho: I make time for the things I want to.**

My heart was racing a mile a minute because I didn't know what was happening at the moment. I felt I needed to ask one more question to confirm.

*Me: Are you Jaren Young?*

**@JarenavsJericho: Whether I say yes or no, u won't believe me.**

I couldn't swallow around the lump in my throat; it felt as if I had an orange lodged inside. I tried to recall all of our conversations and the things I said to him.

**@JarenavsJericho: Are u gonna tell me who u are?**

*Me: No.*

**@JarenavsJericho: Why not?**

*Me: Because knowing who you are changes everything for me.*

**@JarenavsJericho: In what way?**

*Me: In every way.*

**@JarenavsJericho: I need u to explain that. Lol**

Even though I was confident in my own skin, revealing myself to him, was something that made me nervous. I didn't look like the typical Barbie doll that he dated, and I was nervous about the possible rejection.

*Me: No one knows that I am a writer and I can't risk that getting out.*

**@JarenavsJericho: I don't believe u.**

*Me: Why does it matter?*

**@JarenavsJericho: I wanna talk to u outside of this app.**

*Me: Why? You don't know me.*

**@JarensJericho: I know enough, we've been doing this for months.**

*Me: Anonymously!*

**@JarensJericho: I know that u are from Charlotte and go to the "real" HU.**

**@JarensJericho: I know that u wanna write but are settling to be a doctor to please ur parents.**

*Me: That was me feeling safe talking to someone who didn't know me.*

**@JarensJericho: Well I don't wanna do that anymore. I wanna get to know u.**

**@JarensJericho: U wanna know me too.**

I *had* started falling for this person behind the screen. I didn't know how to feel to know that it was Jericho.

*What was I going to lose by being honest?*

If he didn't like what I looked like or who I was then that was his problem. For once, I decided to go for it.

*Me: Fatima Ward*

# Chapter 13

## *Jericho*



*Me: Nice to meet u Fatima Ward.*

*Me: Now give me ur number.*

**@YaraTheWriter: What?**

*Me: I need that number.*

**@YaraTheWriter: Need?**

*Me: You can read.*

My boys started roaring with laughter in the background, so I looked up to see what they were getting into. I had spent the day doing interviews all around New York to promote the upcoming album. Then I rehearsed my set for the tour.

We were finally relaxing at a friend's crib to decompress. My boy PD had the room captivated with some story he was telling.

When I got an alert that Yara or *Fatima*, had updated the book with a new chapter, I clicked on it amidst all the chaos and noise around me. From the first sentence, I knew that she was in her feelings. It felt as if she had written an entire chapter diss track. I could feel her energy jumping off the screen.

When I reached out to her, I could tell by the questions she asked that she had pretty much figured out who she was talking to. I didn't see the point in hiding anything anymore. She was single; I was single, nothing was standing in our way anymore.

**@YaraTheWriter: 704-443-3919**

*Me: Give me 15*

**@YaraTheWriter: Ok**

I exited out of the app.

“Ayo, I gotta make a call,” I announced.

“You better not be calling that bitch,” PD announced, and a few scattered laughs followed.

“Worry about your girl; she keeps blowing me up.” I made my way to the back bedroom.

“Fuck you J!”

Once behind the door, I sat down on the bed and dialed her number.

“Hello,” a soft voice sang into the phone after a few rings.

“Should I call you Yara or Fatima?”

Her laugh echoed over the line forcing me to smile at finally hearing the voice behind the person I had been messaging for months. She sounded sexy, but not as if she was forcing herself to sound that way.

“Fatima is fine. What should I call you? Jericho or Jaren?”

“Call me Jaren.”

“What are you up to on this Thursday night?”

“At my boy’s house with some friends. What about you? Did you do your homework?”

“I swear you think you’re my dad or something always asking about my homework,” she said with amusement. “Yes, I did all of my homework. There is nothing that’s going to stop me from walking across that stage in May.”

“That’s right graduation *is* coming up for you.”

“I’m excited to finally be done, it’s been a long time coming.”

“I bet it has. That’s how I’ve been feeling about this album.”

“So, all this time we’ve been talking. You were up working on your album? All those late nights?”

“I read some of your chapters while in the studio, and we talked many times while I was working on my music.”

“It’s crazy to actually know that.”

“I got some inspiration from you and your lil story at times.”

“Does that mean I’m getting writing credits on the album?”

“Actually, I did shout out *Yara* as an inspiration in my acknowledgements.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“You think I’m lying?”

“What did you say?”

“It says something like, ‘*to Yara, I hope you realize the power of the pen is just as healing as medicine or something like that.*’”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, you want me to send it to you?”

“I do because I don’t believe it.”

“I got you. Which reminds me I’m gonna be out your way in June.”

“I saw.”

“You got tickets yet?”

“Not yet. You plan on hooking me up?”

“As long as you let me see you while I’m there.”

“Why do you wanna see me?”

“I just do. Is that a problem?”

“I don’t wanna mess up this little friendship we have. It’s nice having someone I can talk to about anything without any judgment.”

“How will us *meeting* mess that up?”

“Things are never as perfect as they seem after you meet someone in person.”

“That’s one way to look at it. And sometimes things are just what they are.”

There was a pause over the line as the music blasting from the front carried into the room.

“It sounds like you’re at a party.”

“Naw, just a bunch of niggas, blunts and liquor.”

“Why are you on the phone with me then?”

“Because I wanna be.”

There was another pause.

“What if I wanted to see you before June?”

“I don’t see how that’s possible with our conflicting schedules. I still have classes, and I’m getting ready for medical school on top of that.”

“Don’t you have Spring Break coming up?”

“Yea, the second week in March.”

“You have plans?”

“We are doing Vegas this year.”

“What dates?”

“The fifth through the eleventh. Why?”

“I gotta check with my assistant, but I know I have some dates coming up in Vegas.”

“Well, we’ll be there tearing up the city.”

I chuckled. “Ok *good girl*.”

“Trust, I can get wild. Don’t underestimate me.”

“I’d have to see it to believe it.”

“You might.”

“I will.”

“Whatever, we’ll see.”

For the next hour, we talked about anything and everything it seemed. She explained to me more in-depth the situation with her parents, and I could somewhat see why she was so focused on becoming a doctor rather than a writer.

Her mother had been a cook in a soul food restaurant for many years, and her father had worked his way up in a Construction company to become a manager. They wanted more for their only child, so she felt pressure to make them proud.

I told her about growing up with a single mom. She had done so much research on me already for her book that I found myself just filling in holes and explaining to her a few things. Even though she told me some personal things about her relationship with her boyfriend. I remained mute on mine because Brandy and I were *public figures*. When she asked, I told her that we were too busy with our separate careers and she accepted that.

“So, you’re gonna be on tour a single man, huh?”

Just as I was about to answer her question the door opened.

“Nigga, I thought you said you had a *quick* call to make. Who the hell are you talking to?”

“Yo chill, I’ll be up there in a minute,” I told my boy Haseem.

“A’ight.” He closed the door.

I heard Fatima’s laugh spilling through the phone.

“You sound so sexy on the phone.”

She got quiet as if my words had shocked her.

“You still didn’t answer my question,” she stated.

“What question was that?”

“You being on tour single, it’s about to go down. Have you read the comments on my story?”

I began to laugh, “oh, I’ve most *definitely* read the comments.”

“Exactly! There are girls out there willing to do *anything* to get to your hotel room. You are about to get into all kinds of trouble on the road.”

“You think that’s what I’m about? The groupies?”

“I don’t think that’s *all* your about, but as a man why wouldn’t you enjoy all of that? I probably would if I were you.”

“So, if you were me you would be a ho?”

“*Hey!*”

“That’s basically what you just said.” I laughed.

“I’m not anybody’s ho-”

“Then why expect me to be?” I interrupted her to let her hear the double standard in her statement. “I don’t just run up into anything.”

“That’s what most of your peers do.”

“That’s them. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not a monk or anything, but I’m a little more selective about mine. Aye let me get going, we’ll talk again.”

“Talking to you wasn’t that bad,” she admitted.

“You were nervous about talking to me?”

“A little. I’ve written so much about you, to actually *talk* to you...it was a little nerve-wracking.”

“I like the way you write about me.”

“Have you read the other stories about you too?”

“Nope, yours is the only one. My assistant put me on.”

“What’s her screen name?”

“Don’t get me to lying, I don’t even remember, she’s your biggest fan though.”

“Well, I’m glad she put you on to my work.”

“So am I.”

The phone went silent.



“It was nice talking to you, Fatima.”

“I enjoyed talking to you too, Jaren. You are very different than what I thought, but in a good way.”

“A’ight *Med School*, stay smart.”

“*Med School?*”

“Just like the girl off that football show.”

“*The Game?*”

“Yea, that show.”

“On that note, goodnight, Jaren,” her laughter filled the line.

“*Goodnight.*”

I looked at my phone and realized that we had spent almost two hours talking. It only felt like fifteen minutes.

I went to IG to look up her name, and of course, her page was private, but from what I saw on her profile pic she looked beautiful. Her profile pic was a headshot of her looking into the camera. It was as if her eyes were piercing right through me.

I could see why her ex wouldn’t let go. I didn’t send her a follow request. If I had, it would’ve been a blog story within an hour of me doing so questioning who she was to me. I didn’t want to put that kind of pressure on her, especially while she was keeping such a big secret from the people in her life.

I stared at her picture for a few more seconds before closing it. I went to google to see if she had anything crazy attached to her name and found nothing, but I learned that she was the valedictorian of her high school graduation and that she had received a scholarship to Hampton. The few pictures of her that were available all showed her same beautiful smile and all-knowing eyes.

While getting to know another girl should have been the last thing on my mind with the busy schedule I had ahead. I

couldn't help it when it came Fatima. She was different from the women I dealt with; I was intrigued by her.

I got up from the bed and re-joined my boys in the front room, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't wipe the smile from my face.

# Chapter 14

## *Fatima*



February had flown by faster than any other month in the school year. I wondered if talking back and forth with Jaren had anything to do with it. Since the first phone call, we talked every day it seemed, and when we weren't talking, we were texting.

It was hard keeping that kind of a secret from my best friend. There were times I was bursting to tell her because I was dying to share the details.

It was the weekend before we were supposed to leave for Spring Break and Jaren still would not tell me if he was going to be in Vegas at the same time. He said that me not knowing would keep me on my toes. He knew that we were staying at Planet Hollywood, but he refused to tell me anything about his travel plans.

### *J: 3:47PM: U slackin on the chapters*

I tried my best not to smile, but I couldn't help it whenever I saw his name cross my screen, I would feel butterflies in my stomach.

"Every time you look at that phone you start cheesing from ear to ear. You better tell me who is tapping that ass or I'm gonna *beat yours*," Autumn threatened from the salon chair.

Since we were no longer getting our hair done by Deja, we started going to a Hampton salon called *Natural Expression*. It was a real salon, unlike Deja's apartment.

The girl who now did our hair, Ivy, hooked us both up every other weekend.

"It's just this guy," I answered cryptically.

I was glad that she was in the chair and that I was under the dryer or she would have snatched the phone from me to see the name. I purposely listed him as J only, so she would never figure out his identity.

“You’ve been doing *more* than talking, look at your face right now,” Autumn pointed from across the room. “That’s the face of a woman who is getting some *good dick* or she’s *about* to get some good dick. *Spill!* And you better tell me *everything.*”

“Autumn, keep your head still,” Ivy said positioning her head.

“*Yeah, Autumn, concentrate on keeping your head still,*” I teased.

“Mhm, as soon as she’s done, I’m gonna get some answers.”

“I know that’s right, we *all* want answers now,” one of the other stylists in the shop, Tangi, commented while busy braiding her client’s hair.

“See what you started.”

I responded to Jaren’s message by reminding him that I haven’t written much because between him and school I didn’t have much free time anymore.

He was in Philly doing radio interviews to promote the release of his album which had come out that week. Things around him were more chaotic and he was doing club performances every other night while still working on the logistics of his tour. I didn’t even understand when he found the time to call or text me in between all of that.

After we both finished getting our hair done, we went to the mall to get a few things for our trip to Vegas. I was shocked to learn that I had dropped even more weight; it must have been from all of the stress of finishing up my undergrad classes. I was now a size 10 and had to buy a few pieces for my new size.

Autumn spent the entire afternoon trying to get me to tell her about my mystery man, and I lied and said that it was

someone that I had met while visiting John Hopkins.

I was thankful when she finally let it go because I almost broke down and told her everything. I knew how much she loved Jericho and if she knew that I had been talking to him regularly behind her back, she might kill me.

If she found out that she had been best friends with @YaraTheWriter all this time, she might murder me and bury my body.

Since I didn't see anything coming out of this with Jericho and I never planned to reveal to anyone that I was a writer, I didn't see the point of confessing anything to her. Once I got to medical school, it wouldn't matter anyway.

While walking to our apartments, I thought we had finally finished talking about my *mystery man* when Autumn brought it up again.

"You know I just want you to be happy, right?"

"I know, and I want the same for you."

"I know I joke a lot, but you have been through *hell*, and if this mystery guy makes you happy, then that makes me happy."

"It's not a *thing* though; we are *just friends*."

"None of my guy friends have me smiling like that."

"I can't help it. He makes me laugh."

"Just be careful."

"I am."

"Okay," she held up her hands with defeat. "As your best friend, I just hope I get to meet this *other* friend eventually."

"If he is ever in town, I promise you will. Now let me get in here and finish packing."

"You know Deja is gonna be there."

When we initially paid for this trip at the beginning of the year, it was a group of about twenty of us. Autumn and I were

staying in a room with Chanel; the others branched off in rooms of three to four.

We hadn't seen Deja since we caught her in KeVon's bed, but through mutual friends, we knew she was still going on this trip since she had long paid for it.

"I don't care what she does as long as she stays away from me. And Vegas is big enough that we never have to see each other."

"I will try to make sure that we have a room on a different floor unlike what we requested when we initially made the reservations."

"You need to do that. But I'm fine even if I see her. I don't want KeVon anymore. I actually feel sorry for her that she was okay with being the side chick."

"I know that's right. I'm not sneaking around for *no man*. If we can't be public, then we ain't nothing."

"As long as she stays out of my way and doesn't pop off at the mouth, we're good."

"If she *tries* to, I got something for that ass," Autumn said punching a fist into her palm.

"A'ight Mayweather, we're not about to get kicked out for *anybody*."

"Then she better watch herself."

After I finished packing, I sat down on my bed and began to finish a chapter of *Jericho's Heart*. I was close to finishing the book, and I couldn't wait to wrap up the story. Many of my readers were already begging me for a sequel, but I didn't know how much longer I could write about Jericho while I was interacting with the real person.

In my story, things between *Jericho* and *Lisa* had just gotten to the place where they were happy, but then *Porsha* dropped the bomb that she was pregnant, and now *Jericho* and *Lisa* were at a crossroads as to how to handle it.

After publishing the new chapter, I took a shower.

The minute I stepped out, my ringtone went off. I smiled when I saw that it was Jaren calling.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at some club?”

“I already performed, I’m back at my hotel now. What about you, what are you doing? I saw you posted a chapter, but I haven’t read it yet.”

“I just got out of the shower, I was up late writing,” I replied then the line went dead. “What the-”

Before I could even finish my sentence, I noticed a FaceTime request from him. We had never Facetimed before, and I didn’t want the first time we Facetimed to be while I was wrapped in a towel with my hair wrapped in a scarf. I denied the call.

***J: 3:22AM: You better answer.***

***Me: 3:23AM: NO!***

My phone started ringing again, and I answered.

“Why can’t I see you?”

“I just got my hair done, and it’s wrapped up for the night, I scrubbed my make-up off, and I still need to put some clothes on.”

“Every time I try to FaceTime, you have some excuse. I’m starting to think that you don’t want me to see you.”

“I send you pictures whenever you ask.”

“But I wanna see you while we’re talking.”

I thought about the few times he asked, and I realized that I had always turned him down. Taking pictures, I controlled the angles and made sure he got the perfect images from me.

“So, you want me to take down my hair and everything?”

“You don’t have to do *anything*, I wanna see you. I didn’t say you had to be perfect,” his voice was raspy. “Do whatever you gotta do to get ready and then hit me back.”

“*Jaren.*”

“I’m hanging up.”

I gave myself a moment for his words to sink in and then I rampaged through my dressers like a madwoman trying to find something cute. I finally found a royal blue satin gown that I felt made me look sexy.

I ran inside the bathroom and took off my scarf and primped my freshly flat-ironed hair. I thought about adding some make-up to my face but didn't think that would look natural, so I opted to dim the lights in my bedroom instead.

I took a few deep breaths and drank a full glass of water before finally picking up my phone and calling him. I sat down on my bed with my back pushed up against the headboard making sure my breasts were propped upright and that the phone was pointed at my best angle.

After a few rings, he answered. Nothing prepared me for how good he looked on my phone while lying on the bed shirtless.

*Fatima, get your hormones under control.*

“Damn, you look sexy,” he said in a sleep-roughed voice.

“You went to sleep?”

“You took longer than fifteen minutes, so I thought that you had chickened out on me.”

“I was nervous.”

“You shouldn't be, we've been talking for a minute now.”

“But *seeing* you is different.”

“When am I gonna see you in person?”

“What is it that we're doing here? *Aren't* we just friends?”

He chuckled. “Do you think I talk to my friends this much?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't know?” he echoed placing his arm behind his head giving me a nice view of his tattooed biceps.

“Why don't you tell me?”



“Why don’t you tell me what *you* think is happening between us and we’ll go from there.”

“I think you enjoy talking to somebody outside of your world. It’s new and something fun to do.”

“That’s all you think you are?”

“Nothing else makes sense.”

“I agree with you on that; it doesn’t make sense.” He began to laugh sleepily, and the flash of his perfect white teeth made my stomach flip flop. “To clear things up for you, I’m feeling you, but this is all still new, so I can’t promise you anything.”

“I know,” I agreed with him trying not to lose consciousness from holding my breath. I was acting a lot cooler on the phone than what I felt internally.

“That’s why I wanna see you, be around you, and spend some time with you to see if there is something there.” His tone was serious. “I’m always straight up with whoever I’m dealing with.”

“Why me?”

“To be honest, you kinda slipped in and caught me off guard.”

“How is that?”

“By just being you.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat.

“You better be lucky that I am nowhere near Hampton right now.”

I could only stare at him, wishing I was running my fingers through his beard.

“Aye, I gotta get off this phone though, I have a flight to catch, and I wanna get a few in before I leave. When are you flying to Vegas?”

“Monday morning. What about you?”

“Nice try Med School.”

“The next time we talk, I’m gonna have a nickname for you.”

“We’ll see bout that,” his lips spread into a slow smile.

We ended the call, and I pulled my pillow onto my face and screamed into it.

*Was this happening to me? Was this really my life?*

# Chapter 15

## *Jaren*



“As soon as you finish performing tonight, we have to get you back to the room so that you can get some sleep. Your flight is leaving at five,” Courtney listed off the itinerary for the next few days. “You’ve got three interviews tomorrow in L.A., the first with Big Boy at nine.”

“I’m gonna be tired as shit,” I said scratching the back of my neck. “When do we tape Kimmel?”

“Thursday night.”

“When does our flight leave for Vegas?”

“Right after that.”

“A’ight,” I scratched my head.

“We’re trying to get you in front of as many cameras as possible to push your album and ticket sales,” Larry stated.

I knew he was right, but my mind was split at the moment. Along with taking care of my business, meeting Fatima was also high on my priority list for Vegas. I wanted to feel her out in person and see what she was all about.

“Let me go talk to Kimmel’s people to make sure everything is good to go,” Larry said quickly leaving the room.

“Need anything else?” Courtney asked.

“I just need a minute to make a call.”

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately,” she noted with raised brows. “What’s her name?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. How you know I ain’t calling my mom?”

“Because you’ve never needed time *alone* to talk to your mom.”

I pointed at the door. “I’ll be out in ten.”

“Okay *Mr. Secretive*,” she mocked. “One of those bloggers are gonna find out who you’ve been talking to and post it everywhere anyway.”

“Those reporters can kiss my ass,” I returned as she closed the door.

I didn’t take a lot of people with me on the road, but on this road trip, I had Courtney, Larry, Tyson, Richie, and my boys from home PD and Haseem.

I could hear the music blasting in the background as I twiddled my phone in my hands while staring at my reflection in the mirror. I could walk out on the stage and have my pick of any female in the building, but I wasn’t interested because the woman I wanted to spend time with was miles away kicking it in Las Vegas.

I pressed the screen of my phone and saw that it was close to midnight which meant that she was out somewhere. The phone rang a few times, and when she finally answered, I could hear music blasting in the background.

“Hold on a minute,” she yelled into the phone, and it sounded as if she was walking away from the music. “Hey, Jesus.”

“There you go,” I immediately smiled.

Fatima had begun to call me *Jesus* after Jesus Shuttlesworth from the movie *He Got Game*, to get back at me for calling her *Med School*. She said it was a call back to my ball playing days.

“Where you at?”

“I don’t know; it depends on where you’re at?” she slurred.

“I’m in Oklahoma.”

“*Oklahoma!* You’re supposed to be *here*,” she whined.

“Having fun?”

“We are. I think I can count on one hand how many hours of sleep I’ve gotten since we landed.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Are you coming here or not?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I’ll be able to make it now,” I lied.

“That’s too bad because I’m looking so sexy.”

“I bet you are,” I hissed closing my eyes.

“And don’t try to FaceTime me either, my friends are *everywhere*.”

“You can go to the bathroom.”

“I’d rather *you* come see for yourself.”

“Somebody’s not nervous anymore I see,” I teased.

“If you were here you would see for yourself.”

“I gotta hit this stage; I just wanted to holla at you before you passed out again.”

When I tried to call her the night before she told me that she had gotten in so late from partying that she didn’t even realize that her phone had been dead for hours. Until she woke up with a hangover that next morning.

“It’s my senior year; I gotta live it up.”

“Do you ma, just be safe out there.”

“Yes, daddy.”

“*Daddy*, huh? You talking a whole lotta shit over the phone *Med School*.”

“And what are you gonna do about it?”

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see. You never know when I’ll pop up on you in VA.”

“I won’t hold my breath,” she sarcastically replied. “Break a leg, kill your set...or whatever it is that they say when you are about to perform.”

“Med School, do me a favor.”

“What?”

“No more drinks for the rest of the night; you’ve reached your limit.”

“Make me stop.”

“Don’t test me.”

*Just wait until I got to Vegas.*

After we ended the call, I slid on my hoodie and my jacket and got ready to hit the stage.

The moment I grabbed the mic I was in a zone. My album had only been out a week, and people in the crowd were already screaming my lyrics back at me. There was no greater way to show an emcee love than playing his music so much that you knew all the words.

I was only supposed to perform three songs that night but ended up doing six because they had been showing me so much, love.

The ladies were coming on strong all night as I mingled among the crowd. Tyson was trying his best to keep some distance, but it was no use.

After my performance instead of going right back to the hotel, I decided to stay for an hour to hang out with the crowd. It was the least I could do for the love that they were pouring into me. Courtney and Larry had already gone back to their hotel rooms leaving me with Tyson, PD, Haseem, and Richie.

“Yo, J check out shorty with the white dress on,” PD said eyeing a girl across from us hard.

I had to admit that the girl was gorgeous. She looked like she was from Brazil or some other exotic place. When our eyes met, she started licking her plump lips.

“That’s all you,” I told PD smacking him on the back.

The chick started doing some weird dance off beat and all of the compliments I had just given her in my head I wanted to take all back.

I watched my boy PD make his way over to her, and it took less than five minutes before he was walking towards the exit with her.

“That nigga is gonna catch something you can’t get rid of with a pill,” Haseem said shaking his head with amusement.

“That is one nigga who will slide up in anything.” Between him and Richie I wasn’t sure who I had to spray Lysol at more.

“They gon’ learn one of these days,” Haseem said around the J. Cole song that was blasting from the speakers.

If there were another rapper that I would want to add to our summer tour, it would hands down be Cole.

I looked down at my phone and saw a new message from Fatima; it was a picture of her from earlier when she was lying in bed with her hair spread across the pillow. There was something in her eyes that always got to me; it felt as if she could read my mind through the picture.

*“Damn, this girl got me all fucked up,”* I mumbled to myself while getting up from the club’s beige leather couch.

I signaled to Tyson that I was ready to go. It was past two, and I had only three hours before our chartered jet left for L.A.

# Chapter 16

## *Jaren*



“So, your album is number one in its first week, you are going to be touring with Kadeem this summer, and you are *now* single from what’s being reported,” host Jimmy Kimmel said.

“Is that what you heard?” I asked rubbing my mouth with my hand.

I had just finished performing another single from my album and was sitting down to be interviewed by the late-night comic.

“Yea, the blogs say that you *were* dating Brandy Moore before she moved on to Malik Wallis.”

“I think Brandy Moore is a talented actress.”

“She is.” Jimmy nodded. “Were you two ever a *thing*?”

“I love her movies.”

“Many of us do, but the ladies in my audience want to know if you are single right now? If you aren’t seeing Brandy Moore are you seeing anybody else?”

“I’m seeing my album right now.”

“I guess I’m not gonna get a straight answer out of you?”

We laughed and joked about some current events, played a basketball arcade game and once we finished, I went back to my dressing room.

“As much as you hate doing interviews, you always kill them,” Courtney said while shuffling to get my things together in the dressing room.

“That’s because they ask the same questions.”



As Larry talked, Courtney handed me my phones, and I noticed that I had a new message from Brandy.

***Brandy: 8:46PM: Call me now!***

Somebody attending the taping of the show or on the set must have told her about the interview and my responses.

“You ready?” Tyson asked.

“Court, we ready?” I asked guzzling from a bottled water.

“The car is out back.”

“I’m gonna meet you all out there,” Larry said.

The minute we stepped out of my dressing room I had people asking for autographs. I tried my best to give each fan what they wanted, but it seemed as if the crowd never ended and eventually Tyson had to just cut it off.

My boys re-joined us from mingling backstage and the moment we got inside of the SUV my phone began to ring. When I realized that it was Brandy, I declined the call.

“Oh, hell no.”

“Let me guess, lil Ms. Hollywood is trying to get you back?” Courtney asked with an eye roll.

“She wants that publicity,” Haseem commented.

“That’s how it is out here,” I acknowledged scrolling through my phone.

“You need a regular girl who doesn’t care about being famous,” Tyson chimed in with a grin.

“Is that right?”

“Problem is, *everybody* wants to be famous these days, so good luck with that,” Courtney added dryly.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked noticing her sudden attitude.

“It’s not important.” She frantically typed away on her phone.

I knew exactly who was frustrating her and why he was doing it. He was trying to keep her upset so that he could continue to do whatever dirt he was doing.

She tried to convince me that he *'wasn't like that,'* but I told her any man, college-educated or not, was capable of doing the same shit. Unfortunately, she was gonna have to learn the hard way as most women did.

My mother came to mind, and I could remember her pain like it was yesterday. When she found out about my stepdad's other family, she couldn't get out of her bed for a week. I was proud that she was strong enough to get rid of him and never take him back, but I'll never forget how much she suffered.

When I finally got seated on our chartered jet, I leaned back and closed my eyes. I had been thriving off of only a few hours of sleep, and this short hour-long flight was going to be a nap that I badly needed.

The minute I closed my eyes rather than go right to sleep my thoughts went to Fatima. We had only known each other for about five months, but it seemed more like years. I was ready to finally see her.

# Chapter 17

## *Fatima*



“I’m seeing my album right now,” Jericho stated while sitting on Jimmy Kimmel’s couch.

“I know that’s right,” Chanel said pointing at the tv screen.

It was Friday afternoon, and the three of us were hanging out in our room at *Planet Hollywood* watching *Entertainment Tonight* show clips from Jaren’s interview.

The segment was about Brandy and Malik’s relationship, but they added Jaren’s interview as confirmation that the two were no longer together.

“He didn’t need to be with that phony girl anyways,” Autumn said while shoving a BBQ potato chip in her mouth.

Since we had been in Vegas, we were mostly surviving on liquor and junk food. I was surprised none of us had to be rushed to the hospital yet from dehydration.

Our big group had split in half over the Deja drama. I’m not sure how Deja got any of our other friends to feel sympathetic towards her, but she had been able to. I wasn’t about to convince anyone to choose my side.

Our smaller group consisted of nine of us, and we made sure to party at different spots than them.

“Why he gotta be so fine though?” Autumn said practically drooling over him.

“Speaking of Jericho, I’m gonna need Yara to post a chapter because our girl has been tripping lately,” Chanel said. “I need to know what happens next.”

“I don’t know what’s going on with her, but that book is getting too good,” Autumn chimed on.

I ignored their conversation and went to my phone.

***Me: 5:56PM: Are you in L.A. now?***

I looked up at the tv to watch the rest of the entertainment gossip stories.

***J: 6:04PM: Maybe***

***J: 6:04PM: Why u tryna figure out where I am?***

***Me: 6:07PM: I'm still trying to convince you to come to Vegas.***

***J: 6:08PM: I wish I could Med School.***

***J: 6:09PM: Make sure u send me some flicks though.***

***Me: 6:11PM: I'll think about it.***

I pouted. I was hoping Vegas was on his schedule. I felt it was the perfect place to get our initial meeting out of the way.

***J: 6:15PM: U better do more than think about it.***

***Me: 6:16PM: I'm not scared of you.***

***J: 6:17PM: There u go actin outta pocket again.***

***J: 6:18PM: Don't think I ain't keeping track.***

***Me: 6:20PM: You're not here to do anything about it!***

***J: 6:22PM: What club u hittin up tonight?***

***Me: 6:23PM: Your guess is as good as mine.***

***J: 6:26PM: Act up if u want to.***

***Me: 6:28PM: Is that a threat?***

***J: 6:29PM: I don't make threats, only promises.***

“There she goes cheesing,” Autumn pointed out.

“I'm not the only one *cheesing*,” I quickly pointed out. “Both of you hoes were taking the *walk of shame* this morning.”

“Hey, it's Vegas,” Chanel defended. “This is a no judgment zone!”

“I know that's right,” Autumn leaned over to high-five her.

“And with all the fine men out here, you need to take advantage right along with us,” Chanel pointed out.

“Fatima is holding out for some guy in B-More,” Autumn said dryly. “If you two are just *friends* like you say, then there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“It’s not about him; nobody has caught my eye.”

“Mhm,” Autumn said eyeing me with disbelief. “Well, we got two days left for you to let your freak flag fly.”

“On that note, I’m gonna take another nap before we go out tonight,” I mumbled pulling the covers over my head.

# Chapter 18

## *Fatima*



As Kodak Black blasted from the speakers, I was in the midst of the crowded dance floor dancing with my girls at *TAO Nightclub* inside of *The Venetian*. Before even arriving, we had thrown back multiple shots of Patron. I was having so much carefree fun that week that I didn't want to ever leave Vegas.

"Oh my God! I just heard in the bathroom that Jericho is here," Chanel panted grabbing Autumn and me as if there was an emergency.

"Where?" Autumn looked from the club's stage to the VIP tables.

"I don't know. Some groupies were talking about it in the bathroom."

"He's probably at another club," Autumn said. "The deejay would have said something by now."

I, on the other hand, was rendered speechless. There was no way that Jericho would be in Vegas and not tell me about it.

I looked down at my phone and realized I had a new message from him.

***J: 2:23AM: Stop looking so mean.***

I whipped my head all around the crowded space trying to figure out what was going on. Then I heard the deejay begin to play his new single.

"Shout out to my boy Jericho!" The deejay announced. The intoxicated crowd got even louder.

Unlike everyone else around me, I wasn't dancing. I was trying to figure out where Jaren was and why he had lied to me.

Then I finally saw him, with a scarf on his head and dressed casually in a long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans looking right at me with a huge smile on his face through the sea of eyes all around us.

“Look, there he is,” Autumn pointed out excitedly.

“I told you,” Chanel added.

“I’m getting my ass over to that VIP right now,” Natalie stated.

Dressed in a tight mini, I was sure she would have no problems getting close to any of the VIP tables.

I had a mixture of feelings coursing through me and threw back another shot of Patron when I felt my phone vibrating in my clutch.

***J: 2:49AM: Where u run off to?***

***Me: 2:51AM: Why did you lie to me about coming to Vegas?***

***J: 2:53AM: I was tryin to surprise u.***

At the sight of that text I found it hard to stay mad.

***J: 2:57AM: Where u at?***

***Me: 2:58AM: The bar.***

***J: 3:00AM: Come back where I can see u.***

***Me: 3:02AM: I will when I’m ready.***

***J: 3:03AM: Stop playin or I will come look for u myself.***

***Me: 3:05AM: You wouldn’t dare.***

***J: 3:10AM: Stay where ur at.***

Now I was more confused than ever. I didn’t know what he was trying to pull, but it had me nervous nonetheless.

“Yara, can you follow me please?” A chocolate man who looked like he was a bouncer or wrestler asked me.

“I don’t think so. I don’t you.”

I wasn't that intoxicated to off with a random man because he said so.

"I'm Tyson, security for *you know who*."

"Tell '*you know who*' that he can come get me *himself*."

"He can't do that without making a scene."

"Where are you taking me then?" I moved my hands to my hips.

"Somewhere more discreet."

I finally nodded for him to lead the way. Tyson walked me to a back room further away from the loud crowd.

Once inside, I looked around trying to figure out what it was, but it seemed like some a multi-purpose room used for various things as needed.

When I opened my mouth to say something the door opened again and in walked Jaren. He had taken off his sunglasses and briefly looked at me before turning to his security.

"Make sure no one gets through that door," he instructed him.

The moment Tyson stepped outside he turned to me.

"*Med School*." He flashed a smile that made me unsteady.

"What are you doing here?"

"I had an appearance over at *Drais*, and the fellas wanted to stop in here afterward." He neared me as he talked. "Come're."

The timbre of his voice rippled through me sending shockwaves through my entire body.

The moment I stepped into his arms I regretted doing so. The scent of his amber wood and bergamot mixed cologne held both a fresh and seductive scent that settled me into a deep trance.

He was much taller than me, so I had to reach high to wrap my arms around his neck.



His solid, slender frame held on to me protectively until I felt like I was about to pass out. Not even the liquor could steady my nerves at the moment.

Jaren took a step back and looked me up and down. “You were right about one thing...*damn*, ma.”

I looked down at the white jumpsuit I was wearing as if I didn't know I was dressed to kill for the night.

“I wanna see you tonight.”

“How exactly is that gonna happen without everybody seeing us?”

“I'm here at the Venetian. When you're done with your girls, lemme know.”

I was tongue-tied.

“I'll see you in a few,” he filled in the empty space. Before leaving the room, his eyes lingered on me, forcing me to look away.

I waited a few minutes before leaving. I found my girls dancing on the floor and joined them. I could feel Jaren watching me from VIP.

The minute he sent me a text telling me that he was going back to his room, I relaxed only a little.

My nerves were so flustered that I talked my girls into taking more shots with me. The more I drank, the bolder I felt about meeting up with him. Our encounter in the room had happened so quickly that it was as if it never happened. I didn't know how I was gonna handle spending the entire night with him.

A few minutes after four, I informed my girls that I was leaving with the guy that they had seen me dancing with. They both had plans already, so they barely paid attention.

I sent Jaren a text to say I was ready, and he told me that Tyson was coming to get me. When I saw Tyson, I followed him through the back halls until we reached an elevator.

We stepped inside the car, and I flushed my body against the wall to stop the spinning in my head. When we finally stopped, I grabbed Tyson's arm to steady myself or what I thought was his arm there looked to be two or three of him standing in front of me.

"You alright?" Tyson asked.

"Yeah," I lied trying to shake off the dizziness, "just a little tired."

The moment Jaren opened the door I no longer felt sexy or bold at all. Jaren had an amused expression on his face as if he already knew what was up at the sight of me.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," I mumbled with embarrassment as I let go of Tyson's arm.

"I'll be in my room," Tyson assured him.

Jaren took my hand and guided me through the large suite.

"Where are you taking me?" I drug my feet like a child about to face punishment.

"The bathroom." His fingers linked through mine so naturally as if we had done this many times before.

*Why did I drink so much? If I throw up in front of him, I'm going to die!*

In the bathroom, he sat me down on the ledge of the Garden-style bathtub and held a washcloth under running water. Then he dropped to his knees in front of me and patted the cold rag to my forehead. I was mortified that it was even happening. It wasn't the first meeting I had envisioned having with him.

My eyes tried to avoid the ink that lined the peaks and valleys of his muscled chest, but it was of no use, I couldn't tear them away from what I considered fine art. I honestly didn't realize how *nice* of a body he had until that moment. He didn't flaunt it like some artists built like him often did.

"You feel like you gotta throw up?"

“I don’t know,” I answered internally praying to God to spare me that one embarrassment.

“How much did you drink?”

“Too much. I was nervous about seeing you tonight.” I bit my lip.

He dropped his head and smiled. “Don’t do that shit Med School. I’m trying to behave.” He looked at me with a pained expression. “And what are you nervous about? What happened to all of that *Daddy* talk on the phone?”

“You know why I’m nervous,” I said around the sudden surge of queasiness that was taking over me.

“Enlighten me.”

“For starters, I don’t look like any of the girls that you normally mess with,” I admitted out loud.

“I don’t think any of the girls I’ve messed with look alike.” He shrugged. “What exactly are you talking about?”

“I’ve never seen you with any girl thick like me,” I admitted around the sick feeling in my stomach.

“Are you serious?” he asked with a raised brow.

“All of you rappers date the same exotic looking, small waisted, big booty girls,” I continued. “And *you* dated Brandy Moore, the girl who looks better than Halle, Beyoncé, *and* Rihanna combined.”

He started laughing. “You’re reaching on that one. And what’s all that supposed to mean?”

I hated that I sounded like a depressed, pathetic, insecure drunk but I couldn’t stop my mouth from moving. It had a mind of its own revealing all my insecurities.

“I’m not that,” I said continuing to make a fool of myself. “I’m a thick country girl from Charlotte who is destined to be a doctor instead of the writer that I wanna be.”

“First of all, if you wanna write, *write*. Look at how you got me hooked, and I don’t even *read* like that.”

I allowed his words to sink in.

“Secondly, Fatima, all of this right *here*,” he said rubbing my thighs, “is sexy as *shit*. I don’t know what the fuck you’re even nervous about because I’m trying my best to keep my hands to myself right now.”

I dropped my head out of embarrassment. This night was turning out worse than I had even thought it would.

“Aye,” he said lifting my chin.

The minute my eyes met his he leaned forward until our lips were inches apart. Then he kissed me. His lips were soft as if I was kissing the cheek of a newborn baby rather than the lips of a fully-grown man.

“If I *wasn’t* feeling you...and I mean *everything* about you, you wouldn’t be here right now.” He stood to his feet. “Lemme go grab you some water.”

My eyes followed the sculpted V of his back as he walked out of the bathroom.

*Damn. Damn. Damn. Why did I say that?*

The spinning of my head didn’t allow me to linger on any thought too long.

It felt as if I had to throw up, but at the same time, I couldn’t. I honestly just wanted to lie down and stop the room from spinning.

And I did just that. I crawled on to the cold marble floor, and the minute my face felt the chilled floor, I felt some instant relief. I closed my eyes to absorb the fact that nothing was spinning anymore. And allowed myself to relax into my new comfortable spot until I drifted all the way to sleep.

# Chapter 19

## *Jaren*



While getting dressed, I began to laugh to myself as I watched Fatima stir on the bed. I didn't expect our first meeting to go exactly like that, but it was a memorable night nonetheless.

After leaving *Drais*, it was Richie's idea to drop in at *Tao*. Since it was in the hotel we were staying at; it was a quick stop. I was about to text Fatima to see where she was when I noticed her on the dance floor. I don't know why she stood out among the crowd, but she did.

I got to watch her shake everything she was working with for a few songs before she finally spotted me and froze up. Even in person I still found myself drawn to her. Ignoring the chaos around me, I whispered to Tyson what I needed him to do.

It wasn't that I was ashamed of Fatima, that wasn't it at all, but I knew that she was worried about people seeing her with me. She told me in no uncertain terms that she didn't want to be in any blogs or gossip sites. I was doing my best to be discreet out of respect for her. I honestly didn't care what anyone saw.

When she showed up at my door barely able to stand up, I wasn't surprised. To learn that she was nervous about my attraction to her because of her size caught me off guard. I didn't see anything wrong with her size, she was built like most of the women I saw every day. I tried to silence her concerns with a kiss.

When I noticed her looking green in the face, I left the bathroom to get her bottled water, by the time I returned she was passed out on the floor.

I picked her limp body up from the marble floor and carried her to the King-sized bed. I untied her strappy heels and threw them to the floor. She still didn't move. After turning off all the lights in the other rooms, I crawled into the bed with her, and as if she felt that was her cue, she snuggled her body closer to mine resting her head on my arm.

I couldn't sleep so while she laid on one arm, with the other I scrolled through my personal cell. I noticed the chapter she had last published a few days ago and read it while her steady breathing hissed underneath me.

Fatima really could write her ass off, and I hoped through her drunken state that she heard what I said. After finishing the chapter, I placed my phone on the nightstand and closed my eyes.

"Oh my God," she said looking up at me. She saw me going through my bag and then pulled the duvet back over her head. "What happened last night?"

"Well as you can see, you're fully dressed, so you know I didn't smash," I told her moving to sit on the bed next to her. I pulled the cover from her face. "How are you feeling?"

"Like someone beat me in the head with a baseball bat," she groaned trying to hide her face from me. "What time is it?"

"It's almost ten." I stood over my bag. "I got radio to do at noon."

"Give me a minute to get myself together, and I'll be outta your way," she offered groggily.

"Take your time, I got this suite all weekend." I pulled my shirt on. "I had the concierge grab you a few things; there should be some Tylenol in there to help with your head. Tyson is gonna stay here with you; when you're ready to go back to your hotel, he's gonna get you a car."

"Thank you," her words were followed by a weird expression.

"What's that look for?"

“I made a fool of myself last night. I’m so mortified.”

“Trust me, I’ve seen worse,” I laughed. “What is on the agenda for tonight?”

“I don’t even know,” she answered looking around the room.

I walked towards the dresser to retrieve her purse.

“I need to text my girls and make sure they’re all okay.”

“If they were in as bad a shape as *you*, I think that’s a good idea.” I slid on my boots. I could hear her typing away vigorously on the phone. “I’m gonna be on stage tonight at *Tao* if y’all wanna come through.”

“You think that’s a good idea?” She looked up from her phone.

“I do, and then I wanna see you afterward.”

“I didn’t run you off after last night?”

“Naw, you ain’t done nothing *too* crazy yet,” I laughed. “I can hook you and your girls up.”

“Please don’t do that,” she commented with horror on her face.

“You can say it was from a friend.”

“My best friend is like the CIA; you can’t get anything past her.”

“A’ight, but I still want you to come through.”

“I’ll try to talk them into going there again.”

“Let them know I’m performing.”

“That is all I have to tell them. My friends are *so* obsessed with you.”

“What happens when they find out about us?” I pointed between us.

“There is *nothing* to tell, and I don’t plan on them finding out.”

We went silent and just stared at each other. Even first thing in the morning her all-knowing eyes highlighted by her high cheekbones were drawing me in. Her reddish-brown skin was smooth, so smooth that I couldn't stop rubbing on her throughout the night.

"I promise not to come to your room drunk tonight," she grinned.

"Good because I would like to spend some time with *sober* Fatima."

Both of my phones continued going off, with calls from Courtney, Larry, and Brandy. From the texts she had sent, she was pissed about my Kimmel interview. That was her problem, not mine.

I got up and kissed her on the forehead. "You better hurry up and take that Tylenol."

"*Yes, daddy,*" she mocked.

I stopped in my tracks.

"We still on that?"

"You keep acting like my daddy, so I thought I'd give you the title," she grinned.

"Careful watch you ask for."



# Chapter 20

## *Jaren*



“I wish your ex would stop blowing me up,” Courtney flashed her phone at me. “You didn’t say anything bad about her, so I don’t know what she’s mad about.”

I was in the dressing room at *Tao* with Courtney, Larry, and Tyson getting ready for my performance. All of my boys were in the back area trying to spot new *talent* for the night.

“She’s mad because he wouldn’t confirm they were ever together, which makes her look stupid because of all the stuff she posted on social media when they were together,” Larry answered.

Larry wasn’t a huge fan of Brandy, but he liked the new audience that *dating* her opened up for me.

“I told that girl I don’t live my life like that.”

“It doesn’t matter what you told her, those Hollywood actresses live and die by their reputation,” Larry stated.

“What does she want me to do, come out and say, ‘*yes, we were together and then she fucked around on me.*’”

“Well, not *all* of that, but the together part, *yes*, that’s what she wants you to do,” Larry confirmed. “Her agent has been blowing me up to release something saying that.”

“Yea, I’m not gonna be able to do that. You ready?” I dismissed the thought altogether.

“Let’s do it,” Larry said getting up.

We left my dressing room, and I made my way to the deejay booth where DJ Five and his people were waiting with a mic.

After more small talk I hit the stage and did what I do best. With the lights shining in my face and a sea of phones pointed at me, I couldn't make out where Fatima was if I tried to.

After performing I caught up with my boys in VIP and tried to scan the room for Fatima casually, but I couldn't find her anywhere. Richie, PD, and Haseem had a group of girls already in our area, and the moment I walked up, their attention shifted to me. One of the bolder ones was all up in my face before I had a minute to relax.

"Can I get a picture with you?"

She held up her iPhone, and I took a few selfies then I reached around her to grab one of the bottles.

It was then that I realized that her mouth was moving, but I couldn't make out anything she was saying.

"Whassup?" I leaned down to ask.

"I said what do I have to do to go back to your room?"

Her wavy blonde hair complimented her heart-shaped face and the dress she had on left little for the imagination, hugging her with perfection. She carried herself as if she was rarely ever used to being turned down and judging by the way she was looking at me; it was as if she was daring me to try to now.

"No disrespect ma, it doesn't work like that with me."

"Tell me what I need to do to *make it work*," she continued.

"Look you're a cute girl and all, but it's not going down." I shrugged and began to drink directly from the bottle.

Richie called my name to see if I wanted to join in what they were about to do back in his suite. "The blonde is coming too." He added as if that would seal it.

"I'm cool."

"Come on bruh, at least get your dick sucked or *something*," Richie encouraged while nodding at the blonde.

“Not tonight. You got it,” I told him leaning back to a standing position. When I looked down, the blonde was now bent over in front of me winding slowly. She wasn’t giving up easily.

“I’m going back to the room.” I waved my bottle at the group letting my boys know I was done for the night.

With Tyson leading the way I made my way through the crowd and fans were pulling at me from all directions. *Tao* security had to come and back the eager crowd off of me. I still hadn’t seen Fatima, but I wanted to wait until I got alone before I sent her a text.

When I reached the elevator, I gave Tyson instructions to wait on her.

“You like this one,” Tyson commented out of the blue as we waited for the elevator doors to open.

“I don’t know; it’s still new.”

I pulled out my phone and sent her another text to let her know I was on my way to the suite and that Tyson was waiting for her in the same area.

***Med School: 2:11AM: Looks like you already have company for the night.***

**Me: 2:12AM: What are u talkin bout?**

***Med School: 2:13AM: That bitch you had dancing all on you is the same bitch who slept with my ex behind my back.***

**Me: 2:14AM: Ur friend?**

***Med School: 2:15AM: EX-friend.***

I remembered the blonde dancing on me and closed my eyes. What was the coincidence that the girl pressing up on me was the same girl that had messed with Fatima’s man?

*We were all the way in Vegas, what was she even doing here anyways?*

**Me: 2:18AM: How was I supposed to know who she was?**

**Me: 2:19AM: I wasn't even interested in her.**

***Med School: 2:20AM: Didn't look that way to me.***

**Me: 2:21AM: We'll talk in my room.**

***Med School: 2:22AM: I'm headed to my own room!***

**Me: 2:23AM: U want me to come to Planet Hollywood and get u myself?**

***Med School: 2:24AM: Just leave me alone.***

**Me: 2:26AM: If ur not in my room in an hour, I'm coming to u.**

She didn't respond after that and I continued to my suite knowing that she was gonna make the right choice when it came down to it. She didn't want her friends to find out about me, so she had no choice.

As if on cue thirty minutes later there was a knock on my door and in walked a pissed off Fatima.

Tonight, she was wearing a hunter green fitted skirt and a matching knit top. As good as she looked, I had to focus on the storm now swirling in my room.

# Chapter 21

## *Fatima*



I was beyond livid. I had been excited all day to meet up with Jaren that night so imagine my surprise when Chanel and Natalie pointed out Deja dancing on him.

They were whispering back and forth from what I could see, and Deja couldn't wipe that damn goofy grin from her face the entire time.

To see the man who had been clouding my thoughts for the past few months show interest in my current enemy, bothered me. I didn't want to be a part of any more drama involving Deja, so as far as I was concerned, she could have Jaren too. I showed up at his room to tell him that.

*Who was I kidding? Where was this thing between us going to go besides sex anyways?*

I spun around on the heels of my stilettos after he closed the door.

"Talk, and then I'm leaving." I planted my hands defiantly on my hips.

Jaren began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"You for real mad, like for real, for real?" He took steps closer to me.

Freshly showered with only a white tank and sweats on. The scent of soap lingered all around him.

"Yes, I am!"

"What exactly did I do?" He folded his arms over his chest. "How was I supposed to know who she was?"

“Even if you didn’t know who *she* was. Why was she all up on you in the first place?”

“I don’t know what you think you saw, but I wasn’t paying that girl any attention.”

“You *knew* I was there. You should have pushed her thirsty ass on the floor.”

“You wanted *me* to put my hands on that girl and get my ass locked up?” He was now laughing out loud.

I threw my arms in the air because I know what I recommended made no sense, but I didn’t care. I wanted to make my point that I didn’t want him near her.

“You should have had Tyson do it or had security kick her out of the club.”

“Med School, I handled it. At the end of the day, who is in my room right now?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Did you know she was gonna be here in Vegas?”

“We had planned this girl’s trip at the beginning of the year way before we fell out.”

“Then why didn’t *you* tell me she would be here, so I at least had a heads up.”

“I never expected *her* to be able to get that close to you.”

“I’m sorry for what happened to you but let me tell you something about me.” The look in his eyes darkened. “I’m *not* your ex, so don’t compare me to him. I told you from the beginning that I will *always* be straight up with you. I don’t jump to conclusions, and I can’t stand someone who doesn’t trust me.”

The room was still after his stern words.

“I can’t believe we’re arguing already.”

“This wasn’t an argument,” he pointed out with a nonchalant shrug.

“It was still *stupid*,” I looked around the suite. “I think I’m just gonna go back to my room.”

Jaren reached for my hand, linking our fingers. “You think I’m gonna let you get away that easy?”

“I just figured-” my words were cut off with his lips covering mine.

“You don’t wanna leave,” his words were husky.

*No, I didn’t want to leave, but I was horrified by how the night had started. How did I shift the mood at this point?*

“Do you?” Jaren pulled me closer into him while his lips continued to hypnotize me.

I tried to speak, but nothing came out.

“Did you see me perform?” His hands found their way to my waist.

“Mhm.”

“I was looking for you.” His tongue probed inside of my mouth, swirling our tongues in a dance that I didn’t want to end.

My thoughts immediately began to shift curious as to what was happening and why it was happening so fast. Then I felt him suddenly lift me with ease and put me on the nearby table all without breaking our kiss.

I forgot all about Deja, the girl’s trip, my parents, medical school, and Yara. What was happening to me at the moment was beyond surreal.

“Do you want me to stop?” He rested his forehead against mine.

I answered by reaching for his lips. This time as we kissed, I deepened it, my tongue now aggressively explored him. He tasted of Hennessy and mint, and his lips were still as soft as I remembered from the night before.

*Was I going to do this? Was I going to sleep with him already?*

I felt his lips move down to my neck.

He settled his body between my legs causing my skirt to hike up in the process. My head dropped backward to give him more access to my burning flesh. My skin was scorching.

He placed my arms around his neck, and his mouth found mine again.

*Was I really in a room kissing muthafuckin' Jericho!*

I wanted badly to secretly grab my phone and video record this entire night just in case this was the only opportunity that I got with him.

I felt his strong hands rubbing up and down my back sending tingles along the way. He held on to me protectively as our tongues mingled deeply. Our faces moved left and right, trying to find a deeper angle for our kiss as if we couldn't get enough satisfaction. I had never felt intimacy this intense in my entire life, it was as if there was so much more than our lips and tongues involved.

When I felt his hands move underneath me to lift me up again, I gripped his neck tightly. He walked us to the bedroom with my legs wrapped around his waist. Once there, he laid me down on the king-sized bed yanking his tank off in the process and tossing it behind him.

Whether he was still an active basketball player or not, he had maintained the well-defined lean body of his well. He hovered over me and paused to look into my eyes.

Pictures did him no justice. This man was so ruggedly handsome from his delectable peanut butter skin to his well-maintained beard. I took the opportunity to explore the various tattoos that lined his shoulders and the ones leading to his neck.

He lowered his head until his face was over mine and with his back still arched; he kissed me lightly on the lips.

“You sure you're ready to do this, Med School?” he asked me between lingering kisses.



*Was I ready? If he didn't hurry up, I was going to take over myself!*

I pushed my body up to a sitting position to meet his and kissed him hard so that he could see how bad I wanted to feel him inside of me. He carefully untied my top.

The minute I felt the cool air hit my chest I flinched. His long fingers palmed my breasts like a basketball. He rubbed my nipples gently causing a moan to get caught in the back of my throat at the sheer pleasure from his touch. He replaced his hand with his mouth, and as he eased one of my nipples between his lips, I found myself sinking into the bed. He kissed, sucked and flicked his tongue across my sensitive flesh, causing me to squirm all over the bed.

He finally gave my breasts a break and began to continue his torturous path down my stomach. I felt him easing my skirt and thong down at the same time. He stood back up and walked over to his bag and retrieved a condom box. He placed it on the nightstand and pulled one packet out while never removing his eyes from me.

I lazily watched as he pushed his sweats off and I was no math major or anything, but I tried my best to estimate the number of inches he held in his hand.

*Was all that supposed to fit inside of me?*

I had this funny feeling that this night was going to be one that I wouldn't soon forget and the anticipation of that thought alone was killing me.

This time when he crawled over top of me, I held my breath as nervousness tickled my insides. He found my lips again before he carefully slid each delicious inch inside of me at the same time.

“Uhhh.” I finally let out the breath I had been holding.

It was a tight fit and hurt at first, but the pain soon subsided and turned to pleasure. I gripped his shoulders as if I was about to go on a rollercoaster ride and had to hold on for dear life. When I thought about it, technically, I was.

“Shit,” I heard him grunt as he grounded himself inside of me.

His eyes met mine, and he lowered his mouth to my lips at the same time he began to stroke in and out of my core. I gripped his back because nothing prepared me for how heavenly what he was doing felt.

I had enough sexual partners in my life to know when I ran across a special dick, and *this* was definitely one of them. I hated that it also felt like so much more than that. Every stroke felt more heavenly than the last.

This was the kind of sex that would have you changing your whole life, handing over your bank accounts, giving him the keys to the house and the car, kind of good sex.

As we transitioned to another position, I got on all fours, and the moment he slipped inside of me I swear I almost lost my soul as I threw it back at him.

What Jaren was packing should have come with a surgeon general’s warning. *Beware of life-threatening strokes.*

As he gripped my waist and pounded into me, I prayed for some relief from the pleasure because it was becoming unbearable to withstand.

I don’t even know how long we rolled around the bed, but I couldn’t get enough of him as he took me to orgasm after orgasm. If I never spoke or saw him again after this, it would have all been worth it.

I lost track of how much time flew by, but it felt like he was never going to reach his climax. I had lost track of the number of times I orgasmed, by the time he finally allowed himself to release. I was so worn out, that we laid breathlessly next to each other. I threw my leg over his and began to finger the ink that was on his neck.

“You like my tats?”

“These had to hurt,” I said playing close attention to the details on his neck.

“You got any ink?”

“No, but I want to.”

“I can get my guy to hook you up.”

“Your guy? I’m not getting any *Jaren* or *Jericho* tattoo across my kitty just because you just finished putting it *down*.”

He began to laugh.

“See there you go; I offered my guy. The design was your idea.” He kissed the top of my head. “I swear you always got something smart to say.”

“You should be used to it by now.”

“I’m getting there,” he said after a long yawn.

“What time is it?” I scanned the room for a clock since I had no idea where my phone was. I spotted the one on his side and cringed at how early in the morning it was.

I remembered that he had another performance that Sunday night, so he was able to sleep in all day. I, on the other hand, had to take a flight back to Hampton that afternoon because my Spring Break was technically over.

I reached across him for the alarm clock and set it for noon. As hard as it was gonna be, I had to go back to my room in a few hours even though all I wanted to do was lay in his arms.

I felt the even rise and fall of his chest letting me know that he was sound asleep, and my exhaustion began to fully sink in as I soon fell asleep right along with him.

# Chapter 22

## *Jaren*



I woke up to the blasting of an alarm. I didn't have to be anywhere until that night, and I was hoping to spend the day in bed with Fatima.

I noticed her sitting up on the other side of the bed with her back to me.

“Get yo ass back in this bed.”

“I can't,” she said rolling her neck in a circle, “I gotta pack my bag and get ready for my flight.”

“Why don't you fly back tomorrow morning and chill out here with me,” I said reaching for her. “I'll take care of everything.”

“I have class tomorrow.”

I wiped some smudged make-up from underneath her eyes.

“Besides, how would I explain my sudden change in travel plans to my friends. We came out here together.”

“You're a grown-ass woman; you don't have to explain yourself to anybody.”

“Sounds nice, but it doesn't work like that.”

I had the black-out curtains drawn, so the room was still dark. The light from her phone is what helped her maneuver around the room. I turned on the small lamp by my bed.

“You're not gonna stay?”

“As much as I want to, I can't.” She carried her things to the bathroom.

I heard the water from the sink a few minutes later. I slipped my sweats on and walked across the room to get my phone. At a quick glance, I saw that I had hundreds of

messages waiting on me. Rather than sift through the messages, I put my phone back down and made my way to the bathroom. Fatima had pulled on her clothes already and was in front of the mirror trying to find some way to fix her hair.

I stood behind her and began to place kisses on her neck.

“You’re not playing fair?” She smiled at me through the mirror.

“Is it working?”

“Nope.”

“What about this?” I asked moving my hand underneath her skirt. I watched her in the mirror as her eyes rolled back.

“You are so shady.”

I continued watching her while keeping my hand in place under her skirt. I began to try and plead with her to stay.

“I would never do something like this to you,” she moaned.

“I would want you to.” I began sucking on her neck.

“I have to go.”

“Do you?” I asked huskily in her ear.

“*Jaren...please.*” It looked as if she was hanging on the edge of an orgasm.

“A’ight, I give up.” I held up my hands.

Her hands clamped down on the counter as if she needed it to stand. I smacked her playfully on the butt as she stepped out of the bathroom.

She was making sure she had all of her things as I walked her to the front door.

“This was a lot of fun,” I admitted to her.

“It was.”

Our eyes lingered.

“Let me know when you get back home.” Placing my hand at the small of her back, I took a step forward and kissed her one last time.

After she was gone, I decided to kill time with some shopping.

Inside of the Louis Vuitton store at The Forum, I bought Aliyah the luggage set that she wanted for graduation and found a bag for my mom.

What surprised me on this trip, is that another woman was also on my mind. I wanted to get Fatima something for graduation, but I wasn't trying to do too much either, so I enlisted the help of the salesclerk to find the right *friend* gift.

They had two types of bags appropriate for a writer, a Loft Messenger bag and a 7 Days a Week bag.

“Are you getting little sis a laptop bag too?” PD asked walking up to me. “All that luggage ain't enough?”

“Naw, this is for somebody else.”

I handed the bag I was holding back to the saleswoman so that I could see both in front of her. I looked back and forth between the two bags trying to decide which Fatima would like more.

“Somebody like who?” PD asked skeptically.

“If I wanted, you to know you would know,” I told him. “Go head and wrap that 7 Days a Week bag up for me,” I informed the clerk.

“That's a \$3,000 bag. If you buying that kinda bag for a girl, that means she already got you open,” PD stated.

“It's a graduation gift for a friend.”

“Whatever happened to buying somebody a pen set or a coffee mug?”

“Why you so worried about what I'm doing?” I walked over to where Haseem was looking at wallets.

“I'm thinking about getting my girl this right here,” he said holding up one of the new summer colors.

“I ain't buying my girl *nothing* outta this store,” PD said shaking his head. He had followed me.

“That’s why she won’t leave me alone,” I joked knowing how much it would piss him off.

“J, one of these days your mouth is gonna get you fucked up.”

“That will be your last day on earth, too, my nigga. And as much pussy as you run around here getting, why you worried about what she’s doing *anyway*?”

“Sydney knows better,” PD defended confidently. “And I’m just fucking these hoes, I ain’t buying them \$3,000 bags and shit. Syd don’t need all that, and she knows she got my heart.”

“You see I don’t understand shit like that. If she had your heart, your dick wouldn’t keep falling inside of anybody else,” I stated. “And you should want to buy her nice things.”

“That’s the difference between you and me. I ain’t no pussy whipped nigga like you two.”

“And I’m positive my dick won’t fall off at any minute.” I walked out of the store not waiting for his response.

The clerks were arranging for my purchases to be shipped to my place in New York, so I didn’t need to stay behind to do anything else. Richie was still in the store talking to some girl, and Haseem was at the counter buying the wallet.

Tyson was walking beside me laughing. “You know you were wrong for that. You two always going at it.”

“We’ve been boys since we were kids though, and I know PD always got my back.”

Jokes were just that, but when the dust settled, I knew I could always count on PD. When I had lost my basketball scholarship and had no other options, it was his crib I stayed at until I figured things out. He was there before *Jericho* was ever thought of.

We made our way towards the exit of The Forum before either of us said anything else. The vibration of my phone in my pocket made me check it.

***Med School: 6:55PM: On the plane getting ready to take off. I'll text you when I land.***

***Me: 7:09PM: Have a safe flight***

“That bag you bought back there?” Tyson asked with hesitance. “Is that for her?” He nodded at my phone.

I was surprised by his question because Tyson usually didn't ask about my personal life. I looked around to see if anyone was near us.

“She's graduating from college, and I wanted to do something nice for her. She's a cool girl,” I responded ready to change the topic.

I thought my feelings for her would cool after we slept together. I couldn't have been more wrong, she remained just as strong on my mind as before, and that threw me off.



## Chapter 23

### *Fatima*



“Tima, this dumb girl put up a picture of her and Jericho like they spent the weekend together,” my girl, Tangi whispered as we sat on the plane waiting for it to take off.

“What?” I leaned over to see what she was talking about.

Sure enough, there was a picture of Deja standing next to Jaren in the club. Nothing about the picture screamed that they had hooked up, but this shady girl captioned it: *What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas!*

The comments on the picture blew up with people asking her ‘*how it was*’ and ‘*what he was like in person.*’ I wanted so badly to call her out on it, but how was I going to do that without giving myself away.

Keeping the night before to myself was pure torture. I wanted my girls to know what had happened. I was living one of my fanfiction stories and couldn’t tell anyone.

Sexually, Jaren was everything that I imagined he would be, and I wanted to turn around and go back for seconds rather than go back to Hampton.

Now reflecting to his last request, staying back in the suite with him, didn’t seem like such a bad idea. I wouldn’t be sharing airplane air with Deja. It was hard to believe that we were all good friends when this trip was first thought of. Her betrayal cut deep; I could never trust her again.

If she knew that while she was daydreaming about sexing Jericho, that *I* was the one actually with him, she would have lost it. It felt like the perfect revenge for what she had done to me.

“What are you smiling about?” Tangi asked.

“I’m not about to let Deja or anyone else take me out of my happy place. I’m never gonna forget this trip for the rest of my life.”

I allowed my head to relax against the seat and the minute my eyes closed. I remembered Jaren’s lips on my neck. I could still smell his scent and feel his touch. All the dumb insecurities I had going into meeting him all went away after the way he worshipped my body.

He treated me like the most delectable dessert that he couldn’t get enough of. The thought of all the places he licked and sucked sent chills across my entire body.

Even though we were only sharing sex, somewhere in between positions it felt like it was so much more than that. I tried my best not to read too far into it, but it was hard to ignore.

He was both gentle and rough when I needed him to be; it was as if he knew my body inside and out. If I ever wished there was a real-life rewind button it was at that moment.

The minute we landed at the Newport News/Williamsburg International Airport I dragged my exhausted body to baggage claim, feeling every minute of sleep that I had missed out on. Since it was close to midnight, the airport was relatively empty.

While standing around the carousel waiting on the luggage to drop onto the belt, I felt eyes on me and looked up to see Deja’s smirk. I was too tired to get into it with her, so I narrowed my attention back on the belt.

“It’s Sunday, and she *knows* I’m trying not to go to jail on the Lord’s day,” Autumn said looking up at the ceiling. “But if she doesn’t stop looking over *here*...ooo Jesus, I won’t be able to control what my fists do next.”

“She’s not worth it,” I tried to calm my friend with my tired voice.

“I don’t care what she’s worth,” Autumn stated, then she turned her attention to Deja and loudly added. “I can help her find whatever it is she is looking for.”

Deja stepped forward, and I could only shake my head.

*Here we go.*

We had gotten through an entire week without killing each other, and *now* this crazy girl wanted to start something at the end of our trip.

“Naw, let that bitch go,” Autumn yelled pushing me forward with her strength. “I’ve *been* waiting to finish whooping her ass!”

“Bitch, I’m from Portsmouth, and we don’t just *talk* about it,” Deja shot back.

“And I’m from North Philly where we cut bitches on sight!”

I know we looked crazy to the other passengers. Half of our group was holding back Deja and the other half was holding back Autumn.

*All I wanted to do was to go to bed.*

“Just like a fat-ass jealous bitch to always be hating,” Deja yelled. “Lose some damn weight, and then you can get on my level.”

“*Jealous?* Bitch, I’m not the one lying on Instagram about hooking up with rappers.”

“You’re just mad cause you can’t pull the kinda niggas that I can. But Weight Watchers can help you out with that, so you don’t have to fuck bodyguards like your whack-ass friend.”

Before Autumn could say anything in response, airport security jumped in. I pulled Autumn away from baggage claim and to the bathroom.

“Girl we’re about to graduate. You can’t let that dumb girl mess up your future,” I chastised.

“Tima’s right, you can’t be anybody’s high school counselor ready to go twelve rounds at the drop of a dime,” Chanel added.

“My bad,” Autumn said her hands spread on the bathroom counter. She took steady, deep breaths. “I can’t stand her ass.”

We waited until we thought the other ladies were gone then returned to the baggage claim to get our bags and found Tangi guarding them.

“Y’all didn’t think I was gonna leave our luggage here for those ratchets to do something to?” she joked.

“And that’s when the Chi-town side of me would’ve shown up,” Chanel stated.

“Well at least we made it through the trip without a charge,” Natalie chimed in trying to lighten the mood.

Pulling our bags behind us, we made it to Natalie’s and Autumn’s cars in the lot. I checked my phone the minute I slid inside Autumn’s car and sent Jaren a text letting him know that I had landed in VA. I left out the part about all the airport drama.

I knew he was busy performing at another club, so I didn’t expect a response until later. But a few minutes later the bird chirped with his answer.

***J: 1:41AM: Let me fly u to NY this weekend.***

I sat up straighter in the seat. I didn’t know how to respond to the request, so I didn’t.

“What’s up with you?” Autumn asked noticing my change in demeanor. “And what was Deja talking about? What bodyguard did you hook up with?”

I thought about Tyson and how often we were probably seen walking together. I hadn’t considered the fact that anyone was paying attention or assuming that *we* were hooking up.

“I didn’t hook up with any bodyguard; I don’t know *what* she was talking about.”

Technically, I was telling the truth I wasn’t sleeping with Tyson.

“I hung out with some guy from New York,” I answered cryptically.

“Was he cute?”

I hated lying to my friend, but I wasn't ready to share anything with anybody yet. I wanted to keep this to myself.

"He was. What about you? You hooked up with the same guy four nights in a row. What's up with him?"

"He's a Junior at Texas A&M," Autumn said now full on blushing. "I got his number, but I don't know if I'm gonna call him. I mean I wanted what we did to *stay* in Vegas."

"You should call him you never know."

"You already called New York, didn't you?" Autumn asked with amusement.

I hid my face in my hands.

"Damn, that must have been some *good* dick," she teased turning her car into our apartment complex. I was thankful that it put an end to her interrogation.

We carried our luggage to our second-floor apartments. Once inside, I fell onto my couch. I decided to respond to Jaren before calling it a night.

***Me: 10:23PM: Let me think about it.***

I kicked off my boots and laid my feet across the cushions of my tan couch. I picked up one of my teal pillows and hugged it tightly. My phone chirped again.

***KeVon: 10:40PM: Who were you fuckin in Vegas?***

*How did KeVon know anything about what I was doing in Vegas?*

The only answer was that had to be Deja. I didn't even respond to his text. I was wondering why she was so worried about what I was doing and why she felt the need to report that information to him.

It had been an eventful day, from waking up next to Jaren to almost getting arrested at the airport. I could have written a book about the entire trip, and nobody would ever believe any of it was real. It was funny how real life was sometimes more entertaining than a novel.

## Chapter 24

### *Jaren*



“What I gotta do to get you to come to New York?”  
Fatima’s face filled the screen of my phone.

Since Vegas we talked mostly by FaceTime whenever we were alone. I wasn’t trying to get into anything serious, but Fatima seemed to have me trapped inside some web.

“If I come to New York, somebody is going to see me with you, and my face is gonna be all over social media.”

“I will make sure that nobody sees anything,” I tried to assure her. “I will set you up at a hotel, and I’ll meet you there.”

I honestly understood her hesitancy about coming into my world because messing around with someone famous was like going bungee jumping. You didn’t know what to expect at the bottom once you took that jump. This *celebrity* world was cut-throat; it could chew you up and spit you out.

“I don’t know. I got a paper to work on, a lab to study for-”

“And you’ll have time to do all that.”

She couldn’t hide the smile that was crossing her face no matter how hard she tried, and I found it sexy. The more I saw her, the more things I found attractive about her. I could see why her ex was still sniffing around.

“You know you want to,” I added.

“You swear you know me.” She bit her bottom lip knowing how much I loved when she did cute shit like that. “Okay... fine, I’ll come.”

“Oh, don’t try to act like you don’t want to.”

“I guess I wanna see you too.” She began to laugh.

It had only been four days since I had last been in the same room with Fatima, but it felt longer. Since my schedule that weekend was going to be light, I wanted to take advantage and see her again.

“I will take care of everything,” I assured her.

I had plans on spending those two days locked away in a suite with her minus any distractions. I wanted to see if what I was feeling was real or not. We didn’t get enough time alone in Vegas.

“Let me get back over here and finish studying for this Developmental Biology test, and *you* need to get to rehearsal.”

“A’ight, I’ll talk to you later.”

After making arrangements, I jogged downstairs and saw Courtney on the phone close to tears. I didn’t understand why she stayed in her relationship; she never appeared happy.

When she saw me, she wiped at her eyes and put the phone away.

“You need to let him go.”

“Don’t start that again.” She shoved her things inside of her messenger bag. “The car is here.”

I owned an all-black Mercedes-Benz SLR that I frequently drove myself around the city in. I preferred car service any other time.

In the back of the Cadillac CTS, the tension swirling in the car was thick. I busied myself with my phone answering messages and checking emails.

The minute we pulled up to the rehearsal space Larry, Richie and the tour manager, Terrell Redding, was waiting on me. I was getting my first look at the stage background for my set. I wanted it to feel like I was taking Brooklyn on the road with me, so that was the vision the stage producer had designed for me.

I browsed the set list of twenty-two songs that I was going to perform solo.

Facing the stage, I evaluated the design. There was both a deejay and a live band that Kadeem and I planned to share on tour. My background singers were going to be stage left.

I watched as the rehearsal space went black and the words *Jericho* lit up across the stage. The person standing in for me came rising from under the stage. I liked the smoke but hated the lights being used, so I whispered my notes to Courtney.

They fast-tracked through each song, so I could see how things would transition. Once I was pleased with what I saw I took off my jacket ready to take the stage to perform my entire set from start to finish. Our tour was set to start in the coming weeks, and I wanted to be prepared.

For the next three hours, I went through my entire set twice, I switched up a few things and made notes of transitions I liked and didn't like. When I had nothing else to give for the night, I jumped off the stage and wiped my face with a white towel that had been thrown to me by someone from the staff. While guzzling water, I joined Larry and Terrell who were deep in conversation.

Courtney's shriek grabbed our attention; we all followed the sound and found her in a heated argument with her man Eric. Tears were flowing down her reddened-face as she yelled. I was personally fed up with this entire situation, and like a protective older brother, I went over to where they were.

"Courtney, you a'ight?" I asked purposely ignoring Eric.

"I'm fine," she answered wiping her face. "I just need a minute."

"And what are you gonna do?" Eric asked squaring his shoulders.

"Eric stop, let's just go." Courtney tried tugging on his arm.

"This ain't what you want playboy," I glared at him.

"Playboy? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" He took a step closer.



“You and I both know what it means.”

Larry must have noticed the tension and stepped in between us. “Courtney, why don’t you take off for the rest of the night.”

“Alright,” she resigned, avoiding eye contact as she walked away.

“You can’t save somebody that doesn’t wanna be saved,” Larry stated matter-of-factly.

And he was right; she had to wake up and want better for herself.

# Chapter 25

## *Jaren*



“Hey you,” Fatima said while opening the door to the suite.

I carried my bag inside. Once the door was closed, I set it down and pulled her to me.

“How was your trip?”

“It wasn’t bad. I could get used to flying first class.”

“Is that right?” I laughed forgetting that she was still a struggling college student.

“And all of *this*,” she pointed around the suite, “you didn’t have to do all of this. A room at the Holiday Inn or something would’ve been okay with me.”

“I’m gonna act like you didn’t just say that.” I released her and peeled off my jacket as I walked further inside. “You have me all to yourself for two days, so what is it that you wanna do first?” I sat down on the couch and spread my arms on the back of it.

“Do you really wanna know?” she asked sashaying towards me before straddling my lap. Leaning her head down she kissed me softly on the lips.

“It’s like that?” I cradled her back in my hands while sucking on her bottom lip before sliding my tongue in between her lips. “I missed you, *Med School*.”

“I know you did.”

My hand found its way to her stomach, and I started to tickle her until she jumped off of my lap and on to the couch.

“You talk so much shit, I swear,” I laughed.

“Okay, okay, *okay!* I missed you too, okay,” she roared with laughter.

“That’s what I thought.” I gazed down at her lying beside me. She threw her legs over my lap defiantly.

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“I’m just taking all of you in.” I ran a finger down her face.

Wearing a long-sleeved knit shirt, leggings and barely any make-up she was naturally beautiful. I leaned down to kiss her again, this time allowing my lips to linger over hers, teasing her.

I could honestly stare into her dark brown, deep-set eyes all day. I called them *all-knowing* because she seemed to have an old soul that held so much wisdom beyond her twenty-two years. But there was still an innocence and curiosity there at the same time.

I sucked on her tongue and felt her grip the back of my head. Soft moans escaped from her mouth, and all I could think about was being back inside of her. I pushed myself from the couch and walked over to my bag to get protection. By the time I turned back around Fatima had completely taken off all of her clothes and was boldly waiting on me with her hands on her hips.

When I returned in front of her, she aggressively started removing my clothes as if she needed this as bad as I did. As she unbuckled my belt and jeans, I toed off my sneakers and kicked them to the side.

Fatima took the foil packet from me and pushed me down on the couch; I let her sheath me, something I never trusted any woman to do. A beat later, she was sliding down the length of me. My head fell back helplessly on the couch. Being inside of her felt *that* good.

I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into getting involved with her. *Friendship* was starting not to feel like the right title for us anymore.

# Chapter 26

## *Fatima*



Bliss couldn't describe what I felt while lying naked next to Jaren. Every inch of me was sore, but I didn't care about any of that. Being with him, stripped down like this, felt like heaven.

All Friday night we had sex more times than I could count and then when we were done, we would talk.

He asked me questions about my writing, specifically wanting to analyze *Jericho's Heart*. He wanted to know why I named it that, and I told him because I felt like Jericho didn't know his own heart. It took the pain of losing who and what he wanted for him to learn the true meaning of love.

I shared with him more about my upbringing and listened to him talk about his mom, I understood why he was the way he was when it came to women. He adored his mom, and his face would light up when talking about her.

We talked about his love of basketball and everything that went down at Syracuse. He opened up to me about how difficult the years after getting kicked out of school were for him.

To know he had hustled so hard in the streets selling drugs and doing anything to survive made me have a whole new level of respect for him. Most guys in his situation would have stayed stuck in that trap life; he found a better way through music.

When he realized that he had a way with words and could rap, he started selling mixed tapes then put all of his energy into making it.

"Do you remember that first night in Vegas when you came to my room drunk?" he asked already laughing while recalling

that night.

I covered my face with my hand. “I was praying to God the entire time that I didn’t throw up in front of you.”

“I was surprised you didn’t!”

Amidst the jokes, I couldn’t help but admire him. Calling him fine did him no justice, he was indescribable. His hooded eyes often held mystery behind them, but at times as he talked his brown eyes would light up, and I would feel as if I had reached another part of him that he otherwise safely guarded from others.

He was lying on his back while we talked, the duvet covering his waist. I allowed my fingers to dangle along his abs at times.

“I threw back too many shots trying to take the edge off that night. I was *so* nervous.”

“You shouldn’t have been. Do you remember what I told you that night?”

“Vaguely.”

“I told you that you had enough talent to make it,” he said peering into my eyes. “The way you write connects with people, in the same way, you describe my music. And that’s just as important to the world as having another doctor.”

“How do you figure that?”

“The power of the pen *is* as healing as medicine,” he reminded me of the acknowledgment on his album.

“What do you mean when you say that?”

“Can you imagine a world without music? Without sports? Without *books*?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I just can’t,” I explained. “Those are all things that bring people together, things that make us happy as human beings.”

“*Exactly!* It’s a different kind of medicine, but its medicine.”

“But how is *that* as important as being a doctor?”

“The world needs doctors, we already know that they’re important for obvious reasons, but so are *writers*. Your stories give people an escape from their everyday lives. You allow people to escape their problems, you inspire them, and you help them to see the world in different ways.”

“Being a writer, you don’t have a guaranteed salary though.”

“Don’t be scared to take a chance on yourself and follow your *actual* dream. *Not* the dream your parents gave you, but the purpose you were put on this earth for.”

“If I don’t go to medical school and become a doctor, I will break my parent’s heart.”

“What about breaking your *own* heart?”

I didn’t respond, my hands moved to my stomach, and I linked my fingers. He suddenly got up from the bed and left the room.

Feeling a sudden chill from his absence, I pulled the thick white duvet over my naked body.

A few minutes later wearing only a pair of black Calvin Klein boxer briefs, Jaren returned to the room carrying a box. He turned on the lamp on my side of the bed, sat down on the edge next to me and handed me a box.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

I pushed my body upward until I was sitting up. I looked down at the long, sleek looking charcoal gray box and read the words, Louis Vuitton. I looked up at him again.

“This is expensive.”

“It’s not every day you graduate from college, especially *pre-med*.”

I pushed the thin black ribbon to the side and lifted the lid off of it. I looked down to see one of the most beautiful bags I had ever laid my eyes on. I rubbed my hand against the sleek material as the scent of new leather filled the room.

Noticing a note on the side of the bag I picked it up and held the LV embossed card in my hand.

*“Whenever you carry this bag, I want you to be reminded of what you should be doing. I hope you understand how much this world needs your gift.”* I paused long enough to swallow. *“Congratulations on your graduation. Jesus.”*

At the sight of his nickname, I began to laugh.

I looked at him and then back down at the gift, carefully placing the card back inside of the box. I lifted the black and gray expensive bag from the tissue paper and examined it more closely before setting it back inside.

My eyes met his.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I moved the box to the side and leaned my body forward to wrap my arms around his neck. A second later I felt his arms envelop me. It was something about the safety and security I felt when with him that began to terrify me.

*No man* was this perfect; if there was one thing I learned in my short life, it was that. If my daddy could cheat on my mother, I didn’t put anything past anyone else.

I inhaled a deep breath before finally letting him go. He lifted my chin.

“I want *you* to believe in you the way I do.”

When I agreed to come to New York, I just thought I was signing up for a weekend of more great sex. Jaren was throwing a monkey wrench in that plan.

*Why couldn’t he be good dick that didn’t care about anything else?*

I didn't want him sweeping me off my feet, I needed to keep my feet firmly flatly planted where they were.

"Since I can't be at your graduation, I wanted you to have your gift now."

"Why are you doing all of this?"

"Because I want to," he answered taking my hand in his. "And because I care about you."

"You do?"

"I do, and I know you feel what I'm feeling."

"Yea, there's *something* there, but I don't see how anything past friendship could work between us," I reminded him. "You are about to go on a six-month tour all over the country, and I'm moving to Baltimore right after graduation to start medical school. Even if we wanted more, it wouldn't work."

"Then what do you suggest, we cut each other off right now?"

"I'm not saying that either, let's *not* put a label on whatever *this* is and just go with the flow."

"And you think it's gonna be easy doing that?"

"If there are no labels, then nobody gets hurt."

"You sure about that?"

I wasn't sure but what was the alternative? If I agreed to something more, I was setting myself up to get hurt. If I thought KeVon could hurt me, Jaren had the ability and resources to send me into permanent hibernation.

"I could fly you out while I'm on tour, on my days off I can fly to B-More. If we want it to work, it can."

"That's a lot of pressure, to join you on tour? People will find out about us."

"And?"

"And I don't want that kind of attention."

The truth was, no matter how confident I was in my curvy body. And as much as I knew *he* liked all of me, I knew the



world we lived in was a lot more complicated and superficial. Any time a male celebrity was linked to an “average” woman, if she didn’t look a certain way, people would dissect and drag her until they parted ways.

Jaren wasn’t some D-list nobody. He was at the top of his game and was considered a sex symbol, whether he liked it or not. Women were willing to sell their body parts for one night with him. His fans expected whoever was on his arm to be just as perfect.

To go from a Barbie doll-like Brandy to a *real* woman like me, people would tear me apart relentlessly, and I honestly wasn’t ready for that kind of public scrutiny or criticism.

Jaren allowed his forehead to rest on mine. “The same thing that attracted me to you is the same thing that is driving me crazy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’ll try it your way for now.”

I lifted my head to kiss him, I didn’t want to think about any of that. I tried to enjoy us as we were. The rest could get figured out later. Besides, by the time he set out for his tour things between us would cool off by then anyway.

# Chapter 27

## *Jaren*



I stepped out of the shower and wrapped the plush white towel around my waist. It was after two on Sunday, and I had a fitting in an hour to try on some wardrobe pieces for the tour.

Fatima was lying across the bed naked on her stomach reading out of her *Medicinal Chemistry* textbook. She had pulled her hair into a ponytail and had a pencil shoved sideways between her lips. As if she couldn't get any cuter, here she was making me regret having to leave the room.

"I'm not ready for you to go."

Her flight back to VA didn't leave until seven so she was trying to get in as much studying as possible before she left.

I wanted to reschedule all my other plans for that day because I wanted to stay with her.

*Damn, even in my head I sounded whipped!*

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." I leaned down to kiss her.

"Mmm, don't start that again I gotta study for this lab."

"Well you shouldn't be laying here looking all sexy and shit," I said smacking her on the ass as I sat down on the bed next to her.

"If I go put on some clothes will you keep your hands to yourself?"

"Nope."

"See." She threw her pencil at me.

I didn't know being locked away with one person for 48 hours could be so much fun. Not once did she get on my

nerves and I shared more with her in a weekend than people who had known me for years. I felt that comfortable around her.

Aside from her limited definition of ‘*what we were*,’ everything else felt perfect, and I was someone who didn’t believe in perfection.

Ignoring the fact, I had just taken a shower, I snatched a condom off the nearby nightstand and fisted it in my hand while kissing the curve of her lower back.

“*Jesus*,” she pleaded.

“Are you calling the man above or me?” I teased as I ran my tongue up her spine.

“At this moment, both of you.” She dropped her head on the book. “You want me to fail this lab, don’t you?”

“I didn’t tell you to stop reading,” I pointed out while sucking on a spot on her back.

“How am I supposed to focus with you kissing on me like that?”

“Look at it as motivation.”

“I hate you,” she groaned turning over until she was lying flat on her back.

“Is that your way of telling me you want me to kiss something else?” I asked while spreading her legs.

“You *gotta* let me study,” she begged. “This lab is no joke.”

I slid a finger between her folds, and with my free hand, I pulled her textbook towards me.

“Let’s see,” I said trying to find something to read to her as I eased my finger in and out of her wetness. “*An inverse agonist is a drug which acts at the same receptor as that of an agonist, yet it produces an opposite effect. Also called negative antagonists.*”

Fatima was writhing her hips and shot her head up. “You’ve *gotta* be kidding me right now!”

“What? I’m helping you study.”

“No, you’re torturing me.”

“*Torture?* You don’t like what I’m doing?”

“You are so wrong for this.” She closed her eyes and licked her lips.

“How about if I do this?” I asked pulling my finger out of her core and replacing it with my tongue.

“I’m *never* coming back to New York,” she hissed pushing her textbook to the floor.

I settled myself between her legs and continued pleasing her. I wasn’t trying to keep her from studying, but I didn’t know the next time I would get to have her like this. It was selfish of me, but I couldn’t help myself.

As she reached a climax, I lapped up as much as I could before completely releasing her. I tore open the condom in my hand and held her legs up high and placed them on my shoulders.

“You’re gonna miss your fitting,” she whispered.

“Yea, okay.” I chuckled as I entered her at the same time. I didn’t give a damn about that fitting or anything else at that moment.

Unlike the other times we had sex, this time felt different as if the realization that we were both about to go back to our own separate lives was fully sinking in. Neither of us held back, and the more she screamed, the harder I went.

I lowered my face and bit down on her lower lip. Her tongue slid between my lips, and I slowed my pace focusing on going deeper inside of her. I wasn’t ready for her to get on a plane and fly back to VA and the thought shocked me.

After we finished this time, I made some phone calls to change my fitting times while Fatima was in the shower. I knew I had fucked up my schedule for the day, but I didn’t care.

After rearranging my plans, I took another shower, when I stepped out of the bathroom, I found Fatima already getting dressed for her flight.

“If I fail my lab tomorrow, I’m blaming you.”

“You’re not gonna fail; you’re too smart.”

“We’ll see how smart I am while trying to wing it.”

After saying goodbye, I drove to my condo. I was exhausted and lazily carried my bag towards the elevator. I had rescheduled my fitting time and wanted to get a quick nap before leaving again. I was irritated when I found Brandy outside of my door.

“Why are you here?”

“If you would return calls I wouldn’t have to show up at your place. And *where* have you been? This is my third time coming over here this weekend.”

“How about you tell me what it is that you want?” I unlocked my door.

“Can we at least talk inside?”

“You’ve got five minutes.” I gestured.

“Are you that mad that you can’t return my calls?”

I held up my palm to show her my five fingers.

“Why are you acting like this?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “You might wanna just get to the point of this lil visit.”

“Fine, I’m in New York because I have to do *Wendy Williams* tomorrow as damage control for what you did on Kimmel.”

“What exactly did I do on Kimmel? I didn’t say shit about anything that went down between us and I gave your ass nothing but compliments.”

“But you *lied!*”

I held up my hand to gesture for her to control her tone.

“I didn’t *lie* about shit.”

“When he asked if we were together, you avoided the question, and that makes me look bad.”

“That is *our* business, not Kimmel’s or anybody else’s.”

“But I’m the one looking stupid because I posted all of that stuff on my pages saying that we were.”

“*You* chose to do that.”

“After TMZ came out with those pictures, I didn’t see any reason to hide anything anymore.”

“That’s you, I still keep my business to myself.” I shrugged. “You knew that about me from jump.”

“You are just gonna let me look stupid when I go on *Wendy* tomorrow? People will think that I’m a joke, that I’m out here making up stories for publicity.”

“Don’t answer any questions about us. Talk about your movie or your new boyfriend or whatever.”

“He’s *not* my boyfriend how many times do I have to tell you that?”

“I honestly don’t give a damn what he is to you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

“Are you seeing someone else?” Her eyes scanned the condo as if she was hoping to find a clue.

“Time’s up.”

“Jaren, I’m going on *Wendy* tomorrow, and if she asks about *you*, I’m gonna tell her the truth. That we *were* together.”

“Do what you gotta do Brandy.”

“I’m gonna tell her that the reason we broke up is because of our schedules and that it had *nothing* to do with Leek.”

“*Leek, huh?*” I laughed at the casual way she was saying, *Malik*.

She began to take small steps to the door. “What’s her name?”

I didn’t respond.

“Is she in the business?”

I opened the door the minute we reached it.

“*Jaren, wait!*”

I looked down at her hands on my chest and back at her. She knew me well enough to know that I didn’t like anybody putting their hands on me.

“I have one last thing to say, and I need you to hear me.”

“What is it?”

“I didn’t cheat on you while we were together. I know you don’t believe me, but it’s the truth. People on set were trying to sell stories to give the movie more publicity; none of that stuff was true.”

“Well you got what you wanted,” I shrugged, “they’re talking about your movie everywhere.”

“I didn’t want any of *that* kind of press. I only wanted *you*.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t have been at that premiere with him.” I paused to search her face. She knew full well; she was wrong for what she did.

“We were only at my premiere as *co-stars*, nothing else.”

“Brandy, it’s time for you to go.”

“I-I-I miss you Jaren.”

“Not my problem.”

“Will you stop trying to act hard and listen to me?”

I rubbed my eyes with frustration. “Brandy, I got somewhere to be. I don’t have time for this.”

“Can we talk after you’re done? I could come back by later.”

“Nah.”

She gave me a disappointed look, and that was the last look I saw on her face as I closed the door. I swear I didn't understand why she cared so much about what people were saying about her. If she stopped talking about it, everybody else would.

My phone began to ring, and I pulled it out to see that Fatima had texted me about boarding her flight. Brandy had messed up my mood so much that I grabbed a blunt.

As I smoked, my mind went from Brandy to Fatima, to everything coming up in the months ahead. I had never felt for Brandy the things I was feeling for Fatima, and that thought made me uncomfortable.

I exhaled and closed my eyes; the last thing I wanted to be was caught up in something that wasn't real. Whatever we were doing, we had to figure that shit out soon, or I had to let her go.



# Chapter 28

## *Fatima*



I knocked on Autumn's door and the minute she opened it, I stormed inside.

"I need a drink," I announced going to her mini bar.

"Uh oh, what happened?"

I poured myself a full glass of Moscato and then turned to her as I drank.

"It's barely two o'clock in the afternoon; what's already got you so upset?"

I put the glass down. "I got a D on my lab today."

"*What? You never get D's!*"

"I know," I said picking up the glass and finishing the rest of the sweet drink.

"What is going on with you?"

I filled up my glass again and followed her on the couch. When I heard Jericho's name coming from the tv, I turned to see what was being said about him. When I noticed that Wendy Williams was sitting on the couch with a smiling Brandy, I internally rolled my eyes.

"What is she talking about?" I asked not sure if I wanted to hear her answer.

"This dumb fool is telling Wendy that she and Jericho were together and that the reason they broke up is that they both wanted to focus on their careers."

"Hmm," I said turning to look at the gorgeous actress dressed in a designer dress laughing with Wendy as if they were old friends.

“Wendy got her though. She told Brandy that she believes that Malik *was* the real reason for the break-up and that she thinks something *did* go down between them on the set of that movie.”

“What did she say then?”

“She said none of it was true. She’s trying to say that she is still good friends with Jericho and that she was with him last night.”

“She said *what?*”

“That she saw him last night,” Autumn repeated.

“Is that right?” I downed the rest of the wine in one gulp.

“Alright, give me this,” she said taking the glass from me. “What is going on with you for real? And remember you’re talking to your best friend here.”

I could feel tears burning behind my eyes.

“Wait? Why are you crying?” Autumn asked reaching for her Kleenex box and handing me a tissue. “It’s *one D!* I’m sure your grades are high enough to recover from that.”

“That’s not it.” The tears stung behind my eyes as images of my weekend in New York flashed in my mind.

“Then what is it?”

“You have to promise not to be mad at me or try to kill me,” I prefaced.

“If you are about to sit on my couch and tell me that you took that cheating, lying ass ex of yours back. I will stab you.”

“No, this isn’t about KeVon.”

“Then *who* is it about? Please don’t tell me you are pregnant after our Vegas trip!”

“What? No,” I said shaking my head. “It’s honestly so much that I don’t even know where to begin. That grade is only part of it.”

“Did you study at all while you were in Charlotte this weekend?”

It was time to finally open up to my best friend.

“I wasn’t in Charlotte this weekend.”

“I thought your parents wanted you to visit them since they didn’t get to see you over Spring Break?”

“They *did* want me to come to Charlotte, but I went to New York instead.”

“New York?”

“The guy I told you about in Vegas, he’s not just *some* random guy.”

“Do I know him?”

“It’s Jericho.”

“Jericho who?”

“Jaren Young, *Jericho*.”

“Come again?” she asked her eyes almost bulging out of her head. “I need to see some receipts. I’m not trying to call my best friend a liar or anything, but you have to break this down for me.”

I unlocked my phone and pulled up our most recent conversation which had been that morning before my class. I watched as Autumn scrolled through the messages, some which included selfies of him.

Every so often she would look at me with a death stare. Then she returned my phone.

“Bitch, I could *kill* you right now,” she said her mood looking between calm and crazy. “You’ve been talking to *my* baby daddy, and you kept that to yourself all this time?”

“I thought Antoine was your future baby daddy?”

“They *both* are!” She snapped. “And stop trying to be funny to change the topic.”

I held up my hands with innocence.

“Did you meet him in Vegas? Is that who you were secretly running off with?”

“It *was*, but that’s not how we met.”

“How did you meet?”

“It’s actually a funny story.”

“Make it *unfunny* and just tell me.”

“We met on *WriteNow*.”

“Huh? When did *you* join *WriteNow*?”

“That’s the other thing, I’ve been on *WriteNow* for a few years now.”

“I don’t understand why would you hide that from me?”

“Well, because I didn’t join as a reader.”

“You write? I could’ve been promoting your stuff?”

“I wanted to see if I was any good, so I decided to keep my identity a secret.”

“Are your books good? What’s your screen name?”

“@*YaraTheWriter*.”

“You want me to stab you,” she said jumping up from her seat. “*All* this time and you couldn’t tell *me* that?”

“When you first started reading my books I was flattered. You guys were all excited about my work without even knowing that it was me.”

“Why wouldn’t you wanna share that with us?”

“I liked getting the feedback and hearing your excitement about my books because of how much you *liked* them and *not* because you’re my friend.”

“I would have supported you no matter what, you know that. I would have been telling *everybody* about your stories.”

“And that’s the other reason why I didn’t say anything. You know I can’t risk my parents finding out about this.”

“Why not?”

“You know how they are. They want me to focus on medical school, and that’s it.”

“But you’re talented,” she stressed. “They can’t be upset about that.”

We both got quiet.

“I’m so pissed at you right now. I’m the *first* one ready to go to jail for you when it’s time to fight. I love you *that* much because you are like the sister I never had.”

I could see the hurt all over her face and felt terrible about keeping it all from her.

“I know, and *I’m sorry*. I wasn’t trying to hurt you or keep anything from you. It just kinda happened that way.”

“How long have you two been talking?” A smirk was now hiding behind her glare.

“Since October.”

“It’s almost April! How could you keep a secret like *this* for *that* long?”

“I didn’t know who he was at first. He reached out to me as a reader, and we would talk back and forth about *Jericho’s Heart*.”

“He read your book about him? So that kind of stuff *does* happen?”

“It’s the first time it’s ever happened to me, but yeah.”

“So, all nine of my other future baby daddies could be lurking on there, too?” she asked with renewed excitement.

“Maybe.”

“When did you find out it was him?”

“After I broke up with KeVon, around the time Jaren released his new album.”

“*Jaren*?” she asked batting her eyes. Then she looked at the now ended DVR recording of *The Wendy Williams Show* she had been watching. “You already knew about all that Brandy stuff?”

“No, I didn’t. We never talked like that. He never told me anything personal, well not until we started talking on the

phone. But it was *after* he and Brandy were done.”

“I feel like I’m *living* through you right now. How could you keep something so juicy like this from me? I mean if the roles were reversed, you wouldn’t be able to shut me up.”

“I don’t know. I guess it didn’t feel real to me.”

“Sooooo. How was it?”

“What?”

“The dick girl!”

I dropped my head with embarrassment recalling the numerous orgasms I had enjoyed that weekend.

I began laughing uncontrollably.

“I hate you so much right now. I can tell all over your face that he put it down,” she said giving me a stank face. “*Now* I see why you got a *D* on that damn lab. Your ass was in NYC getting the *D* all weekend.” She shook her head with disgust. “Serves you right. So, it was Jericho’s bodyguard that Deja saw you with in Vegas?”

“His name is Tyson, and he was escorting me to and from the suite,” I confirmed.

Autumn began to bend over laughing. “Please let me tell her. Let me show her the pictures.”

You would have thought that I was Dave Chappelle with how hard she was laughing and holding on to her stomach.

“No! You can’t tell *anybody* about this!”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want it to get out. I don’t want people all in my business or harassing me.”

“You’re better than me. I would be telling everybody *that* man was tapping all this.”

“You say that until the situation is real. You’ve seen how some of those bloggers are when they find out who celebrities are dating. They are ruthless, and I don’t look *anything* like his last woman.”

“And yet, that man is flying *you* to New York. He obviously likes you as you are, so why do you care about what other people think?”

“We aren’t together like that, so there is no need for people to know anything. I’m not trying to look stupid out here either.”

“You worry too much.”

“I *just* left him yesterday, and Brandy is sitting on Wendy’s couch telling the world she saw him last night. Like he wasted *no* time after I left.”

“That bitch could be lying, ask him about it first before you flip out and mess up my chance to meet my future baby daddy.”

“Excuse me?”

“Girl, I’m talking about my Ricey.” She waved off. “Jericho is not on my list anymore. Unlike Deja, I *follow* girl code!”

“How will I mess up your chance to meet Antoine?”

“They know each other. So, I will be expecting an introduction sometime in the future to make up for all this blasphemous secrecy.”

I pushed myself up from her couch. “That’s my cue to go back to my apartment.” I walked towards her door and stopped. “I’m sorry about all the stuff I kept from you.”

“I can’t do anything but forgive you if I plan to meet my Ricey.”

I rolled my eyes and hugged her tightly.

Once back in my apartment I called Jaren, both nervous and anxious to hear what he had to say. But when my call went to voicemail, I felt uneasy.

“*Don’t jump to conclusions,*” I repeated to myself. “*Hear what he has to say first.*”

Thoughts of KeVon and Deja and all of their web of lies came to the forefront. One thing I wasn’t about to do was sit

back and allow anyone to play me like that again.

I decided to take a bubble bath to try and relax, the minute I closed my eyes, my phone began to ring.

“Hey, I was in a meeting when you called earlier. How did your lab go?”

“Horrible. I got a D , and you owe me,” I said dryly.

“My bad. I wasn’t trying to mess you up like *that*, but I *will* enjoy making it up to you.”

I didn’t respond because I had other things I wanted to ask him.

“Did you go see Brandy last night?”

“No, I didn’t go see her, but she did come to my condo to talk.”

I sat up in the water. “Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“I thought we were just going with the flow with no labels? Why would I be reporting to you about anything that I do?”

“I was just, I mean-”

She showed up on her own and only stayed long enough to tell me about her going on some show,” he clarified.

“Is there anything going on between the two of you?”

“Not since I told you that we were done. Where is all this coming from anyways?”

“She was on Wendy Williams today making it seem like you two talk all the time.”

“Med School, you are the *only* woman I’m doing anything with right now.”

“Okay,” I said softly biting my lip to keep from smiling.

“Understood?”

“Understood.”

“And it doesn’t sound like you are cool with going with the flow either...”



I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

# Chapter 29

## *Jaren*

*\*One Month Later\**



Kadeem and I had spent all week doing promotional interviews all over New York. Our first tour date was kicking off at Madison Square Garden.

While riding in the back of my SUV after leaving another interview, I listened to Courtney update me on my schedule.

I felt my personal phone vibrating in my lap and lifted it to see that Fatima had sent me a message.

***Med School: 5:47PM: Just landed.***

***Me: 5:48PM: I'll be there in a few.***

“Uh oh, I already know who that was.”

“Mind yo bidness.” I put my phone down.

“It’s not my fault you can never wipe that goofy ass grin off your face whenever you finish talking to her.”

“You *think* you know something.”

In the past month, Fatima and I had seen each other three times. She flew up to New York twice for quick turnaround trips and then we mutually met up in D.C. while I was there for promotional stuff.

I informed Courtney about Fatima because with things becoming so chaotic around me, I didn’t want anything falling through the cracks when it came to her.

The two had yet to meet in person, but from afar Courtney already liked her.

“How is your relationship?”

“We’re doing much better. I told you we had to get through that rough patch,” she announced proudly.

I didn’t say anything. If she was happy with where her relationship was who was I to keep beating a dead horse. I just hoped all of this happiness lasted while we were out on the road.

When we got to my condo, Courtney went over the next day’s schedule before going home. The entire weekend I was going to be busy, but I didn’t care, I wanted Fatima with me for the first show.

She had been taking finals all week, and her actual commencement was that next Friday. I had a show in New Jersey the night of her graduation, or I would have been there.

After Courtney left, I packed a quick bag to meet Fatima at the hotel. I wanted Fatima to stay with me, but she was still uncomfortable with somebody finding out about us reminding me that was how TMZ found out about Brandy.

During my traffic-filled drive to the Ritz. I thought about her; I didn’t know what the hell to call us if anybody *did* ask because technically, we were still ‘*going with the flow.*’

I knew one thing for sure; this tour would bring out the best and the worst to whatever this arrangement between us was.

# Chapter 30

## *Jaren*



“How am I supposed to get on that stage tonight?” I asked gripping Fatima’s hips as she rode me.

It was a little after noon, and I had a lot to do before that night’s first show, but Fatima was still holding me captive in the suite. She had climbed on top of me when I made a weak attempt at getting up. And here we were an hour later still in the middle of fucking.

I lifted my head and took a mouthful of one of her breasts as I cradled her back with my hands. In my own way, I was still trying my best to convince her to come to the show as a part of my entourage.

I told her that there were so many of my friends and family coming as guests of mine, that nobody would question who she was, but she wasn’t trying to hear any of it.

She was planning to go, but with her friend Autumn who was in Harlem visiting her Aunt. I was able to convince Fatima to accept the passes.

Fatima’s increased moans let me know that she was coming close to another orgasm and I moved from her breasts to her lips and sucked her screams inside my mouth.

She was now holding me tightly around the neck as our faces remained close. I watched as she slowly opened her euphoric-filled eyes and smiled at me.

“What am I gonna do while you’re on tour?”

“Come see me,” I answered biting her lip.

It was something so naturally sexy about her that I could have stayed like this all day looking at her.

“We’ll see,” she said sounding as if she wanted to brush off the topic.

“Is that part of the ‘*seeing where it goes?*’”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Let me ask you a question.” I leaned my back against the headboard. “If I’m on tour and I decide to fuck somebody else. Are we still good?”

“What?” she asked protectively covering her chest.

“See what I’m saying,” I said gripping her so that she couldn’t get up. Both of my phones were vibrating back and forth over and over on the nightstand, but I ignored them because Fatima and I needed to have this talk. “I’m not saying that’s what I’m gonna do. I’m trying to *show* you that you ain’t going for that shit, so I don’t know why you’re trying to act like you’re cool with whatever.”

“Would you be mad if *I* was?” she asked.

I glared at her. “If I’m sleeping with you then that’s what it is. I better not find out about *no* other nigga.”

“There’s nobody else.”

“Then stop trying to down play what *this* is.”

“I’m not downplaying anything; I’m just...it’s a lot.”

“At some point, you have to *live* your life.” I carefully moved her off of my lap so I could reach for my phones. It was the first night of the tour, and I was already moving behind schedule. “I gotta get moving.”

After quickly showering and throwing on a t-shirt and some jeans; I walked back over to the bed where Fatima was watching tv. The expression on her face was still unreadable.

“I’ll see you there.”

I left her suite and hit the ground running. I drove my car straight to the arena because I had soundcheck that I was an hour late for. Kadeem had agreed to switch times with me, and he was on stage going through his soundcheck when I walked in.

I took in all of the arena's seats. This was the first time I had ever played MSG, and I remembered being in this *same* place watching Samir perform back in the day and being in awe of his greatness.

To know that it was my turn to be up there was overwhelming in itself as I scanned the 21,000 empty seats. Knowing both nights were sold-out made the weekend that much more special.

Larry approached me with a frown. "What happened?"

"Something came up."

"This can't happen again," he warned.

"I'm *here* right," I said slapping him on the back. "You gotta chill. I'm not gonna do *anything* to mess up the paper. A'ight?"

When Kadeem was done, we chopped it up for a few before they started playing my opening song. I took the mic that was given to me and began to go over my first song in soundcheck. I yelled out changes to the engineer to let him know what I didn't like in the sound, especially when I heard an echo. I adjusted the volume in my earpiece and tried to get a feel for the stage. After an hour of soundcheck, I made my way backstage to my dressing room.

Along with my friends and family, every emcee that I had ever admired was stopping by to wish me luck. The energy was nothing but love.

The closer it got to my set, the more nerves began to kick in. I was going to be setting the tone for the show and the whole tour. I had to be on my game.

"You should get dressed," Courtney raised her head from her phone to tell me.

By now it was only my mom and my sister in my dressing room. After praying over me, my mom and sister left to go to their seats and Courtney followed.

When I stepped out of my room, I found my entire team waiting with anxious expressions on their faces.

At my mark, I took the mic and stepped onto the lift. I heard the band playing the instrumental to my first song as the lift raised me towards the stage.

I began to spit my lyrics as I neared it. I could hear my name being screamed and that roaring sound sent a chill through me. This was it, the level of my career that I had been waiting on, that next status that most emcees could only dream about. I was about to make the most of it.

The minute the lift stopped on the stage I stood still as my name was being chanted. The stage was dark with smoke surrounding all around me. I could feel the love of the crowd as they screamed, and I wanted to give it all right back.

I slowly put the mic up to my lips again.

“*New York City!*” I yelled into the mic as the band continued to play the instrumental to my record. I saw hands reaching for me and people in tears.

When the stage fully lit up, Jericho took over.

# Chapter 31

## *Fatima*



“G<sup>irl</sup>, I’ve already *seen* two of my baby daddies!” Autumn squealed as we maneuvered our way backstage.

After watching Jaren perform, I was so hype about his set that I made my way to the back to congratulate him. I was on a high; it was something about seeing him in his element that was sexy. I couldn’t wait to get back to my room afterward to celebrate.

As we neared where we were told was Jaren’s dressing room, we stumbled on what was pure chaos outside. I noticed Tyson standing close by Jaren and a few other people that I remembered seeing with him at the club in Vegas. Outside of that, it was all new faces; many of those faces were barely dressed women trying to make their way to him as well.

At the moment he was in the middle of taking pictures with the who’s who of hip hop and various athletes.

One face I *did* recognize, was the cause of the current pain in my left arm. Autumn’s nails were digging into my arm deep at the sight of Philadelphia Eagles wide-receiver, Antoine Rice. It also looked like she had stopped breathing altogether at just the sight of him.

She turned her back to the group to face me. “Bitch, your man got a *baby daddy oasis* around him right now,” Autumn said in clipped tones. “Samir, Sean, Darian, and my Ricey are *all* over there!”

She began to push her bra upward to make her breasts sit higher and started adjusting the dress she had on. She pulled out her compact and began to add another layer of her MAC Intoxica lipstick and smacked her lips in the mirror.



“Maybe we should come back later.”

“*Oh, hell no,*” Autumn threatened. “You will *not* take this away from me, and you still owe me remember.”

I pointed at the chaos in front of us. “Look at that, how in the world do you think we’re gonna get through all of those damn groupies?”

“Your man is in the center of all that, so we are *gonna* get through that sea of hoes and get to our men,” she stated holding up her VIP pass.

I held my finger up for her not to talk so loudly. “He is *not* my man.”

“Girl please, who are you kidding,” she said while primping her hair. “That man is flying you to New York whenever he has a minute off. *He* is your man; you’re just too dumb to admit it.”

“I’m not dumb.”

“Trust me, *you’re being dumb.* You may be all book smart and want not, but when it comes to relationships...you’re still a work in process.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or be offended by how she read of me.

“But the good news is that man over there likes you anyways. So, you better get it together before one of those *groupies* you’re so worried about, snatches his ass up.”

After she tossed her compact back in her small clutch, she faced me.

“Do I look baby mama-ish?” She waved her hand down the length of her body.

“You look as good as you did when we left the hotel.”

“Nope, that’s not good enough,” she said briefly glancing behind her to look at the area where Jaren and the guys were still posing for media members and fans. “My *number one* baby daddy is over there looking all baby daddy-ish right now. *I* need to look *just* as good as him.”

“Yes, you are looking *baby mama-ish*,” I mocked.

It wasn't that I wasn't happy for her opportunity to finally meet Antoine; it was the nervousness that was ripping away at my stomach that had me on edge. This was the first time Jaren, and I was out in public together.

“A'ight, now let's walk like we *belong* here.”

“I think I'm gonna throw up,” I whispered.

“You better open up that lil bag of yours and do it in there, because I'm *not* turning around,” Autumn maintained.

I clutched my stomach as we got closer to where Jaren stood laughing with the guys he was just taking pictures with. I noticed Tyson lean over and say something in his ear and his eyes lifted from the crowd and looked over the heads of everyone until he made eye contact with me.

A slow smile spread across his lips at the sight of me, and I felt myself relax some, then I watched as he turned his head to say something to Tyson before resuming his conversation.

A few minutes later I felt a short man who I didn't recognize tugging on my arm. Since I didn't know who he was, I looked at him skeptically snatching my arm back.

“I was told to take you to the dressing room,” he said with irritation.

“Hold up,” Autumn interrupted. “Unless Antoine-the-muthafuckin-Rice is gonna be in that room. I'm not going anywhere.”

I turned to the man who still hadn't identified himself.

“Can you tell them that my friend wants to meet Antoine first?”

The guy looked me up and down as if I were asking for too much. He pulled out his phone and sent a text.

“A'ight, they are gonna bring him to the dressing room, too.”

Once again Autumn clutched my arm in a death grip. With Autumn holding on to me I followed the man around the

growing crowd.

“Alright, Alright.” A man who looked like he was a bodyguard hired for the tour yelled at the noisy crowd. We continued to walk as if he wasn’t talking to us. “Jericho still has to perform, so I need everyone to back away from this area. You can come back after the show, but right now you gotta move.”

I heard the mumbles among the group, and I tried my best to keep my head down.

“What are you, his cousin or something?” The short guy turned briefly to ask.

“Excuse me?” Autumn echoed in annoyance. “This is-”

I immediately covered her mouth.

“We’re friends of his,” I answered cryptically. Autumn gave me a disapproving look.

As the crowd began to disperse slowly, the celebrities remained clustered in groups.

One of the bodyguards announced to them, “Kadeem is about to go on in ten minutes.”

As much as I wanted to see Jaren, I also didn’t want to miss Kadeem. I was a fan of both men; I just happened to be sleeping with one of them.

When we finally reached the door of the dressing room, another man was guarding the door, and he moved to the side and opened it at the sight of us.

*What had Jaren told everybody when it came to me?*

There was a pretty brown-skinned woman inside talking on the phone. She waved at me, but I had no idea who she was. After taking a moment to think about it, I guessed that it was his assistant Courtney.

There were all kinds of bottles of liquor that had been gifted to him along with different types of gift arrangements and tables full of various foods. My eyes surveyed the room,

and I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, but I looked anyways.

Once who I guessed was Courtney was off of the phone, she walked over to me and held out her hand. "It's nice to finally meet you. I'm Courtney, and I recognize you as Yara."

I was shocked that he was telling people my name was Yara, but I went along with it anyway. "That's me, and this is my best friend Autumn."

She turned to shake Autumn's hand. "He should be coming in any minute. Can I get either of you anything to drink?"

"We're okay," I answered for the both of us.

The door opened again and in walked Jericho flanked by Tyson and a small group of guys. None of them were Antoine, and I immediately saw the disappointment on Autumn's face.

"I'm gonna kill that little midget. *He* said Antoine was gonna be in here," she mumbled to me as Jaren approached us.

Jaren gave me a brief hug.

"I want you to meet my girl Autumn," I introduced.

"So, this is the *infamous* best friend," he asked shaking her hand.

"Nice to finally meet you too," she grinned.

"How did you like the show?" he asked while drinking water. The room was scattered with several conversations, so no one was paying attention to us.

"You did your thing up there," I noted. Autumn said nothing.

"I guess your girl didn't like it," he joked.

"She was hoping to meet Antoine Rice, and we were told that he would be in here."

"You got a thing for number twelve, huh?" he chuckled lightly. "They went to watch Kadeem. I can hook that up for you after the show though."

Autumn couldn't wipe the smile that formed on her face at those words.

"I'm glad you came back here," he said focusing his attention solely on me.

"I know it's gonna be impossible to after the show, so I might just take the car back to the hotel."

"It's up to you, just lemme know." He lowered his lips to my ear. "You look so damn sexy right now. Wait until we get back to the room."

I cleared my throat. "Well, we're gonna get back to our seats so we can catch Kadeem."

He laughed at my diversion. "A'ight, I'll see you out there."

"It was nice to meet you Courtney," I waved at his assistant.

"Nice to meet you too."

As Autumn and I walked by his entourage of friends I could feel all eyes on the both of us.

"*Damn,*" one of them said from behind us as the door was opened.

"Girl...you better than me because *that man* is even finer in person," Autumn said the moment we got a few steps away from his dressing room. "I don't see how you can be so calm around him."

I didn't have the answer to that myself.

As we neared our area, we noticed Antoine Rice and R&B singer Darian Russell standing off to the side on their phones. Autumn almost had a panic attack at the sight of them.

"No offense but I'm not waiting on your man to introduce us," she said pushing up her breasts again.

If she kept doing it, they were going to spill out of her dress.

Then my girl surprised me and walked right up to Rice as if he was any other guy. But Autumn always had confidence like that. She was shaped like the curvier stripper girls that Drake liked to rap about. She had big breasts, thick thighs, and a butt so big that it looked like she had implants, but it was all natural.

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw Antoine running his hand along her waist. The two shared whispered words and then exchanged numbers.

Once they were done, she came back over to me, and we finished our path to our seats. She didn't say a word until we sat back down and then she calmly turned to me.

“I am having that man's baby. *Do you hear me?*”

I couldn't stop laughing, and I didn't know why. I loved my best friend. She could make a stressful night completely entertaining all by herself. I couldn't have made it through this concert with anyone else but her.

For the next hour, we watched Kadeem do his thing. When Jaren came out from the side of the stage to perform their finale song, the crowd reacted even louder and crazier.

I couldn't take my eyes off of him as he whipped back and forth across the stage. He and Kadeem together were magic, and I felt captivated watching him as *Jericho*.

When they finished the last song, they both said goodbye to the city together and then walked off the stage in different directions. In all honesty, they had just put on one of the best concerts I had ever been to.

Autumn and I decided to catch the car back to the Ritz after we saw how many more people were now hanging out backstage after the concert. I text Jaren to let him know what our plans were.

The moment we got back to the hotel, rather than drive back to her Aunt's house in Queens, Autumn decided to stay in the suite with me. There was no way I was gonna turn my girl away, and neither one of us could afford to get her a room

there for the night either. She plopped down on the couch and peeled off her heels.

“I will never forget this night for the rest of my life.” Her voice sounded as hoarse as mine.

After kicking off my shoes, I grabbed her an extra blanket and pillow and placed it on the couch.

It was after one in the morning, and I hadn't heard back from Jaren. I tried not to be disappointed about it, but I was.

I took a shower to scrub the night's festivities off of me; then I went back into the bedroom. I began to get anxious about where he was. By the time it hit three, I stopped waiting and finally allowed myself to go to sleep.

# Chapter 32

## *Jaren*



It was after five by the time I left the after party. I usually didn't hang out that long, but this party was different because it felt like all of hip hop was present.

To have so many *real* hip hop heads blessing what we were doing was something I couldn't put in words. While riding in the back of the car to head to the Ritz to see Fatima, I pulled out my phone to respond to her last message.

***Me: 5:48AM: omw***

When she didn't respond, I figured that she was already sleeping. I needed to get some sleep myself for our next show.

When I reached her suite, Autumn answered the door. Her hair was smashed to one side, her make-up was a little smudged, and she was still wearing the dress she had worn to the concert except it was now wrinkled and hiked up.

She barely acknowledged me as she returned to the couch. I continued walking past the living room area trying not to disturb her while heading to the bathroom where I knew for sure that Fatima was sleeping.

Once inside the room, I closed the door and found her asleep with some skimpy lingerie on. One of her thighs was exposed and thrown over the duvet. I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead and watched as her eyes struggled open.

“Whassup Med School?” I whispered trying not to slur.

“You stink,” she wrinkled her nose.

“I'll go take a shower,” I chuckled at her bluntness.

“Where were you?”

“I was out.”



“Why didn’t you let me know?”

“I thought we were just going with the flow,” I chuckled.

“So that means being inconsiderate?”

“Let me get this straight,” I held up my hand. “You don’t want anyone to *think* that you’re my girl, but you wanna question me about where I’ve been like my girl?”

“*You* flew *me* up here to be with you. Let’s *not* get it twisted.” She slid off the bed and walked towards the bathroom.

“Yo, where are you going?” I called after her, but she didn’t respond.

She went inside and closed the door shut when I tried to turn the knob, I saw that she had also locked it.

“Fatima, come on...open the door.”

I waited a few minutes to see if she would come out, but she didn’t.

My head was already starting to pound from the combination of alcohol and blunts I had smoked throughout the night. I pulled out my phone and shot a text to my driver to turn around and come back. I wasn’t about to spend my morning arguing with her.

I walked back towards the front of the suite where Autumn was knocked out sprawled across the beige couch. If she wasn’t there, that’s probably where I would have crashed.

By the time I got home around seven, my mom was up. She and Aliyah were staying with me for the weekend because they both wanted to be at my first show.

“I didn’t expect you to come back this early,” she said sipping on her coffee.

“I got the other show tonight so, I’m gonna go up and get some sleep.” I kissed the top of her head.

“Want me to wake you up at a certain time?”

“Yea, can you wake me up at around three,” I asked her around a yawn. “I got soundcheck at five, and I need to be there on time.”

“Will do.” She returned to her magazine.

Not caring that I needed to take a shower first, I crashed in my bed.

By the time my mom was shaking me awake, it felt like I had only just fallen asleep. After showering and getting ready, I rushed down to meet Courtney in the car.

“I’m surprised you’re on time,” Courtney joked.

“Don’t play me like that.”

“I mean with Yara around,” she noted with a grin. “Speaking of her, she’s gorgeous in person.”

I let her comment hang in the air. I hadn’t heard from Fatima, so I didn’t feel like talking about her.

“I know you heard me.”

I glanced at her but said nothing.

“Is she coming tonight?”

“She went back home.”

“Well, okay then,” she hissed. “Did something happen last night?”

“I just wanna focus on tonight,” I answered evenly. I hadn’t done anything to Fatima for her to be upset or radio silent.

All I did was go to an afterparty to celebrate my show. I didn’t fuck anybody else or disrespect her in any way. She made the rules. *Fatima* was the one who wanted to keep things *casual*. *She* didn’t want to be in a relationship or give us a *label*. The first time I *showed* her what *that* was going to be like, she couldn’t handle it. I wasn’t that nigga who was going to wait around for her to get it either, and she was about to learn that lesson.

# Chapter 33

## *Fatima*



***J: 6:55PM: Ur wrong***

I re-read Jaren's text from days before, and as much as I wanted to respond, I didn't.

Yes, he was right, I *did* set myself up for this by trying to keep us casual, but that was beside the point. I felt disrespected by how and what he did in New York.

"Girl, look at all these pictures of your man at his show in Boston," Autumn said showing me pictures of Jaren performing at the Boston Garden.

I didn't want to look, but I did anyway. He looked good in every picture. I hated the gnawing feeling in my stomach.

"Call him already. This has gone on long enough."

"Does he look like he's suffering to you?"

"You want him to look like a sad puppy dog on stage?" Autumn returned. "He's an entertainer."

"I don't want to be in this situation," I said banging my head against the cushioned pillows.

"In what situation? Having one of the *finest* men in the world *so* into you that he wants to be with you?" she mocked. "Yeah, that's a *really* difficult situation to be in. My heart goes out to you."

"You don't understand; you're not looking at it the same way I am."

"I'm looking at it the *only* way I *would* in your situation." She sat up straighter. "Let my *Ricey* tell *me* that he wants to *be with me*. I'm jumping *in*; no questions asked."

"That's all hypothetical."

“Trust, I am *not* playing around when it comes to *Antoine Greer Rice!*”

Since the night of the concert, Autumn had traded a few texts with Antoine, and he told her to hit him up whenever she was in Philly. It wasn't a declaration of love, but Autumn didn't care, she was one step closer to making a baby with him.

My thoughts went to Jaren; I didn't want things to get serious between us. I just wanted him to live his normal life and for us to hook-up from time to time casually. That's what my mind said, but my heart was saying something different. No matter how hard I tried to put my heart in check, it would go rogue and do its own thing anyway.

When Jaren came to my room drunk, it reminded me so much of KeVon and the things that he used to do to me. I wasn't about to repeat history.

That night in the bathroom, I did have to relieve myself. I remained there until I had calmed down. When I stepped out and realized that he was gone, I became even more furious.

The fact that he thought it was cool to roll into *my room* after six and expect sex with no questions asked was insane. He wasn't about to treat me any kind of way and think I would be okay with it. Whether mad or not, he should have stayed around long enough to give me a chance to say my peace.

I left New York determined to protect my heart and leave him alone altogether. However, doing that was easier said than done. There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think about Jaren.

I began to treat my feelings for him like the side effects of the *common cold*. I missed him, my heart hurt, I suffered through sleepless nights and avoided social media so, I didn't have to see him. I felt empty inside. But I was willing to push through the pain because I knew eventually; I would start to feel better and get over him.

“It’s different, you just want to screw Antoine-” I reminded her.

“Correction, I want to have *all* of his babies,” Autumn defended. “There is a difference.”

“You know what I’m saying. You and Antoine know what’s up and your feelings aren’t involved.”

Let me tell you something Tima, let that *fine-ass man*, who we are *all* blessed to watch catch a ball, tell me that he wants to be in a relationship. I’m quitting school, packing my bags, and moving to Philly.”

“You would not.”

“Well probably not *that* extreme all at one time, but I’m gonna try and give him a chance. I’m not gonna turn him down just because I’m scared of being hurt.”

“You don’t understand...”

“Fatima, I was around for every guy you have dated. Even that loser KeVon. And after seeing Jaren up close and *watching* the way he goes about trying to take care of you, I can tell that he likes you. And the reason I keep saying you are *dumb* is because *every* woman in this world would *kill* to be in the position you’re in. And *you* are messing it all up overthinking everything.”

“I can’t help it! Who isn’t scared of being hurt?”

“That’s life! We take chances on everything. Eating right, working out, starting a business. Not every singer charts on Billboard, not every business sees a profit, not every writer makes it to the New York Times Bestseller’s list, but that doesn’t stop them from trying.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“We have to take chances in life, and that’s including when it comes to love. Not every relationship will work, but you still take a chance because eventually, you will find the right one. You don’t stop loving or believing in it just because your heart has been broken.”

Her long monologue hung in the air for a few quiet minutes as I absorbed her words.

“Life is about chances,” she said getting up from the couch and walking towards the door. “You have to decide to take a chance and *live* and stop worrying about trying to protect yourself all the damn time. Now, I’m taking my annoyed ass to bed because I have to be at your graduation tomorrow morning.”

Her words followed her long after she walked out of my apartment. I numbly walked around trying to tidy it up in preparation for my parent’s arrival. My graduation day was that next day, and I had to put on an excited face for them, or my mom would harass me the whole weekend. There was no way I would tell her about Jaren because I knew she wouldn’t approve of him.

## Chapter 34

### *Fatima*



My graduation day should have been one of the happiest days of my life. I was at the *Crowne Plaza Hampton-Marina* celebrating the fact that I had just graduated from Hampton University and that I was about to go off to medical school at John Hopkins.

The problem was, everybody around me was in more of a celebratory mood than I was. With the way my mom was beaming with excitement and pride, you would have thought that *she* was the one who had just received her diploma.

My dad had rented out the hotel's *Regatta Grille* to celebrate my big accomplishment, and I tried to put on my best face for everyone, but that damn *common cold* was still nagging me.

*I missed Jaren.*

"Well, for I'll be damned." I heard Autumn mumble sarcastically as I was sliding a forkful of steak into my mouth.

I followed her eyes only to find KeVon walking into the room carrying an elaborate bouquet.

My mom got up from the table as if he was her long-lost son and hugged him tightly. Autumn squeezed the life out of my leg underneath the table.

"What the hell is your mama smoking on?" Chanel asked watching on in shock.

"I don't know *why* she likes him so much," I said with irritation.

"Well, she needs to *unlike* his ass so that you can move on," Autumn countered.

I had family members and friends from all over North Carolina and Virginia around the table. My mom was going around and introducing *my ex*, as my *long-time boyfriend!* Steam was floating from around me.

After making his way around the table and charming all of the women in my family, he finally made his way towards me as if he was *Boyfriend of the Year*.

I stood up from the table and walked in his direction, but instead of hugging him and thanking him for coming, I snatched the flowers from him, threw them to the floor, and walked past him and out the back side of the room.

The cool spring air hit my face, and I let out a sigh of relief. The man I wanted to be there, was nowhere to be found, the man that I couldn't shake, was. That was the story of my life. My wants and needs versus my reality; they never matched up at the same time.

I held onto the outdoor railing and looked out at the water and the private boats that were lined in front of me. I considered jumping in one of them and boating my ass to an island.

A few minutes later the door opened, and I glanced briefly to see who it was. It was my father, and I thanked God for that because if KeVon had walked through those doors, I would have been likely to toss him over the deck.

“Talk to me princess,” my dad said coming to stand beside me.

“I don't get it. KeVon and I have been over for months now, first Christmas now *my graduation?* Why are you trying to shove that man down my throat? You know what he did to me.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. I had *nothing* to do with that back there or with what happened at Christmas. That was *all* your mother,” my dad answered shaking his head as if he was just as disappointed as I was.

“But why? He cheated on me with *one of my friends* and she acts like all he did was forget my birthday.”



“Your mother is just scared that you are gonna become another *statistic*.”

“What kind of a statistic?”

“You know the ‘*successful black woman who can’t get a husband*’ statistic they have all you women up in arms about these days. I told her that this was *your* life, not hers, but she got it stuck in her head that since *he* was the one who helped you when you had all those surgeries, that it must be true love.

“What about you daddy? Do you think that KeVon is the best that I can do?”

“Baby girl I *know* you can do so much better than him. Men like KeVon, they still have a lot of growing up to do. They don’t know what they want. He may *think* he does, but he’s not ready.”

“What about you? Were you ready when you were with mom?” I finally asked him the question I had been dying to know the answer to.

He let out a long sigh. “When I met your mom, I knew that she was a good girl,” he stopped talking and looked back briefly at the closed door. “But I wasn’t ready to get married or start a family. I made a lot of mistakes in the beginning of our marriage that I’m not proud of.”

“So why did you do it if you weren’t ready?”

“Because I cared about your mom and she was very persistent,” he laughed. “None of that matters because you, young lady are about to go on to medical school and you will meet another doctor and become part of a powerhouse medical couple.”

“Daddy to be honest with you; I don’t think I’m ready for medical school.”

“You’re probably just burnt out from all those tests you had to take. You just need a little vacation to reset. Its why I bought you that gift.”

“Why is it so important to you and mom that I become a doctor?”

“I spent most of my life working hard in construction, and your mother slaved away in the kitchen at that restaurant. We were both determined to see better for our children, I mean, *you*,” he tried to recover.

I wasn't sure of all the circumstances, but I did know that after I was born, they weren't able to have any more children. I never asked my mom why because it always seemed like a painful topic.

“But I can be successful at *anything*?”

“There's a *chance* you could, but being a *doctor* comes with prestige that you can't *find* with any other field. It's like the highest thing to achieve besides becoming a President or something like that.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “We are so proud of you.

I merely nodded because my chance to open up had both come and went.

“This is supposed to be *your* day remember,” he reminded me. “I'll *personally* get rid of the *muscle head* if he isn't gone.”

My dad may have been getting rid of my headache, but there was nothing my dad or anyone could do or say to help me get rid of my *common cold*.

# Chapter 35

## *Jaren*



“Yo, Jerseyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy.” I sang into my mic as we wrapped up our last song at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey. “My nigga Kadeem and I wanna thank you for all the love. We fucks with Jersey.”

“Thank you for supporting *The Humble Hustle* tour,” Kadeem added. “We’re out here trying to bring that *real* hip hop back.”

The roar of the crowd’s response was immediate.

“Until next time,” Kadeem said gesturing at the crowd.

“My nigga!” I shouted over at Kadeem as we both began to walk in opposite sides of the stage.

“Another one,” he returned pointing at me from the other side of the stage.

I enjoyed being on this tour with him; we both fed off of each other’s hungry energy and equally soaked up all the love we were getting from the hip hop community.

As soon as I got backstage, my entourage was waiting to show me, love. My mom and sister were also at this show and walked with me to my dressing room.

“I just love watching you up there, minus all of that cursing,” my mom said linking her arm through mine.

“Ma, that’s how all the music is these days,” Aliyah laughed in response.

“But that doesn’t mean that he has to do it. In my day, they sang about love and making love.”

“Aye, I’m not trying to hear all that,” I interrupted. I did not want to think about my mom getting it in with anybody.

As we walked through the busy halls, various people were shouting out to me how good the show was. I acknowledged most compliments with a raised hand because I didn't have much to say.

I walked past a massive poster of Kadeem and I that was spread across the wall. We were facing each other like prize fighters. Over his head, the word *Humble* was written in cursive and over mine was the word *Hustle*. It was a catchy marketing idea to use a song title from both of our new albums that described each of us perfectly.

To arguably be the best lyricist out, Kadeem was extremely *humble* even though he didn't have to be. Anybody who knew me knew that my whole life could be summed up in the word *hustle*. I never stopped grinding, and no matter how much success I had, it still wasn't enough. I wanted to be known as the greatest emcee ever by the time I dropped my mic for the last time.

Once inside of my room I grabbed a bottle of Hennessy that had been given to me that night. I didn't even bother pouring any into a cup; I drank directly from the bottle as people filled my dressing room.

After a few minutes of chatting it up, my boys left to look for groupies and I was left with my thoughts and the most irritating thing about that is that they kept going back to Fatima. Her graduation was the day before, and I wanted to follow through with my initial plans to send her some things but changed my mind.

"Well, we're gonna get out of here," my mom announced standing up.

"Let me know when you get back to the house," I responded hugging her.

The first purchase I made when I got my first check was to buy her a house. I moved them down to the suburbs of Newark in a massive five-bedroom house that was tucked away safely in a gated community.

"We will," she said tightly hugging my waist.

Just then the door opened up again, and I expected to see another athlete or celebrity walking through to give me love but instead it was the last person I expected to see walk through the door-*Fatima*.

She was dressed in fitted jeans that hugged every one of her curves and wore an unsure expression on her face as our eyes met. I watched as she carefully closed the door. I immediately noticed the pass on her chest and knew the one person who could have given it to her. When I turned to Courtney, she refused to look up at me.

I turned back to Fatima and noticed my mom looking from her to me and back again as if she was trying to figure out who she was and what was going on. Nobody knew what to say.

“Hi, I’m Jaren’s mom,” my mom said breaking the ice and shaking Fatima’s hand. “And this is my daughter, Aliyah.”

“Hi, I’m Fatima.”

I had been calling her Yara to help keep her identity private, and here she was telling my mother who she was.

“Well, we were just leaving,” my mom announced again.

“I’m gonna follow you out,” Courtney said still avoiding eye contact with me.

“I bet you are,” I said as she walked by me.

“It was nice to meet you, Fatima,” my mom said when she opened the door to leave.

As the three women filed out of my dressing room. Fatima and I stood still as if we were both standing on the opposite side of a drawn line.

“Why are you here?”

“I came to apologize to you.”

“That’s what they make phones for.” I grabbed my opened bottle of Hennessy and took another gulp.

“I deserved that.” She nodded while looking around the room. When her eyes met mine, I could see that she was

nervous. “I should have texted you back or answered your call. I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted.” I moved to sit back on the couch. “That it?”

“Um...I...”

“Say what you gotta say.”

“I was wrong.” She took a step forward, but she was still across the room from me. “Back in New York...you were right.”

“About?”

She exhaled as if doing this was taking everything out of her. “The fact that I was telling you one thing about us and feeling another...I had no reason to get mad at you that night.”

“Then why did you?”

“Because I *do* care about you...and I was...well *I am* scared that I will get hurt in the process.”

I took another gulp of the Hennessy and allowed it to burn the back of my throat as I thought about how to respond to what she had just said.

“Have I given you a reason to be scared?”

She shook her head *no*. “It’s just, in my last relationship, he used to do the same thing that you did that night-”

“Aye, lemme stop you right there,” I said putting the bottle down. “I *told* you before that I’m not your ex. Whatever he did before *me*, that’s him, *not me*.”

“I know that-”

“Do you?” I asked squinting my eyes at her. “I mean because I’ve been straight up with you from jump,” I told her not holding back the harshness from my voice. “I told you up front that I wanted you, but it’s not what *you* wanted.”

“I know that’s what I said, but it wasn’t true.”

“*It wasn’t true?*”

“I wasn’t ready then-”

“And what? You are *now*?” I finished for her. “You came all the way here to tell me what exactly? That *now* you wanna be with me?”

I stood up from the couch and walked over to where she stood.

“That’s why I’m here.”

I scanned her gorgeous reddish-brown face from her delicate brown eyes that seemed to hold so much knowledge to the pouty lips I missed kissing.

“Life don’t work like that.” As I was about to say something else, the door opened, and Courtney peaked her head inside.

“Everyone is ready,” she told me looking between Fatima and me as if she was trying to see if we were good now. “Do you want her to ride with us back to the hotel?”

“Nah,” I said keeping my eyes on Courtney as I said it. “Give me a minute.”

I noticed her flash a look of regret at Fatima before closing the door again.

“You say everything you came here to say?”

“Uh, um, yeah...I did.” I could see the shock written all over her face.

*Did she honestly think that she was going to walk into my dressing room and apologize and that we would be all good after that?*

“A’ight, well I gotta go. We’re flying to Chicago in the morning.” I opened the door for her.

She took measured steps to the door without looking at me as I held on to it for her.

“Aye, congratulations on getting that degree. Good luck with medical school.”

I saw the hurt flash in her eyes, but she forced a smile anyways.

“Thank you.” Then she walked out of the room.

With Tyson close behind me, I walked to where several Black SUVs were lined up in the back of the arena.

Richie and PD were already in the back talking about some girls they had met. I didn't feel like talking, so I just looked out the window and replayed what had happened in my dressing room.

“You are so stubborn,” Courtney said breaking into my thoughts.

“How? And what the fuck are you doing giving out passes without running it by me first?”

“You've been acting moody all week, I was trying to cheer you up. I thought seeing her would do that. If I thought that she was some crazy girl, I wouldn't have done any of this. I was trying to help you out.”

*“Help me out?”*

“When things don't go your way you, you like to push people away without a second thought.”

“That's because I only want loyalty around me.”

“Can you just try and put yourself in her shoes?” she whispered, turning briefly to make sure that Richie or PD weren't listening.

Between the music that was playing in the background and the conversations they were having on their phones, they could care less what was going on between us.

“You aren't just a *regular* guy down the street; you are *Jericho*. I would be intimidated to date you myself.”

*“I don't see what that has to do with her?”*

“I'll put it like this. As long as I've been your assistant, I've *never* seen you like this with *any* girl. So as your assistant *and* your friend, I was looking out for you.”

“The same way I try to help you out?”



“This isn’t about me. My relationship is fine. If you wanna mope around and act like everything is ‘*all good*,’ that’s on *you*. *You* may not understand why I fight so hard for what I have with Eric, but I understand the importance of fighting for the person you love. You’re letting your ego get in the way of your happiness.

I didn’t even try to respond to her words.

# Chapter 36

## *Fatima*



I didn't cry, I couldn't. I had already prepared myself for the worst thanks to Courtney's advice.

After my disaster of a graduation dinner, I made plans to see him. I couldn't put it off anymore.

I went to the number I had saved for Courtney and sent her a Hail Mary text hoping that she would help me. I didn't go into details I just asked for her help in getting a chance to see him so that I could apologize.

I knew Jaren enough to know that if I had texted him, he would have ignored me. If I had called him, he would have sent my call to voicemail. I had allowed too much time to pass, and I knew that he needed to see more effort from me than just a phone call.

I had been surprised by how anxious Courtney was about helping me. She offered to get me a ticket and a VIP pass and also told me where they were staying. Her last piece of advice to me was to expect the worse because that was how Jaren got down. He didn't trust many people, didn't give second chances, didn't believe in forgiveness, and he had a weapon for a tongue.

*I knew that in more ways than one, but I wasn't about to tell her that.*

I couldn't focus on what could happen. My common cold had turned into the flu, and the only cure for it was in New Jersey.

After paying for a last-minute coach plane ticket through American Airlines and reserving a room at the Courtyard by Marriott, I packed for my trip.

That Saturday morning, I wished my parents off, advising my overbearing mom to stay out of my love life.

Once in Newark, I took a shuttle to my hotel, and after spending time getting myself together for the concert, I sent up a little prayer that things would go well.

My seat wasn't as good as it was in New York, but *beggars couldn't be choosy*. I felt weird watching Jaren perform this time. I felt like a stranger rather than a woman who knew him intimately. It was crazy how one week of non-communication could wipe away months of constant communication.

As soon as the show was over, I made my way to his dressing room. Outside was just as loud and chaotic as it had been in New York. From behind the crowd, I made eye contact with Tyson who looked shocked to see me initially. I held up my pass so that he could see that I wasn't stalking Jaren.

He made a path for me to slip in the room. I didn't know what I expected once inside; I guess a bunch of guys drinking and smoking. Instead, it was Jaren standing in front of two women that looked like they could be his sister and Courtney.

I couldn't read his facial expression or body language, but he didn't seem happy to see me. When his mom introduced herself, I was glad that someone was there to break the ice. Had she not been there he looked like he would have kicked me out without letting me say anything.

Once alone, I expected him to be upset. To say some hurtful things to me, but to eventually forgive me. I believed that strongly in what we had, but that's not what happened. He was completely cold and practically dismissed me by the end.

I didn't cry or speak; I felt like I was in a twilight zone while waiting for the car. Just recalling the look in his eyes caused a shiver down my spine. I was genuinely shocked that he was able to turn his feelings for me off that quick.

Once back in my hotel room, I pulled off my pumps and threw them against the wall out of frustration. It was after I did this that stubborn tears trickled slowly down my face as I reflected on my failed trip.

I had taken for granted what I had with Jaren and allowed myself to become paralyzed by the unknown.

I picked up the phone to order some room service before they closed for the night. I ordered mozzarella sticks, chicken wings, French fries, and chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream. I hadn't binged like this in years, but at the moment, it felt like the only thing that would make me feel better.

I changed into a T-shirt, and a pair of yoga pants then wrapped my hair in a leopard scarf. The last thing I wanted to do that next day was fuss with matted and tangled hair.

I turned on the tv and splurged on an "*In Theaters Now*" movie.

My phone began to chirp letting me know that I had a new message. I snatched it up hoping that it was Jaren changing his mind only to find a new message from Autumn.

***Bestie: 12:16AM: Try not to make any babies tonight!***

I smiled at her message. I wanted to call Autumn and tell her that things didn't work out, but I didn't want to disappoint her. I also wasn't ready to hear the '*I told you so*' speech either. I tossed my phone on the bed as disappointment settled in even more.

Fifteen minutes later there was a knock at the door, and I became overly excited about the fat and greasy food that was on the other side. I snatched it open, and an older-looking man was standing behind my cart. I looked at all of the saucers on the cart and my mouth began to water. I hadn't eaten *this* recklessly in so long, not since before my health scare.

I opened the door wider so that he could push the cart inside. After he set all of my plates on the table, he opened the door to leave. I gasped when I realized that a hooded Jaren was standing in the hall in front of my door. The older man looked at him skeptically and then with his eyes asked me if I was okay being alone with Jaren.

Though I wanted to curse Jaren out for the hell he had put me through earlier; I didn't feel threatened by his presence, so

my eyes softened letting the kind stranger know I was okay.

“Cute scarf.”

“Is everything a joke to you?” I yanked it off of my head.

“Are you gonna let me in?”

“*No.*”

“You can come catch me by surprise and say what you have to say, and I don’t get to do the same?”

“And what do you have to say?”

“I guess you’re gonna have to let me in to find out.”

I reluctantly held the door wider, so he could walk through. He looked over at the table where the plates were and looked back at me.

“Did Courtney call to let you know I was coming?” he nodded at the spread.

“Can you just say whatever it is you have to say and leave?”

He had the nerve to open one of the platters and pick up a French fry. Then he casually walked over to the bed as if I had invited him over and sat down.

He pulled the hood from off his head and just stared at me.

“You caught me off guard,” he finally said.

“I didn’t have any other choice.” I fingered my hair until it felt as if it had laid back down.

“But you did, you could have picked up the phone and let me know *something.*”

“I already told you I was sorry.”

“And that’s supposed to make it all better?”

We were at a standstill just watching each other. Both filled with so much stubborn pride.

“Come’re.”

“I’m fine where I’m at.”

He dropped his head as if his frustration with me was at an all-time high. I shifted my weight to prevent my knees from buckling from nervousness.

He stood up from the bed and walked over to where I stood by the table full of the junk food that I still couldn't wait to tear into.

I couldn't tell what was going on through his mind; he was examining me like a doctor looking at every detail of a sick patient.

“When you walked into my dressing room earlier, what did you want me to say?”

I swallowed around the lump that had formed in my throat. “I don't know.”

“You *do* know, you didn't come all the way up here for nothing.”

I thought about all of the scenarios that I had played out in my mind about how that meeting would go. In my mind I never expected him to act the way he did towards me in real life.

“I wanted you to forgive me, and I wanted you to tell me that we were okay.” My heart was racing inside my chest.

“Okay as what? *Friends?*”

“I don't wanna be your friend.”

“Since when?”

“Since this past week, when I felt like I was losing it without you.”

His expression was still cold as if nothing I was saying had changed anything in his mind.

“I forgive you...and we're okay,” he finally said after a long, torturous pause.

I finally sighed with relief and allowed my body to finally relax for the first time since he had walked into my room.

I suddenly felt Jaren's arms wrap around me and he began to pull me into his chest. When I felt him kiss the top of my head, I finally let my guard down and wrapped my arms around him as well.

# Chapter 37

## *Jaren*



“**E**xplain to me how this is going to work?” Fatima asked me as I ran my finger down her arm. “I mean, I’m willing to *do* this, but I don’t exactly know what you expect from me.”

“Be *you*.”

“I guess the better question is, what do you want from me?”

“I don’t want anything.”

It was almost five in the morning, and we were lying in the bed of her hotel room facing each other fully clothed. We had spent the entire night talking that way.

The night before after her visit to my dressing room, rather than go back to my hotel, I went to one of the after parties. I wasn’t there an hour before I realized that I had to see Fatima again. I couldn’t leave things where they were.

I had Courtney send me her information, and I took the car to her.

The minute I got to her room and saw the redness in her eyes, I immediately regretted how harsh I had been with her at the arena. Yes, I was pissed at seeing her after she had blown me off for the week, but I knew I could have handled *her* differently.

Watching Fatima, was like witnessing my mom’s pain. I felt that same familiar overprotective nature.

I could see in Fatima’s eyes that she didn’t want to hurt me, that she never meant for things to go as far as they did.

“What do you mean?”



Although I had an early flight to Chicago, this time with Fatima was important. We had to figure out what we were doing before *either* of us left that room. And as bad as I wanted to be inside of her that night to make up for all the time that had passed, that was the *last* thing either of us needed. We had to get on the same page before I hit the road and sex wasn't going to solve those things.

"I mean, you say you don't wanna hide the fact that we're together, but then you also say that you are private. Which is it?" she asked.

"Both. You already know I'm not that guy who talks about his personal life like that, but I'm *with you*, and that's what it is. I don't have to put that on display for anybody."

I was the type of private person who didn't talk about his relationship in interviews. I didn't post things on social media, and I didn't try to flaunt what I was doing for the paparazzi either. But on the other hand, I didn't go out of my way to hide anything either. I just lived my life.

If the paps caught me walking out of a restaurant with someone, I didn't try to explain myself or what I was doing, but I also didn't ever confirm the stories they would print. I just lived in between the line, allowing what I did to remain a mystery even though you could see aspects of my life in plain sight.

"When Brandy used to post snaps of you two together or say things about your relationship. Did that bother you?"

"She could do what she wanted; I didn't care. It's just not my style."

"This is also new to me..." Fatima sighed.

"Med School, I'm not gonna let *anybody* ever disrespect you."

Things with Fatima would be different because she was just as private as I was. I was going to do everything in my power to protect her at all costs.

"You a'ight?" My voice sounded rugged to my ears.

“Yea. I’ll be right back.”

She went into the bathroom. After some time had passed, I followed her inside and found her pressing a washcloth to her face.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and leaned down to kiss her on the neck.

“Look at how sexy you are,” I said meeting her eyes through the mirror.

She reached up to graze my beard with her delicate hand.

“*This* right here is nobody’s business.”

She faced me and wrapped her arms around my neck before kissing me on the lips. “I can’t wait to meet up with you in Memphis.”

After Chicago, we had a show in Memphis. I tried to get Fatima to come with me to Chi-town, but she had stuff to do on campus to get ready for her move to Baltimore.

Her lease was up that weekend, and she wanted to get as much accomplished as she could before joining me on any dates.

I lifted her from the floor and sat her on the bathroom counter. “What are you gonna do when you get there?”

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see.” She nipped at my lips.

“I wish I could be there to help you pack.”

“I told you I have some friends helping me out.”

“If you need *anything*, let me know,” I told her allowing one last kiss to linger. “I gotta get back to the hotel.”

Fatima poked out her lip in a pout.

“I’ll see you this weekend.”

# Chapter 38

## *Fatima*



“Girl, I can’t believe that boy hired a *whole* moving company to move all of your stuff for you,” Autumn said as we taped another one of her boxes. “You should have told him that your apartment extended to 212 too.”

“I was just as surprised as you.”

That Monday when I woke up to begin the process of packing boxes to get ready for my move, there was a knock at the door and on the other side was a local moving company that Jaren had hired to move, ship, and store my things in Baltimore.

I was surprised. He told me that since he couldn’t be there to help, he thought that taking care of it for me was the next best thing. I was shocked that with everything he had going on, that he thought about something that small as helping me move, was that important.

“You’re so damn lucky, and you don’t even know it.”

“Don’t tell me what I don’t know,” I giggled sitting down on her couch. “He is *nothing* like I thought he would be. I *expected* him to be more of an asshole than KeVon was. He always comes off so aggressive and nonchalant in his interviews and performances that the side I see of him doesn’t feel real.”

“I bet his ass *is aggressive*,” Autumn joked sticking out her tongue.

“Shut up; I already told you I’m not telling you details.”

“And that is fucked up because once I get some of that *Antoine dick, girl*, I’m writing my book to tell you *everything*.”

“Some things I just wanna keep to myself,” I said honestly not wanting to put Jaren’s business out there like that, even to my best friend.

“Just selfish...you hear me. But I’m happy for you. You deserve this, especially after what that fool you used to date did to you.”

I didn’t even want to think about KeVon anymore, so I didn’t respond to her statement.

“Well, that’s all I’m doing today. I’m gonna shower and get changed so we can go to dinner.”

That night, we were meeting up with the rest of our friends to have one final dinner before we all started going our separate ways in the world.

“Yea, I’m gonna go back to the hotel and do the same,” I said walking towards her door.

As if moving me wasn’t enough, Jaren booked me a room at the *Hampton Marina Hotel* for the week, so I would have somewhere to sleep since I was moved out of my apartment completely.

“And to think *you* were ready to throw all that away.”

Natalie and Chanel appeared from the bedroom huffing and puffing with exaggeration. They had been boxing up stuff there.

“Why couldn’t you just hire a moving company like Tima?” Natalie said to Autumn.

Autumn glared at me. “Some of us don’t have the *resources* like others.”

“What you got a sugar daddy or something now?” Chanel asked sitting next to Autumn.

As much as I wanted to tell my two other close friends who I was now seeing I didn’t want to do it at that minute. That was a conversation we had to have with wine when everyone was relaxed.

We all had been helping Autumn pack boxes all day, so we were all hot, hungry, and irritable. To add, ‘*oh by the way Jericho is my boyfriend*’ didn’t feel like the best way to end the long day.

“Well I’m outta here,” I said trying to hurry up and escape the looming questions my friends had for me.

“I bet you do,” Autumn chimed in.

While getting ready for that night, Jaren called me to let me know that I was on his mind hard and to also joke about how he should have sexed me down when we made up in New Jersey.

I had to remind him that I was flying into Memphis soon and would be traveling with him for two weeks straight. I was more anxious than ever for these next two days to fly by so that I could be with him. I was excited to experience just *half* of what he wanted to do to me.

That night my girls and I took over *Dave and Busters* in Virginia Beach. We were reminiscing on our times at Hampton.

In the middle of reminiscing, I saw flashes of purple and gold approaching our tables and rolled my eyes expecting to see KeVon among the small group of Ques interrupting our celebratory dinner.

They began to go around the table hugging each of us as we loudly congratulated each other on graduating and moving on from Hampton. After KeVon’s business partner, Miles finished giving me a hug we made small talk.

“How’s the gym coming along?”

“We are doing a lot better than we thought we would at this point. Kev is actually in B-More right now scouting new locations.”

“For what?”

“We are looking into opening another gym in his city.”

“Wait, what about the gym you just opened here?” I asked not wanting KeVon in the same city as me, even though that

was where he was from.

When I had initially applied to John Hopkins, one of the reasons it was my top school was because it was in Baltimore where KeVon had shown interest in moving back to after graduation. When he and Miles opened up their gym in Virginia Beach, I thought he had let that dream of going back to Baltimore alone.

“Well the gym is doing so good here that I am gonna manage this one and he’s gonna run that one,” Miles answered.

I opened my mouth, but nothing would come out.

“He’s not gonna bother you; he’s been wanting to open up a gym back home long before you two even broke up. Besides he’s moved on.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to, I could see it all over your face. B-More is big enough for both of you and *your* gonna be busy with medical school; you won’t have time to do anything but sleep.”

I remembered then that Miles’ older brother was some type of doctor, so he did know a little something about how challenging medical school was.

“Either way, I am happy for you both, and I honestly wish him nothing but success,” I assured him.

“Appreciate that.” Miles pushed his glasses up on his face and then wrapped an arm around me.

Miles was the muscular light-skinned pretty boy who was intelligent when it came to business. If you looked up *ladies’ man* in the dictionary, his face would be there. He was so smooth around women that he could talk you out of your draws while making you believe it was *your* idea.

The glasses always threw women off because it made him look so sweet and innocent at the same time. His client list was overflowing with women who wanted to get next to him, and I knew for sure that he slept with almost every client that he

worked out. I should have known then that KeVon probably got down like that as well.

After the guys left, we wrapped up our dinner and shared some tearful goodbyes. Half of the women at the table I had grown to love were leaving that next morning. Even though I had a few more days with my best friend, I was going to miss seeing this entire group daily.

# Chapter 39

## *Fatima*



When I neared the baggage claim at Memphis International Airport. I saw a man holding up a sign with my name on it. I went over to identify myself to him, and he quickly recovered my bags from the conveyer belt. While following him to the car I tried to call Jaren, but he didn't answer the phone. I sent him a text to let him know that I was in Memphis and on my way to him.

It was my first time in Memphis so as we drove; I took in all of the beauty of the city. When we pulled up to a building that read *Madison Hotel*, I became confused.

“I thought that he was staying at *The Peabody*?”

“I was told to bring you here,” the driver returned with assurance.

“Can you just give me a minute?” I tried to call Jaren again with no answer. A few minutes later a text from Courtney came through.

***Courtney: 8:46PM: J is finishing up an interview, he'll meet you at the hotel.***

I began to wonder if part of the “being private” included me staying at a separate hotel than him, so I finally agreed to get out of the car.

Wearing a cute red and cream printed maxi dress that I had just bought the day before, I entered the hotel. When I gave the woman at the front desk my name, instead of showing me to my room she asked me to follow her.

We rode the elevator up a few floors, and when the doors opened, my mouth flew open at the beauty that was before me.



*Twilight Sky Terrace* was written in lights above us, and across the breathtaking view of the water, I could see that the sun was setting.

The bright-colored cushions lined the seating of the modernly chic decorated space and a blazing fire pit burned in the center. Various sized candles added to the romantic ambiance.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Can I get some water?”

“Coming right up.” She left me alone on the rooftop.

With my phone, I began to take pictures of everything.

Then while in the middle of recording a snap about how beautiful Memphis was, I heard footsteps and moved my phone from in front of me to see Jaren carrying a filled glass.

“I thought I would help our waitress out,” he said with a half grin.

I deleted the video I had just shot because his voice could be heard at the end of it and put my phone away. I met him halfway and wrapped my arms around his neck savoring the feeling of being in his arms again. I loved every inch of his 6’6 frame, especially when he would bend down to hold me like he was at the moment.

He followed the hug with a kiss that almost left me levitating off the ground.

“What’s all *this*?”

“Well, now that I can call you *my girl*, I gotta start treating you like it,” he said with a laugh. “You like it out here?”

“I do,” I said turning around to look at the beautifully illuminated sky. I felt his arms loop through my waist, and he pressed another kiss to my neck. “Is this supposed to be our first official *date* or something?”

“Yea, I figured I’d make an honest woman out of you,” he joked. I pushed him in the side.

“*Watch it.*”

“You betta chill with all that before I call Tyson up here,” he threatened.

“He won’t do anything; he likes me.”

“Yea, you’re right, but I’ll remind him who signs his paychecks.”

After ordering our food, we continued looking out across the city’s skyline.

“It’s so beautiful out here,” I said pulling out my phone again.

I had him take pictures of me with the skyline’s backdrop, and I posted them to my IG page.

No fanfiction story I could have ever written could match how much of a fantasy this all felt. I would have never guessed that I would be on the rooftop of a hotel in Memphis spending time alone with *Jaren Young*.

I looked down at my phone and noticed that Jaren had also posted a picture on his IG page. It was the same backdrop that I used, but you could see my silhouette in his picture and my hair blowing sideways. He captioned the photo simply.

**@Jericho: Memphis.**

I know he didn’t exactly post a picture of my face or a picture of us together, but I had never seen him post any woman that wasn’t his mom or sister.

I looked down at the comments, and immediately people were trying to figure out who was in the picture. I wondered if I should delete my picture before people began to match the two images. Unlike his six million, I only had about 700 followers on my private page, and they were my close friends and family.

I didn’t read too far into the gesture because servers brought our dishes out and began setting the food around the fire pit. Jaren took my hand, and we walked over to the spread and started to enjoy our first official date as a couple.

# Chapter 40

## *Jaren*



Two weeks had flown by and having Fatima on the road with me was something I enjoyed more than I thought I would.

After Memphis, we did a show in Louisville and then we flew to Texas to do shows in Dallas, Austin, Houston, and San Antonio. We went sightseeing discreetly and took in every city while sexing each other every chance we got.

The tour was in Atlanta, and after this stop, she was flying on to Baltimore to start her summer job. I didn't want her to leave.

At the moment though, instead of being my *girl*, she was acting as my assistant.

That morning, Courtney had gotten extremely sick. Tyson took her to the hospital and Fatima volunteered to go with her.

The two had gotten close in the short weeks she had traveled with us. They would laugh and joke like old friends who had found each other again. Sometimes they would team up against me. Courtney usually kept her distance from the women I was involved with.

Once at the hospital, Courtney called me in tears and informed me that she was pregnant. Apparently, she had called her man first, and instead of supporting her, this nigga told her that he didn't believe it was his baby and then hung up on her.

*What kind of nigga abandoned his girl when she needed him the most?*

Like an older brother, I was ready to forget that night's show in Atlanta and pull up on him. It was Fatima who took control of the situation.

She volunteered to be my assistant for the two Atlanta shows to give Courtney time to figure out what she was going to do next. I didn't know many girls who would be humble enough to do what she was doing, and it only added to what I liked about her.

Courtney sent her a list of stuff she had to do throughout the night, and like a professional, Fatima took the job seriously. She didn't miss a beat and was genuinely concerned about trying to make sure I had everything I needed.

In the middle of performing what I considered my "ladies' song," I enjoyed the women rapping the lyrics back to me. Some of the most beautiful women I had ever seen in my life were in the crowd, but all I could think about was the one who was in my dressing room.

My feelings for her were growing stronger the more time we spent together. She was like no one I had ever messed with before.

Posting a picture with her silhouette was something I did without a second thought. Every city that I went to, I would take a picture of the skyline view of that city, but it was usually always just the background. I never had anyone *in* the picture before.

Even though you couldn't see Fatima's face and you didn't know who she was, if you were a fan of mine, you would know that her placement in the picture was a statement.

I was *still* getting asked questions about the mystery figure. I never answered them, and she didn't mind all the rumors that were swirling around naming various actors and singers that they tried to match me with.

Once I finished with my set, I left the stage and was met by my crew. After handing me a towel, Fatima gave me a quick hug before leaving for the dressing room.

Tyson stayed by my side as I took pictures with various people. When I finally got through the small crowd, I looked up to find Brandy staring back at me.

"Hey." The crowd parted like the Red Sea for us.

“Whassup? What are you doing in Atlanta?”

“They got me shooting a new movie down here,” she said smiling suggestively. “I enjoyed your show.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Can we go somewhere and talk after you’re done?”

“Nah, I’m with somebody now.”

“And that means you can’t have a conversation?”

“We don’t have anything else to talk about.”

“Why are you acting like I’m some stranger to you?”

“I’m not playing this game with you, I gotta get ready for the rest of the show.” I dabbed my face with the towel as I left her standing there.

I returned to my dressing room and found Fatima in full assistant mode. I found it so sexy that I asked Tyson to keep everyone out of my room.

“Okay, Courtney told me to have your things ready for you to take a shower,” she said so focused on being the perfect assistant that she didn’t notice my change in energy.

While she was arranging things on the table, I stepped behind her, glad that she was wearing a skirt. I dropped a hand to the hem and moved it upward. When she realized what I was doing, she stared at my reflection in the mirror.

“*Jesus*,” my nickname strained from her pink coated lips.

“Not even *he* can save you right now,” I joked.

I learned early on when around her to keep a condom on me, so I was able to retrieve one easily from nearby without moving from where I was.

She gripped the table when I entered her. The roar from the crowd was the only other sound filling the room.

Fatima’s hand slammed hard against the mirror, and a loud moan escaped her lips as I eased in and out of her. I was going to miss this part of her being on tour with me- having sex whenever and wherever we wanted.

I fisted her hair in my hand lifting her head so that she could watch what I was doing to her. I didn't care about anything or anyone outside of the room.

When we finished, she tried her best to fix herself up. I leaned down to kiss her on the lips before leaving to take a shower. When I returned, she had lit some candles and sprayed the room.

"Smelled like straight sex," she said with amusement.

"You don't want nobody to know I'm hittin' that." I smacked her butt playfully.

"*Jaren*, get dressed and go to the stage before I get fired as your *temporary* assistant."

After getting dressed, the moment I opened the door I was getting all kinds of questions about what took me so long and why I had the door locked. I ignored them all.

The moment I got to my place on the side of the stage I transformed from *Jaren* back to *Jericho* and even *then*, *Fatima* was still on my mind.

# Chapter 41

## *Fatima*



**I** *don't want to go to Baltimore.*

That's all I could think about as I freshened up in the bathroom.

My baby had come, right off the stage and as if performing for an hour and a half straight wasn't enough, he came back to the dressing room for another performance. I still felt the goosebumps from just thinking about how good it felt.

I had grown used to our spontaneous sex sessions. It was in Dallas where he first pulled me into the hallway of a club, he was hosting a party at and lifted my skirt to sex me right there. No one walked in on us but the worry of that surprisingly excited me. From there it turned into a competition between the two of us.

*Who could catch who off guard first?*

In Austin, I raised the partition in our car and rode my baby right before a radio interview. It was so good that he ended up being thirty minutes late. He got me back that night on the balcony of our hotel.

We couldn't get enough of each other and to be honest, it was about more than just the sex. The sex only added to what we already shared. At times I felt more like I was hanging with my best friend more than anything.

After cleaning up, I sent a text to Courtney to check on her. I was still shocked by how her long-term boyfriend treated her upon finding out she was pregnant. She cried her eyes out in the hospital room, reciting the fact that Jaren tried to warn her about him. I felt helpless to do anything.

I liked Courtney a lot and not just because she was Jaren's assistant. We connected while talking about my *WriteNow*

stories. She shared with me how she introduced Jaren to my work and admitted that her favorite story was *Jericho's Heart*.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, I realized that someone else was in the room.

"Excuse me, how can I help you?" I asked the woman whose back was to me.

When she turned around, I recognized Brandy immediately. Had I thought she was drop dead gorgeous on screen, in person she looked unreal. From her sparkling gray eyes to her long wavy hair I couldn't stop staring at her.

"You must be Jaren's new assistant," she said holding out her hand. "I'm Brandy Moore."

I reluctantly took her hand. "I'm Fatima Ward and I'm helping Courtney out for the night."

"How *is* she doing?"

Not knowing what she knew I kept my answer neutral. "She's doing well. Did you need something?"

"I stopped by to wait on Jaren."

I tried my best not to let her get under my skin.

Her size four figure was decorated with a royal blue skin-tight designer dress that complimented her honey skin. I tried my best not to be intimidated by her, but I was. I had been a fan before I was Jaren's woman.

"He is actually about to go back on stage if you want to wait here."

I didn't want her to wait with me, but I was trying to be mature about the situation.

"Where do I know you from?" she asked looking at me sideways. "You look *so* familiar."

"I have no idea."

Then she acted as if a light bulb went off in her head. "Now I *know*. You're the girl that some people think Jaren is seeing."

"I *am* with Jaren," I corrected her.



“With him? Like *with him*, with him,” she said looking me up and down. “Like, he actually *sleeps* with you?”

It was the way she asked the last question that made my skin crawl.

“Maybe it’s not such a good idea that you wait here for him.”

Talking to her was giving me flashbacks of Deja, and my fists began to itch.

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything by that; I’m just surprised...” She forced a smile.

“I know what you’re trying to do and it’s not gonna work.”

“What am I trying to do?” she asked feigning innocence. “All I’m saying is that I know Jaren well enough to know when he’s going through something.”

“*Going through something?*”

“You clearly fulfill some new infatuation he has.”

“You *think* I’m an infatuation? How do you know that’s not what you were to him?”

“Jaren and I make sense, we understand this business, we look good together.”

“You think so?”

“I *know* so. Jaren is still mad at me for all of the stories that were out there about my co-star and me,” she explained. “I hurt him, and you’re his way of getting back at me.”

“On that note, you need to leave.”

“Forgive me if I hurt your feelings. I’m not trying to. I feel like as *women* we have to stick together.”

“Is that right?” I folded my arms.

“These men are out here doing all kinds of stuff, and we can’t let them walk all over us or take advantage of us.”

I walked over to the door and opened it for her.

“I was just trying to do the right thing and warn you that things could get ugly for you.”

“You don’t know me or anything about *us*.”

“You’re right I don’t know *you*, but I know *him*. I just don’t want to see you get hurt. You seem like a lovely girl, and this business spits out girls like that.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Well anyways, please let Jaren know I stopped by. It *was* nice to meet you.”

Then with that, she was gone. I don’t know why her words bothered me so much, but they did. I guess I always wondered how Jaren went from her to me. We were so different.

I busied myself around the room until Jaren returned. I was supposed to meet him backstage with a towel and water but my *talk* with Brandy was still looping through my mind, and I forgot.

He gave me a weird look and asked if I was ok and I told him I was. I pushed Brandy’s words out of my mind and went back to being his temporary assistant.

Back in our hotel room, I didn’t even get a step inside before Jaren was lifting me.

“You ready for another round?”

I cupped his face and gazed into his eyes. He must have noticed something in mine because he pulled back.

“What is it?”

“Brandy came by your dressing room.”

“Did something happen?”

I didn’t want to come off intimidated by her, so I told him “*no*.” I tried to kiss him, but he stopped me.

“You sure?”

I responded by kissing him lightly on the lips. “Are you gonna make love to me or not?”

“That’s what we’re doing now?”

“You know what I meant.”

It was too early in our relationship to be throwing around the word. And even though I couldn't describe my feelings for him in words, that didn't mean it was love just yet. I knew I cared about him a lot, more than any other guy I dated, and those feelings were more profound than anything I had ever felt for KeVon.

Jaren continued to search my eyes intently. “Yea, I know what you mean.”

It felt like we were suspended in time as we carefully watched each other. Then he lowered his head to kiss me, and this time it was even slower and even more intimate than before.

I wrapped my arm around his neck when I felt him backing me towards the bathroom. Inside he began to untie my blouse and peeled it off along with my bra. He trailed kisses down my neck, licking and sucking as he followed a path to my breasts.

After taking one in his mouth, he began to suck as if he was a baby seeking nourishment.

Then he dropped to his knees and that path continued to my stomach while peeling away my remaining clothes.

He returned to his feet and turned on the shower. After ripping off his clothes, he led me inside the shower and lifted me against the wall while I wrapped my legs around him. The intensity of this sex was so strong that I had to fight tears from falling. That was how overwhelming it felt; it felt like what I believed love should feel like.

From the way, he kissed me, to the way he touched me, and the way he looked at me. It was all different. Everything was in slow motion as if it was our last night together.

Once we made it back to the room while lying naked and exhausted in his arms, I felt him rubbing my cheek delicately.

“I don't want you to go to Baltimore.”

“I don't wanna go either. I'm not looking forward to all of the stress,” I admitted. “I'm my parents *only* chance at having

a doctor in the family.”

“You can’t live for what your parents want. The only time I ever *see* you light up, is when you’re writing. How long do you think you can keep shoving that part of you down?”

“I can do both. That’s what I’ve *been* doing.”

“From what you explained to me, you will barely have time to eat, drink, or sleep in medical school. When will you ever have time to?”

“I’ll find a way.”

“You gotta stop being so scared to stand up for yourself.”

“And what do you recommend I do? Quit school and start writing full-time?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s not realistic.”

“Anything is *realistic* if you want it bad enough.”

“Are you saying I don’t want it?”

“I want you to be happy. I think you need to take your gift more serious and stop looking at it as a hobby. You already know that if you ever need *anything* when you’re ready to take that next step. I don’t care what it is, lemme know. I’ll help you.” He followed his words by kissing the top of my head.

I loved how protected he made me feel. We lay silently together while I wrapped my head around our conversation.

*Was it time for me to finally take the leap and become a writer full-time?*

# Chapter 42

## *Jaren*



Fatima was in the middle of packing up her things to leave. I had gotten so used to her being with me that I didn't know what I was gonna do when she was gone.

"Don't forget this." I handed her the earrings that I had bought for her the day before.

Ever since our first Atlanta show when she told me that she had seen Brandy she had been acting a little differently. When I kept trying to ask her if she was okay, she would brush off my concerns as being all in my head. So, I let it go and hoped that if something *was* wrong that she felt secure enough to open up to me.

I wanted Fatima to be happy, and I didn't think medical school was going to satisfy her. I had spent the past two days trying to convince her to follow her heart, but she was adamant that she wanted to go to medical school and become a doctor. So, I backed off.

I was willing to start a publishing company and publish her books for her if she wanted me to. That's how much I believed in her. But she had to want it for herself first.

I stopped her from moving around and slowly pulled her onto my lap.

"You sure this is what you wanna do?"

"Are we talking about medical school again?"

"All of it," I said rubbing her leg. "If you tell me this is 100% what you wanna do I will support you."

"I'm sure this is what I want."

"Okay." My phone rang, and Courtney's name appeared. "Whassup?"

Fatima went back to what she was doing.

Rather than go back to New York, once she felt better, Courtney decided to continue on with the tour.

“I’m just checking on you to make sure everything is okay before I come back,” she noted.

“I’m straight; how are things up there?”

“Eric is now trying to say that he wouldn’t be surprised if the baby is yours.”

“*Mine?*”

“He’s saying anything because he swears it can’t be *his*.”

“A DNA test will take care of all that,” I added while scratching my beard.

“Speaking of taking care of stuff. Have you seen what the blogs are saying?”

“You know I don’t keep up with that shit.” Then I began to wonder if they had found out about Fatima. “What’s going on?”

“They are saying that you and Brandy are getting back together.”

“They really will make up anything,” I looked at Fatima who was zipping her luggage.

“*Sources* have been reporting that the two of you were spotted together in Atlanta.”

“The only time I saw her was the night you were sick.”

“Well, you better talk to Fatima about it and make sure she’s good because that’s the *last* thing *any* woman wants to read. Especially when she’s about to leave.”

“I’ll holla at her. A’ight, lemme know if you need anything.”

“I always do.”

“See you tomorrow.” I turned to Fatima, “Courtney said hey.”

“How is she?”

“Besides the fact that nigga she just made a baby with is a bum, she’s a’ight,” I cleared my throat. “She lemme know about some blogs saying stuff about Brandy and me.”

A frown crossed her face. “Is there a *you and Brandy?*”

“I’m not dealing with that girl at all.”

“What are the blogs saying?”

“That we are getting back together.”

“Where are they getting that from?”

“When people see you talking they assume they know what it means.”

“People want to see you with Brandy.”

“Look, I don’t want anything to do with Brandy, so we’re not even going there.”

I pulled her arms around my neck.

“I think we need to have some make-up sex now.”

“What?” She finally cracked a smile, “we weren’t even fighting.”

“It felt like a half-a-one, so we need to do something about that before you leave.”

She leaned in and kissed me, and I started peeling her shirt off. Getting it in one more time before she left wasn’t going to hurt either of us.

# Chapter 43

## *Jaren*



It was a week after Fatima had left for Baltimore and to say I missed her was an understatement. It wasn't just about the sex either; it was her presence in general that I missed. We talked and FaceTimed every day, and even then, it didn't feel like enough.

While in Denver doing anything normal was impossible. Not even Tyson could control the crowds. I took as many pictures as I could while out, and I signed everything that was shoved in front of me, but it felt like it was never-ending.

I mostly remained in my room. That morning, I had been trying to talk Fatima into flying out for the night to be with me since she had the weekend off, but she was adamant that she couldn't and promised to fly out to my show in Seattle that next weekend. She was still trying to get things together in Baltimore and wanted to get a little more settled before leaving.

The aggressive way the groupies were coming at me was hilarious. Even the most respectable women were propositioning me with the wildest things. But I wasn't tempted by any of that; I was waiting to see one person.

The minute I got to my suite at the *Four Seasons*, I crashed on the couch and pulled out my phone to FaceTime with Fatima.

The minute the call began to go through I heard an echo in the room and looked around, when she answered I started laughing immediately. She was wearing barely anything lying in what looked like the bed that was in my suite.

“Yo.” I bit my lip.



She was grinning hard as I got up from the couch and walked to the bedroom. The moment I opened the door and saw her lying sideways on the bed. I tossed my phone on the dresser and joined her.

“How long have you been waiting here?”

“Umm, for a few hours,” she giggled running her soft hand along my face. “Courtney told me that you got mobbed at the mall.”

“I don’t know what we were thinking trying to shop,” I chuckled. “It was all love though,” I said already trying to figure out with my free hand, how to peel her lingerie off. “Had I known all of *this* was waiting for me in the room I would’ve been back.”

“Is that right?”

“When are you flying back?” I asked while sucking on her neck.

“Sunday afternoon.”

“That means I get two whole days,” I mocked.

“Mhm, I might even come to your show, too.”

I slid my hand between her legs. “Ooo, it’s nice and warm.”

I watched as Fatima’s eyes rolled backward and she licked her lips as I worked my magic inside of her with just my finger. I lifted myself from the bed because I didn’t have any condoms near me like I usually did when she was around.

I looked in all of my bags, but I couldn’t find any. I glanced at Fatima.

“Feel like being creative?”

“Not if it includes you sticking that anaconda inside of me without a condom.”

Not that I had planned to do that, it was the way she said her statement that threw me off.

“Why say it like that?”

“I’m not trying to be in the same predicament as Courtney.”

“You think I would turn my back on you?”

“I don’t think you would, but I can’t afford to be pregnant right now either. I’m about to start medical school.”

I got what she was saying, but it seemed like her comment held more than just her worries about being pregnant in medical school. I wanted to press the issue but didn’t. Instead, I called over to the concierge and arranged for condoms to be delivered to my suite.

While lying in my arms, I could see that she was in deep thought.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked while playing with her hair.

“I was thinking about getting off social media for a while.”

“Did something happen?”

“I was reading some stuff about your fans wanting you to get back with Brandy.”

“Don’t read that shit.”

“It’s hard not to when it’s everywhere.”

“I am with *you*...not Brandy. If I wanted to be with Brandy, I would be with her.” I made her look at me. “I *don’t* want her.”

She nuzzled herself in my arms as if she needed that reassurance. I hoped she believed what I told her over the things that she was reading online.

# Chapter 44

## *Fatima*



Saturday night's concert was as dope as all the others I had been to. No matter how many times I watched, him perform I was impressed every time with how much he put into his shows.

He was at the end of his set when he started talking to the crowd about his process while working on this album. I had heard him say all of these things before, so it was nothing new, but then he started talking about his mom and things she taught him about love, I listened more intently. It felt like he was trying to let his fans in on what was going on in his life without actually putting his business out there.

The instrumental to what he dubbed his *ladies' song* began to play when he finished talking. Immediately, the women in the crowd started singing along with the chorus. He walked across the stage holding his hand up to his ear, I knew he loved this part of what he did.

The delirious crowd shouted the lyrics with excitement as if they had been waiting on this song all night. Joined by the featured singer, Abina, he started reciting her parts.

While bobbing my head to the beat, it was then that I realized that he was rapping completely different lyrics than what was actually on the album. People in the crowd with their phones pointed at him began to realize it too and quieted their cheers to listen.

It was when he was halfway through the first verse when I realized that he was rapping about me. He didn't say my name, but there were references in the song about things that were similar to us.

He talked about finding inspiration from this one girl, about long hours of talking on the phone with her, about her loving

to write as much as him, about what finally meeting her was like. He talked about almost losing this girl, not wanting love, not wanting to admit that what he was feeling was love, only to realize that it was too late she had his heart.

I couldn't move, I couldn't speak. When I realized what he was doing, it felt as if my knees were about to buckle.

*He had just told me he loved me.*

From where I was sitting, he couldn't see me from where he was on stage. If I didn't think security would body slam me, I would have run on stage to jump all over him. That's how much of a high I felt in that moment.

After he finished his set and said goodbye to the crowd, I made my way backstage. Even though I could see him, I couldn't reach him because he was surrounded by so many people congratulating him on a good show. I forced my way through the crowd not caring that I was probably bringing attention to myself in doing so.

The moment I got to him I threw my arms around his sweaty neck and hugged him tightly. Surprising even him by the look on his face. I felt him wrap his arms around my waist.

"You like that?" he whispered into my ear.

"I loved it," I closed my eyes.

I was so overwhelmed by him, the song, and the gesture, that I didn't care who was looking at us as we shared this intimate moment.

The rest of the night flew by for me after that. By the time we got to the room, I was ripping at his clothes.

"Damn, I might need to write an entire album with songs about you," he joked as I frantically unbuckled his jeans.

"If you do that, I might just have to give you a baby," I joked before covering my mouth with his.

I felt his massive hands cup my butt and I found myself not wanting to go to Baltimore anymore. His declaration changed so much.

“Aye, I meant what I said. I love you.” He paused. “And I don’t throw those words around either.”

It was something about hearing him say the actual words to me, looking at me the way that he was, that caused everything inside of me to tingle.

“I love you too.”

I had known for a while, that I did, but I couldn’t bring myself to admit that to him until I knew how *he* felt first. Now that he was letting me know what it was, I felt the freedom to finally relax in what we had.

“I know,” he joked causing me to hit him in the side. “I have that kind of effect on people.”

“Whatever.” He could never let a serious moment be just that. He always had to sneak in a joke, but I guess that was something about him that I also loved.

We spent the rest of the night, making what I was finally sure was love. He kissed every crevice of my body that night and worked just as hard to please me as he did putting on the show that night. I, in turn, gave him everything that I had to give.

When we were finally done in the wee hours of the morning, I slept more peacefully in his arms than I ever had before.

# Chapter 45

## *Fatima*



That next morning, Jaren woke me up the only way he knew how, and we made love again. I didn't wanna leave him, but I knew that I couldn't stay and allow my life to evolve around him either.

Most of our most intimate talks usually took place after we had sex, so I wasn't surprised when Jaren began to ask me questions.

"Let's make a deal," he said catching me off guard.

"It depends on what it is."

"Take one of the books that you wrote on *WriteNow* and let me publish it."

"What?" I asked sitting up.

"I think if you see some real success with your writing, then you won't be so quick to be dismissive of it."

"You think I'm being dismissive of my writing?"

"Just make a deal with me."

"I will publish your book, and if it does well, I think you should consider a career in writing."

"You believe in me that much?" It was one thing to have someone tell you to follow your dream; it was another to have them invest in that dream.

"You should already know how much I believe in you," he kissed me lightly on the lips.

His phone began to go off, and he picked it up. He immediately began to frown and sat up on the bed.

"What? When?"

Then there was a pause.

“It says what?” he said scratching the top of his head with his palm. “You gotta be fucking kidding me.”

Then there was another pause.

“She said what?” he asked with irritation. “Nah, you’re good, thanks for the heads up.”

The minute he ended the call he looked at me with a weird expression.

“What’s wrong?”

He turned his phone to face me, and I read the words, “***TMZ: Is This Woman the Reason Brandy Moore and Jericho Broke Up? Everything You Need to Know About Fatima Ward.***”

I snatched the phone from him. “I had nothing to do with you two breaking up,” I said raising my voice at him as if he was the one who had written the article.

I began to scour the article and whoever their sources were; they filled the blog post with nothing but lies and painted me as a home-wrecker.

Brandy had *sources close to her*, who told TMZ that she tried to keep the fact that he was messing around on her with me out of the press to protect him because she loved him.

There were pictures of us from last night’s concert, and we looked intimate in each one. I didn’t remember seeing anyone taking pictures of us.

The article told them five fast facts about me. That I graduated from Hampton University, that I was an only child from Charlotte, that I used to date a personal trainer, even naming KeVon and his gym. They uncovered my *WriteNow* account. Lastly, they reported that I had gastric bypass surgery to lose weight and revealed previous pictures of me at my heaviest weight next to current photos of me. My heart was racing with so many mixed emotions that I couldn’t move.

Without hesitation, Jaren took his phone from me. I had been prepared for people to find out we were together. I wasn’t

prepared for anything like *this*.



# Chapter 46

## *Jaren*



I sat at a promotional event in the *Pepsi Center* not sure who to fuck up. My mind was still thinking about what had happened the morning before when Courtney called me about the TMZ article that had just posted.

I was used to TMZ, and the bloggers coming for me but never had I seen people come for someone I cared about the way they did. When I saw my *fans* attacking Fatima on my pages, I knew I had to do something.

I immediately went to my IG page while Fatima was panicking on the phone crying and trying to explain herself to her parents. I read some of the hating ass comments and felt myself grow like the Hulk.

When I noticed Fatima screaming on her mom, about “*this being her life*,” I snatched the phone from her and ended the call. My baby had been answering calls all morning trying to figure out who had betrayed her.

I told her that once she got a little fame from being with me, that people around her would start to show their true colors. I didn’t think that it would happen this fast or that they would be this intrusive into her life.

I had never seen her at her bigger size, and I never believed it was something that she tried to hide from me either. She had opened up to me about her emergency surgery and the fact; she had to lose a lot of weight. None of that mattered to me; it didn’t change how I looked or felt about her. I didn’t fall in love with her weight. I fell in love with her.

What bothered me the most is not that the fact that someone wanted to expose who she was to me, but that they were trying to destroy and embarrass her in the process. I

wanted to fuck up everyone involved; once I found out who it was.

“She is *so* upset with me,” she cried into my chest.

“For what?”

“She says that I’m on the path to ruining my life running around behind a *thug*.”

I had never met her mom before, but it was then that I was 100% sure that she was a judgmental, manipulative woman.

“She kept asking about the *Yara* stuff and told me that being a writer is not a job that will support me in the long run,” Fatima continued tears streaming down her face. “*This* was why I kept all of this to myself; I knew my parents wouldn’t understand.”

“As your parents, they should want to know the real you. Not the person that they want you to be.”

The only silver lining from this scandal was the fact that her parents now knew everything, and she couldn’t hide behind her truth anymore.

“Not like this!” I recalled her screaming as more tears flowed.

I had spent that entire morning trying to calm her down the best I could which wasn’t much. She was both nervous and paranoid about the flight back to Baltimore and reporting to her new job. Courtney gave her one of her black NY caps and a pair of sunglasses so Fatima could camouflage her face while traveling.

Even though she got through the airport in Denver mostly unnoticed, it was in Baltimore where she found a few strange people lurking outside of her apartment. It was then that I told her I was going to move her to a building that had more security.

We stayed up talking all night on the phone, I couldn’t go to sleep knowing she was so upset. She didn’t know who to trust and had begun, avoiding calls from other friends and family.

I called in every favor I could to get to the bottom of who the sources were. I was pretty sure anybody who somewhat knew Fatima had a piece in the story.

“You ready?” Courtney whispered to me.

“Yea, I’m ready,” I told her trying to get my mind right for Revolt’s *fan experience* event that I was participating in with Kadeem.

Being the real nigga that he was, he didn’t bring up any of the gossip stuff going on even though you couldn’t escape it.

The gossip still trending nonstop on social media with people feeling sympathetic towards Brandy and attacking Fatima for being a “*homewrecker, a thirsty fat bitch, and a THOT.*” The memes, gifs, and jokes were endless.

For the next two hours, we answered questions from our Denver fans, and I was thankful that they weren’t bringing up any questions about our personal lives. They asked questions about our music, the tour, and what we thought the current state of hip hop was.

Off to the side, I could see Courtney typing away on her phone and judging by the look on her face I could tell that she was upset about something. I just prayed that it had nothing else to do with hurting Fatima.

After taking pictures with fans, Courtney checked on me and I told her to get Fatima on the phone. I needed to make sure she was okay.

“Hello.”

“Whassup Med School?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at that fan event thingy?”

“I am. I wanted to hear your voice though, and make sure you were good.”

“You don’t have to keep checking up on me; I’m a big girl. Eventually, the world was going to find out about me anyway.” She paused. “Some guy scared the hell out of me this morning when I left for work. He had his camera right in my face.”

“As soon as you tell me which apartment you like, I’m getting you outta there.”

I knew the place where she was staying was an apartment building where most of the medical students stayed, but other medical students weren’t in her situation. I couldn’t protect her from where I was, so the least I could do was provide her with better security.

“I’m thinking about taking a year off,” she suddenly announced. A weakness had returned to her voice as if she was fighting tears. “My mom won’t speak to me; I’m side-eyeing all of my friends. I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

“A break might be good.” I noticed Courtney pointing at her watch. “It will also give you some time to figure out what you *really* wanna do.”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

“Aye, I gotta get back out there. I’ma call you when I’m done.”

“Okay.” I could hear the disappointment in her voice.

“If you want me to fly you back out here, just say the word.”

“I’m fine. I wanna barricade myself behind the door until all of this goes away.” She chuckled lightly. “I’ve never wanted a Kardashian scandal more in my life.”

I didn’t care who was waiting for me; I wasn’t about to rush her off the phone, not while she sounded like this.

“I can’t even go on *WriteNow*. I gained so many new readers that my page keeps freezing up. I have hundreds of messages from my *new* readers asking questions about *you* and thousands more from my *old* readers wanting to know how we got together and if you read the story.”

“I promise you that this will go away.”

“Well, get back out there before they come for me even more,” she forced a laugh.

“I’ma call you when I’m done.”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I ended the call and handed the phone to Courtney.

“How is she?”

“She seems straight.” I scanned the area to see if anyone was eavesdropping.

Once I reached the stage, I started telling some jokes to relax some of the tension from my waiting fans. I didn’t owe them an explanation as to what took me so long, but I still owed them the courtesy to give them the experience that they hoped for.

These were 500 diehard fans who had won a contest in order to be in a room with us and they at least deserved for me to try and give that love back to them. After all, they took a chance on a failed ball-player who stumbled into the rap game.

I took pictures and signed everything put in front of me. When we finally finished, I walked with Tyson, Courtney and Larry and a few of my boys towards our waiting SUVs. Of course, paparazzi were waiting outside, and my guard immediately went up.

I slid my glasses on and acted as if they didn’t exist as I passed them. I could feel the bright flashes following me as they yelled questions about Brandy and Fatima.

“This shit is crazy,” I said pulling out my phone to text Fatima.

“It will go away,” Courtney said busy typing on her phone.

Even though she wasn’t showing, I looked down at her stomach area anyways. I wondered how she was going to handle the tour as her pregnancy progressed.

“On the real bruh,” PD said from behind me, “I didn’t know you liked ‘em thick like that.” He started laughing. “Were you hittin’ that *before* her surgery too?”

I looked over at Courtney who was in the seat beside me, and her nervous expression let me know that my ears weren't playing tricks on me.

"What the fuck you mean by that?" I asked him.

"I mean she's nice, a lil thicker than what you normally date, but she's thick in all of the right places *now*. Let's be honest *before* her surgery; shorty was looking like Precious."

"What the fuck you just say, my nigga?" I reacted.

"He didn't mean it like that," Courtney tried to calm me down.

"As much shit as you talk about my girl, don't even try it," PD continued to laugh. "You can dish that shit out, but you can't take it."

"Yo, chill fam," Haseem said. He was sitting next to PD behind me.

"Nigga, you got me all the way fucked up," I said getting up from my seat not caring that the SUV was still moving.

"*Jaren, stop!*" Courtney screamed placing her hands on my chest. "PD shut the up before he beats your ass."

"That nigga ain't gon' do *shit*. I wish a muthafucka would. I don't give a fuck who you are," he continued rambling. "Nigga, don't be mad at me because your little secret is out."

PD may have been my boy, but he had just crossed the line in my eyes. I don't care how much shit I talked about his girl; he wasn't about to talk about mine in any way around me.

Peeling Courtney's hands off of my chest, I reached where he was and was able to throw two punches connecting on his face before Haseem got in between us.

"Pull the fuckin' car over!" I yelled to the driver as Haseem stood bent between us.

I could hear PD talking shit from the back and if I was able to decipher anything that he said, not Haseem or anybody else was going to be able to stop me from beating his ass. Tyson

was sitting in the front seat with the driver, but he was so big he couldn't do anything from where he was.

I swung the door open.

“Jaren, what are you doing?” Courtney asked in a panic.

“If I stay in this truck, I'm gonna kill that muthafucka.” I jumped out.

“At least get into the other truck,” she said with the phone to her ear, “you can't be out here by yourself.”

The moment I was outside of the SUV, I remembered that this was *my car*.

*What the fuck was I leaving for?*

Tyson ran over to me and asked me what I needed him to do, and I just told him to ‘*handle it.*’ I needed the fresh air badly; I couldn't go anywhere with my anger at the level it was. I didn't care about how she used to look. I didn't like anybody I knew thinking that they could make jokes about my woman.

I walked down the block not exactly knowing where we were in downtown Denver and not caring. A few minutes later Tyson came and got me, and I returned to the SUV. Only Courtney and Tyson remained in the vehicle.

“You okay?” Courtney asked.

I nodded that I was, but all I was ready to do was to get back to my room and talk to Fatima. I think part of my frustration is that I wanted her close to me while she was going through what she was going through. With her on the other side of the country I couldn't protect her or be there for her like I know she needed.

“What do you need me to do?” Courtney asked.

“Nothing.”

A call from my mom came through as if on cue, and I knew that Courtney must have sent her a message.

For the next few minutes, I explained to my mom everything that was going on. And she gave me the motherly

advice that I needed. As my mom talked, I realized more and more that I needed Fatima.



# Chapter 47

## *Fatima*



I felt like a prisoner in my own apartment. For the past two days, all I did was go to the clinic during the day and then hide out in my apartment for the rest of the night. My phone went off continuously.

I de-activated all my social media pages because even my close friends and family members were tripping. I was getting requests for tickets to Jaren's upcoming concerts from cousins I hadn't spoken to in years.

All of a sudden, my *casual friends* were now my *best friends* posting old and mostly unflattering pictures of me with them on their pages. It was crazy the amount of brand-new attention I was getting from people who knew me.

I spoke to my close friends from Hampton, and I could tell that both Chanel and Natalie were hurt that I had kept both secrets from them. But Chanel came to understand, that I was only trying to protect myself. Natalie on the other hand still wasn't speaking to me.

She wasn't the only one; my mom hadn't spoken to me since Jaren had hung up on her. I tried to message her, pleading with her to try to hear me out. But nothing worked. I had spoken to my dad a few times, but my mom outright refused to talk to me until I told her I was done with Jaren and focused on medical school. I wasn't telling her either.

My dad informed me that she felt that Jaren was a bad influence and leading me down the wrong path. She felt in her heart that KeVon was who I should be with. What about how he treated me? What about the way he broke my heart? I don't know how she could judge Jaren so harshly when she didn't even know him but continuously made excuses for KeVon.

I didn't understand her harsh judgment of Jaren based off of a google search. If they took the time to get to know him, they would see that he treated me better than *any* other man I had ever been with.

I got off the phone with my father feeling like I had failed them, feeling as if I had honestly let them both down. Or as my mom said, that after all of their sacrifices to get me to this point. I was now "*breaking their heart.*"

I was their only child, and that was the *last* thing I wanted to do. But I was in love with Jaren, it was too late to take those feelings back now, and I couldn't turn off my gift to write. There was no way I could stuff that back inside of a box; it was my gift.

In all of my secluded free time, I had begun writing a new book about a regular curvy girl in search of love. I created a new account on *WriteNow* and was now writing anonymously under @FollowYourHeart

I wasn't abandoning my fans, I still had my Yara page, but I couldn't write the things I wanted to on that page since being exposed. All of the embarrassment, pain, anxiety, and anger I felt from this whole situation I poured into the new story.

I thought about the horrific things that people were saying about me and channeled that pain and frustration into my new character. It gave me a voice I had not yet found publicly. I wanted them to understand the human side of being overweight. Even though I was smaller, nothing else about me had changed.

Being overweight didn't make me of lesser value; it didn't mean I was lazy or that I didn't care about my health. I didn't understand why society found so much pleasure in fat-shaming others.

On my new *WriteNow* account, I only had three readers, but it was three readers that I cherished and hoped to reach with my message. As a society, we had to stop judging people solely based on their looks, and I wanted my story to reflect that. I wanted people to learn more compassion.

Being *pretty* didn't make you a good person, just as being *ugly* didn't automatically make you untrustworthy. Being *thin* didn't mean you cared more about your health, just as being *thick* didn't mean you *didn't* care.

This new book was the only private sanctuary I had, besides Jaren.

When he called the night before to tell me that he wanted to spend his two days off with me, I was shocked, to say the least. It was a lot of traveling to fly from Denver to Baltimore then on to Seattle for only two days, but he wanted to do it for me.

His love and support for me was still consistent and never wavering.

I had the tv on low in front of me, but when Brandy came on the screen during *Entertainment Tonight*, I grabbed the remote to turn the volume up. In my heart, I believed that she had a hand in the *TMZ* article in some way.

She was talking to Kevin Frazier on the set of the new movie that she was in starring alongside Kevin Hart. They were walking along the set, and she looked sad as if *her* world had been turned upside down.

"How are you holding up since the story about Jericho and this other woman broke?" Kevin asked her sympathetically.

*This other woman? They weren't even together!*

"It's been difficult," she said after taking a deep breath. "To love someone so much and be betrayed is never easy to wrap your head around."

*I can't believe this bitch is on national tv lying like this.*

"What Jaren and I had was special, it is special, so of course this hurts." She swiped at tears that weren't even there.

"Take your time. I know this has to be hard."

"It is. But I don't blame him; I blame her because she knew that we were together and chose to go after him anyways.

"What the hell?" I was now yelling at the tv.

“Have you spoken to Jericho since the story broke? Is he still seeing this other woman?”

“I’m *not* the other woman!”

I noticed my phone lighting up on my lap and saw that Autumn was calling. She was one of the few phone calls I was taking, and she was as supportive as she could from so far away.

She was working at a youth program for the summer and wouldn’t get a break to travel to visit me for another week.

“Hello.”

“Tell me you see this bitch lying on ET,” she said.

“Oh, I see her. Now I see why she’s one of the best actresses in Hollywood.”

“Please, she ain’t no Viola Davis, I can see right through her and that suspect acting.”

“Well, she’s doing enough to convince everyone else to feel sorry for her.”

“You need to go on one of these shows and let the world know the truth,” she suggested for the hundredth time.

“Even if I did, nobody is going to listen or believe what I have to say. They’ve already made up their minds about me.”

“Then Jaren needs to do it. Somebody has to get your side out there. Her getting all this camera time to lie is fucked up.”

I thought about her words, and I knew she was right, but I didn’t feel right asking Jaren to do something I know he didn’t like doing- talking about his personal life with the media.

“Aut, I don’t wanna talk about this anymore.” I turned the channel.

“How are you?”

“Same as yesterday. As if everyone can’t stop staring and talking about me. I can’t even count how many death threats I’ve gotten.”

“That’s because they don’t *know* you. As much as I want to, I can’t fight everyone in the world for my best friend.”

“I don’t need anyone to fight for me; I can handle it.”

“Nobody should have to go through this.”

For the next hour we talked, and I was so glad she could make me laugh.

The first night all of this came out, when I got back to Baltimore, together on the phone, we tried to figure out who could have talked to TMZ, but nothing added up. We both assumed Deja automatically, but she didn’t know anything about me being Yara. I wondered if it was KeVon because he could have easily stumbled across something to find that information out.

Back when Autumn and I used to read the blogs, the things they printed seemed funny and even harmless to us. Now that the tables had turned, I realized the significance of how intrusive these bloggers really were and how easily the truth was manipulated. It didn’t feel good being on the other side of the story.

After ending the call, a new text from Jaren came through.

***J: 7:35PM: About to land in 20***

I felt relief at seeing Jaren’s text. I was more than ready to see him; I needed him.

Rather than fly with everyone else to Seattle that morning, he booked a separate charter jet and flew straight to me. If that wasn’t love, I didn’t know what was.

I grabbed the keys to my car and made the drive from my apartment to the BWI Private Jet Terminal which was only ten miles from my apartment.

I tapped my hand nervously on the steering wheel. I would have never asked him to fly across the country in the middle of the tour to be with me, but I was so happy that he was doing it anyway. That was the difference between him and any other guy. With Jaren, actions spoke louder than words. He chose to make me a priority.

Even though I didn't feel like it, I tried to dress both low-key and sexy for him. After seeing the pictures of the *bigger* me, I wanted to remind him that I was still the sexy woman he had fallen in love with. I knew it was superficial, but what girl didn't want to appear sexy to her man. Whenever we talked, nothing felt different between us since he saw those pictures, but I still wanted to look my best.

I pulled into the parking reserved for chartered jets. I looked down at my phone and saw the number of messages and calls that I had missed along the way and internally groaned. I hated that I had to cut myself off from people.

I had only expected to hear the comments about my weight and how my beauty wasn't that of Brandy's, but the TMZ story had turned me into so much more than that.

They had people believing that I was the reason they broke up and weren't getting back together. No matter what I tried to say, no one would listen to me over *Brandy*.

The minute I saw Jaren's plane landing I got out of my car and stood in front of it. When I saw him get off of the plane carrying an overnight bag, I couldn't stop the smile from forming on my lips. No matter how alone I felt with everything going on, the man walking in my direction could instantly make me feel safe.

When he reached me, he dropped his bag, and I walked into his arms wrapping them around his waist. We stood like that for several moments before either of us moved.

"Let's go," I heard him say.

The drive back to my apartment was just as short as it was driving there. When we reached my building, I was surprised and thankful not to find anyone waiting for me. The way we were dressed in dark clothes and hoodies, they would have mistaken us for robbers anyways.

Once safely inside, Jaren walked around taking in my space for the first time. He looked at pictures and surveyed the decor.

"It's wild that this is my first time being at your crib."

“I still haven’t been to your place either.”

“You wanna go right now?” he asked me, and I could tell that he was serious.

“I think you’ve done enough traveling for one day.”

“Com’ere,” Jaren said softly yanking off his hoodie and sitting down on my couch.

I made my way over to where he sat, and he took my hand to pull me onto his lap.

“I’m gonna make this right. I’ve got some things in motion that I need you to trust me on.”

I nodded.

“I told you before that I don’t let *anybody* fuck with the people I love,” he went on kissing my cheek. “I know for a fact that Brandy was involved in pushing that article and I got something for her, and everyone involved.”

“She was?”

“She just doesn’t know who she’s fuckin’ with,” he continued rubbing my thigh. “Once I find out who the other sources are, it’s a wrap.”

Rather than respond I wrapped my arms around his neck and nuzzled my face there.

# Chapter 48

## *Jaren*



It was almost five in the morning and I hadn't slept at all. After making love to my baby, we did what we always did and talked about real shit.

She let me know how she was feeling about the fake friends, the stares from strangers, her parents, the abuse from people online, and the interviews where Brandy kept throwing dirt on her name.

The more Fatima talked, the more I found myself going to a dark place. I was full of rage and didn't know where to channel it. She surprised me and told me to put all of that energy into my music the same way I had told her to put her anger into her writing. That was one funny thing about being in love with another writer; there was a mutual understanding of our unique gift.

After she fell asleep, I found a writing pad on her dresser and sat down by her bedroom window. In one view, I looked out at the darkened city, in my other view, my baby was sleeping peacefully in the bed as if she didn't have a worry in the world as long as I was there with her.

I started scribbling lyrics faster than my mind could even keep up with. My emotions were pouring out on to the paper as if the ink was bleeding my anger.

It only took me an hour to finish *Cut from A Different Cloth*.

I got on the phone and made a few phone calls to put some things in motion. I didn't need sleep, because I was running off of pure adrenaline. Once I finished, I threw the pad back on to the dresser and crawled in bed with Fatima. It was as if she felt drawn to me because she rolled over and placed her head on my chest.



I began to rub her bareback with my fingertips.

“Keep that up, and you’re gonna start something,” she mumbled into my chest.

“Well since you’re up...”

“How long have you been up?” she yawned.

“I had to get some things off my chest.”

“Did it help?”

“A little. I called up some of my connects out here, and I’m going into the studio later on today.”

“What kind of song did you write?”

“One that will shut everybody the fuck up.”

She returned her head to my chest.

“I also put in a call over to 105 to get on *The Breakfast Club*.”

Her head shot up. “What?”

“I *gotta* put some people in their place. I’ve held my tongue long enough.” Before she could answer, I flipped her body underneath mine. “*And* since you’re not sleepy anymore...”

“Oh God, I haven’t even brushed my teeth yet,” she said covering her mouth.

“You still on that? Then don’t talk and let me get to work,” I said while making my way down her body.

I peered up at her as I placed light kisses on her stomach, while my hands gripped her on both sides. I don’t know why, but I felt like I needed to worship her body. I felt like she needed to *see* how much I loved every inch of her.

We both needed these two days away from everything and everyone, and it was the rejuvenation that I needed.

# Chapter 49

## *Jaren*



“We got Jaren Young AKA Jericho in the studio,” DJ Envy announced while sitting across from me. “It’s about time we got you back in here.”

“Whas good man,” I replied with a chuckle looking at each of them. Angela Yee was on my left, Envy was across from me, and Charlamagne tha God was to my right.

I had just left Fatima that morning to do the only interview that I was planning to do to talk about this entire situation. *The Breakfast Club* was one of the most popular shows in the nation, so I knew this interview would be heard all over the world.

“We got the Henny in the studio for you,” Angela Yee added pointing at the unopened bottle and cups stacked on the table between us.

“That’s whassup.”

“We heard it was gonna be that kinda day,” Charlamagne said. “We got a *lot* to talk about.”

“We do, unfortunately about the wrong shit.”

“Before we get into all that, let’s talk about this tour,” DJ Envy chimed in. “You and Kadeem... *The Humble Hustle Tour*. How’s it going so far?”

“That’s my nigga right there.” I started opening the bottle of Hennessy. “We’re over a month in, and we’ve been getting nothing but mad love in every city.”

“We were at your New York shows. *Everybody* is talking about this tour.”

“We’re trying to give real hip hop back to the people. We wanna take it back to the days when hip hop was about

the *music* and not the latest gimmick.”

“That’s one thing I love about your music; it’s straight New York hip hop,” Charlamagne added. “We’re talking real bars that are talking about *something*.”

“There are a few of us out here trying keep to hip hop raw, shout out to Kadeem, J. Cole, Chance, Sean, Kendrick...we’re doing our part to make it about the music again.”

“I love how you show so much respect to the legends,” Angela said. “How does it feel to have them embrace you the way they have?”

“Man, I grew up admiring these guys, so to have them reaching out to *me* to get on *my* album, man...”

“Well you along with Kadeem, are one of the few rookies that the legends all agree on,” DJ Envy added.

“Man, I can’t stress how much I appreciate the love. In my own right, I’m trying to be legendary. I want this generation to look up to me the way that I looked up to them.”

“Well this new record you brought today is *definitely* legendary,” Charlamagne segwayed. “Let’s talk about *Cut from a Different Cloth*. When did you have time to record this while on tour?”

“I recorded it yesterday with my boy Richie down in B-More. I had a lot on my mind.”

“We could tell, because you’re *very* angry on this record,” Envy followed-up.

“Do you blame me?”

“Not at all. As a man I get it. Now, why don’t you tell us what you want us to know,” Charlamagne continued. “Cause I’ve known you for years and you’ve never talked about your personal life like this.”

“I don’t believe in that shit because I try to protect home as much as possible. I feel like, you can say what you want about me. Come for me, I can take that shit, I don’t care. I can handle myself. But when you come for *home*...we got a problem.”

“You’re talking about the TMZ post?” Envy clarified.

“All of it. *Everybody* that got something to say about wifey or my situation, I’m coming for in this song.”

“You are here to tell the world that this woman is wifey?” Charlamagne confirmed.

“That’s home right there,” I repeated firmly.

“Did Brandy Moore ever carry that title?” Angela asked.

“Nah.”

“But you two *were* smashing though,” Charlamagne asked. “I’ve seen her snaps.”

“Let me say this, and after I do this interview, I ain’t never talking about this girl *ever* again or giving her anymore shine off of my name.” I motioned with my hands that it was a wrap.

“Yes, please give us the tea on what went down with Ms. Moore,” Angela encouraged.

“We were cool, we *were* together for a few months, but it was never on the level like what I got now.”

“Is it true that you cheated on Brandy with this other girl?” Envy asked.

“Not true *at all*.”

“What is the truth?” Charlamagne asked.

“I wasn’t *with* Brandy when I started seeing Fatima.”

“Why did the two of you break-up?” Angela asked.

“We’re just different. And if we’re keeping it all the way 100, I’m not the one who cheated.”

“Are the rumors about her and Malik Wallis true?” Envy asked.

“You’ll have to ask them that. I don’t know, and I don’t care. I am telling you that *I* didn’t cheat on her.”

“Social media is blowing up right now. They are going in,” Charlamagne laughed.

“I’ll say this; there ain’t no cut in my character. I’m 100% man, and I’m gonna respect *you* as a female as long as you respect me as a man. We were together; it didn’t work out. Cool, now move on and leave me the fuck alone. Don’t get out here and start playing games.”

“So, you’re saying she crossed the line?” Angela asked.

“*Way* over the line. Everything that she’s said about my girl is a lie.”

“Why do you think she’s doing all of this?” Envy asked.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care, but she picked the wrong one to do it with.”

“Well I always thought that there was something phony about her, so I’m not surprised,” Charlamagne added. “Tell us, was the TMZ article truthful in what they wrote about your girl?”

“I don’t fuck with TMZ either,” I made clear. “She *is* a writer, a damn good one too. I am trying get her to publish one of her books now. She is about to start medical school. She never had *any* weight loss surgery, I don’t want to go into details, but the surgery she had was one that saved her life. I didn’t appreciate how they came for her in that article; it was fucked up.”

“Tell us what *you* want us to know about her,” Charlamagne followed-up.

“I’m not gonna tell all of her personal business like that. But what I will say about her is that she is one of the most *beautiful* souls I’ve ever met in my life, yo. Real talk. She ain’t never done nothing to *Brandy* or anybody else. She doesn’t even *want* this life like that, all of this fame and shit, she doesn’t want none of this.”

“That’s rare these days,” Charlamagne pointed out.

“That’s one of the things I love about her; she doesn’t care about being famous.”

“I guess we should go ahead and play the new record then,” DJ Envy said. “I think you might have just ruined a few

careers with this song *and* this interview.”

“She did it to herself. She couldn’t stop running her mouth. I don’t go on shows and talk about my life like this; she made this side of me come out.”

“She woke up a sleeping giant,” Charlamagne clarified.

“A giant who can spit bars.” I nodded.

“A’ight, here is the world premiere of *Cut from a Different Cloth* by our man Jericho who is in the studio with us,” DJ Envy introduced my song. “We know you got a flight to catch to Seattle, so we wanna thank you for stopping by this morning.”

“Thanks for having me.”

“Give wifey some love from us, we might need her to get out here and teach these other women some things,” Charlamagne joked.

All I could do was laugh at that statement as I left the studio.

*Mission accomplished.*

# Chapter 50

## *Fatima*



“Whatever you say *wifey*,” Chanel teased across the table.

“Keep it up, and I’m gonna start calling you Deja while you’re over there rocking that blonde wig,” I snapped back.

Chanel patted her wig. “Leave my wig alone. I just wanted to try something different since I know hanging around you; I’m likely to meet J. Cole or somebody.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help but laugh with my girl. I know she was only teasing and trying to keep me in good spirits to laugh at the fact that I couldn’t trust any of my other friends anymore.

It had been almost a week since Jaren had dropped *Cut from a Different Cloth* and it was still playing in heavy rotation everywhere. Because of that record and his interview on *The Breakfast Club*, I was finally able to leave my apartment in peace.

Chanel and Autumn both came up to visit me for a few days. We were hanging out downtown Baltimore at *Vision*, a restaurant/ night club that was popular among our age group.

Since Jaren spoke out, some of the hate was dying down.

“Speaking of J. Cole, have you hooked up with Antoine yet?” Chanel asked.

“Girl, nah. That nigga ain’t serious, he’s been acting funny responding to my texts, so I’m not about to fly up there,” Autumn answered blowing off the topic with her hand.

“I told you that man has a type,” Chanel commented while drinking from her martini. “He ain’t ready for all *that* to be thrown back at him.”

“Well it’s *his* loss,” Autumn said. “I should have shot my shot with Darian anyways.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Chanel said snapping her fingers. “Darian already told us how deep he can dig all in it.”

We spent the next few minutes laughing about one of Chanel’s favorite R&B singers before Autumn changed the conversation.

“What city is Mr. Jericho in tonight?” she asked sipping on her drink.

“They are finishing up their last show in Portland.”

“Are you gonna join him?” Autumn followed-up.

“No, I have to work. I can only fly out on the weekends to see him now.”

“I don’t know about you,” Chanel said being extra. “But the moment *that nigga* called me wifey for the whole world to know, my ass would’ve quit my little job and joined him on tour.”

“Even though he *called* me wifey, doesn’t mean we are ready for all that. And I don’t ever wanna have to rely on *any* man to do for me. At any time, he could change his mind and move on to the next one. Wifey is just a name; it doesn’t hold any real title.”

“That’s why I can’t stand when a nigga calls me *wifey*, like give me a ring and just call me *wife*,” Autumn agreed.

“That’s how I feel.”

“Girl please, it’s a step up from just being a *girlfriend*. You got that man out here giving you a *title* and writing diss records-” Chanel began to list before I interrupted her.

“He didn’t write that diss record for me.”

“That man said, ‘*wifey told me to do what I gotta do and with her blessin’ comes the death of many*,’” Autumn quoted one of the beginning lyrics to his song.

“And *then* he went on to destroy that bitch in *one entire verse*,” Chanel laughed. “She shut down her



entire social media and has been hiding out since. Her ass doesn't want any press now."

Brandy wasn't the only focus of his diss track though. His first verse read her for filth, his second verse went after the bloggers and gossip sites, and his third verse went after fake friends who talked to these sites and trolls. I loved everything about the song from the lyrics to the beat; I could see why he couldn't wait to record it.

"Yea, well she's also trying to sue him for defamation of character now," I reminded them.

"Girl, no judge is gonna listen to her. She set herself up for that one," Autumn chimed in.

"I just hate that he had to get out of character because he felt he had to defend me."

"That's what a *real* man does. He's gonna do *anything* to protect his woman," Chanel said.

"It's still hard for me to wrap my head around it." I shrugged while allowing Chanel's words to sink in fully.

As the night went on, we started dancing on the club side. Pushing any other negative thought to the side, I was happy to be out with my girls and having a good time.

I guess I had too many drinks because I stumbled my way to the bathroom. I freshened up a little and sent a selfie to Jaren so he could see how sexy I looked.

I thought about the shows he had to do in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, D.C., and Pennsylvania and got excited that he would soon be close enough to me for three weeks straight that I could take quick flights to him.

After I was *refreshed*, I stepped out of the bathroom and ran right into somebody. Of course, when I looked up to see it was KeVon, I rolled my eyes.

"Why are you everywhere?"

"How am I everywhere?"

"My apartment, Christmas, *graduation*..."

“Your apartment, I’ll fess up to. But Christmas and graduation, that was *all* your mom. *She* begged me work to it out with you because she believes *we’re soulmates*.”

I groaned. “That woman drives me crazy. I swear.”

“She only wants what’s best for you.” He took a step closer as a few people tried to walk by. The moment they moved around us, I put space between us again.

“I guess that’s why she’s not speaking to me because *she wants what’s best*.”

“You’re not the only one she’s not speaking to, she called and cussed me out for giving up on you too easily.”

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. What’s she mad at you about?”

“She thinks I’m gonna throw away my life *for a thug*,” I repeated her words.

“Does he treat you good?”

“He treats me better than you did.”

He dropped his head as if he knew he had walked into that comeback. “I deserved that.”

“You deserved that and more for what you said to TMZ.”

“I know I did you dirty for what I did with Deja, but I would never do anything like that to you,” he went on. “They *did* reach out to me, and they *offered* me money, but I never talked to anyone.”

“If that’s true, I appreciate that.”

“I’m not this horrible guy you keep thinking I am. I know you don’t believe this, but I do love you, and I miss you. I know messed up.”

“I need to get back to my girls,” I cut him off.

“Fatima...” he reached for my hand.

“No, I’m not doing this with you KeVon.” I then took the opportunity to slip away.

After dancing the night away, we found a diner to eat at afterward. While laughing and talking about the night's shenanigans, I noticed Autumn weirdly staring at her phone.

“What’s wrong with you?” Chanel asked.

Autumn turned her phone to us. On the screen was an intimate looking picture of KeVon and me in the hallway of the club we had just left. The caption read: *Does Jericho know that Wifey is still hooking up with her Ex?*

*Was there anything I could do without it coming back to haunt me?*

# Chapter 51

## *Jaren*



Right after our Minneapolis show, I took another shower before meeting with fans. That night, in the middle of my set, I honored the memory of Prince with a song that he liked from my first album. We sampled it with his smash hit, *Purple Rain*.

Ever since I dropped *Cut from a Different Cloth*, audiences were now screaming with expectation for me to perform it, so I added it to the setlist.

The crowd chanted the lyrics to the song as if it had become their personal anthem for whatever they were also dealing with in their life. In a way, it was because everybody dealt with the same shit.

Once I reached my dressing room, I saw the selfies that Fatima had sent me while out with her girls. After what she had been through in the past week, she deserved to relax and have some fun.

The rest of my night flew by, and after I performed my last song with Kadeem, we boarded our plane for Indianapolis. We had a few more Midwest stops before we flew to Florida and worked our way up the coast.

While on our jet, various pictures of Fatima were popping up on my timeline.

I examined each of them, her at the table eating with her girls, the pictures of her dancing, pictures of her talking intimately to a guy that looked like her ex. I wasn't the type of guy to jump to conclusions, but I was wondering what her ex was doing in Baltimore in the first place?

I was glad PD and my other boys were sleeping because I knew that nigga would have something to say about them.

Courtney was the only one up, and she didn't comment on them.

"I'm glad Fatima is getting back to normal," she said breaking into my thoughts.

"She's a'ight. How are you feeling?" I nodded at her stomach.

"I'm still getting a little sick, but I'm okay."

"You think you're gonna be able to make it through the tour?"

"As far as I can see."

"If you ever need to go back home lemme know."

"And leave you by yourself. You wouldn't know what to do without me," she teased.

"I think I'll survive," I chuckled.

"You'll *survive*, but *I* make your life easier."

"Yea, you're right about that. But we have to make sure that baby is okay first."

"You're gonna be a good husband and dad one day."

"I'm gonna try my best to be, better than that deadbeat who got my mom pregnant."

I thought about the man who I was told I looked like, who had never been a part of my life. I may have had his features, but I was far from being like him.

"Fatima is lucky. I hope she knows that."

It was almost four by the time we landed in Indianapolis and as if on cue Fatima was calling me, but I declined her call because I had too many ears around me. I let her know by text that I would call her in my room.

Once at the Four Seasons I laid down in my bed and returned her call. The minute she answered she started rambling on about some pictures posted and started apologizing. I didn't interrupt her, I didn't try to comment. I let her get out everything she had to say before I said anything.

“Are you there?” she asked me once she noticed that I hadn’t said anything.

“I’m letting you talk.”

“I don’t know who was taking those pictures, but it’s not what it looks like.”

“What was the first thing I told you the minute I finished with that interview?” I was calm and mostly sleepy in my delivery.

“That we now had a target on our backs.”

“Exactly, the moment I called you wifey to the entire world, I let the dogs out. They are gonna come for both of us. Niggas are gonna try and test you whether you are doing the right thing or not. Anything we say or do is gonna be talked about from here on out.”

“I know, but all I was doing was dancing with my friends,” she exclaimed still sounding upset. “We were only talking about the fact that he didn’t talk to TMZ.”

“So that *was* your ex.”

“It was.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I don’t know.”

“What is he doing in Baltimore?”

“He opened a gym here.”

“How long have you known about that?”

When she went silent, I knew then that she had known for a while.

“Why didn’t you give me a heads up?”

“I haven’t seen him in months, so I didn’t think that it was that big of a deal.”

“A nigga that is still trying to get with you, moving to the *same* city as you, isn’t a big deal?”

“He’s from here; he didn’t move here for me.”

“Just like you keep saying that I didn’t write that diss track for you?”

“You don’t find that to be a coincidence? He already has a gym in VA, but the moment you move to Baltimore, he decided to open a gym up there?”

“I don’t care about his reasons for moving here; my only focus is you and medical school, *that’s it.*”

I wanted to tell her that medical school shouldn’t be her focus, but it was to no use.

“Where are you now?”

“In my bedroom. Autumn and Chanel are both in the living room passed out.”

“Go lock the door.”

“What?”

“Go lock the door.”

I heard her get up from the bed and walk over to the door. I switched to FaceTime.

She answered as she crawled back on to the bed. She looked at me with uncertainty as I stared back at her.

“When I called you wifey, I didn’t mean that lightly. I’m gonna always believe you over *anybody*. I know you, and I know what you’re about so don’t ever worry about me seeing some pictures and tripping.”

She got quiet. “I love you.”

“I know you do, and I love you, too. Now take your clothes off.”

“*Take my clothes off?*”

“Take ‘em off.”

“We were just arguing, and *now* you want me to take my clothes off?”

“Exactly, we gotta have make-up sex now.”

I was already shirtless with just my basketball shorts on.

“You and this make-up sex,” she blushed.

“You rather I go downstairs and pick out somebody to bring to my room?”

“I wish you would.”

I began to laugh at her expression.

“I want you, but since you’re all the way over there, we gotta do what we gotta do.”

I watched as she began to peel off her dress and rather than fight like people were hoping we would do after those pictures came out. We had fun pleasing each other through the phone.



## Chapter 52

### *Fatima*



“This is your city, huh?” Jaren asked as I drove him around in the rental.

“Yup, this is home,” I said smiling out at the city that raised me.

“Growing up we thought everything outside of New York, was the country.” He began to laugh. “Even now on tour, I’ve seen some of the most beautiful cities. Places I thought I would never be caught dead in are now some of my new favorite places.”

“That’s the problem with New Yorkers, y’all don’t ever want to leave the state,” I said maneuvering through the streets I knew well.

“Why do we need to leave? Everybody wants to come to *us*.”

“That’s not the point.”

Two weeks had flown by, and the tour was now in Charlotte. I flew down Friday after work and met him at The Ritz-Carlton.

When he told me, he wanted me to show him around; I told him I didn’t want drivers or anything. I just wanted to spend this time alone with him.

They had a Friday night show which I made it just in time for. This time after his show while he greeted fans, I had people also wanting me to get into their pictures. After we finished with fans, we went to an afterparty where he showed me off proudly.

It was surreal to think I once believed I couldn’t fit into his world and here, he was showing me in more ways than one

that I did.

After several rounds of making love once we got back to the room, it was then that he told me that he wanted me to spend the day sightseeing. I took him to where I graduated high school, to the spots where I hung out and lastly to the home I grew up in.

We were sitting outside of my parent's home parked on the side of the street. I had meant only to show him where I lived when Jaren surprised me and got out of the car.

“What are you doing?”

“Let's go say hi.”

He was dressed casually in jeans and his throwback Syracuse basketball jersey. Tattoos that were normally hidden in a regular shirt were visible.

“They aren't speaking to me,” I reminded him getting out of the car.

“It's about time they start.” He reached the door and pressed the doorbell.

I reluctantly followed him towards the front door. As I approached, my dad's head popped out looking at Jaren with suspicion.

“Tima?” he asked as if he was unsure, he was looking at me.

“Hey dad,” I waved nervously, and he opened the door. “I was in town and decided to stop by.”

I watched as my father looked Jaren up and down. “Otis Ward.” He said holding his palm out to Jaren.

“Jaren Young. It's nice to finally meet you.”

“You don't go by *Jericho*?”

Jaren laughed. “Only when I'm performing.”

“Well, it's nice to meet you. Why don't you both come inside.”

I walked past Jaren and followed my dad inside with Jaren trailing close behind. This was my childhood home, and I felt as much of a stranger as Jaren was inside of it.

I looked at the cranberry and cinnamon colored decor that made up our living room. Pictures of me from all ages were displayed all over the living room and on the walls. While my dad went to get my mom, Jaren took the opportunity to look at the pictures.

“You were a cute kid,” he said looking at a young picture of me. I was a chubby kid with pigtails sprouting out all over my head.

“Thank you,” I mumbled. I was anxious to see my mom’s reaction to our presence.

“Don’t be so nervous,” he said wrapping his arms around me from behind.

“That’s easy for you to say you don’t know what you just walked into.”

A few minutes later, I heard my mom’s mouth.

“Hello, Fatima.” Her smile was forced as she evaluated Jaren.

“Hey, mom.”

“And who do we have here?”

I knew my mom, and I saw right through her. She was being nice enough to us because she didn’t believe in making scenes.

“Jaren Young,” Jaren introduced himself.

“Loretta Ward, it’s nice to meet you. What brings you to Charlotte?”

“Jaren is performing at the *Spectrum Center*.”

“Oh really?” She seemed both shocked and impressed. “You must be very popular to be performing in an arena *that* big.”

“The tour is doing well.”

“I see. Would either of you like something to drink?”

We both shook our heads and sat down on one of the nearby tan couches. My mother and father sat across from us on the other couch.

“Why don’t you tell us about yourself?” my father asked Jaren after a long pause.

Jaren gave the short version of his story, telling them how he grew up in Brooklyn with his mother and sister. He told them about how he started off playing basketball but ended up turning his love of poetry into a rap career. My father seemed impressed by him; my mother seemed further skeptical of him.

“When did you start getting tattoos, you have so *many* of them?” she asked.

“It’s something I’ve been into for a minute.” He looked down at his tats as if he had never seen them before. “It’s another way I like to express myself.”

“I got a few tattoos of my own back in the day.” My father smiled pulling up the sleeve of his t-shirt to reveal his cross tattoo that displayed my grandmother’s name on it.

“You got any more?”

“I got a football one on this arm and then on my back I got this hawk design,” my father rambled. I could see the two men were already comfortable with each other.

“How did you and our daughter meet?” My mom asked cutting into their conversation and looking between us.

Jaren looked at me, and we both smiled. When people asked us this question, they always laughed at our answer.

“Well I read a book she was writing, and our friendly debates kinda turned into *this*,” he said looking at me as he answered.

“The writing?” she asked with disgust in her voice.

“Yea. I’m not a reader like that, but she had me hooked.”

“What a cute story,” she mumbled. “Can I speak with you for a minute?”

I got up from the couch and followed my mom to her room. The minute I closed the door her entire demeanor changed.

“Did you think you were gonna ambush us at our home and force us to like your little rapper boyfriend?”

“I was showing him around the city, and *he* wanted to meet you. I didn’t know it was a crime to stop by my parent’s home.”

“Stop being dramatic.”

“I would think you would *want* to meet the man that I’m involved with.”

“Yea, if it was a respectable young man with a legitimate career. With all the pedigree of men, you were surrounded by at Hampton and the ones you *will* meet at John Hopkins. Do you think *that* is the best you can do?”

“What is so wrong with him? You don’t even *know* him.”

“I don’t need to know him. I see his type every day, and that’s not what I want for my daughter.”

“But KeVon is? And, why are you still calling him about me?”

“I don’t want him to give up on you. I was only reminding him that you were worth fighting for.”

“*He. Slept. With. One. Of. My. Friends,*” I enunciated each word.

“That floozy was never your friend in the first place, and he regrets doing that,” she said stepping towards me. “Let’s forget KeVon for a second, even if you don’t want *him*, there are better options out there.”

“You don’t even care that Jaren makes me happier than I’ve ever been in my life?”

“Happy? *That* isn’t lasting happiness sweetheart. You’re just going through a little phase,” she brushed off nonchalantly. “I went through a bad boy phase when I was

young, so I guess I understand all of this somewhat. You'll eventually grow out of it too."

"Are you listening to *anything* that I'm saying?"

"I've been where you are, so listen to your mom when I tell you that all of this is temporary," she said confidently. "And like I know you will get over that boy in there, I know you will also see this little hobby for what it is. A *hobby*, not a *career*."

"What if I wanted to make it my career? You wouldn't support me?"

"I'm not gonna watch you throw away four years of pre-med and the opportunity to go to the top medical school, so you can pursue some hobby that has no guaranteed return. How many successful writers can you even name?"

"You don't think I'm good enough to be one of them?"  
Tears burned behind my eyes.

"I believe you have the potential to be one of the best pediatric doctors in the nation. I want to see you go on and do something I never got the chance to do."

I wiped my eyes because I could see that I wasn't getting through to her. She wasn't trying to hear me at all.

"The day you put on that white coat will be the happiest day of your life; trust me."

"My stories are *really, really* good," I tried to convince her.

"Anyone can write a good story sweetheart. You want to be known for doing something *great*, not for making up stories. Where's the respectability in that?"

Her words stung, but not more than the fact that the woman I grew up admiring, the woman I grew up trying to become, was breaking my heart with her selfish words.

Rather than respond to her, I swung the door open and stormed out of her room. I walked past my father and Jaren who were both in the middle of laughing like two old friends.

I slammed the front door behind me and continued towards the car. I'd rather sit there for the rest of the visit than hear

anything else *she* had to say.

I felt my arm being pulled and turned to find Jaren tugging on me.

“Hold up.”

“I wanna leave,” I informed him trying to struggle free from his grasp.

“What did she say to you?”

“Can I have a minute with my daughter?” I heard my father ask.

Jaren stepped to the side, and my father faced me. “What happened?”

“She won’t listen to anything I have to say.” Stubborn tears trickled down my face. “I’m not trying to hurt her, but I have to live my own life.”

“I agree.”

“Do you?” I asked him skeptically. “Even if medical school isn’t in that plan?”

My father opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

“I didn’t think so,” I said turning my back to him and walking to the car.

I got in the driver’s seat and took one last look at my dad. He looked bothered by what was happening but didn’t move to try and stop me other. I watched as he and Jaren exchanged words and then they even gave each other a hug before parting ways.

I started the car, ready to leave Jaren there with them. Once inside the car, he didn’t try to say anything to me. I drove at least a few miles towards the hotel before I heard him speak.

“Pull over,” he told me pointedly. I looked for a safe area and did as he said. “I’m gonna drive the rest of the way.”

I stomped my way around the back of the car until I found him still standing beside the passenger door.

“I thought you wanted to drive?”

“Come’re.” He pulled me into his arms.

It was in his embrace that I felt like I could finally breathe. I held on to his back as if he was saving me from falling.

“I don’t know what your mom said to you, to get you like this. But I want you to listen to me,” he said forcing me to look at him. “Sometimes in life, you just have to take things into your hands and do what it is that *you* wanna do.”

I nodded.

“And as long as *I* am here, you will always have my support. *Always.*”

After we finally got back inside the car, we drove back to the room to get ready for that night’s show. It was during Jaren’s set that something went off inside of me.

He had taken a chance on himself and invested in his mixed tapes and hustled his way to a record deal. He was a living example of following your dreams.

I had this overwhelming feeling that my mom was wrong. I *did* have what it took to be one of the greats, and I was now more than determined to prove her and my father wrong.

As much as I loved and appreciated what Jaren was trying to do for me, this was something I also had to do on my own. I needed to prove something to myself most of all. And it was at that moment that I came up with a new plan, one that was all about what I wanted to do.



# Chapter 53

## *Jaren*



After North Carolina, we did shows in Hampton and Richmond, Virginia. We were currently in D.C. to perform two shows before moving onto Baltimore. At the moment, Kadeem and I were in the middle of a photo shoot for the September issue of *Rolling Stone*. They wanted to do a spread about the tour, then do individual features on both of us.

Since it was a short flight from Baltimore, Fatima made plans to meet me at the Verizon Center after work so that she could catch the concert. Since seeing her parents, I noticed something different in her and I couldn't exactly put my finger on what.

She had always carried her MacBook, but lately, she seemed to be writing on it more than usual. There were a few nights when she was visiting that I would wake up to find her engrossed on it. When I asked her what she was working on, she would say that she had to get some things off of her chest.

I assumed the confrontation with her mom was the cause of that and when she was ready to share what she was working on, she would. Sometimes people wanted to work things out for themselves and just wanted your silent support as they did so.

The minute the photographer asked for the next wardrobe change; I went back to the connecting room turned dressing room with Courtney leading the way. They wanted me to do my next set of shots alone with a basketball. Because my story was so unique, every interviewer wanted to explore that side of me.

I didn't mind; basketball was my first love, so taking a trip back now and then to reminisce on that love was something I

enjoyed doing.

As I changed out of my clothes, I noticed Courtney looking at me funny.

“What? You look like you wanna talk shit?” I asked while pulling on the new shirt.

“I was gonna give your conceited ass a compliment, but I changed my mind now.”

“*You’re giving me a compliment?*” I asked mockingly. “That must be part of those baby hormones I always hear about.”

“It has nothing to do with the baby,” she snapped.

I stopped what I was doing and went over to her. “Aye, what’s going on with you?”

“I guess I’m finally coming to terms with the fact that my baby is not gonna have a father when he or she comes into this world.” She swiped at a tear. “And that’s not something I thought *I* would ever have to deal with.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wasn’t fooling around with some random guy who was running in the streets. I’ve been in a *relationship* with this man for *years*. We went to college together; we planned our future-”

“That’s your problem right there. Just because a nigga went to college doesn’t automatically make him a good man. I know plenty of niggas in the hood taking care of their babies.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just not one of these girls out here with baby daddies all over the place.”

“Nobody said you were and fuck anybody who believes that shit anyways. You just hooked up with a whack nigga and got pregnant by him. It happens to the best of ‘em. You don’t know what kind of man you’re dealing with until some real shit goes down.”

“You’re right about that.”

“Whether that nigga is there or not, you got a bunch of uncles over here ready to spoil that baby. If it’s a boy, we’re gonna show him how to be a man. If it’s a girl, we’re locking her in the room until she’s thirty.”

A smile finally broke through.

“I don’t want PD or Richie anywhere near my baby J.”

I started laughing harder. Don’t you want your baby to learn what *not* to do.” She gave me a warning look, and I gave her a hug. “Don’t get no tears on this shirt, we gotta give this shit back when we’re done.”

But she didn’t respond; she just held on to me. I could see that this baby stuff was getting to her and I began to wonder if her being on this tour was the best thing for her anymore.

Larry walked into the room holding his phone up. “They’re ready for you.”

“I’ll be right there. I gotta finish getting dressed.” Courtney had finally let me go and was wiping her eyes. “You good?”

She nodded and reversed back to assistant mode, moving around the room in a hurry.

After I finished dressing, I returned to the set for another round of shooting. Larry and Tyson were both walking alongside me.

“Should we be looking at getting you another assistant?” Larry whispered.

I turned briefly to see where Courtney was, but she was several steps behind me engaged in conversation with someone from the magazine.

“Why do you keep asking that?”

“Because I don’t think you realize how moody and emotional pregnant women get,” he explained.

“I don’t know from experience, but it can’t be that bad.”

“Well, *from experience*, I am telling you that they can be a nightmare to deal with. They get *moody* and *mean* and *emotional* and *needy* and *cranky*-”

“Aye, you a’ight? You look like you’re having flashbacks about it.”

“If I am, that’s because I am trying to warn you as to how bad it can get. I like Courtney, but she’s going to have a lot on her plate dealing with this baby. And from here on out things are only going to get worse for you. We have been putting things off and turning down things because we can’t fit all of the requests in your already crowded schedule.”

“I know Courtney’s got a lot on her plate, but I’m not gonna do her like that. She was all of those things already *before* getting pregnant; she’ll be straight.”

I went to the set, and one of the production assistants threw me a basketball. I palmed it and spun it around in my hand and did a few tricks. I was rusty, so it didn’t look as smooth as it used to. I heard the clicks begin and continued being myself as the photographer captured me in real time.

While in mid-laugh from a blotched trick, I noticed Fatima hugging Courtney. That only caused my smile to grow even wider because I wasn’t expecting her until later on.

She waved, and I gave her a nod to acknowledge that I saw her. The minute I finished I went over to where she was and lifted her from the floor.

“You can’t be popping up on me like that. You know I can’t get no work done once I see yo’ fine ass.”

“You’re looking a little rusty out there with that basketball,” she joked.

“It’s been a minute since I’ve been on the court.”

Along with Courtney and Larry, we began to walk back towards the connecting room, so that I could change. When Courtney tried to follow us inside the room, I asked her to give me a minute alone with Fatima.

“J, you better not mess up any of the clothes,” she said with her hands on her hips.

“Ain’t nobody gonna mess up nothing. We’ll be out in a minute.”

I wasn't planning on having sex with Fatima in the room; I just wanted a minute alone with my baby because those minutes were now few and far between. I closed the door and turned to where Fatima was sitting on one of the chairs, and I pulled her out of the chair.

"Girl, I miss you so damn much." I rocked her in a hug.

"You better."

"What am I gonna do when you start medical school?"

"You'll survive; Baltimore isn't too far from New York."

After having some private time alone with her, I changed back into my clothes and then stepped outside to find Larry, Tyson, and Courtney all busy on their phones as they waited.

The minute we got back to my suite, I had Fatima pinned up against the wall. I didn't care how exhausted I was gonna be while performing; there was nothing that was about to stop me from being inside of her.

After we finished playing *house* in my suite, we all took the cars to the Verizon Center to get ready for that night's show. Fatima was only staying for my set, and then she had to catch a flight back to Baltimore because she had to work in the morning.

Once I completed my set, I met her in my room and again kicked everybody out so that I could have a moment alone with her before she left.

The minute she was gone it seemed like moody Courtney entered the room in her absence. I thought it was funny how her demeanor could be completely usual one minute and the next she acted as if she was possessed.

As she went around the room adjusting and arranging things my boys were messing up, I leaned back in my seat and began to think about Fatima. Once again, I wanted to have sex with her and once again neither one of us had a condom.

I began to wonder what would happen if she did get pregnant, how that would change things between us. At this point in my career, having a baby was the last thing I wanted

to think about, but it was something about *Fatima* being pregnant with my child that made me smile.

When I noticed Courtney going off on a drunk PD in the corner, I pulled her to the side and forced her to sit down. Then I talked my boy into leaving the room.

While Larry and I had been talking about sending Courtney home, I was beginning to wonder if I was gonna have to do the same with PD. I made him a part of my team because he had been there from the beginning and I knew I could trust him. But the fame seemed to be getting to his head. He was turning into a completely different person, someone that I was starting not to like. And if it came down to saving my friendship with him or having him as my employee, I was going to choose friendship.

Fatima had sent me a text message to let me know that she had made it to her gate and would be boarding soon. I told her to have a safe flight.

It was funny how with her around my focus changed. I was now questioning the agendas of the people around me. I was also thinking beyond music and success to things that were more tangible like having my own family. I didn't know what it was about this girl or our relationship that made everything seem so much clearer to me, but it was.

# Chapter 54

## *Fatima*



*I* felt good to not have to rush to an airport.

I maneuvered my way backstage. Jaren had just finished performing, and as I always did, I wanted to see him afterward to tell him how good his show was.

I spoke briefly to Tyson and his boys who were all busy entertaining groupies as I slipped inside. I was a bit thrown off when I saw Courtney lying on the couch and Jaren on his knees over her.

I slowly closed the door. “Is everything okay?”

“I got a lil dizzy while getting his stuff ready,” Courtney answered weakly.

“Want me to take a look?”

Even though I wasn’t a doctor yet, I knew enough to know if Courtney needed additional medical attention.

Jaren moved out of the way, and I knelt beside her. I first took her wrist and began to check her pulse.

“How long have you been feeling dizzy?”

“It just started,” she said looking visibly uncomfortable. “I was up moving around, and then I started feeling unsteady.”

Jaren handed her bottled water over my shoulder, and she began to drink from it.

“Can you see how many fingers I’m holding up?”

“Three.”

“Can you follow my finger?” I watched as her pupils followed the direction of my finger. “Do you feel like you have a headache?”

“No.”

“Do you have any pain in your abdomen?”

“No.”

“How far along are you now?”

“Fifteen weeks. I just started my second trimester. Do you think the baby is okay?”

“It should be. I don’t see any visible signs of anything more serious,” I explained to them. “In the second semester your uterus is growing, so more pressure is being put on your blood vessels which can make you feel light-headed. If you are standing for too long or moving around too much, you will also get dizzy.”

I looked over her again trying to make sure she was okay. I was shocked how easily I was able to recall information I had learned in my pre-med classes.

“When was the last time you ate?”

She squinted her eyes as if she was trying to remember. “Maybe a few hours ago.”

“You need to eat something; the dizziness could be from low blood sugar levels.” I stood up. “If you go to the bathroom and you see *any* bleeding, you need to go to the hospital.”

“Thank you, Fatima.”

“No problem. Can I get you anything while I’m here?”

“Can you hand me one of those sandwiches?”

I walked over to the table spread, and along with a turkey sub, I added some baby carrots, and mixed fruit to her plate then handed it to her.

Jaren who had been standing over me while I checked her, still looked panicked. I handed her the plate and checked on him.

“Is she gonna be okay?” I followed him inside the space and closed the door behind us.



“She’s fine. She needs to pace herself and take it easy. The first two trimesters are the worst when it comes to being sick.”

“I told her to sit down somewhere.” His entire energy changed once he realized she was going to be fine and he started rubbing my arm. “Take a shower with me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I need to get moving anyways.” He then smacked my butt.

“Keep it up, and you won’t be seeing *any* of this tonight.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Back inside the central part of his dressing room, I took the empty plate from Courtney.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Good. I know it’s hard while being on the road, but you have to keep track of when you eat, or you’ll keep getting dizzy like that.”

“I learned my lesson,” she acknowledged. “You’re going to make a good doctor.”

“We shall see; my program starts in two weeks.”

“You say that like you’re not excited.”

“It’s not that. I just got something else in the works that I had hoped to hear about by now.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t really wanna get into it.” I stood up. I gripped my stomach instinctually. I had just started my cycle, and my cramps were excruciating.

“Wait. Are you pregnant?” Courtney asked, her eyes filled with horror.

Jaren stepped out of the bathroom freshly dressed. “*You’re pregnant?*”

I looked at Courtney and then at Jaren. I liked Courtney, and I felt like she was a good assistant for Jaren, but whether I was pregnant or not was none of her business.

“Courtney, can you excuse us?” I asked.

Rather than say “*sure*” or “*okay*” she looked at Jaren as if *my* request wasn’t enough. My eyes found him too, and I hoped he read every thought in them.

“Court, can you give us a few,” he finally asked.

I watched as she made a scene of getting up from the couch. She was barely showing with just a tiny bump but was acting like she was ready to pop. Jaren helped her up, and she left the dressing room.

“Are you about to tell me that you’re pregnant?”

“No, I’m *not* pregnant.”

“Then why did you want Courtney?”

“Because her asking me about whether I was pregnant or not was out of line. I understand that Courtney is your assistant and that you two have a close relationship, but *our* relationship still needs to remain *our* relationship.”

“I know that.”

“What goes on between me and you isn’t anybody else’s business...*not* even Courtney’s.”

“Did something happen between you two?”

“No, I’m just protective of *us*. ”

“And you’re *sure* you’re not pregnant?” he asked wrapping his arms around my waist.

“I’m *not* pregnant, Mother Nature is paying me a visit.”

“*Again?* Wasn’t she *just* here?”

“Yea, a *month* ago.”

“So that means-”

“We can cuddle and watch Netflix; mama is cramping tonight.”

“Mama, huh?” he said rubbing my stomach, “I like the sound of that.”

“I like the sound of *wife* first.”

There was a knock at the door, and Courtney popped her head in. “They need you.” She informed him while avoiding me.

“I’ll be right there.”

She hesitated as if she wanted to say something else but changed her mind and closed the door. After sharing another kiss, Jaren finished putting on his jewelry and left the room. I decided not to follow him this time and stayed back in the room.

# Chapter 55

## *Fatima*



After the show, Jaren had to show his face at an afterparty. His manager had booked him for. I stayed back in the suite because I didn't feel like going and I fell asleep working on my new story.

At almost three Jaren was stroking my face with his hand.

"Hey."

"Hey. You need anything?"

"No." I moved my dead Macbook to the nightstand and went to the bathroom. "How was the party?"

"Same as all the others."

I used the bathroom and came back out to find Jaren whispering on the phone. I cleared my throat, and he looked up at me holding a finger up.

"Okay, I'll be there in a minute," he continued then ended his call and turned to me.

At those words, my eyebrows widened. "Where are you going this late?"

"Courtney is upset."

"And?"

"What do you mean, *and*?"

"She's upset, *and* you plan to go to her room to do exactly *what* this late in the morning?"

"It's not like that with Courtney. I already told you that's lil sis, ain't nothing going down like that."

If he thought a pregnant Courtney could get upset, he hadn't seen *me* on my period.

“You’re about to make me choose?”

My hands moved to my hips. If he left the room, I had already set in my mind that I was going home.

“It’s called boundaries.”

I knew how hormonal pregnant women could get and I could sense the fact that Courtney was beginning to act territorial when it came to Jaren.

I was sympathetic to her situation. I understood that Jaren was trying to be there because her baby daddy wasn’t. But Jaren *wasn’t* her baby daddy. He might not have seen the subtle differences, but I could.

He picked up his phone again and put it to his ear. For the next minute, I listened to him tell Courtney he wasn’t coming down. I’m not sure what her response was, but I honestly didn’t care.

When he finished, he went to the bathroom to take a shower, and I scrolled through Netflix to find a movie.

A half hour later, he came out of the bathroom with just a towel wrapped around his waist. It was moments like this I wanted to curse Mother Nature for her existence and eternal monthly punishment on women.

“What’s wrong?” I asked noticing the agitation on his face.

“You don’t have any reason to be suspicious of Courtney.”

“I never said I was; I said she needs to *learn* boundaries.”

“She’s my assistant. That’s it.”

“Would you feel comfortable with me going to my Attending’s room at this hour?”

He gave me a look as if I was being ridiculous.

“That’s different; your *Attending* wants to sleep with you if he’s calling you this late. It’s not like that with Courtney; we don’t look at each other in that way.”

I scanned Jaren from his perfectly cut hair to his beard, to his gorgeous face. I don’t care what he said; I could see how

any woman could easily find herself falling for him without even realizing it.

“I don’t wanna fight about this. I said what I had to say.”

I laid down on the bed and felt Jaren moving around behind me before also getting in the bed and sliding his arm through my waist. Neither one of us said anything else about the topic as we fell asleep.

I wasn’t trying to be an asshole to Courtney; I was only following my gut when it came to the situation. I had set some things in motion that I hoped would pan out soon and if they did, I was going to be around Jaren more. And if we didn’t find a happy medium soon, I could see things turning uglier between us.

# Chapter 56

## *Jaren*



That night in Philly, I brought out Meek Mill and Beanie Siegel to join me on stage. We did a few songs together, and they added freestyle verses to *Cut from a Different Cloth*.

Once I finished with the rest of my set, I made my way off-stage. My boys were waiting nearby, and as people surrounded me talking over each other about how dope the show was, I reached for the towel Courtney was holding out. Courtney then handed me bottled water but didn't say anything to me as she did so. This had been the routine since we left Baltimore.

Larry approached me talking about some call he got about Kadeem and me performing together at the MTV Video Music Awards. As he explained the details, we walked towards my dressing room.

I thought it was a good idea, so I had him agree to the performance. As he walked off with renewed excitement, I made my way into the room. My boys followed and immediately started pouring drinks.

"Aye, I need you to get with Larry," I told Courtney while busy sending Fatima a text.

"Yup," she said in a quipped tone.

I was fed up with the tension between us. When I noticed the room thinning out, I had her sit down.

"What's your problem?"

"You know what's wrong with me."

"If I did, I wouldn't be asking you."

"Back in Baltimore, I needed you, and you left me hanging."

“It was almost *four* in the morning.”

“You told me if I *ever* needed you that you would be there.”

“I *did* say that, but I’m also *with* somebody now so I can’t always do everything you want me to.”

“She tells you what to do?”

“Nobody *tells* me what to do. It’s called respect.”

“Respect goes two ways,” Courtney went on, “Fatima has to respect the fact that I was here before her.”

“Where is this coming from? I thought the two of you were cool?”

“I thought so too, but for some reason, she has a problem with me.”

“I don’t think she has a *problem* with you. She wants there to be some boundaries.”

“Boundaries from me?”

“All I know is that I want my girl and my assistant to start getting along again.”

“Then I suggest you put *her* in her place.”

I couldn’t believe what she had just said so I took a minute to allow the words to sink in before I answered her.

“Fatima is my girl; she doesn’t work for me.”

“But I do, so you should’ve had my back.”

I had to remind myself that she was pregnant and that I had to be careful with how I handled her.

“I think we better just leave it right there.”

Courtney tilted her head as if she was even more angry with me and then she got up and stormed out of the room. I groaned as I rubbed my hair.

“What is she pissed about now?” PD asked sitting down in the open chair.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”



“My guess is that they got into it.”

I looked down at him in shock. “What makes you say that?”

“I could see it coming a mile away.” PD continued. “Bruh, are you sure that’s not your baby?”

I looked at him like he was sniffing a line in front of me.

“I’m just saying, she’s acting like *your* baby is inside of her.”

“Well it’s not, so you can get that out of your head now.”

PD nodded. “The Henny probably just got me tripping.”

Brushing off his words, I took a shower and changed.

Once I stepped out, I saw Courtney straightening up in the room. I didn’t know what her mood was, so I just tried to avoid her. I began to pull my chain over my neck when I noticed her looking at me in the mirror.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” she said looking as if she was close to tears. “I have a lot going on in my life, and I’m just scared. Having a baby is a huge step.”

“I know it is.”

“I never ever meant to cause any problems between you and Fatima.”

“Are sure you don’t want to go back home and get yourself together.”

“I can handle it. That night, Eric had called, and we got into an argument about the baby...*that’s* why I was so upset. I just needed you there.”

“I am here. I just can’t always be there in the way *you* want me to be.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry for how I’ve been acting.”

“You’re good; it happens sometimes.”

# Chapter 57

## *Jaren*



That Sunday I had the day off before we had our last Philly show. I flew down to Baltimore to spend it with Fatima. When I wasn't deep inside of her, we would talk. It was something about just talking to her that always made her feel like home.

I had drifted off to sleep at the end of the bed while we were watching some show and when I woke up that afternoon, I found her typing away on her MacBook. I pulled her by her legs towards me.

“What are you doing?” she giggled.

“You're gonna tell me what you're working on. Every time I look up you are working on something.” I began to tickle her.

“Okay, okay, okay,” she squealed gasping for air. “I'll tell you!”

I stopped, and she laid in the crook of my arm with her laptop over us.

“I've been working on a new story,” she said scrolling through her document until she reached the beginning. “I submitted the first three chapters to a literary agent a few weeks ago. She looked up at me as if she was unsure what I thought about what she was telling me so far.

“You *have* been writing?” I smiled down at her.

“I was trying to surprise you.”

“What did the agent say?”

She couldn't even hide the smile from creeping on her face as she began to answer. “He loved the first three chapters and wants me to submit the rest of the manuscript to him.”

“Are you serious?”

“I wanted to wait to tell you once everything was finalized, but it looks like I will be signing with him soon and he already knows a few publishing companies that are interested in my story.”

I was so happy for her, especially the look of pure excitement that was covering her face.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about a curvy girl who feels stuck on the path that her parents set out for her. She has two best guy friends, and when one of them is murdered by a cop during a traffic stop, she begins to look at the world differently. While her other best guy friend moves on and gets drafted by the NFL, she announces to him that she wants to do something to change the world in honor of their friend. She comes up with this idea to travel around the country to cities where other innocent kids have been killed and becomes an active member of Black Lives Matter. He ends up joining her on a few stops, and while learning more about herself and her love of activism, she falls in love with him.”

“And what happens?”

“Well, when her best friend finds himself in conflict with the NFL and the team’s policies. He is forced to choose between his love of activism and his dream career.”

“What about her?”

“It takes him a lot longer to realize that he is in love with her. He tries to hold on to the friendship out of respect of their former friend.”

“I like that. It’s crazy how your mind can come up with a whole story like that.”

“I feel the same way about your music.”

“You did all of this behind my back? You know I would have published this book for you without you having to go through an agent.”

“I know you would have, but I wanted to do this by myself.”

I took the MacBook away from her and moved it to the side of the bed. “I guess I have to start calling you something else instead of *Med School*.”

“Looks that way.”

“What about medical school?”

“I have an appointment with my advisor on Monday morning to tell him that I am gonna take a year off. I’ve decided to give myself a year to get my writing off the ground, if it doesn’t work out as I hope, then I’m gonna go back to medical school and dedicate myself to it.”

“You have thought this out.”

“I have. I was also thinking about even joining a certain *someone* for the rest of their tour...”

“Don’t be playing with me,” I told her as my phone began to go off. I snatched it off the nightstand.

“Let me guess, Courtney,” Fatima said rolling her eyes.

“Actually, it’s Larry,” I said glancing at the screen. “Whassup?”

Larry began to ask me if I was available to do some appearance in Philly that night and I told him that I was in Baltimore with Fatima. He didn’t like my response and told me so. We had a similar conversation before about me putting off things because of Fatima. Larry was feeling more and more as if my relationship was becoming a distraction to my career.

In the past, I would sometimes do last minute appearances on my days off, all of that changed with Fatima in my life.

Once I got off the phone with him, I looked down at Fatima.

“I’m so proud of you,” I told her lowering my head to kiss her on the mouth.

“How proud?”

“I can show you better than I can tell you,” I said working my way down her body.

# Chapter 58

## *Fatima*



I was finally taking the leap! I had fully joined the tour with Jaren after putting medical school on hold. I was filled with both nervousness and excitement at my decision.

Even though I had decided that this step was necessary, the fact that I was solely relying on Jaren now made me somewhat uneasy.

I still had a few more chapters left in my book, *A Chosen Dream*, and my literary agent, Charles Wideman, was loving every new chapter I submitted to him. He was so excited about the book that he decided to sign me even though I wasn't finished with the manuscript. He told me that he recognized my raw talent, and he could also see this story making it to the big screen.

At the moment we were in Columbus, Ohio on the tour's latest stop, enjoying one of Jaren's rare days off hanging out in his suite. Both Larry, Courtney, and a few other people, some I didn't recognize, was also present talking business with Jaren.

Jaren was sitting on the couch engrossed in documents in front of him as they discussed with him the importance of next week's MTV appearance. Kadeem was going to open the show by himself, and bring out Jaren for their song and then Jaren was going to close the set with one of the most popular songs from his new album.

Even though *Cut from a Different Cloth* was his hottest song out, that platform wasn't appropriate for it. Plus, he had already agreed to perform it at the Hip Hop Awards.

His stylist, a Korean man named, Jim Woo who liked to simply go by Halo, was measuring him and going over ideas for wardrobe for his arrival, the performance, and the after party. Jaren was very vocal about what he wanted for his look,

and as Halo took notes and made sketches, Jaren would point out things.

*Who knew men put so much thought into what they were going to wear to events?*

“What are you wearing?” Halo yelled across the room causing all eyes to turn to me.

My mouth had dropped open at his question because Jaren and I hadn’t even discussed me going. Honestly, the awards were far from his mind as he focused on each show that was directly in front of him. Larry had called this meeting on his day off to firm up things between them and to help Jaren get prepared for the show. After that, they were going to rehearse for the performance.

My eyes went to Jaren and he looked at me as if my answer didn’t bother him either way.

“He’ll be on the red carpet alone,” Larry said cutting into the silence in the room.

“Hold up,” Jaren said holding out a hand, “I haven’t even thought about it.”

“Jaren, we already discussed this. *You* are a sex symbol whether you like it or not and your fans don’t want to see you walking the carpet with a woman,” Larry stated.

“I went on the radio and told the world that I’m with somebody. Everybody already *knows* about her,” he argued with amusement.

“It’s one thing to know about her, it’s another thing to *flaunt* her on the red carpet of one of the biggest award shows in the world,” Larry said firmly. “Why don’t you have her join you at the afterparty?”

“When I was with Brandy, you tried to push us on every red carpet.”

“That’s because *Brandy Moore* is one of the biggest stars in the world,” Larry answered matter-of-factly.

“How about you let us decide if she wants to go or not? After *we* talk about it, I’ll get back with you and let you know

my decision.”

“Jaren, you’ve always talked about keeping your relationships private. Why would you change it up now?” Courtney asked.

It was her inclusion into the conversation that I paid the most attention to. Larry always acted as if he didn’t like me around, but I was able to ignore it in the beginning because Courtney had been so warm and welcoming.

After our tense moments in Baltimore, she was no longer all warm and fuzzy like she had been, and I had a feeling it was because she felt as if I was taking Jaren from her. I tried to be sensitive to that knowing that she needed him more now than ever, but it was becoming ridiculous.

I wasn’t trying to change Jaren, mess up their career plans for him, or be in the way. *He* wanted me on this tour, and the decisions he made concerning me were his own. I never tried to influence him in any way. I was happy just playing my position behind the scenes while working on my book.

“I said I’ll talk it over with Fatima,” Jaren reiterated.

The look of hurt on her face let me know that she was not used to Jaren going against her or talking to her in such a dismissive way.

Not wanting to hear anything else, I pulled out my earbuds and put them in my ear, then scooped up my MacBook and closed the door to the bedroom.

Once I could get my mind off of the conversation, I witnessed in the living room; I was finally able to dive back into the chapter I was working on. While I was in the middle of pounding out a tense scene, I felt arms wrap around me. I pulled out the earbuds.

“Are you finished in there?”

“They’re all gone.” He sat down next to me. “Why did you leave?”

“I don’t like being a part of your meetings like that. Nobody in there wants me here but *you*. I don’t want to make



things worse by always being around when their talking business.”

“It doesn’t matter what they want. They all work for me,” he said moving hair out of my face. “Do you wanna go to the award show with me?”

I thought about it and quickly shook my head *no*. “I think that is something for you to experience with your fans. I don’t want you spending the night worried about me.”

“Are you sure? Because if you wanna go, I can get a stylist up here today to measure you for something.”

“I don’t wanna put myself out there like that. Maybe the next show, but not this one.”

“You’re not gonna be in the way if you come. I know how to multi-task very well.” He slipped his hand between my legs.

“Stop, Jaren. I can’t,” I told him trying to squeeze my legs shut. “I really wanna get through this chapter while these ideas are fresh in my head.”

He pulled his hand back. “*Damn*. I was trying to get some before I left for rehearsal.”

“You’re gonna have to wait until you get back.”

“It’s like that?”

“Yup.”

“You shouldn’t be over here looking all sexy then.” He kissed my thigh.

“I know what you’re trying to do; let me get through this chapter.”

“*A’ight!* I’m about to take a shower and meet up with Kadeem for rehearsal.”

“I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Oh, you’re gonna see me a’ight,” he said biting his bottom lip. I took a nearby pillow and threw it at him.

“Get out of here before Larry bans me from the rest of the tour.”

“That will never happen,” he said before disappearing inside of the bathroom.

# Chapter 59

## *Fatima*



It had been two weeks since I had rejoined the tour and the entire time things between me, and Courtney were strained.

Her belly had grown, and you could see that she was in the middle stages of pregnancy.

I tried to help her out or offer assistance when she didn't look like she was doing too well, but she rebuffed all of my help and practically treated me like a stranger.

At first, it didn't bother me, but now it was getting under my skin. When the three of us would be in the same room, the tension would be so high that I would find myself excusing myself from the situation so that it didn't affect Jaren.

He tried to tell me that Courtney was just hormonal from pregnancy, but it seemed like things were a lot deeper than that. When I first met Courtney, I was confident that nothing had ever gone down between her and Jaren. The more jealous she acted around me, I began to wonder how much of that was true.

While Jaren was on stage performing, I decided to try and talk to her since these were some of the rare moments, I got to be alone with her.

“Courtney, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“About?”

“Why does it feel like I did something to you?”

“The moment you tried to come between my relationship with Jaren is when things became that way.”

“How did I come between you two?”

“None of his other women have *ever* stepped out of line like you.”

“I don’t think I’ve done anything to you. I mean, if we are going to be around each other for the rest of this tour, I was hoping that we could at least be cordial,” I reasoned.

“I work for Jaren; that doesn’t mean I have to get along with you.”

“I know you don’t, but I was trying to help make things less awkward between us.”

“You have your place in his life, and I have mine, and long *after* you’re gone, *I* will still be here.”

After she said those words, she walked out of the dressing room.

I sat down in the chair and replayed our conversation. I began to wonder to myself if I was the one who should go back home.

*Why was I forcing myself where I didn’t belong?*

After another hour passed before Jaren returned to the room and it quickly filled up with his entourage.

“You didn’t watch the show?”

I shook my head ‘*no.*’

“Whas wrong?” he followed-up with a frown.

“Nothing.”

He didn’t believe me but still, let it go. For the rest of the night, I tried to *play my position* as the supportive girlfriend without being in his way. While he took pictures with his boys, Courtney slipped beside me.

“You see Fatima; *we* are his family. *We* are the people who have always taken care of him and got him to where he is today. *None* of us would do anything to hurt him so stop trying to come in between that.”

I was too stunned to even respond.

Later on, that night, I couldn't get into having sex with Jaren. I had so many questions swirling around in my head that the mood was gone.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm just thinking."

"About?"

"Maybe I should go back to my apartment in Baltimore and finish working on my book there."

"Where did that come from?"

"I think I need to focus."

"And that's the *only* thing bothering you?" His expressions reflected that he wasn't convinced.

"I'm trying my best to fit in here, but nobody wants me on this tour. I'm tired of feeling like I am in the way."

"You're not in the way if *I* want you here."

"I thought maybe I can go back to Maryland, finish the book, let some time pass, let Courtney cool down, and then finish out the California dates with you."

He rubbed his eyes as if he was frustrated.

"You know that's not what I want."

"It's not what either of us wants; maybe it's what we need right now."

"Let me talk to Courtney-" he urged moving off the bed.

"Don't; you will only make things worse."

"Maybe I need to send Courtney home and get a new assistant?"

"I'm not trying to see anybody lose their job."

"Look at me Fatima," he said forcing my eyes to him. "You are not in the way; *I* want you here. I don't know how many different ways I can tell you that. And I don't give a damn what anybody else has to say about it as long as this. *You and*

*me* are good, then that is all that matters. Let *me* take care of everybody else.”

It was something about the way he knew how to take control of a situation and make everything feel right that I found myself loving most about him. Around him, he wouldn't allow me to worry or second guess myself. He would be firm in whatever he was thinking, and that always allowed me to relax in the safety of him. I just hoped things would get better for here on out.

# Chapter 60

## *Jaren*



When Fatima started talking about going back to Baltimore, that was when I knew I had to step in. I individually let everyone around me know that if I ever heard them disrespecting Fatima, they would be gone. They each tried to convince me that they were only trying to look out for me, but I didn't see it that way. They were disrespecting the woman I loved, and nothing about that was helping me.

She hated that I was giving ultimatums, but they had to learn that she was around to stay. They needed to respect her the same way they did me.

She was nearing the last few chapters of her book and the closer she got to the end, the more she stayed up working around the clock. It was sexy to see someone who worked just as hard as me.

"Let's go with that," my stylist, Halo said after I stood in the mirror examining what he had put together.

"A'ight."

I was dressed down in Versace, from my bomber jacket to my metallic sneakers. I was more than ready to hit the red carpet. For the stage, I had some new *I Never Hated* merch I couldn't wait to pull out.

At the *Beverly Hills Hotel* in Inglewood, California not too far from *The Forum*. Fatima was on the couch busy on her MacBook while I got dressed. I would catch her glance up to look at me as I tried on pieces Halo had laid out.

I wanted her to come with me that night, but I understood that she was hesitant about that kind of spotlight. Not everybody wanted to see their name in lights.

While noticing her watching me, I turned around to face her.

“Keep looking at me like that, and you’re gonna be in trouble.”

“Is that right?”

I glanced at Halo and then back at Fatima. Then I looked down at my watch.

“Un uh, you have to get out of here,” she shook her head.

“Halo, can you give us a minute?”

“Don’t mess up the clothes, *that’s* Versace,” Halo said stepping out the door.

I began to peel off all the pieces and hung them back up on the rack. And in just my boxer briefs I walked over to where she was.

“How am I supposed to resist all of that?” She pushed her Macbook to the side.

“You’re not supposed to resist.”

The way she was sucking on my tongue, made me second guess if I was gonna make the red carpet at all that afternoon.

“I’ll be right back.” I didn’t have any condoms within reach, so I had to go to the room to grab one.

Fatima pulled me back down. “We don’t need it.” She followed her words by sliding her tongue inside of my mouth.

I knew she was on birth control, but we both believed firmly in practicing safe sex. This step was another turning point between us.

“I might need more than an hour if it’s like that,” I joked.

“No, you won’t.”

I slid underneath her until I was sitting on the couch and she straddled my lap. I watched as she paused before sliding down the length of me and the moment, I was inside of her, my head fell back on the couch.



She gripped my neck and began to slide up and down. I was ready to call Larry and tell him I caught a stomach bug or something. What she was doing to me was pure torture, and I wasn't ready to leave.

I cupped her back and felt her bite my shoulder. What followed was an hour of some of the most passionate sex we'd ever had.

The moment I stepped outside of the room, my team was giving me all kinds of looks. Tyson and Halo both had knowing grins on their faces, Courtney looked annoyed, Larry looked irritated, and my publicists looked as if they were gonna explode because of the amount of time that had been lost.

"I'm ready." I strolled towards the elevators.

They followed mumbling among themselves. I didn't care what anyone had to say. I still had to *live* my life, because at the end of the day, this *was* my life and they were technically all on board for the ride.

As the elevator dropped, I thought about how I couldn't wait to get back to my room for a repeat of what I just had.

# Chapter 61

## *Jaren*



Our performance at the MTV Music Awards was the talk of the night. Kadeem and I came up with the idea to use similar backdrops from our tour which we spliced in half. He was representing the West, and I was representing the East.

Surprising the hell out of me, we won an award for best rap collaboration. I let Kadeem do most of the talking. When I did speak, I thanked God, my mom, my sister, everyone who got me to this point and even Fatima for inspiring me.

After the formal show I went to Ice Cube's afterparty and even though I enjoyed as much of the night as I could, I found myself sexting with Fatima.

By the time I got back to the room, Fatima was in a deep sleep, but that wasn't about to stop me from waking her up. I took a shower, and when I returned, I crawled under the covers.

The moment my tongue touched her between the legs she began to squirm awake grabbing the back of my head.

"Don't you ever get tired?" she asked mid-moan.

She widened her legs as I devoured her even more and when I felt her juices release, I moved my way up.

"Congratulations on your win," she smiled lazily.

"I wish you were there."

I felt her wrap her arms snugly around my neck and pull me closer. And it was with that encouragement that I slowly slid inside of her.

With nowhere to rush to, with no one waiting on either of us and the entire day ahead to relax, I took my time enjoying being inside of her warmth with nothing separating us.

Hours later, I woke up to find a tight-lipped Fatima pounding away on her MacBook. I knew her enough to know that something was wrong.

“What is it?”

“I suggest you check your phone.”

I tried to think about everything I had done at the awards show and after party.

*Did I talk to someone I wasn't supposed to? Was I pictured doing something foul? Did she not like someone I was pictured with?*

I pulled my phone off the nightstand and began to scroll through messages, and I saw links to posts about Brandy and me being in the same building for the first time. I saw blogs about things that happened at the party with several pictures including me.

But then I saw a link to *The Gossip Room* with an article that read: ***Exclusive: Jericho is Expecting A Baby!***

“What the fuck?”

*“Sources close to Jericho tell The Gossip Room that he is expecting a baby. His longtime assistant, Courtney Bassett (seen pictured below with him backstage at the MTV Music Awards) is pregnant with his first child. The source went on to tell us that Jericho and his camp have been trying to keep this secret under wraps for months, but recent tensions with his new girlfriend have the two women at each other's throats. His “wifey” Fatima Ward did not attend the award show with him, but Courtney was beside him the entire night. Her due date is said to be January 17th, so in due time we will see who this baby comes out looking like.”*

I scanned the pictures that followed the article, and in each of them, you could see how they tried to find what looked like *intimate* moments between Courtney and me.

I slid off the bed and pulled on shorts and a t-shirt. I went to the bathroom and washed my face, brushed my teeth then I made my way to the living room where Fatima was pounding even harder on her laptop.

I sat on the wooden coffee table across from her. “That’s not my baby. I’ve never, *ever* slept with Courtney in my life.”

Still, she said nothing.

“I will put out a statement.”

She said nothing.

“Say *something*.”

“I’m flying back to Baltimore later today.”

“Didn’t you just hear what I said?”

“I’m tired of this entire situation, between PD, Courtney, Larry...”

“So, your answer is to run?”

“If that’s how you wanna look at it.”

“Fatima, let me fix this.”

“I need to go... *for me*.”

“Do you think that’s my baby?”

“No, but you have some stuff to clean up in your camp, and until you do, I’m going home,” she said then swallowed hard. “From the TMZ article to this...I can’t stay in a mess like this. I have my career that I need to focus on.”

I searched her eyes and saw the seriousness in them. We stared at each other for several quiet minutes before she got up from the couch and left me sitting alone in the living room.

What could I say to that? She was right; it was long overdue, I had to clean house.

## Chapter 62

### *Fatima*



I had to get out of there, I didn't know what future Jaren and I stood a chance at having but we had already been tested so much. *The Gossip Room* story was honestly the straw that broke the camel's back and the last sign I needed to convince myself that it was time to go.

It wasn't Jaren that I was running away from, it was the entourage around him who felt as if they knew what was best for him and that *I* wasn't it! I didn't like that kind of pressure on our already public and criticized relationship.

I knew how much Jaren respected and was loyal to his team, so the last thing I wanted him to do was to fire anyone on my account. I didn't want to be known as that girl. I didn't want my name attached to any scandal regarding his blooming career.

Even after I explained my reasons, Jaren tried everything to convince me to stay, but no amount of sex was going to fix what was in plain sight. He had to decide how to handle his team on his own and however he handled it would let me know my true importance in his life.

It had been a few days since the article came out and as promised, Jaren did put out a statement denying all of the allegations. He even had Courtney release a statement in which she named the baby's actual father. Only for *that* man to deny the baby as being his, he pointed to the fact that Courtney spent many nights at Jaren's condo and that he believed the two were sleeping together all along. Gossipers were abuzz with trying to figure out the true tea, and I was thankful that I was thousands of miles away from it.

For some reason, I believed Jaren when he told me that they had never slept together. I honestly thought if they had,

Courtney would have thrown that in my face a long time ago. The fact she never said anything made me feel as if her feelings for him were one-sided. I think the loneliness was more so getting to her than actual feelings.

I was in such a creative space that I didn't want to be around any of it. All I wanted to do was finish my manuscript and wait with anticipation to see which publishing company would pick up the rights to it. I was ready to see my dream come to fruition and I didn't have the time or energy to surround myself with the drama.

I had just finished my last chapter earlier that day and was spending the rest of it celebrating my accomplishment. I couldn't believe something I started over a month ago was now sitting in front of me completely done.

It needed editing, but the manuscript was perfect in my eyes.

I poured myself a glass of wine and called my bestie who I hadn't talked to since returning home.

"Hey baby mama," Autumn joked.

"There you go."

"Where are you guys at now?"

"He's in Phoenix; I'm in Baltimore."

"Do not tell me that you two broke up over that story; you know those bloggers don't have a life."

"That may be so, but I had to take a break from that tour. It's too much drama," I explained.

"Damn, it's like that?"

"Everybody has something to say, and they are driving us both crazy."

"What does *he* say?"

"That all he wants is me, that he doesn't care about anyone else."

"Do you believe he had a thing with his assistant?"

“I don’t, and before you call me dumb, just know that I thought this through.”

“I don’t think that’s dumb at all, I know that you are trusting your intuition. What are you doing this weekend? I might drive up so that we can hang out.”

“I’ve got no plans, so come on.”

“Alright, let me call Chanel and let’s make it happen.”

We spent the next half hour talking about what was going on with other friends of ours and about what was going on in each of our lives. She couldn’t believe what I had been through with Courtney and was mad I hadn’t called her about it sooner.

After getting off of the phone, I curled my feet underneath me and tried to get lost in a new show starring Sanaa Lathan.

My phone began to ring, and I saw that it was a Facetime request from Jaren. I picked at my stray hairs before finally answering.

“Hey,” he said the moment the screen appeared.

“Hey.”

He was sitting on the couch of what I assumed was his new room.

“You look comfortable.”

It had been weird between us since I left him in California after the story broke.

“Yea. I just finished my book, and I have been celebrating by lounging around my apartment and sipping on wine.”

“I wish I could be there.”

“I wish you could be here too. Are you ready for tonight’s show?”

“Of course, but I’m ready for this tour to be over only three more weeks. I can’t wait to go home to my bed.”

“I bet.”

“I sent Courtney home,” he offered even though I didn’t ask.

“Was she the one that talked to that blog?”

“She says that she wasn’t, but whether she did or not, I think her being at home is what’s best for the baby.” He stared at me for a few quiet beats. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“Why don’t you come see me this weekend?”

“I can’t; I already made plans with my girls.” I shrugged.

“Next weekend?”

“We’ll see.”

“I don’t like how things are between us now,” he noted rubbing his face.

“I don’t either.”

We made small talk for a few more minutes before we finally ended the call altogether.



# Chapter 63

## *Jaren*



“Cut!” The director of our video, Dave Meyers, announced.

Kadeem and I were shooting a video for our song out in Las Vegas. It was something we had been wanting to do but agreed to do when the tour was close to wrapping. The only shows that we had left were in different cities all over California, with our last show being in L.A.

For our shows in Vegas that week, we had permits to shoot the video on various locations around the city. I was focused on putting out a good visual, but I couldn't deny that everything felt different around me.

I missed Fatima; I didn't realize how much a part of my life she had become until she left the way she did. And I'm not the type of nigga to sweat any girl the way it felt like I was sweating her.

Fatima had become like my best friend, the person I trusted more than anyone in my life besides my mom. Even though I knew we were still together, everything felt off.

I knew I had to clean house in my circle, but how did I do that without fully knowing who had my back and who was a snake. I had people around me who had been down with me from the beginning. I couldn't start getting rid of them without any proof.

After sending Courtney home, Larry found me a temp assistant, a young brunette who was only useful as a temporary.

Once off the set, I locked myself inside of my trailer and called Fatima. When she didn't answer, I placed my phone down and took a minute to clear my head.

I picked up my blunt from the nearby table and began to smoke it. With Courtney not being around, I was able to smoke again. I smoked in silence for the next few minutes, evaluating everything going on in my life.

When I heard a knock on my trailer, Tyson popped his head in to let me know that they were ready to start shooting again. I left the trailer feeling a little more renewed.

We shot our last scene for the next few hours. After saying goodbye to Kadeem and others from the set, I began to walk towards my car with Tyson right next to me.

“You miss her. Don’t you?” Tyson suddenly asked me out of the blue.

“She couldn’t handle all of this.”

“I don’t blame her.”

Instead of getting inside the SUV, I stopped several feet away from it.

“You sound like you know something.”

“I keep my ear to the ground.” He shrugged nonchalantly.

“Oh, yea. What do I need to know?”

“Not everyone around you got your best interests at heart.”

“Is that right? What do you know about the blog stuff?”

“I know when you first started messing with *her*, Larry was asking all of us a bunch of questions about her. He wanted to know *everything*. He was digging up anything he could find.”

“Larry?”

“You need to watch him.”

“Anybody else?”

“You were right to send Courtney home.”

“Why you say that?”

“She was in over her head. Fuckin with the wrong people,” he stated. His expression was serious the entire conversation, and I knew that I could trust what he was telling me.

“Like who?”

“I know PD for sure; I’m not sure about who else.”

“PD? Since when?”

Tyson shrugged. “I don’t know. PD was obvious though. They got into it a lot.”

I began to rub my hand over my face. I had *never* picked up that vibe from Courtney or PD. It made me question everything I knew about her.

“*Damn, PD.* Where have I been?” I scratched my head as if I would find answers after I did.

“Practically on a honeymoon.”

“I can’t believe that nigga was out here fuckin vulnerable ass pregnant women.”

“PD don’t care about that shit. That nigga swears *he’s* the one on tour.”

I thought about the times he and I got into it on the road, especially when he came for Fatima. I hadn’t gotten over that, but I was trying because of my loyalty to him as a friend. I now knew for sure that I had to send him back home.

“Bruh, if you see anything else going on behind my back, you gotta let a nigga know!”

“I’m just the bodyguard.”

“I need you to be my eyes and ears from here on out.”

He nodded with understanding.

My first call was to my lawyer, I had a lot to figure out before I made any moves.

After it was finally decided that I was sending my boys back to New York, I got into it with PD over the situation. He felt that I was choosing Fatima over them and since he had always been there for me, he felt betrayed.

I didn’t have time to go into it with him because he knew what was up. He had done enough that I should’ve sent him home a long time ago.



## Chapter 64

### *Fatima*



“I don’t believe this asshole,” I screamed into the phone at Autumn.

“I told you to keep your eyes on him.”

I was on my way to dinner with my new agent, Charles Wideman, when I received an alert that KeVon did some interview with TMZ.

*What happened to ‘Tima, I would never do that to you’?*

I pulled over in the nearest shopping center parking lot to concentrate on reading the article. In it, there were several old intimate pictures of us from when we were a couple in happier times. Pictures of us together being silly right after sex. You couldn’t see my parts or his, but you could see that we were both naked and my disheveled hair was the dead giveaway as to what we had been doing.

There were pictures he had taken of him training me when I was at my bigger size. In the article, he talked about how *he* wanted me when no one else did because of my weight and low self-esteem.

*Excuse me? I never had a problem pulling a man!*

He talked about helping me to lose the weight and building my confidence and that once I did all of that, I left him.

I had to force myself to keep reading the fabricated article because I needed to know how badly he had damaged my reputation with it.

He went on to say that after *‘I broke up with him for Jericho,’* that he tried his best to win me back, but I was too caught up in my new fame.

The worst part of the article is when KeVon said that after news about *Jericho* being the father of his assistant's baby came out that I ran back to Baltimore to beg him to take me back.

I didn't understand why he would do this.

He went on to tell TMZ that he didn't want to be anybody's sloppy seconds and that he realized that it was time that he moved on with his life. He told them he was single and focused on the success of his gym. Then, of course, he included the address, phone number, website information, and social media information for how to get in contact with him.

I tossed the phone onto the passenger seat and cradled my face in my hands.

*This couldn't be happening to me.*

Autumn was the first person I had called because I didn't know what to do or what to say to Jaren.

"I knew that nigga was up to something popping up everywhere. He probably put a damn GPS on your car."

"Autumn, why would he lie like that?"

"Because men like him are *crazy*. They get territorial about certain vaginas they've had, and they don't want anyone else to have a taste."

"But he can fall inside Deja and whoever else?"

"That's how it is. Men think they have a pass to do whoever they want, but they don't want that for a girl that they have feelings for. Even if he doesn't wanna do right by you, he doesn't want you to move on either."

"What do I do? What do I tell Jaren? I don't want to be on the receiving end of one of his diss tracks," I told her just thinking about how he murdered Brandy with *Cut from a Different Cloth*.

"He wouldn't do that to you."

I noticed my agent on the other line. "Aut, I gotta go; I'm late meeting with my agent."

“Girl, don’t be messing up your money worried about that asshole.”

“I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“Make sure you do that, I want to hear *everything*.”

I switched over and answered my agent’s call. “I’m so sorry, I’m on my way.”

“No worries, I was just calling to make sure that you were okay.”

“I saw some unsettling news just now, but I’m fine.”

“Well, I hope my news will cheer you up, see you shortly.”

I continued my drive to *Maisey’s* a famous American eatery in downtown Baltimore. Once I arrived, I couldn’t stop apologizing as I neared the table.

Charles stood to greet me. We had FaceTimed many times, but this was our first time being in the same room.

I took a seat across from him where I began to drink from the glass of water.

“It’s nice to be sitting across from such a creative mind finally.”

“I appreciate you taking a chance on me.”

“Are you kidding me? You are like an undiscovered gem. I had a bidding war over who was going to publish your book.”

“Are you serious?”

“How about we go ahead and order so that we can get down to business? We have a lot to talk about.”

After ordering our dishes, he let me know which publishing companies were interested in the rights to my book. I was overwhelmed by everything he was telling me from the signing bonus to the plans for the rollout. I was getting my own national tour. Unknown writers didn’t get this kind of buzz for their first book.

I felt like I was stuck in some twilight zone the more we discussed how they planned to market my book that next

summer. They wanted it to be a popular summer read and wanted to build buzz for it.

They found the *Black Lives Matter* messages intertwined with a love story timely without preaching at either side of the argument. It was a book they felt would help the divisiveness that was currently being felt in the country.

“So, what do you think?”

“I want you to reach over and pinch me.”

He had ordered a bottle of champagne after he finished with his news and poured us both a glass.

“I want to propose a toast, to one of the most talented young authors this country has yet to see. You better buckle up because you are about to go on the ride of your life.”

We clinked glasses, and I took a sip while allowing his words to sink in. As he talked, I noticed that my phone was ringing. I glanced at it to see that it was Jaren. As much as I wanted to answer and tell him about what was going on, I knew that he was calling for more than one reason and I didn't want to have that kind of conversation in front of my agent.

I denied the call and told him I would call him back after I finished with my meeting. He didn't respond.

For the next hour, we went over things in the manuscript that the publisher didn't like or wanted me to expand on. I wasn't entirely comfortable with all of the changes, but I had a few ideas on a compromise that I hoped they would accept.

After we finished our meeting, he walked me to my car. He had a car waiting to take him back to the airport so that he could fly back to New York while I traveled back home.

On the drive I tried to call Jaren again, and this time he sent my call to voicemail and didn't follow it up with a response of any kind. I was beginning to think maybe all of the pressures around us were starting to show the cracks in our relationship and there was honestly nothing I could do about it with so many miles separating us.



# Chapter 65

## *Fatima*



That next morning my phone began to go off, and I wiped my eyes to check the time on my clock. Since I didn't have school or a job to rush to, I had been sleeping in more and more.

For the past couple of months, Jaren had been paying for my apartment and all of my expenses. It allowed me to save and I was thankful for that savings now because it allowed me the flexibility to take a step back to get my life together.

If our relationship really was coming to an end, at least I would be able to support myself until the actual release of my book. If I had to get another job, I would do that too until I was able to support myself solely with writing.

My phone's ringtone went off, and I cleared my throat to answer it when I saw Jaren's name.

"Good morning."

"Did I wake you up?" he asked.

"I'm up now."

"Good, then come answer the door."

I shot up in the bed. "You're here? In Baltimore?"

"I guess you'll have to open the door to find out."

There was no way I was about to answer the door with my hair wrapped and funky breath. I sprinted to the bathroom and brushed my teeth with one hand while trying to smooth down my hair with the other. I quickly poured a cupful of mouthwash in my mouth as I sprayed one of my Bath & Body Works body sprays all over my body.

Once I felt as if I was presentable, I finally answered the door and tried my best to act as if I hadn't been acting like a madwoman in my bathroom just minutes earlier.

The moment I opened the door and saw Jaren standing in front of me with a hoodie on, my stomach did a couple of flips.

“You’re supposed to be on your way to San Francisco.”

Rather than confirm my statement, he dropped his lips to mine and kissed me as if he had been thinking about doing that his entire flight.

He back walked us inside of my apartment, and I threw my arms around his neck more securely to thoroughly accept more of him devouring my mouth.

We spent several minutes just kissing like that, when he finally released my lips, he rested his forehead against mine. The sounds of our heavy breathing filled my quiet apartment.

“I tried to call you,” I told him in a small voice between deep breaths.

“I needed to *see* you.”

“What’s wrong?” I know my question was dumb considering the TMZ article that had just come out the day before, but if it was about *that* I didn’t expect the kind of reaction I was getting from him at the moment.

He looked me directly in my eyes. “I never knew what it was to really *need* someone before.”

“Is your new assistant *that* bad?” I joked.

“Fatima, I need you like I need my music.” The desperation in his eyes surprised me. “After my show, I flew all the way here because I needed to tell you that.”

I looked away because I didn’t know what he wanted me to say to his words.

“You asked me to fix things around me, and I did. I want *you* with me for the rest of this tour. No, fuck that, I *need* you with me.”

“Because of the article?”

“You know I don’t believe the shit they write. I *know* you, just like you knew me enough to know that I didn’t sleep with

Courtney. I want *you* with me.”

“My book got sold to a publisher, and it will be coming out next summer,” I told him as my answer trying my best to hide the smile that wanted to break through.

He wrapped his arms around me. Without him saying anything I knew he was just as proud of me as I was of myself and he also knew that I was telling him that I would re-join him for the rest of the tour. We just had an unspoken connection like that.

# Chapter 66

## *Jaren*



“Let me get this straight,” Fatima said as we laid naked in her bed. “Courtney has been sleeping with *PD*? Do you think the baby might be his?”

“I don’t think they’ve been messing around *that* long. I think it started on the tour.”

“And here I thought she was growing feelings for *you*...” she mumbled looking up at the ceiling.

“What made you think that?”

“Just things she would say and the way she would act around you. I guess I read her wrong though. But *PD*?” she repeated with a pinched face. “He doesn’t even seem like her type.”

“He’s not. She likes those clean-cut, Fortune 500 type of niggas.”

“Have you talked to her about it?”

“Not yet. I didn’t find out until, she was already back in New York. And since she’s pregnant, I’m not trying to bring no more stress to her life.” I released a breath.

“Have you talked to *PD*?”

“Nope. We had that big fight in Vegas, and I sent his ass home after that.”

We laid in silence for a while before either of us spoke again.

“You haven’t *officially* fired anybody yet; you just kicked them off the tour?”

“Pretty much. I’m meeting up with Samir next week in L.A., and I have another meeting with my lawyer after that.

I'm trying to make sure my business is straight first."

"That's smart."

"What about you? You need me to handle your ex?"

"You got enough on your plate. I can take care of him."

"I wanna handle it."

"I'm telling you I can handle KeVon."

It was moments like this with Fatima that I enjoyed the most. After sex, we would bare our souls to each other. It was in these moments that I believed we had built the foundation we had. So as people kept coming for us, it was what we knew and found in each other that helped to sustain us through all the drama.

"I don't wanna talk about any of that anymore. I wanna talk about this book," I said gently popping her leg.

"I can't describe how excited I am. They have me scheduled for a tour and everything."

"I'm gonna have to follow you around and take pictures of you with your fans."

"My little tour will be *nothing* compared to yours."

"You already know I'm gonna help you promote the hell outta that joint when it drops."

"I appreciate it."

"I'm proud of you, and I'm glad that you are gonna finish out the tour with me."

"You know I will always be there to support you; I just couldn't be around all of that negativity."

"I know," I told her linking our fingers. "And I told you I would handle it and I did."

"What time is our flight?"

"Seven."

I had us flying out that night on a private jet straight to San Francisco where I had a show to do that next night. I hadn't

initially planned my impromptu trip to Baltimore, but my last-minute realization of how much I needed to be with her made me leave right after our last Vegas show.

I checked the clock on her nightstand.

“We got a few hours,” I said unlinking our fingers and sliding that same hand between her legs.

“I swear you must take Viagra or something.”

I bit her bottom lip, “I’m nowhere near that old, and you know you like everything I do to you.”

“You think so?” she asked sitting up to straddle my body. I gripped her waist and just enjoyed the view of her gazing down on me.

“I *know* so.”

# Chapter 67

## *Jaren*



With Tyson alongside me, we took a car straight to Levi's Stadium. Once inside, I rushed to the dressing room. It still felt weird having Tyson as the only part of my entourage. I was used to the laughter from my boys and Courtney's nagging.

Fatima was inside of the room with a strained look on her face, and I was immediately on alert at the sight of that. When she offered to be my assistant for the last few dates, I thankfully let go of the temp. When I saw Larry standing across from her popping fruit in his mouth, I immediately began to feel the heat rise under my neck.

I gestured for Fatima to leave the room.

"There goes my top client," Larry said wiping his hands with a napkin. "You have been a hard person to catch up with."

"I thought I told you I didn't need you for the rest of the tour."

"I know what you *told* me, but I am *still* your manager unless that has changed without my knowledge?"

I didn't respond to him because I was still working with my lawyer on the legalities of his firing.

"I'm a professional and part of my job is to check on my clients. Especially for the closing shows of the tour that *I* booked for you."

"On everything, I'm trying not to put hands on you."

"If we're having manager, client issues, we need to discuss what those are."

“Were you the one feeding stories about Fatima to the media?”

“Is that what this is all about? You have a problem with me because you think I sold some stories about your little girlfriend?”

“Did you?”

“I’m around the media all the time, if they heard something I said and printed it, I can’t control that.”

“Can’t control it? How does talking to the media about my girl *any* part of being my manager?”

“I’ve never *talked* to the media directly about her.” He picked up a nearby bottle of Hennessy and poured himself some. “She should be happy about all of the free publicity. She’s famous now, and she needs that since she’s becoming a published author.”

“Bruh, you gotta get the fuck up outta my room.”

The door suddenly swung open, and Tyson popped his head inside.

Larry casually continued to drink from his cup. “Can we help you, Tyson?”

Tyson looked directly at me. “You good?”

I gestured that I was, and he closed the door.

“If you know what is best for you, you will stop being buttsore about some blog posts and refocus so that we can continue to make money.”

I didn’t care about waiting on attorneys or anything else anymore. I couldn’t have a man like this around me or my woman. Everything about him felt sleazy.

“I know you are hard of hearing sometimes, but I hope you hear me clearly on this. *You. Are. Fired,*” I said directly to him.

“With everything that I have on you and your little girlfriend, are you sure about that?”



“If you know what is good for you, you’ll leave Fatima out of it.”

“Now where’s the fun in that?” He grabbed a red apple off the table, took a bite of it and left the room.

Fatima stepped inside with hesitation.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“What did he say to you?”

“He was telling me that he had a lot of plans for you and that he hoped I would still be around to see them all. What did he say to you?”

“Nothing important.”

“Do you need me to do anything?”

“I want you to focus on your book.”

All this time she had believed that someone from her life had been running to the media and it was somebody from my camp doing it all along. I didn’t want to get her upset with that news, so I kept it to myself. I reached for her and sat her on my lap.

“There is nothing I won’t do to protect you. You know that right?”

“I know.”

“I love you.” I kissed her shoulder.

“I know that, too.” It was her smile that settled the mood Larry had put me in.

# Chapter 68

## *Fatima*



Jaren had that next day off. After all the chaos that had happened the night before with Larry, I suggested that we get away from everything and enjoy the beach.

After getting dressed, we took a car south to some resort in Laguna Beach called *Surf & Sand*. After checking into a room and changing into swimwear that we had picked up at one of the shops we passed along the way, we made our way to the beach.

Thankfully there was no crowd, and we were able to enjoy time alone without anyone from Laguna Beach recognizing either of us.

The sand was pristine white, and to the touch, it felt as if we were walking on pillows. The crisp blue ocean water swayed back and forth peacefully as we walked towards it.

We didn't say much; we didn't need to. Just being in the moment was what we both needed and something we weren't taking for granted. I felt Jaren link his fingers loosely through mine as we neared the water, but it wasn't in a romantic way.

"Are you that scared of the water?" I asked.

"I already told you that I can't swim," he answered while looking ahead.

I began to giggle uncontrollably.

"That shit's funny, huh?"

"I'm sorry. I have never seen you scared of *anything* the way you are looking at this water."

"Laugh all you want, there are probably sharks out there ready to take a bite of yo' ass, and I won't be able to help you."

“What happened to *protecting me from anything?*”

“That didn’t include *anything* with water.” He stopped when the water was at his waist.

“It’s just water.” I wrapped my arms around him. “Just like you won’t let anything happen to *me*, I’m not gonna let *anything* happen to you.”

“You can’t control anything in this water either.”

I released him and began to lay on my back and floated away from him. Mostly just teasing him for the fact that we were in this beautiful ocean water and he was looking as if I had just dropped him into some swamp.

“This is supposed to be relaxing,” I closed my eyes and sang to him as I floated further from him.

“I don’t find anything relaxing and stop going so far out.”

“*Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,*” I sang.

I turned over on my stomach and then dropped my body low into the water. I was a great swimmer so I couldn’t understand not feeling safe. When I finally popped back up, I could see that Jaren had a panicked look on his face, but he still hadn’t moved from his spot. That made me want to have a little more fun with him.

I began to talk to him about the tour and how he felt that it was finally coming to an end.

“As much as I’ve loved doing this tour, I’m ready to go home,” he stated.

We still had a reasonable distance between us as we talked.

“I’m ready for a break and to spend more time with you,” he went on.

“I can’t wai-” I purposely dropped my body in the water to make him think that something had a hold of my leg.

Through the muddled water, I could hear him yelling something. I allowed my head to pop up from the water and acted even more as if something had attacked me.

“Fatima! Fatima! You better stop playing, you know I can’t swim!” he said in a panic.

I dropped my body in the water again and stayed down for as long as I could before coming up. Jaren had already started jogging back towards the beach to try and get help. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. I began to swim towards him, and when he turned around and saw that it had all been a joke, he looked as if he wanted to kill me.

I couldn’t speak because I couldn’t stop laughing. I tried to catch up with him as he stormed on the beach.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t help myself.”

“That shit wasn’t funny. I thought something had happened to yo’ ass.”

“Baby, I’m sorry,” I told him reaching for him, but he jerked away.

“You can’t play with me like that.” He picked up his towel and wiped his face with it.

I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Heyyyy...*relax.*”

I tried to sit on his lap.

“Go on with that,” he moved his head.

“When you’re mad, you’re *so* stubborn,” I told him mushing him in the head before I sat down on my lounge chair.

He rested his forearms on his thighs and looked out at the water. Several minutes went by before he said anything.

“It is nice out here though, peaceful.”

I pulled my hair up in a messy bun. The entire day was worth the hair drama I would have later. One thing I had gotten used to while on tour was the fact that Jaren would hire stylists in every city to take care of me. It was one of the perks I enjoyed.

When we finished enjoying the ocean, we walked back to the resort. While I attempted to wash my hair in the shower, Jaren joined me inside. He started by helping me with my hair.

That lasted all of five minutes, as I soon felt his hands moving from my hair to my breasts and lower. I didn't protest.

Once we were done making love, we ordered room service from the *Splashes Restaurant*. I ordered the Wild Alaskan Halibut, and he ordered the Butter Poached Maine Lobster Tail. We sat out on the balcony of our suite, overlooking the water and talked.

One thing we knew how to do together was enjoy each other's company. He could always make me laugh and whenever I looked over at him to find him laughing it warmed my heart that I could also bring that kind of joy to him.

"Can you believe we're coming up on a year since the first time you sent me a message on *WriteNow*?"

"Has it been that long?"

"I should have known then that it was you lurking all on my story," I hissed.

"I need to post something to let all these other celebrities out here know about all those stories on there. Y'all are some real freaks."

"It does get wild."

"How did you come up with Yara? Where did you get that name from?"

"I know this sounds stupid. There was this pretty girl in my fifth-grade class who had that name, and I fell in love with it. It was just so unique and stayed with me. I'm probably gonna name my daughter Yara; I like it so much."

"Yea, we're not doing that." He shook his head.

"*We*? You know something I don't know?"

"I know *a lot* that you don't know." He paused. "Besides your writing, what do you see for your future?"

"I see what everybody else sees...marriage, kids, the picket fence. What about you?"

"Before you, I honestly didn't care about any of those things," he slid broccoli in his mouth.

“And I guess I made you think about those things?” I responded sarcastically.

“Real talk. After watching the way my dad and step-dad did my moms, I knew then that I didn’t wanna get married or have kids.”

“All because of what you saw other men do?”

“They weren’t just *other* men; they were supposed to be my father figures. Them niggas didn’t do nothing but hurt the woman who gave birth to me.”

“You ever thought about having a relationship with your dad now?”

“He’s dead to me.”

“Does your sister have a relationship with her dad?”

“They talk, but they’re not that close.”

“Do you think you’re ready for all of that?”

“I don’t know if I’m ready, but I can see those things in my future now,” his eyes fell to mine. To have a man tell you the level of importance you are to him would make any woman speechless.

Jaren came off intimidating to others; his appearance was intimidating and when he opened his mouth, you didn’t know what to expect. He didn’t sugarcoat things, but with me, he was honest and vulnerable.

I fell asleep in his arms that night, and I was so comfortable next to him that I jumped when both of our phones began to go off early that following day.

While he was busy reading through his messages, I answered the call from my mom.

“Hello.”

“I told you that thug wasn’t gonna do anything but bring you down,” my mother spewed into the phone.

“Ma...huh...what?”

“Your naked body is all over the internet right now.”

“My what?”

“That no-good man you’ve been laying up with has leaked a video of the two of you having sex and it’s *all* over the internet. How could you do this to us?”

“What video?”

I whipped my head to look at Jaren and found him staring at something intently on the phone and judging by the look on his face; I could see there was a problem.

“I can’t believe that you would break your father’s heart like this. I raised you better than this Fatima!”

“Mom, I gotta call you back,” I told her hanging up the phone before she had a chance to say anything else.

I looked at Jaren nervously. “Please don’t tell me that you are watching a video of us having sex.”

He turned his phone towards me, and on the video, he was giving it to me good in one of the dozens of suites we had stayed in. We both examined the video trying to figure out when and where it had been made.

“Did you record us having sex and not tell me?” I snapped at him.

“Come on, you know I wouldn’t do that to you.”

I jumped up from the bed in a panic as calls, texts, and notifications continued to roll in.

“My *ass* is all over the internet!” I screamed.

“Fatima, I never recorded us having sex.”

“Then how did a video of us having sex get out?”

“I don’t know, but I’m gonna find out.” He was already on another call.

I buried my face in my hands.

No one could have this much back luck in one life! If it wasn’t one thing, it was another, and it was never-ending. Even though I loved Jaren and was experiencing the highest of highs, being with him, it was also coming with the lowest of

lows, and I was beginning to wonder if this relationship was worth it all.



# Chapter 69

## *Jaren*



“You know who leaked this video right?” My lawyer Terry Gunter asked me.

After Fatima and I realized a video of us had been leaked, Terry was the first phone call that I made that morning. I found out I couldn't do anything to stop the footage because it was everywhere online, but Terry did work on having it removed as much as he could.

Fatima was freaking out so bad that I had to call an on-staff medical professional to come check to on her. They gave her something to relax, making her mostly numb for the rest of the day.

The entire car ride back to our hotel she didn't say a word. She gazed out of the car window. I didn't know what to do to comfort her because my hands were tied.

As freaky as Fatima and I were, we *never* recorded anything we did. I spent the drive trying to figure how anyone got their hands on footage of us.

Once we got to the *Four Seasons*, Fatima went to bed. While she rested, I decided to go to my attorney's room to talk about what legal actions we had available to us.

Even though we both knew that Larry was behind this, we couldn't legally prove it because as usual, he covered his tracks well.

I could have killed him with my bare hands if he were standing in front of me.

“So, the only way I can get him is by proving he snuck a camera in our room?” I asked.

“If you can get someone to admit to knowing about it or seeing it, we can get criminal charges brought against him.”

“*That muthafucka,*” I hissed.

“That’s not all.”

“What else is there? It can’t be worse than this.”

“His attorney contacted me to give me a heads up of the wrongful termination lawsuit he’s filing against you.”

“What?”

“He’s saying that he was instrumental in getting your career to this point and now that you have arrived, you terminated him without just cause.”

“Are you serious?”

“He’s seeking fifty million in damages.”

“*Fifty-fuckin million!* I should’ve killed that nigga when he was in my dressing room.”

“I didn’t hear that and please don’t repeat that,” Terry stressed.

“What do I do next?”

“I had your PR team release a statement already. I don’t want you to do or say *anything* else about this. I have someone looking into it, and I want to see what I can find first.”

“I’m just supposed to act like nothing is going on?”

“You have to. You don’t want to get sued for slander so don’t say *anything*. If you are asked directly, say *no comment*.”

“What about Fatima?”

“I wish there were something I could do,” he said looking as if he felt as bad about the situation. “Legally my hands are tied until we come across evidence that shows us who recorded and leaked this video.”

“*Damn.*”

“The ex you wanted me to look into. Do you think he might have anything to do with the video?”

“Nah. He’s too dumb,” I told him.

“Give me some time, and I *will* find something. The investigator I hired is thorough.”

“A’ight, man.”

“You also might want to get Fatima her security, someone that will protect her from the media.”

“I’ll do that.”

I left his room feeling helpless. Tyson tried his best to reassure me, but nothing was going to wipe that tape from people’s minds. Brandy would have figured out how to capitalize on this kind of a scandal, but Fatima wasn’t that girl.

I went back to my suite to check on Fatima, and she was still sleeping. Whatever they had given her was so strong that she was dead to the world. I had to check her pulse to make sure she was still breathing.

I didn’t expect her to go to the show, but I thought about the fact that I needed a new personal manager and assistant. I put a call out to Samir; I was technically still signed to him even though I was a *Twisted Life* artist. He understood, what was going on around me and came through with two assistants that would help me get through the Friday and Saturday night shows. Everything else I would figure out once back in New York.

Samir and Kadeem were two of my first phone calls; both were upset and ready to do something on my behalf. A few of my boys from back home reached out, even PD who was ready to put a hit on Larry. Richie flew in to help me get through the next two shows, helping me out on the managerial side.

My pre-show routine was much more different than usual. I smoked, drank some Henny, anything and everything to get my head right.

Samir was backstage with me along with a few other emcees who had stopped through. I tried to be in a positive

mood as much as possible, but everyone knew what I was going through, so the tension was there.

If it was just a video with me and a random, I would have been able to blow it off. It was the fact that it was *Fatima* that bothered me so much. You don't want *anybody* you loved, especially your woman, to be violated in that way.

The moment I appeared on the stage, the crowd gave me even more love than they had during the previous show. It was like screaming for me was their way to say “*fuck you*” to whoever violated my privacy. I absorbed that love from my fans and had to signal for the band to stop, so I could take it all in.

“I feel that shit L.A.,” I said into the mic still standing on my spot in the middle of the stage. “Thank you for that; you can't trust any of these muthafuckas.”

The crowd starting cheering even louder, I signaled for the deejay to drop the beat and with the crowd's energy fueling me I started doing my set.

By the time I got to *Cut from A Different Cloth*, I was on a high.

“I need everybody in the muthafuckin' building to put a middle finger up,” I said holding up my own. “I wrote this song because I started realizing I had some fucked-up people in my life, and I had to put them on notice.”

I looked out at the sea of middle fingers in the air.

“Some shit went down today; I'm pretty sure you all know what I'm talking about,” I said taking the bottled water from the side of the stage, I took a gulp then handed it back. “If you don't know anything about me, I don't play when it comes to *home*.”

The crowd sounded just as aggressive as I felt.

“To the nigga who leaked that shit, know that I'm coming for you.”

I think I performed that song with more anger than I had ever performed it before, even changing some lyrics to

subliminally speak to Larry. All this time I had been able to keep the streets out of my music. All the illegal shit I had to do when I was selling, I was able to keep out of me. I tried to handle things professionally and follow the rules of the business.

Larry had awoken that other side of me. I didn't care about lawsuits, investigations, or any of that white-collar shit. I wanted to get my gun, go straight to that nigga's house and put a bullet in the center of his head. He honestly didn't know the type of nigga that he had set off, but he was about to learn.

The more I thought about the entire situation I became angrier. I had been paying this nigga all this time, and he had been doing shady shit behind my back. I was glad that I always had a separate accountant and lawyer who handled my money because there was no telling what he would have done had he had access to that too.

After I finished with my show, I went back to my dressing room, all of the people that I was used to surrounding me, were no longer there. Nothing felt stable around me anymore. I tried to call Fatima, but my call went to voicemail. I called the suite, but there was no answer there either. My worry started kicking in, but then I remembered that she had taken some medicine that was meant to help her sleep.

After the show, I didn't feel like mingling, so I left. It was after two when I finally walked through the door of our suite. I had a funny feeling that something wasn't right, but I tried to ignore that nagging feeling in my gut.

I got to the bedroom and didn't see Fatima there. I looked in the bathroom, and she wasn't there either. I walked back inside the bedroom and noticed a note by the nightstand, and I had a feeling as to what it said before I even read it.

***"I'm sorry. I can't do this anymore."***

I guess it was naive of me to think that she would get over this. We had gotten over so much other bullshit already, I thought that we were strong enough to work through this too. But her note let me know that she did have a breaking point, and this was it.



# Chapter 70

## *Fatima*



“You are still on this couch?” Autumn said as she walked inside her apartment. “Have you even eaten or taken a bath yet?”

“Leave me alone,” I mumbled to her as I pulled the blanket even more over my face.

“When you’re spread eagle all over the Internet for the world to see, *then* you can say something to me.”

It had been five days since the video had been leaked and I still felt captive to the embarrassment of it.

I considered myself a pretty loyal person, and I had stuck by Jaren through everything else we had been through since becoming a couple, but *this* was on a whole other level. I had no interest in doing the *Kardashian come-up*. I wanted my private sex life to remain that- *private!*

While Jaren was at his L.A. show, I did a lot of thinking, and I decided then that we needed to take a break. Not because I didn’t love him, but because I was losing myself in the process.

I booked a flight to Norfolk that night and Autumn picked me up from the airport.

I know it was cowardly of me to leave Jaren with nothing but a note, but I couldn’t tell him I was leaving to his face. He would’ve found some way to talk me out of it, and I had already made up my mind.

Just when I thought I was coming to terms with the video, I received a call from my agent the day before telling me that *Simon & Schuster* was putting my book on hold. Just like that, the things that were looking up in my life were now being ripped from me, all because of a video of me having sex.

I buried myself on Autumn's couch wishing the world would stop and rewind all the way back to when that first @JarenavsJericho message appeared in my inbox.

"Your mom is calling again," Autumn said looking down at my phone flashing on the coffee table.

"I need to change my number."

"What about Jaren?"

"What about him?"

"Even if you don't wanna talk to your parents, you should at least talk to *him*," Autumn stressed.

"If I were ready to talk to him, I would be in Baltimore right now," I mumbled from under the covers.

"Come on Tima, you've got to get it together," Autumn said yanking the blanket off of me. "Look at the positives."

"Are you serious?"

"If we're being honest, that was one of the best videos I have *ever* seen in my life. *Your* man can *put it down*."

"I'm gonna act like you didn't just say that out loud."

"I know I joke a lot, but I can't sit by and watch my best friend go into a depression."

"Well what do you suggest I do?" I asked feeling tears burning in my eyes. "Wait I know, I can go legally change my name. Then go see some plastic surgeon in Brazil and get a new face."

"Stop playing."

"I'm not! I'm considering this. My book is on hold, medical school is on hold. Tell me what my next step should be?"

"I know everything looks bad right now, but things *will* get better."

"I just don't understand why it seems like in the *best* relationship I ever had in my life, I mean the most *amazing* one- the *worst* things have happened."



“I wish I had answers for you, but I *don't*. All I know is that this man has made you happier than any other man that you have ever dated since I've known you. Are you ready to let him go?”

“I can't even go to sleep at night without taking sleeping pills because I'm looking all around for cameras.”

“I can't even imagine what that feels like, but you have to believe that it will get better.”

“Aut, I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy. You have no idea how violating it is. To know that I was making love to *my man*, thinking that we were sharing a private moment and that moment has now been seen by *everyone* in the world. I don't even know how many other tapes there are; there could be *more*.”

My face dropped in my hands. Just thinking about the things we did all over those suites had me feeling as if another panic attack was coming on.

Autumn held on to me tightly. “Sis, I'm so sorry that you're going through this. But don't forget that you aren't going through this by yourself. You aren't the only person on that video.”

“When was the last time a man was judged for having a sex tape? This won't hurt *him*, but this can *ruin* me.”

“You *will* survive this, but in the meantime, we have to get you *off* of this couch, and we have to do something about this hair. It's a knotted bird's nest.” She started picking through my hair.

“I can't go to the salon you know those nosy heifers won't leave me alone. Can you do it for me?”

“Since you are going through what you're going through I will *this* time,” she rolled her eyes as if I was asking for too much with my request.

I finally got up from the couch, took a shower, washed my hair, and brushed my teeth raw. When I got out, I sat down on the chair Autumn had set up in her room in front of her

mirrored dresser. I let her blow-dry and then flat iron my hair. At least I was starting to look a little like myself again.

We talked about things going on with her and the guy she was dating because I didn't want to talk about my own life.

"I like this one," Autumn said while sliding the flat iron down another small strand of the side of my hair. "He's good to me."

"How long has it been now between you two?"

"Since this summer."

"You've been with this guy since June, and you still have him around, this *must* be real." Even though I hated my own life, I was overly happy for my girl.

"He makes me happy...just like Jaren makes you happy."

"It doesn't matter *what* he makes me anymore."

"None of what happened is his fault."

"I know it's not his fault, but that doesn't change the fact that there is a video of *us* having sex *all* over the internet."

"Okay, after we get past that fact. What are you gonna do?"

"I honestly don't know."

Her phone began to chirp, and she checked the message. "I'll be right back."

She left the room, and I finished flat ironing the last few strands of my hair. I looked at my make-up-less expression in the mirror. I looked awful, but my hair was done.

I had just turned twenty-three, and I already felt as if my life was over. Tears began to trickle down my face again; I couldn't even count how many times I had cried like this since the video leaked.

I wiped the tears from my face, and when I looked back at my reflection in the mirror, Jaren was standing there. I thought I was seeing things, so I began to wipe my eyes harder, but he

was still in my reflection. I turned around to find him standing at the door.

“I’m sorry, he’s been worried about you,” she mouthed to me.

I opened my mouth to protest, but she cut me off with her hand.

“Just *talk* to him.”

My eyes scanned him from his low-cut fade to his thick beard, to the black *Trap Lord* tee, to the tiger print jacket and the pair of MX1 jeans he was wearing. Unlike me, he didn’t look as if he was losing any sleep at all.

“I’ll be back,” Autumn filled the silence in the room before leaving the two of us together.

Once I thought she was out of earshot, I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to the punch.

“You won’t answer any of my calls.”

“I wasn’t ready to talk.”

“I get that you got scared and left, but you’re trying to shut me out of your life?”

“I had no choice.”

“I didn’t record you, I didn’t even *know* we were being recorded!”

“*You* didn’t, but somebody around you *did*.”

“I know...and I’m sorry,” he said still trying to close the gap between us. “I promise you that I’m gonna take care of it.”

“Can you wipe the video off the entire internet? Can you erase what my parents saw? What my friends and family saw? What my *publisher* saw?”

He dropped his head and looked away because he knew that he didn’t have the power to do that.

“My book has been put on hold because of this,” I yelled at him, fresh tears streaming down my face. I wasn’t sure I had any left to cry over this situation. “They might not ever

publish it at all! And all because I was off with you living, some, some...fantasy!"

"*Stop*," he didn't give me a choice as his strength pulled me to him.

The moment he pressed my face to his chest, more tears fell as I crumbled into his arms. I both didn't want it and needed it at the same time, and I hated that he knew that about me.

"I can't erase anything off of the internet. I can't even legally do what I wanna do to the person who did this."

"You know who did it?" I pushed myself off of his chest and looked up at him.

"Larry," he confirmed.

"How did you find out?"

"That night when he came to my dressing room, he told me that he had something on us."

"Why didn't you say anything to me?"

"I thought he was bluffing. I didn't think he had anything like *this*."

"Why was he threatening you?"

"Because I fired him."

"He ruined my life because you *fired* him."

"He is trying to get to me by hurting *you*."

"Well, he succeeded," I told him tasting the salt of my tears as they ran down my lips.

"I'm gonna take care of it, I promise."

"Even if you do *get* him, it still doesn't fix *anything* in my life. How do you know there aren't other videos or pictures of us?"

"I don't know that-"

"Well *trying* is not good enough."

“What else do you want from me? I am trying to fix this shit! I didn’t ask for any of this either, and you act like I’m just as guilty.”

“Do you know I can’t even close my eyes for longer than a few minutes on my own without taking some sedative? That everywhere I walk, even in *this* apartment, I feel like I’m being watched. Do you know how that feels?”

“I know you are going through a lot, but you’re not the only one in this.”

“None of this is hurting you. They’re only coming after *me*, and I have to do something.”

“So that’s it, fuck everything else? Fuck *us*, right?”

“This is not about us.”

“The fuck you mean it’s not about us?”

“This is about *me*. I’m finally choosing me! And that means that I have to start looking out for *myself* and being with you brings too much drama and attention into my life.”

“You don’t trust me to take care of you?”

“No,” I shook my head. “You can’t.”

For the next few minutes, we had what felt like a silent standoff before he turned and finally left Autumn’s bedroom without saying another word. Even though it felt as if my heart was shredding, I didn’t run after him. I loved Jaren with everything in me, but for once, I had to fight for me, even if it didn’t make sense to anyone else but me.

# Chapter 71

## *Jaren*



I walked into my empty condo with a heavy heart. Out of all the chaos around me, I still thought I had Fatima. I believed all she needed was a few days to cool off. When I couldn't get in contact with her, I reached out to Autumn to check on how she was doing. Since the tour was over, all of my focus was on making things right with her.

It was Autumn who told me that she was not doing well and acting depressed. We thought that seeing me would help.

It didn't.

Her normally bright, all-knowing eyes were red, swollen, carried bags underneath, and held no life in them. It was evident that she wasn't eating by the amount of weight she had lost since I had last seen her. But I understood her pain and frustration, while she was losing opportunities because of the tape, I was gaining them.

I didn't know what I expected when I got to Hampton; I guess I partly expected her to see me and remember why we were worth fighting for.

My security buzzer alerted me that Courtney had finally arrived at my condo. We had been in contact since the video leaked, and she told me that she wanted to meet with me when I got back to New York.

I checked the security camera, and once I verified it was Courtney, I buzzed her in.

When I saw her growing belly, I hugged her. She looked ready to pop and regardless of what had gone down with us, she was still like a little sister to me.

"Look at you," I told her nodding at her belly. "It's only been a month."

“This baby is growing fast,” she said rubbing her stomach.

“You need anything?”

“Water.”

I grabbed two bottled waters and sat next to her on the couch.

“So whassup?”

“I heard that you fired Larry,” she said in a small voice.

“You came all the way here to ask me that?”

“I’m here to ask you if I’m fired too.” Fear filled her eyes.

“Should you be?”

“I don’t wanna be.”

“That’s not what I asked you. I asked *should* you be?”

She didn’t say anything.

I decided on a different approach. “Is there anything you wanna tell me? When you left, I heard some things...”

“What did you hear?” she asked with a panicked expression.

“I’m not trying to get you upset; I just want the truth.”

“What did you hear?”

“I heard about PD.”

“He told you?”

“Is it true?”

She cradled her face in her hands.

“I’m not mad; you’re a grown-ass woman. I just want to know what’s going on with you.”

“That happened *one* time. I was feeling lonely, and he was there...”

“Like I said it’s not my business.” I drank from my bottle. “Is that why you were so upset and moody? Did something happen?”

Her head dropped, and she started crying. I was even more confused.

“Did he do something to hurt you?” I was trying to find the source of her tears.

“I really messed up J.”

“Messed up how?”

“I’ve been seeing somebody besides Eric,” she said searching my eyes as if she needed to see my reaction before continuing.

“With the way he treats you, I don’t blame you.”

“And this baby might even be his.”

“*Oh,*” I said now realizing all of the stress she had been under.

“Does this other guy know about the baby?”

She nodded. “If it’s his, he can’t be a part of my baby’s life.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s married.”

“You’ve been messing with some married cat?”

She nodded.

“Do I know him?”

She nodded again.

“Who is it?”

“I *really* need this job J,” she said as fresh tears strained down her face. “I have to be able to take care of me and the baby.”

“I get that part, but I wanna know who the father is?”

She looked at me with horror on her face. “It’s Larry.”

“Larry? You’ve been fuckin’ my manager?” I asked jumping up from the couch as if it was on fire.

She nodded.



“What the fuck, Courtney? *We’ve* been around his wife *and* his kids!”

“*I know,*” she said dropping her head and crying harder. “It just happened, and I couldn’t stop.”

“How long has it be going on?”

“Almost a year. It started one night when he came over to see you and when Eric and I would fight, I would confide in him. I thought he cared about me.” She began to cry harder.

*It explained why Eric believed her and I were sleeping together.*

“On the tour, you two were still messing around?”

“Until he found out I was pregnant. When I wouldn’t agree to have an abortion, he stopped talking to me.”

Now I finally understood her mood swings. Her possible *married* baby daddy was on tour with us and wanted nothing to do with her or the baby, and she still had to see him every day. I recalled our numerous conversations in which he talked to me about sending her home, and it all made sense.

But then my wheels started turning. “Lemme ask you something.”

She looked up at me with wide eyes.

“Did you know about the stuff he was doing behind my back?”

Her silence let me know her answer.

“I don’t believe you,” I was trying to remain calm because she was pregnant.

“He wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

“If he wasn’t trying to hurt us, then what the fuck was he doing?”

“It was nothing personal; he was trying to scare her off, he was only trying to end the relationship. Your fans want to see you with Brandy, and according to him that was a better look.”

“A better look?”

“You were distracted with Fatima,” she continued. “You were turning down appearances and other opportunities. You weren’t doing that stuff before her. When you were with Brandy, things made more sense, and she stayed out of the way.”

“And you were *in* on all of this?”

“I just knew what was going on, but when she started being rude to me, I wanted her gone too.”

“*You* were the one who told him about her being a writer?”

She didn’t answer.

“When all of that shit blew up in my face, you already knew everything.”

“I’m sorry,” she said in a timid voice. “He wasn’t even speaking to me at all for most of the tour, so I don’t know everything that went on.”

“You should have come to me!” I yelled at her, and she started crying harder. “Did you know he was putting cameras in my room?”

Her silence was making it harder to talk to her.

“*Courtney!* This nigga posted a video of me and Fatima having sex! You better start talking!”

“I didn’t know it was a video camera,” she said quietly. “He told me that he was trying to *hear* what you were saying about him behind his back. Whenever we were in your suite for meetings, he would put them in different places. I didn’t *know* he was *video* recording you.”

“But you *knew* that he *was* recording me?”

“I didn’t know how to come to you about it,” she defended.

“Do you have any idea what Fatima is going through right now? We’re not even together because of this bullshit.”

“I’m sorry,” she continued to repeat around her tears.

“I need you to get out,” I said as calmly as I could.

“J, I’m sorry. I’m telling you now because I care about you. I want to help fix everything.”

“If you *cared*, you would have come to me a *long* time ago.”

“I *need* this job,” she said in a hoarse voice.

“Courtney, get out of my house. You are pregnant, and I’m trying to respect that.”

“*J...please.*”

I couldn’t control the beating inside my chest. I wanted to drive over to Larry’s apartment and end his life right then.

“Courtney, just get the fuck out.”

I left the room. I couldn’t take another minute around her. And I prayed that she didn’t follow me to my room. I called my mom because the fury inside of me was at dangerous levels and I was scared of what I would do with it.

It took my mom an hour to talk me off the ledge of killing this man. She brought up karma, the system working it out, and anything to get me to calm down. Once off the phone with her, I tried to call Fatima, but she didn’t answer.

I sat down on my bed and thought about that past year. I could now see all of the red flags that I had missed. My next call was to Terry to discuss legal action. I know I couldn’t erase the video, but I could figure out a way to make him pay for what went down.

## Chapter 72

### *Fatima*



Two weeks had flown by since Jaren's visit, and Autumn and Chanel had finally talked me into leaving the apartment. We decided to go to MacArthur Center for the day to do some shopping for the Halloween party both of them were going to that weekend. I was honestly going along for the ride to get them both to stop nagging me about 'getting out of the house' and asking 'what my next step would be.'

Most of society had moved on from the sex tape scandal, but my life still felt as if it was on pause.

I hadn't heard from Jaren since he walked out. He called me late that same night, but I didn't answer. As far as I could tell he seemed to be laying low since the tour was over.

There were many nights that I wanted to call him to hear his voice, but my stubborn pride wouldn't let me do it. If I went back to him, I was opening myself up to more public embarrassment. I didn't want to spend all of my time wondering what was going to drop next or worrying about other videos. I wanted my normal life back.

I thought about trying to be there for him as a friend, but I knew that wasn't possible. Some relationships couldn't handle a friendship; ours was one of them. The problem was, every waking moment my heart called out for him. I felt like a piece of me was missing, and I wanted badly to find something to fill that space.

Saying goodbye to Jaren was one of the hardest things I ever had to do in my life, he didn't deserve it, we didn't deserve it. But it was like they always say in the case of emergencies "treat yourself first before trying to help anyone else." And that is what I was doing.

Upon first meeting Larry, I thought he was that gorgeous older guy that seemed to never age. He was in his forties but looked much younger with the level of how he took care of himself. He reminded me so much of Andre from *Empire*. He seemed to have a perfect life- a gorgeous Hollywood wife and two talented kids. I couldn't see why he would do anything to hurt us.

"This would be so cute on your new skinny ass." Chanel held up a cat suit.

She wasn't lying about the skinny part. I had lost so much weight that I didn't even recognize myself anymore. It was the smallest I had ever been in my entire life, and it wasn't in a good way. I sometimes felt as if I was going to lose it altogether and end up in a mental hospital, but something kept me from going that route.

"I already told you that I'm not going to that party," I reiterated to them again.

"*Baby steps,*" Autumn reminded Chanel.

We were inside of *Express* when a group of high school-aged girls walked up to us. Immediately noticing their recognition of me, I felt like I was going to snap if they mentioned the video.

One girl spoke up for the group. "We're sorry to bother you, but are you *YaratheWriter*?"

"Depends on who's asking," Autumn replied dryly looking the girl up and down.

"Well my name is Katrina, and we just wanted you to know that we are huge fans of your books on *WriteNow*. We knew you went to school in the area, so we were trying figure to out if it was really you."

They didn't want to approach me about the video or Jaren, they were approaching us about *my* writing?

"Do you have any other stories?" Another one of them asked.

“Well she’s been working on publishing her first book,” Chanel answered.

“Are you serious?” Katrina asked. “When is it coming out and what’s the name of it?”

I thought about the fact that I didn’t have a release date anymore. “We’re not sure of the date right now, but I’ll be sure to post all of the details on my *WriteNow* page when I do know.”

For the next few minutes we made small talk about my writing, and no one brought up Jaren or the sex tape. It was refreshing.

“Please don’t *ever* stop writing, I relate to your stories so much,” Katrina said.

“Thank you for telling me that.” I was so moved by her words.

After we left the young girls, I couldn’t stop grinning.

“See, not everybody knows you for how good you can throw it back!” Autumn joked as we walked out of the store with our bags.

I pushed her so hard that she stumbled a little.

“Hey bitch, that was meant to be a compliment. I might’ve learned a few things from that video,” she said rubbing her arm.

“And to think all this time I thought that *you* were the sweet and innocent one. You might be the biggest freak of all three of us,” Chanel added.

The rest of the afternoon, however, didn’t turn out that smoothly. Nobody else in the mall knew me for my writing. They recognized me from Jaren and the video and couldn’t stop whispering and pointing. I could feel people sneaking pictures and video of me. I made them take me back to the apartment when I couldn’t take anymore.

Later that night, when I got back to Autumn’s apartment and couldn’t sleep, I picked up her laptop with a new idea in

my head and began to write a new story. When I finally could get to a stopping point, I felt as if I was on top of the world.

Without thinking I dialed the number that I hadn't looked at in weeks. After the third ring, he answered, and I froze.

"You know I can hear you breathing right?"

I felt my face warm that he could still find humor when talking to me amid this weird place we were in.

"Did I wake you up?"

"Nah, I'm in the studio." He paused. "What are you doing up?"

"I started writing a new book."

"I'm happy for you."

"I'm proud of me too."

I was taking the pain from this situation and turning it into a story so that people could realize the pain of being violated as I had been. The girls at the mall had inspired me to remember to use the voice I have.

"Are you okay?" he asked after a long pause.

"I'm getting there. What about you?"

"I miss you."

I swallowed hard. "I know."

"Do you?" he asked me. "Because it seems like you wanna punish us both for something that's not *our* fault."

"That's not what I'm doing."

"Then explain to me why we're here."

"I didn't call you to argue."

"We're not arguing."

I closed my eyes and squeezed them tight. "My stuff is still in that apartment. Once I find a new place next week, I'll get it out."

“I want you to keep the apartment for as long as you need to.”

“I’m gonna find a new place, and then I’ll let you know when I’ve moved out,” I repeated.

“Do what you wanna do Fatima. I gotta get back in the booth.”

His harsh words were followed by silence letting me know that he had also ended the call.



# Chapter 73

## *Jaren*



I was at the Hip Hop Awards taping in Atlanta, trying to put all of the drama behind me. After getting my affairs in order in New York, I took my mom as my date to the show along with Tyson, my new manager, Joel Francis, and my new assistant Simon Levey.

Joel was recommended to me by Samir's manager, Anthony Saleh. He was an up-and-coming manager who they both trusted to work for me. From the moment we met we hit it off, he seemed to understand me as an artist better than Larry ever did.

Simon was an intern at *Twisted Life* and an aspiring emcee. He was hungry and wanted to learn whatever he could from me.

I was set to perform *Cut from A Different Cloth*, the *last* song I honestly felt like performing since Fatima had called me to tell me that she was moving out of the apartment. It felt like a double slap to the face; she was treating me as if I did all of this to her.

My new manager, Joel walked into the room, "They're ready for you."

"A'ight."

"You sure about that new verse?" Joel asked me.

I had changed the third verse of my song since I knew that Larry was in the audience with his new female artist. I wanted to call him out in front of the world.

With the evidence, we gathered from Courtney, and what Terry's investigator found in the cyberspace, we were able to go to the police. Courtney sat down and gave them a statement of what she knew about Larry and the cameras. They were

able to identify the type of camera used and pinned down the fact that the video had been recorded in a *Four Seasons* suite. The authorities agreed to take on the case in their Cyber Crimes Department and were in the middle of the investigation.

I had my publicist working the rest of it, defending both Fatima and me from the leaking of the video. Some people honestly believed that Fatima leaked the video for clout. I shut that down immediately on IG live, telling my fans that's not the type of girl she was.

While others in the room talked about what was going on at the awards, I decided to go through my phone. I noticed my fans repeatedly tagging me on a picture that had been posted of Fatima by her friends at a Halloween party. She was wearing an all-black leather catsuit.

***@Thermaltake: When bae is bad, and everybody knows it! #Perfection #Unapologetic #Unbothered***

Just looking at Fatima and how good she looked in the catsuit made me lean back in my chair. I stroked my beard while my eyes scanned her from top to bottom. She looked much better than when I last saw her which was the most important thing I noticed about the picture.

I clicked the heart on the picture to like it, even though I knew the blogs were probably writing a post about it the minute I did. I didn't care; whether I was with Fatima or not, I was never gonna stop supporting her.

"It's a shame I never got to spend any time with my future daughter-in-law," my mom said looking over my shoulder at the picture.

"Go on with that," I told her getting up from my chair. "Let it go."

"That woman loves you," she stated confidently.

"I can't force her to be with me. What do you want me to do? She wants nothing to do with me right now."

"I can only imagine what that poor girl is going through. That's already violating enough for *anybody*, but for a *real*

woman like Fatima...”

“*A real woman*, huh?” I asked my mom with a smirk. “You met her all of what, a few minutes, and you know that she’s a real woman?”

“A queen knows when she is in the presence of another queen.”

“Is that right?”

“She’s special. I knew that right away after meeting her,” my mother nodded confidently.

“None of that matters anymore, we’re not together.”

“Give her some time. She’s been through a lot. This is all affecting her much more different than it is you.”

“Aye, J,” Simon interrupted reluctantly. “You gotta get moving; they need you up there.”

I hugged my mom before leaving my dressing room.

The moment I hit the stage I cleared my head of every thought that wasn’t about the performance. I closed my eyes and fisted the mic. I began to rap the beginning lyrics from my song feeling every cutthroat lyric as if I had only just written them.

I had my deejay behind me easing into the beat, and once I got to the chorus I started moving around the stage, and the lights started flashing red behind me to represent the anger that was in my soul.

On the stage backdrop, I had them scroll images of every article, blog post, and fucked up comment that was ever said about me. When I got to my new verse, I made sure to spot Larry in the audience. I stood as close to the edge of the stage as I could get to him and pointed directly at him while ripping him to shreds. I held his eyes the entire time, and I could see the embarrassment and fear reflected in his.

People seated around him started to look at him uncomfortably and skeptically, including his new artist. I wanted them to know him for who he was. By the end, the entire crowd was to their feet as I exited the stage.

The moment I got backstage everybody was showing me love for my performance. When I rounded the corner, I felt somebody pull at my shoulder and found Larry squaring off in front of me. Tyson placed himself between us before either of us had a chance to react.

“I’m suing you for every dime you have, and I’m going to make sure that *no one*, ever works with your ghetto ass again,” he said with assurance.

I didn’t try to fight with words; I was lunging at him even though Tyson and six other people were holding on to me.

“My nigga, I made *you!*” I reminded him as I felt my body being pulled away in the opposite direction. No matter how strong I was, I couldn’t get out of the grip they had on me.

“I knew that was a bad idea,” I heard my manager say while on the phone.

I was on a high pacing back and forth in my room. I couldn’t calm down. I wanted just a few minutes alone with Larry to release that anger. Both Simon and Tyron were blocking the door. They only let my mom through, and she was in tears as she hugged me. She had never seen me like this.

When my mom released me, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Fatima’s number without thinking about what I was doing.

“Hello,” she said with loud music blasting in the background.

I was surprised that she answered and didn’t have words to say because I was still trying to process everything. My emotions had been up and down so much in the past twenty minutes, that I needed a moment to let them catch up.

The music began to fade on her end as if she was moving to a quieter place.

“Jaren, what’s wrong?” she asked with concern.

I closed my eyes, I needed to hear her voice.

“Are you okay?” she followed-up.

“I need you.”

“Where are you?”

“In Atlanta, but I’m flying back to Brooklyn tomorrow.”

There was a brief pause on the line before I heard her say.  
“I’ll be there.”

# Chapter 74

## *Fatima*



““**W**hat does this mean? You going to New York,” Autumn asked.

“I don’t know. He said he needed me, and I’ve *never* heard him sound like that,” I answered her while zipping my suitcase. “I’m going to check on him, and *then* I’m going to Baltimore after that to get the rest of my stuff.”

“You are so damn stubborn,” Autumn said looking at me like a disapproving parent. “He practically fired everyone around him for you. He wants you to feel safe?”

“I can’t help that it doesn’t.”

“Then maybe it’s time for you go see someone about that,” Autumn said her voice softening.

“Maybe I need to. But just ‘*getting back*’ with Jaren is not the solution to my problems.”

“But you love him, and you’re miserable without him, so think about that while you’re up there.” Autumn grabbed her keys and left the room. She was my ride to the airport.

After hugging my girl and thanking her for allowing me to stay with her for so long. I made my way to my Delta flight, thanks to my aunt Sable who had hooked me up with a buddy pass.

After I told Jaren I would be there, I booked my own room. I knew what I could handle and staying under the same roof with him, wasn’t it. I wanted to help him, I wanted to know he was okay, but I was also *still* vulnerable to him.

I searched the plants, under pillows, in the lamps, the phones, the tv, anywhere I believed one could hide a camera. And then after I finished, I swept through the room again

looking for places that I had missed the first time. By the time I finally finished I sat down on the edge of the bed and put my head in my hands.

*Larry doesn't have access to my room. There is no way a camera is in here.*

Once I finished calming down, I gave Jaren the information to my room. About half an hour later he was at my door wearing a cap pulled low with one of his “*I Never Hated*” merch shirts, distressed jeans and some animal designed coat. I let him in.

My stomach churned being alone with him again. It was much harder than I believed it would be. We both sat down on the same couch facing each other.

“What happened yesterday?” I asked him filling the silence.

“I was in Atlanta for the Hip Hop Awards.”

“How did it go?”

“Larry was there.”

“What was he doing there?”

“He’s got some new female artist.” He shrugged.

“Did something happen between you two?”

“I changed one of my verses, and we got into it backstage.” He was being very direct with his answers. I couldn’t read his energy or understand why he needed me to come to New York.

“Then you called me after that?”

He looked up at me. “He took you from me.”

It was the first time I had seen him vulnerable since he had stepped inside my room. My heartbeat tripled.

“No, he didn’t.” I couldn’t stand the way he was looking at me, so I averted my eyes and stood up.

“My mom wants to see you again, I told her I would bring you over,” he stated after a long pause.

“She’s here? And she wants to see *me*?” I didn’t know if I had heard him correctly.

“She wants to know that you’re okay too.”

I took a few seconds to think about his request. “Okay, let me get my coat.”

After grabbing my coat, I opened the door ready to escape the overwhelming emotions that I was feeling. From behind me he pushed the door close. The skin on my neck began to form goosebumps as I felt his breath close to my skin. I felt him place light kisses against the nape of my neck. I inhaled deeply trying to get control of the situation.

“*Jaren*,” I said his name in a pleading voice, “I didn’t come for this.”

It felt like hours went by before he finally opened the door again. Neither of us said another word as we left the room.

The drive to his condo we spent time talking about the award show and everything that went down. He also informed me of Courtney possibly carrying Larry’s baby and the fact they had been sleeping together for a year. He could have knocked me over with a feather with that information.

Once we pulled into the parking garage for his building, he stopped the car and turned to me.

“They are investigating him Fatima; once they finish, they are gonna charge him for what he did.”

“You don’t know that for sure, people find ways to get around charges all the time.”

“They are gonna get him, and I don’t see anybody else working with him after I buried his ass in Atlanta. He’s finished.”

We both got out of the car and took the elevator to his floor. The moment we walked inside his mother came walking towards me with her arms wide open.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you the *right* way,” she said hugging me as if we had known each other for years.



“It’s good to see you again too.”

“I know it’s late, but I made dinner if you’re hungry,” she said searching my eyes.

“I don’t have much of an appetite, but I can’t say *no* because Jaren told me you could throw down in the kitchen.”

“If this boy didn’t play ball and workout, he would not look like he does right now,” his mom joked. “He eats more than anyone I know.”

We both laughed as I followed her to the kitchen. She had cooked smothered chicken with rice. I watched as she spooned some onto a plate. I took in the modern kitchen that looked as if a chef had decorated it. Top of the line stainless steel professional appliances were mixed in between white cabinets and custom-designed backsplashes on the walls.

Jaren was nowhere in sight, so I took the opportunity to connect with his mom.

“Is he doing okay?”

His mom paused from what she was doing. “He has his good days, and he has his bad,” she shrugged. “Jaren is so loyal to those around him. Finding out that the people around him weren’t *as* loyal; it hurt him.”

“I still can’t believe everything he told me.”

“It’s been difficult, but he doesn’t get knocked down easily. Losing you was probably the worst part of it all.”

I didn’t have a response to that.

“But I don’t blame you for what you’re doing, if I had to go through what you did, I’d probably cut myself off from the world too.”

“I’m not trying to hurt him.”

“I know you aren’t and so does he, but that doesn’t lessen, the pain either.”

I picked up my plate and followed her to the dining room table. I placed a napkin across my lap and picked at the food

before I eased some onto my fork and slid it between my lips.

“Mmm,” I said slowly pulling the fork out. “This is delicious.”

“Thank you,” she grinned proudly, “that’s an old recipe family recipe.”

“You have to teach me how to make this.”

“Anytime, just say the word.”

I continued eating even though I wasn’t hungry, it was that good.

“How does Aliyah like college?”

“She loves it at *Rutgers*. Every time I talk to her, she’s got something going on.”

“That’s good,” I nodded. “You never know what will happen in that first year.”

“I am so proud of her. I’m proud of both of my children.”

Just hearing her talk about her children made me miss my parents. I put my fork down and took a sip of the juice.

“How are things between you and your parents?” she asked me as if she could read my mind.

“They are still upset with me for putting medical school on hold. They blame me for everything that happened with that video.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not *yours* either, and your parents need to understand that. Don’t *ever* apologize to anyone for following your *own* heart. This is your life; your parents will eventually come around.”

“I don’t see that ever happening.”

“They’re your parents, they will,” she said and took a drink from her cup. “I’m glad you decided to come; he needed this.”

“No matter what I will always be there for him.”

“I know that about you.”

I looked up to see Jaren coming down the stairs. Our eyes locked and I felt my stomach drop. He still had a strong effect, on me, even when we weren't together.

“Let me get that for you,” his mom took my mostly empty plate and went to the kitchen.”

Jaren took my hand and told me that he wanted to show me around the rest of his home, his mom waved for me to go with him.

After showing me the lone downstairs bedroom and full bathroom, he took me upstairs to where there were three more bedrooms and bathrooms. One served as an office/ studio and was the furthest room down the hall, one was the guest bedroom that his mom was staying in, and the last was his all black and gray decorated, spacious master bedroom. I could have set-up camp in his closet alone.

“You have a nice place,” I acknowledged after he finished the tour.

“Besides buying my mom her dream house, this was huge for me.”

“I bet it was,” I noted looking up at the intricately designed lighting in the ceiling.

I began to walk out of his room, I tried my best not to act like a stranger around him, but the bed lying between us in a room was like putting a bottle in front of an alcoholic. It was a trigger.

I stepped out of the room, and he followed without protest. Once we reached the living room, I sat in one of the butter soft expensive-looking leather couches, and Jaren sat next to me.

The three of us began to share laughs while watching some crime show, and I couldn't ignore how complete I felt being with them like this. I must have been exhausted because one minute we were watching the show and the next Jaren was waking me up. It was pitch black in his townhouse style condo, and his mom was nowhere in sight.

“What time is it?” I mumbled as he hovered over me.

“It’s past two.”

“Where’s your mom?”

“She called it a night a long time ago,” he chuckled. “I was trying not to move you since you were sleeping so peacefully which is something, I know you’ve been having trouble doing lately.”

I thought about how I hadn’t awakened in a panic one time since being with him.

“I’m up,” I said swinging my legs off of his couch and sitting up. “If you don’t feel like taking me back to the hotel, I can order a Lyft.”

“I have an extra bedroom for you to sleep in.”

“I don’t have any of my things.”

“I have extra stuff you can use, and you can wear one of my t-shirts. You don’t need to be out this late.”

I finally let him pull me to my feet and lead me to the downstairs guest bedroom. Once inside he turned on the light, and I looked around the teal and charcoal decorated room.

When he left the room, I placed my boots by the dresser and began to pull off my jewelry. I set my jacket on the nearby chair and then I stood again to look at my reflection in the mirror.

*What was I doing?*

Jaren returned with a t-shirt, a pair of shorts, and a towel set.

“Thanks.”

“If you need anything else let me know,” he said.

“I’ll be fine.”

Then he lowered his lips to mine and kissed me before I could react. It was the last thing I needed, but I couldn’t stop it either.

*I missed this. I missed him!*

I tried not to enjoy it, but the warmth of his tongue was so heavenly.

Before I could even process what was happening, I felt him lifting me off my feet and lying me across the bed.

“Your mom,” I panicked.

“I’m a grown man, and this is *my* house.” I could smell the Hennessy on his breath as he kissed me again. I wasn’t trying to send him mixed signals, but I couldn’t stop what was happening even though I needed to.

I opened my eyes and looked to the side of the room just as Jaren’s tongue began to circle my neck. I was in pure ecstasy until I thought I saw a red light staring back at me.

## Chapter 75

### *Jaren*



“**G***et up, get up!*” Fatima began to panic while pushing me off of her.

“Yo, what the f-”

I didn’t know what was going on, but I immediately got off of her and held my hands up as if she was the police. That was one thing my mom taught me, when a woman said ‘*no,*’ back off of her immediately.

“There is a camera in there,” she pointed frantically.

“Where?” I asked looking at the nightstand she was pointing at.

There was a fancy lamp that my interior designer had picked out that was attached to the wall and hung over the nightstand. On the nightstand was a plant and some type of small colorful art statue that the light was illuminating over.

“It’s inside of the plant,” she directed.

I went over to the plant and looked all around it and inside of it. I didn’t see anything. I checked the lamp, the statue and all around the area before turning to her.

“There is no camera.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

“Well, did you check the rest of the room. Someone could have planted one, and you don’t know it.”

“Are you being serious?” I asked her trying not to dismiss how ridiculous she sounded.

Offended by how I was looking at her or what I said, she rolled her eyes and scooted off the bed. “I’ll check myself.”

And right before my eyes, I watched her go to the other nightstand and check the artwork that was on it as well as the other matching wall lamp. Then she opened and closed drawers on the dresser across from the bed.

Her search went to the wall mounted flat screen tv where she felt all around it with her hands. Then she moved to the cable box and DVD player. She looked like a cop with a warrant looking for evidence. I stood mostly in shock, but after a while, it took everything in me not to laugh. It felt comical, but I was only reminded of how much this leaked video had changed her.

When she climbed on the bed, she stood on her tiptoes and felt around the ceiling light. I couldn't sit back and watch anymore. With my strength, I grabbed her by the waist and pulled her back down.

"I wasn't done," she objected.

"Yo, you wildin' right now," I said pulling her across my lap. "Are you doing this everywhere you go?"

She didn't answer. I began to rub her leg protectively and dropped my forehead to hers. It's one thing to know the person you love isn't doing well; it was another thing to actually see it. I felt both responsible and helpless.

"You know what you're doing is crazy right?"

"Don't call me crazy," she mumbled.

"I didn't call *you* crazy," I said then pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I said that shit you just did, *that's* crazy."

She didn't say anything for a few minutes.

"I can't help it," she said in a small voice then I watched as a few tears dropped to her hand. "I feel like there is somebody always watching me, wherever I go, no matter where I am."

"Damn, baby I didn't know it was like that," I said hugging her. I knew she wasn't handling things well, but *this* was another level that was tearing me up inside. To see someone so carefree about life shut down like this was painful to watch.

"Autumn said I might need to see somebody."

“I think she’s right,” I said now rocking her. “You’re gonna drive yourself crazy.”

I heard her release a long breath. I could feel the physical and mental exhaustion all over her. I laid her down on the bed. Then I turned off the light and crawled into the bed with her fully clothed. I wrapped my arm around her waist and held her until I knew for sure that she was asleep.

Around six in the morning, I got up and left the room. I wasn’t surprised to see my mom already sitting at the dining room table.

“Good morning, son.”

“Good morning.”

“Everything okay?” she asked cradling her coffee cup.

“Yeah, I need to go out to clear my head. Can you look out for Fatima?”

“Of course,” she said putting her cup down. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t wanna get into it right now.”

“Of course, I’ll keep an eye out for her.”

“Thanks.” I climbed the steps with heavy feet, replaying everything that had happened.

After showering and changing I left for the studio, hoping I could do what I had to do before she woke up.

Richie met me at the studio along with my engineer Brendan Powell. As they played the track over and over, I began to easily write lyrics to a song that had been heavy on my heart since the moment I saw Fatima the night before. I guess I was on my Jay-Z *Song Cry* vibe because that’s the kind of song that I ended up writing.

“You sound like Aubrey Graham in the booth,” Richie joked.

“Drake be singing, I don’t sing,” I clarified.



“You may not sing, but the ladies are gonna eat this shit up,” he stated.

Whether it was a hit or not, it was something that I needed to get off my chest. I was thankful for the distraction from everything going on at home.

While listening to the finished song, Fatima’s name appeared on my phone, and I answered it stepping away from them.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Your mom told me you are working at the studio. So, I’m gonna go ahead and go back to the hotel.”

“Why?”

“I have a flight leaving this afternoon for Baltimore, and I have to get my things.”

“I’m on my way home now; don’t go anywhere.” I didn’t give her the chance to respond before I ended the call.

When I entered my apartment, I heard laughter the moment I opened the door. I followed the voices until I reached the kitchen where I found Fatima and my mom laughing over the stove cooking together.

Fatima was wearing my t-shirt along with her jeans from the night before, and her hair was pulled up into a ponytail. It felt natural seeing them together.

“You see, that’s a little trick I use to make the eggs moist,” I heard my mom say.

Fatima was stirring in a skillet while my mom sprinkled something on a pan next to her.

“What smells so good?” I asked.

“We are just making breakfast,” my mom answered. “Are you hungry?”

I was hungry, but I was also eager to talk to Fatima alone. “Can you give us a minute?”

“Who me?” Fatima asked pointing the spoon at herself.

“Ma, we’ll be right back.”

Fatima handed my mom the spoon and rather than go to the guest bedroom I had her follow me to my room. The moment we were both inside I turned to her.

“I’ve been thinking about this all night, and I want you to stay here.”

“Jaren, I-”

“*Just listen,*” I said. “I didn’t like what I saw last night. I know you keep saying that you don’t wanna be together, but I’m asking you to stay here while you get the help you need. None of his would’ve happened to you if you weren’t on the road with me. Let me help you.”

“I wanna find someone in Baltimore.”

“I don’t want you in Baltimore, not by yourself. At least *here*, I can keep an eye on you and make sure that you’re okay.”

“That’s the problem.”

“What is?” I asked her with confusion.

“Nobody cares about who I am or what I’m doing unless I’m *with you!*”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“That means when I’m *with you*; I feel even more paranoid about the fact that someone is watching me or that there is a camera hidden somewhere.” She looked around the room then back at me. “Being in Baltimore, nobody cares about me.”

“You don’t need to be alone right now. Not after what I saw.”

“Jaren, I want my life back. I wanna write. I wanna go places and not have people staring at me. I’ve tried so hard to find my way in your world *because* of how much I love you. I need you to understand; I just can’t do it anymore.”

“And just forget what we have?”

“If that’s how you wanna look at it. I don’t care anymore.” Then she turned to open up my door and left.

I paced my room for a few minutes. I wasn’t about to follow her out of the room or chase after her anymore. I was done putting myself out there.

I had to wait until I calmed down before going back downstairs. When I reached the kitchen where I thought I would find both of them still cooking, I found my mom alone instead stirring in the skillet. I found Fatima fully dressed in her clothes pulling on her coat. Her eyes reflected her frustration at my presence.

“*Fatima?*”

“I want you to find someone who can make you happy, who can *handle* all of this,” she said. “I just can’t, no matter how much I love you; I can’t do it.”

Her words stung, but I wasn’t about to let her know how much.

“Let me get my keys; I’ll take you back to the hotel,” I was tired of fighting for us by myself.

In the kitchen, my mom had filled three plates with food thinking that we would all sit down and eat.

“Ma, I’ma be right back. I’m taking her back to the hotel.”

“What? We cooked all of this breakfast.” She looked at Fatima with disappointment.

“I lost my appetite,” Fatima said trying to hide how emotional she was.

My mom looked from Fatima to me, and back to Fatima. She looked like she had a mouthful for me.

“Well, give me a hug,” she said already rocking Fatima in a warm hug. “I thought I was gonna have more time to spend with you.”

“I know, but I’ve gotta get to Baltimore.”

“Well don’t be a stranger you hear me,” my mom continued finally releasing her. “Are you sure you don’t wanna wrap

some food to take with you?”

“I’m sure.”

“Well, you have a safe trip.”

After hugging my mom, Fatima walked past me as if I was of no importance to her.

The ride to the Sheraton was awkward. No matter how pissed off I was with her, I still walked her to her room. The moment I saw that she was safely inside, I turned and left without saying another word to her. I decided then that I was done with the Fatima chapter of my life.

## Chapter 76

### *Fatima*



“Fatima, in our last session we talked about the diagnosis I gave you,” Dr. Suzanne Preciado, my therapist told me. I sought out Dr. Preciado because she specialized in *Journal Therapy*. As a writer, I knew this would be the best therapy for me when I first began researching various therapies.

“Yea and I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.”

Unlike just simply writing in your journal, journal therapy was an actual intense therapeutic writing therapy. My therapist would use prompts to help me dissect my feelings and emotions to help me find more clarity in what I was going through, and it also helped me to write out solutions.

It had been a month since I had left Jaren in New York and we hadn’t talked once since he dropped me off at the hotel. When I moved out of the luxury apartment, he had gotten for me in Baltimore; I called him to let him know I had cleared it and found that his cell number had changed.

I was both shocked and hurt to know that he changed his number and didn’t even bother to tell me, but I chalked it up as the beginning of the closure we needed.

I moved into a smaller, more affordable apartment and found a therapist that I had been seeing for the entire month. She had been helping me discover who I was and why I was acting in the extreme ways that I was.

I learned that it was much deeper than just the sex tape. I had so many things buried in me that I had never dealt with, that *this* experience was my breaking point.

“Let’s talk about Adjustment Disorder/ Stress Response Syndrome,” Dr. Preciado said officially starting our session.

“I read more about it, so I think I understand it more this meeting,” I told her.

“The biggest thing you need to know is that unlike other diagnoses like PTSD, adjustment diagnosis is a *short-term* diagnosis and the symptoms are only temporary. They normally don’t last longer than six months. Right now, you are still having a hard time coping, because your symptoms are overwhelming.”

“I feel violated,” I expressed to her. “Like if it happened to me *once*, that it can happen to me again and maybe be worse the next time.”

“Fatima, you were the victim of a *crime*, so you *should* feel that way.”

We sat next to each other in two plush chairs during our sessions. She had her notebook full of things she wrote down about me, and I had my journal which I carried everywhere with me.

“The feelings of hopelessness, the sadness, the crying, the anxiety, the worry, the headaches, the withdrawal from people, the changes in your appetite, and the problems with sleeping are normal for what you’ve been through. But since we’ve started in here with the journal therapy, I *have* noticed some positive changes.”

“My eating is back to normal, and I’m sleeping for longer periods of time.”

“And those are two critical things,” she acknowledged with a smile. “Once we get your *health* back in order, everything else will fall in place.”

“I hope.” I smiled at her.

“Let’s see the work I assigned to you in our last session.”

In my last session, my homework was to imagine my favorite fictional character had the same problems as me and I had to write a prompt as to how that character would figure it out.

I wasn't a big fan of the show *Empire*, but I loved the character, Cookie Lyons. I thought her slick mouth and fearlessness was entertaining. In my prompt I had her do and say everything I wanted to in real life. I even had her beat Larry's ass with her bare hands, and after she was done with that, I had her shoot him with a gun.

"Outside of violence, how would this character handle this situation?"

I closed my eyes and began to write an alternate resolution, and, in that world, I could see Cookie producing a song through her sexually empowered artist Tiana. In that song and through Tiana she would express all of her frustration and anger.

"The book you are working on, isn't that what you're doing in a sense? Giving a voice to those who have gone through something similar to this."

"I'm trying to."

"*That* is where you are going to find your revenge, not by actual violence, but by turning what happened to you into something that helps to heal others."

For the next half hour, we discussed my fictional character, my book, and how things were going at home alone.

"I live by myself, and when I'm alone, there are times when I can't silence the voice in my head telling me that someone is watching me or that there is a camera somewhere in my apartment," I explained to her. "What do I do?"

"I want you to open up your journal and start keeping what I call a purge page," she said tapping her pen. "I want you to write down *everything* that is inside of your mind. Once you get all of it out, I want you to give yourself permission to come back to it later with a clearer head."

"What if that doesn't help?" I shrugged.

"Then I want you to go to the next page of your journal and have a heart-to-heart with that inner voice. If that voice has been extra vocal that day, start to debate against it." She paused. "If that voice has been telling you about all of the

things going wrong around you, reply with all the things that are going *right*. If that voice tells you there is a camera in your apartment when you *know* there's not, put that voice back in its place. You need to gain control of your mind again."

"Okay."

"For your next homework assignment, I want you to think of a person you have pushed away the most since this all happened to you and I want you to write them a letter."

My thoughts immediately went to Jaren.

"Write *him a letter*?" I repeated to make sure I heard her correctly.

"You're not going to actually send it to him," she clarified. "You are going to write it to say everything you need to say to him just to get it out."

She opened her calendar and began to go over dates. "Are you going out of town for Thanksgiving?"

"I hadn't planned on it."

"I think this holiday should be the opening you take to try and make amends with your parents," she said. "You are going to need your family to get through this, and they need to finally embrace you for who you are, not who they want you to be."

"I'll think about it."



# Chapter 77

## *Fatima*



Sometimes an idea should just remain that, an idea! It was the day after Thanksgiving, and my mom still wouldn't look at or talk to me, she had barricaded herself in her room all day.

The night before my dad and I had stayed up talking and had made amends. I opened up to him about why I made the decisions about medical school and everything I had been through with Jaren. He seemed happy that I was giving my dream a timeline and being realistic about the success of a writer.

He tried to convince me that my mom would come around eventually, but I wasn't so sure if that was true or not. She had been walking around treating me like a stranger the entire three days I had been there. It was as if she had convinced herself that I had quit medical school to become a porn star.

After extended family left for the night, I went to my room set to go to bed, but there was a knock at my door. I turned to find my mom walking inside carrying *my* therapeutic journal.

"What are you doing with that?" I asked her not caring if I sounded harsh.

"I had run out of paper and found this in your desk," she answered handing me my book.

"That doesn't explain why you have my journal."

"I'm sorry." It was then that I saw that she was crying. "When I realized what it was, I was gonna put it back, but something inside of me felt like I needed to read this."

"That *you* needed to read *my* personal thoughts?" I was livid because I had written so many personal things in there. There was no telling what she read.

“I know you’re upset, but I’m glad that I read it. It helped me to understand so much about you that I didn’t.” She wiped a tear. “And I’m also glad that you started therapy, I didn’t realize how much I’ve been hurting you.”

Watching my mom cry, made me start to cry.

“There is so much that I need to apologize to you for that I don’t even know where to begin,” she said wiping another tear, but they started flowing so fast down her face that it wasn’t helping much. I picked up a nearby Kleenex and handed it to her. “I should have been there for you when that video was leaked. I was just so mad at you for all of the choices that you were making that I didn’t even think about how this was affecting you.”

“I would never leak a video like that of myself and Jaren would *never* do that to me either,” I reiterated to her.

“I should have been there. I didn’t realize how much this writing thing meant to you either,” she went on nodding at my journal. “After I read through your journal. I went on to that *WriteNow* thingy and started reading one of your stories, and I have been stuck up in my room completely glued to it since,” she said with a half-chuckle.

*All day I thought she had been in her room to avoid me and she was actually reading one of my stories!*

“You’re right; you are talented.” She looked at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. “I was so caught up in you going to medical school that I didn’t allow myself the chance to see if you had any other gifts.”

“I’ve loved writing since I was ten. I would write stories on my computer and hide them in a folder so that no one would find them because I didn’t think they were good enough,” I confessed. “Then when I got to Hampton, I found *WriteNow* and I decided to post some of my stories and...things just kinda took off from there.”

“And I never allowed you the safety to feel as if you could share that with me,” she said shaking her head, “I’m *so* sorry.” Then she surprised me and pulled me into a hug. “I was trying

so hard to steer you to a perfect life, one better than the one that I had, and all I did was cripple you.”

I didn't know what to say; I had never seen my mom this vulnerable before.

“The KeVon thing, I don't know what I was thinking,” she shrugged. “I just liked him so much because of how he helped you.”

“Yes, he helped me, but he also did a lot to hurt me and; I knew *that* wasn't love.”

She laughed. “I've put up with a lot to keep my family together, and I was projecting my issues and insecurities on to you, and you didn't deserve that. I wish I were as strong as you were to walk away, but my mother taught me differently.”

I swallowed hard. I never thought about the fact that my mom had learned to be the way she was from her mom.

“When I found out that I couldn't have any more kids, I put all of my hopes and dreams on you, and I realize now that none of that was fair to you. And I ended up losing my daughter in the process.” She pointed at my journal. “I have to let you live your life, and one thing that is very clear throughout that journal is how much you love *that* man.”

Just thinking about Jaren and what I lost in letting him go made tears spring to my eyes. I recalled watching the Hip Hop Awards on tv earlier that week and remembering the way he stood up for me in front of the world.

On Thanksgiving night, after talking to my dad, I spent hours writing the letter to Jaren in my private journal. Instead of overthinking the letter I just allowed my fingers to flow, after all, he was never going to read it anyways! I bled on the pages until there was nothing left to give.

“Well if he loves you like I believe he does, then he is not gonna give up on you. I don't care what his mouth says. You need to send that letter to him.” She shook her head in amazement. “I have never in my life read a letter so moving. He needs to read those words.”

“That letter is for an assignment. I’m not sending that to him,” I clarified.

Though I hated that she had read my words, in a way I was glad because it led to the bridge that brought us together.

For the next few hours, we sat on my bed and talked like old girlfriends catching up. She explained to me the medical reasons why she couldn’t have kids anymore, the reasons she stayed with my father, and I told her about my experiences with KeVon and Jaren.

Before I went to sleep, I received a new message from Chanel to an article link about Jaren.

***Chanel: 12:45AM: I wanted you to hear about this from one of us.***

***“All of Hip Hop is excited to see that Jericho has moved on to Machel McGregor.”***

# Chapter 78

## *Jaren*



aren, look at this,” Machellesaid holding her phone up to me. “I knew once you posted that picture of us in the studio the other day that everybody was gonna start jumping to conclusions.”

I started laughing because social media had honestly started blowing up over *one* picture. In the picture, we weren’t talking, touching, or anything and yet we were *now* a couple.

“They’re even calling us *Jachelle*,” she laughed. “I swear people need to get a life.”

“That’s the problem though; some people *live* through us.”

“We are ready for you two,” the director of Machelles’s video, Anthony Landlery, announced.

We were on the set of Machelles’s video for the first single she had dropped from her new album. After she did me a favor and laid down vocals for my new song, I turned around and did the same for her by jumping on her first single. Her team liked our vibe so much that they asked me to star as her love interest in the video.

I considered Machelles family, so I didn’t mind. Even though she was beautiful, there was never anything sexual between us, and she also had a man that she kept out of the public eye which I was cool with.

That entire day we shot scenes in an apartment and all over Philly acting like a couple. We ended the video shoot with intimate scenes between the two of us to capture the sexy vibe of the song.

When we finally finished, we watched as they played back some of the freshly shot footage.

“Are you sure you two aren’t dating?” Her director asked looking between us. “The two of you have great on-screen chemistry.”

“We’re good friends,” Mabelle answered for us. “And don’t nobody want his mean ass.”

“I’m a teddy bear,” I joked.

“Teddy bears don’t destroy careers,” she hissed.

“If either of you has anyone in your life, you might want to prepare them for this video. When I finish putting my touches on it, no one will believe that the two of you aren’t together,” the director added mesmerized by what was on the screen.

My thoughts went to Fatima. I hadn’t spoken a word to her since she left New York. I had my numbers changed because I needed a fresh start from everything.

With Christmas approaching and my birthday right after that, I had a lot to look forward to, and I couldn’t keep worrying about what was going on with her. After she moved out of the apartment, I had set her up in; there was nothing left tying us together anymore.

After we finished looking at the playback footage, I said goodbye to Mabelle, and everyone else then left with Tyson, Simon, and Joel. So far, this new team was working out perfectly with absolutely no drama, and I was thankful for that.

Riding back to the hotel, we were all busy on our phones.

“Aye, Terry said the authorities told him it could be any day now.” Joel flashed his phone at me, and I quickly scanned the message.

Larry was going to be formally charged with cyber and surveillance charges. It was just a matter of waiting for the official word to come down. After doing an investigation, they were able to find evidence that linked him to the video being leaked. They hadn’t shared with me what that was, but I did know that Courtney’s testimony helped them along the way. The only problem was the most he would serve if convicted was up to five years.

Whether he served jail time or not, I was going to continue to come after him at every chance I could get. I didn't want any other artist to work with him. From what I heard, the female artist he was working with had fired him after the Hip Hop Awards because she didn't want her name attached with scandal while she was still trying to get a footing in the business.

As Terry knew he would, Larry was trying his best to sue me for defamation, but that lawsuit wasn't going anywhere.

After talking to my mom about the news, she talked me into giving Fatima a heads up about the impending charges. She felt that Fatima deserved to hear it from me before the story hit the net and turned her life upside down again.

The moment I got back to my suite I did some things around my room, mostly to stall before making the call. I pulled up her number and sat on the couch hoping to keep it short.

"Hello," I heard her voice say softly over the line.

"Hey, it's me."

There was dead silence, and I began to wonder if I should have just sent her a text. There was too much to explain to her to handle it that way though.

"I didn't recognize the number," she said.

"I was just calling to give you a heads up that they are gonna be formally charging Larry."

"They are?"

"Yea, they have enough evidence against him."

"Will he do any time?" she sounded skeptical.

"Up to five and he might not even get that to be honest."

"Not even five years for something that will follow both of us for the rest of our lives..."

"I wanted to let you know so that you could look out for any new faces following you around. You know the bloggers

are gonna be all over this story and will probably start harassing you again the first few days the news comes out.”

“Thank you for calling me.”

“A’ight, well I’ll let you know if I hear anything else.”

“*Jaren.*”

“Yeah,” I tried to maintain control in my voice.

“Merry Christmas.”

Christmas was weeks away, so this was her way of saying that we wouldn’t talk again. I hated that this was how we were acting towards each other. At one point we were inseparable, and here we were acting as if we couldn’t even call each other up for holidays.

“Merry Christmas to you too and Happy New Year.” After my words, we both ended the call mutually.

I tossed my phone on to the space next to me and allowed my head to fall back on the couch.

Women thought that we got over broken hearts easily, that wasn’t true at all, we just showed our pain differently. Many of us not showing it at all because we didn’t want to appear weak. Even if we had thousands of women waiting in line, we couldn’t see any of them while our minds were stuck on that *one*.

I had opened myself up to believe that my future was with Fatima and she was able to dismiss me without a backward glance. I was never allowing myself to fall that deep again.

To distract myself, I started recording snaps talking about the upcoming video with Machel and my forthcoming album pushing all thoughts of Fatima out of my mind. My focus was now solely on my career.



## Chapter 79

### *Fatima*



It was the week before Christmas. After I got the phone call from Jaren about what was to come with Larry's arrest, I called up my girls Chanel and Autumn, and we planned a getaway trip to Miami. I preferred to go somewhere else, but I got outvoted.

As far as the bloggers knew, I was in Baltimore or Hampton anyways, the last place they expected to find me was in Miami. But eventually, somebody *was* going to notice me and tip off one of the media leeches about my whereabouts.

My cousin, Charity, was also joining us on the trip. I didn't get much time to spend with her, so I was glad she was there. I was sharing a room with her while Chanel and Autumn shared the adjoining room at the *W South Beach Hotel*.

While lazily hanging out around our room, I got a phone call from my agent. After Larry was charged a few days before with secretly recording and leaking our video, my publisher contacted him about a new release date for my book. My life was finally getting back on track.

He framed it as an early Christmas gift and said once I got back from Miami that we would get into the details. It was then that I told him about my other book which I lovingly titled "*Unapologetically Me*." He loved the concept and asked me to send him the manuscript.

"We are gonna go out tonight and celebrate the hell out of my cousin," Charity stated.

"I know that's right," Autumn added. "And after putting up with your butt for almost a month on my couch. I better get an *extra special* shout out."

"You know you will," I laughed.

For the rest of the day, we hit the beach. It felt nice to get a break from the cold weather and to have the sun hitting our faces. We drank, swam, took pictures and acted like kids on Christmas morning. We left the worries of the world far behind us.

But my thoughts eventually went to Jaren, and I began to laugh thinking about the last time I was at the beach with him in California and his fear of the ocean.

“You’re doing it again,” Chanel mumbled. She had been so still lying next to me with her shades on that I thought she was sleeping.

“Doing what?”

“You know what you’re doing,” she laughed while flipping on to her stomach.

“I’m lying here getting sun like you.”

“Mhm and I just finished getting dicked, down by Darian.”

“Your freaky butt probably did. You know he likes to hang out in Miami.” I tried to shift the topic off of me.

Chanel suddenly pulled off her sunglasses and looked at me. “If we run into *that* man. I’m telling you right now; you’re not seeing me for the *rest* of this trip!”

“I thought you were all supposed to be here for me as support on this *empowering girl’s trip!*”

“If I get the chance to ride *Darian Eugene Russell*, you better be a good friend and supply me with some condoms,” Chanel said with not the hint of a smile on her face.

With all the sex songs that Darian had, even that supply probably wasn’t enough.

“I can’t with you or Autumn,” I said looking out at Autumn and Charity talking to some guys while standing in line at a drink vendor.

“But on a serious note, I can tell that you miss him,” she followed-up. “Don’t be embarrassed about it.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“You don’t think he’s with Machelles do you?”

“If it’s not her, it’s *somebody*,” I couldn’t be mad, it was what I told him I wanted for him. “Guys like him don’t stay single long,” I recalled how easily he moved from Brandy to me.

“And you think he just got over you *that* quick?” She stared at me. “No faith in that honey pot down there, huh?”

“It’s not about the *honey pot*; it’s everything else. Now that I look back, I know that I really messed things up.”

“You were going through a lot Tima, cut yourself some slack,” she said compassionately. “Why don’t you call *him*?”

“Trust me, I know it’s too late.”

I didn’t think he was really with Machelles but judging from the snippets of her video they shot together, the rest of the world believed they were. Their fans had practically started planning their *wedding* and *baby shower*.

“Autumn was right; you can be so dumb sometimes,” Chanel mumbled.

“Autumn, what?” Autumn asked carrying two fruity looking alcoholic drinks. Charity also carried the same two drinks in her hands.

“I was telling *Ms. Dumbass* over here that she needs to stop being stubborn and call Jaren,” Chanel answered.

“I second that,” Charity said.

“I’ve *been* Team Jaren all along,” Autumn said while handing Chanel one of the drinks.

I took a drink from Charity. “I’m not gonna take too much more of all this name-calling.”

“What are you gonna do about it?” Chanel challenged me.

“Fatima is not budging so leave her alone,” Autumn resigned.

The conversation was dropped, and we finished off our drinks while on the beach.

Later that night we were at the club celebrating my book release and life in general. I was proud of myself for everything I had survived that year and made it a point to celebrate hard.

While in the middle of the floor carelessly dancing to a Future song, I almost passed out when I heard the deejay announce that Jericho was there.

*Was I being punked?*

I whipped my head left and right trying to see him among the crowded club, but I didn't see him at all. Autumn began to point to one of the skyboxes above us and after a lot of maneuvering and squinting it was then that I saw him. Through all of the themed smoke and purple and blue illuminated lights, looking better than I had ever seen him look before.

I suddenly felt sick to my stomach and recalled all of the drinks I had consumed that day, on and off the beach. They felt heavy sitting in the pit of my stomach.

I latched onto Charity, "I wanna go back to the room. I don't feel good."

"Girl, don't let seeing him make you run," Charity replied.

"I'm serious," I pleaded with her loudly over the music.

She took my hand and began to maneuver me through the crowd. The moment we got to the bathroom I towered over the sink not caring about the women who were throwing me dirty looks. They didn't seem to recognize me or care who I was. To them, I was hogging prime real estate-mirror space.

"Text him and let him know you're here," Charity pleaded with me.

"I can't," I said taking deep breaths and shaking my head. I snatched a nearby Kleenex and began to blot my face. My body temperature had risen another twenty degrees. Charity was digging inside of my clutch and pulled out my phone. I could see what she was doing, but I didn't move fast enough to stop her.

“Tell me you didn’t,” I threatened.

“Just did,” she tapped my phone with her manicured fingernail.

“Whatever you did, undo it,” I said snatching my phone from her only to see that she had sent Jaren a message.

I cursed myself for saving his new number.

“*We are family!*” I reminded her.

I expected Chanel and Autumn to put me out there, not my blood.

“And *as your family*, I wanna see you happy. And *he* makes you happy.”

I opened up the message to see what she had written to him.

***Me: 1:11AM: I am here at LIV and I wanna see you.***

“*I could kill you,*” I grumbled to her stuffing Kleenex under my arms. I felt as if I was sitting in a sauna.

“You’ll thank me later,” she said while applying a fresh coat of lipstick to her lips.

I looked at the mirror and began to finger strands of my hair.

*Why was I so worried? He was probably going to ignore the text any way.*

***J: 1:25AM: Where r u***

I read the short message at least fifty times in the span of a minute before looking up at Charity.

“Look, what you did!” I chastised her. I wasn’t ready to see him, not like this.

“Girl, this is your chance to tell that man how you feel,” she said shaking me as if she was trying to knock sense into me. “You’re always talking about what the *universe* wants. Well, the universe brought *him* to *this* club out of all the clubs in the world he could have gone to. Take a hint and go see him.”

I took a few deep breaths to allow her words to sink in fully. She was right, the universe *was* giving me a break, and if I didn't take the chance now, I didn't know when I would have another one. I held my phone to my face and responded.

***Me: 1:33AM: In the bathroom.***

***J: 1:35AM: Tyson is comin to u.***

I showed the message to Charity.

“Okay, you need to get yourself together,” she said blotting my face with the Kleenex as I pulled out my lipstick and began to spread a fresh layer across my lips. She prepped my dress.

“How do I look?” I asked her after throwing everything back inside of my clutch.

“Like you're ready to get your man back,” she beamed. She must have noticed someone staring at us because she looked past me. “Do you need something?”

“I know you from somewhere,” a brown-skinned woman with auburn hair said to me.

“Nope, you've got me confused with somebody else,” I told her cryptically while already exiting the bathroom.

I looked around the crowded hall for Tyson and a few minutes went by when I saw him walking towards me. I couldn't read from his expression if he were happy or irritated to see me until he pulled me into a bear hug.

Meeting up with him in the club hallway reminded me so much of the first time we met each other in Vegas, funny how time flew by. He allowed Charity to walk with us to the sky booth where Jaren was.

The moment I stepped inside, all eyes were on me, and I regretted agreeing to come up there. I recognized the faces of some of his crew and noted the number of groupies inside.

Jaren had a bottle of something in his hand. He didn't stand to greet me; he didn't ask me to sit down with him; he barely seemed to acknowledge the fact that I was there besides a glance.

“Hey,” I said around the music that was blasting once our eyes met.

“Whas up,” he said dismissively. A long pause followed. “Is that it?”

*This was a bad idea.*

“Yea, I just wanted to say hi,” I told him trying my best to maintain my pride. “I’ll see you around.” I tugged on Charity’s arm, gesturing for her that it was time to leave.

We made our way back down the stairs, and I forgot all about celebrating. I didn’t care if I went by myself, but I was going back to the hotel. I text Chanel and Autumn that I was ready to leave, and I was surprised to see that they were also ready to call it a night.

The four of us made our way outside of the club where we took a taxi back to our hotel. I was quiet the entire ride. Chanel and Autumn were laughing about something that had happened, completely oblivious to what I had been through. I didn’t bother telling them about what happened with Jaren because it was too embarrassing to relive.

Once we got to the hotel, we all took off our heels and carried them in our hands across the lobby. I was torn between wanting to throw up and wanting to cry, but my body wouldn’t allow me to do either. I knew upfront what kind of guy I was dealing with.

After saying goodnight to Chanel and Autumn, I closed our adjoining door and went inside my room and sat on the bed. I felt my phone vibrating in my purse.

***J: 2:52AM: Where r u***

“If it’s him you better answer it,” Charity advised while gathering her things to get ready to take a shower.

“Were you not there? Did you see how he treated me?” I reminded her.

“He has every right to be pissed at you. Just see what he wants.”

I looked at the time on my phone. “He wants what every man wants when it’s close to three in the morning.”

“Then take a spin for old time’s sake,” she smiled mischievously. “You know it’s been a minute since you’ve had some anyway.”

“You do know that you are giving me horrible advice right now?”

“Well, if I am,” she said carrying her pajamas and toiletries in her hand. “*Blame it on the al-al-al-al-cohol,*” she began to sing before closing the door.

I stared at my phone for a few minutes and decided to answer.

***Me: 3:18AM: Back at my room. GN***

***J: 3:19AM: Which hotel***

*Did he not see the goodnight part of my text?*

Rather than respond. I tossed my phone on the nightstand by my bed and turned on the tv. I was going to get my things together to take a shower.

About a half-hour later there was a knock at my door. I could already sense who it was, and I was not impressed. I looked through the peephole and saw Tyson. I swung the door open.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I wailed.

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” he said holding up his hands, he couldn’t wipe the grin from his face. “He’s downstairs waiting in the car.”

“Waiting for what? I’m not going anywhere with him,” I told Tyson defiantly.

Tyson pulled out his phone, and after saying a few whispered things, he handed it to me.

“Either you come down or I’m coming up there,” Jaren stated matter-of-factly.



I didn't respond, instead, I moved my face away from the phone and went inside of the room to grab a pair of flats and to tell Charity that I was stepping out for a quick minute.

I snatched my phone off the bed and followed Tyson down the elevator and to the car. Once we got inside of the darkened SUV, it started driving off. The driver and Tyson were sitting in the front, and I was in the back with Jaren.

"I didn't agree to go anywhere with you," I protested loud enough for the driver to hear.

"Relax," Jaren told me still leaning back comfortably in his seat.

We drove up the street, and in some sort of secret service swap, they both got out of the car. My eyes followed where they were going and saw them walk inside of some restaurant across the street. Once they were out of sight, Jaren turned to me.

"I don't-" I started, but before another word could come out of my mouth Jaren had leaned over his seat and put his lips on mine.

I didn't even try to stop him. Not only did he look delicious, he still tasted the same. I found my tongue deeply entangling with his, savoring how much I missed him in this way.

"Come back to my room with me," he said thickly in between kisses.

Though I wanted to, everything within me told me not to.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Come on Fatima," he said slurring his words as his lips found their way to the spot right under my ear. "You know you want to."

Whether I did or not, I didn't have a good feeling, and I was going to follow my instinct.

"I can't."

He stopped and searched my eyes as if he was trying to see if I was serious. At the same time, I noticed the driver and Tyson laughing while carrying multiple bags of food in the direction of the SUV.

“On the real, you play too many fuckin’ games,” he said brushing me off. “You still don’t know what the fuck you want.”

I was shocked by the way he was talking to me and even more stunned by the way he instructed the driver to drop me off back at the hotel.

To top off the disrespect, he didn’t even speak to me as he instructed Tyson to walk me to the room.

“You hurt him pretty bad,” Tyson offered as we rode on the elevator.

“Yeah...well...he hurt me too.”

The moment we got to my door Tyson tried one last time to make excuses for him.

“He’s drunk and high...he didn’t mean any of that.”

“Goodnight Tyson,” I responded.

# Chapter 80

## *Jaren*



Walking on to the set of my video, “*It Ain’t the Same No More*” I was still having trouble waking up. Going out the night before had been a horrible idea. I just hoped that the two hours of sleep I did get would carry me through the day. And I was thankful that we were shooting the video at the beaches of Miami and not in the freezing streets of New York.

While lying down on the couch inside my trailer, I looked at my phone. Fatima had sent me a text saying that she wanted to meet up and talk later. I hadn’t decided if I wanted to or not. I was still surprised that we were both in Miami at the same time.

The moment she walked into our skybox the night before, I studied her, I couldn’t tell what kind of mood she was in, so I was on guard dealing with her.

When all she had to say to me was “*hey,*” I knew then that she was still on that bullshit and I wasn’t in the mood to entertain it. If she wanted to be with me, she was gonna have to open up her mouth and say it. I wasn’t chasing after her anymore.

Instead, she turned and left, and I let her.

Later on, that night, while leaving the club I was horny and rather than pick up some random chick I didn’t know, it made sense to hit up Fatima. Even though she didn’t wanna be in a relationship, that didn’t mean we couldn’t get it in one last time.

When I realized that she wasn’t even down for that either, I took her back to the room because I was tired of the games. I was in the mood to have sex or go to sleep- that’s it.

Simon walked into my trailer and handed me breakfast from some nearby restaurant. I opened the boxes and started to eat the pancakes. As I ate, my director, Shane Riley walked in my trailer and began to go over how the day's shoot would go.

After getting dressed, I found myself texting Fatima back and agreeing to meet up with her. I couldn't help the fact that I still had a soft spot for her.

The moment I stepped out of my trailer, there were people waiting for me. Tyson scanned each of them suspiciously. At this point, I trusted him more than anyone else around me, and it was my talk with him this morning that made me think twice about how I treated Fatima.

Shane approached me with a gorgeous Latina.

"Jericho, this right here is your lead, Leya Velez," he pointed out.

I scanned her up and down. Some emcees were vocal about choosing their lead. I didn't care. I could have easily used Mabelle. I just told the director that I wanted a fresh face and a girl that looked natural. I didn't want a body-injected, overly made-up female for this video.

Leya was dressed like a sexy around-the-way girl all the way down to her Jordans. I shook her hand and I could tell by the way her eyes were lingering on mine that she wanted to do more than shoot the video with me.

*It Ain't the Same No More* was my version of a love song. I had recorded it in the studio when Fatima was in New York. The premise of the video was me meeting a girl, falling in love with her, only to lose her and never understanding why. It was the story of my relationship with Fatima and to know that she was nearby, made it all so ironic.

We shot four different scenes from nine that morning until eleven that night. The moment we wrapped for the night, Leya volunteered to show me around Miami afterward. As much as I was ready to blow off Fatima and go hang out with her, I couldn't seem to find the words to do it.

I took her number anyways just in case I changed my mind and then followed Tyson, Joel, and Simon to my trailer.

“What are we getting into tonight?” Simon asked rubbing his hands together.

“I gotta go take care of something,” I told him making eye contact with Tyson. He wasn’t going with me either, but he knew where I was going.

*Me: 12:02AM: omw*

*Fatima: 12:03AM: see you soon*

After dropping Simon, Tyson, and Joel off at the room, I took the SUV to Fatima’s hotel. Even with sunglasses, a cap, and a hoodie on, I was recognized the moment I stepped into the lobby by two girls on their way out. I guess being so tall it was hard not to stand out. I tried to downplay it, but eventually took a quick picture with them so that they didn’t make a scene and draw more attention to me.

At her door, I took a deep breath before knocking because I didn’t know what to expect.

Fatima opened the door wearing some white shorts and a bright pink tank top. She looked like she was enjoying Miami to the fullest.

“Hey,” she said opening the door wide for me to walk inside.

“That seems to be the thing we keep saying to each other these days.” I walked past her.

“Want anything to drink?”

“What do you wanna talk to me about?” I asked her looking around the room.

I could tell which bed was hers immediately when I saw her MacBook, but rather than sit on it, I chose to sit down on the chair by the desk.

“So, whassup?”

I could see that she was nervous, but I wasn’t about to beat around the bush. I wanted to know why I was in her room.

“I just wanted to apologize to you for the things I said to you in New York,” she began with hesitation fidgeting with her fingers.

“For which part?”

“For all of it.”

“What does that mean?” I asked leaning back in the seat.

“I miss you...*so* much,” her eyes had softened as she spoke.

“Today you do,” I corrected for her. “*Today* you miss me.”

“No, I miss you every day, all the time.”

“Then why am I just now hearing this?”

“I had to work out some things, get some help...and figure out my life.”

“We could have done that together,” I pointed out. “You told me that you didn’t want this even *after* you got help. *Remember?*”

“I was just saying things back then because I was scared.”

“How do I know tomorrow you won’t just change your mind again?”

“I won’t.”

I searched her face, and as much as I missed her, I didn’t believe a thing coming out of her mouth.

“Fatima, I think all of *this* is just bullshit,” I pointed around the room. “I don’t know what changed over the past month, or so that suddenly gave you an *epiphany*, but I’m not buying it. Is that all you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Why are you so angry at me?” she asked in a raised voice and I noticed her struggling not to cry. “You *know* me, you *know* I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you on purpose!” She turned her back to me. “*Fuck!*” She snapped in frustration. “I did *not* wanna cry in front of you.”

I knew then that I had pushed too hard and watching her cry was as bad as watching my mom cry.

“Come’re,” I said pulling her arm though she tried to pull it away. “Stop being so stubborn and *come here.*” I maneuvered her onto my lap. “Just like I *know* you...you *know* me,” I explained to her. “You *know* I care about you, scratch that, you know I *love* you.”

“And I feel exactly the same.”

“I know you do, but I can’t do this back and forth shit.” I shook my head. “In the past year, I found out almost everybody around me was doing some foul shit.” I paused to let that sink in. “I need the person *with me* to be there, *no matter what.* We’re *supposed* to work all this shit out together.”

“It was too many things at the same time,” she said as another tear squiggled its way down her cheek. “I had to do this by myself.”

“And that’s where we see things differently. As your man, you left me feeling as if I let you down and you wouldn’t even let me do anything to help you,” I explained. “When you pushed me away the way you did, that shit hurt.”

“So where do we go?”

“Neither one of us is ready to pick up where we left off. I can tell you, that I’m not ready,” I admitted honestly. “We could try to build something as friends again, but that’s all I got for you.”

I could see the disappointment on her face.

“I understand,” she finally said.

The scent of her perfume began to surround me, and I couldn’t help myself. I tilted my nose to her neck and inhaled.

“Didn’t you just say we were going back to being friends?”

“Can we start tomorrow?” I joked placing a peck on her neck.

*I was still a man and sex between us was always good.*

She wiggled her body off of my lap. “We are either *together* or not.”

“Damn, no drive-bys either?” I joked, but she didn’t find it funny and tossed a nearby pillow at me. I caught the pillow and started laughing. “On the real though, I’m sorry about last night. I was drunk, high, horny...you name it.”

“I figured as much.”

“Where are your people?”

“Out at another club, Charity is gonna bunk with them afterward because she doesn’t want to bother us.”

“See, even she was hoping you would give me some,” I nudged her playfully.

“She’ll just be happy to know we are at least on speaking terms again.”

“Me too,” I admitted. It was so late that I laid across her bed; I hadn’t recovered from the night before. “So, catch me up on your life, *friend*.”

She laid on her stomach next to me. “Well, I have a release date again.”

“There we go.”

“I just found out yesterday; that’s why we were at *LIV* last night.”

“You weren’t back here kissing the bathroom floor, were you?”

“You’re never gonna let me live Vegas down, are you?”

“Not anytime soon,” I chuckled. “Is that why you’re down here in Miami?”

“Actually, after you called me about the Larry stuff, we decided to come down for the week to get away from everything and the cold. What about you?”

“I’m shooting a video for a new single I got coming out in a month.”

“You already started working on a new album?”

I nodded. “It’s almost finished. The label heard the first single, and they want it now.”



“What’s it called?”

“*It Ain’t the Same No More.*”

Fatima’s eyes flashed with regret. “You wrote a song about what we’re going through?”

“I wrote it while you were in New York, that morning I went to the studio.”

“Will I be able to show my face in public after it drops? I didn’t get the Brandy *treatment*, did I?”

I started laughing. “Naw, I didn’t do you like that.”

“Can I hear it?”

“I guess I can play it for you.” I retrieved my phone and pressed play. I watched her as she listened with her eyes closed while bobbing her head.

By the end, she looked up at me. “No wonder they wanna rush that song out, it’s nice.”

“It’s a different sound for me.”

“I like Machelle singing on it,” she followed-up.

I scanned her face to look for any signs of jealousy from that comment but didn’t find anything.

“What are you doing for Christmas next week?”

“I’m going home to spend it with my family in Charlotte.”

“You and your folks good now?”

“Can you believe my mom apologized to me?”

“How did that happen?”

“It’s kinda messed up when you think about it, but she read my therapeutic journal-”

“Therapeutic journal?”

“The counselor that I’ve been seeing, that’s the therapy she specializes in. A lot of my treatment is focused around writing,” she explained. “I have this journal that I carry with me everywhere, and she gives me assignments.”

“And your mom read that? Oh, I know you went the fuck off.”

“I was about to, but when I realized how much it helped her to understand me, I got over it. Can you believe that she is even on *WriteNow* reading my books?”

“Get the fuck outta here. After all that?”

“And she wants to meet you again.”

“Me?”

“That must’ve been some serious shit you wrote in your journal for her to come around like that.”

“Everything I feel I can better express in writing which is why this therapy has been helping me so much.”

“Well, it seems to be helping because I haven’t seen you tearing up this room looking for a camera.”

“Hey, it got really bad, I was going through it.”

“I know you were, and I hope that the person who put us through this at least sees some time behind bars.”

“Which reminds me, I received something in the mail about testifying,” she said with hesitation. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

“I wrote a statement for my lawyer to read, I’m not walking in the courtroom. I might kill him.”

“Don’t say that,” she said around a yawn.

I looked down at my phone and realized that we had been talking for hours. “I gotta get going. I have to be back on the set in a few hours.”

I pushed myself off the bed and Fatima followed me.

“You can stay here and get some sleep if you want.”

“If I stay here any longer, *sleep* is the last thing I’m gonna get,” I told her not hiding what I was hinting at. “I’ll hit you up before I leave.”

“Thank you for coming.”

We hugged, and I hesitated for just a second before releasing her.

# Chapter 81

## *Fatima*



“To our last night in Miami!” Chanel sang holding up her glass.

“*To the last night!*”

It was Saturday night, and we all had flights going home that Sunday night. Honestly, the week had flown by so fast I wanted to hit reset on the trip and start it over, skipping over some of the parts that included Jaren.

Since the night the two of us talked two days ago, we had been pretty friendly sending neutral texts back and forth. It reminded me of how we were before getting involved.

I understood his hesitation in wanting to just get back together. He wanted to rebuild to see if there was anything left to be saved, but that didn't stop the anxiety inside of me. I was worried that he would find somebody else and be completely over me.

After taking snaps and pictures and posting them all over social media, we finally went to some new club called *Reincarnation*.

When I let Jaren know where I was going to be, he let me know that he had an appearance at *King of Diamonds* that night. Just thinking about the amount of beautiful, half-naked women he was about to be surrounded around left me feeling self-conscious. He didn't owe me anything; he didn't have any reason to be loyal to me because I *did* walk away, and we were now *only* friends.

On the ride over Jaren had sent me a new message. He had copied the picture of me that I had posted on IG and resent it to me, reminding me that he had eyes everywhere. We playfully went back and forth about what that meant.

“What are you over there laughing so hard about?” Autumn asked.

I was sitting in the back seat of our Lyft with her and Charity, while Chanel was in the front seat flirting with our driver.

“Nothing.” I shrugged.

“You two over there texting all that cute shit, aren’t you?” Autumn asked.

I didn’t confirm or deny her assessment.

“I wish you would sleep together already. I’m telling you, you will figure everything else out after that.”

“It’s not that easy, sex can’t fix this,” I admitted.

I didn’t believe sex could save a relationship. I did think it could make a great relationship better. As bad as I wanted to jump back in the bed with Jaren and as good as the sex between us was, I had to know where we stood first. My feelings were too invested when it came to him. And now that I was entirely on board and knew that I wanted him no matter what challenges came with being his woman, I didn’t want to get hurt.

Once we got to *Reincarnation*, we were surprised by the line that almost wrapped the building.

“Can’t you call Jaren and tell him to hook us up or something?” Chanel asked as we stood in line.

“No, I can’t,” I told her with annoyance.

The line was moving slowly as if they had a strict limit on how many people they were let inside. I was already tired of standing in my stilettos, so I considered trying to find another place to party at. Then suddenly some short white man with two men dressed in all black who looked like they could be security walked down the line as if they were looking for someone.

When they reached us, he motioned for me to follow him.

“You and your friends come with me,” he said in a business-like voice.

We were all confused and a little nervous. We followed the man while the two bigger men followed behind us. It honestly felt like we were doing some prison walk. I could hear the rumbles behind us from people who thought we were in some type of trouble or being kicked out before we even got in.

The moment we stepped inside of the club the man began to talk to a beautiful woman also dressed in all black. While talking, he would glance and point at me as if he was giving her directions. I wished I knew how to read lips.

The man then turned to me. “I’m sorry if I scared you out there, but I don’t handle business in front of other people.”

*Business?*

“I’m Scott Emery. Jericho is a friend of mine, and he told me that you were a special friend of his and that he wanted me to take care of you and your friends,” he explained.

I glanced behind me at Chanel, Autumn, and Charity who still looked confused by everything going on. They couldn’t hear our conversation over the loud music.

“He did?”

“This is Shelly,” he continued pointing at the brunette standing next to him. “She is going to take you all to one of our VIP tables and if you need *anything* ask for me.”

I thanked him and watched him walk away.

Shelly had a bright smile plastered on her face and introduced herself to all of us before leading us to our table. Once she left, they immediately turned to me with quizzical glances.

“You were ready to give *this* kind of treatment up?” Chanel asked shaking her head. “That man is *just your friend*, and he’s *still* taking care of you.”

I pulled out my phone and sent him a simple text.

***Me: 12:39AM: Thank you.***

He didn't respond right away which I didn't expect him to, but when he finally did, I couldn't stop smiling.

***J: 1:27AM: ur welcome***

***J: 1:27AM: celebrate ur book release on me***

***Me: 1:28AM: I will make sure to do that.***

We danced hard that night. I laughed, sang, and drank not caring what anyone else thought about it. I had learned so much about myself in therapy, including how I was always living for other people, scared to stand up to my parents, terrified to disappoint any of my teachers and, afraid for anyone to hear or see me doing anything wrong.

Journaling helped me to see that the reason why I would sometimes feel as if I was suffocating was because I actually was. I was living for *everyone* else *but* myself. Even when I was making decisions *for me*, I did it in a way so that I was still trying to please everyone around me.

That night, I felt like I was cleansing all of that from my life. I was shedding my skin and celebrating the new woman I had become. I felt as if I was revealing my new self to the world *unapologetically* for the first time. I felt so free, so happy, and so in love with myself. I knew that I still had a lot of work to do in therapy, but for the first time, I looked forward to every part of my life.

By the end of the night, as we were leaving, I felt bold enough to do something I had never done before in my life. I threw out all of the *rules* in my head and sent Jaren a text.

***Me: 3:16AM: I want you.***

An hour later I was inside of his suite with my overnight bag after showering and changing in my room.

The minute he answered the door shirtless, we started kissing. I dropped my bag by the door and wrapped my arms around his neck as he all but yanked me inside of his suite.

I had a flash of a moment when I wanted to check his room for cameras, but I pushed back against that voice- trusting myself with him wholeheartedly.

Kissing Jaren was like enjoying a warm dessert; you never wanted it to end. He was pulling at my maxi dress, while I was tugging at his sweats, we wasted no time with words as we stumbled around his suite. The moment he pushed me onto the bed, one thought made me hesitate.

*Were we gonna use a condom?*

His eyes scanned mine as if he was asking me to make the call and I don't know if it was the alcohol or just pure ignorance on my part, but I decided to trust him.

He lowered his body over my opened legs and watched me with this funny look on his face.

“What?”

“There is something different about you.”

“I guess I've had to grow up a lot this past year.”

Rather than say anything else I felt every inch of him sitting on my inner thigh, teasing at my entrance. Our eyes dueled, it was as if we both wanted to maintain power over what was happening, neither one of us wanted to be vulnerable either.

*Making love, that's not what this is right now Fatima. It's just sex.*

The moment Jaren began to slide each inch inside of me I heard a squeal leave my voice. I had forgotten how good he felt, it was like the feeling a lost kid must have felt when finally finding their way back home.

My hands gripped the lined muscles of his back, and I tried my best not to scratch but couldn't help myself. The way he was drilling inside of me was worthy of scratches, screams, and so much more. We had sex wildly all over the room, switching back and forth between hard and gentle. I think I sweated every one of my tracks out of my head and I didn't even care. It was worth it. By the time we finally finished for the last time I didn't even know what time it was, I fell asleep with him holding me like he used to.



Hours later, when I woke up, I looked at the clock on the nightstand first. It read 2:07PM. My flight wasn't leaving until seven, so I wasn't as worried about missing my flight as I was about the fact I was in his room, by myself. I called out his name, but there was no answer.

I crawled out of bed in search of my things; they were, no longer thrown all over the floor but instead, neatly placed on the couch. I self-consciously pulled my dress on and reached for my phone. On it was messages from my cousin and friends, my mom and Jaren.

***J: 11:04AM: Didn't wanna wake u omw back to New York.***

Realizing the casualness of our *new* relationship all I could do was gather my things. After taking a shower, brushing my teeth, and taming my hair the best I could, I left the room still holding my head up high.

## Chapter 82

### *Jaren*



“Judging from your first single. Is it safe to say that you are taking this album in a more mainstream direction?” Gerald Lamarre from Billboard magazine asked me.

“I wouldn’t say that. My music is New York and is gonna always be New York, but on *this* album, I changed it up because I experienced some other things that I wanted to talk to my fans about.”

“Like heartbreak?” Gerald followed-up. “Are you nervous about being compared to Drake with the release of this song? You know the *hip hop* love songs are more his lane.”

“No offense to Drake, I actually dig what he does. But he has his style, and I have mine. This song is more about me opening myself up to my fans. I’m talking about real shit that happens every day. And I wanna let them know, I’ve been in love, and I hurt like them.”

“When you say you’ve been hurt, do you care to elaborate on who hurt hip hop’s favorite New York rapper?”

“Who it *was* doesn’t matter, all they need to know is that I’ve *been* hurt, and I know what that shit feels like.”

“Ah, come on you know everybody wants to know. Let your fans in on who it was. Was it Brandy or Machelles?”

“What they *wanna* know and *need* to know are two different things,” I nodded hoping he would take the hint to move on to the next question.

It was a few days after Christmas, and I was back on my grind. *Twisted Life* had released, *It Ain’t the Same No More* to radio, and it had been blowing up. Everyone seemed to vibe with it, and I knew it was because love and pain were universal topics.

I had been doing interview after interview trying to promote it and talk about the album.

Because the song was about being hurt by a woman every interviewer asked me the same questions.

*Who is the song about? Is this about the leaked video? Are you dating Machel?*

It was annoying.

We spent the last few minutes of the interview talking about my album and what it was like working on *Twisted Life*. After I finished, I left with Tyson, Joel, Simon, and Haseem for the studio.

While we were in the studio working on the song, I received a new text message and opened it when I saw that it was from Fatima.

I thought about the last time I saw her in Miami and paused.

After sexing her that night, I had to turn around and catch a flight back to New York because I had a show.

Since that day I could count on one hand the number of messages we had sent to each other, the last being “*Merry Christmas*” wishes. It wasn’t that I didn’t miss her, I did, but after what happened between us, I wasn’t about to jump into anything again.

***Fatima: 11:22AM: I’ve gone back and forth with what to say to you to get you to understand how much I love you. But when I’m in front of you, I can never find the right words. During my therapy, I was asked to write a letter to the person I’ve hurt the most since that video was leaked. Of course, I wrote that letter to you because I know I was wrong for everything I put you through. I was told I didn’t have to send it, but after what happened in Miami, I realized that this might be the only thing that could help you understand. I don’t want to be your enemy just like I don’t want to be your friend.***

There were three images attached to the text and rather than read what the letter said inside of the crowded studio; I decided to read it later when I was done with the session and alone.

I didn't open her letter until I got back to my condo. I lit a blunt because I wasn't sure what to expect and I wanted to be relaxed.

*Jaren,*

*Seeing my naked body all over the Internet having sex was the last thing I ever saw for my future. And it is because of that reality and so much more that I pushed you away the way I did. I wanted to write you this letter because there are so many things that I need to say to you, but I want to start off by telling you that I am so sorry for how I handled everything. I was wrong to run, wrong to push you away and treat you as if you had leaked the video.*

*Over a year ago we hadn't even met yet, and still, you are the most important person in my life. From the moment you sent me that first message to now, I could have never known that responding to you about my story would turn into all of this.*

*It was in those first messages that I felt a connection to your soul. And it was after we finally met that I knew for sure that I had found my future, the person that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.*

*Not being with you has been more difficult than anything I have ever experienced in my life. The pain I'm feeling from not sharing my life with you anymore is honestly worse than anything I've ever felt.*

*I don't even have the words to express to you how much my heart hurts. There are reminders of you everywhere I look, and they only remind me of all the mistakes I've made.*

*I miss the way you would run your fingers across my skin when we are just lazily lying around. To the way, you would*

*caress my cheek or the way your lips would kiss the nape of my neck. To the way, you could find different ways to make me laugh, even when I didn't want to.*

*There is not a night that I don't close my eyes and remember the way you used to look into mine when we made love. Or the sound of your deep voice saying my name or telling me how much you loved me.*

*I thought that this time away from you would help me get over you, but I was wrong. Every day my love for you only grows deeper. When I am around you, whenever I hear your voice, or just the mention of your name, my heart beats a little faster.*

*The truth is, I can't picture my life without you. When something good happens to me, you're the first person that I want to tell. When something bad happens to me, I know that I can count on you to do everything in your power to make whatever is wrong, right.*

*Before meeting you, I didn't believe it was possible to love someone so deeply and completely, but through you, I have learned that true love does exist because I got to experience it with you. The way you loved me is something I had never experienced before in my life, not even from my parents!*

*You showed me what true sacrifice in love meant when I watched you travel on short trips to see me then turn around to fly back to perform in a show. Or when you would fuss over if I was okay before you were even okay.*

*That is love. You are love.*

*I ran because I was scared! I had so much fear planted within me that I didn't know how to live for something real. I had been living my entire life in a lie. Doing whatever it was that anyone else wanted me to do. I was silently drowning in a pool of fear, and you were the one person who reached down and pulled me back to the surface.*

*You saved me from myself. I can't thank you enough for that, but I still had to find myself. I had to learn to live for*

*what I wanted and to not look for the validation or approval from others, including you.*

*Since I was young, I was taught to smile and to do as I was told. My mother taught me to accept what love I could get and to be appreciative of scraps. It was my father who taught me that love was supposed to hurt. In my first real adult relationship, I learned that no man would ever truly love me for being me. By the time you came along, I was carrying damage and didn't even know it.*

*For years I pushed my real passions deep down, hiding it from everyone who thought they knew me. You were the first person I shared my secret with. The person I first trusted my dreams with. That speaks to the power of what we had early on. Your faith in me when it came to my gift forever changed my life.*

*You taught me that I deserve better than the distorted perception of love that was taught to me. That I deserved more than the manipulative love that I was convinced to accept. You were like a light to me, in a life that was filled with nothing but darkness.*

*I know that I am not easy to love, that taking a chance on me is something that you don't want to do or feel safe doing. But I'm begging you to believe in me. To believe in what we shared.*

*I know you find all of this hard to believe or to accept and I know you still doubt my intentions. You have every reason to question my motives because I walked away when you needed me, when you needed us, the most.*

*As your world crumbled around you, your priority was to take care of me, while my priority was to save myself.*

*I was wrong, and I can't blame you for the way you have treated me since. In your eyes, I was just another snake camouflaged in a different skin than the others. You didn't deserve what they did to you, just as you didn't deserve the way I deserted you.*

*My love is in no way perfect, and it has many flaws, but I promise you that it's real.*

*I am writing this letter to promise you that if you take me back, that if you give me another chance, I promise to never take you for granted again. I need you in my life just as much as I need writing in order to breathe. It's who I am it's what allows me to live.*

*Without you, my life doesn't make sense. It doesn't feel complete. And it's hard for me to look forward to following my dreams when you were such a huge part of those dreams. I know I don't deserve you or the kind of love that you have to offer, but I am hoping that you will give me another chance anyways to love you in the right way.*

*Even if you decide that I am not what you want, I want you to know that you have changed my life forever. I will always and forever hold you close in my heart.*

*Love,*

*Fatima*

I read all of the images twice, trying to fully absorb the words she had written. I had no idea she felt this way. Her attitude always came off as if she didn't care anymore. I saw glimpses of her caring, but never anything deep like *this*.

I leaned back in my chair and allowed my thoughts of what to do take over. I had a lot to think about, Fatima had just turned my world upside down again with just words.

## Chapter 83

### *Fatima*



“I am so stupid!” I groaned into my pillow throwing it across my face.

I was in my room in Charlotte with my cousin Charity trying my best not to recheck my phone. I had put myself out there and sent Jaren a text including pictures I had taken of my journal letter, and he had yet to respond.

After what had happened in Miami, I opened up to my mom about what was going on with us, and she recommended to me that I send him my letter from therapy because it was something that expressed all of my feelings.

So, I did it. *Two days ago!*

It was Saturday afternoon and Charity along with my dad’s younger sister, Sable, decided that they were taking me out to get my mind off of the fact that Jaren hadn’t responded to me.

I had put it all out there. I poured my entire soul into that letter to him, and he didn’t even as much as say “*thank you!*” He knew it took a lot for me to bare my heart to him in that way.

My dad sat me down the night before to tell me that sometimes in life that we didn’t always get a second chance to love. That sometimes when we messed up or lose someone, no matter how they feel about us, we still have to live with the consequences.

I knew this was true because I had done exactly that to KeVon and every other guy who did something I didn’t like. But losing them felt *nothing* like this.

The more time passed, the more I began to accept the inevitable, that Jaren wanted to move on.



*At least I got one last smash in before things were completely over between us.*

They had been playing his song; *It Ain't the Same No More* repeatedly since its release. I had to hear over and over in his voice how much I had hurt him. I could hear the pain in the lyrics and delivery.

Honestly, the leaked sex video was my out; it was my way to justify running. It was the out I needed to run from the fear of *that* love eventually blowing up in my face. It was through counseling when I learned *that's* what I was doing when it came to our relationship.

I projected my experiences with KeVon on to him, and I was secretly waiting for the other shoe to drop because everything felt too perfect that I didn't believe it could be real.

I was wrong for not loving myself enough to know that what Jaren was giving me was real. It wasn't a fake, superficial, opportunist love that we shared. Our love was a pure soul connection and had been that from the minute we first traded messages.

Without ever laying an eye on each other, we fell in love. I should have believed enough in that foundation to fight for us. To fight for him! But it was all spilled milk now, and I couldn't put it back.

"You have done what you needed to and if *that* is not good enough for him, then forget him. You are still young and still fabulous, and there are other guys out here in this world," Charity said sitting next to me on the bed. "It's *his* loss Tima."

"It still hurts," I told her trying to fight more tears.

"It's *gonna* hurt, but you will love again and do it right the next time."

"I'm *never* gonna find a love like that. There is nobody in this world like him."

"Maybe not, but you don't know unless you *try*." Then a smile formed on her face, and she began to stroke her chin. "Besides one good thing came out of all this."

*“What?”*

“You can make him a villain in your next book and kill his ass off,” she said, and it helped me to laugh a little.

“I hate you.”

“This is what we’re gonna do. We are gonna get dressed up, get sexy as hell and have a good time tonight, okay.”

I nodded.

“And we are gonna post a bunch of sexy pictures so that he can see what he’s missing out on. I bet his stubborn ass will start calling then.”

I scooted off the bed and began to forcefully change my mood.

# Chapter 84

## *Fatima*



That night we went to *Myth*, a sexy downtown Charlotte club. The place was packed, and though I saw several guys that caught my eye, I felt nothing.

Every guy that tried to approach me, I forced myself to talk to them, but my heart wasn't into it. It was as if I was physically there, but I wasn't there.

While in the bathroom we took all kinds of crazy pictures for the Gram.

"I am *so proud* of you," my Aunt Sable said while pushing my hair from my shoulder. "You have *finally* come out of that shell you've always been hiding in. And I can't wait to read this book when it comes out."

"Thank you, auntie."

"If you wanna get away from everything or decide that you wanna move to Atlanta, you know you can. I've got an extra room," she offered. "Remember you have options; you don't have to stay up there in Baltimore by yourself."

"I've been thinking about that, but I just signed that lease, so I have to break that if I decide to move anywhere else."

"I know somebody that can get you out of that lease now."

"You always got the plug," I laughed.

"Girl, you have to," she returned while freshening up her make-up. "It makes life a lot easier."

When we left the bathroom, we threw back more shots then made our way onto the dance floor. Thanks to my aunt and my cousin I began to dance Jaren out of my system.

A half-hour later the deejay suddenly began to play the beginning beat to *It Ain't The Same No More*.

*I couldn't even escape him on the dance floor!*

Then I heard what sounded like Jaren's voice live on the mic and I knew I had to be tripping.

When the crowd suddenly erupted, I knew *then* that I wasn't imagining anything, and that Jaren *was* somewhere in the building about to perform that damn song.

I looked up by the small stage next to the deejay booth, and there he was.

"Oh my God!" Charity screamed in my ear.

I was in a trance as I watched him perform this song about *me* hurting *him*.

*He couldn't pick another song to perform? He had other hits!*

Then he pointed me out in the crowd, I don't know how because we were near the back of the dance floor. When Tyson appeared, I already knew I had no choice but to go with him. The tears started pooling in my eyes before I had even reached the stage because I had genuinely believed that we were done, that *our* fairytale was over.

Cell phones were up pointing between him on stage and me walking towards the stage. I had no idea what Jaren was doing or why he was doing it so publicly.

By the time Tyson picked me up and placed me on the stage, Jaren bent down to help me the rest of the way. The moment he saw my tears he pulled me into a hug with one arm as he continued to rap into the mic with the other.

I didn't know what to do but to hold on to him by his waist. I refused to look at the crowd because I was feeling so many different emotions. I buried my face in his shirt.

After he finished the song, he made me lift my head.

"Aye," he said laughing into the mic with his rugged New York accent, his other arm still around my shoulder. "Whas

good Charlotte?”

The crowd continued erupting at the sight of him.

I finally looked up at him, and he kissed me on the forehead again.

“When a nigga falls in love, he don’t eva wanna admit that shit. You know what I’m sayin.”

The call and response with the crowd continued as they shouted different things at him.

“I already went on *The Breakfast Club* to tell you that *this* right here was, wifey.” He nodded his head at me while enjoying the catcalls from the crowd.

He talked to the crowd as if I was not there under his arm.

“Charlotte, I love this girl right here. You feel me. She means *everything* to me,” he continued finally looking at me again, but then he released me. “But I’m not cool with her being just wifey anymore...”

The crowd went nuts; their reaction displayed exactly what was going on inside of my chest.

His smile, one of the most beautiful smiles I had ever seen in my life, just beamed at me as he took a few steps away, leaving me to hold my own weight up.

It took a few minutes before the crowd would let him say anything.

“Aye, I came *all the way* here to Charlotte to change that title,” he finally said, holding my eyes even though hundreds of people were screaming at us.

“Hold on,” he told me grinning mischievously as he held up a finger.

With a wide grin on his face, he began to dig in his pocket and pulled out a black ring box. My hands went to my mouth because I just wanted him to forgive me. I didn’t think he would get me a ring.

“I’m not tryna be your friend either,” he told me into the mic while opening the box.

The ring was so bright and so massively huge that I *did* stop breathing.

“We’ve been through some things, and I know we will go through even more,” he began to talk directly to me, “but I don’t wanna do this with *nobody* else.”

Screams of, ‘*say yes*’ sprinkled through the crowd.

“I wanna spend the *rest* of my life with you,” he finished.

I didn’t even care about the ring. I jumped into his arms wrapping my arms tightly around his neck. I held on to him. I did not care about the crowd, the cameras, or anything. I was just in this moment with him.

“I love you so much,” I whispered in his ear. “I’m so sorry.”

“I love you, too,” he said so only I could hear, and he rubbed his hand up and down my back, “I love you, too.” He repeated with a sigh rocking me in his arms.

As private as he was, I couldn’t believe that he was doing the proposal like this.

He pulled back to look at my eyes. “I figured since I told the world you were wifey, that the world might as well know that I was upgrading that title,” he reasoned with a laugh as if he could read my thoughts.

“Yes, I’ll marry you,” I finally answered kissing him softly on the lips.

He slid the diamond weight on my finger, and we hugged. Then I begged him to get me off of the stage.

When we got to the back to an empty dressing room, I shoved him hard in the chest.

“You couldn’t respond to my text after reading my letter?” I told him trying to still get on him for leaving me in the dark and allowing me to be miserable for days. “You could have told me *something!*”

“We’re gonna argue already?” he asked with a grin. “You know I had to make you sweat a little bit.”

My hands on my waist let him know that I didn't find any of it amusing.

"I had to figure some things out, but the one thing that was consistent was the fact I can't live without you. That shit hurts too bad." He shook his head. "I knew I had to come do this the right way after everything that went down in Miami. I called up your parent's yesterday, got their blessing at breakfast and here we are."

"My parents knew?"

"They knew and were in on the surprise," he explained with a nod. "Fatima, that letter, baby girl if you don't know *anything* you *gotta* know you were born to be a writer. How could I not do *this* after reading that?"

He pulled me into another hug and this time held on to me, I relaxed into his arms and closed my eyes.

I was finally living my dream, a dream that I never believed was possible. And I was doing it for the first time in my life while being *unapologetically me*.

While floating on a high, Jaren lifted his head and asked me, "Can we go have make-up sex now?"

***The End***

*This isn't the end of Fatima and Jaren's story. Look for "A Silenced Gift" coming out Summer 2019. Go to [www.dslittle.com](http://www.dslittle.com) for more details or follow me on social media @dlittlewriter.*